

EDUCATION SELECT COMMITTEE

CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE WORKFORCE INQUIRY

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Response – drafted by;

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CoramBAAF is the membership organisation for local authorities and the voluntary and independent sector that provides a range of services that develop, promote and enable best multi-disciplinary policy and practice in child and family placement practice.

What is needed from social work, and by social workers in 2019

The fundamental issues in answering this question are addressed by noting that 2019 is the 30th. anniversary of the Children Act 1989. The Act was a major change in society's view of the relationship between children and their parents with a move from the concept of 'legal custody' to that of 'parental responsibility'. As such, the law moved from a long-standing issue where parents exercised what amounted to legal ownership of the child to one where the parents had responsibility towards their child in the way that they exercised their authority, provided resources and made a fundamental commitment to them

throughout their minority and beyond. The Act also established that where a court is considering the future of a child in either private and public law cases, the welfare of the child – the paramountcy principle - in the immediate and long term is the primary factor that must be addressed when the court makes any decision. These factors were and are of huge significance in setting out a modern framework for children, the responsibilities of their parents and the role of the State including social workers.

Section 1 of the Act sets out a 'welfare checklist' that provides further detail of the primary issues. This includes recognition of the adverse impact that any delay may have when making a plan and decision about the child's future care arrangements – a statutory duty subsequently placed on the courts that requires care proceedings to be completed within 26 weeks. The checklist also includes a requirement that in considering any plan for a child the court must address the question of whether making an Order is better for the child than making no Order. This sub-section sets out a significant principle about the role of the court in needing to satisfy itself that the welfare of the child can only be met by making an appropriate order as opposed to making no order and resolving the primary issues through other means. This directly reflects an overarching principle set in Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights that requires 'respect for an individual's "private and family life, his home and his correspondence", subject to certain restrictions that are "in accordance with the law" and "necessary in a democratic society".

The Children Act 1989 created a framework where the role of the social worker is core to its delivery – alongside many other professionals. While the Act requires compliance by social workers in everything that they do, the principles of the Act are also deeply aligned to the profession in its values, beliefs and practice. Social work reflects the best of what the Act sets out as the drivers that inform the relationship between the State, families and children. Firstly, in its recognition that many families find themselves in difficulty with consequences that result in children being 'in need'. The range of factors is wide and can include disability and special needs, temporary family crisis including health and mental health, and challenges in meeting basic needs such as housing, hygiene and food. Section 17 of the Act recognises this and it is the role of local authorities to provide services primarily through social workers in their engagement with the family in exploring the issues, reaching an understanding of the problems and proposing and enabling a solution to help resolve the crisis. Section 20 of the Act enables a parent to request that the child be temporarily placed in foster care where this provides an opportunity to enhance the family's problem-solving strategy.

The skills and knowledge of social workers in establishing a relationship of trust with the parents that is open, supportive, empathetic and reliable is core to the spirit of working in partnership as set out in the Act. This means recognising that there may be levels of anxiety in the parents where they may fear that they will be blamed and seen to be at fault for the crisis they find themselves in. This can be especially difficult if the parents experienced poor levels of care as children. Social workers need to draw on their understanding of child and family development, the nature of the stresses that impact on families and then finding

helpful ways to work with families to 'problem solve'. This can be set out as the capacity and ability of social workers to:

1. Intervene early to help, support and protect children and their families through the diligent use of their professional expertise and access to quality services,
2. Uphold their statutory and professional responsibilities under relevant legislation,
3. Access appropriate and meaningful professional development and support;
4. Work with other professionals who play a role in the care of children within the education and health systems.

The principles set out above and the challenges in enabling and delivering them are fundamental to the social work profession. But the notion of working in partnership with families can be severely tested when the needs of the child are identified as at risk because of actions or lack of action by the parents. The profession and society as a whole has become all too familiar with the reality of those risks through years of serious case reviews where children have been killed or seriously injured as a direct result of the threat that parents pose and the action or lack of action they take to address this. In many cases, social workers and their local authorities have been identified as having a poor understanding of the risks and a plan to safeguard the child given those risks. Working in partnership with parents in such circumstances is extremely challenging as the responsibility to protect the child runs at odds with the importance of positively working with the parent. The skills and knowledge of social workers in developing an enabling relationship with the parents are demanding and the issues that need to be addressed are typically complex – especially the very raw emotions that accompany this. Child protection plans will set out the detail of

the arrangements to resolve the issues but this will be highly dependant on establishing an 'enabling relationship' with the parents and in some circumstances this will not be adequate to protect the child. In some circumstances, the plan can be quickly escalated to the need to protect the child when the evidence indicates that there is a risk of or that the child has experienced 'significant harm' as defined in law. The local authority may then decide to issue care proceedings where the evidence indicates that this is necessary to protect the child and ensure their welfare including the plan for the child in the long term. This will include fully informing the parents of the evidence of the risks to the child, identifying the detail of the care plan and continuing to work constructively and meaningfully with the parents including working with the extended family through family group conferences. If there are issues about the parents' fear of being blamed and judged to be bad parents when section 17 or 20 inform the activities and responsibilities of social workers, then these issues are likely to be seriously amplified if children are removed or forcibly removed from the parents' care. This can result in the almost complete breakdown in the relationship between the parents and the social worker which will be framed during care proceedings as one side opposing the other on the basis of 'truth' and 'lies'. The outcome of those proceedings may well reinforce those issues especially if the child is placed in long term care with foster carers or adopters. At the same time, the parents cannot and must not be 'written off' as they are very likely to be significant to the child in terms of their history and origins however complex this might be.

Recent debates have questioned whether the evolution of these issues has resulted in social work becoming dominated by an 'investigative mode of

practice' where the fear of underestimating the risk to the child can result in children being seriously injured or killed and the professional and the local authority held to account for their failure to act. This has also been accompanied by social work becoming dominated by an 'administrative mode of operation' with compliance required in terms of computer systems, recording and demanding protocols. In addition, many issues are being raised about the impact of austerity with its direct reduction in a wide range of services that families need and social workers need access to in order to improve the quality of parenting, children's development and welfare. Food banks and access to housing are indicative of one range of issues, access to health services - both physical, mental health and addiction services another, domestic violence provision another. The framing of the population into two groups - 'skivers' or 'strivers' (Osbourne 2012)¹ has added a notable division in the value and worth of the latter group of citizens as opposed to the former. The pressure on social workers to resolve these questions rests far outside of their duties and responsibilities and it often rests outside of the capacity of their employers – local authorities - to address these issues as well.

The range of services that children's social workers provide is far wider than specific child protection matters. Family placement in foster care, adoption or special guardianship play a significant part. Services for children with disabilities

¹ Osbourne, G. 2012, Chancellor's speech to the Conservative Party Conference. Available from <https://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/politics/2012/10/george-osbornes-speech-conservative-conference-full-texting>

another. Services provided by the voluntary and independent sector are another. Fundamental to all of this is the relationship between the social worker and the person or people they work with. Applying to become an adopter or a foster carer is a challenging and anxiety-provoking process with many highly personal issues at the core of that process. Directly working with foster carers, adopters or special guardians is an equally demanding task and process. Working directly with children requires another set of sensitive, appropriate and knowledge-based skills especially when children have come to be fearful of the adults that have played a part in their lives when they have been abused or neglected. The issues raised in establishing a relationship, often in challenging circumstances cannot be under-estimated. Maintaining that relationship over time in a helpful, constructive and problem-solving way will always be challenging and there are likely to be many confusing, upsetting and troubling issues to be addressed during that process. Without a robust framework that enables these issues to be recognised, discussed and understood as a standard part of the practice framework, these issues may result in more problems than they solve.

Working with people in a spirit of partnership in problem-solving mode when the very nature of that work is likely to start with some form of the question such as 'whose side are you on' is very difficult. Building a relationship of trust, openness and dependability must be key to the basic approach every social worker starts with. However, when the issues faced by the individual or family have created seriously challenging questions such as 'whose side are you on?', this either becomes a huge hurdle to overcome or it leads to a breakdown of trust in the relationship between social workers and families – adults and children. This commonly experienced theme introduces high levels of stress for everybody

involved. It is the very opposite of what social work and social workers committed themselves to in their values, beliefs and actions developed over many decades. It is at the moment a 'problem without resolution'. And the social work profession might therefore be described as coming to operate 'in survival mode' as it attempts to work with people who start from a position of high anxiety about the position they currently find themselves in.

How initiatives and reforms to social work training have impacted on the social work workforce.

As this response was being drafted, the Department of Education published a research report on phase 1 of a significant longitudinal study of social workers career progression undertaken by IFF Research, Manchester Metropolitan University and the University of Salford². The study raises a range of important questions about the challenges to career progression, the stability of the social work workforce, the levels of stress experienced by social workers and the working conditions of social workers. There are several factors identified in that report which align with the issues raised above although the research questions and methodology used at this stage are not casework specific – the challenges faced by social workers in working directly with individuals and families and the direct impact of those challenges. A survey was completed by 5621 social workers from 95 local authorities with a further 40 completing a telephone interview – 20 who were planning to stay as children's social workers and 20 who

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https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/826965/LongCAF_Wave1_report_IFF_DfE_August19.pdf?_ga=2.229896472.503541948.1566546550-1578664186.1566546550

planned to leave. The motivation to become a social worker was strongly related to personal values, education and personal experience. The completed training programme was regarded as positive by 73% when it came to social work generally and 68% for children and families social work. For those social workers who completed the ASYE³.

year for newly qualified social workers, 65% found this helpful while 35% did not. However, after that year had finished, the research identified a significant drop in satisfaction as workload and administrative responsibilities increased. This was notably so for child protection social workers with consequent moves to roles that were less intense and anxiety-provoking. Social workers reported that they were overwhelmed with the most common causes of stress at work identified as:

- too much paperwork (68%);
- too many cases (50%);
- insufficient time for direct work with children and families (44%);
- The nature of working culture/practices (42%);
- lack of resources to support families (36%).

However, despite those troubling figures, job satisfaction was reported as high at 74%. When asked where they expected to be working in 12 months, 72% planned this to be in local authority child and family social work. However, the research identified a critical point for social workers at 2 to 3 years after qualification when dissatisfaction and stress levels notably increased as they experienced an expectation that with that number of years experience, they should just be able to get on with the work. It was noted from the qualitative

³ Assessed and Supported Year in Employment

interviews that what drove a social worker to stay or leave their post was very difficult to identify – a critical question the study identified that required more detailed understanding.

The research provides a very helpful perspective on the current state of play of children and families social work. It indicates high levels of satisfaction in social work training as it is currently delivered and of transition into practice with again a high level of satisfaction of ASYE. But the degree of challenge to social workers is also significant with career satisfaction and what enables or disables this and work-related stress two important features.

Summary

There is an alignment between our view of the current challenges that face children and family social work and those reported in phase 1 of the research study. There are key themes that underlie this from our point of view which hopefully the research team might address in further stages of the study.

1. As noted above, the Children Act 1989 fundamentally set out the role of the State as working in partnership with families who find themselves in temporary or a longer-term crisis. It is a perspective that recognises that family crisis are common but that children have a right to their safety, well-being and development and that State services play a critical part in this. This is a very difficult perspective to put into practice when policy seeks to separate individuals into the 'worthy' and 'deserving' and the 'unworthy' and 'undeserving'.

2. The profession of social work is fundamentally driven by values, beliefs and action that is child and family centred.
3. Families that find themselves in a crisis may have a range of views about what might help but it is important to recognise that the stresses of the crisis and what led up to the crisis may result in a range of very strong feelings from despair to anger to blame. Any professional might find themselves caught up with this range of feelings as they start to work with the family. This can result in significant stress for the social worker alongside that of the family. And without appropriate reflective support, this can seriously impact on the work of the social worker.
4. Social workers must feel able to describe their feelings however troubling they might be to a supervisor or in a group discussion who can help them reflect on and understand those feelings and how they might be recognised and discussed in working with the family.
5. The culture and working environment of social workers must be informed by an openness to the challenge of complex feelings without fear of criticism or blame when they are expressed in words or actions.
6. The knowledge and practice base of social work must be informed and driven by the relational world of human functioning and development. This is critical to understanding the nature of child, adolescent and adult development, the role and functioning of the family, community and society.
7. Social workers cannot work effectively without having access to a policy framework that is positively supportive of families and children. This must include a range of services that focus on specific issues whether these are parenting support, educational provision or health services or high-end

interventions such as the Family Drug and Alcohol Courts, 'Pause' and mental health services.

8. Local authorities must have access to sufficient budgets to ensure the delivery of children's services that are fully compliant with and are driven by the principles of the Children Act 1989 and subsequent legislation.