



## Notes of Wider Reference Group Meeting on 9 May 2011

### **Introduction**

The third meeting of the Wider Reference Group received an update of progress to date on the College and a presentation on the Professional Capabilities Framework being developed by the Social Work Reform Board. This framework, once developed and agreed, will pass to The College which will ensure that it is used to support social workers to achieve excellence in their practice.

The presentations are attached to this report.

Two discussion groups then met to explore the ways that The College should involve people who use social work services and carers in its work and on the ways The College should use the Professional Capabilities Framework to support social workers to achieve excellent practice. The notes from each discussion group are presented below.

### **Notes from the discussion group on involving service users and carers in the College of Social Work**

#### **Personal experiences of social care**

We began by discussing people's experiences of supporting close relatives who need social care. People felt that they sometimes knew how to get things done because they worked around social care. The College could provide information and guidance to service users and carers in similar positions, so that they also have what they need to find their way through the system. This would be by clarifying their rights and the duties of social workers, providing signposting and using language that is accessible to the public in all its publications and web based information.

#### **Barriers to participation**

There was a brief discussion of the barriers that prevent people from getting involved. These included fear of social workers, social workers not listening to what service users and carers tell them and the need to see service users and carers as distinct groups.

## **Experiences of involving service users and carers**

The group had lots of experience of involving service users and carers in their organisations. These included:

- The Fostering Network has recently completed a piece of work on participation. They found that it was easy to develop but much harder to embed because the cultural shift needed for meaningful participation was difficult to achieve.
- Skills for Care have service user representatives on their boards. They also have strong local networks and groups that take part in consultations. The College may be able to link into some of these networks. They have found it more appropriate to work with organisations led by service users and carers, rather than individuals.
- At the Grandparents Association, one third of the trustees are service users. There are also ways that service users can speak to and spend time together.

## **Reasons for participation in the College**

We discussed the reasons that the College wants to involve service users and carers in its work. These include:

1. The College aims to improve standards in social work. This is meaningless if it does not result in better experiences and outcomes for service users and carers.
2. The College expects social workers to work in partnership with service users and carers. We want to model partnership working throughout our organisation.

## **Issues for participation in the College**

The group discussed some of the issues that the College needs to think about. They pointed out that there is a tension between being a membership organisation for social workers, and including users' voices in all that the College does. Social workers might want the organisation to be for them alone. The group felt that everybody – service users, carers and social workers – need time and space to discuss their similarities and differences, and social workers need to be willing to give up power.

It was also felt that social workers and service users often want the same things. If social workers can access service users' views through the College, it will help empower them to stand up to budget cuts. There are also examples of user-led organisations offering practice placements to social workers, and this can help build strong relationships.

There was also some discussion of the issue of service users becoming 'tame' through their involvement. For example, creating a static group of service users that the College then relies on over the years can mean that everyone becomes complacent. This means that there needs to be continuity, so that people can get fully involved in the work of the College. But there also needs to be ways of capturing the views of people who aren't usually involved. This might be through one off consultations. It is also important to repeat consultations to understand how people's views and experiences are changing.

## **Recommendations**

- All the information provided by The College should be accessible to the public and should help people who use social work services and carers know what they should expect from social workers
- The College must manage people's expectations carefully through honesty and openness about what can and can't be changed.
- Everyone needs to be supported to develop the skills to work together.
- The College should offer full support to service users and carers who are getting involved, for example, through meeting preparation, training etc.
- Service users and carers should be able to contribute in ways that match their skills and interests.
- The simple, practical things should not be overlooked, such as paying travel expenses on the day and thinking about meeting people at times and places that suit them.
- The College should reach out to service user and carer organisations rather than expecting people to come to us. However, it can be difficult to have the time and budget to build face to face relationships with service users and carers. It should be acknowledged that this can affect trust and people's confidence to speak up.
- The College should demonstrate what has changed as a result of service user involvement.
- The College should make sure that the organisations we work with are genuinely user-led or carer-led.
- If things aren't working, the College should find out why from the perspective of service users and carers.
- Service users should have media training so that they can talk about the impact that excellent social work has on their lives.

## **Notes from the discussion group on the professional capabilities framework**

The notes below reflect a summary of key points made by the participants.

### **Higher education:**

- HE teachers need to be competent and up to date
- Curriculum must be updated to reflect real current practice of social workers
- Funding changes in HE endanger future of undergraduate programmes in particular
- Masters route tends to increase recruitment to management after only short time working with clients – increases likelihood of two-tier profession, often with women in the lower-paid frontline roles.
- Profession (as distinct from employers alone) has to take responsibility to *willingly* offer and support practice placements which are overseen by a professional social worker
- Future initial training may look very different – employment based/inter-professional modules/generic social work degree (i.e. not licence to practise) – but need to avoid making same mistakes as were made with CSS and CQSW where people with non-social work degrees ‘topped up’ to become social workers
- Leadership is not something you pick up later in your career, but is part of the whole career planning process for all social workers and should be there in the curriculum from the start

### **Broader issues**

- Social workers use their skills in a whole range of non-social work roles, and they may want to be members of the college to maintain their professional identity and links
- Frontline social workers lose their skills very quickly once they progress to management as very few keep any sort of caseload – this has implications for their role in understanding and supporting staff
- We currently have no way of knowing how many social workers are required where – with some government indications that maybe they are not needed at all!
- Social workers must realise that they will need to begin to pay for things which so far have been available for free, or heavily subsidised
- PCF in its current form is not transferable to the other nations, and transferability for social workers between countries is restricted

## Recommendations for The College

- Should be aiming to get the vast majority of 92K registered social workers as members so it can be the voice of the profession
- Endorsement scheme needed for employers as well as education programmes to identify best practice
- Need to keep asking what difference pcf will make, and driving it forward – words on the paper won't change anything
- 'lifelong learning' might be a better label than continuing professional development to capture its importance from undergraduate onwards
- Should not sell 'benefits' of College offers but try to encourage members to become part of changing the profession and see membership as an 'honour'
- Encouraging locality based activity – social workers working together, mentoring within and across organisations, getting involved in planning services etc
- Engage with social work practices and international social work practitioners to find innovative and effective ways to improve service delivery
- Build support – e.g. online portfolio – to support learning and help with new ways of thinking about and recording learning
- Make sure the public know what social workers do when it works well – not only when it goes wrong
- Keep revisiting and evaluating the pcf to make sure it is still fit for purpose
- Enable grass roots movement for change – SWRB 'imposition' will not bring about the culture change that is necessary.