



## **The College Consultation Events: Findings May-September 2010**

This paper provides information about feedback from the 12 consultation events involving the Social Work profession. The Interim Board will need to consider whether all of the plans for The College are consistent with the findings of the consultation exercise.

A full analysis of the consultation will be presented to the Interim Board in their November meeting.

### **Introduction**

The College of Social Work organised 12 consultation events throughout England, which ran from May to September 2010. These consultation events involved the Social Work profession and gave individuals the opportunity to discuss the future direction of The College of Social Work. A '*Purpose and functions*' proposal document, which was published by The College Development Group, formed the basis of discussions for these consultation events.

285 social workers attended the consultation events (390 social workers booked places). Of these 285 people, 212 worked for local authorities:

- 89 in adult services.
- 83 in children's services.
- 31 in mental health services.
- 9 in other local authority services.

Those working for local authorities included newly qualified social workers, team leaders, managers and frontline practitioners.

The remainder of the attendees were students, independent social workers, lecturers in colleges and universities, NHS workers, and staff from voluntary and private sector organisations.

Discussions focused on the overall aspirations, vision, mission and purpose of The College, on individual member benefits and on a possible future business model.

All attendees were given the opportunity to express their views and opinions on film. Their responses have been recorded as part of The College's 'Making History'

campaign and these films will be viewed by the Interim Board, giving a real overview of exactly what people have been saying during the consultation exercise.

## Key findings

One key issue which was raised consistently throughout the consultation exercise was the vital need for the role of Social Work and its specific functions to be clarified.

Regardless of their areas of expertise, all social workers at the events expressed strong support for The College to work with the public, policy makers and the media to define the role of the profession. If The College prioritises this work, it is felt that confidence levels will be raised and the Social Work sector will regain a sense of identity and professionalism.

Social workers emphasised the importance of The College having a 'good product' to sell. Social workers felt that The College should work to promote a set of consistent standards of excellence, presenting these to a wider audience, in turn bringing coherence and clarity to the profession.

## Detailed findings

### Functions and activities for The College

The majority of attendees thought that The College should:

- Educate the public about the role of Social Work, by working closely with the media, whilst maintaining a strong and independent voice.
- Provide professional guidance and advice (including continued professional development, also referred to as CPD) on continued training and career development, and practice dilemmas, as well as influencing management. An interest was expressed in receiving employment-related advice via a union partnership.

### The College will need to:

#### Provide a strong voice for, and leadership to the profession

Participants at all events prioritised the need for The College to provide a strong voice and leadership to the profession when dealing with the media, public, employers, government and other related professions.

## Define the values and purpose of the Social Work profession

There was a great deal of support for The College to take a role in defining what Social Work is and to ensure that a consistent message is conveyed. Most of the discussion revolved around the need for defining the role in order to achieve professionalisation.

As a priority The College needs to clarify the role of Social Work and what makes it different to other professions. It was felt that only a unifying independent body, like a College, with the profession's interests at heart could do this.

Consultation attendees discussed the following issues in relation to clarifying the role and remit of Social Work:

- The difficulty of protecting functions when there is no clear definition of Social Work.
- The idea that values, principles and standards all stem from a core set of Social Work functions.
- Lack of clarity around roles means service users do not know what to expect from their social workers.
- Lack of clarity around roles means employers do not know what to expect from their social workers.
- The College could create a Social Work 'myths buster', which would be an initial definition of the role of the profession, whilst the reserved functions paper is being written by the Interim Board.
- The College should champion and uphold Social Work beliefs and values.
- The College should protect the values of Social Work in integrated teams where there may be a conflict of interest with other professions.

Support for 'reserved functions' was strongly expressed in the smaller events by all attendees. There was a majority view among attendees, that if The College can define reserved functions effectively, many of the other positive changes will occur as a result, including a greater understanding of Social Work by the public, and an increase in pride and independence amongst the profession.

## Improve media coverage and public understanding of Social Work

There was overwhelming support for The College to work with the media to ensure more balanced and fair reporting. Most attendees emphasised that improving the understanding of Social Work with the media and public was the most important function for The College.

People expressed the need for a College to be proactive as well as reactive, representing Social Work and social workers in a positive and balanced way when dealing with the media. Participants supported the idea of The College being the first port of call in crisis situations, adopting an independent and credible voice.

Suggestions for media work included:

- Representation for the profession during times of crisis. Such work should pre-empt headlines and should be proactive rather than reactive.
- Promoting fair reporting at all times, especially in a crisis situation. The public need to be given an accurate and balanced view of any given incident, to ensure that honesty is maintained and confidence in the Social Work profession is instilled.
- The College could offer support and advice to local authorities when dealing with high profile cases.
- Providing relevant media training and support for professionals who may be involved in high profile cases.
- Building relationships with the media.
- The College could seek to improve the public perception of engagement with social workers, so that cooperating with social services is seen in a more positive light.
- The College should develop a bank of spokespeople from different areas of the profession.
- The College needs a dedicated media team.

There was strong support and enthusiasm for the development of a Media Centre for Social Work, which would be attached to The College. A number of attendees also expressed a willingness to speak to the Press on behalf of the College. The majority felt that if their views and opinions could be kept separate from their employers', they would be able to contribute a strong, positive and independent message on behalf of the profession.

## Influence policy

The College should adopt a strong, cohesive voice when discussing the policy and regulatory framework governing the profession.

Suggestions for government engagement included:

- Speaking up in relation to policy, working conditions and resources, and using the information that people bring to The College to form those arguments.
- Working to promote good employment practice and standards, providing employers with incentives to adopt these standards.
- Highlighting resources, capacity and staffing needs, as well as the negative impact that not meeting these has on Social Work practice.
- Advocacy, representation and intervention at the highest levels when systems and services are reviewed.
- Advocating for defined career pathways within the Social Work profession, providing benchmarks for structure, standards and guidance.

- Developing employer standards.
- Improving the quality of initial and post-qualifying training.
- The College could provide information and advice on policy and advise on how this translates to practice.
- Proactively commenting on relevant government policy and issues.
- Examining and re-balancing the role of administration and face-to-face work with service users.

## Provide training and development advice and guidance

There was considerable support for The College to influence the provision of initial and post-qualifying training. It was suggested that The College could take on the role of awarding CPD accreditation to post-qualifying courses, potentially building a database of accredited courses, enabling social workers and their managers to have easy access to select appropriate courses.

People felt that The College could have a role in:

- Influencing Social Work education (ensuring that the real life situations social workers face are part of the training) and ensuring that all initial training adheres to the same standards and covers the same topics.
- Helping people find high quality post-qualifying training (via awarding CPD and hosting a signposting database of courses that provide CPD points).
- Defining the role of managers and promoting good management skills amongst organisations involved in management training and practice.
- Supporting members to build individual CPD portfolios and enabling them to use these portfolios as evidence for registering with the profession's regulatory body.
- Ensuring employers give adequate priority to training through provision of training leave and training-related budgets.
- Providing access to all relevant information, including journals, case reviews and books.
- Producing good practice examples and scenarios on The College website, offering practical guidance and suggestions from social workers who have also been in similar situations.

## Provide employment and professional advice

Participants welcomed the idea of a professional advice service that could be accessed by members of The College, but felt that employment advice should come directly from trade unions. People also felt that The College should develop employer standards and accreditations, and should support employers to meet these standards.

Suggestions for the role of The College in relation to employment standards included:

- Providing advice on 'whistle blowing', and offering support and professional advice to social workers who have been involved in traumatic and stressful cases.
- Facilitating access to union membership and employment advice, working alongside existing unions to provide this function.
- Providing information to students on job availability in the statutory, independent and voluntary sectors, helping them to select which area of practice to enter post-qualification.
- Giving access to international learning and practice, and building on existing successful overseas Social Work models.

## Develop, uphold and support standards

People felt strongly that The College needs to become the 'guardian' of reserved functions, outlining and clarifying the 'values' and standards for practice, for both social workers and managers. Linked to this, there was strong feeling that as a professional body, The College could then support and empower social workers to hold employers accountable if/when they were being tasked to work outside these values and/or their role.

People felt that The College should:

- Formulate standards and represent the profession with organisations that have responsibility for regulation.
- Develop guidance on the responsibilities of a newly qualified social worker and the standards required to move from probationary/newly qualified to fully licensed to practice.
- The College could set the benchmark for standards.
- Clarify the standards social workers can expect from their employers.
- Provide guidance and standards relating to caseloads.
- Act as an evidence bank for good practice.
- Adopt a lead role in ensuring that the quality of supervision is upheld.

## Provide guidance and support to the profession and allied professions

Participants said they would value an individual advice and guidance service, and pointed out that the service would need to be carefully structured so as to maintain the confidentiality of the person seeking guidance and that of their colleagues.

Participants would welcome the production of professional guidance for themselves, their managers, other professions, and for people who use Social Work services and their carers.

Social workers need access to up-to-date evidence from research, best practice, and information about new developments within the sector.

Many participants pointed out their time limitations and the impact that this has on researching guidance and learning resources. It was felt that if CPD points were tied into registration requirements, then there would be a stronger argument for taking the time to research guidance.

Suggestions included:

- Providing guidance for social workers, service users, and carers.
- Enabling social workers to define their role to their manager (especially if they are not managed by a social worker).
- Putting a case together for profession-specific supervision.
- Informing other professions of the role of social workers, enabling more productive co-working.
- Enabling College members to develop a portfolio of CPD evidence which would support applications to be registered with the profession's regulatory body.
- Offering opportunities for peer support, sharing practice via moderated online forums.
- Providing advice and support to newly qualified social workers and recognising their specific needs.
- Clarifying the expectations for employers about the level of support that they should be offering to their teams.

## Representation of social workers in employment disputes

The majority of attendees felt that representation in employer disputes should remain a union function.

When union membership was discussed in the context of College membership benefits, the majority favoured a one-stop-shop and most people saw negotiating some arrangement with UNISON as being a successful route to achieving this coherence.

## People who use Social Work services and their carers

Separate consultation events have taken place involving people who use Social Work services and their carers. A separate report of the findings from these events will be available in mid-November.

In the events involving social workers, many expressed the view that The College should work directly with service users to ensure that their views and opinions are

incorporated into the development of The College, modelling co-production and participation as a key element of its work.

However, the majority also felt that although it is essential that people who use services and their carers help to shape The College, it must be absolutely clear that The College is being established to represent and stand up for social workers and the Social Work profession.

Given the current status of Social Work and the lack of a representative body, there was concern that social workers are not in a strong enough position to be effective advocates for their service users.

If The College is able to achieve all of the functions outlined above for its members, then inevitably, outcomes for people who use services will also improve.

The College could support service users by:

- Providing accessible information on entitlements to services, clear descriptions of what Social Work is, advice on complaints procedures and signposting to relevant and useful services.
- Defining the role of Social Work, outlining the standards and behaviours that people should expect. Service users should have the knowledge and support to challenge the level of service they receive, if they feel that these standards are not being upheld.
- Incorporating feedback from service users and carers into future strategies and plans. The College should also maintain regular contact with service users, to ensure that their wants and needs are reflected in The College's mission, vision and values.
- Ensuring that service users and carers contribute to training. It was suggested that The College could look into the possibility of facilitating forums for service user and carer consultations.
- Promoting positive practice examples and case studies, to encourage 'hard to reach' groups to feel more confident about seeking support from social services.
- Providing guidance to service users on the easiest way to access Social Work services in their area.
- Raising the profile of Social Work with the public, so that service users may feel they are receiving a service worth having.

## Membership subscriptions

By far the majority view at all events was the wish for a single membership fee, which offers both College and union membership. Some participants favoured a union opt out clause.

Questions were raised about the variety of Social Work unions and how these would fit in with The College. Some attendees favoured the idea of a joining arrangement between all unions. If this is not possible, it was felt that The College should provide gateway arrangements to unions representing CAFCASS employees and university lecturers.

A sizeable number of participants thought a partnership could increase understanding of the Social Work profession within the union itself.

The majority of attendees said they would not pay two membership fees and for this reason, support was expressed for the idea of a convergence with BASW.

Many people said they would be happy to pay a membership fee for approximately the same amount as is already charged for UNISON and BASW membership, provided that access to and benefits of both services were readily available.

## Additional issues

Other topics that were discussed at the consultation events were:

### Membership criteria

It was suggested that full (voting) College membership should only be available to qualified social workers.

Many people felt that membership to The College should be mandatory in order for there to be sufficient numbers, enabling The College to be as strong and influential as possible. It was suggested that mandatory membership could be enforced via employers over time.

People wanted reassurance that The College would exist to support social workers and would not simply represent the views of Social Work managers. The importance of practicing social workers being involved with The College and its development, was felt to be a key factor in ensuring that the values and opinions of the profession were reflected and taken into consideration.

### Location

Some attendees asked where The College would be based. There was a feeling that Social Work policy making is all too often London-centric and that the College would need to be very visible across England, wherever it is based.

### Time pressures

Participants spoke about their challenging workloads and expressed concern that they may not have the time to take full advantage of their membership services.

### The Social Care landscape

People asked for clarity on how The College differs from other bodies e.g. GSCC, National Skills Academy, and how it will fit into the Social Care framework of existing organisations. A preference was expressed for the existence of a single 'body' that social workers could become affiliated to.

### Systems

Many participants voiced concerns about the amount of paperwork that they were responsible for, which compromised the face-to-face contact that they were able to devote to their service users.

## Conclusion

These findings give strong support to the proposals developed by The College Development Group, and are consistent with the findings of the online questionnaire.

The College's Interim Board will be meeting for the second time in November, where they will consider the findings of the consultation exercise.

A revised set of College purpose and functions will be compiled, based on the needs and wants of the Social Work profession, as well as people who use services and their carers.