

NSPCC

Response to

Social Work Taskforce call for Evidence

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NSPCC response to the SOCIAL WORK TASKFORCE

Summary

The NSPCC supports the work of the Social Work Task Force and would agree that the themes identified reflect key issues facing the social work profession today. Addressing these broad issues will be vital to improving the protection of children from abuse and neglect, but not sufficient. The Task Force needs to ensure children and families social workers are equipped to safeguard and protect those most at risk from deliberate harm and the identified themes do not address sufficiently the child protection responsibilities of children and families social workers.

- It is important that learning and evidence should be considered from social workers practising in a diversity of settings, not only in the statutory sector and including the learning from other countries in the UK.
- The NSPCC has undertaken an efficiency and effectiveness improvement process with some of our projects and believe this could be used in other settings to enable a greater proportion of social worker's time to be spent working directly with children and families.
- A focus on tools should not just be about the use of ICT, but also about ensuring social workers understand, are able to access and know how to use, validated tools (scales, questionnaires, checklists) to support assessment and care planning.
- Attention needs to be given to ensuring recruitment onto courses is done well and that courses provide the right content as well as appropriate high quality practice experiences to ensure that students are well prepared to enter practice as a qualified social worker.
- Social workers are not ready at the point of qualifying to take on complex cases, but need a framework of support and development over the first years to build the knowledge, skills and experience to take on the complex cases.
- The Taskforce should look at alternative methods for developing processes and learning, such as the models developed by Vanguard for the public sector.
- The pay scales for social work should be reviewed to reflect the complexity of the work and the stresses that practitioners face.
- Creating a better informed public debate and awareness of the challenges and dilemmas faced by children and family social workers is vital. Social workers cannot protect children from harm on their own – the confidence and support of other professions and of the wider public needs to be rebuilt following the death of baby Peter.

Introduction

1. There are a number of issues facing the social work profession as a whole and so it is right that the Social Work Taskforce's remit is broad. But there needs to be specific additional consideration of the particular issues affecting this group of social workers, who are most under pressure and scrutiny, and on whom children depend.
2. Our response is informed by:
 - Our experience as an **employer** of social workers in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. We employ both newly qualified and experienced social workers to undertake work to protect children from abuse and to help them recover from the effects of abuse. We assess the competence of these staff and provide a varied programme of induction and continuing professional development for social workers. This includes supporting them to undertake post qualifying training.

- Our experience of running a **Social Work traineeship scheme** – now in its third year
 - Understanding of the training needs and practice issues faced by social workers and the organisational contexts and cultures in which they work, based on the experience of our **Training and Consultancy service**. This service works with a range of statutory, voluntary and commercial bodies across the UK, undertaking training needs analyses, designing and delivering training and development opportunities, learning resources, providing post-qualifying programmes and providing organisational consultancy in relation to safeguarding arrangements. One of our staff (Enid Hendry) sits on your Key Partners group ;
 - As a provider of **practice placements** for social work students in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. This gives an insight into the variable quality and content of programmes and the approaches taken to recruitment and assessment
3. The NSPCC welcomes the work of the Social Work Taskforce It may be implicit in the thinking, but one issue we would raise is the importance of recognising that social workers work in a range of settings, including in the voluntary sector. In our reading the work of the Taskforce and also the main focus of government has been on social workers in statutory settings. A failure to recognise those social workers working elsewhere means losing important learning and evidence. For example, until recently the focus on developing the next generation of Directors of Children’s Services has been about those recruiting those currently in the local authority sector. By extending the pool to those working in the voluntary sector one increases the chances of recruiting those who have the necessary ability to lead and manage. We therefore would urge the Taskforce in all aspects of its work to ensure that the full diversity of social work experience and practice is considered and reflected.
4. Social work policy has diverged across the four nations of the UK and we believe there is merit in looking at some of the developments that are taking place in Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland. We provide some examples under the themes below.

Theme one: *We have been told that social workers feel they do not have enough time to devote directly to the people they want to help. They feel overstretched by staff shortages and tied up in bureaucracy.*

5. The NSPCC hears similar views from social workers employed by statutory agencies, when we are providing them with training. The balance between completing administrative tasks and time spent on using skills to work directly with children and families is difficult, especially when there is a drive to ensure targets are met. However the focus has to be on improving outcomes for service users, be they a vulnerable child or a vulnerable adult, and so a greater proportion of social worker time should be used to work directly with them and their families to provide the support and interventions needed to bring about positive changes.
6. Intervening to protect children at serious risk from deliberate harm requires highly skilled and intensive interventions. We have commented extensively on this in our submissions to Lord Laming’s review¹. Getting the quality of supervision right is a vital ingredient to the effective support of staff and will help with staff retention. We are

¹ NSPCC – Evidence to Lord Laming’s Review of Child Protection Dec 2008 Section 2.1
http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/policyandpublicaffairs/Consultations/2008/Lamingresponse_wdf62413.pdf

aware that on occasion the emotionally demanding and stressful nature of this work may mean that some staff retreat behind the administrative requirements to avoid dealing with the pain, distress and conflict this work can involve. This requires skilled line management support.

7. While the pressures of bureaucracy and performance reporting in the NSPCC are different to a statutory agency, our expectations of all our staff are no less exacting in terms of recording, reporting on performance and evaluating effectiveness. However the majority of practitioner's time is spent in working directly with children and families. This balance of manageable caseloads and good quality supervision and development opportunities helps us to retain social workers and enables them to deepen and extend their skills and improve the quality of their work with children and families.
8. As part of a wider efficiency review, an efficiency and effectiveness improvement process was developed and piloted in an NSPCC project. This process was designed with the help of an internationally recognised consultancy firm, to improve efficiency and reduce time wasted so that a greater proportion of social worker time could be spent on work with children and families. This model involved observation and structured interviews, value-added analysis, detailed process mapping and then team workshops to tackle identified problems and to generate solutions and an action plan. The approach led to concrete ideas for improved efficiency (e.g. a clearer referral form, quicker ways of recording sessions) and was experienced by social workers as empowering. It helped to introduce a continuous improvement mindset within the team and ownership of the action plan. We believe this could be useful and transferable to the statutory sector.

Theme two: *We have been told that social workers feel very frustrated by some of the tools and support they are given to do their jobs.*

9. Under the Quality Protects programme, there were a number of positive developments such as the Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and the range of validated tools (e.g. the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and the Child Development Checklist) designed to support assessment and planning. Although there are now a range of tools to help practitioners, knowledge of these tools, access to them and time to learn to use them properly is variable; hence there is less likelihood of them being used to good effect. Face to face time with children and families is vital, and this time needs to be used well, otherwise it is an opportunity lost. A focus on developing competent practitioners therefore requires time for them to learn about how to use a range of tools that can assist them in assessing, analysing and intervening effectively.

Theme three: *We have been told that new social workers are often not properly prepared for the demands of the job and that the education system does not effectively support ongoing development and specialisation*

10. We wish to make a number of points of relevance in terms of selection and pre- and post-qualifying training.
11. Getting the right people into courses is an obvious starting point. Whilst the NSPCC welcomes the measures being taken to raise the academic standards and intellectual

rigour of those entering the profession, this must be combined with selecting people with strong inter-personal skills and emotional resilience. Interpersonal and intellectual skills are both essential to effective children and families social work.

12. The NSPCC has developed an approach to interviewing that helps organisations to recruit more effectively, to probe in more depth in order to really understand not just what people do but how they do it, and importantly why they do it, thereby giving a more rounded and complete picture of a candidate. We have found this approach, known as Values Based Interviewing (VBI)² to be effective in predicting an individual's behaviour at work once recruited into post. VBI was shown to be widely acceptable to managers, interviewers and candidates as a selection method that increases confidence in recruitment decision-making, greatly reducing or eliminating the "gut feel" element of decision-making in interviews. We think this could be used in a range of sectors and are willing to work with any employers who may want to use it on a consultancy basis.
13. The debate about generic vs. specialist courses for social workers is an ongoing one. Social workers do need to have a breadth of knowledge and we believe that students should be expected to spend around a third of their degree on generic / other areas and two thirds on their chosen specialism, such as children and families, mental health or older people. The breadth of what is currently expected to be covered does not leave enough time for key specialist skills and knowledge to be developed. For example, the NSPCC is aware that a very valuable component on the observation of children has had to be dropped at Nottingham University because of a lack of available time in the curriculum. Such components should be essential elements for any student wanting to work with children and families.
14. We are also aware that there is a large variation in the quality and rigour of university-based provision. Any social work course needs to be able to draw together theory and its application within a current practice context. Students on placement with the NSPCC comment critically about the distance between what is being taught and what they experience and have to deal within a practice context.
15. The NSPCC is aware that a lack of practice placements has meant that some social workers are currently qualifying without necessarily having had any experience of statutory work. The experience of having to make sense of legislation, understand the guidance and then apply it in writing a report for a court or a foster panel is one that should not be left until someone is qualified; this is too late. We consider it to be imperative that social workers going into children and families social work should have had a placement in a children and families setting and this should have included experience of statutory work.
16. The quality of practice placements is also of concern. The drive in the 1990s to raise the quality and consistency of practice placements has been lost, because of the difficulty in meeting the increased demand for placements, the move to the new degree, vacancy rates and increased workloads. The quality of the practice teacher therefore becomes more variable and work pressures mean practice teachers may not

² Cleary (2008) Value Based Interviewing: Report into the development and evaluation of the effectiveness of a value based interviewing method used in recruitment and selection of individuals to work with children and young people, NSPCC

have the same time to focus on enabling, enhancing and assessing a student's learning.³

17. Our experience tells us that there are also issues about courses not being prepared to fail students. Our practice teachers have on occasion advocated that a student should not be allowed to progress but have come under pressure to pass them. It has been suggested that the NSPCC expects too much. Thresholds for entry to the social work profession should not be inappropriately lowered.
18. Through our research⁴, inspections, practice and work with external agencies as a training provider, we have identified a number of skills gaps that are critical to safeguarding and protecting children and young people from abuse and neglect:
 - Working with cases of child neglect
 - Working with the families of children with a child protection plan to achieve change;
 - Analysis, professional judgement and decision-making in situations where there are child protection concerns or children are known to be at risk of significant harm;
 - Working with passively or actively hostile, or resistant, individuals;
 - Knowledge and understanding of child development, including observational skills;
 - Engaging and communicating effectively with children and young people.
19. These cannot all be addressed within a qualifying course, but they are required as a minimum for being an effective social worker who is able to work with complex and challenging family situations. Support and opportunities for continuing professional development are needed to learn, apply, test and build on the foundation provided by the qualification programme. The Newly Qualified Social Worker pilot programme is a good start. We would like to see this as a protected and assessed "probationary year in practice", similar to that being undertaken by newly qualified teachers. It should enable an employer to identify an individual's strengths and the gaps which need to be addressed over time to assist the social worker in developing the skills needed to work with the most complex cases.
20. A distinction needs to be drawn between what a social work qualification should equip a social worker to do at the point of entry to the profession, and the level of skill and experience needed to deal with a situation as complex and serious, for example, as Baby Peter's case. It is not appropriate for someone who is just qualified to be expected to deal with that level of complexity. A career path for social workers needs to map out how to take people from initial qualification to the level of expertise to cope with such cases. A structured framework of continued professional development and required competencies for undertaking particular responsibilities for protecting children is required, with social workers needing to demonstrate competence before being able to move on to the next level. The NSPCC has developed a process for assessing the competence of all newly appointed practitioners, linked to the provision of development opportunities. Only those who demonstrate essential competencies are confirmed in post. We would be happy to provide more detail about this process if this would be helpful.

³ Parker J Developing Effective Practice Learning for Tomorrow's Social Workers. *Social Work Education* Vol. 26, No. 8, December 2007

⁴ NSPCC – Evidence to Lord Laming's Review of Child Protection Dec 2008

Theme four: *We have been told that social workers do not feel that their profession speaks with a strong national voice or is well supported at national level.*

21. We would reiterate the need to ensure that such a voice/ voices reflect/s the diversity of the profession not just in terms of types of work, but also the places and settings in which and places they work in across the UK. Devolution is leading to a divergence in social care policy and that trend is reflected in how the professions are supported in different national jurisdictions. We believe that there may be lessons for the Taskforce from the work that is being carried out in Scotland under the Changing Lives agenda especially the focus on a competent and confident workforce.⁵
22. In speaking with a strong voice it is also important to be open and honest about the challenges, successes and failings of the profession and to work to create a better informed public debate about what the profession can and should do, for example, to protect children where the available evidence may be uncertain.
23. The NSPCC Research Department, the University of Huddersfield and Cardiff University are currently in the process of developing a research proposal which will consider the effect(s) of media and public discourse(s) on social work as a profession, social work practitioners and thereby on children who are in need of protection. The research will consider:
- How and why some child protection/ child death cases become high profile/ social problems.
 - If and/or how new forms of digital media have impacted upon the representation(s) of social work
 - The impact of recent media coverage of social work on; a) social work practice; b) social work practitioner's perception(s) of their role and their working practices; c) public perceptions of social workers/ social work practices.
 - The way in which social work/ social work practitioners were represented by the media in relation to Baby Peter and if and/or how this differs from representations of social work/social work practitioners in earlier high profile cases (such as Maria Cowell, Jasmine Beckford, Cleveland, Orkney, Victoria Climbié etc), or in the media coverage of any other child deaths which occur during the research period (such as Brandon Muir).
 - How social work was represented in media/ public discourse in comparison to other professions who were involved in the Baby Peter case.
 - If there is any difference in the media coverage of social work/ social work practitioners across the four nations, and the impact of media discourse(s) in different locations across the UK.
 - How all of the above may affect children who are in need of protection.

We would be happy to collaborate with the Taskforce on this, if this is of interest.

Theme five: *We have been told that systems for managing the performance of social workers are not driving quality first and foremost.*

⁵ Changing lives - Report of the 21st Century Social Work Review Scottish Government 2006
<http://www.scotland.gov.uk/Publications/2006/02/02094408/0>

24. The Taskforce may want to look at the work of John Seddon and Vanguard on the application of systems thinking and processes to the public sector.⁶ Any performance system needs to focus on the quality of service to users. The Vanguard approach focuses on designing work in a way that focuses on the user, while also ensuring that learning feeds back into the way that services are delivered.
25. Transparency and accountability are especially important to reassure the public, whose confidence in social work practice has been eroded, and also to protect children effectively. The role of the GSCC in holding social workers to account and de-registering those found unfit to practice is not well understood outside the profession or by the public at large and should be better communicated. This requires a sophisticated approach to inspection which focuses on the experience of service users including in particular children and young people and the quality of work undertaken with children and families to address problems and achieve change. It is far more important to understand the quality of contact rather than whether contact took place; quality and accuracy of assessment not purely whether done within required timescale. We suggest there may be merit in talking to Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Education (HMIe) about the standards-based approach to inspection that is used in Children's Services in Scotland as they are due to publish a final report on the findings of inspection of child protection in the autumn.

Theme six: *We have been told that social workers feel that their profession is undervalued, poorly understood and under continuous media attack. This is making it hard for them to do their jobs and hard to attract people into the profession.*

26. We need to reach a point in public discourse when people are praising professionals working in our public services they routinely list social workers alongside the police, teachers and health workers. Likewise, good social work should be valued in the same way that good education is valued. In recent years, the terms 'social care' and 'social care worker' have started to replace 'social work' and 'social worker'; in children and families social work, the term 'children's services' has arguably served to obscure the distinct nature and value of social work. We recommend that the taskforce considers the differing terminologies in use and recommends the use of consistent language which demonstrates the importance of and pride in this important profession.
27. Until and unless social workers feel valued and respected for the work they do on behalf of the wider society there will continue to be difficulties attracting and retaining social workers, particularly to work with children at risk of deliberate harm. Creating a better informed public debate and awareness of the challenges and dilemmas faced by children and family social workers is vital. Social workers cannot protect children from harm on their own – they need to have the confidence and support of other professions and of the wider public. Following the death of baby Peter this confidence has understandably been eroded and needs to be re-built.
28. In addition to issues raised in relation to value and lack of understanding, we think it important not to ignore or neglect the issue of pay and reward. The pay of social workers has not kept pace with that of other public sector employees. Those who take on the complex high risk work need to be properly rewarded financially. Alongside

⁶ Seddon : Adult Social Care: a systems analysis and a better way forward – Vanguard Consulting 2005

pay, support is important. In recognition of the work our staff do, the NSPCC provides a range of benefits including:

- Flexible working
- Family friendly work practices
- Employee assistance programmes- this includes a confidential independent counselling service provided free of charge to all staff
- Staff training and development
- We routinely explore the reasons for staff deciding to leave the NSPCC and undertake periodic staff surveys to understand and improve the quality of staff's work experience.

29. Many other organisations do this, but we would reiterate the importance of ensuring that employees feel that their employers understand the stresses of their work and are supporting and valuing them by working in ways which help them to do the best possible for children.

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