



The contribution of social work

The College of Social Work Development Team has produced this document which clarifies the contribution of social work to the well-being and care of people and communities in the early part of the twenty-first century.

It aims to provide an initial core statement regarding the contribution of social work as a background to the development of The College of Social Work.

Context and background

The Social Work Taskforce report¹ included a public statement on the wide range of situations where an individual or family might need social work support, including:

- caring for family members
- experiencing problems with family relationships and conflicts
- struggling with the challenges of growing old
- suffering serious personal troubles and mental distress
- having drug and alcohol problems
- facing difficulties as a result of disability, including feeling isolated within the community and experiencing practical problems with money or housing.

Social work is the 'safety net' of society. Trained and qualified social workers intervene into private and/or family life in order to:

- protect individuals from harm to themselves or to others
- promote human development and security, social inclusion and participation across the lifespan.

Social work as a profession demands specific personal attributes and qualities as well as knowledge and skills informed by evidence. It is an established professional discipline which works with other professions to play a key role in helping children, adults and families to take control of and to improve their lives in conditions where their security, safety or ability to participate in civic life are restricted. There are currently approximately

84,000 registered social workers in England.² Nationally, there are some 1.5 million people receiving adult social services (including residential care and assessment of need) and 950,000 children receiving children's social services (including children assessed as in need, children in care and children with child protection plans).

1. Legislative framework

Social work operates within a framework of legislation and government policy relating to children, families and adults and is subject to the General Social Care Council's codes of practice (GSCC codes) for practitioners and employers. Legislation relating to adult social care is currently subject to comprehensive review by the Law Commission in England and Wales.

2. Identifying need for social work intervention

Social work employers are responsible for identifying situations where a registered, experienced social worker should become involved. Intervention may occur on either a preventative or statutory basis when:

- vulnerable adults and children need safeguarding from abuse, neglect or exploitation, and possibly need removing from their home
- a child or adult could cause significant harm to themselves or others
- there is a serious likelihood of family disintegration or relationship breakdown, which threatens to impair health and well-being
- parents or carers are no longer able to look after their children
- a child or vulnerable adult's future home, care or custody arrangements are disputed
- someone may face deprivation of their liberty under the mental health or mental capacity legislation.

3. The purpose of social work

Social work encourages creative ways of working to resolve the challenges vulnerable people face and aims to promote empowerment, enabling people to take action to improve their lives.

The profession works with people in a variety of different ways appropriate to individual circumstances, to help them achieve independence and exercise their human and civil rights. This might also include challenging the responses of other agencies where these are detrimental to a person's well-being.

Social workers work holistically with people and families in complex social circumstances. Often, there are no clear answers. Recognition of value judgements and the ability to understand conflicts of interest are essential skills which social workers must possess to achieve the best possible results for people.

Effective communication, a non-judgemental approach, building trust and maintaining strong relationships are crucial to enabling change. Social work is therefore practised, whenever possible, in partnership with children, adults, families and communities and is concerned with improving the personal, practical, psychological and social aspects of people's lives.

In the case of children and young people in care, the consistency and reliability of the relationship with their social worker is crucial. Social work with children and young people in care must consider the long-term purpose and benefits as well as the safety of the child or young person involved.

For disabled adults and older people, the social worker can help the individual to assess and manage risk, adapt to change and loss and make major decisions concerning where and how to live.

4. What social workers do

Social workers take on a variety of roles, often acting as a critical friend, broker or advocate, facilitating the support that people need through creative use of all available resources. Social workers aim to:

- enhance parenting and support the physical, intellectual and emotional development of children and young people who need help, in line with the Children's Plan³

- help disadvantaged people of all ages improve their health and well-being
- arrange good-quality alternative care for children whose parents cannot care for them, and for adults who can no longer manage in their own homes
- aid people in poverty to improve their financial position, informing them about their entitlements and helping them to access training, work opportunities and benefits, in line with Putting People First⁴
- prevent children and young people from re-offending and protect the public from harm as a consequence.

These tasks do not all have to be carried out by social workers, but they should be led by an experienced social worker. Some tasks may be shared with other specialists, such as play therapists or, under supervision, delegated to benefits officers and volunteers. Some tasks fall into the remit of nurses, teachers, police officers, court officials, benefits staff and probation officers.

Social workers have the expertise to build bridges with other disciplines and agencies. They make a vital contribution in interdisciplinary teams and multi-agency settings, helping to overcome barriers between different professions and services.

Knowledge of local community resources, voluntary organisations and statutory agencies, together with the ability to navigate the complex web of information and opportunities available are also essential in carrying out the role of social worker.

5. The core values of social work

Social work, alongside other professions, shares and draws on a set of core values and principles relating to:

- the human, legal and civil rights of the child and adult
- the equality, worth and diversity of all people, respecting their individuality, privacy and dignity
- protection from discrimination and prejudice
- personal autonomy, independence, choice and control.

Social work practice is unique in that these core values and principles are intrinsic to the manner in which social work is carried out. The creation and nurturing of respectful and constructive personal relationships is fundamental to all social work.

6. The wider contribution of social work

Day-to-day social work has a clear role in supporting parents and carers, reducing the risks of abuse, neglect and youth offending, preventing family breakdown and helping adults to maintain or recover their independence. Skilled social work often avoids the need for compulsory intervention, and enables children or adults to remain safely in their homes.

However, social workers may have to intervene directly in people's lives, to ensure that individuals are safe and to support people to make their own decisions and changes to their circumstances. Such intervention often involves representing an individual when communicating with other agencies. Support may be offered when dealing with:

- service providers
- mediators
- therapists
- counsellors
- brokers
- advisers
- information-givers
- advocates
- designers of care packages
- navigators of the wider care system (social workers know how to access services and resources for people and help them to find their way around the system to obtain the services and resources they need and to which they are entitled).

Social work also aids the development of social policy, practice and service provision, and can help to build community capacity and regeneration. The profession works with other social care-, health- and education-related services at local and national levels to ensure people receive effective, integrated services and support.

7. The knowledge base, skills and qualities of social work

Through extensive training, social workers can make a vital contribution in situations where there are high levels of uncertainty, stress, conflicts of interest and risk. This is of particular importance in situations involving children and vulnerable adults.

Social work draws on specialist analytical skills and knowledge to assess situations where there may be no obvious answers and where a careful judgement has to be made whether or not to intervene, and to commit valued resources while identifying and balancing the associated risks. In some situations, social workers may have to initiate legal action to protect a child or adult who is at serious risk or poses a threat to themselves or others.

Examples of when social work skills are required include working with disabled adults – helping them assess and manage risks over extended periods of time and ensuring that their access to aspects of ordinary life is not overly restricted, nor that they are subject to ‘over-protection’ – or assisting parents who face personal challenges due to a disability, a mental health problem or substance misuse. Any such parental assessment must take into account the well-being of any children within the family as well as that of the parent.

8. Knowledge and evidence base for social work practice

Social work has developed its own academic discipline with a knowledge base that draws on psychology, sociology, social policy, law, philosophy, ethics and other subjects as they relate to complex social work tasks. This knowledge is developed through research, tested in practice and informed by the experience and expertise of people who use services. In a difficult situation involving conflicting interests, social workers will often need to refer back to their knowledge base and their core values and principles in order to make a clear judgement. A tested and robust knowledge base is essential when social workers have to draw on their internal emotional and ethical resources.

An evidence-based approach to practice is essential to social work. For example, it is needed to fully meet the expectations of legal and court processes and to effectively represent cases in courts of law. It is also essential to effectively assess the likely impact of environmental factors when combined with, for example, mental health conditions, on the long-term outcomes for an individual and their family.

Reflective practice is key to effective social work. It enables social workers to reflect on the impacts and outcomes of their methods of intervention. Social workers require good and regular support and supervision, as well as continuing professional development (CPD) in order to ensure that they are up to date with research and best practice.

9. Social work and social policy development

Social work makes a vital contribution to policy implementation, ensuring the viability of any proposals and assessing their likely impact. The profession contributes to the development of social policy locally, regionally and nationally. Social workers on the front line can identify when services are working well and when they are not. The profession also has a major contribution to make when services are being developed and commissioned, by identifying needs, gaps and overlaps. Social work can also ensure that emerging practice and policies are evidence- and experience-based by contribution to research studies, surveys, websites, discussion forums, draft legislation and guidance.

10. What support do social workers need to be effective?

Employers must provide social workers with good quality working conditions, to enable them to fulfil their duty of care. Regular supervision, realistic workloads, access to learning support, CPD, supportive information technology (IT) and management systems, and a suitable working environment all contribute to effective social work.

Social workers share with other professions a personal responsibility for updating their knowledge and practice and contributing to research, student learning and briefings for other professions. Ready access to the knowledge community is therefore also essential.

Good social work relies heavily on robust methods of workforce selection, training and ongoing motivation. Regulation through the GSCC, inspection through the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted), the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), along with effective supervision, ensures that appropriate standards are consistently met.

11. What will The College do for the profession?

The College will seek to improve and support social work through providing leadership by and for the profession. It will promote the development of social work and represent the profession in discussions with organisations that regulate, train, work with and are affected by social work.

Proposed values

The College will reflect and work in line with the following values.

- *Leadership*: The College will provide leadership to the profession.
- *Excellence*: The College will enable and guard excellence in the profession.
- *Pride*: The College will have pride in, and bring pride to, the profession.
- *Partnership*: The College will actively seek partnerships with people who use services and their carers and will promote partnerships that empower service users.
- *Independence*: The College will be independent and willing to challenge the views and actions of other actors when necessary.
- *Led by the profession*: The College will mobilise the considerable expertise of the profession and its members to inform all College activity.
- *Starting from strengths*: The College will build on existing good practice in the UK, Europe and overseas.
- *Collaboration*: The College will work collaboratively with allied professions and with organisations affecting the profession.
- *Coherence*: The College will bring coherence and clarity to the profession.
- *Representation*: The College will support social workers through advocacy, and represent their interests to employers, government and all relevant organisations.

Proposed functions

In order to fulfil its objectives, it is proposed that The College will have the following functions.

Providing a strong voice for, and leadership to, the profession

Social workers deal with very sensitive cases. As a result, individual social workers are often uncomfortable speaking out about their work or pressing for support. The College will represent and lead the profession by:

- influencing the development of national policies that impact on social work and social workers, acting as an advocate for the profession
- building relationships and developing policies with other professional bodies (e.g. teachers, the police, occupational therapists, nurses, probation officers etc.) on issues of common interest, acting as an advocate for social work

- building relationships and developing policies with the academic community delivering social work training and research
- representing the profession in discussions with policy-makers in government and among the public, media and other professions
- establishing links with similar organisations overseas in order to learn from and share good practice in supporting social work.

Defining the values and purpose of the social work profession

There is some confusion over the current and future role of social work within social care. The College will:

- Set out and uphold the values and purpose of social work – including its commitment to placing people who use services and their carers at the heart of the process.
- Define and uphold the reserved functions of social work (i.e. the activities which only qualified social workers can undertake) in ways which support and enhance the core function and skills of social work.

Developing, upholding and supporting standards

Social workers should be working to the highest professional standards. The GSCC regulates social workers and holds them to account in line with a code of practice. However, The College can help to raise the standards even further by working closely with social workers, their employers, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the regulators in order to:

- Agree, establish and promote professional standards for good practice. This should include clarifying the personal responsibilities of individual social workers, and what these standards mean in a range of different work settings.
- Agree, establish and promote standards that social workers' employers should meet. These include standards for employing, supervising, supporting and developing social workers at all levels of seniority. The College will also clarify what social workers or other professionals should do if these standards are not in place or are not met. The College will work with the organisations that regulate employers of social workers (i.e. the CQC and Ofsted) to 'accredit' employers who meet these standards.

Providing guidance and support to the profession and allied professions

It can be difficult to keep up to date with the latest policy and practice in social work, and what it means for individual cases. The College will support social workers, and other professionals who work with them, by:

- providing national guidance to clarify what good practice means in difficult situations at all levels of the social work profession
- providing up-to-date information and guidance on issues affecting the profession
- collecting and disseminating knowledge, evidence and exemplars of what works.

Shaping training and development

Social workers need a range of complex skills – including excellent judgement, listening skills, negotiation and analytical skills, as well as a valid social work qualification. As with all professions, social workers are required to continue their professional development throughout their career. The College will improve the selection, training and ongoing development of social workers by working with those who select, train, employ and regulate them. The College will:

- agree, establish and promote standards for the quality of training
- influence the development of a more coherent approach to the initial selection and training of social work students, their learning when they are in practice and the promotion of ongoing training and development of the profession
- be the source of expert advice to government on workforce planning, working in partnership with the sector skills councils, employers and training providers
- approve and promote the provision of CPD.

Notes

1. The Social Work Task Force, 2009. *Facing Up to the Task: the interim report of the Social Work Task Force*. London: HM Government, pp.5
2. <http://www.gsc.org.uk/The+Social+Care+Register/Check+the+register/>, last updated 9 July 2010 and sourced on 12 July 2010.
3. <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/childrensplan/>
4. <http://www.puttingpeoplefirst.org.uk/>

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