

Social Work Reform Board

Tim Loughton MP
Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families

Paul Burstow MP
Minister of State for Care Services

David Willetts MP
Minister of State for Universities and Science

17 August 2010

Dear Ministers,

On behalf of the Social Work Reform Board (see Annex One for membership), I would like to thank you for your support of our work so far and, more widely, of the social work profession. We are grateful to Tim Loughton MP, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Children and Families, for taking the time to attend our July meeting. We look forward to meeting with Paul Burstow MP, Minister of State for Care Services, and David Willetts MP, Minister of State for Universities and Science, at future meetings. I am writing to all three Ministers to report on our progress so far, and to outline our priorities for the next year, which we discussed with the Minister for Children in July.

Our role and our priorities for the social work reform programme

The Social Work Reform Board brings together the social work profession, employers, educators, regulators, service users and Government, working together to embed improvements. All member organisations of the Board are committed to using this important opportunity to lead reform of the sector in partnership with Government. As well as bringing together representatives of relevant organisations, we understand the importance of involving practitioners, service users and carers in all our work. The Social Work Task Force recommendations were based on extensive consultation with social workers, and we will continue to ensure their views inform all that we do.

The Board is taking the fifteen Task Force recommendations (see Annex Two) forward as a whole, to ensure the programme of reform is joined-up and comprehensive, as the Task Force envisaged. We hope that current financial pressure on the sector will not be allowed to dilute the urgency and importance of the reform programme. We believe this is necessary for real,

lasting change to both the social work profession and the system it operates in. However, phasing of the programme is necessary to build capacity in the system, so that it can support these changes.

The Board met in July to discuss our priorities. In our discussion, we agreed it was important to move forward on both improving the quality of entrants to the profession, and supporting experienced professionals to improve their practice and retain their experience on the front line. Making sure that all social workers are well qualified, competent and confident in their professionalism is vital for improving practice. However, we must also improve the environment in which many social workers practise, including the support and supervision they receive and their workloads.

We must too be mindful of the increasing pressures on the social work system at a time of severe financial constraints. We need to ensure employers see the value in prioritising social work and the changes we propose – which will strengthen front line practice and reduce unnecessary bureaucracy.

We believe the social work profession and our reform programme can make a valuable contribution to Government's broader policy ambitions. Social workers have an important role to play in supporting local communities as part of Government's vision for a 'Big Society', and of strong, stable families. Our work so far has also been in tune with aims to reduce bureaucracy and regulatory burdens on the system, and to free up front line practitioners to use their professional judgment. We will work towards this by strengthening the training and support social workers receive, and by simplifying the array of standards and guidance currently overwhelming them.

Improving the quality of entrants to social work

We are pleased that there has been an increase in applications to degree courses this year, which should provide universities with a strong field of candidates from which to select students. A high calibre of entrants to training is important to produce a confident, professional workforce that is valued by society. We will be presenting proposals for improving the calibre of entrants to social work courses what ever the level of applications by March 2011, for consultation and decisions. Acknowledging that higher education institutions are responsible for their own admissions' policies, we have been taking advice from the higher education sector throughout this work. We expect changes to the ways candidates are assessed and selected to be introduced for the 2012 cohort of entrants. Some progress has already been made in improving social work degrees, for example inspection reports on courses have been made available to the public online. Consultation on the degree curriculum should be carried out during 2011, aiming for full implementation of the changes by September 2013. Ahead of this, we will be in close contact with higher education institutions to advise them and help them plan for change.

An important step in improving entrants to the workforce is ensuring enough

high quality practice placements are available to students. We are working on proposals for how employers and HEIs can work together in securing good practice placements. This partnership approach will have a wider benefit, embedding a commitment to training the next generation of social workers within employers' structures and a closer understanding and influence of the academic content and quality of HEI provision. We will advise Ministers on practice learning in spring 2011. This will include a recommendation about whether there could be a reduction in the number of required placement days and, if so, when that could happen.

Better social work education and training

The recent announcement about the future of the General Social Care Council (GSCC) has caused concern among members of the Reform Board. While we note the rationale for such a change we were disappointed that the contribution GSCC has recently been making to our work was not recognised. We would advocate for the GSCC changes to be timed to maximise their contribution to the speedy delivery of the Task Force's recommendations.

In particular the GSCC has been working to deliver the Task Force recommendation on more transparent and effective regulation of social work education, to assure greater consistency and quality. It would be unhelpful to lose this improvement because organisational change is required. There are a number of other recommendations to which the GSCC is an important, if not primary, contributor and we would welcome recognition of their role in these. Important functions that the GSCC currently carries out will need to be securely allocated and should take account of the opportunity to strengthen the emerging College of Social Work.

We hope to ensure that the Health Professions Council (HPC) has a clear understanding of the distinct needs of the social work profession, and is well informed of our work to improve it, ahead of it taking on the regulatory roles of GSCC. We also feel it is important that changes to social work regulation in England do not imbalance wider UK arrangements. In any transfer of functions from GSCC, care should be given to maintain UK-wide coherence.

We continue to see the assessed and supported year in employment as an essential part of our reform programme to bridge the gap between completing the social work degree and becoming a fully autonomous professional social worker. Progress has been made in this area recently with the introduction of the national adults' and children's Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQS) programmes funded by Government. In 2011 we will recommend options for the assessed year in employment, which will build on current activity and incorporate new models of assessing participants.

Supporting current social workers

We are confident that these changes to initial education and entry into the

profession will improve the quality and supply of social workers. However, it will take time for this new generation of social workers to enter front line practice. We need change to happen now, and this is why it is vital we also support existing professionals. There are many social workers in the field who are competent, confident and passionate about their work, but some of them lack the skills and many lack the support they need to provide the best possible service to the public.

The Task Force recommended a new national framework for continuing professional development (CPD) during the course of a social worker's career, enabling them to build on their specialist skills and to develop as leaders and managers, and as educators and researchers. CPD is not only essential to keep professionals' knowledge and skills up to date, but is also important in ensuring individuals' professional confidence and resilience. We also want to make sure we support the development of social work academics in the future, and that research is built into expectations of social workers as evidence-based professionals. Although the Board agrees with the decision not to pilot a Masters in Social Work Practice, we think it is important to make early progress with a CPD framework, accessible to all social workers. There will need to be consultation on the framework, and we would hope this will take place in late 2010, so that the content and detail can begin to be added, developed and phased in from 2011.

The Task Force also specifically recommended additional training and support for front line managers. The Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) and Skills for Care, along with the National Skills Academy for Social Care, are working to develop this, and are testing approaches with local authorities. It is intended that there will be a national offer of support from 2011.

A new set of standards for the profession

The Board foresees a new overarching set of standards for the profession as opposed to the myriad sets currently in place. These professional standards will underpin the whole of the social work reform programme. A single set of standards will ensure our reform is comprehensive and simple for the profession and the public to understand, replacing the current complexity and confusion. As the basis of so much of the Board's work, we regard these standards as an important priority. We are currently reviewing the various existing standards and capability frameworks. We will agree a framework for the standards in spring 2011.

Building on these standards, we will produce a single, nationally-recognised career structure for social work, shared by both adults' and children's settings, with clear progression routes and expectations. This will include an Advanced Social Work Professional role where an experienced practitioner can progress in their career and remain in front line practice. The role is already being trialled in children's services, and colleagues in adult social work are already considering its transferability to other settings. It is expected that eventually

the career structure will link with Local Authority pay and grading structures. In the meantime, we welcome the progress already made by the National Joint Council working party on pay and conditions.

A standard for employers

As part of the development of the standard for employers, we have been encouraging employers to carry out a 'health check' of their organisations. This looks at workloads, staffing and support for their social workers. We will use the results fed back to us to shape the employers' standard and to show the benefits of this engagement with the workforce. Some results are starting to come in, but we have agreed to do more to promote the health check and justify its potential value to employers, so that more employers are willing to carry it out. We are pleased to note that administration of the Social Work Improvement Fund encourages children's services to engage with the health check process.

The Board feels strongly that a commitment to a culture of regular supervision in social work is one of the best ways of supporting social workers and improving practice. This is an important part of the employers' standard recommended by the Task Force. We will be discussing a draft framework for the employers' standard in September. This will be followed by testing with employers, social workers and service users, to demonstrate the benefits to the workforce and their organisations before roll out of the standard begins in spring 2011.

The Task Force recommended the development of a supply and demand model for social workers. This will take time to develop and we have recently set up a working group to develop a model by mid 2011. After this time, depending on the availability and reliability of data, we hope that demand and supply of social workers can start to be predicted and better managed.

Partnerships and leadership

Many aspects of our work, including changes to practice placements and CPD, will require strong partnerships between employers and HEIs for their effective delivery. We have been considering how we can encourage HEIs and employers to share responsibility and accountability in a structured and productive way. We hope to support the sector in agreeing a framework for partnerships by the end of 2011.

We have been impressed by the speedy progress made by the College of Social Work, having been kept well informed of developments. We welcomed the recent appointment of the College's joint interim chairs, and hope they will start to attend our meetings as a member organisation of the Board. We look forward to the College taking an increasingly active role in the social work reform programme. As the voice of the profession, it will play an important part in improvement of standards and practice.

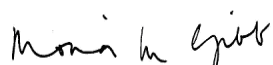
Areas for further consideration

There are a number of areas of work recommended by the Task Force in their final report which we think now require further consideration given the pressures on the public sector, for example, advanced teaching organisation status for employers providing an excellent standard of practice education. Some of the characteristics of an advanced teaching organisation will develop from the work on practice placements and the employers' standard, but we do not think work on incentivising such a status should be a priority at this stage in the programme. Different models will be developed and presented to the Reform Board in due course, but this approach may instead contribute to a model of partnerships between employers and HEIs. The Board also believe that the proposed introduction of a licence to practise (beyond the introduction of the assessment at the end of the assessed year in employment) needs to be revisited, particularly in light of the recent announcement about the transfer of GSCC's functions to HPC. The Board therefore proposes to review the timetable for implementation of the Task Force's recommendation on licence to practise in spring 2011.

When the Minister for Children met with us, he spoke about the Munro Review and the need for this process and our own to be closely aligned and cooperative. I have been pleased that Professor Munro has already attended meetings of our working groups, and we hope to welcome her at our September Board meeting. We have been considering throughout our work how our recommendations to Ministers might fit with those that will arise from Prof Munro's review, and we look forward to working very closely with her. I am particularly aware that colleagues working in adult social work are very keen to see how her findings can be considered in adult safeguarding.

The Board also understands the importance of communicating our work, and we continually endeavour to inform social workers, the sector and the public of our progress. I hope I and my colleagues on the Board will be able to share this letter with our colleagues and networks, along with your response to it, as part of these communications.

Yours sincerely



Moira Gibb CBE
Chair, Social Work Reform Board

Annex One: Membership of the Social Work Reform Board

Chair: Moira Gibb CBE

Regulator

GSCC

Employers

ADASS

ADCS

LGA

LGE

CAFCASS

Children England

Mind

NHS Confederation

SOLACE

Educators

Association of Social Work Professors

JUC-SWEC

Social Policy and Social Work (SWAP)

Universities UK

Profession

Aspect

BASW

College of Social Work

Unison

Service User and Carer Representation

A National Voice

Princess Royal Trust for Carers

Shaping Our Lives

Government/Departments

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)

Department for Education (DfE)

Department of Health (DH)

Delivery Organisations and Arms-Length Bodies

CQC

CWDC

HEFCE
Ofsted
SCIE
Skills for Care
QAA

Devolved administration from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland will also receive papers and will be welcome to attend meetings.

Annex Two: The recommendations of the Social Work Task Force

The Social Work Task Force recommended...

1. **Calibre of Entrants:** that criteria governing the calibre of entrants to social work education and training be strengthened.
2. **Curriculum and Delivery:** an overhaul of the content and delivery of social work degree courses.
3. **Practice Placements:** that new arrangements be put in place to provide sufficient high quality practice placements, which are properly supervised and assessed, for all social work students.
4. **Assessed Year in Employment:** the creation of an assessed and supported year in employment as the final stage in becoming a social worker.
5. **Regulation of Social Work Education:** more transparent and effective regulation of social work education to give greater assurance of consistency and quality.
6. **Standard for Employers:** the development of a clear national standard for the support social workers should expect from their employers in order to do their jobs effectively.
7. **Supervision:** that the new standard for employers should be supported by clear national requirements for the supervision of social workers.
8. **Front Line Management:** the creation of dedicated programmes of training and support for front line social work managers.
9. **Continuing Professional Development:** the creation of a more coherent and effective national framework for the continuing professional development of social workers, along with mechanisms to encourage a shift in culture which raises expectations of an entitlement to ongoing learning and development.
10. **National Career Structure:** the creation of a single, nationally recognised career structure for social work.
11. **National College of Social Work:** the creation of an independent national college of social work, developed and led by social workers.
12. **Public Understanding:** a new programme of action on public understanding of social work.
13. **Licence to Practise:** the development of a licence to practise system for social workers.

14. **Social Worker Supply:** a new system for forecasting levels of supply and demand for social workers.
15. **National Reform Programme:** the creation of a single national reform programme for social work.