

# Tasmania Branch Connect – What We Heard

26 March 2026 – Hotel Grand Chancellor, Launceston

Around 25 social workers came together for networking, a national AASW update from new CEO Kerryn Pennell, and facilitated conversations about social work practice and professional experience. Five additional anonymous responses were received after the event from people unable to contribute on the night.

## About Branch Connect

Tasmania Branch Connect was held in Launceston on 26 March 2026 as an opportunity to strengthen connection across the profession and hear directly from social workers about their work, experiences and priorities.

The evening included informal networking and refreshments, a Welcome to Country by Melissa Carter and national AASW update from Kerryn Pennell, and three facilitated conversation tables. The discussion framework explored social work roles, how the profession is understood, working with other professionals, professional impact, ongoing development and the challenges facing Tasmanian social workers.

Participants were also offered an anonymous written feedback option. Five follow-up responses were received, including perspectives from leadership and policy, learning design and mentoring, addiction counselling, counselling and education, and specialist health social work.

## What we heard

### 1. Social work is broad and difficult to capture through job titles alone

Participants described social workers as deep listeners, systems thinkers and navigators, counsellors, advocates, educators, assessors, crisis responders, community connectors, consultants and care managers. They also used less conventional descriptions including "diplomats", "pot stirrers", "culture architects" and people who ask the hard questions. The written responses broadened this picture further to include leadership, policy, learning design, mentoring, supervision and specialised health practice.

*"We will work in the messy stuff."*

### 2. How social workers practise matters as much as what they do

Across the conversations, participants repeatedly returned to connection, relationships, deep listening, advocacy, empowerment, encouragement, validation and person-centred practice. They spoke about working with people rather than doing things to or for them, starting where the person is at, providing a safe place and being aware of power. Flexibility, creativity, collaboration and holistic practice were also prominent in the written feedback.

*"Working WITH people."*

### 3. Social work continues to be misunderstood

Participants identified familiar misconceptions about the profession: that social workers are psychologists, that they remove children, that they should have a "magic wand", or that caring somehow makes the work less professional. There was a strong counter-message that social work is a skilled profession with expertise that is not always visible to others. One written respondent described how specialist health social work can be underestimated when it is viewed only as emotional support or service referral, rather than recognising psychosocial assessment, risk management, care planning, advocacy and multidisciplinary work.

*"We are a professional profession."*

### 4. Safe practice involves knowing both our contribution and our limits

Reflection, professional assessment, referral, warm handovers, multidisciplinary teamwork and bridging people to other professionals and services were all identified as important. Participants also emphasised supervision, mentoring, professional standards, ethics and the importance of being able to say "I don't know". Written feedback similarly highlighted boundaries, knowing when an issue sits outside one's scope, seeking support and referring on.

*"It's ok to say you don't know."*

### 5. Tasmania's context affects social work practice

The feedback points to a practice environment shaped by service gaps, narrow eligibility criteria, funding pressures, workforce shortages, recruitment difficulties, increasing complexity and workload pressure. Participants also raised administrative burden, risk aversion, limited or inconsistent management support and constrained access to services. For some practitioners, these conditions mean holding significant client need while waiting for other supports to become available, increasing the importance of advocacy and system navigation.

### 6. Social workers want connection, development and advocacy

Supervision, professional development, accessible learning, peer connection and professional networks were recurring priorities. Respondents wanted affordable or free opportunities to engage, regional events, stronger links between practitioners and teams, and advocacy with government and funders. The feedback also reinforced the need to recognise the realities of practice across Tasmania's urban, rural and regional communities.

## A few threads running across the conversations

- Social work is practised across a wide range of roles and settings, including roles that may not carry a social work job title.
- The profession's contribution is expressed not only through tasks and activities, but through values, relationships, critical reflection, systems thinking and the way social workers work alongside people.
- Professional identity, supervision, ethics, boundaries and ongoing learning help social workers navigate complexity and recognise the limits of their own role.
- The Tasmanian service environment - including workforce, funding and access pressures - influences what social workers are asked to hold and how they practise.

## About this summary

This document captures themes from one Branch engagement event involving approximately 25 participants in Launceston, together with five subsequent anonymous responses. It is intended as a record of what was heard rather than a representative account of the views of all Tasmanian social workers. The themes have been drawn from the table notes and written responses and grouped to reflect recurring ideas across the material.

## Where to next?

The Branch Connect conversations provide an early snapshot of how Tasmanian social workers describe their work, professional identity, challenges and hopes for the profession.

Since the March event, national discussions about the development of an Australian social work Scope of Practice have continued to evolve, with AASW Branches across Australia exploring different ways of engaging social workers in these conversations.

The themes captured through Branch Connect now provide a valuable starting point for Tasmania's contribution to this broader work. Rather than beginning again, the Tasmania Branch can build on what social workers have already told us and create further opportunities for social workers across the state to consider what defines social work practice, what may distinguish our contribution, and what needs to be recognised in a contemporary Scope of Practice.

This summary therefore represents a starting point rather than a conclusion. Further conversations will help broaden the voices represented and deepen our understanding of social work practice within the Tasmanian context.