Moira Gibb
Chair, Social Work Task Force

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Dear Moira

Government response to the Social Work Task Force

Thank you for your report *Building a safe, confident future: the final report of the Social Work Task Force* which sets out the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force for comprehensive reform in social work.

Any of us may need the support of a social worker at some point in our lives. We rarely hear about the difference that a good social worker makes when things go well but when things have gone wrong, the social work profession as a whole has often come in for blame. As a result, public confidence has been damaged and many social workers have felt vilified and unappreciated, undermining their capacity to provide high quality services. Those who are heavily dependent on social work services suffer the most when this happens, and as they include some of the most vulnerable people in our society this is of great concern.

We accept your recommendations which set a challenging vision for the future of social work, and the changes that must be made. They are based on the results of extensive consultation with employers, educators, service users and social workers themselves. They give all of us – Government, employers, educators and the profession itself – the opportunity to show that we can rise to that challenge: this is an opportunity it is imperative that we seize.

We agree that your recommendations need to be delivered through a reform programme for social work that will require commitment over a number of years. All of us will need to change the ways in which we behave in order to deliver this.
The Government will need to work closely with the profession, employers and educators and offer strong and sustained commitment and drive. The profession, employers and educators must be prepared to engage constructively and openly with each other, with the public, and with Government. We must all demonstrate that our overriding priority is the improvement of social work practice, so that social workers can provide the best possible service to those who need their support.

Key elements of the reform programme you recommend include:

- A career structure for social workers so that experienced practitioners can progress in front line roles as well as management. This must ensure that social workers are appropriately rewarded for their work.

- A new standard for employers to ensure that all employers put in place the conditions that social workers need to practice effectively, including high quality supervision, time for continuing professional development and manageable work loads.

- A new and independent College for Social Work, led and owned by the profession, which must establish a stronger voice for social work and exercise appropriate influence over national policy making and public debate; and a programme of work to improve public understanding of social work and of the essential contribution social workers make.

- Reforms to initial social work training, so that people of high calibre enter social work and all students receive good quality education and practice learning placements, equipping them for the challenges they will face when they begin to practice.

- A new ‘licensing’ system which will introduce an assessed probationary year in employment for new social work graduates. This must ensure that they are both properly supported in their first year in practice and are properly assessed before they are fully licensed.
• A revamped framework for continuing professional development, underpinned by a practice-based masters qualification, so that all social workers can keep their skills up to date and develop specialist knowledge as they progress in their careers.

• All this in addition to the reforms to the Integrated Children’s System the Task Force has already proposed and the Government has accepted. Over the next few months these should significantly reduce bureaucracy on the front line.

These measures will make a real difference for social workers and for those who use their services. The work of the Social Work Task Force has begun to create the conditions for change in social work, and has brought all of the key partners to the table. The challenge now – for government, for the profession, for employers and for educators – is to build on these strong foundations to take forward a reform programme which delivers on the ambitions you have set out.

What Government must do

You have said that the Government must maintain commitment to supporting excellence in social work. We will need to show strong leadership and commitment in making reform happen and to work in partnership with the profession, employers and social work educators. It will need to make sure the programme is properly supported and resourced, and that it becomes part of mainstream business in the relevant Departments.

As you have recommended, we will act as quickly as possible to work through the legislative and resourcing implications of your recommendations, and the changes that are needed to arms-length government organisations that operate in and around social work.

We must ensure that the momentum the Task Force has established is maintained. So we are grateful to you for agreeing to establish a new Social Work Reform Board which will oversee the development, and then implementation, of the reform programme.
Early in 2010, the Government – with the support of the Social Work Reform Board – will publish an implementation plan for reform of adult and children’s social work. This will set out how we will put in place the key elements of the reform programme, making a sustained commitment to improvement for the future. The reform programme will build on the strong support and engagement that the task force has established across the sector. It must also build on the good progress and innovation that is already happening in some parts of the country, and be carefully planned so that front line services are not disrupted as an improved support system is put place.

There must be places on this board for the organisations which represent the profession, educators and employers, including the new College. We need it to continue the strong challenge that the Task Force has provided to Government so far. Success will be dependent on all partners making the commitment to change that is needed.

**What the profession must do**

The Task Force has said that that social workers need to develop a more powerful voice. They must take responsibility for setting their own high standards and for demonstrating high quality professional practice which makes a real difference to those they work with, and for working well with other practitioners. They need to work with employers, educators and the government to enhance their credibility and raise their status – and to ensure that they have the support they need to do the work that service users look to them to do.

We strongly support the Task Force’s recommendation that the profession should establish its own College of Social Work. This will be an essential step in enabling social workers to gain a strong voice and to work with Government, employers, social work educators and the public and media, on a more equal footing. The Government will provide logistical support to the College while it establishes itself, and is working with bodies which represent social workers and Task Force members to support the immediate appointment of a shadow board and interim chair. But the College must be owned by the profession itself, and move quickly to establish independent funding and governance arrangements.
We want to see the College acquire Royal status to give the profession the standing it deserves and the status it needs to influence national policy making and public debate. The College will have to establish itself as a credible, independent voice for social work and for the profession, and while Government will provide it with start-up support the College will need to work with social workers to determine its independent funding and governance arrangements.

It will be critical that the profession seizes this opportunity to become a strong and positive influence on the shaping of policy which affects social workers and those who use their services. We hope the College will play a key role in articulating standards for the profession, establishing the expectations which must drive all aspects of the reform programme, and that it will quickly develop the capacity to speak confidently and compellingly to the public and media about social work and its value.

The reforms in social work will not lessen the high expectations the public, service users and employers have of the quality of social work practice. However, they must be developed and delivered with the profession so that social workers are well supported in meeting those expectations, and have a strong voice in determining standards and the ways in which they are held to account for delivering them.

One of the key issues that social workers have raised with the Task Force has been the problems with the Integrated Children's System (ICS) in children's services. This is a good example of an issue which can only be resolved by joint working between the government, the profession and employers. The Task Force prioritised its advice in this area and we accepted your early recommendations that ICS should be reformed to become a system which is locally owned and driven, framed by simplified specifications agreed at national level. Working closely with an expert panel of ICS users, and with the support of Task Force members, DCSF has begun this improvement process.

On 22 October, we released a first package of simplification guidance to local authorities. This was developed by the expert panel and is designed to help practitioners and managers make best use of their systems and to support local authorities to simplify their systems in line with local needs.

We have also made further funding available for the improvement of IT systems and have removed the requirement that authorities should comply with national specifications in order to receive this investment. The Task Force's work in gathering
and articulating the views of front line social workers was essential to Ministers’ decision to change the department’s approach to ICS, and that partnership approach to improvement will be critical to our future success.

What employers must do

The Task Force has said that employers must act now to ensure that they are listening to their staff and putting in place the support that they need. They must have high expectations for the quality of the services children, young people and adults in vulnerable circumstances receive from social workers. But, they must engage directly with their social workers to ensure that they are able to deliver those high standards.

This year we have provided funding to enable them to ensure that newly qualified social workers are well supported and trained in their first year in practice. And, in children’s services the £58m Social Work Transformation Fund announced in May is already helping employers to sponsor graduates through social work training and encourage returners back into the work place. It is also encouraging the good practice in delivering social work services to be shared across organisational boundaries, and in some regions it is supporting local authorities to work together to tackle recruitment and retention issues.

Many authorities are already acting to remodel their social work services, finding more efficient means of organising teams and of supporting social workers. In the process they are not only improving the quality of the time that social workers spend with service users but are also promoting multi-agency working. Many local authorities are also acting to improve the usability of the IT that social workers need to do their jobs – supported, in children’s services, by the improvement programme for the Integrated Children’s System which you have helped us to deliver.

In adult social work, we are pleased that ADASS, together with Skills for Care and DH, have developed advice for local authorities on how best to use social work skills and knowledge to take forward the personalisation agenda in adult social care.

If the reforms that the Task Force has recommended are to make a real difference, all employers of social workers will need to raise their game to the level of the very best. We particularly welcome the guidance/tool that you have developed to support
employers in working with their staff to ensure that they have the support and supervision they need, together with manageable case loads. We will further promote this approach by recommending it to directors of adult services, and in the forthcoming statutory guidance 'Working Together to Safeguard Children'.

Employers will also need to work much more collaboratively – with each other, with the profession and with HEIs and other social work educators. The regional collaborations for initial training and practice learning you have recommended will be important in this respect.

We also agree that employers must work much more effectively together and with government with regard to the supply of social workers and how this is influenced by pay. We need much better data about the number of social workers needed and we welcome the commitment of local government employers to work with unions to establish new progression pay grades for social workers. Ensuring that social workers are paid appropriately, and that progression routes develop to keep the best on the front line, will be a crucial plank of the reform programme for the profession.

We very much support your recommendation that there should be a new, nationally recognised standard for the support that employers should put in place. As part of the reform programme we will challenge employers to come together to develop that standard, working closely with the profession and with us to ensure that it sets expectations which are reasonable, and will ensure that all authorities are performing at the level of the very best. This standard must particularly ensure that social workers are supported to work in integrated services and multi-disciplinary teams, alongside or reporting to colleagues from other professional disciplines.

While the majority of social workers in England work for local authorities, CAFCASS, the NHS and voluntary and private sector organisations are also important employers of social workers. They must play a significant role in the development of the standard and the wider reform programme.
What educators of social workers must do

You have said that educators of social workers must deliver a consistently high quality of initial training and of continuing professional education. They must work with the profession and employers to ensure that social workers are well prepared for the work they do and are supported to improve their skills and to specialise, throughout their careers.

This means that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) must work together, with employers, and with the GSCC through its accreditation of courses, to ensure that appropriately high expectations are set for students entering and graduating from courses, and that high quality practice placements and academic education prepares them well for the jobs they will go on to do.

We very much welcome The Task Force’s recommendations to secure consistency in the quality of initial training for social work, and your proposals for the revamping of the continuing professional development framework. HEIs must play an important role in the Social Work Reform programme and will have places on the Reform Board.

We will need to work closely with HEIs to put strengthened arrangements in place, where they are needed. Any changes considered as a result of the Task Force recommendations will need to be consistent with the strategy we have set out in “Higher Ambitions – the future of universities in a knowledge economy”, published on 3 November. This sets a clear framework to ensure fair access to university, raising aspirations so that those with the potential to succeed at the highest levels are encouraged to do so, whatever their background.

Admissions decisions are a matter for each university. Social work is a profession that is particularly good at attracting applicants from diverse backgrounds. It is important that we build on that strength, and that potential social workers are supported to attain the necessary high levels skills. We will encourage universities to consider the Task Force’s recommendations around the selection process for social workers, alongside taking into account the education and social context of pupils’ achievements in their admissions processes. The importance of fair access to the Professions will be further highlighted when the Government published its response to Alan Milburn’s report “Unleashing Aspiration: The Final Report on Fair Access to the Professions.”
Investment in initial training and support to students is the most expensive aspect of the Government's financial commitment to supporting social workers. As you have recommended, we will work with the HEI sector and others to ensure that that money is well directed to secure the outcomes we seek for the social workers of the future.

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Social workers, and those who educate and employ them, have been important members of the Social Work Task Force and its key partners and practitioner reference groups. Many more have contributed to the development of your recommendations through the impressive programme of regional events, visits to local areas and consultation processes and through your extensive survey of social worker workloads. Service users have also played a vocal and critical role on the Task Force and by contributing their perspective of the difference that social work – and really good social workers – can make for them. We are very grateful to all those who have taken part and to you for your efforts to make sure that their voices have been heard.

We must act quickly, ensuring that our actions are proportionate and affordable, and have lasting impact – making a difference not just for the current generation of social workers, but for those who will follow them over the next decade and beyond. This is of potential benefit to all of us in society who may need social work services at any time in our lives. And we must act together. As Secretaries of State for Children and for Health, that is what we intend to do. To succeed, we will need employers, educators and the profession to rise to your challenge and seize this opportunity, too.

Yours sincerely

Andy Burnham
Secretary of State for Health

Ed Balls
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