

INTRODUCTION

1. BAAF's main activities are the development, promotion and advocacy of best policy and practice for children separated from their birth families; the provision of advice and information to our members and to the general public; training, consultancy and seminars; child placement services including the publication of our flagship monthly newspaper, Be My Parent. We also publish a quarterly professional journal, Adoption and Fostering, books and guides for professionals, academics, parents and carers and research studies. The main users of our services are our members comprising local authorities across the UK, voluntary adoption agencies, independent fostering agencies and also individual social work, legal and medical professionals and carers.

2. BAAF welcomes the opportunity to contribute to the Commission's review of the role of social workers in children's services. We believe that the longstanding significant difficulties in the recruitment and retention of front line staff has created an acute morale problem in the social work profession. The reputation and status of social workers in the public eye is very poor yet their responsibilities and contribution to social welfare issues are very significant. BAAF is concerned that unless a more detailed, evidence based, analysis is undertaken of the role and tasks of social workers as well as their value, knowledge and skill base then the marked discrepancy in public sector vacancy rates identified on page 85 of the Green Paper, 'Every Child Matters' will simply continue.

3. There are serious issues across the entire public sector about the lack of stability in their structures and ways of working and this directly impacts on professional and other staff in the way that they retain expertise and confidence in their role and responsibilities. Where there are also significant difficulties in staff recruitment and retention, these contribute to a sense of disorganization and insecurity which militates against effective work and this is particularly so when the complexity of the task in social work requires familiarity, stability and support. Frequent changes of social worker or other professionals in itself impede good practice and may in some cases contribute to dangerous practice. Knowing a child or family over time can make a primary contribution to the development of trust and effective service delivery to a family.

SOCIAL WORK TRAINING

1. Social work training is undergoing a major period of change with the introduction of the undergraduate degree programme and a new post qualifying framework. The National Occupational Standards for Social Work drive the development of social work training with the definition of the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers(2001) taken as core:

"a profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social

work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments.

Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work"

2. The NOS are comprehensive and recognize the many roles that social workers have in children's services. It is difficult to argue with this framework in itself but it is yet to be seen whether the new qualification framework with its values, knowledge and skill sufficiently prepares social workers take to enable them to deliver high quality, confident and authoritative professional services that form the basis for their future professional development. It should be noted however, that the recent CSCI¹ report comments -

'Having diagnosed what is required, social workers generally focus on coordinating services. We see a few examples of social workers who use their skills and relationships to work directly with children and their parents to alter the balance of behaviours in families and achieve changes to enable the child to stay with the family. But it has become exceptional for mainstream children's social services teams to provide these services for any length of time.' (Para 6.36)

3. The Social Care Institute of Excellence has recently published a Knowledge Review on the teaching of communication skills with children on social work training courses. In it they say:

'The evidence of our survey on skills assessment supports our main finding in relation to teaching and learning. In neither college based modules nor practice learning is there any expectation that a generic preparation for the social work profession ought to involve students in being assessed in direct communication with children. Unless child observation is taught and assessed,

¹ Making Every Child Matter: Messages From Inspection of Children's Services, CSCI, October, 2005

scrutiny of student performance in direct communication with children, including in simulated exercises, is often fortuitous.' (pp82)²

4. Lastly the Joint Chief Inspectors report on Safeguarding Children in 2005 says that:

... three years after the first Safeguarding Children report, there remain significant issues about how thresholds are applied by social services in their child protection and family support work. Key findings include:

- agencies other than social services are often unclear about how to recognise the signs of abuse or neglect, are uncertain about the thresholds that apply to child protection or do not know to whom they should refer their concerns. More attention needs to be paid to identifying welfare concerns for children with disabilities;
- largely because of resource pressures, some councils' social services apply inappropriately high thresholds in responding to child protection referrals and in taking action to protect children; and
- because some social services are unable to respond to families requiring support, other agencies do not refer children when concerns about their welfare first emerge. This means that some families are subject to avoidable pressure, children may experience preventable abuse or neglect and relationships between social services and other agencies may become strained.

² Luckock, B., Lefevre, M., Orr D., Jones M., Marchant, R., Tanner K., (2006). Teaching, Learning and Assessing Communication Skills with Children and Young People in Social Work Education, London: Social Care Institute of Excellence

- These continued concerns raise questions about whether there will be sufficient capacity in all council areas to protect and promote the welfare of children effectively as well as achieving an appropriate balance between universal and preventative services within the new Every Child Matters arrangements.³
5. All three of these very different reports come to a worrying conclusion. They raise many questions about how a situation has arisen where sustained direct work with clients has become exceptional both in social work practice and in training and thresholds for social workers offering support to families can be so high that many do not get what they urgently need. Serious consideration needs to be given to how the social work role becomes re-focused on providing direct support to children and young people and their families and receive training that prepares them to do so. This must start by re-asserting that for most social workers, the reasons they choose the profession is to work directly with clients. If the system they find on entering work places little value on these skills and does not properly recognise the challenges for workers in doing direct work, then these skills will not be sustained, let alone develop. Social workers need to work in conditions that enable the vision of a direct service profession to be delivered. Similarly, local authorities need the resources to create organisational structures and cultures where social workers are valued and supported for their direct work knowledge and skills. There then might be some expectation that this will feed back into better rates of recruitment and retention.

³ CSCI, (2005), *Safeguarding Children, The second Joint Chief Inspectors' Report on Arrangements to Safeguard Children*, Newcastle, CSCI

THE NATURE AND CONTEXT OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

6. Many professions have been subject to a growing uncertainty about their value, status and contribution to society and as an emerging profession, social work has been particularly subject to this. There are also growing expectations about what professionals can achieve with little tolerance for the limits of what they can do and none at all for any mistakes they might make. While it is appropriate to set high standards and have high expectations, and to expect professionals to be responsible and accountable for what they do, social workers work in areas of the most acute and chronic need at an individual, family, community and societal level where many of the issues they confront are difficult to fully comprehend, explain or to find effective solutions for. The social work profession has engaged throughout its history in debates about its potential to bring about fundamental structural changes in society, particularly in relation to inequality and social exclusion through to life changing interventions with families through to the, 'down to earth provision' of practical support. Other professions are rarely concerned with such a wide ranging agenda and tend to focus their concerns on ensuring appropriate levels of relevant technical expertise in relation to well specified problem areas even if they address complex individual and community problems - architects, doctors, lawyers and accountants.
7. The organizational structures and systems that most social workers and managers in children services work within are extremely demanding and a number of issues account for this.

- Social work with children, whether this is child protection, family support, with 'looked after' children, disabled children or asylum seeking children is extremely complex and involves a large number of internal and external organisational systems coming together which requires a high degree of administrative coordination.
 - The needs of vulnerable children are complex and the family situations they come from are often unstable and unpredictable.
 - Families can be reluctant to engage with services because of a fear of the consequences – losing one's children, personal or social stigma at being seen to fail at something as fundamental as family life or the experience that services offer little that is of direct benefit. Some families will actively resist or challenge social work intervention.
 - The conflict between values associated with 'welfare' and those of fault and blame. Images of 'feckless' parents or scroungers or the undeserving poor too easily become resurrected by politicians or the media. Most of the people that social workers work with are struggling with poverty, discrimination or multiple disadvantage and they make up the greater majority of those who become subject to child protection investigations or child welfare services.
 - Significant time and resources are required to maintain the system – complex and detailed procedures, regular internal and external auditing and inspections, complex recording systems, complex commissioning and contractual arrangements, high levels of monitoring, lack of resources.
 - The high cost of service provision and the limited resources available to meet these costs.
4. As publicly funded professionals working in publicly accountable organizations, social workers and managers have been subject to continual scrutiny about the quality, effectiveness, cost and organizational arrangements of what they do. They are not alone in this. The search for efficiency and effectiveness and ever increasing expectations of what public

services can and should do is long standing. The consequential and unsettling agenda of change and re-organisation places a considerable cost on social workers and managers and directly impacts on professional confidence and morale. Although change seems inevitable, it is often not clear that the conditions that enable professional practice are sufficiently at the centre of the change agenda. The current organisational structures have developed over time and should be understood as a response to the challenges inherent in trying to resolve the issues in the points outlined above. However, systems currently in place largely result from the implementation of too frequent, well intended problem solving initiatives that if ill coordinated and poorly resourced, can disrupt a sense of continuity and familiarity in managers and practitioner's work practices. Trends in the development of organisational and managerial culture in recent years that might be fit for business have not been paralleled by equally important developments in the systems that support people in their professional roles and responsibilities.

8. Many practitioners would not consider that what they need to enable them to do what they came into social work to do plays a very significant part in organizational change and the consequences are now too readily seen in the CSCI and SCIE reports quoted above.
9. Unlike many other professions the 'technology' associated with the role of social workers is often poorly understood. What they do when they undertake assessments and what they do when they intervene to directly help people does not have the same status of other professions who have highly developed technologies. For example, the model of General Practitioner consultation

involves the G.P. asking relevant questions, undertaking direct investigations of symptoms and evaluating these against known patterns of illness and disease. This process will be enhanced by a relationship of trust, open communication, transparency and feedback. Treatment, however, may be completely independent of these qualities where it involves prescribed medicines, surgery or other techniques.

10. This process is in marked contrast to that for example in child protection, where assessment (diagnostic) skills and service delivery (treatment) skills can only be pursued meaningfully within the context of the on-going relationship that the social worker has with the child and family concerned. While there may be direct evidence from physical signs and symptoms of abuse (and in many cases these are disputed in relation to their cause), the social worker will need to put these into the context of what they know or can discover about the child and family circumstances. Any 'hard' evidence from signs and symptoms will need to be placed in the context of the more extensive 'soft' evidence about relationships within the family, the intentions and capabilities of the parents and the support and services available to them. A core part of this process must involve the practitioner in a discussion with the family and, where appropriate with the child, in order to understand what has happened to them in the past, what is happening to them in the present and what might need to happen in the future to address the issues under consideration. For this to work well, the social worker needs to find ways of developing an open and supportive relationship that is core to the whole process working well. They need then to have -

- the authority, confidence, knowledge and skill to engage with diverse groups of people in a wide range of contexts including those where suspicion and hostility may be significant
- the capacity to explore in a flexible but disciplined way the highly complex and diverse situations in which child protection and welfare cases present themselves
- the capacity to construct meaningful hypotheses and explanations about these events using available knowledge, evidence, protocols and procedures. This requires the ability to gather information, analyse it and construct meaningful pictures of these events that make sense not just to the agency but also to the family who are subject to the investigation.
- the capacity to recognise that the hypotheses and explanations they construct are precisely that - interpretations of family circumstances and needs that may evolve and change over time. They are useful only insofar as they are meaningful to the professionals and to the families whose lives they seek to explore and explain.
- An understanding that the process of assessment and planning in child protection and welfare is often infused with considerable anxiety and uncertainty because the issues at stake – the possible abuse and safety of children, the very serious consequences of getting this wrong, and the potentially radical interventions that might result from a family becoming involved with social workers – are so serious.

11. Given the context in which social work practice operates, it is not surprising that it has come to prioritise work that ensures that risk is minimized, that services are only available when very high thresholds of need have been reached and that procedural compliance is given priority. Creating organisational cultures which support social workers in working with high levels of complexity and risk where they are directly exposed to the immediacy of distressed children and highly anxious, defensive or angry parents and making judgements that have very serious and long term consequences is essential. If creating and sustaining appropriate relationships with clients in these circumstances is core to their being effective in this task, this must become a more highly valued priority for the organisations they work for.

12. What this argument leads to is the conclusion that in order to establish and maintain a skilled and knowledgeable workforce social work must be identified as a 'people' focussed profession. The issues raised above highlight the inevitable conflict between a people focussed service with a value, knowledge and skill base that supports this and a complex legal and administrative service based on politically and organisationally driven performance measures, resource limitations and rationing.

RE-ASSERTING 'PEOPLE FOCUSED' SOCIAL WORK

13. The motivation to become a social worker is probably no different to what it was 10, 20, 30 or more years ago. People choose social work for their interest in people's welfare in much the same way as teachers are interested in children's

education or health workers are interested in the health of people. Many professionals feel that their people focussed interests have become submerged in organisations driven by other agendas. For social workers there are real challenges to make and stay in contact in a helpful and meaningful way with distressed and disturbed people and they can often feel that when they do so then it becomes too easily a hidden matter which they have little opportunity to properly explore and get support with in the organisations that employ them. The bodies responsible for regulating and promoting professional social work and social work training must continue to re-assert the people orientated nature of the profession and its values, knowledge and skills base and the importance of ensuring that these drive the work that social workers do. This means that the social work profession must be primarily driven by professional and not bureaucratic values. The 'quality of thinking' necessary for reasoned professional judgements to be made and the particular nature of the professional task must be recognised as core to driving assessment and planning services that are child and family centred. Anxiety and uncertainty in workers must be openly acknowledged and proper professional and managerial support provided. Professional development, professional consultation and enabling supervision need to be recognised as the lifeblood of safe and effective practice and as an on-going responsibility of practitioners, managers and employing organisations.

14. Social work organizations do need to ensure that they have effective professional support systems in place for front line staff. This requires more than ensuring organizational accountability but the recognition of the particular demands of the social work task and the impact that this has on front line workers.

Bureaucratic forms of communication and accountability have their place within each agency but they need to be balanced against the needs for workers to explore the complex issues they are continually faced with in exploring child protection and child welfare concerns. This should include the confidence to discuss uncertainties and anxieties without fear of censure, ridicule or blame. Where other organizations are concerned with high-risk operations such as pilots, the availability of support and report channels of communication have been essential in identifying dangerous or risk apparent situations before they become serious or catastrophic.

15. There are many perverse incentives within modern organizational practice that work against child centred practice. There needs to be public and professional debate about the severe difficulties for organisations that at one and the same time are charged with the responsibility of determining eligibility for publicly funded services and resources and the responsibility for maintaining a clear focus on child focussed assessment and planning. These responsibilities do not sit easily together and their lack of resolution has real and damaging consequences when they are not acknowledged.
16. Training for practitioners and managers must continue to have high priority. The managers of services need recognition, for the professional content of their role, and must be trained and supported in this.
17. Priority must be given to training workers in the importance of and stresses of interagency work, in the development of effective working relationships across organisational boundaries, the potential for misunderstanding, the likelihood of

differing priorities, cultures and language and the potential for resolution of these difficulties. Clarity about respective roles and responsibilities is essential. However, setting this out on paper in procedural guidelines is one thing, developing effective working relationships where this becomes meaningful is something else. This requires time, trust and open and transparent communication.

CONCLUSION

It is a matter of urgency that the continuing problems in the social work profession are addressed. There are a number of developments that have the potential to improve the current situation, the introduction of the General Social Care Council, the Children's Workforce Development Council, and the new degree and post-qualifying framework. However, these new structures must ensure that they continue to place at the centre of their work those issues that are core to the social work profession – its people-focused objectives – and to recognize the many forces that militate against this. Social workers do not have recourse to the many technologies that are available to other professions. It is their basic humanity, commitment and determination that enables them to work with the most vulnerable groups in society. However, there is nothing simplistic about this. Their work demands the deepest understanding into the nature of the human condition and the personal cost to them of doing so can be high. In the public eye social workers have become too easily identified with the problems of their clients. They stand on the boundary of the opportunities and resources that society has to offer its citizens but have to recognise that the people they often work with do not find it easy to avail themselves of

these. Social workers also represent to their clients some of the real constraints and limitations of societal resources which can create frustration, disappointment and anger. They are also responsible for setting limits to people's behaviour and enforcing the consequences of this when this creates significant problems for others – particularly children. The challenges inherent in this must be recognised In training, in on going professional development and support and in organisations that recognise the value of the work that social workers do. At the same time, they need the status, recognition and remuneration that go along with this most challenging of professional roles.