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BRINGING CARE EXPERIENCE TO SOCIAL WORK CAPACITY BUILDING IN UGANDA

Consultation Report

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DEFINITIONS

Alternative family care: Care for children outside of their parental care that includes foster care, adoption, kinship, guardianship or kafala.

Caregiver/carer: A parent or guardian who is charged with the responsibility for a child's welfare.

Care experienced individuals: Children already separated from their families and in alternative care (residential care, kinship care, foster care). Children reintegrated from residential care and their families and young people who have grown up in alternative care and are now living in the community, or who are preparing for this transition.

Care leaver: Anyone who spent time in care as a child or young adult. Such care could be in foster care, institutional care (mainly children's homes), or other arrangements outside the immediate or extended family.

Care reform: Improvements to the legal and policy framework, structures and resources that prevent family separation, support families to care for children well, determine and deliver alternative care and promote reintegration.¹

Child Care Institution: In Ugandan law these are also known as Children's homes, Children's villages, and Baby Homes according to the Children and Baby Home Regulations.

Community: Individuals or groups of people, organizations and institutions (formal and informal) where the child and family live.

Child: Any human being under the age of 18 years.²

Family: Relatives of a child, including both immediate family (mother, father, stepparents, siblings, grandparents), and extended family also referred to as relatives or 'kin' (aunts, uncles, cousins).

Foster Care / Foster Care Placement: Placement of a child with a person who is not his or her parent or relative but who is willing, with support and supervision, to undertake the care and maintenance of the child (National Framework for Alternative Care (NFCA) 2012, Children Act Cap 59 as amended 2016). Internationally, Foster Care is defined as situations where children are placed by a competent authority in alternative care—the domestic environment of a family other than children's own family, that has been selected qualified, approved and supervised for providing such care.

Kinship Care: Family-based care within a child's extended family or with close friends of the family who are known to the child. It is the care of a child by relatives, also called relative placement.³

Life skills: Skills that are necessary to fully participate in everyday life.

¹ Adapted from UNICEF Eastern and Southern Africa Regional Office (ESARO) and Changing the Way We Care (CTWWC), *An introduction to care reform*, 2022

² United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989) and African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (1990)

³ Uganda Ministry of Gender, Labour and Social Development (MGLSD), *The National Framework for Alternative Care 2012*.

Reintegration: “Process of a separated child making what is anticipated to be a permanent transition back to his or her immediate or extended family and community (usually of origin), in order to receive protection and care and to find a sense of belonging and purpose in all spheres of life.”⁴

Social service workforce: The social service workforce refers to a broad range of governmental and nongovernmental, paid or unpaid, professionals and paraprofessionals who work with vulnerable children, youth, adults, older persons, persons with disabilities, families and communities to ensure healthy development and well-being. The social service workforce focuses on preventative, responsive and promotive services; they prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and family separation.

The social service workforce constitutes a broad array of practitioners, researchers, managers and educators, including, but not limited to: social workers, social educators, social pedagogues, child care workers, youth workers, child and youth care workers, community development workers/community liaison officers, community workers, welfare officers, social/cultural animators and case managers.⁵

⁴ The Interagency Group on Reintegration, *Reaching for Home, Global learning on Family Reintegration in low and lower-middle income countries*, 2013

⁵ Adapted from: Global Social Service Workforce Alliance, ‘Definition of the Social Service Workforce’, 2016. Access here: <https://socialserviceworkforce.org/the-workforce/defining-the-workforce/>

INTRODUCTION

Global and regional guidance shows that maximum efforts must be made to keep children in caring and protective families, and to provide safe and high-quality alternative care when this is not possible.⁶ In many countries, including Uganda, further efforts are needed before these goals can be achieved. Too many children remain in harmful institutional care, living alone on the streets, or in families where they are vulnerable to abuse, neglect or exploitation.⁷ Young people leaving care to live independently for the first time are also poorly supported.⁸

Social workers play a vital role in supporting vulnerable families, children in different care settings, reintegrated children and young adults who had spent time in children's homes and now live in the community (care leavers). For these contributions to be relevant and effective, it is vital that social workers first understand what children, young adult care leavers, and parents or other family members caring for children (caregivers) want and need from them. To explore these expectations, Child's i Foundation consulted 133 children, young adult care leavers and caregivers in Uganda. These individuals all had experience of living in vulnerable families, living in residential care, family reintegration, or leaving care to live independently as adults. They are referred to collectively as 'care-experienced individuals' throughout this report.

The consultations are part of a broader initiative designed to bring the voices of care experienced individuals to social worker capacity building. The findings have been used to develop training tools that encourage social workers to change their practices to better meet the needs and wishes of care experienced individuals. The findings are also being used to advocate for broader changes to policies and guidance around the role and capacities of social workers. It is recognised that it may not be possible or advisable for social workers to fulfil all of the roles or display all of the characteristics asked of them by the participants during the consultations. The ramifications of the findings for policy and practice are explored at the end of the document.

The consultations and broader project were initiated by the Global Social Service Workforce Alliance (GSSWA), with funding from the Martin James Foundation. In addition to Uganda, a similar process is being carried out in India and Brazil and resources from these countries can be found when available on the GSSWA website.

⁶ United Nations (1989) *Convention on the Rights of the Child*, African Union (1990) *African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child*, UN (2009) *Guidelines for the alternative care of children*

⁷ See: <https://mglsd.go.ug/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Pocket-handbook-facts-figures-2021.22.pdf>

⁸ See: https://bettercarenetwork.org/sites/default/files/UCL_Report_v06a.pdf

What do we mean by care experienced individual?

For the purpose of this project, a care experience individuals is a child, care leaver or caregiver who has experience of the care system. This includes:

- Children in families vulnerable to separation.
- Children already separated from their families and in alternative care (residential, kinship or foster care).
- The parents or other family members who cared for children before entering alternative care.
- Foster and kinship carers.
- Children reintegrated from alternative care back to their families and their caregivers.
- Young people who have grown up in alternative care and are now living in the community, or who are preparing for this transition.

In the consultations in Uganda, we focused on care leavers already living in the community, children in vulnerable families and their caregivers and children reintegrated back to their families and their caregivers.

HOW WERE THESE CONSULTATIONS CARRIED OUT?

The consultations involved group discussions and interviews with 133 care experienced individuals, as outlined in Table 1 below. The consultations took place in Kampala, and in rural and peri-urban areas in Mpigi district. The consultations used creative and participatory methods to explore the areas of support required of social workers, and attributes and skills that social workers need to fulfil these roles.

Table 1: Participants in the consultations

Participant category	Number of participants
Young adult care leavers - Male	15
Young adult care leavers - Female	16
Fathers/ male caregivers	20
Mothers/ female caregivers	28
Boys - in families (reintegrated or vulnerable to separation)	26
Girls - in families (reintegrated or vulnerable to separation)	28
Total	133

Participants were identified in a variety of ways. Young adult care leavers were largely chosen from the Association of Care Leavers Uganda. Reintegrated children and their caregivers were chosen through connections at specific children's homes where Child's i Foundation has supported the closure or transitioning/ repurposing of facilities as part of de-institutionalised efforts. Around half of the participants from vulnerable families were from communities where Child's i Foundation has programmes, though not all of these participants have had direct contact with Child's i Foundation. Other members of vulnerable families were chosen through connections with other existing community structures that work to support vulnerable families.

It is recognised that choosing participants with connections to the Association of Care Leavers Uganda, Child's i Foundation and other community structures may introduce a degree of bias into the findings. However, it was felt to be important to find participants who has some experienced of support from social workers that they could reflect on during the consultations. Having an established relationships of trust with participants was also essential, as was being able to offer follow-up support and counselling should participants become distress or reveal situations of harm to a child or adult during the consultations.

WHO ARE SOCIAL WORKERS?

The consultations used the definition of the social service workforce developed by the GSSWA:

“The social service workforce refers to a broad range of governmental and non-governmental, paid or unpaid, professionals and paraprofessionals who work with vulnerable children, youth, adults, older persons, persons with disabilities, families and communities to ensure healthy development and well-being. The social service workforce focuses on preventative, responsive and promotive services; they prevent and respond to violence, abuse, exploitation, neglect and family separation.

The social service workforce constitutes a broad array of practitioners, researchers, managers and educators, including – but not limited to: social workers, social educators, social pedagogues, child care workers, youth workers, child and youth care workers, community development workers/community liaison officers, community workers, welfare officers, social/cultural animators and case managers.”⁹

As indicated by this definition, the workforce includes volunteers and professionals, and those working with both Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) and government. These individuals have numerous titles and have received varying levels of training. They may support various vulnerable groups, though in these consultations, social workers working on children’s care were focused on. This includes social workers trying to prevent family separation, support children in alternative care, and reintegrate separated children and **young adult care leavers** back to families and communities. Although the GSSWA definition uses the term ‘social services workforce’, in this document, the term ‘social worker’ is used as this is the more common term in Uganda.

At the start of each group discussion, efforts were made to explore the term ‘social worker’ to ensure a common understanding between participants and facilitators. From these discussions, it is clear that the term ‘social worker’ in Uganda mainly refers to the following.

- Staff working in children’s homes and performing social work functions.
- NGO social workers
- District probation and social welfare officers

Likely owing to the way that participants were selected, participants more commonly spoke of NGO and children’s home social workers than government social workers. This should be considered when interpreting the findings. The quotes in Box 1 show how **young women care leavers** perceived and described social workers.

⁹ Global Social Service Workforce Alliance definition available [here](#).

Box 1: How young women care leavers describe social workers

“Someone working on behalf of an organisation. The person who is in the field. Like a messenger for an organisation. They go into the field and do research and take back information to the organisation, with the aim of helping.”

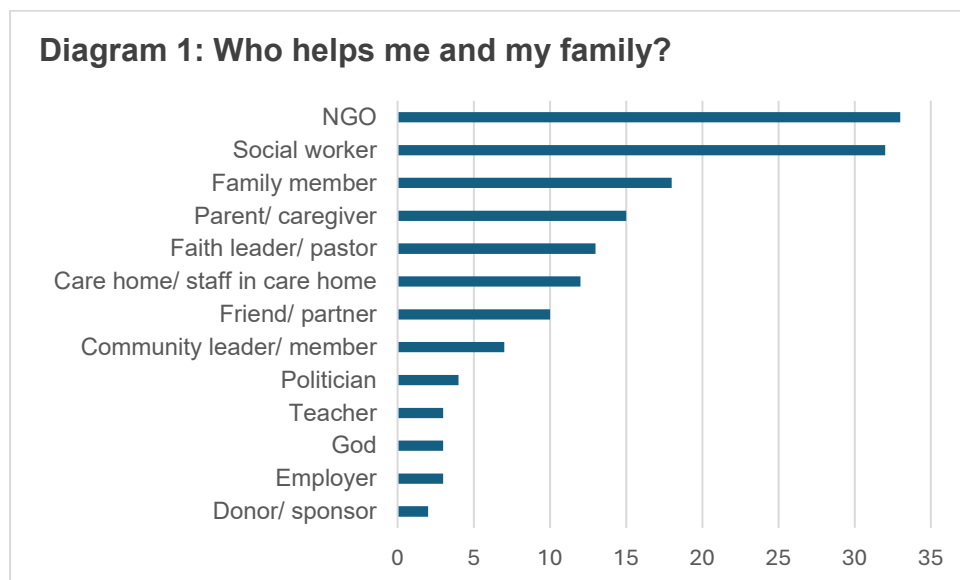
“A social worker is a mediator between the community and the organisation according to their required needs.”

“A social worker is a professional – though some are not professional and do the work really well.”

HOW IMPORTANT ARE SOCIAL WORKERS IN OUR LIVES?

During the consultations, participants were asked who helped them and their families at times of need, particularly when challenges around children's care emerged, such as abuse in families or placement into alternative care. Social workers were widely recognised as playing a role. As shown in Diagram 1, they are the second most likely group to be mentioned in reference to questions about who helps children and young adult care leavers and their families. Note that social workers are listed here only when it was clear that the person mentioned fitted into the definition of social workers outlined above. Participants often spoke more generically about NGOs or children's homes, or the staff working for them, some of whom could also have been social workers.

Although these findings clearly indicate a strong role for social workers in supporting children's care, it is important not to over-emphasise these contributions. As the consultations were designed to explore the role and effectiveness of social workers, participants were deliberately selected that already had some experience of social workers. It is likely that many children in vulnerable families or in informal forms of alternative care, such as kinship care, will have had no or much more limited contact with social workers and would have therefore provided different answers. It is also the case that if the number of times participants mentioned the help of parents, caregivers, family members, friends and partners is combined this figure exceeds that of social workers. This highlights the importance of informal supports from family and community.



HOW CAN SOCIAL WORKERS HELP ME AND MY FAMILY?

The word cloud in Diagram 2 shows the number of times that different forms of support were mentioned in response to questions about how social workers were or could support care experienced individuals. The larger the words in the cloud, the more time this was highlighted during the discussions.

Diagram 2: Word cloud on the how social workers can support care experienced individuals



Overall, support focused on increasing household incomes was the form on support most mentioned during the group discussions. This largely referred to help through NGO run income generating projects such as loans to set up small businesses. Participants also referred to assistance accessing government social protection schemes and the provision of material goods (such as a new mattress for a reintegrated child). The greater emphasis on livelihoods programmes suggests that caregivers and young adult care leavers want to become self-sufficient and not rely on handouts.

“When they offered to give my child back, I told them I didn’t have bedding for her, so they gave mattress, blanket and other things. When they asked what I needed, I said ‘if you could give me a cow, I am old but I can take care of the cow, if it produces I could get milk and sell it and breed more cows. Before long, I would have enough cows to leave behind for my children as a start for their lives’.” (Elderly male kinship carer of a reintegrated child, Mpigi)

The second most mentioned form of support was help with schooling and vocational training. This largely referred to help with school fees, books or uniforms, suggesting that this is another form of material support. Young adult care leavers also highlighted the need for practical vocational training so that they could earn a living.

“A lot of times when we have failed to clear the school fees, I talk to Uncle X [a social worker] and he helps us.” (Girl in a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

These findings indicate a need to explore the role of social workers in providing social protection. Evidence from elsewhere in the region indicates advantages and disadvantages of social workers playing this role.¹⁰ Social workers can help target and deliver social protection to the most vulnerable groups as they often know who these families are. As indicated by the quote below, providing material assistance can help to build relationships of trust, allowing social workers to fulfil their other functions more effectively. However, spending time delivering social protection may not be best use of social workers skills, and may leave them with limited time to protect vulnerable children from harm.

“I think social worker should not visit empty handed, yes counselling is important, but they should be able to give us start-up capital.” (Mother of a reintegrated child, Mpigi)

After material support and help with school fees, guidance and emotional support were most often highlighted by participants. Several forms of guidance were referenced by participants, as outlined in Diagram 3 and the quotes below.

Diagram 3: Forms of support guidance highlighted during the consultations

Child and young adult care leavers	Caregivers
• Adjusting to life in the community (e.g. living without structures or rules, learning how to do household chores) • Dealing with relationships – with other family members, friends, romantic partners or those in the wider community. • Learning to be more disciplined – to get up and go to college or work. • Moral guidance – learning wrong from right, respecting adults, not being led astray by peers. • Finding work or making choices in relation to education.	• The importance of children remaining in family, and how to prevent separation/enable reintegration. • Dealing with changing and challenging family dynamics • Parenting and disciplining children

¹⁰ UNICEF, *Creating synergies between social protection and care reform in Eastern and Southern Africa*, 2022.

“While we are growing [in a children’s home], we have routine, we wake up, we shower, we play, we eat, we shower, we sleep, we do not learn anything. The life they give us is a rich life, a privileged life, which is not forever. I think they should train us in real life experience. When you leave the orphanage, the challenges are many. They spoon feed us and when we leave we go back to zero.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

“I needed someone to listen to me and advise me before deciding on any decision.” (Young man care leaver, Kampala)

“The social worker should give advice to children on how to behave in the community.” (Boy reintegrated from residential care, Mpigi)

“They have helped us to learn chores like washing clothes, sweeping the compound that helped us in community.” (Girl reintegrated from residential care, Mpigi)

“Children returned home have different behaviours, they do not listen and they do not want to listen to their parents, so we need social workers to follow up, to put the children back in line.” (Mother of a child reintegrated from residential care, Mpigi)

Participants highlighted multiple forms of emotional support that they wanted from social workers including calming them down so that they could think rationally, reducing the stress and pressure they were under, comforting them when upset, encouraging them, and making them feel less alone.

“After some people have lost their loved ones they become so sad and sorrowful so they need counselling.” (Girl from a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

Other forms of support from social workers less commonly mentioned included the following.

- Following up on children and caregivers living in the community after having left residential care to monitor their wellbeing. This was described as needing to happen regularly, especially when children or young adults first leave care.
- Making referrals to other organisations for assistance.
- Protecting children from abuse or neglect.
- Helping children and families access support networks in the wider extended family and community.

“We spend a lot of time in orphanages with social workers, and even though we return to our families, we’re often more accustomed to them than to our own family. It’s important that they continue to provide counselling and support. Even if they can’t offer material assistance, ongoing counselling and follow-up are essential for helping us adjust and succeed.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

The consultations show that support needs from social workers vary, indicating that social workers role may need to be tailored to specific groups. For example, caregivers and children both highlighted material forms of support most often. However, children were more likely to specifically reference help with school fees than caregivers, suggesting that they prioritise their education more. Young adult care leavers were more likely to highlight guidance and emotional support than other participants. As illustrated by Diagram 3, forms of guidance required from social workers also varied by category of participant. There were no strong differences in support needs by gender, though female participants were a little more likely to highly emotional support than male participants.

These consultations were not intended to map the support provided by social workers against the support requested by care experienced individuals. However, during the discussions, some commonly identified gaps in support did emerge:

- Insufficient material or livelihoods support.
- Limited educational assistance, especially vocational or further education for care leavers.
- Timely emotional/ mental health support from social workers.
- Insufficient monitoring and follow-up.

“The challenge I found we did not have food to eat and there was no money at home.” (Girl reintegrated from residential care, Mpigi)

“Organisations should continue supporting individuals until they finish high school or university, but often they let you go when you're young, leaving you with no job prospects or options for continuing your education. It feels like they don't really help at all.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

“What missed when I went back home there was that critical moment when you needed people to come and visit you and talk to you and they were not there. Instead, they come later on when you don't need them.” (Young man care leaver, Kampala)

“Social worker do not follow up most of the time. I see children brought back [from residential care] in my community, and they have already dropped out of school, and are wandering around the village.” (Mother of a reintegrated child, Mpigi)

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF SOCIAL WORKERS ACROSS THE CONTINUUM OF CARE?

The support provided by social workers was seen to be needed to prevent family separation, help children in alternative care, enable reintegration back to families, and assist young adult care leavers living independently in the community for the first time. The support needs identified by participants for each of these situations is summarised below.

Support needs to prevent family separation

- Material and livelihoods support.
- Help with school fees..
- Guidance on the importance of children growing up in a family.
- Encouragement so that they don't give up when times are hard.
- Support to children in kinship care, or moving children from parental to kinship care so that they don't end up in residential care.
- Referrals to other organisations.
- Help for men who have lost their wives and don't know how to care for their children.

“Our parents used to drink, spend money on unnecessary things and they had the mindset that investing in children was like a waste of money. So our parents need to be educated on many things like the value of educating a child and child growing up in a family.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

“The first thing the social worker should do or should have done would be to get them a counsellor to guide them and to comfort them and to let them know that even if the tragedy has befallen their house this is not the end of the world, it's not the end of everything.” (Male caregiver from a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

“When you marry and stay with your wife and bear children, there is a level towards which you aspire to reach. The mother plays a certain role, the father also plays a certain role. ...So should one of those people die, it's like a bicycle losing its chain. Out of 10 men, there might be only two who can keep up and keep the house on the same footing as it was before they lost their wife.” (Male caregiver who has lost his wife, Mpigi)

Support needs for children and young people in residential care

- Help adjusting when children first arrive in residential care, including around missing their family and making new friends.
- Emotional support when children worry about their family back at home, or when they wonder why they have been sent to residential care and not their siblings.
- Help ensuring children stay in touch with their family and see them regularly.

- Someone to monitor children's wellbeing and make sure they are not being harmed by staff or other children, that they have enough food to eat, have some privacy and somewhere appropriate to sleep.
- Life-skills training and guidance to prepare children for returning to their families or living independently for the first time.

"When you get a 10-year-old, and you place them in a completely new environment at 10 years old, and you introduce them to new people you just leave them there with these people, you are torturing the child's mind... You have to introduce him to new people a new culture, you have to tell him here we do things like this, we don't do them like that. Here we eat food at 6:00 pm, we wake up at this time. It's really different from what they have been experiencing." (Male caregiver, vulnerable family, Mpigi)

"I missed my family, siblings and parents. In a new place with new people you can't share some personal issues you would love to share, you even fear approaching the caretaker to discuss these issues." (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

"I was from the village, and things were really hard because I was a village girl and didn't know much. I was very young to be separated from my mother. I was getting free education and food, so I had no problem with that. But the loneliness and not having anyone to talk to made it tough, and I used to cry. Meeting new people and trying to associate with them was really hard, but I managed to bear it." (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

Support needs for parents of children in residential

- Emotional support as they miss their children.
- Persuading that they should take children back.
- Help solving the problems that led to the child being placed into residential care so that they can be reunited again.
- Help rebuilding damaged relationships with their children.

"No parent ever wants a child to be separated from their child, so the pain is too much. When you have eaten, you start asking yourself if my child has eaten." (Mother of a child in residential care)

Support needs for children reintegrated from residential care and their families

- All of the supports listed above around preventing family separation to stop children from being re-separated.
- Help rebuilding damaged family relationships, including work with parents and siblings.
- Help adjusting to their new life and to not feel like they are a burden on the family.

- Assistance so that children can continue with their education, such as registering in a new school.
- On-going help building life-skills and relationships with friends and siblings.
- Emotional/ mental health support if children miss their friends and caregivers back in the care home.
- Monitoring visits and calls to check on children's wellbeing.
- Guidance around children's work and ensuring that any work carried out by children is not exploitative or harmful, and allows them to also attend school.

"For me, life became even more challenging after leaving the care home because I returned to my home and the situation was more difficult. At home, they acted like they didn't need me. I felt like a burden to them, and they weren't used to me being around." (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

"My daughter faced big challenges when she returned home. She was bullied by my other children, who even made up a song with lyrics about her showing off but failing and coming back. My daughter didn't know why she had to come back home so she was confused..... At home, she didn't have everything she was used to, which made her feel lonely and uncared for." (Mother of a girl reintegrated from residential care, Mpigi)

"The boy that you are returning to me has been feeling well while he was in your care, has been drinking some milk, has been eating some eggs which I cannot provide for him at home, considering all the other children I have. So if there is any help I would request then it is financial. His bedding- the bed, the bed sheets, blanket and the mattress- he has been using in the care home - if possible I would request that it is returned together with him." (Father of a boy reintegrated from residential care, Mpigi)

"When kids are in an orphanage, they don't have to do any work. So, when they come home and are asked to help around the house, they find it challenging." (Female caregiver of a reintegrated child, Mpigi)

"I also think that that [reintegrated] children will be having a mental problem because of the way they are being tossed from one place to another to the other." (Father of a reintegrated child, Mpigi)

Support needs for young adult care leavers returning to families or living independently for the first time

- Many of the same supports as children reintegrated from residential care.
- Some flexibility about when young people leave residential care, so that they can leave when they are ready.

- Help adjusting from having everything done for them in the care home to having to do everything for themselves.
- Dealing with pity and discrimination once others discover they have grown up in care.
- A package of support covering financial help to set up home, help with college fees, livelihoods and employment support so that care leavers can earn a living, and help finding housing.
- Guidance around romantic relationships and forming new friendships in the community.
- Regular monitoring visits until care leavers are fully settled in the community, often lasting several years.

“You are used to be given everything, so you don’t know anything about struggle. We need counselling, briefing about the outside world, advice on who we should mix with.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

“When people find out that you were raised in the home there is a way people perceive you negatively and somehow discriminate against you, take pity on you.” (Young man care leaver, Kampala)

“[Social workers] should not leave you abruptly. They should check on you and your family.” (Young man care leaver, Kampala)

WHAT MAKES A GOOD SOCIAL WORKER?

During the consultations, children, young adult care leavers and caregivers were asked about what makes a good social worker. Their responses are summarised in the word cloud in diagram 4, with the larger word representing the qualities that were mentioned more often during the consultations. The responses broadly fit into three categories:

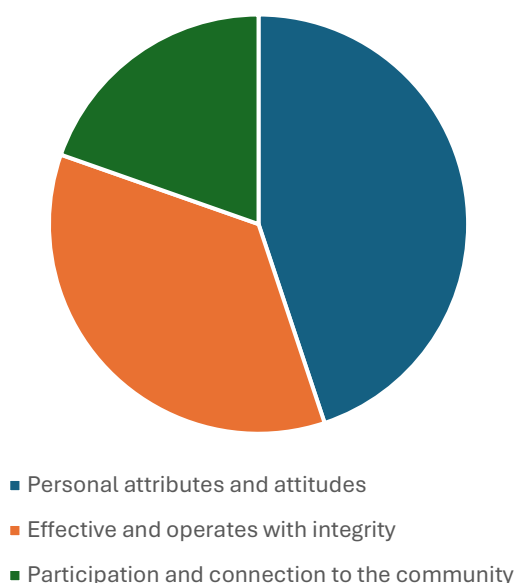
1. Personal attributes and attitudes.
2. Being effective and operating with integrity.
3. Participation and connection to the community.

As illustrated in diagram 5 below, of these three categories personal attributes and attitudes was mentioned most frequently, followed by being effective and operating with integrity and then participation and connection to the community.

Diagram 4: What makes a good social worker?



Diagram 5: Responses to questions on what makes a good social worker by category



The characteristics of a good social worker valued by participants are listed below under each of these three categories. This is done in order of the number of times the characteristic was highlighted during the consultations.

Personal attributes and attitudes

- **Empathy and kindness**

“[Social workers should not] talk to you with no empathy at all, make you feel like this is all your fault, like it's your doing and you deserve it.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

“Social worker should understand my pain and the difficulties I might be facing.” (Female caregiver from a vulnerable family, Kampala)

“A good social worker should make you her friend and bring you close and shows you love so that you can be able to open up.” (Female caregiver from a vulnerable family, Kampala)

“A good social worker gives me help without hoping to get anything in return.” (Male caregiver from vulnerable family, Kampala)

“[A good social worker will not] make sure that you know that it's him or her who is helping you and that they are doing you a favour.” (Female caregiver from a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

- **Encouragement and hope.**

“Advising how you can make it – you can do more than you think.” (Female caregiver from a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

“Should use encouraging words...words like – ‘you’re stronger than you think, you’re capable, and I believe in you’, you know something like that so that you also start to believe in yourself.” (Female care leaver, Kampala)

- **Polite and not angry**

“First he greets you and your family.” (Male care leaver, Kampala)

“She should speak to me calmly not rudely or arrogantly. Her attitude matters.” (Female caregiver from a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

- **Friendly and positive.**

“A good social worker should be happy and helpful....her face is always happy.” (Girls reintegrated from residential care, Mpigi)

- **Acts with humility and is not superior, arrogant or judgemental.**

“A good social worker, upon visiting and finding us eating, should join us if we offer them food. Even if the meal is different from what they are accustomed to at their homes, they should eat with us and not show any signs of disgust towards our food.” (Female caregiver of a reintegrated child, Mpigi)

“[A social worker should not] come to your home and undermine you. She should not speak to you with the attitude that you are nothing, you are not worthy.” (Female caregiver from a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

“[A social work should not] makes you feel like they are doing you a favour, a very big one, or keep reminding you of your background.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

“They should not behave like they are wiser, smarter, know everything.” (Young man care leaver, Kampala)

Being effective and operating with integrity

- **Not corrupt.**

“[A social worker should not] take what he is supposed to give you and gives it to someone else, or even keep it for himself.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

“He should not make you pay for the services that are free.” (Young man care leaver, Kampala)

“A bad social worker asks for sex in return for support.” (Women caregiver from a vulnerable family, Kampala)

- **Maintains confidentiality.**

“Not going around sharing your problems with other people” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

“When you make a mistake, they should not tell everyone about it.” (Girl reintegrated from residential care, Kampala)

- **Honest and reliable.**

“Should be a good timekeeper. When they say ‘I am coming at 10am’, they come at 10am not 12” (Male caregiver from a vulnerable family, Kampala)

“My children really love [this social worker]. And they love him because he does not lie ...he does not make empty promises.” (Male caregiver from a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

- **Treats people equally and fairly**

“Some social workers have favourites, even when we were in the care home there are those children that are treated nicely and those ones that are not.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

- **Is not violent or exploitative**

“There are some who rape girls, the male social workers...When they come to support this family and there is this girl they are interested in. They support them in going to school but tell them that they have to give something in return. I have seen many of them in community they take advantage of girls.” (Boy from a vulnerable family, Kampala)

- **Having a strong moral compass, often based on religious values.**

“That child needs the attention of a God-fearing social worker who is kind, polite, and truthful doesn’t lie.” (Male caregivers from vulnerable family, Mpigi)

- **Easy to identify as a social worker**

“A good social worker should have identification because some people may come to the community when they are not social workers.” (Male caregivers from a vulnerable family, Kampala)

- **Takes action**

“They should not come and ask you, as if they are going to solve the problem or help, but then they don’t.” (Boy from a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

Participation and connection to the community

- **Is available to help, easy to contact, and will come to the community.**

“They should be available and ready to help at all times.” (Male caregiver from vulnerable family, Kampala)

“A good social worker should find us at our home so that they know what is really going on.” (Woman from a vulnerable family, Mpigi)

- **Consults, listens carefully and takes our perspective seriously.**

“Be good listeners – giving advice and not making decisions for us. They may need to make decisions for kids, but not for someone who is over 18. They just need to guide them, not make their decisions.” (Young woman care leaver, Kampala)

“Should assess the situation - ask you questions and also should brainstorm solutions together.” (Male caregiver or reintegrated child, Mpigi)

- **Takes time to build trust and relationships, and understand us and our community.**

“Should stick with one person until they stop because retelling the stories is not good.” (Young man care leaver, Kampala)

“They become so close to you, someone you can tell your problems to. You should at least know them a little.” (Young man care leaver, Kampala)

Differences in perspectives on what makes a good social workers

There were some differences in perceptions of a good social worker between categories of participant, including the following.

- Men and boys were more likely to highlight being listened to and social workers being honest, reliable and consistent than women and girls.
- Women and girls were more likely to emphasise the importance of social workers being available and coming to them than boys and men. This may perhaps reflect their time availability or being more confined to homes and the community due to their work and caring commitments.
- Young adult care leavers were particularly likely to highlight the importance of social workers showing humility rather than acting in an arrogant or superior way. This perhaps reflects their age and desire to be respected rather than patronised as they come into adulthood. This may also reflect care leavers engagement in the Association of Care Leavers Uganda which has exposed them to their rights to participate and given them opportunities to be heard which they appreciate.

Are social workers predominantly ‘good’?

In 11 of the group discussions, participants agreed that social workers in their community are predominantly ‘good’, in six discussions they felt that social workers mainly don’t meet the characteristics of a good social worker, and in three discussions participants felt that there was an even mix between good and not so good social workers. Areas where social workers were particularly seen to fail to live up to the standards expected of them by participants included the following.

- Corruption and abuse, including children being beaten by social workers in children’s homes and social workers demanding sex or payment for services.
- Favouritism and social workers not treating children, young adults and caregivers equally.

- Social workers being patronising, not listening to or respecting the perspectives of care experienced individuals and rushing conversations.
- Social workers making decisions for rather than with young adult care leavers.
- Social workers not keeping promises, being unreliable and not visiting when promised.
- A lack of consistency, with assigned social workers frequently changing.

It was not possible to determine if these criticisms are valid through the consultations. It may be the case that some of the individuals claiming to be social workers in communities are actually corrupt individuals seeking to get payment for services they never intended to provide. Regardless of whether these criticisms of social workers are valid, it is concerning that many care experienced individuals have negative perceptions of social workers. This is likely to affect the capacity of social workers to build relationships of trust.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Summary of findings

The care experienced individuals consulted for this project primarily want social workers who can offer support in four key areas:

- Increasing household incomes
- Help with schooling and vocational training, particularly paying school fees.
- Providing guidance across a range of areas including the importance of families for child wellbeing, life-skills and adjusting to living in the community after a period in residential care, building relationships, understanding right from wrong, and parenting.
- Emotional/ mental health support to stay calm, and deal with distress, stress and loneliness.

Other areas of support required by social workers include follow-up and monitoring once children or young adults leave children's homes to live in the community, referrals to other organisations, protecting children from harm, and help accessing family and community support networks. Support needs vary by group of care-experienced individual and may therefore need to be tailored to meet specific needs.

Social workers were seen to play a vital role in supporting children and families in a range of care settings. Children and their families need help from social workers to prevent family separation and enable family reintegration. Children in children's homes and their parents also need support and guidance, as do young adult care leavers living with families or independently in the community.

Participants wanted social workers with a combination of the right personal attributes and attitudes, the ability to take action and operate with integrity, and a willingness to consult and connect with them. According to those with care experience, social workers must be empathetic, kind, polite, respectful, cheerful and calm. They should offer encouragement and hope, act with humility and not be superior or arrogant. Social workers must not be corrupt, violent or exploitative. They should maintain confidentiality, be honest and reliable, take action to solve problems, and treat people equally and fairly. Social workers need to be easy to contact, and willing to visit the community regularly. They must take time to build trust and understand needs, listen to the perspectives of care experienced individuals, and take them seriously.

Social workers often play a positive role in the lives of the care experienced individuals consulted for this project. However, social workers are not meeting the expectations of some participants. Participants wanted more support across most of the areas of assistance they prioritise. They also cited examples of social workers being corrupt, unfair and patronising, not listening carefully to their needs, and not taking sufficient action to assist them.

Recommendations and next steps

Further analysis and discussion is now required to develop more concrete recommendations for social work recruitment, training, standard and support in Uganda. This analysis should centre on the following.

1. Review the roles of social workers within government and NGOs in Uganda to ensure that they reflect the priorities of care experienced individuals. This includes:
 - Reflecting carefully on the role that social workers should play in delivering social protection, and ensuring that social workers can, at the very least, provide referrals to effective support for poverty alleviation and school fees.
 - Considering the forms of guidance and emotional support that social workers need to provide, and ensuring that they have the necessary information and skills.
2. Recognise the vital role that social workers play in care reform. Find ways to ensure that:
 - There are sufficient social workers located in communities to prevent family separation and support reintegration, and that these social workers understand the needs of vulnerable children and their families.
 - Social workers in children's homes understand and can meet the needs of the children in their care and their families.
 - Social work support is provided for young adult care leavers that reflects their priorities.
3. Consider the recruitment of social workers, and whether selection processes assess the skills and attributes prioritised by care experienced individuals, such as kindness, empathy, humility, calmness, reliability, honesty, and the capacity to listen to and respect the perspectives of those with care experience. Aim to use recruitment processes to help ensure that social workers have the right motivations – a genuine desire to help vulnerable groups.
4. Review academic, government and NGO training frameworks, including pre and in-service training for social workers to ensure that they seek to enhance the skills and attributes prioritised by care experienced individuals.
5. Examine professional standards for social workers to ensure they address issues such as corruption, the importance of confidentiality, and safeguarding. Explore how these standards are enforced and the extent to which care experienced individuals have opportunities to make complaints against social workers.
6. Find ways to instil the importance of child, young adult care leaver and caregiver participation in social workers. For example:
 - Develop and include modules that share the voices of care experienced individuals in social work training, using the tools developed through this project.
 - Highlight the rights of children and young adult care leavers to participate in decisions which affect them, including in social work training, case management procedures and decision-making processes around care placements.
 - Support care leavers associations and networks.