

## **The Roles and Tasks of Social Work –Identifying the unique role, value and contribution of social work in NI today**

Paul Martin, DHSSPS (NI) Chief Social Services Officer has commissioned the NISCC to lead an exciting project to review the roles and tasks unique to social work. He outlines his expectations for the review and how it will benefit the social work profession.

This is a once in a lifetime opportunity for the social work profession to articulate the full range of what we do and what we have to offer; and importantly, the difference we make in people's lives through our work and our interventions. But articulating what we do and the difference we make is not easy; mostly due to the very breadth and diversity of what we have to offer. Social work cannot be defined as a specific skill or a specific body of knowledge. Rather it is an eclectic range of different skills and expertise. What we have to offer is like a patchwork, with lots of different bits and pieces. The social worker's ability to put the right bits and pieces together in response to different situations is what makes us unique and versatile and able to deal with each person as an individual. This diversity, this ability to be flexible, to be responsive, to be person-centred is what makes social work unique and valuable. We do not have a one size fits all approach to our work; that is not a weakness, that is our strength.

In working with people whose circumstances are invariably difficult and complicated we deal with real lives and real feelings. Social workers have obligations to service users, carers, families, communities, to each other, to their employers and to society. Our work involves questions about ethics, morals and values about individual rights and welfare; about the rights and interests of other parties; about freedom and fairness; about inequality and structural oppression and about the distribution of scarce resources. There are no blueprints for what we do and there is rarely a right or wrong answer. It's often a question of what is the best action for the particular circumstances that offers the greatest chance of a positive outcome for all those involved. We rely on principles such as fairness, social justice, choice, dignity and honesty to guide us. Social work is not 'soft', 'warm' and 'cuddly' as some might describe – nor is it 'easy'. We need to find an effective way to help others understand this.

The more we articulate clearly what we do, then the more we can be clear about the important contribution we make to those who need our assistance. Our inability to do this over many years has left social workers as scapegoats for the media, the public and politicians to blame when things go wrong. The blame is not always ours and it is time to stop talking ourselves down and take pride in being part of the social work profession. We now need to state realistically what we can do and what we can achieve. Surveys and feedback consistently confirm people's appreciation and satisfaction with their social workers and the service they receive. Advocating on behalf of others has traditionally been one of the strengths of social work. The fact that people, whether as individuals, groups or communities see us as fit and able to represent them and their agendas is a testimony to the valuable and valued role we play in ensuring those with

whose voices are not always listened to are given a voice. This is something about which we should feel justifiably proud.

And what do social workers do? We listen to those who are not normally listened to. We articulate people's views and advocate on behalf of those who cannot do so for themselves. We provide care and support for people who need assistance in dealing with challenging areas in their lives and, where necessary, we seek to protect those at risk of harm. Importantly we change what we do as society changes – we have to if social work is to remain current and relevant to people and their everyday lives. That is why I am convinced it is so timely to review the roles and tasks of social work as the political, economic and social landscape changes around us.

New agendas, changing demands and increased expectations need a confident workforce that is fit for purpose – ready to take on new roles and responsibilities and to work in new and different ways. The profession needs a strong, authoritative voice to speak out on its behalf. I believe that the NISCC can strengthen the professional voice of social work, adding to the voices already represented by BASW and Unions. NISCC registers all social workers in Northern Ireland and is in a key position to speak out on matters of professional conduct and standards and issues that impact on these. For this reason I am commissioning the NISCC to take this important piece of work forward. This is one of the greatest opportunities social work in Northern Ireland has had in recent years to proactively influence its role within the integrated system and to improve its professional standing – let's not waste it.”

NISCC will be consulting widely over the next few months. Details are available on the NISCC website [www.niscc.info](http://www.niscc.info).

## **LAUNCH OF A REVIEW OF THE ROLES AND TASKS OF SOCIAL WORK IN NORTHERN IRELAND**

**16 JANUARY 2008**

### **PRESENTATION: PAUL MARTIN, CHIEF SOCIAL SERVICES OFFICER**

Last year saw the beginning of a new era in politics for Northern Ireland with the establishment of a power-sharing administration. I am very clear that the new administration is determined to make its mark on the future of Northern Ireland, and importantly for us, on how public services are delivered, developed, managed and funded.

The Review of Public Administration (RPA) was planned as one of the most radical changes to the Health and Social Services system in over 30 years. We have already seen 18 Trusts collapsed into 5 and we await with interest, if not a little trepidation, the final decision regarding regional commissioning and performance management arrangements. While the delays in the full roll-out of RPA are difficult for all of us, I have no doubt the ultimate decision will reflect the original aim of the RPA process to streamline and improve the efficiency and quality of health and social care system in Northern Ireland ..... we can take that as a given.

From the very beginning of this process we have had to take a long hard look at where social work fits into the new world, forcing us to focus on fundamental questions about the unique role, value and contribution of social work. Today's launch of a review of the roles and tasks of social work is a continuation of that process. It gives us a unique and exciting opportunity to articulate collectively as a profession the full range of what we do and what we have to offer; and

importantly, the difference we can make in people's lives through our work and our interventions.

I do believe it is vital that we invest the time and effort to do this and to do it well.

The more we can articulate clearly what we do, then the more we can be clear about the important contribution we make to those who need our assistance. Our inability to do this over many years has left us easy scapegoats for the media, the public and politicians to blame when things go wrong. The blame is not always ours to take but we are not always good at dealing with that. Too prepared, I believe, to roll over and accept the inevitability of our guilt! We've got to stop it **all of us**; we must stop talking ourselves down and take pride in being part of the social work profession. We now need to state realistically what we can do and what we can achieve. Too aspirational, and we will create false expectations and perpetuate our negative image as incompetent do-gooders. Too reductionist, and we risk condemning ourselves to the narrow, functionalist role of social control which in no way reflects the breadth and diversity of what we can do.

And what do social workers do? We listen to those who are not normally listened to. We articulate people's views and advocate on behalf of those who cannot do so for themselves. We provide care and support for people who need assistance in dealing with challenging areas in their lives and, where necessary, we seek to protect those at risk of harm.

Importantly we change what we do as society changes – we have to if social work is to remain current and relevant to people and their everyday lives. That is why I am convinced it is so timely to review the roles and tasks of social work as the political, economic and social landscape changes around us. Apart from the

devolved administration and RPA, there are a number of other significant developments to consider:

- The Green Paper on Adult Social Care announced just before Christmas;
- The Bamford Review with a very clear shift to a social model of care for those with mental health needs and those with a learning disability;
- The Reform and Modernisation of Children's Services with a clear focus on improved systems for child care and social work practice;
- The New Safeguarding arrangements – again highlighting the importance of a **joined-up inter-agency approach** to child protection;
- Growing older population and increase in immigrant workers with all the new challenges associated with such a significant change in the make-up of our society here;
- Emerging rights and responsibilities agenda.

New agendas, changing demands, increased expectations need a workforce that is fit for purpose – ready to take on new roles and responsibilities and to work in new and different ways.

There are those who would have us believe there is no role for social work in this new world. But then reports of the death of social work are, as they always have been, premature and grossly over-exaggerated. Social work is still very much on the agenda and must continue to demonstrate its capacity to be flexible and responsive to this rapidly changing environment. What is my evidence for this?

Firstly, social work is very much on this government's agenda. This government has demonstrated its commitment to building up the capacity of the profession in a very tangible way over the past few years through new investment in a range of initiatives.

- A new Degree in Social Work to bring social work in line with other professions;
- An Assessed Year in Employment to support new graduates into the profession;
- The establishment of the Northern Ireland Social Care Council to promote safe and effective practice through the regulation of the workforce and social work education;
- An extensive modernisation programme for children's services designed to improve outcomes for young people and their families;
- A new social work career structure, including the introduction of principal practitioner posts;
- Support for the Social Care Institute for Excellence to ensure the ongoing development of an evidence base for our practice.

We were the only profession under RPA to have a dedicated group to consider the implications of the changes for us and to map out a way forward. We are now being given an opportunity to provide the detail of what we can do and the difference we can make in the new arrangements. We need to take the opportunities we have been given and prove that we are capable of stepping up to the mark.

My second reason for having confidence in the future of social work is our history. We just have to look back over the past 40 years of social work in Northern Ireland for evidence of the profession's ability to adapt and be responsive to changing contexts and environments. Throughout the 'troubles', social workers found ways to ensure services continued to be delivered in spite of the surrounding violence and civil disturbance. At the same time social workers developed innovative new services in response to changing demands and emerging new needs. Social work has evolved and adapted to immense changes and I am confident it will continue to do so.

And my final point in why I believe there is a place for social work in the new arrangements is the fact that the majority of people who use our services value them. During the troubles when some communities felt alienated from the State, social workers, as agents of the State, were able to go on about their work within these communities. This suggests to me that there was a recognition and acceptance of the important role social workers had within these communities, not just in terms of protecting those at risk, but in representing those communities and their views. This is something about which we should feel justifiably proud. Yes, we do have our critics and they tend to get more airspace than our supporters, but surveys and feedback consistently confirm people's appreciation and satisfaction with their social workers and the service they receive.

Advocating on behalf of others has traditionally been one of the strengths of social work. The fact that people, whether as individuals, groups or communities see us as fit and able to represent them and their agendas is a testimony to the valuable and valued role we play in ensuring those with whose voices are not always listened to are given a voice. It is time to reclaim traditional roles and tasks such as advocacy and community development and establish them as the core social work activities they are.

I believe the changing political landscape of Northern Ireland will present us with increased opportunities to do this. The new Assembly is keen to strengthen the powers of local District Councils. This presents us with a great opportunity to re-energise and rework the profession's relationship with local communities and to strengthen our interface with local Councils and local representatives. There are some who have never stopped doing this, there are others for whom this will be Back to the Future. However, for the majority of social workers, while advocacy and community development have continued to be part of their professional training, individual casework has dominated workloads reinforcing a narrow view of what social workers do linked to statutory responsibilities. **Articulating the full range of what we do will help challenge this view.**

**But articulating what we do and the difference we make is not easy. We are getting better at it, but we need to get a whole lot better if we want others to understand the full range of what we can do and the difference we make in people's lives. One of the difficulties in articulating what we do is the very breadth and diversity of what we have to offer.**

**Social work cannot be defined as a specific skill or a specific body of knowledge. Rather it is an eclectic range of different skills and expertise. What we have to offer is like a patchwork, with lots of different bits and pieces. The social worker's ability to put the right bits and pieces together in response to different situations is what makes us **unique** and **versatile** and able to deal with each person as a unique individual. This diversity, this ability to be flexible, to be responsive, to be person-centred is what makes social work unique and valuable. We do not have a one size fits all approach to our work; that is not a weakness, **that is our strength.****

The fact that other professions have taken on some of the skills and expertise traditionally associated with social work such as counselling should not be seen as a threat. We cannot nor should we stop others from expanding their repertoire of skills but that doesn't mean that we have to stop using these particular skills because someone else is also using them as part of what they have to offer. Counselling skills are core to how we engage with and work with people. We don't need to refer those we work with elsewhere for counselling when we can provide it ourselves – to do so suggests we do not have confidence in our own ability. It's time to assert what we do with confidence and to continue to do what we do well. If we do not have confidence in ourselves how really can we expect others to have confidence in us?

And I believe we have every reason to feel confident. The facts speak for themselves. We have successfully adapted and changed and we will continue to do so. We have been a key force in influencing society's awareness of the needs and rights of many individuals and groups:

- the homeless and dispossessed;
- those excluded from mainstream society;
- those warehoused in large institutions;
- those struggling below the poverty line;
- the young, the old;
- the victims of abuse; and
- those on the wrong side of the law.

And importantly we work in ways that empower and respect these people as citizens with rights and dignity no matter what their circumstances.

**In working with people whose circumstances are invariably difficult and complicated we deal with real lives and real feelings. Social workers have**

obligations to service users, carers, families, communities, to each other, to their employers and to society. Our work involves questions about ethics, morals and values about individual rights and welfare; about the rights and interests of other parties; about freedom and fairness; about inequality and structural oppression and about the distribution of scarce resources. There are no blueprints for what we do and there is rarely a right or wrong answer. It's often a question of what is the best action for the particular circumstances that offers the greatest chance of a positive outcome for all those involved. We rely on principles such as fairness, social justice, choice, dignity and honesty to guide us. Social work is not **'soft'**, warm and cuddly as some might describe. Social work is not **'easy'**. We need to find an effective way to help others understand this. I am sure many of you here feel as I do - we are damned if we do and we are damned if we don't. But there is a growing recognition by ourselves and by others that social work alone cannot work in isolation of other key services.

There is a growing acknowledgement at senior levels within government that there needs to be more effective joined up thinking and working across government departments as well as at front line level across professional and agency boundaries. We have a strong tradition in social work of working across boundaries; a tradition we must further build upon – we have long recognised the need to work with our colleagues in education, housing, police, community work, health – joint protocol training, ACPCs, case conferences and so on. These initiatives may not always have been as effective as we would have wished but nevertheless we have experience and we have learning that we can use to inform and improve future arrangements. We should not be shy about taking the lead in moving this agenda forward with our colleagues. Being clear about what social work has to offer within joined-up working arrangements will be crucial to ensure we present a confident and professional face to the world and particularly to those whom we are all here to serve.

A confident profession needs a strong, authoritative voice to speak out on its behalf. I believe that NISCC can strengthen the professional voice of social work, adding to the voices already represented by BASW and Unions. NISCC registers **all** social workers in Northern Ireland and is in a key position to speak out on matters of professional conduct and standards and issues that impact that these – it is vital that it does. For this reason I will be commissioning NISCC to take this important piece of work forward. Having an agreed collective view of what we do is an important element in establishing a strong and authoritative voice for the profession. This is one of the greatest opportunities social work in Northern Ireland has had in recent years to proactively influence its role within the integrated system and to improve its professional standing – let's not waste it.

**PAUL MARTIN**

Chief Social Services Officer

16 January 2008