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United Kingdom: social workers in Westminster – party or profession?

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In this chapter, we explore the career trajectories and political activities of 32 social workers who became Members of Parliament (MPs) in the United Kingdom. Our findings suggest that the sensibilities we might associate with social work, such as a desire to promote social advocacy through political action, may be more strongly mediated by political party and gender than a professional background in social work. We suggest that there may be an element of *dis*identification with social work and certainly a departure from the profession once on a political career trajectory. Furthermore, the fact that most British MPs are seen as engaging in a form of 'social work' through their representation of constituents with grievances adds another layer of complexity to our understanding of social workers who hold political office in the British context.

Social work as a profession

The increasing trend since the 2000s towards the professionalisation of social work in the United Kingdom resulted in the statutory regulation and registration of social workers from 2001 and the status of 'social worker' becoming a legally protected title from 2005. The regulation of social work is devolved to relevant bodies in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. In England, registered social workers must re-register annually with the national regulator, Social Work England, which can also remove them from the register for professional malpractice. The average salaries of social workers range from a starting annual salary of £27,000 to £50,000 for those with experience (see basw.co.uk).

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW) is the independent non-regulatory national membership body for the profession. It acts as a union to its approximately 22,000 members and owns two academic journals, *The British Journal of Social Work* and *Practice*. The BASW runs public campaigns on policy issues such as poverty and lobbies Westminster, acting as 'the voice for social work'. A national College of Social Work was briefly established by government in 2012, but was promptly abandoned in 2015 (Nosowska and Templeton, 2016).

A particular focus politically in the United Kingdom has been the university-based education of social workers. Successive policy makers have regarded the focus on social justice in social work education programmes with – at best – suspicion. Despite this, the level of education required for qualified social worker status has steadily increased from the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (1975–91) to the undergraduate Diploma in Social Work (1991–2009) to the current bachelor's degree (available since 2003). Postgraduate routes have continued to be available, including a diploma and a master's level qualification. In recent years, controversial 'elite' fast-track postgraduate routes to qualification have reduced the role of universities. The most recent route is the social worker degree apprenticeship, which trains those employed as unqualified care workers.

As of 2022, the total number of registered social workers in the United Kingdom was 115,478, representing 0.35 per cent of the total UK workforce (32,925,000 in 2022; ONS, 2025). By far the largest number of social workers is in England, with 100,654 in 2022 (Social Work England, 2023), followed by Northern Ireland with 6,417 (Department of Health (Northern Ireland), 2022), Scotland with 4,226 (Scottish Social Services Council, 2023) and Wales with 4,181 (Social Care Wales, 2022). In terms of the distribution of social workers by sector, in England, specifically, in services for adults, most are employed in local authorities (18,500), followed by the National Health Service (4,000) and the independent sector (2,200; Skills for Care, 2024). In children's social care, again most are employed in local authorities (33,100) and there are also agency workers (7,200; GOV.UK, 2024). Social work employees constitute the largest subsector of those employed in the voluntary sector, but it is not clear how social work is defined in this context (National Council for Voluntary Organisations, 2021).

In terms of the distribution of social workers across England, there are some striking regional divides. It has been found that London and the South East, taken together, have one social worker per 495 people, a higher rate than in the Midlands (one per 610), the South West (one per 638) and the East (one per 671; Samuel, 2023). There has been a significant increase in applications to register by social workers from overseas, particularly from Africa and India. Social work remains a largely feminised profession as measured by those registered, with 82 per cent of registrants female as at September 2022 (Skills for Care, 2023).

The social work profession has been subject to repeated cycles of crisis and reform resulting from negative media and political reaction to serious events, such as child deaths (Warner, 2015). In a 2023 survey commissioned by Social Work England, only 11 per cent of social workers reported feeling respected, while 44 per cent of the public reported that they respect social workers (Social Work England, 2024). UK social work, at least in the statutory sector, is a profession with low morale that faces increasing demands

on services with diminished resources, with retention a significant issue. Of the 5,335 who left the social work register in 2022, almost a quarter had been registered for less than one year (Samuel, 2023).

Institutional opportunity structures

The UK parliamentary system is bicameral, comprising an elected House of Commons and a non-elected revising chamber, the House of Lords, with the Sovereign constituting a third part of the system. In each election, one MP is elected to represent one of around 650 constituencies for the duration of a Parliament through a plurality voting system known as 'first past the post'. Voters cast a vote for a single candidate and the candidate with the most votes is elected. In most elections, this system produces a one-party majority government drawn from one of the two major parties – Conservative and Labour. There are notable exceptions to this rule, one being the 2010 'hung Parliament', which resulted in a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government.

Once elected, MPs have a dual role as legislator and as advocate, both for their constituency as a whole and for individual constituents. MPs have a range of routes into influencing policies and legislation, the most powerful of which is to undertake a ministerial role on the Executive if their party is in government. There is also a wide range of cross-party committees that can influence policies through producing reports and by scrutinising legislation and policies. Parliament and its MPs act as a check on the Executive and can even block government legislation if sufficient numbers of MPs vote against it. For many backbench MPs (those who are not serving as ministers on the government's 'frontbench' in the House of Commons), their main focus is helping their constituents by being a good 'Constituency Member' (Searing, 1994). These constituency activities have long been defined in political circles, often disparagingly, as a form of 'glorified social work' (Crewe, 2015, p 86; see also Warner, 2020).

There are between 800 and 900 Lords, or 'peers', in the House of Lords, making it the largest upper house in the world. Like MPs, they pass laws and scrutinise the work of government. Unlike MPs, peers are not elected, but formally appointed by the reigning monarch and on the advice of the prime minister. For some politicians, an appointment to the Lords is the logical final step in their political career. This particular layer of institutional opportunity structures is therefore closed to all but a tiny minority of UK citizens.

The opportunity structure for would-be politicians in the United Kingdom has expanded significantly since the late 1990s due to the devolution of powers to Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, all of which now also have their own unicameral elected parliament or assembly. There have been between 90 and 108 seats available in the Northern Ireland Assembly, 60 in the Senedd Cymru (Welsh Parliament) and 129 in the Scottish Parliament. These distinctive legislatures and executives have a range of devolved powers

in policy areas such as health and social care, education, policing and transport. These policy areas in England are retained by the Westminster Parliament, which additionally has reserved powers for policy in areas such as defence, foreign affairs and immigration across the whole United Kingdom.

Local government structures in the United Kingdom are complex and overlapping, with approximately 12,000 local councils, which range in size from small parish councils to large combined authority areas. Like MPs, councillors are generally elected via the first-past-the-post system. There are 16,169 elected local councillors in England (Lawson, 2025), 1,254 and 1,226 in Wales and Scotland, respectively, and 462 in Northern Ireland. Serving on a local council is often a stepping stone to election to Parliament (Cairney, 2007; Allen, 2013), reflecting the growing importance of 'localism', in which voters express a preference for electoral candidates who come from and live in the local area (Campbell et al, 2019). Transition from one of the devolved national legislatures to the UK Parliament appears to be a less well-worn route than that from the local to the national political stage (Stolz, 2024).

In addition to devolution, the United Kingdom's institutional opportunity structures have also been expanded through decentralisation, involving the transfer of powers and budgets to 'metro mayors', who represent combined authorities, including in city deals. Police and crime commissioners, introduced in 2012, make up an additional directly elected tier. They are responsible for ensuring that the police meet the needs of the local community.

For the 2024/25 financial year, the basic annual salary of an MP was £91,346 (Kelly, 2025), which is considerably higher than the national median wage in the United Kingdom of £34,963 in 2024 (Statista, 2025). The prime minister's salary, including their MP salary, was £164,951 in 2022 (GOV.UK, 2022). One attraction for those ambitious to hold political power is the additional earning capacity that can result from a time in front-line politics. It is said that former Prime Minister Boris Johnson earned £5 million during the first six months after leaving office (Thévoz, 2023).

Disincentives to hold political office include high workloads and the proliferation of threats and abuse that MPs receive. Women MPs and those from Black and minority ethnic groups are frequently targeted (Lilly, 2024). As well as there being a high volume of correspondence, constituency surgery work takes an emotional toll (Warner, 2020). The job can involve long periods of time away from family, particularly for those with constituencies far outside London, where Parliament is located.

Political recruitment

Data collection

The research reported in this chapter focuses on social worker MPs (SWMPs) – that is, MPs who had previously been employed and/or qualified

as a social worker. The complex range of qualifications and changes to the regulation of the profession were important factors to consider in identifying SWMPs. While some could be identified easily by their qualification, others, particularly older MPs, had practised as social workers in the period before statutory regulation. In those cases, we looked closely at job roles alongside factors such as having a first degree in the social sciences, which was a traditional route into a social work job. A good example is Sylvia Heal, who was elected as a Labour MP four times between 1983 and 2010. Information in the public domain states that she practised as a social worker for several years, including ten years working in drug rehabilitation services, and that she is a graduate, though the degree subject is not specified. Sylvia is included in our group of SWMPs based on her career background even though her social work qualification status is unknown.

We collected data within the 30-year time frame of 1992 to 2022, covering eight elections and 5,215 MPs (most of them re-elected multiple times), to encompass MPs with long experience of Parliament as well as newer incumbents and to include a range of Parliaments in terms of the parties in government. There is no official biographical data available in MPs' parliamentary profiles (UK Parliament, 2023), so it was necessary to consult sources ranging from personal websites to Wikipedia, relevant news articles and *The Almanac of British Politics* (Waller and Criddle, 1995; 1999; 2002; 2007).

We initially identified 78 MPs and then checked these more closely for relevant qualifications and job roles. Six MPs were borderline in that they described themselves as social workers in one or more of the resources we searched but had no identifiably relevant qualification and no clear job role. Only those fitting the definition of 'social worker' in terms of their qualification and/or clear job role were included in the final list of 32 SWMPs that is the basis for all following analyses.

For the purpose of comparison, in addition to the SWMP data, we drew on data available from existing studies on three other groups of professionals – teachers, barristers and solicitors – and created a comparison group for each group. The teacher and solicitor groups were matched to the SWMP group by party; this was not done for the barrister group due to the lack of enough Labour barristers. To deepen our analysis, we created a 'random occupation' group, comprising a group of MPs from random occupations but matched by gender, age, party and region.

Results

During the 30-year period under consideration, there were 32 SWMPs. Seven of them (21.9 per cent) held the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work, while five were awarded a master's in social work (15.6 per cent) and two held a Diploma in Social Work (6.3 per cent). Three SWMPs

studied applied social science (9.4 per cent) while two held a degree in social administration (6.3 per cent). One held a degree in sociology with social work, one had a degree in social science, and one completed a social work degree abroad (all 3.1 per cent). For the remainder (n = 10; 31.3 per cent), a qualification in social work was confirmed but not specified. Most of the qualifications of this group predate the United Kingdom's formal social work qualification framework. All of the MPs had relevant working experience as a social worker in addition to their degree.

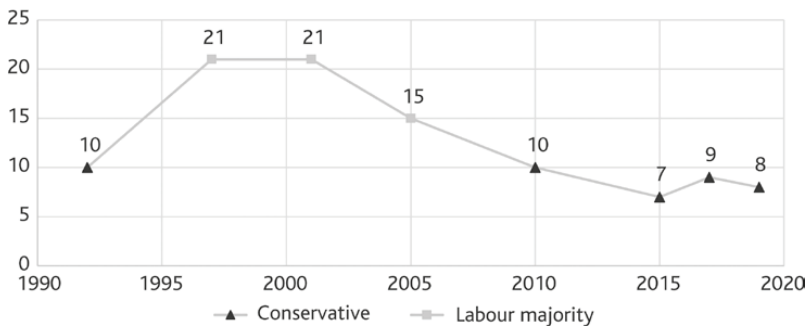
The vast majority of SWMPs (n = 29; 90.6 per cent) were members of the Labour Party, while only two (6.3 per cent) were Conservatives and one (3.1 per cent) was Plaid Cymru. Accordingly, it comes as no surprise that during years of Labour government, the number of SWMPs was higher (see Figure 11.1).

Of the 32 SWMPs, 18 (56.3 per cent) were female. By comparison, only 23 per cent of *all* MPs elected since 1992 were female. The continuously rising share of female MPs from 9 per cent in 1992 to 34 per cent in 2019 (Cracknell and Tunnicliffe, 2022) was not reflected in rising numbers of SWMPs, however. Furthermore, the gender split in favour of women found in the overall number of social workers in the United Kingdom (as noted earlier, 82 per cent of social workers were female in 2022; Skills for Care, 2023) did not translate to Parliament, which suggests that it tends to be men in the social work profession that feel drawn to more powerful public offices. This would be consistent with a similar split in management positions in social services, where men have tended to predominate despite the otherwise 'feminised' profile of the social work profession (McPhail, 2004).

The average age of first-time-MPs varied between 39 and 43 years between 1979 and 2019 (Cracknell and Tunnicliffe, 2022). The average age of first-time SWMPs (1992–2019) was slightly higher at 44.4 years.

SWMPs are found in almost all regions of the United Kingdom, though most of them represent constituencies in the North of England, the Midlands

Figure 11.1: Number of SWMPs per election, 1992–2019



and Wales, those areas where Labour traditionally is most successful. Moreover, SWMPs tend to represent English constituencies with higher rates of deprivation (for deprivation data by constituency for England, see Francis-Devine, 2020). Of the 25 English SWMP constituencies in our sample, 21 were among the most deprived 50 per cent of constituencies. However, in general, we find that the more deprived the region, the higher the percentage of Labour MPs. Labour MPs were vastly over-represented in constituencies in the two most deprived deciles, still over-represented in deciles three and four, and under-represented in all the rest. This suggests that SWMPs do not represent areas that are any more deprived than the areas represented by Labour MPs as a group. On the contrary, our SWMPs tended to represent *less* deprived areas than the average Labour MP (see Table 11.1).

Social work as a politics-facilitating profession

Can social work be seen as a politics-facilitating profession in the United Kingdom? In comparison to their overall share of the UK workforce, SWMPs do indeed appear to be over-represented in the House of Commons. Referring to data for the last 20 years, we find that social workers comprised between 0.26 and 0.41 per cent of the total workforce in the United

Table 11.1: Number and share of English constituencies represented by SWMPs and non-social worker Labour MPs, by constituency deprivation

Deprivation decile	Deprivation index rank	Number of SWMP constituencies (1992–2022) in decile	Percentage of all SWMPs (n = 25) in decile	Number of Labour MP constituencies (2019) in decile	Percentage of all Labour MPs (n = 180) in decile
1st (most deprived)	≤53	3	12.0	44	24.4
2nd	≤107	4	16.0	39	21.7
3rd	≤160	2	8.0	29	16.1
4th	≤213	7	28.0	24	13.3
5th	≤267	5	20.0	14	7.8
6th	≤320	1	4.0	13	7.2
7th	≤373	0	0.0	11	6.1
8th	≤426	0	0.0	5	2.8
9th	≤480	2	8.0	0	0.0
10th (least deprived)	≤533	1	4.0	1	0.6

Source: Based on constituency deprivation data from Francis-Devine (2020)

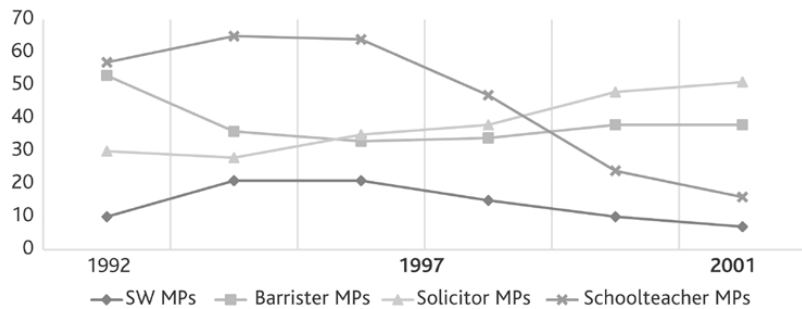
Kingdom (Office for National Statistics – ONS, 2019). In 1997 and 2001, SWMPs' share of all MPs peaked at 3.2 per cent, with the lowest point being 1.1 per cent in 2015.

However, in comparison to other traditional politics-facilitating professions, such as law and teaching, the share of SWMPs was relatively low (see Figure 11.2). In 2015, 14.2 per cent of MPs had a background as either a barrister or a solicitor, whereas these together made up only 0.64 per cent of the total workforce that year (Cracknell and Tunnicliffe, 2022). Moreover, the share of barristers who went on to be an MP was considerably higher than the share of social workers becoming an MP. As an example, in 2010 there were 120,000 social workers in the United Kingdom and 10 SWMPs (0.008 per cent). In comparison, there were 157,000 legal professionals and 86 barrister or solicitor MPs (0.05 per cent; ONS, 2019).

As Figure 11.2 also shows, barristers appear to have been more closely aligned than solicitors with Conservative rule; we see a steady increase in the number of solicitors across all Parliaments. While schoolteachers were over-represented in the 1990s and early 2000s, numbers have subsequently gone down, and in 2015 there were only 15 former schoolteachers in Westminster, or 2.3 per cent of MPs, compared with their 3 per cent share of the total workforce (ONS, 2019). As such, in that year, they were the only under-represented group out of the ones compared here.

In terms of the time spent in social work prior to entering Parliament, this was 15.5 years on average for SWMPs for whom this information was stated (n = 19). Of those where the field of social work is known, seven worked in child care/protection or fostering (21.9 per cent), four were probation officers (12.5 per cent), three were psychiatric or mental health social workers (9.4 per cent), three were in a managing/director position (9.4 per cent) and one each was a social work tutor, welfare rights officer,

Figure 11.2: Number of SWMPs in comparison to MPs from other occupations, 1992–2015



Note: Years in bold indicate a Labour majority.
Source: Based on data from Cracknell and Tunnicliffe (2022)

residential care home inspector, worker in a drug rehabilitation centre and worker with survivors of childhood sexual abuse (3.1 per cent each). Eighteen were still practising social workers when they were elected. The other 14 had worked as social workers in the past but their occupation immediately before being elected was something different (for example, a journalist) or was somewhat unclear.

In conclusion, when considering political recruitment, it is perhaps most accurate to argue that the key factor has been political party, with the complex array of co-occurring factors that this represents. As highlighted in Figure 11.2, the presence of socially oriented professions, such as social work and teaching, increase when Labour is in the electoral ascendancy. Similarly, when the Conservative Party dominates, we see an increased preponderance of law professions, specifically barristers.

Political career patterns

Pathways into Parliament

To understand the different pathways into UK parliamentary politics, a range of factors should be considered. First, a distinction can be made between the 'traditional' route into politics and what has become an increasingly 'professionalised' route. Traditional pathways are characterised by a background of involvement in the relevant political party at a local or regional level, such as by serving as a councillor, or, in the case of the Labour Party, through trade union activism (Durose et al, 2013, p 251). The so-called professionalised route typically involves paid employment in or around Westminster – for example, as a special advisor, known as a 'SPAD'. A university education is a defining feature of the professionalised pathway into politics (Durose et al, 2013).

Turning to our sample of 32 SWMPs, 27 (84.4 per cent) had previous political experience at regional, local or party level, with 23 (71.9 per cent) having served as elected councillors. Judging by this indicator, most SWMPs followed the traditional path into politics, as outlined by Durose et al (2013). This is also supported by their average age at entry into Parliament, which, at 44.4 years, is similar to the average of 43 in 2015 and 42 in 2019. In a 'professionalised' group, we would expect to see a younger average age at entry because politics is their first profession. SWMP Beverley Hughes, a former probation officer, is a good example of someone who became an MP via the 'traditional' route, as she was elected to Parliament in 1997 aged 47 years, having served as a Trafford borough councillor since 1986.

In terms of the 'professionalised' route into politics, only two SWMPs (6.3 per cent) had worked as a case worker for an MP, while three (9.4 per cent) had worked for a union and two (6.3 per cent) had been employed by an executive party committee. The traditional route appears to be more

closely associated with Labour-dominated Parliaments, in which SWMPs are more likely to be present. While 62 per cent of the MPs in the 1997 Labour-dominated intake had a background in local elected politics, this proportion fell to 41.6 per cent in the hung Parliament of 2010 (Allen, 2013, p 690). In the random occupation group of MPs, which we created for comparison, only 52 per cent had experience as local councillors, while more of them were parliamentary researchers or personal assistants for other MPs (18.8 per cent), political researchers for councils (6.3 per cent) or involved with a union (18.8 per cent). It seems MPs in random occupations, despite belonging to the same party, age group and region, are somewhat closer to the professionalised route into politics than SWMPs.

Parliamentary careers

Career progression once in Parliament is probably best measured in terms of advances to frontbench positions. Between 1945 and 1974, 28.2 per cent of MPs held ministerial office while between 1974 and 1992 this proportion rose to 45.6 per cent (Rush, 1994). This overall trend reflects the supposed increasing professionalisation of politics plus the expansion of government posts such that the opportunities for MPs to carve out a career within Parliament have grown. Of the 31 SWMPs (excluding the Plaid Cymru MP, who would not have been eligible for a frontbench role), 19 (61.3 per cent) held a frontbench (or shadow) position at some point in their Parliamentary career and 6 (19.4 per cent) of them held cabinet or shadow cabinet roles.

For comparison of SWMPs and non-SWMPs, we focused on Labour and Conservative MPs elected between 2010 and 2023 only. Data collected from UK Parliament (2023) show that 71.9 per cent of this group had held either a ministerial or a shadow ministerial position at some point in their career. This was the case for a higher share of the 16 SWMPs elected during the same period, with 14 (87.5 per cent) having held a frontbench or shadow position at some point. SWMP Tessa Jowell, for example, was a Labour MP for 23 years, between 1992 and 2015, and held a range of major ministerial positions in the cabinets of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown as well as opposition frontbench roles.

In terms of tenure, in 2019 the median time in Parliament of all retiring MPs was 18 years (Cowley, 2022). The median tenure of SWMPs who had left Parliament by 2019 was slightly lower, at 14 years. However, seven SWMPs achieved a tenure of more than 20 years, showing that some of them have served for long periods. Like Tessa Jowell, Hilary Armstrong had a long and distinguished parliamentary career as a Labour MP, sitting, like Jowell, for 23 years, between 1987 and 2010. She held multiple major ministerial portfolios in government under Tony Blair and subsequently was a shadow minister. The relationship between political careers and social

work practice was the subject of a social work conference panel event held in 2020 that featured Hilary Armstrong and two other prominent social worker politicians, Mark Drakeford and Julie Morgan (see Scourfield and Warner, 2022).

Careers after Parliament

The professionalisation of politics suggests that more politicians commit the majority of their time to politics, can live off it and have a long-term interest in career maintenance (Borchert, 2003). This means that MPs can leave their pre-politics careers behind. After full-time politics, they might retire but maintain honorary or voluntary positions in charities, while for others their political career can act as a springboard into a further paid position in administrative or other roles.

Of our 32 SWMPs, eight were incumbents, two died in office and no information is known for one. Of the remaining 21, among those who left Parliament, none returned to social work and only two (9.5 per cent) pursued related fields. Cathy Jamieson became chief executive of Care Visions, which provides residential and foster care placements for vulnerable young people in Scotland. Hilton Dawson became chief executive of a care charity and was also chief executive of the BASW.

The low number of only two SWMPs returning to the social work field can be compared with four SWMPs who retired directly from Parliament, five who went to the House of Lords and six who stayed in other politics and related fields (being elected to regional parliaments, returning to local councils, becoming a mayor, founding new parties or becoming a police and crime commissioner). The remaining four SWMPs became consultants or writers. From these figures, we can conclude that the SWMPs largely leave their profession behind for a professional career in politics and do not return to it. This is in stark contrast to barrister MPs, 50 per cent of whom returned to law after leaving Parliament. In this light, it is particularly interesting to have found one case of a non-SWMP, Anne Begg, whose career moved *closer* to social work after leaving the House of Commons. She was appointed a Council member of the Scottish Social Services Council, the regulatory body for social and care workers in Scotland (Begg, nd).

Social advocacy

We define social advocacy as the substantive representation of vulnerable groups and expected this to be reflected in MPs' engagement in different committees or ministries. On policy, MPs with a background in social work might be expected to pursue more socially oriented goals – in other words, to engage in social advocacy more than their colleagues with different

backgrounds. To test this, we collected data on SWMPs' government/opposition (frontbench) posts as well as their membership of committees (as found on the House of Commons members career webpage; UK Parliament, 2023). These committees/frontbench posts were coded as social advocacy related if they had a direct connection to a social justice issue, such as immigration, equalities and poverty and/or a direct connection to a social work practice domain, such as mental health, older people, health and education (as this encompasses children and families). Examples of social advocacy committees include those on: Education and Employment, Health and Social Care, and Levelling Up, Housing and Communities. Typical non-social advocacy posts would include those related to: Defence, Energy and Climate Change, Trade and Industry, and Science.

As noted earlier, of the 31 SWMPs who were eligible, 19 (61.3 per cent) held a frontbench position at some point in their career. For 63 per cent of these 19, at least one of the positions was in a social advocacy ministry (see Table 11.2). However, most of them worked in other fields during their time in Westminster as well. Only 32 per cent held a majority of their positions in social advocacy fields. The numbers for committee memberships were fairly similar: 31 of 32 (96.9 per cent) had committee positions listed on their career page; for 26 per cent, the majority were social advocacy committees.

Comparing these numbers to other professions, barristers stand out as the professionals least inclined to be involved in social advocacy-related policy work, particularly at ministry level. The bulk of their ministerial work is in non-social advocacy related arenas. Turning to committee work, the share of MPs across all the groups that had membership of at least one social advocacy committee ranged from 62 per cent to 71 per cent. However, when it comes to having a preponderance of activities on social advocacy committees, the

Table 11.2: Membership in social advocacy ministries and committees, 1992–2022

	SWMPs (%)	Random occupation MPs (%)	Teacher MPs (%)	Solicitor MPs (%)	Barrister MPs (%)
MP was part of **at least 1** social advocacy ministry	63	65	57	63	27
The **majority** of the MP's ministry positions were in social advocacy ministries	32	15	24	4	0
The MP was part of **at least 1** social advocacy committee	71	66	64	70	62
The **majority** of the MP's committee positions were in social advocacy committees	26	24	14	7	10

SWMPs and MPs in the random occupation group appear to be closely matched between 24% and 26%. In contrast, out of all the groups, it was solicitors who seemed to focus almost exclusively on non-social advocacy fields, with barristers – the only group that could not be matched by party and was mainly made up of Conservative MPs – not far behind.

The UK Parliament also houses All-Party Parliamentary Groups (APPGs), which are informal, cross-party groups formed by members of both chambers who share a common interest in a particular policy area (Parallel Parliament, 2024). The APPG on Social Work was linked with the BASW and consisted of ten members, only two of which were former social workers. Notably this means that there were eight other members who shared a strong interest in social work *without* having any professional background in the field. This shows that a background in social work is no requirement for a focus on social advocacy and *may* also suggest a disidentification with their profession on the part of those SWMPs who were not involved.

Similarly, not all SWMPs focus on social work-related issues. Sarah Atherton was an SWMP whose activities in Parliament focused on non-social advocacy themes. A former generic social worker, she previously sat on the Defence Select Committee, leading its inquiry into the experiences of women in the military, and was the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Wales Office and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. In contrast, the political activities of Paul Goggins, a former children's social worker, were strongly aligned with social advocacy themes. He was a junior minister for prisons and the probation service, then the voluntary and community sector. He also served on the Social Work and Poverty APPGs.

Conclusion

Our analysis suggests that political party is the key factor in the political recruitment and routes into Parliament of individuals from socially oriented professions such as social work. When Labour is popular electorally, we tend to see more such professionals elected. In future work, it would be interesting to check if this held true in the 2024 general election, particularly given Labour's large majority.

Once in Parliament, while the SWMPs in our study show a slightly stronger focus on social advocacy ministries and committees compared with MPs from other professions, the biggest difference was again along party lines. Furthermore, our analysis shows that a significant proportion of SWMPs are drawn to engage in activities that are firmly outside the social advocacy domain. Rather than using their political position primarily to advocate for social issues that might be considered well-aligned with social work's social justice and human rights agenda, they also use it to stretch their experience in other policy directions, such as defence or foreign policy. Future research

might address what motivates these individuals to adopt this approach and, specifically, whether *dis*identification with social work may be a factor. To be taken seriously in politics, perhaps a close affiliation with 'soft' issues as compared with the 'hard' politics of, say, defence is not considered a good strategy. None of the SWMPs in our study returned to social work, suggesting that – like many other MPs, aside from barristers – their political career supplants their original profession. Given that the SWMPs reflect the gender dynamics of the profession in terms of the recruitment of men to more powerful leadership positions, further research should also consider the role that gender plays in this complex picture of politics, power and advocacy.

It is notable that meaningful political activity relating to issues such as defence or foreign policy is only possible in Westminster, whereas advancing social advocacy goals can be effectively pursued at regional or local levels as well as in Westminster. Another avenue for further research would, therefore, usefully focus on the devolved powers and their strong social advocacy focus, as well as these matters for England in Westminster. Similarly, future work should also consider the relationship between social advocacy and social work at local council level.

It is clear from the literature that many British MPs perform 'social advocacy' in their constituency work to the extent that they are seen to become 'like' social workers in certain respects. This may reflect the nature of political representation in a first-past-the-post electoral system, where the connection between an MP and their constituents has a deeply symbolic importance in the public and political imagination. Future research might explore the nature and extent of the constituency work carried out by SWMPs compared with their non-social worker colleagues. Closer analysis of these activities would further deepen our understanding of what characterises social workers holding political office in the UK context.

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