

ROLES AND TASKS OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN NORTHERN IRELAND IN THE 21st CENTURY

BRIEFING PAPER ON LESSONS FROM REVIEWS IN SCOTLAND, ENGLAND AND WALES

1 – The purpose of this paper is to assist the Northern Ireland Review of social workers' roles and tasks by drawing together the key information, messages, issues and questions from work already carried out in Scotland, Wales and England, and setting out what will need to be considered and addressed in the Northern Ireland project.

The previous reviews

2 – The Scottish Review was initiated in June 2004. Scottish Ministers described it as “a fundamental review of social work in light of the increasing complexity and demand for services and as well as repeated messages arising from case reviews”. It was conducted by a Review Group of stakeholders with an independent Chairman, supported by a review team including four social work advisors, and a number of sub groups including one made up of people using services. The Review Group's report, *Changing Lives*, was published in February 2006 with a response from Scottish ministers.

3 – In August 2005, a stakeholder group led by ADSS in Wales published *Social Work in Wales: A Profession to Value*. The report, and the project group which produced it, focused on “the recruitment and retention of local authority social workers in Wales”. In the process, they considered a number of the same issues about roles and tasks as the Scotland and England reviews, as well as other matters affecting recruitment and retention such as pay and rewards, terms and conditions, and the scope for local authorities to collaborate in order to attract more and better recruits.

4 – In England, a stakeholder working group established in 2005 by Health and Education ministers, and chaired by officials from the two departments, was asked to in consider a range of issues concerning social work and the wider social care workforce. Four working groups considered ways to improve the quality of social care practice; increase the supply of qualified social workers and social care workers; define the role(s) of qualified social workers; and develop the wider social care workforce to improve career opportunities and service standards. The report *Options for Excellence*, produced in 2006, outlined an agenda of short-term and longer-term developments to address these issues.

5 - Subsequently, Ministers from the two departments commissioned the General Social Care Council, working with the sector skills councils for children and adults, the Commission for Social Care Inspection and the Social Care Institute for Excellence, to prepare and consult widely on a statement of social work roles and tasks. The steering group for this initiative, formed of

representatives of the five national bodies, worked with a reference group bringing together a wide range of stakeholders bodies. The statement produced by the review, *Social Work at its Best*, was published in March 2008, and welcomed by the Departments of Health and Children, Schools and Families as a valuable contribution to their work to develop and implement workforce strategies for children's and adults' workforces.

The policy contexts

6 – Social care is a devolved function, and each of the social work reviews has been strongly influenced by the distinctive policy frameworks developed in the respective countries following devolution. It is worth noting however that some elements of a UK-wide framework remain in place. Without compromising their independence, the four Social Care Councils and the four UK administrations have sought to maintain common approaches to the registration and regulation of social workers. Skills for Care and Development, the Sector Skills Council for social care, children and young people's workforces in the UK, is an Alliance of 5 organisations : Care Council for Wales, Children's Workforce Development Council, Northern Ireland Social Care Council, Scottish Social Services Council, and Skills for Care. The national occupational standards for social work were developed following a series of consultations across the UK, and the social work degree is the recognised professional qualification in all four countries.

7 – The Scottish review was launched with a statement from the minister that *"What is driving this process is an absolute determination to change lives for the better. We are determined to make sure modern Scotland has social work services of the highest quality. That means a fundamental look."* In Scotland, following the Kilbrandon model, social work and the wide range of social care services all come under the title "social work services" Youth justice and criminal justice services are an integral part of social work services, and work with people with substance abuse problems and their families features strongly. As well as social work roles and tasks, the review was also looking at the roles and requirements of the local authority Chief Social Work Services Officer, with a view to *"strengthening leadership and management, and giving clear direction to the service"*. The review report notes some key aspects of the policy context: an ageing population; increasing proportion of children in need; medical advances combined with growth in chronic health conditions; effects of fractured relationships, social polarisation and cultural diversity; managing risk; shrinking of the Scottish workforce; rising expectations for choice, independence and personalisation; changing technology; fear of crime, and a weakening of communities.

8 – The Welsh policy framework for social work and social care is set out in *Fulfilled lives, supportive communities*, published in 2007 after a consultation period begun in 2005. It stresses accessibility, working together, people having a greater say and being helped to live full, independent lives, services provided in or near people's homes, best use of technology, better protection for vulnerable people, The policy maintains an integrated approach to children's and adults' services. It commits the Welsh Assembly government to

taking forward the findings and recommendations of *Social Work in Wales: A Profession to Value*. As well as addressing pay and conditions issues as a means to improve recruitment of social workers, the report implicitly acknowledges the problems experienced in some of the small local authorities created at the time of local government restructuring, reflected both in critical Joint Review reports from the Audit commission, and in the proposals for authorities to join together on recruitment schemes instead of competing.

9 – In England, following the Laming Inquiry, the government policy leads for children's and adults' social care were separated, children becoming the responsibility of the then Department for Education and Skills, now the Department for Children, Schools and Families, and adult services remaining with the Department of Health. Through its work on social exclusion, the Cabinet Office has also promoted an emphasis on strengthening support for families through its policy document *Think Family*. Local authorities were required to appoint a Director of Adults' Services and a Director of Children's Services, the latter normally responsible for education as well as children's social care. The sector skills council functions were divided between Skills for Care, dealing with the adult social care workforce, and the Children's Workforce Development Council, and responsibility for regulating and inspecting children's social care services was transferred from the Commission for Social Care Inspection to Ofsted.

10 - Government acknowledged the importance of ensuring good connections at the policy interface, not least to enable proper coordination of services for young people in transition to adulthood and families where parents experience problems of chronic illness and disability, mental health, learning disability or substance abuse which impact on their children. In practice, the two departments have pursued their own policy agendas, priorities and timetables, and have not always been able to coordinate their efforts. This dual approach had significant impacts on *Options for Excellence*, and even more on the England review of social work roles and tasks.

11 – In 2003, the then DfES published a Green Paper on children's services, *Every Child Matters*, and this has been followed by a stream of related policy documents on matters such as safeguarding, improving services for children in care, better support for families of disabled children, and the development of children's centres. *Every Child Matters* is described as "a Government programme for a national framework to support the "joining up" of children's services - education, culture, health, social care, and justice". The programme is driven by a set of child-focused outcomes, derived from an initial statement of the five key areas children said mattered to them. The major implications for the workforce have been recognised in successive Children's Workforce strategies and action plans. Within the *Every Child Matters* programme, DCSF is clear what it expects of social workers. *Care Matters*, the policy relating to children in care, contained proposals for remodelling the social work role with increased support from non-professional staff, and experimenting with independent social work practices at arms length from local authorities to whom case responsibility for groups of children could be sub-contracted. There has been some tension between the department's strong commitment

to an integrated children's workforce and the case for maintaining an integrated model of social work across the lifespan.

12 – The Department of Health published its adult social care Green Paper *Independence, Wellbeing and Choice*, in 2004, and following consultation its main elements were endorsed in the 2006 White Paper *Our Health, Our Care, Our Say: A new direction for community services*. The Green Paper set out a vision and direction of travel for adult social care, with strong emphases on enabling people to have as much control and choice as possible in the arrangements for their support, on increasing take-up of direct payments and introducing the alternative of individual budgets, and on the need for joint working between social care and the NHS. A 20-point action plan for achieving the transformation of adult social care was included in the joint protocol *Putting People First*. Building on the analysis in *Social Work at its Best*, further work is under way to identify the implications of the personalisation agenda for the role of social workers in adult social care.

Processes and outputs

13 – Both the Scottish and English reviews made use of literature surveys. The one commissioned by the Scottish review focused on presenting social work as “a profession in crisis”. The English review commissioned and published two surveys. One majored on summarising the main themes from the social work research literature and the raft of government policy documents on children's and adult social care. This was followed by a survey of the literature reflecting the experience and views of people using services and carers. An extract from the latter appears at the start of *Social work at its best*:

"People value a social work approach based on challenging the broader barriers they face. They place a particular value on social work's social approach, the social work relationship, and the positive personal qualities they associate with social workers. These include warmth, respect, being non-judgemental, listening, treating people with equality, being trustworthy, open, honest and reliable, and communicating well. People value the support that social workers offer as well as their ability to help them access and deal with other services and agencies".

14 – The Scottish review established a number of working groups to generate material for consideration by the Review Group. In addition to a stakeholder group on social work roles and tasks, and a group drawn from people using services, they also commissioned research to define “The need for social work intervention”. The Scottish Review Group identified a number of key questions on which it invited comments from any individual or group with an interest, and published the numerous responses on the Review website. It produced an interim report signalling some key early findings and generating further debate, including a strong reaction to some of its comments from the Association of Directors of Social Work Services. The final report is a substantial document including chapters on social work now and in the future,

the role of the social worker, building capacity to deliver personalised services and sustainable change, and capacity-building in the workforce. On publication, it enjoyed broad support across the stakeholder interests, and was accompanied by a document from ministers accepting its findings and outlining action.

15 – The England review was planned in three stages phased over a year. An initial phase drew on the commissioned literature surveys, discussion with the stakeholder representatives' group, and consultative workshops using an Appreciative Inquiry methodology with a variety of groups, to identify key issues for inclusion in an online survey. In the second phase, a firm was commissioned to conduct the survey and analyse both the results received in the prescribed online format, and more detailed narrative submissions from a number of organisations. The third phase aimed to digest all the contributions from the first two phases to produce a succinct statement of social work roles and tasks, designed to serve a number of purposes and audiences. Meeting all these targets with a single document proved challenging, but the alternative of producing different documents for the various target audiences was felt to carry greater risks in terms of blurring and diffusing the messages from the review. In the course of what amounted to a fourth phase, the wording of the statement was the subject of detailed negotiation with senior management in the 5 participating organisations and two government departments.

Key issues and outcomes

16 – Stance of government and employers – Scottish ministers were explicit about their wish to strengthen social work in order to modernise and enhance its contribution to individual and social wellbeing. In England, the stance of the government departments has been more ambiguous, leaving a sense that social work has still to demonstrate its value and justify its existence in terms of its contribution to delivering government's policies. The local authorities, as employers of the majority of social workers, have supported the reviews whilst showing some concern about possible restrictions their scope to deploy social workers as they see fit.

17 – Concerns of social workers – Social workers have expressed anxieties on several counts : that procedural and rationing requirements make their current roles inflexible, and underuse the knowledge and skills derived from their training and practice; that other professional groups (eg CPNs, counsellors) are encroaching on parts of what they consider their territory; and that the emphasis on shifting power towards people using services and carers inevitably disempowers professionals and threatens their roles.

18 – Views and aims of people using services – children and adults in contact with social work services have been keen to be engaged in the review process, taking it seriously and believing they have much to contribute; they see the need for improving the situation and performance of social workers,

have many ideas about how this could be done, see themselves and social workers generally as being on the same side, and in most cases greatly appreciate the benefit of having “a good social worker”.

19 – Defining social work – some people, including some academic colleagues, take the view that social work is inherently indefinable. Within the reviews, and sometimes with government officials, there has been debate about the nature of definition : whether the task is to identify what it is about social work that is distinctive, or unique, or characteristic, or that only social work or social workers can, or should be permitted to do. The definition produced by the International Federation of Social Workers is considered useful in some circumstances, but too general and generic for other purposes.

20 – Definition of “role” and “task” – both Scottish and English reviews arrived at the view that social work involved a plurality of roles and tasks. It was necessary to adopt definitions of what constituted “roles” and “tasks”, and the relationship between the two. The England review identified a range of roles undertaken by social workers in various situations, and a set of tasks required in the course of performing those roles which could be carried out by the social worker, or a social care worker or member of another discipline.

21 – Impact of changing and interacting policies – in Scotland and England, policy changes associated with the modernisation, personalisation and safeguarding agendas are having a strong influence on perceptions of social work roles and tasks. The implications are mixed. Some point to more enabling, creative roles for social workers working in partnership with people to help them find the self-directed solutions that best fit their circumstances. Others emphasise the continuing vulnerable situations of many children and adults, including older people with multiple disabilities and communication problems, where safeguarding considerations and ensuring people have a voice may be paramount concerns.

22 – Reserved roles and tasks – one of the most difficult issues, particularly in the English review and discussions with officials, was the identification of roles and tasks which should be reserved only to registered, qualified and experienced social workers. The Scottish review produced a list of half a dozen such roles, mostly involving use of statutory powers, but there has since been limited progress in establishing a legal framework for enforcing this approach. The England review identifies the small number of roles restricted by law to registered social workers. Beyond these examples, the England review lists those circumstances where responsibility rests with employers to ensure an experienced registered social worker is involved.

23 – Protection of title – “registered social worker” has the benefit of legal protection of title. This makes it an offence for anyone to use the title if their name is not registered with one of the Social Care Councils. It offers the public the safeguard of knowing a social worker has met the qualification and other requirements to be admitted to and remain on the register. The

England review saw part of its remit as defining more firmly what roles and tasks should be associated with the title of registered social worker, and hence should attract concern if they are being carried out by those not on the register. This too proved an area where definitive answers are still hard to come by.

24 - Multiple accountabilities – there are shifts taking place in the balance of the social worker’s accountabilities – to the employer, to the person using their services, to their regulatory body, to their social work peers, to other agencies in which they are outposted and other members of multi-disciplinary teams, and to the wider public. Managing this complex set of accountabilities and the interactions between them requires skill and flexibility on the part of the social worker. Within a framework of individual registration, social workers might expect to exercise more professional autonomy, enabling more innovative responses to people’s diverse situations, and expanding the roles they can perform alongside other disciplines in team settings.

25 – Boundaries with other social care roles – very few elements of social work roles and tasks have not at some time and in some places been carried out by non-social workers. Some employers resist drawing too clear a line between the roles of social workers and those of other staff in social care, taking the view they should retain the flexibility to deploy staff according to the needs of their population and its demands at any one time. Whilst seeking greater clarity, the England review has tried to steer away from a simple two-tier model with separate cadres of social workers and assistants. Such models have had adverse effects in nursing, teaching and the police, and tend to run counter to social work’s holistic approach.

26 – Boundaries with other professional disciplines – a number of other disciplines, particularly in health, define themselves by identifying and defending their own exclusive patch of professional territory and the specialist entry requirements that go with it. Social work uses a different professional model, more inclusive, more permeable in its boundaries with other disciplines, arguably more flexible in adjusting its remit to the varied needs of people using its services. This is helpful in the context of more joint working and reducing the pressure on people to fit themselves to rigid demarcations between professions. It makes it harder to define exactly where social work stops and starts.

27 – Knowledge for good practice – the reviews so far have emphasised the range of knowledge and expertise, drawn from a variety of academic, research, experiential and practical sources, which social work applies to understanding the complexities of people’s individual and family situations and the range of options and solutions that may be available to them. The diversity of this knowledge, and the complex, uncertain, often high-risk circumstances in which social workers operate, are identified as two of the characteristic features of social work roles and tasks.

28 – Supervision, reflection, workplace support - the previous reviews have acknowledged the importance of on-going professional supervision, structured opportunity for reflection on practice, and workplace learning and support systems appropriate to the nature of social work roles and tasks. These are seen as necessary supports for risk-management and the exercise of fine professional judgement, and as part of the employer's duty of care towards both the practitioner and the people using services.

Possible lessons

29 – The broad lesson is that, whilst the social work reviews so far have addressed a number of similar themes, there are also issues specific to the context of each country and administration which strongly influence the debate and its outcome. Recognising this, other lessons concern:

- Asking the right questions – whether a review looks at social work or social workers, whether it is asked “What is unique or distinctive about social work?” or “What can only social workers do?”, makes a big difference to the focus of the review
- Being clear about purpose and required outcome – the England review aimed to achieve several different purposes (to tell people what to expect of social work, and increase public confidence; to clarify the distinctive contributions social work makes; to focus and improve social work practice; to underpin social work education, training and regulation), and struggled to meet them within its brief format
- Recognising issues around shifts of power – the various stakeholders may not all share common agendas; some are keen to see change whilst others are concerned to preserve what is good in the status quo; and many are likely to feel their interests could be threatened by the process and outcome of the review. Building confidence early on is important.
- Seeking consensus or giving a lead – social work has tended in the other countries to start the reviews feeling on the defensive, and building a consensus around expectations of social work has been coloured by this initial stance. There has been a strong sense of wishing to use the review to present social work in a positive light. This is understandable, but it may tend to inhibit a bolder vision of social work's future potential.
- Benefits of transparency in process – all three reviews have benefited from open processes giving a range of opportunities to engage in debate and consider the views of others.

Don Brand, April 2008