

Children England submission to the new inquiry into Training of Children and Families Social Workers

Introduction

1. Children England welcomes the decision of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee to undertake an inquiry into the training of children and families' social workers. It is vital to the social work profession and for children, young people and families more widely to have a thorough, impartial examination of the current state of social work training. We strongly support the Committee's undertaking in examining issues pertaining to the training of social workers to assess the Government's current approaches to training and supporting new social workers.

2. As the leading membership organisation for the children, young people and families voluntary sector, Children England is in a unique position to represent charities that work with children, young people and families. Our members include the largest children's charities in the country through to small local groups. Our mission is to create a fairer world for children, young people and families by championing the voluntary organisations which work on their behalf. The role of the voluntary and community sector in the field of social work is vital not only in directly providing and supporting social workers, but in ensuring that children and families are safe, supported and enabled to thrive.

3. This short submission does not attempt to cover each aspect of Children England's concern in relation into the training of children and families social workers. Rather it sets out some of the key themes that we believe must be addressed, and we would urge the Committee to consider these issues as part of their inquiry into the training of children and families social workers.

4. Children England would be very happy to assist with any further questions the Committee may have with the inquiry. We would also be willing to help the Committee to engage with the children, young people and families voluntary sector.

Context and drivers

5. There are a number of drivers which are impacting on the training of children and families social workers at this point in time. Key issues are:

- Needing to drive forward improvements in the quality of professional practice.
- Attracting and retaining the brightest and best people to work in social work.
- Strengthening the delivery system which supports and challenges social workers.

6. The Government and its partners, including the third sector, needs to develop its thinking and its work programmes to help address the current issues within social work. These include recruitment, retention and issues around morale and status, as well as practice.

7. There is a need to help build confidence and skills for the children and families' social workers doing their job, as well as supporting experienced social workers, and to encourage more to remain in front line roles.

Entry routes to the profession

8. Social work with families and children is one of the most challenging and rewarding careers to enter into. It is also a career with great variety that demands aptness of response, understanding and strong communication skills. As such, the field of social work needs to attract and retain people with many different backgrounds - from the new graduate to mature and experienced people moving from different fields.

9. Flexibility thus has to be a crucial issue in entry into social work - not only to attract a wide range of people with a range of skills and experience, but to ensure that in this current climate of increasing vacancies the maximum amount of people see social work as a viable and flexible option as a long-term career. This however, should not undermine the need for highly skilled, well qualified applicants nor add greater confusion to the myriad of qualifications currently associated with social work.

10. What is required are a series of well-defined entry routes into the profession. This should prevent some potential applicants from being excluded whilst ensuring consistency across the country as to how one can enter the profession.

11. Qualifications are important in terms of ensuring standards in the profession, but these courses need to be delivered in such a way that allows the maximum number of committed individuals to access them.

12. Making routes into the profession flexible, yet ensuring consistent practice across the country needs to be mirrored with greater promotion by the relevant bodies. It is not enough to improve

the clarity of entry routes into the profession for those already interested; social work as a career and the ways into it need greater promotion from the outset.

13. Entry routes need to be flexible but without compromising the status of the profession to encourage mature entrants, re-entrants and people considering a career change. For example, degree level qualifications are very expensive. A framework needs to encourage both recruitment and retention, with sustainable funding.

Structure of training

14. Degree level qualifications do not necessarily deliver the required skill-mix needed. Although degree entry provides in effect a baseline of academic ability, unless the degree course challenges the student both academically and personally the momentum of learning can be lost. It is also important to note that social work degrees provide the first step in entering and developing within the profession.

15. Ongoing career development is highly important. The quality of supervision, support, leadership and management that a social worker has after their initial training and throughout their careers underpins the development of their skills. The degree acts as a foundation to build their career upon. The focus throughout a social worker's career should shift from practice to more emphasis on research with time and experience. Allowing the development of leaders so those entering the profession can aspire is also important.

Content of initial training

16. The content of the initial training through the social work degree has to be generic- it has to cover the crucial legalistic, policy and theoretical frameworks covering everything from elder abuse to child protection. However, the degree should also provide an opportunity for students to develop the vital personal and professional qualities required to become a successful social worker. This could be developed by enabling students to meet with families and young people who have been in contact with social services in the past. This should help to develop the personal skills required of a potential social worker- honing negotiating skills, becoming aware of inherent power relationships, actively listening and acting promptly and responsibly. This could be facilitated through voluntary sector bodies who are engaged with hard-to-reach families. Although a large part of this can be developed through the placement process it may be of use for social work students to speak with and learn from more experienced social workers

and families who have been engaged with social services as separate from the placement process. This would also allow the students greater opportunities to learn and make mistakes within a safe environment.

17. An aspect of training which is missing from social work bachelor degrees is an explicit focus on poverty. Poverty is one of the most common features of families whose children come to the attention of social workers. It is not the only factor involved but families on low income are far more likely to be required to have contact with social care services. The implication is that social work courses need to equip future social workers more fully - with the motivation, knowledge and skills to deal with the poverty of the families with whom they work.

18. Social workers, once in the field, have to balance the realities of their work with the complex systems and policy frameworks within which their employer organisations exist. The continued and important emphasis on child-centred frontline work and the drive for joined-up working across agencies to support this needs to be conveyed strongly through initial training.

Post-qualifying training and career paths

19. It has been difficult to recruit social workers with relevant experience. It used to be a widespread expectation that someone with post-qualifying experience would be expected to fill vacant positions. This is no longer the case and what is now happening is that staff are being recruited to post without the specialist experience. This de-professionalises the profession and reduces the quality of service being delivered.

20. It is important to take account of the specialist services offered both regionally and nationally. Clear pathways need to exist to recruit specialist staff for this areas allowing transferability across each specialism.

Quality

21. The feedback from employers is that incorrect placements are being provided and an alternative is to provide a regulated route similar to health in order to measure and evaluate. Ideally, there is scope to promote integration placements across a range of organisations, to enable staff to develop a real and better understanding.

22. The quality of training needs to be measured to ensure it is reaching standards, but at the same time needs flexibility to meet particular regional needs. Training needs to be consistent throughout the country. Training should be quality assured by one agency.

23. Any national frameworks or models that are to be developed should allow for regional variation and digression, particularly around pay and reward. As a proxy to this a national framework should also include pay structures related to post as currently reflected in teaching. This would help specifically in developing and retaining staff. There are challenges of negotiating access to training and funding.

24. The flipside to developing staff qualifications is that qualifications may mean more pay - who will find the increase? There needs to be the ability to reward staff properly for the levels of expertise acquired. We cannot have good services for children on the cheap, with insecure funding.

Supply of initial training

25. There needs to be integrated workforce planning and voluntary sector service quality and choice. The understanding of the demographics of the social work population is inadequate and there is no supply model of the social work workforce unlike teachers and nurses. This means that at this moment in time it is difficult to ensure adequate training capacity and workforce planning.

26. A statement of collaboration could be signed by key partners / agencies to ensure integrated working within social work and that best practice is shared. There also needs to be simple and equitable access to funding for training

Post-qualifying training and career paths

27. The profession would need to have mainstream funding to create a sustainable environment and continuing professionalisation of the role, and status recognition within and outside of the third sector. This will ensure that accessibility is for all organisations no matter how small. The stability that mainstream funding would provide would allow organisations to succession plan efficiently and effectively.

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