Essay

The Past, Present, and Future of Social Work and Charities in the UK

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Abstract

The evolving relationship between the state and the voluntary sector in the United Kingdom has played a foundational role in the development of British social work. By tracing its origins from 19th-century charitable activity rooted in moral judgement and social hierarchy, to the contemporary professionalised and regulated form present today, this essay examines how these developments have shaped service provision. Particular attention is given to shifting power dynamics and the lived experience of service users. Whilst the professionalisation and regulation of each sector has introduced important safeguards and standards; they have also reinforced hierarchies that risk dehumanising beneficiaries and detracting from justice-orientated outcomes. Through a historical and legislative lens, this essay explores the benefits and limitations of these developments, advocating for a renewed focus on social justice, collaborative practice, and community-led approaches in the future of social work.

Keywords: Social Work England, British Social Work, Third-sector, Charity, Charity Organisation Society, UK Legislation, Professionalisation, Safeguarding, Regulation, Justice.

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Introduction

The relationship between the state and voluntary sector has played a fundamental role in the development of social work in the United Kingdom, from its origins in 19th century charitable activity, rooted in moral judgement and social hierarchy, to its present-day form professionalised and regulated form. This essay aims to explore how the professionalisation of both the charity and social work sectors has shaped service provision, particularly in relation to power and the experiences of those that use services. Whilst increased regulation and formalisation have introduced safeguards and standards, it has also reinforced harmful hierarchies that contribute to the dehumanisation of charity beneficiaries, shifting focus away from long-term justice-orientated outcomes. Drawing on historical context and legislation, I aim to examine the risks and benefits of

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these developments and argue for a renewed commitment to social justice, collaboration, and community-led practice in the future of social work.

A brief history

To understand the formation of charity and social work as we know it today, it is important to examine the role of the Charity Organisation Society (COS), founded in London in 1869. Often credited for the development of individual casework, the COS was described as "an association of gentlemen aided and abetted by the nobility and royalty" with the belief that "…it was the responsibility of the better-off to protect and develop the character of the poorer elements of society" (Humphreys p. 1, 2001). This paternalistic approach can be traced back to Britain's colonial past, where the white population often saw themselves as having a responsibility to 'save' the people they colonised, categorising them as either "deserving" or "undeserving" of help based on moralistic and racialised judgments. For example, abolitionist William Wilberforce and missionary Charles Grant used emotionally charged narratives to justify their causes, portraying people as in need of rescuing from moral degradation (Major pp. 251-263, 2012). These depictions used in Evangelical and Abolitionist circles worked to stir the emotions of the white and wealthy for the movements to gain funding and social status at the expense of the dignity and autonomy of those they claimed to help. Major (2012, pp. 251) described this notion as "the pornography of pain".

The COS pioneered a methodological and moralistic approach to charity that introduced the notion of the "deserving" and "undeserving" poor. To prevent those deemed underserving from accessing charitable support, the COS implemented investigative procedures to assess the background of all applicants to decide if they were deserving of support. Those who were not deserving of voluntary aid were left to the Poor Law authorities. A central aim of the COS was to coordinate charitable efforts with those of the state (Humphreys, 2001 pp. 23-96). The government at the time supported this notion and it was agreed that although the responsibility for the poor remained with the government, all other provision would be through the charity sector (Humphreys, 2001 pp. 24). Whilst this model of practice was presented as efficient and 'scientific', it introduced a system of surveillance and conditionality that reinforced power imbalances and laid the foundations for future social work and third-sector practices.

The Old Poor Law underwent amendment in 1834 following the Reform Act of 1832, which expanded voting rights to include most middle-class men (UK Parliament, 2025). This amendment aimed to reduce the risk of social revolution and promote the principles of Utilitarianism, which emphasises the greatest good for the greatest number of people. The Poor Law 1834 intended to lower the cost of poor relief by limiting relief only to able-bodied paupers through workhouses. The underlying notion behind this approach was the belief that individuals are inherently hedonistic, and as such, the state believed that by making poor relief less desirable, it could lower the overall cost of provision (UK Parliament, 2025). Not only was the Poor Law 1834 designed to discourage people's use of state support, but it was also used to dehumanise anyone who did use it.

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The National Archives (2025) presents the New Poor Law poster which depicts those in the workhouse with shaved heads and wearing the same clothes, stripped of any form of identity. This dehumanisation and criminalisation of the poor continued for over a century.

In 1948 the National Assistance Act was passed by the Labour government, bringing an end to the Poor Law. This act reformed the British social welfare system and created modern social care. The Act placed a duty on local authorities to provide accommodation for "disabled, sick, aged and other persons" (National Assistance Act 1948 c.29) and introduced the regulation of care homes. It also allowed local authorities to financially support voluntary organisations that assisted in welfare matters. During this same period, the COS was renamed the Family Welfare Association (Family Action 2024), reflecting a shift in focus to broader family support. The act also introduced the means testing of social care provision, establishing a distinction that persists today between universal healthcare services and financially assessed social care, while also reinforcing systems of assessment and eligibility that shape who is considered entitled to support. Although the act laid the groundwork for local authority involvement, social services did not become an integral part of the local authority until 1970.

Changing Legislation

Since the early 19th century, welfare provision in the UK has been shared between the state and the voluntary sector. This collaboration has significantly shaped the development of welfare legislation, as demonstrated by the close relationship between the COS and the Poor Laws. When organisations hold this amount of power and influence over people's lives, the introduction of regulatory frameworks has been widely justified as necessary to ensure public safety. Both the charity sector and social services have undergone gradual development in regulatory frameworks to ensure accountability, transparency, and the safeguarding of those they encounter.

The Charitable Trusts Act 1853 established the permanent Charity Commission for England and Wales, which had the role of investigating charitable trust management. This act took just over two decades to be accepted and passed due to opposition from the Church, the courts, companies, and universities (The National Archives, 2025). The act also required the commission to file annual reports to parliament. In 1855, the Charitable Trusts Amendment Act required charities to submit annual accounts of their endowments and in 1860 the Charity Commission was granted further powers to remove or appoint trustees, manage charity property, and establish administration schemes. After the publication of The Nathan Report in 1952, parliament introduced the Charities Act 1960 based on the Nathan Committee's recommendations to improve regulation and transparency of the charity sector. Changes included; establishing the Register of Charities; strengthening the Charity Commissions powers; requiring charities to keep and submit accounts, annual reports, and statements of activities which could be inspected by the public; support for smaller charities; broadening the cy-près doctrine which allowed the Charity Commission to redirect charitable funds to similar modern purposes when a charity failed to

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reach its aim; and authorised the Commission to issue guidance to trustees for standards of management (McGregor-Lowndes, 2017).

This legislation was updated again in 1993, 2006, and finally in the Charities Act 2011. The Charities Act 1993 brought together existing amendments and introduced key requirements for charities to maintain proper accounts and submit annual reports. It also clarified regulations around fundraising practices and outlined the responsibilities of trustees. The Charities Act 2006 introduced a significant change by establishing the public benefit test, making it a requirement for charities to demonstrate tangible benefit to the public. It also established the Charity Tribunal to manage legal appeals more efficiently. Finally, the Charities Act 2011 combined previous legislation into a single statute, providing clearer definitions of legal duties and responsibilities of charity trustees.

At this same time social services were in the beginnings of becoming a unified practice under the government rather than a fragmented practice under charitable organisations. The Seebohm Report published in 1968 recommended major transformation of social services by unifying all areas under a single unified social services department in each local authority (The Health Foundation, 2025). This report led to the Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 which amended the previous Health Visiting and Social Work (Training) Act 1962 and unified various services under the same social services department per local authority. These services included child and adult welfare, disability care, and mental health. This caused a shift from the previous specialised social service care to a more generic a model of generalist casework in social work where workers were expected to work across all sectors to provide holistic, person-centred care. In this same year, the British Association of Social Workers was formed, merging multiple branches of the profession to form what is still the overarching professional association for social work in the UK today (Professional Social Work, 2010; Koutsounia, 2024).

In the years that followed, the number of social work legislation only grew, solidifying social work as an integral profession under local authorities. The Care Standards Act 2000 was the first piece of British legislation to make 'social worker' a protected title in which social workers had to be qualified and registered under the regulator General Social Care Council. This changed in 2012 to the Health and Care Professions Council to reduce costs, and again in 2019 to Social Work England when the Department for Education expressed concerns of social work education courses producing poor quality trainees (McNicoll, 2016). Social Work England was created under the Children and Social Work Act 2017 and works as a non-departmental public body overseen by the department for education.

Discussion

The charity sector and social work have developed in parallel, with several key areas of mutual progress. Notable shared developments include professionalisation, safeguarding, transparency, public trust, and government oversight balanced with organisational independence. These

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advancements are significant because they have raised the standards of care and support, enhanced accountability, and reinforced ethical practice (Social Work England, 2019; The Charity Commission, 2020). Together, they enable both sectors to work collaboratively with the public in promoting social justice through structured, regulated, and trustworthy systems.

The drive towards professionalisation in both social work and the charity sector is evident in key legislative and regulatory reforms. The Care Standards Act 2000 introduced the formal registration and regulation of social workers, promoting accountability and safeguarding public welfare through competence-based regulation. Similarly, the Charities Act 2006 clarified legal definitions and modernised regulation in the sector by strengthening the role of the Charity Commission to promote professional governance, responsible trusteeship, and public trust. These developments laid the foundation for further reforms, such as the Charities Act 2011, which consolidated previous legislation, and the establishment of Social Work England in 2019, which acts as the specialist regulator for social workers in England. Together, these changes reflect a drive for professionalisation by enhancing the regulation and credibility of both sectors. This shift to professionalisation is also intended to improve outcomes for those who use the services by holding professionals in each sector accountable to consistent standards of practice.

The growing recognition of the importance of safeguarding is reflected in key pieces of legislation, including the Children Acts 1989 and 2004, the Charities Act 2011, and the Care Act 2014. These laws collectively establish a robust legal framework for the protection of adults and children within the health and social care sector. The Children Act 1989 section 17 and 47 places duties on local authorities to safeguard and promote the welfare of children in need and to investigate where there is reasonable cause to suspect significant harm. The Children Act 2004 sections 10 and 11 strengthen this by requiring key agencies to work together and places explicit safeguarding duties on organisations providing services to children. The Care Act 2014 section 42-45 establishes responsibilities for adult safeguarding, placing a duty on local authorities to make enquiries when an adult is at risk of abuse or neglect and to establish Safeguarding Adults Boards to coordinate inter-agency responses. The Charities Act 2011 does not specifically mention safeguarding; however, section 177 outlines trustees' duty of care in relation to the Safeguarding Vulnerable Groups Act 2006, which includes protecting beneficiaries and others who engage with the charity from harm. This duty underpins the Charity Commissions safeguarding expectations which require policies and procedures to be in place to identify and respond to abuse. Together, these legislative developments have embedded safeguarding as a legal and ethical duty across both statutory and voluntary sectors, promoting accountability and public protection.

Both the social work and charity sectors emphasise transparency as a core principle for building and maintaining public trust. In social work, transparency is upheld through the professional standards set by Social Work England (2019) and the code of ethics outlined by the British Association of Social Workers (2023), both of which identify openness and honesty as essential to ethical practice. Social Work England (2025) further demonstrates this by publishing fitness to practice outcomes on its website, ensuring public access to regulatory decisions and maintaining

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confidence in the profession. Similarly, the Charities Act 2011 reinforces transparency in the charity sector by mandating financial reporting, governance disclosures, and evidence of public benefit. This is shown through the Charity Commission's online Register of Charities, where the public can access detailed information about a charity's trustees, financial accounts, governing documents, assets, liabilities, and organisational links (Charity Commission, 2025). These measures across both sectors encourage accountability and ensure public engagement whilst reinforcing legitimacy.

Both the social work and charity sectors strive to maintain independence from the state, despite their complex intertwining relationship. In statutory social work, workers are employed by local authorities and funded through public resources, yet they remain ethically obligated to act in the best interests of individuals and communities. This duty is enshrined in the professional standards of Social Work England (2019) and the ethical code of the British Association of Social Workers (2023), particularly regarding promoting social justice and challenging systemic inequalities. However, this dual accountability can cause tensions between professional autonomy and state expectations, often resulting in ethical dilemmas. Conversely, charities are legally recognised as independent, non-governmental organisations, yet they frequently rely on government funding to deliver services. This financial dependence can compromise their operational freedom and influence the way in which they deliver services. In 2007, only one quarter of UK charities felt that they were free to make decisions without pressure to conform to the wishes of funders (Macmillan, 2010 pp.21). In practice, many charities are restricted to offering short-term interventions due to short-term funding contracts. For example, service delivery contracts typically last only 1 to 2 years (House of Lords Committee on Charities, 2017). This creates a cyclical dependency on funding where organisations must prioritise donor satisfaction in order to secure future funding, hindering the charity sector's ability to provide consistent long-term support to achieve sustainable outcomes and making them accountable first and foremost to the donor who holds the power to influence what support is offered.

Although both sectors have developed greatly since their beginnings through increased regulation, professionalisation, and legislative development, they remain interdependent in the delivery of social care and support. Charities often fill the gaps in public services by providing specialist or community-based support funded by the state, the public or private donors (NVCO, 2024), while statutory services rely on the voluntary sector to complement and extend their reach. Ongoing challenges such as funding constraints and accountability gaps present risks to those who use both services. These challenges can lead to fragmented service provision and reduced quality of care (Local Government Association, 2020).

As both sectors continue to pursue professionalisation, they have risked harm to those who use their services. The professionalisation of the social work sector has sparked ongoing debates in professional and academic circles. Some suggest that the formalisation of social work through protected titles poses a threat to community engagement and prevents meaningful work (Maylea, 2021; Hunter and Wroe, 2024). However, others suggest that the academisation of social work has

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enhanced practice by equipping workers with theoretical knowledge and evidence-based tools (Heite, 2012; Orme et al, 2007). However, despite these benefits, the power associated with professional status can create distance between social workers and the communities they aim to support. This dynamic can create a top-down approach to intervention in which social workers are seen as agents of the state rather than allies to the people they serve. It can also be argued that the pressures associated with professional accountability have contributed to the emergence of blame culture within the profession where fear of scrutiny can lead to risk-averse practices and underreporting of discrepancies (Featherstone et al, 2014 pp. 75-84). Although professionalisation intended to improve standards, it may have instead undermined the trust within social worker and community relationships.

Whilst the requirement for charities to demonstrate public benefit under section 4 of the Charities Act 2011 intended to ensure that charities genuinely serve societal needs, it has also contributed to a culture of performance driven reporting where quantifiable outputs are favoured over long-term outcomes (Duncan, 2026). This can be seen through most charities' websites where statistical information and numbers are displayed to prove that their work is effective. Unfortunately, this data does not demonstrate the long-term impact of practice but rather a consistent need within society. For example, homelessness support charity Crisis UK (2025) shows that they have provided support to 5321 people in 2023-4. This data does not show the nature, depth, or duration of the support provided or if these interventions led to sustainable long-term change. It is also not clear whether work is being undertaken to address systemic reliance on its services. This ambiguity may stem from the restrictive nature of outcome-based funding, which prioritises short-term, measurable results, or from a deeper structural issue such as a lack of incentive to challenge the systemic conditions that sustain demand for their existence.

In this practice, beneficiaries are reduced to statistics or emotionally charged images used to demonstrate the 'good work' being done, rather than being recognised as individuals with agency. This dehumanisation of beneficiaries can be seen through fundraising methods that paint the relationship between donors and receivers as gracious benefactor and grateful beneficiary (Irfan, 2021), reinforcing a power imbalance that strips recipients of voice and dignity. A modern example of this dynamic is explored by Gies' (2021) research into the ethics of charity fundraising particular to the Macmillan Cancer Support campaigns. Although the campaign in question was financially successful, Gies highlights how the lack of beneficiary involvement in its design led to controversy and harm to those it intended to support. Despite the backlash, Macmillan chose not to withdraw the campaign, reflecting utilitarian logic where the overall benefit justified the harm caused to individuals. This approach demonstrates a troubling aspect of professionalised charity work: the prioritisation of outcomes that guarantee funding over beneficiary empowerment.

Conclusion

Whilst the professionalisation of both sectors has brought strong regulatory frameworks and increased accountability in order to be transparent to gain public trust, these developments have

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also produced significant tensions. A strong emphasis and reliance on performance metrics can lead to the dehumanisation of people using services, often reducing them to statistics or narratives that serve institutional goals. This mirrors the origins of 19th century charity work, where beneficiaries were often portrayed in ways that appealed to the moral obligations of wealthy donors. In social work, professionalisation can reinforce hierarchal power dynamics and contribute to a blame culture, particularly in high-stress areas such as child protection. These practices risk prioritising institutional needs over the wellbeing and empowerment of individuals and communities. It is essential to reflect on what is required of social workers and charities in the future as they continue to operate within increasingly professionalised and performance-driven environments.

I suggest a renewed focus on social work's foundational commitments to social justice and meaningful community engagement. This would require social workers not only to critically engage with charity partners and challenge performative practices, but also to actively cooperate with charity partners to create solutions with the communities they work with. To achieve this, social workers must use reflective and critical thinking skills, embrace anti-oppressive and relationship-based approaches, and prioritise lived experience as a source of knowledge. Social work education and supervision must support this by encouraging ethical questioning and resistance to utilitarian practices that prioritise efficiency over impact. Social workers should also use their power and professional title to act as advocates within multi-agency settings to challenge funding models or organisational cultures that undermine sustainable, person-centred support.

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