

Education Select Committee Memorandum: Social Work Reform

Executive summary

1. Government is committed to reforming social care and social work practice to deliver better support and better outcomes for children. Through the leadership of the Child Protection Implementation Taskforce we are delivering a radical programme of reform, which is transforming the care children receive. This addresses three priorities: improving the skills and capacity of the social work workforce; raising the bar on quality, innovation and efficiency in practice; and establishing a framework of leaner, robust governance and accountability which does not tolerate failure.
2. Central to success will be improving the capability and professional confidence of social workers. Our reforms will ensure better qualified and trained social workers, operating with consistently high levels of knowledge and skills, able to sustain and develop their careers through clear pathways without losing focus on the front line.
3. We continue to invest in identifying clear evidence of effectiveness and efficiency in social work practice, stimulating new innovative approaches which we will disseminate throughout the system.
4. Collectively these reforms address the challenges of delivering effective services, while stabilising and improving the quality of the workforce, in a time of fiscal constraint.

A What are the specific problems this strategy is seeking to address and what is the evidence behind it?

5. On 31 March 2015, there were over 390,000 children assessed as 'children in need' in England, receiving support from social care and other services to promote their welfare. Around 50,000 of these children were on child protection plans – with social workers working to protect them from neglect and abuse, usually in their family homes. Of all children in need, just under 70,000 were looked after by the state in foster care or, less frequently, in residential care or in other settings. Children move into and out of these categories of need: in the year ending 31 March 2015, over 400,000 children started an episode of need and throughout the year there were over 781,000 children in need.¹
6. These services cost the taxpayer around £6bn a year and are, largely, delivered by around 27,000 local authority employed child and family social workers

¹ Department for Education (DfE) Statistical First Release Characteristics of Children in Need: 2014 to 2015 published 22 October 2015.

working in statutory settings in England.² They work within a complex system of support, alongside others including family support workers, those working in residential settings and foster carers.

7. The services these children receive are sometimes excellent, but too often the system does not identify needs early, or effectively, enough and does not always intervene decisively to the benefit of the children involved. There are sizeable variations in quality across the country, and currently no clear correlation between spend and outcomes. Threats like child sexual exploitation or radicalisation pose challenges to the system which are being met with, at best, mixed success. Ofsted inspection of local authority children's services, under its new inspection framework, has yet to judge any local authority's services as outstanding with 23% of local authorities judged to be 'good', 52% as 'requires improvement' and 25% as 'inadequate'.³
8. Reasons for this performance profile are complex: variability in leadership; accountability and governance structures which work better in some areas than others; and a weakness in the overall system's ability to learn effectively from good practice and from mistakes all play a part. Serious case reviews set out common errors in practice, but too often do not get to the root cause of mistakes and support improved practice.⁴
9. Improving the capability and professional confidence of social workers is arguably the most important issue to be tackled if we are to see better social care systems across the country. Better social work leadership will, of course, have a key part to play in that.
10. Evidence on the quality of social work, and the way professionals are trained and supported, suggests some strengths but identifies too some significant weaknesses:
 - Recent reviews have found that too often social workers are poorly trained and not ready for frontline practice when they leave social work education. Sir Martin Narey (2014) found significant deficiencies in the training of child and family social workers. Some universities had high standards but others appeared to prepare students inadequately. The 2014 Croisdale-Appleby review echoed Narey's findings, identifying the need for better university-

² DfE Statistical First Release Schools, Education and children's services spending: 2014-15 published 10 December 2015; DfE Statistical First Release Children's Social Work Workforce, figures as of September 2014, published May 2015.

³ Internal analysis of published Ofsted LA reports, reports available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk> 69 LAs had been inspected at the beginning of November 2015.

⁴ For further information on serious case reviews - see eg the reports of the national panel of independent experts on Serious Case Reviews, available at <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/serious-case-review-panel>.

employer partnerships and better quality statutory placements available to all social work students;⁵

- While there is excellent social work practice around the country, Professor Eileen Munro (2011) found that social workers were often too focused on complying with rules and regulations at the expense of spending time helping children and families. This means that sometimes social workers operate in a spirit of defensive, process-oriented compliance in which the child's interests are lost and decisive action is lacking. She also recognised that a target-driven culture had limited social workers' scope to exercise their professional judgment and risked reducing scope for innovation;⁶
- There can be a lack of confident, forceful, innovative practice leadership at local levels. Ofsted judgments in the current inspection framework on the quality of leadership, management and governance in children's social care show that less than 30% of those local authorities inspected are rated 'good' or 'outstanding' and over 70% are 'inadequate' or 'require improvement';⁷ and
- The workforce itself operates in pressured circumstances with sometimes low morale, vacancy and turnover rates that are higher than local government averages and a reliance on temporary staff.

11. There is, though, a great deal of positive practice within the sector, driven by a core of authorities who have performed strongly over time under a range of different inspection frameworks, and others who have demonstrated a rapid trajectory of improvement in recent years. We can point to examples of authorities with a strong focus on workforce quality and development, to others who are exploring cross-authority/regional approaches to improving services, and recently (stimulated in part by the Government's Innovation Programme) a growing appetite to explore a new range of delivery structures. Much of the Government's social work strategy aims to deepen our understanding of such approaches and help them spread more widely across the sector.

B What is the Government's overall strategy for the reform of children's social work?

12. On 24 June 2015 the Prime Minister announced the establishment of the Child Protection Implementation Taskforce, which is overseeing a sizeable programme of improvement to the children's social care system.

13. Our approach rests on three central aims:

- Improving the skills and capacity of the social work workforce at all levels;

⁵ Narey (2014) Making the education of social workers consistently effective; Croisdale-Appleby (2014) Revisioning Social Work Education.

⁶ Munro (2011) The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report A child-centred system

⁷ Internal analysis of published Ofsted LA reports, reports available at <http://reports.ofsted.gov.uk>

- Creating working environments for them in which quality, innovation and efficiency are key to developing the very best work with children and families; and
- Streamlining governance and accountability, so that both are leaner and more robust, better able to identify problems and put them right.

Improving the skills and capacity of the workforce

14. We are committed to building a stronger social work profession, with clear professional standards and the knowledge and skills to protect children and promote their welfare. The appointment of the first Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, Isabelle Trowler, in 2013 was a key step in both bringing social work expertise into the centre of Government and in challenging the profession to improve. Our focus is on those 27,000 child and family social workers in local authority statutory services, supporting the most vulnerable children and families.

A practice-focused, career pathway based on the highest levels of skill and knowledge.

15. We need a consistently excellent children's social work profession, confident in its expertise and achievements, and clear about the knowledge and skills required to do the job well. Social workers deserve to expect clear career pathways, allowing the very best social workers to move up to senior leadership roles, while retaining their focus on front-line practice.

16. Following the publication of Sir Martin Narey's review of the education of child and family social workers in February 2014 and advice from Isabelle Trowler, the Chief Social Worker for England (Children and Families), in October 2014 the Secretary of State for Education announced three levels of social work practice:

- Approved Child and Family Practitioner: setting a stretching new standard for all those employed in the most demanding front-line social work roles;
- Practice Supervisor: ensuring that front-line workers are managed and supervised by those with the knowledge and skills needed to shape that practice excellence; and
- Practice Leader: a senior leadership position focused on front-line practice in a local area, accountable for the quality of that practice and complementing the corporate leadership role of the Director of Children's Services.

17. We have subsequently published statements of the knowledge and skills that social workers at each level should possess.⁸ These are practice-based, positive,

⁸ See <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/knowledge-and-skills-for-child-and-family-social-work> and <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/social-work-knowledge-and-skills-for-supervisors-and-leaders>.

ambitious and aspirational, characteristics which were received positively by respondents to our consultations on them.⁹

Support for high quality training and development

18. We are overhauling social work training and education, raising the calibre of entrants to the profession and ensuring they are fully prepared for the specific demands of child and family social work.
19. We have supported the new fast-track Frontline qualification programme for child and family social workers and continued the Step Up to Social Work programme, investing £35m in both over the 2010-15 period. Our programmes have the needs of employers and the realities of statutory child and family social work in mind. They have proved increasingly popular with local authorities and have been successful in appealing to high calibre graduates and career changers specifically interested in a career in child and family social work.
20. Local authority participation in Step Up has grown from 42 in 2010 to 103 in 2016. Three cohorts have delivered over 670 successful graduates. A 2013 evaluation of the programme showed it was valued by the local authorities developing and implementing the programme and was generally believed to have generated a significant group of highly capable and committed new entrants to the social work profession.¹⁰
21. Frontline is now ranked 40 in the prestigious Times Top 100 graduate employers list and has done much to raise the recognition and status of the profession amongst good graduates. In the first cohort of participants, who qualified as social workers in September 2015, a third had first class honours degrees. The second cohort, of similar calibre, started their training in July 2015. 98 social workers have qualified from the first cohort, 119 participants are currently being trained and a further 180 participants are currently being recruited to begin their training next summer.¹¹ 18 local authorities, in two regions, benefited in 2014 from Frontline's excellent social work students; up to 30 in three regions are set to host them in 2016.¹² We will publish findings based on the independent evaluation of Frontline by Cardiff University in 2016.
22. These two programmes result in good rates of entrants entering and remaining in social work after graduation, minimising the usual attrition rates into the profession.¹³ Further studies showed that around 80% of the first two Step Up cohorts gained posts as social workers (compared with 61% of post graduates from traditional entry routes moving into social work).¹⁴ Of the 98 first cohort

⁹ As above.

¹⁰ Smith et al (2013) Step up to Social Work Programme Evaluation 2012: The Regional Partnerships and Employers Perspectives.

¹¹ Frontline management information. See <http://www.thefrontline.org.uk>

¹² Frontline management information, as above.

¹³ Smith et al (2013), Frontline management information.

¹⁴ Baginsky, M. & Manthorpe, J. (2015) 'A fast track route into social work. Did they go or did they stay?', European Association of Schools of Social Work Conference: Social Work Education in Europe: towards 2025,

Frontline candidates that graduated this autumn, the majority did so with distinctions or commendations.¹⁵

23. We are expanding these approaches and over £100million will be invested in attracting more high-calibre graduates into social work.
24. Social work students have also benefited from significant investment through the provision of bursary and placement support funding. We are continuing to innovate and create better routes into the profession. Working with the Department of Health, we have, this year, made available a further £2m for four pilot Social Work Teaching Partnerships, strengthening the employer role in initial training. These programmes, as with Step Up and Frontline, place a strong emphasis on the requirements of frontline statutory providers, providing students with high quality experience on the front line during training, preparing them for the reality of work.
25. We are continuing to support new child and family social workers in their first, crucial, year in employment. Since 2011-12 we have contributed over £10m towards the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). Over 7000 social workers have so far benefited, with their employer receiving £2,000 per recruit. Participation has increased significantly since its introduction, from 1876 in 2011-12 to 2774 in 2014-15.

Assessment and accreditation

26. The knowledge and skills statements will form the basis of a new national assessment and accreditation system for each of the levels.
27. This will provide:
 - For the first time, a career pathway enabling social workers to progress on the basis of their skills and knowledge, which stays close to front line practice;
 - Clarity for employers, families and the public about the quality of practice that can be expected from those who hold these accreditations;
 - A clear mark of expertise and practice that positions child and family social work as a leading profession and an attractive career including for some of the very best graduates in the country; and
 - Improved support for social workers at all levels – from better trained supervisors and practice leaders.
28. We are currently trialling this new assessment process for Child and Family Practitioners and Practice Supervisors. Over 1,000 social workers across the country - from places as diverse as Kent, Birmingham and Hartlepool - are

Milan, 30 June. Skillsforcare, 'Social work education in England 2009-2014', A report for the Department of Health, latest figures from 2012-13, March 2015.

¹⁵ Frontline management information.

participating. The four-stage assessment and accreditation system is designed to recognise the importance of the views of employers, of independently tested knowledge and of direct work with children and families. Results from this 'proof of concept' phase, including feedback from participating social workers, will be used to inform decisions about national roll-out, on which we will consult next year.

29. Our early work, together with consultation with key partners, suggests that assessment and accreditation for Practice Leaders should focus on the quality of both front line practice and the strategic leadership skills needed to run effective services. It should assess their ability to progress change in an organisation and develop skills over time. It should also allow Practice Leaders to develop the networks of support and challenge that will help to strengthen the system as a whole; demonstrating, sharing and leading good practice. Further to this, we feel it is important to identify and provide development opportunities for the Practice Leaders of the future and are considering what this should look like. We will provide further detail on our plans in this area next year.

Alongside these plans with a direct positive impact on social workers, we are:

30. Reforming practice and systems, through:

- The Government's £100m Children's Social Care Innovation Programme, working with 53 projects across the country to explore, evaluate and disseminate new ideas about how our social workers and others around them can best make a difference in the lives of our most vulnerable children;
- Working with some of the country's best local authorities as "Partners in Practice" to help us trial new ways of working and model excellent practice for local authorities right across the country to learn from. We announced the first six partners this week - North Yorkshire, Hampshire, Tri-borough (Westminster, Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington & Chelsea), Leeds, Durham and Richmond & Kingston;
- A drive to recruit new trust sponsors from the charity sector to help deliver innovative children's services: the Secretary of State for Education will chair a roundtable in the new year with local authorities and major charities such as Barnardos and the NSPCC;
- Establishing a permanent mechanism for identifying excellence and disseminating it across the system by creating a "What Works Centre" for child protection; and
- Sharpening our work with all authorities where services have been judged by Ofsted to be inadequate. Those authorities where failure is persistent or systemic will work with a DfE appointed commissioner who will decide whether services should be removed from local authority control.

31. And strengthening governance and accountability through:

- Working with local authorities and others on new models for the delivery of children's social care, through social care trusts, combined social care systems and city deals; and
- Undertaking a review of the system of Local Safeguarding Children Boards, and centralisation of Serious Case Reviews to learn lessons from serious incidents and ensure only the best social workers are on these cases.

C How do the new initiatives in reforming children's social work build on other recent reforms?

32. These initiatives build on both previous reforms in children's social work and the findings from a series of influential reports – from the Social Work Reform Board, chaired by Moira Gibb, from Eileen Munro's 2011 review of Child Protection and from the twin 2014 reports on social work education by Sir Martin Narey and David Croisdale-Appleby.

33. Several of our reforms draw on the advice of the Social Work Reform Board:

- The funding of the induction year for new social workers, through the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment;
- Supporting reform of the social work degree, focusing on the skills and knowledge needed for effective practice in the statutory sector and the supply of statutory placements;
- Providing consistent, high standards for social work, publishing statements of knowledge and skills to complement the Professional Capabilities Framework; and
- Maintaining a focus on continuous professional development through our plans for the assessment and accreditation system.¹⁶

34. Professor Munro's 2011 review of child protection - with its emphasis on supporting strong, confident social work practice without unnecessary bureaucracy and regulation - underpins much of our reform agenda.¹⁷ In line with her recommendations our promotion of new child and family social entry routes, close working between employers and higher education institutions and sector specific statements of knowledge and skills, ensure the particular requirements of child and family social work are explicitly featured in professional standards, training and professional development as she recommended. Our development of Practice Leaders build on and extend the reach of the Principal Social Workers she recommended.

¹⁶ See for example Building a safe and confident future: Maintaining momentum, Progress Report from the Social Work Reform Board (2012).

¹⁷ Munro (2011) The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report A child-centred system.

35. Professor Munro also recommended the creation of the post of Chief Social Worker - the appointment of Isabelle Trowler as Chief Social Worker for Children and Families has brought the voice of practice based, professional expertise to the centre of government policy making and leadership to the sector.
36. Many of our reform initiatives respond directly to the reports of Sir Martin Narey and Professor David Croisdale-Appleby which made wide ranging recommendations.¹⁸ Croisdale-Appleby pointed to the importance of high quality, placements and greater employer engagement in social work education. He emphasised the importance of the first year post qualification. Martin Narey, whose report focused on the education of childrens' social workers noted the importance of having clear agreed standards of what social workers need to understand, with more focus on the needs of child and family social workers within the context of generic social work education. Both emphasised the need for rigorous entry requirements and both were encouraging of exploring the potential of innovative routes into social work, such as fast track approaches, provided of course quality standards are maintained.

D What action is being taken by the Government to reverse the recruitment and retention crisis in children's social work?

37. Our main concern about recruitment of social workers is the variability between local areas, rather than about the overall national picture. Latest available statistics show that vacancy (15%) and turnover rates (17%) in child and family social work are higher than comparable local government averages (7% and 12% respectively). This disguises significant local variation - in some local authorities vacancy rates are as low as 1% while in others they are as high as 54%, with turnover rates ranging from 4% to 57%.¹⁹ Figures also need to be read in context – higher turnover rates may, for example, be characteristic of a locally mobile workforce.
38. Retention overall is also a concern, the average social work career is less than 8 years, compared to 16 for a nurse and 25 for a doctor.²⁰ This represents a low return on the investment we make in training and creates challenges in building and retaining professional expertise.
39. The quality of the environment in which social workers operate can be a key determinant of recruitment and retention variations. That includes: the quality of supervision and wider leadership and management; opportunities for development and career progression; workloads and levels of bureaucracy; organisational culture; and how much the local system is valued by others including the public and the local press.²¹

¹⁸ Narey (2014) Making the education of social workers consistently effective; Croisdale-Appleby (2014) Revisioning Social Work Education.

¹⁹ DfE Statistical First Release Children's Social Work Workforce, published May 2015, figures as of September 2014.

²⁰ Curtis, L et al (2010) The expected working life of a social worker, BJSW.

²¹ Bowyer, S and Rowe, A (2015) Social Work Recruitment and Retention. Research In Practice. Strategic Briefing. Dartington.

40. Our reforms seek to address a number of these points directly:

- We have evidence that we are attracting people into social work through Frontline and Step Up who would not have considered it a career option previously;
- More confident, better trained social workers will be better able to cope with the demands of frontline practice, and higher quality supervision will help significantly too;
- A clear career path, rooted in practice, should help retention rates – providing aspiration and pathways to the next level; and
- Learning from the Innovation Programme and from “Partners in Practice” local authorities, the What Works Centre and a robust approach to intervening where there is failure should help to drive improvement throughout the system and eliminate quickly some of the practices which make particular authorities unattractive places to work.

E What is the impact on children’s social care of reductions in funding to local authorities and other employers of social workers?

41. It is too early to predict, with any accuracy, the impact of the Spending Review on individual local authorities. We know that in the last Parliament child protection was prioritised in spending terms by local authorities and that there was no significant correlation between spend and effectiveness. Nonetheless, there is no doubt, that the fiscal position presents some significant challenges.

42. Our reform programme is intended to support efficiency as well as effectiveness. The improved decision making and leadership which will result from the package of reforms set out here will lead to sharper more effective interventions which will both improve children's lives and be less costly overall.

43. More specifically:

- We have seen, for example in Leeds, the way in which improved leadership and a reform of the way social work is done can drive very significant savings in the cost of looked after children's services;
- A number of our Innovation Programme projects have very ambitious cost reduction targets alongside their main aim of improving services to children and families. The creation of a respected What Works Centre to help identify and disseminate best practice should help share ideas quickly and easily across the system; and
- We would expect the chances of reform to be very significantly enhanced by the development of a strong Practice Leader role and better trained, stronger social workers, with high quality supervision enabling better decisions and the avoidance of drift and hesitancy in the system.

44. While recognising the complexity of the challenges involved we are keen both to see the impact of these reforms and to support local authorities more generally in seeking to understand both what is effective and what is efficient.

Conclusion

45. We are committed to driving through a comprehensive programme of reform, which is insistent on the highest possible standards of practice and care.

46. The Child Protection Taskforce oversees our programme of reforms, monitoring implementation and progress, and adding sharp accountability to the social work reform strategy. It also brings greater focus to cross-government working within this area. The Taskforce is an acknowledgement by the Prime Minister that reform of children's services and social work is, and will remain, an absolute priority for this Government.