

Social Work Task Force

Building a safe, confident future

The final report of the
Social Work Task Force:
November 2009

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Foreword



Moira Gibb CBE
Chair, Social Work Task Force

Our remit letter from the Secretaries of State for Health and for Children Schools and Families began by recognising that “the job social workers do is critical to the nation. They play an essential role in protecting children and young people from harm and in supporting people of every age. The work they do can be difficult and very demanding, requiring careful professional judgements that can make all the difference to those they serve”.

However, the letter also acknowledged that the profession is not currently flourishing in England. The challenges facing the profession were underlined for us in our many opportunities to meet with and hear from front line practitioners and service users, as well as managers, educators, elected members, regulators and observers.

It was relatively straightforward to develop a critique of the current problems, particularly those faced by social workers in the statutory sector and most extremely by those on the front line of child protection. We heard also about changing policy expectations causing uncertainty in adults’ services. We heard evidence of steeply rising demand in some areas, adding further to a sense of deep concern. In our interim report we set out the main obstacles we saw to the delivery of high quality social work – and the building blocks we think must come together to produce a comprehensive reform programme. We tested these with a wide audience, formally and informally. There was extensive support for our critique.

Putting things right for the future will be more demanding.

We have tested out many of the fifteen core recommendations in this our final report with relevant groups and individuals – including our Key Partners Group and our Practitioners Reference Group – and are grateful for the help we have had in shaping them. We are therefore hoping for similar widespread support for our proposals, which will need participation from all sectors to become a reality.

Working with the building blocks set out in our interim report, we have put forward a comprehensive reform programme, all of which needs to be put in place over time. No doubt some will see one or two recommendations as more important than others or will debate the ordering of any implementation plan developed by government. The stability, safety and improvement of the profession requires that they should all be put in place, without gaps, but need to be built up carefully and systematically. We have limited our recommendations in number and kept our report as short as possible to help all those who are key to delivering these changes, and to the subsequent success of these reforms, to play their part.

We know also that capacity across the social work service is very stretched. It will be difficult for those coping with very demanding jobs today to spare time to contribute to building a new future. As a result, leadership by employers, supported by government, is needed in the here and now to take the action which will begin to ease the pressure.

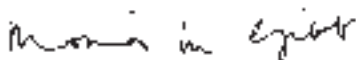
Most of the ways forward we have suggested cannot happen without collaboration between key players. For example, the education and training of the next generation of social workers must be the joint responsibility of universities and employers. But many other sector bodies have a part to play and I ask that they prioritise this now above any organisational interests, so that we can together grasp this opportunity.

Strong, independent, national leadership of the profession will also make a great difference. Participation in the life and development of a profession demands resources – principally the time of social workers themselves which is generally under the control of managers and employers. The national college of social work we are proposing in this report will need not just the active support of practising social workers, but also of their employers.

There also needs to be collaboration on addressing the poor image of the social work profession, which as it stands now is preventing good people from seeking to join the profession and speeding the departure of others. This will require a greater willingness to explain, avoiding the use of jargon and trying to be more transparent. It will need much greater openness with the media, and more effort and expertise in telling the positive stories. This cannot be merely an afterthought but is fundamental to making the most of the other reforms we are recommending.

I would like to thank my colleagues on the Task Force and in the Joint Social Work Unit, and all others who have contributed, for the work they have put into arriving at the advice and recommendations in this report. These recommendations have the potential to put the profession on a safe, confident footing for the future. This will ultimately be to the benefit of people who are vulnerable or at risk and who should be able to draw on the expertise of a good social worker. This is a great prize to aim for.

However, the recommendations themselves are just that – recommendations. They need to be translated now into sustained action in which everyone signs up to a common purpose, and delivers on their responsibilities. In short, social work has arrived at a watershed moment. This gives us an opportunity to come together to build a safe, confident future, which all of us must seize.



Moira Gibb CBE

Executive Summary

“Good social workers are at the end of a phone, give confidence in a crisis, help find solutions, give a second opinion, know the legal position, react to need. I’ve never had a problem with social workers. I’ve had outstanding support.”

“When my Mam died the social worker helped me to get my name on the tenancy of the house I lived in with my Mam. They sorted all of this out and then helped me to decide what to do next.”

“Good social workers provide clarity about what progress has been made. They tell you what can and can’t be done, what’s causing problems. Keeping you involved is the most important thing.”

“They need to be confident about getting out and looking at and inspecting the places they have put children – foster homes, care homes and so on. They need to take a lot of care to make sure they have a really good understanding of your situation. They shouldn’t make assumptions.”

Service users and carers who spoke to the Social Work Task Force.

The Social Work Task Force believes in the value of good social work and in its importance to society.

“When people are made vulnerable – by poverty, bereavement, addiction, isolation, mental distress, disability, neglect, abuse, or other circumstances – what happens next matters hugely. If outcomes are poor, if dependency becomes ingrained or harm goes unchecked, individuals, families, communities and the economy can pay a heavy price. Good social workers can and do make a huge difference in these difficult situations.”¹

Good social work like this – and like the social work described above by service users who spoke to the Task Force – depends on confident, effective frontline professionals. These professionals depend, in turn, on a system of high quality training, regulation and leadership behind them. This system should provide them with the resources and conditions they need to do their job well.

When social workers have confidence in their own skills, purpose and identity, and in the system in place to back them up, they have a huge amount to offer. They collaborate effectively with other professionals and adapt to new roles and expectations. Most importantly, they forge

¹ *Facing Up to the Task: the interim report of the Social Work Task Force* (July 2009).

constructive partnerships with people who find themselves vulnerable or at risk and make a sustained difference in their lives.

At present, however, social work in England too often falls short of these basic conditions for success. Weaknesses in recruitment, retention, frontline resources, training, leadership, public understanding and other factors are all compounding one another. They are holding back the profession and making service improvement difficult to achieve. Most importantly, people who look to social workers for support are not getting the consistently high quality of service they deserve.

At the same time, the profession is being asked to respond to change: for instance, adapting to the new agenda for personalisation in adult services; responding to heightened public concern about child protection; and playing an effective part in integrated working between different agencies.

Social work is too important for us not to pursue excellence everywhere. We recognise that there is much innovation and good practice within the system. However, they are not widespread enough. In some places and organisations, quality of practice has suffered badly.

Our ambitions for reform

We believe therefore that the quality of social work practice now needs to be raised significantly, through comprehensive, ambitious reform, including

- better training – with employers, educators and the profession all taking their full share of responsibility for investing in the next generation and in enabling social workers already in practice to develop their skills continuously
- improved working conditions – with employers signing up to new standards for the support and supervision of their frontline workforce that make good practice possible
- stronger leadership and independence – with the profession taking more control over its own standards, how it is understood and valued by the public, and the contribution it makes to changes in policy and practice
- a reliable supply of confident, high quality, adaptable professionals into the workforce, where they can build long-term careers on the frontline
- greater understanding among the general public, service users, other professionals and the media of the role and purpose of social work, the demands of the job and the contribution social workers make
- more use of research and continuing professional development to inform frontline practice

We are proposing a single national reform programme for social work to ensure that there is concerted, co-ordinated progress on all fronts.

As reform unfolds and conditions improve, social work needs to become a profession which takes responsibility for the quality of its practice. It should use the best evidence to determine how it can be most effective. It should be respected and supported, but held fairly to account by Government, employers, educators, regulators and the public.

Listening to people who use services – adults, young people and children – will be especially important. From our contact with service users, we know that their experiences are mixed and that we need to resolve underlying problems with the profession in order to address this. Social work reform will not succeed unless it is open to and influenced by the views and experiences of people who know best the impact that good (and bad) practice can have.

Our recommendations reflect all of these ambitions. We expect this report to act as a turning point for the profession.

Our recommendations

We are recommending a **reformed system of initial education and training**, increasing the number of confident, competent professionals coming into the workforce (Chapter 1).

A reformed system of education and training should

- begin with clear, consistent criteria for entry to social work courses – with a new regime for testing and interviewing candidates that balances academic and personal skills – so that all students are of a high calibre
- provide courses where the content, teaching, placement opportunities and assessment are of a high standard across all providers – we are, for instance, proposing advanced teaching organisation status for agencies providing high quality practice placements to social work students
- culminate in a new supported and assessed first year in employment, which would act as the final stage in becoming a full, practising social worker

The assessed year in employment would also allow social workers to increase their expertise in specialised areas of social work, building on the improved grounding provided by the degree and creating a solid platform for further career long development. Responsibility for assessment could potentially be shared between employers, higher education institutions and the regulator.

The system for educating social workers will be strengthened by more transparent and effective regulation and by stronger local partnerships between universities and employers. This should give greater assurance of quality, consistency and supply.

We are recommending the establishment of an independent **national college of social work**. The college will articulate and promote the interests of good social work. It will give the profession itself strong, independent leadership; a clear voice in public debate, policy development and policy delivery; and strong ownership of the standards to be upheld. (Chapter 4)

We are recommending **clear, universal and binding standards for employers**. These would cover how frontline social work should be resourced, managed and supported – including clear requirements governing supervision – so that high quality practice is an achievable aim for all social workers. Employers providing a social work service should be required to assess their performance against the standard, take this through their internal review process, publish the results – including information on the caseload ceilings or controls they are operating – and set out their plans for improvement. We are publishing an initial framework to help with action now in assessing the “health” of organisations on a range of issues affecting workload. We are also

recommending the creation of a **dedicated programme of training and support for managers** of frontline social workers. (Chapter 2)

We are recommending a **single, nationally recognised career structure** (Chapter 3). This new career structure would

- map each of the main stages of a career in social work from degree course entrant onwards, making clear the expectations that should apply to social workers at each of these stages
- give shape to the more coherent and effective **national framework for the continuing professional development of social workers** which we are also recommending (Chapter 3) and which should incorporate the new Masters in Social Work Practice
- guide individual employers in how the social work task is best organised in localities with the right mix of expertise within frontline teams and how they should configure their workforce to support progression
- ensure that social workers are paid fairly, in line with their skills, knowledge and level of responsibility – with, in particular, progression routes available to high quality, specialist practitioners which do not remove them from frontline practice

We are recommending a new **system for forecasting levels of demand for social workers**, which can eventually be used for local, regional and national planning concerning training and recruitment (Chapter 6).

To replace current requirements for renewal of registration with a system that is more rigorous and transparent about tangible improvements in knowledge and skills, we are recommending a **licence to practise** system for social workers (Chapter 6). Under this system, practitioners would first acquire and then maintain their status as social workers (and their ability to be employed as such). This would be achieved through demonstrating that they continue to meet high standards of professional development and competence. Once established the licence to practise will allow for the development of requirements relating to more specialist expertise.

Social workers have left the Task Force in no doubt regarding their concern about the way in which the profession is reported on in the media and the impact this is having on recruitment, morale and public perception. Members of the public, colleagues from other professions and service users are often unclear or confused about what they should expect of social workers, leading to misunderstanding and frustration on all sides. Under these circumstances, the profession will struggle to be confident and effective.

We are also recommending therefore

- a new **programme of action on public understanding of social work**, creating greater openness about the profession, in which the proposed national college should play the leading role. Action should include a sustained approach to raising and maintaining public awareness of what social work entails and the contribution good social work makes to society. The public description of social work originally developed by the Social Work Task Force for our interim report should be adopted, finalised and used by the national college for this purpose. (The original wording can be found in the Executive Summary of the interim report. See Annex B.)

The changes we need to see are not simple. It will be difficult to make progress while responsibility for the overall health of the profession stays fragmented. Employers, educators, the Government and the profession itself all need to act differently. There is a need for a much more collaborative approach between us to strengthen social work, with demonstrably high levels of accountability for the actions we take, both when we are acting individually and together.

Reform of this kind is likely to require a ten year commitment with concerted action over the next five years in particular. We are recommending therefore the creation of a **single national reform programme for social work** (see Chapter 6). The reform programme – including, for instance, the development of the standard for employers, the national career structure and the supply model – should be overseen by a new board, reporting to Ministers, and reflecting this need for collective responsibility. Overall progress in delivering reform should be reviewed and made public annually.

The programme should be structured around the building blocks for reform originally set out in the interim report of the Social Work Task Force. (These can also be found at Annex B.)

Collective action will clearly need to be taken at a more local level, as well as nationally, on some matters. This includes close collaboration between employers and educators to ensure there are adequate numbers of: places on social work courses; high quality practice placement opportunities for students; and suitable entrants to the workforce. The board overseeing reform should move quickly to understand local, regional and sub-regional partnerships, where these are currently in place, and also how other professions organise themselves to handle these issues. It should bring forward advice on how local employers and higher education institutions can best work and plan together on questions of education, training and local workforce supply.

The reform programme should also build on all that is still being learnt from existing measures to improve social work, as introduced over recent years by government, individual employers, higher education institutions and others, including the newly qualified social worker programmes and employment based routes into qualifications.

The role of Government

By setting up the Task Force, Ministers have already shown strong shared commitment to social work reform on a cross-departmental basis. Continuing government commitment to excellence in social work will be even more vital over the long term.

In particular, we believe government action should include

- ongoing joint commitment and leadership across government in support of the national reform programme – with rapid action to ensure that the programme is put in place and gets swiftly underway and that it becomes mainstream business in the relevant departments
- the necessary investment to make reform a reality at all levels, especially on the frontline – our proposals have implications for resources and legislation which Government will need to work through as quickly as possible if momentum is to be maintained
- strong logistical support to the profession to enable it to establish an independent national college

- rationalisation of the delivery organisations, partnerships and standard setting mechanisms, the proliferation of which contributes to confusion and inefficiencies in workforce improvement – if the profession is to become more confident and more effective, it needs to be supported by organisations that are more clearly focused on the improvement of social work
- ensuring the performance indicator regimes that influence social work do not privilege the completion of processes at the expense of service quality or outcomes for service users, and that they avoid perverse incentives and measures for which there is no supporting evidence base
- intervening strongly whenever any of the ambitions and recommendations for social work set out in this report are at risk of not being achieved

A better, stronger future for social work needs everyone concerned to be clear about where we are trying to get to and the priority actions needed to achieve this; and about the delivery system and their responsibilities within it. We are confident our report provides a platform for meeting these conditions. We hope that the prospect of comprehensive, long term reform of the kind we are recommending will be widely welcomed.

Short term action

However, we are also acutely aware of the very real pressures facing social work right now. Some of the reforms we are recommending will take time to be implemented in full and to produce change on the ground. It will not be possible to put some into effect until the capacity within the system has increased. It follows that managers, employers, higher education institutions and regulators, as well as government, must all act quickly to ensure they are providing the best possible support to people who need social work services *now* – and to the people who are charged with delivering these services.

In particular, we recommend that

- DCSF and local authorities should continue to improve the Integrated Children's System (ICS), by translating national specifications into tangible improvements to local systems, making ICS more straightforward and effective for frontline social workers in children's services
- local government should consider how resources can be reallocated to make a difference on the front line – central government must support local government to manage high pressures on front line services, including through making resources available
- employers should hold frank and open discussions with frontline practitioners and managers about the reality of practice on the frontline, the burdens practitioners are carrying, and how they can improve services
- both formal and informal piloting of the remodelling of social work services should be encouraged and incentivised and, where necessary, resourced, building on what is being learnt from work already underway

As made clear above, we believe that social work reform will not work unless it is open to the views and experiences of people who use the service. We have incorporated this principle into a number of our recommendations – including, for instance, in how the national college for social work, the assessed year in employment, and the programme of action on the public understanding of social work are developed and delivered. The voice and influence of service users should be built into the whole reform programme from the start.

Conclusion

Social workers and others have been talking about some of the problems and potential solutions raised in this report for some time. There is now both an opportunity and an urgent necessity to put things right. Employers, educators and social workers themselves all need to seize this moment.

Employers need to provide greater leadership and direction for social work locally. They must act now to ensure that they are listening to their staff and putting in place the support that they need. They must set the highest standards for the services children, young people and vulnerable adults receive from social workers. But, they must engage directly with their social workers to ensure that they are able to deliver those high standards.

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

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 for those they work with. To do this, they need to work with employers, educators and the government to strengthen their credibility, to raise their status, and to ensure that they have the support they need to do their work.

Finally, in addition to the challenges we have already set out for it above, central government must signal its intention to set change in motion now, unblock the route to long term progress, and help to construct the durable partnerships without which reform will not succeed.

The Social Work Task Force's 15 recommendations

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:** 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.

Introduction

The Social Work Task Force was set up by the Department of Health and the Department for Children, Schools and Families to undertake a comprehensive review of frontline social work practice and to make recommendations for improvement and reform of the whole profession, across adult and children's services.

The Task Force met for the first time in February 2009. The members of the Task Force were drawn from local frontline services and senior leadership, research, the media, the third sector, service user organisations, Unison and the British Association of Social Workers. (A list of the members of the Task Force can be found in Annex B.) It published its first report in May 2009 in the form of a letter from the Chair to the Secretaries of State for Health and for Children, Schools and Families.

In July 2009, the Task Force published its interim report, *Facing up to the Task*. (The Executive Summary is reproduced at Annex A.) This set out proposals for the kind of comprehensive reform needed, including a series of building blocks for constructing a reform programme. We have not repeated here all of the evidence to support the recommendations we are now making. This is set out in greater detail in our interim report, which should be seen as a companion document to the final report. The interim report also contained a public description of social work developed by the Task Force. This should be adopted and developed by the national college proposed in this report for use in a programme of action on improving the public understanding of social work².

In this final report, the Task Force is setting out fifteen recommendations for improving and reforming social work. These recommendations were developed from the building blocks for reform first set out in the interim report. Each chapter is in two parts. The first part summarizes context and evidence. The second part contains the recommendations. The first five chapters focus on specific issues directly affecting how social work is practised. Chapter 6 is focused on action needed to underpin long term improvement and reform.

The Task Force has carried out a wide-ranging programme of consultation and evidence gathering, beginning in spring 2009. A summary of this programme is contained in the interim report. The Chair and members of the Task Force are grateful to all of those who took part – particularly the service users who contributed through focus groups and questionnaires; the frontline practitioners who gave up their time to take part in regional events and online surveys; and the Key Partners Group and Practitioners Reference Group, both of which met the Task

² The executive summary of the Interim Report, including the public description is re-printed as Annex B to this report. The description was also used by Skills for Care and the Children's Workforce Development Council in their work on describing social work roles and tasks. Further information is available from their websites.

Force on a number of occasions over the past eight months. All of this input has played a vital part in helping the Task Force to understand the issues and arrive at its recommendations.

While the Task Force has been at work, Lord Laming's progress report on *The Protection of Children in England* and the report of the House of Commons Children, Schools and Families Committee on the *Training of Children and Families Social Workers* have both been published. The Task Force has carefully considered the content of both reports and has sought to address the issues raised by them for the social work profession. The Task Force believes that the recommendations it is now putting forward, and the reform programme that should deliver them, will enable the government, employers, educators and the profession to respond to the problems identified by Lord Laming and the select committee.

Lord Laming's and the select committee's reports focused on social work in children's services only. The Task Force believes that there is great value to service users in preserving social work as a single profession covering work with both children and adults. The recommendations in this report are intended to support a continuing single profession. They are designed to enable social workers to benefit from high quality education and training in responding to both the needs of children and adults, but also to develop specialist skills early in and over the full course of their careers.

Much of this report is inevitably focused on social work in the statutory sector. This is, in many respects, the bedrock of social work in England. However, CAFCASS, the NHS and voluntary and private sector organisations are also important employers of social workers. The Task Force is confident its proposals will help social workers across all the services and sectors in which they currently work.

Copies of the previous Task Force reports and other key documents can be found at <http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf/>.

Chapter 1: Starting Out

Summary

The Social Work Task Force is recommending a reformed system of initial education and training, increasing the number of confident, competent professionals coming into the workforce.

A reformed system of education and training should

- begin with clear, consistent criteria for entry to social work courses – with a new regime for testing and interviewing candidates that balances academic and personal skills – so that all students are of a high calibre
- provide courses where the content, teaching, placement opportunities and assessment are of a high standard across all providers – we are, for instance, proposing advanced teaching organisation status for agencies providing high quality practice placements to social work students
- culminate in a new supported and assessed first year in employment, which would act as the final stage in becoming a full practising social worker

The assessed year in employment would also allow social workers to increase their expertise in specialised areas of work, building on the improved grounding provided by the degree and creating a solid platform for further career long development. Responsibility for assessment could potentially be shared between employers, higher education institutions and the regulator.

The system for educating social workers will be strengthened by more transparent and effective regulation. This should give greater assurance of consistency and quality.

- 1.1** The introduction of the social work degree in 2003, with increases in the time spent by students in assessed practice, was a very important development for social work. It heralded the arrival of a graduate profession. Along with social workers becoming professionals with a 'protected title' which only they could use, achieving degree status sent a clear signal about what social work should be: a profession made up of highly skilled, highly qualified practitioners, whose expertise continuously develops throughout their career.

- 1.2 There was optimism and enthusiasm about a new qualification, which it was hoped would raise both the quality and supply of social workers. At the same time, the degree brought the academic level of social work training in England more in line with other countries and with other professions, which had had degree level (or in some cases Masters) training for many years.
- 1.3 The degree has had some notable successes in relation to the original ambitions for it. Following a considerable decline over previous years, one of the aims of the social work degree was to increase the numbers of those accessing social work education and training. This target was achieved during the first three years. Over 13,000 people have now qualified as social workers since the first students graduated in 2005.
- 1.4 The degree has also achieved its aim of continuing to attract a high proportion of students from different black and minority ethnic groups, helping to ensure that social workers represent the diverse communities they serve. It has also succeeded in increasing the proportion of younger candidates and school leavers into the courses, while maintaining high levels of mature students, thus opening up the possibility that all those who have the potential to become good practitioners can do so, regardless of age. Post-graduate courses – 25% of all provision – are popular and show good progression and achievement rates.
- 1.5 Through the degree, new initiatives were also introduced to encourage the participation of service users and carers in all aspects of degree design and delivery. While implementation of the requirement governing this involvement has been variable, service users are now closely involved in the design and delivery of courses to good effect.
- 1.6 However, the Task Force has also heard from many sources that initial education and training is not yet reliable enough in meeting its primary objective, which must be to prepare students for the demands of frontline practice. Some employers are telling us that they are unable to appoint newly qualified social workers (NQSW) because of a lack of suitable applicants. Some NQSW cannot find jobs. Others who do enter the workforce are often expected to take on unrealistically complex tasks because of the acute recruitment and retention problem in many authorities. Equally, employers need to be realistic about the time people need to progress from achieving a professional qualification to operating as a full professional, and what therefore a newly qualified social worker should be asked to do.
- 1.7 There are, of course, many strong, respected courses that other providers can learn from. Reform needs to build on such successes – and ensure that the whole system reaches new levels of consistency in providing high quality education and training.
- 1.8 We believe that there are a number of strengths and weaknesses in the system as a whole that account for the current state of affairs. These were set out in detail in the interim report of the Social Work Task Force and are summarised below.

Local partnership between employers and educators

- 1.9** There are examples of good collaboration between employers and higher education institutions (HEI) providing social work courses, which deliver several major benefits. Collaboration of this kind helps in
- aligning the academic and practical parts of the degree to best effect
 - establishing a shared understanding, at a local level, about what precisely should – and shouldn't – be expected from initial social work education and training
 - managing workforce supply needs strategically
 - providing high quality practice placements for students
- 1.10** However, the current requirements for employers and service users to be involved in the design and delivery of local courses have not worked well in all areas.
- 1.11** It is critical now that employers and educators work together more closely to drive improvements in social work education³. Employers in particular need to get more involved in devising and delivering local strategies and courses that will ensure the delivery of high quality education and training to produce the kinds of social workers they want and need.

Calibre of entrants

- 1.12** The calibre of entrants to social work degree courses is pivotal in improving the quality of graduates entering the workforce and to raising the standards and status of the profession.
- 1.13** Social work calls for a particular mix of analytical skills, insight, common sense, confidence, resilience, empathy and use of authority. Some of these attributes are difficult to test and there is mixed evidence about the exact correlation between certain qualifications and skills and being an effective social worker⁴.
- 1.14** There are many excellent candidates entering and completing the social work degree. However, despite current over-demand for social work places, it also appears that some courses (possibly under pressure from their institutions to fill places) are accepting people not suited to the degree or to social work. In particular, there is acute concern that a minority of those accepted onto courses have poor skills in literacy or have difficulty in

³ Active partnerships of this kind would reflect the aspiration that employers and businesses become "active partners with universities, not passive customers". See *Higher Ambitions: the future of universities in a knowledge economy* (BIS, 2009).

⁴ A particular area of controversy is the variety in 'A' level and other qualification tariff points required for entry to social work courses and how these compare to other professional training requirements. Due to the high proportion of mature candidates entering social work only 30% enter under tariff schemes. A further 30% of entrants to social work already have a first degree. The remaining 40% enter with basic requirements and through ACCESS to higher education programmes which are currently ungraded. There is considerable variety in what different HEI allow to make up tariff points. Some stipulate 'A' levels only; others will allow AS level, GCSEs, qualifications in unrelated disciplines, etc. Recent research shows an average points threshold of 250 for social work courses. Where similar courses are offered by the HEI, points or A level grades requested are generally in line with (or higher than) requirements for courses such as nursing and midwifery, but lower than those required for teaching, particularly at the highest range.

analysing and conceptualising, and that they lack the maturity, resilience or life experience that contribute to becoming a good social worker.

- 1.15 Selection processes in universities vary, with some innovative approaches being used⁵. However, the Task Force believes that current arrangements do not go far enough to ensure that *all* institutions are assessing candidates rigorously enough to ensure they have the right mix of intellectual and personal qualities to succeed as social workers. We have been told that these problems can compound one another with less academically able students struggling with the demands of the college work and being unable to concentrate on the learning from their placement as a result.
- 1.16 Employers and service users have an important role to play in getting the right people into social work. While most HEI already involve employers and service users in their selection process (as they are required to do), the way in which they do this varies and may be ineffective in some cases.
- 1.17 More attention must therefore be paid to ensuring those most likely to excel on the course, and enter the workforce as confident, competent practitioners, are selected for entry to the degree. Evidence and feedback the Task Force has received suggests that there is a strong case for more research into the attributes and characteristics that make for good social workers.

Social work courses: curriculum, delivery and assessment

- 1.18 The curriculum for the social work degree is currently determined through a combination of the QAA benchmark standards for social work, the Department of Health requirements for social work training, and the National Occupational Standards.
- 1.19 We have concluded that the current requirements governing the content of the degree are too loosely determined. They lack clarity and are not widely understood. The degree needs to be delivered with greater consistency and a greater focus on linking theory to practice. Feedback from employers, practitioners, practice assessors and from independent research strongly suggests that there are certain areas of knowledge and skills which are not being covered to the right depth in social work initial training. These include: assessment frameworks; risk analysis; communication skills; managing conflict and hostility; working with other professionals. An understanding of the research, legislation and policy basis for practice is also essential. Clear and shared expectations of the social work curriculum are essential. The right knowledge and skills must be learnt to sufficient depth to provide a strong foundation for high quality practice and continuous development throughout a social worker's career.
- 1.20 We also recognise, however, that a balance needs to be struck. Educators need room to innovate in driving up the quality and relevance of their courses, and the curriculum must remain responsive to the changing realities of practice.

⁵ These include opportunities to reflect on life experience; extended personal statements to test motivation; written questions drawn from research regarding safe/effective recruitment (e.g. re tenacity, coping under pressure, self in relationships with others) and exams.

- 1.21** The Task Force has been strongly persuaded that social work should continue to be served by a generic entry qualification that is relevant to work in both adult and children's sectors, and that supports movement between the two. This conclusion reflects the majority view we have encountered through our consultation and evidence gathering.
- 1.22** A good generic degree course should enable all students to develop the knowledge, skills and values in working holistically and safely with the whole range of individuals, families and communities where social work is needed. Splitting the degree would be destabilising and impractical. It would require students to make decisions about their future direction before they may be ready to. The fragility of the profession would be increased rather than reduced by potentially costly and highly time-consuming separation.
- 1.23** However, the Task Force also understands the arguments it has heard for greater specialist input to the degree, which is made in particular by those responsible for delivering services for children and families. We believe that this can and must be achieved through the improvements we are recommending to the degree (including practice placements), coupled with the new opportunities to develop more specialised expertise offered by the assessed year in practice proposed below.
- 1.24** We also strongly support the view that academic staff need to keep up to date with what is happening in the field. There have been benefits from joint appointments, secondments and shared research. Universities should also continuously engage with people with expertise that has a bearing on the practice of social work – for instance, service users, judges, lawyers, psychiatrists and staff from third sector organisations – so that they can help to raise the overall level of social work education. Good examples of this approach exist, but they are currently hard to fund and maintain.
- 1.25** Despite this need for universities to stay informed about what is happening in frontline social work and share this with students, strong concerns have been expressed to the Task Force about the calibre of some lecturers and tutors. These concerns touch on, in particular, their understanding of how theory is applied in practice and of the current realities of frontline social work. Educators need to share in the real challenges posed in service delivery and avoid any temptation to criticise from the sidelines.
- 1.26** Universities should help students develop a strong appreciation of the need for continuous professional development to take into their future careers; and of the importance of evidence, with a willingness to both use and contribute to research. Students themselves need, through taking the degree, to begin developing into social workers who reflect critically on what they do and the decisions they make. This is already happening where provision is good. It needs to become more widespread.
- 1.27** Finally, all HEI need to recognise the vital part they have to play in making sure that people who use services receive the high quality social work they need and deserve. It is essential therefore that HEI have robust assessment mechanisms to ensure that only those who are suitable for practice pass their course.

Practice placements

- 1.28** Social work needs a culture in which professionals and employers take seriously their responsibility for developing the future generation of workers (in a similar way to other professions, such as medicine). High quality practice placements are a vital part of how students develop the knowledge, skills and values that will allow them to work with service users, safely and effectively⁶. They need to be actively managed so that the balance is right between teaching and learning, and between the application of theory and skills development. Currently, students are required to undertake at least 200 days in assessed practice in two different settings and with at least two service user groups. They should also have some experience of undertaking statutory social work tasks.
- 1.29** At their best, practice placements give students opportunities to learn directly from the most competent and experienced practitioners. Students can contribute to the learning environment of their placement agency by offering new ideas and enthusiasm. They get the chance to understand at first hand from service users how social workers can make a real difference. Placements also provide an important source of future recruitment for employers.
- 1.30** However, concerns are universally expressed that many students are experiencing placements which do not allow them to learn what they need. Placements may, for instance, lack high quality supervision, guidance and assessment. Students are sometimes taught and assessed by non-social workers. Some are being passed who are not competent or suitable for frontline social work. Others are unable to find jobs due to their poor practice experience.

Regulation and standards

- 1.31** Regulation is one of the most important levers for improving the quality of social work education. The quality assurance of social work degree courses is currently delegated to universities under arrangements established when the degree was introduced. It has continued to evolve in the light of the government's better regulation principles. This has led to a 'light touch' system of regulation and, in retrospect, the levers that do exist have not been used vigorously enough. Currently there is too much variation in the selection processes, and in the quality and consistency of the courses themselves.
- 1.32** The degree is also currently founded on standards and requirements set by different bodies, which are confusing and lack transparency. As such, they provide weak levers for a concerted effort to drive up the quality of social work education.

⁶ National standards for the quality assurance of practice learning have recently been developed and endorsed. See www.skillsforcare.org.uk/socialwork/practicelearning/sw_national_projects.aspx. Use of this tool will become mandatory for the 2009/2010 academic year. HEI will have to report to GSCC and this information will be made available to students through publication of reports on the GSCC web site.

Supply

- 1.33** We do not have a system for analysing or forecasting the overall demand for and supply of social workers in England, and the implications this has for education and training. This issue is dealt with more fully in Chapter 6.
- 1.34** The degree has provided a platform for further improvement of social work education. However, the shortcomings set out above are not simply teething problems of the kind that can occur during the roll out of any major reform. Unless they are addressed, they will undermine the success of the degree in the long term, and impair the supply of new social workers ready for the opportunities and demands of frontline practice.

Recommendations

- 1.35** Through our recommendations for long term reform, we wish therefore to help consolidate the gains made by the introduction of the degree, but also to stimulate some fundamental changes to initial training, in the interests of producing a fully effective frontline workforce, ready for and committed to continuous learning and improvement.

Recommendation 1: Calibre of Entrants

The Social Work Task Force recommends that criteria governing the calibre of entrants to social work education and training be strengthened.

- 1.36** The revised criteria for all applicants to all initial degree courses should include
- successful completion of a written test, which measures the clarity of writing, logical coherence and the capacity for developing reflective and analytical thinking
 - high performance in selection interviews which evaluate the life and work experience of course applicants, their communication skills, creativity and emotional resilience, reinforcing the current requirements⁷
- 1.37** We would also propose that
- HEI applying entry thresholds below the national average for social work (where entry to degree courses is based on UCAS points)⁸ should raise their threshold
 - all candidates should give evidence of their competence in English and Maths (through at least grade C or above at GCSE or an equivalent qualification)
- 1.38** Regulation should ensure that these criteria are applied consistently and fairly and in line with government ambitions set out in *Unleashing Aspirations* and the recent *Higher Ambitions* report⁹.

⁷ Current requirements specify that alongside criteria set by each HEI, all entrants must: have appropriate personal and intellectual qualities, have completed an individual or group interview; have achieved at least Key Skills level 2 in English and Maths and communicate clearly and accurately in spoken and written English.

⁸ Currently 250.

⁹ *Higher Ambitions, the future of universities in a knowledge economy* BIS, 2009.

- 1.39** The Task Force has heard concerns that some people who would make excellent social workers might be excluded from social work training if the academic criteria are strengthened¹⁰. We believe that the answer to this lies not in lowering capability requirements but in offering practical assistance and encouragement to suitable potential candidates in meeting the requirements for entry to the degree course. Where these routes maintain the necessary standards, the Task Force supports schemes such as Grow Your Own and the Open University – UNISON courses, which support and enable staff to develop so that they can undertake the level of academic education and training demanded by social work. Exit routes to alternative, lower level or non-qualifying courses should be available in all programmes to enable those who are not competent or suitable to practise as social workers to complete a course in related areas.
- 1.40** Currently 75% per cent of new social workers qualify through the undergraduate training degree. However, the Task Force has also heard that many employers prefer to offer placements to and employ those who have achieved their qualification at Masters level. Mindful of this and in order to better support career progression, we would encourage expansion of the Masters qualification for those who hold appropriate degrees¹¹.

Recommendation 2: Curriculum and Delivery

The Social Work Task Force recommends an overhaul of the content and delivery of social work degree courses.

- 1.41** This process for overhauling current arrangements should be set out by the Government as soon as possible and overseen through the proposed national reform programme for social work (see Chapter 6). The overhaul should lead to
- a curriculum based on jointly agreed outcome standards for the social work degree with these standards explicitly tied to robust assessment processes
 - systems for ensuring that everyone who designs and delivers social work courses are up to date with current knowledge, policy and practice
- 1.42** The regulator of social work education will have an important role to play in taking a more robust approach to ensuring that requirements are met, that the curriculum is kept up to date and that employers and service users are engaged in its design and delivery.
- 1.43** The Task Force believes that a stronger and more consistent focus on the content and quality of the degree will ensure that, by the time students complete their courses, they will be equipped with the knowledge, legislative context and tools required for initial work with either children or adults. They will also be prepared for more specialist learning during their assessed year in employment (see below) and throughout their subsequent career.

¹⁰ Currently, 90% of those studying for social work degrees are doing so through full time, college based courses.

¹¹ See DCSF/CWDC Graduate Recruitment Scheme and Step Up to Social Work Programme.

Recommendation 3: Practice Placements

The Social Work Task Force recommends 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.

- 1.44** The development of these new arrangements should be overseen by the board supporting the national reform programme for social work. They should include the following elements.

Formal sharing of accountability and responsibility

- Responsibility for securing the provision of practice learning should not fall to HEI alone. It should be a shared responsibility and the focus of active partnerships between employers and HEI – with formal guidance provided on the best approaches to building these partnerships locally. Partnerships should take responsibility for the allocation and audit of placement opportunities, based on the best possible information about supply and demand; and explore the potential for service level agreements where these are not already in place.

Advanced teaching organisations

- We set out above the importance of practice placements in the development of social workers. Best practice in this area should be recognised, encouraged and widely adopted. We would like to see the introduction of the status of advanced teaching organisation, tied to financial rewards and incentives and awarded to agencies who demonstrate expertise and a track record in providing good quality practice placements.

Placement criteria

- Mechanisms should be introduced to make sure that all students eventually benefit from at least one placement in a local authority, mental health trust or national organisation undertaking statutory work, where social workers are employed and where case accountability rests with the agency.¹²

¹² Work currently underway through the Social Work Development Partnership to clearly define and develop action plans for the improved provision of statutory placements should be completed and built upon. National organisations undertaking statutory work include NSPCC and CAF/CASS.

New funding arrangements

- Funding to support placement organisation, allocation and delivery is currently provided through the Department of Health's Education Support Grant, distributed by the GSCC. These arrangements should be revised to ensure that funding provides the most effective means for securing high quality placements for all students. Revised funding arrangements should ensure: dedicated support for placement organisation and allocation; support to practice educators in devoting time to students; and incentives for the development of advanced teaching agencies.

Assessment standards

- The practice educator should be recognised as a specific and senior role within the nationally recognised career structure for social workers proposed elsewhere in this report (see Chapter 3). Employers should ensure that they support staff to develop these skills as part of their responsibility for investing in the next generation of social workers and for supporting all social workers in their on-going learning and development.
- Definitive standards are needed for those who teach and assess social work students on placement¹³. While other professionals may helpfully contribute to the learning of students on placement and provide feedback, all social work students should in future only be taught and assessed by qualified and experienced social workers.
- A date should be set for ensuring that, as soon as possible, all those who take responsibility for the supervision and assessment of a social work student in their final placement hold a current practice teaching award or have demonstrated their competence against agreed national standards, with these to be finally determined by the board overseeing the reform programme.

Placement days

- 1.45** Serious consideration should be given to reducing the minimum number of placement days to be undertaken within the social work degree from 200 to no less than 130. Such a reduction would help to
- release more time to deliver important elements of the curriculum which may not be currently covered sufficiently
 - ensure a sharper focus on what the placement is meant to achieve in terms of the student's learning and development
 - enable all students to have better quality placements
- 1.46** Students should continue to gain practice experience and learning in two practice settings with two different service user groups.
- 1.47** While this would entail a decrease in the number of placement days within the degree, the introduction of the assessed year in employment which we are also recommending

¹³ Draft national standards have been developed for practice education by the Social Work Development Partnership and core funding has been allocated to pilot how these may be achieved.

(see below) would see a significant increase in the amount of time students spend in practice before becoming licensed social workers.

Recommendation 4: Assessed Year In Employment

The Social Work Task Force recommends the creation of an assessed and supported year in employment as the final stage in becoming a social worker.

- 1.48** The assessed year in employment would have to be successfully completed before a full licence to practise (see Chapter 6) could be granted for the first time. Degree holders would need to obtain employment with a local authority (or other appropriate organisation such as NSPCC, CAFCASS or third sector organisations) to undertake their assessed and supported year in employment.
- 1.49** They would bring with them formal records of what they had achieved at university¹⁴ in order to ensure continuity of learning. Assessment should be carried out jointly by employers and HEI, with feedback from service users taken into account. The consequences of not meeting the competences – i.e. not being eligible for full licence to practise and not therefore being able to continue employment as a social worker – would need to be made clear from to people joining degree courses and again when they are about to embark on the assessed year.
- 1.50** Detailed requirements governing the assessed year in employment should be determined through the national programme for social work reform and the board overseeing it. Options to explore include
- fixed entitlements to
 - time for reflection, study, learning, contact with mentors
 - good quality supervision
 - access to research literature and training opportunities
 - good quality ICT
 - a managed and balanced case-load
 - opportunities for shadowing and co-working with more experienced staff to learn on the job and gradually to take on more complex work independently; and for experience across different sections of the agency or partner agencies in the area
 - formal training contract covering entitlements and responsibilities during the assessed year in employment
- 1.51** NQSW schemes recently introduced across the profession have been welcomed as a first step in providing much needed support, continuing development and protected caseloads

¹⁴ For instance, the transcript and Personal Development Plan (PDP) with which all university students record the learning and development they have completed throughout their course; and also the Transitional PDP in the NQSW framework for adult services.

for social workers taking up their first post¹⁵. They are also helping managers to supervise more effectively. This proposal should build on these developments by introducing a national assessment framework that is credible, transparent and fair, with built in moderation and appeals processes. This should be designed to fit in with the emerging career structure across the profession as described in Chapter 3.

- 1.52** The assessed year in employment will provide an important opportunity for new social workers to develop experience and expertise in children's or adult services, building on the improved grounding provided by the degree and creating a solid platform for further career long development. It should also help organisations to strengthen their own culture and practice in supporting career-long learning. Although the assessed year in employment will allow the development of more specialist expertise, we also believe that good collaboration between children's and adult services departments in local authorities, on both practice placements and the assessed year in employment, would enrich the training experience.
- 1.53** There should be room for employers to respond in innovative ways to the ambitions for their role in improving social work education set out in this report. This could include new types of collaboration between employers such as forming joint units, specialist settings for teaching social workers and stronger collaboratives for research and development.

Recommendation 5: Regulation of Social Work Education

The Social Work Task Force recommends more transparent and effective regulation of social work education to give greater assurance of consistency and quality.

- 1.54** The regime for regulating social work education should ensure proportionate regulation, targeting weak course providers and encouraging the best. The regulator should be authorised and resourced to
- ensure social work courses are properly inspected against a new set of standards in the interests of consistent, high quality provision across the country
 - take a robust approach to ensuring that: the content of courses is kept up to date with the changing demands of frontline practice; that organisers and teachers of social work courses are up to date with current knowledge, policy and practice; and that expert practitioners, service users, employers and other professionals are consistently and substantially involved in the design and delivery of courses
 - ensure that criteria for entrance to courses and suitability for entry into the workforce are met through assessment¹⁶

¹⁵ See Skills for Care and Children's Workforce Development Council websites.

¹⁶ Taking account also of the *Unleashing Aspirations* and *Higher Ambitions* reports published by the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills.

1.55 New regulation arrangements will take time to implement and must be properly resourced. In the meantime, the Task Force welcomes the work that the General Social Care Council (GSCC) has done to consider how it can strengthen quality assurance of courses, under the existing rules¹⁷. These include: publication of annual monitoring and re-approval reports on social work courses; the provision of clear information about quality for the public and potential students; targeted visits to providers and placements where provision may be weak; mechanisms for bringing together evidence gained directly from students, employers, service users and carers with evidence from formal monitoring; increasing the involvement of service users and carers in how courses are regulated; and monitoring courses more closely to ensure that HEI have appropriate staffing and resources, including placements, to offer high quality social work education. The Task Force believes that GSCC should implement these measures as soon as possible.

A note on funding

- 1.56** There is currently significant funding provided by government to support the social work degree, including £70 million for the provision of bursaries, and £32.5 million for placement funding and development.
- 1.57** The current bursary arrangements have been successful in encouraging increased numbers of applicants to social work courses. These incentives now need to be reviewed to promote applications from people of sufficiently high quality, and to encourage completion of degree courses, entry to and retention in the work force.
- 1.58** We believe that government should review funding arrangements to provide incentives for high quality entrants to the social work profession and to ensure high quality placements are made available to all students.

¹⁷ The GSCC began reviewing its regulatory models and framework in March 2008. As a result of the significant policy changes in both social work and in regulatory practice, the GSCC now believes that the model of regulation used to inspect universities needs to be strengthened and that a more rigorous regime with interventions based on risk should be introduced. Some interventions will require agreement by Ministers before changes can be made.

Chapter 2:

Time, Resources and Support

Summary

The Social Work Task Force recommends clear, universal and binding standards for employers.

These would cover how frontline social work should be resourced, managed and supported – including clear requirements governing supervision – so that high quality practice is an achievable aim for all social workers. Employers providing a social work service should be required to assess their performance against the standard, take this through their internal review process, publish the results – including information on the caseload ceilings or controls they are operating – and set out their plans for improvement. We are publishing an initial framework to help with action now in assessing the “health” of organisations on the range of issues affecting workload.

We are also recommending the creation of a dedicated programme of training and support for managers of frontline social workers.

- 2.1** In our interim report, we set out our findings about the tools and support that social workers need to be effective, fulfil their responsibilities, and meet expectations.
- 2.2** We identified three key areas in which the nature and demands of social work mean that social workers are particularly dependent on having the right forms of support around them.
- Practical conditions, including
 - the working environment – especially one that allows social workers to meet the need for confidentiality and sensitivity inherent in their job
 - ICT systems and equipment – which allow social workers to carry out the vital tasks of record keeping and data sharing safely and efficiently, and which allow them to inform and influence the introduction of new systems, so that these suit their needs and the needs of good social work
 - time – unless practitioners have enough time to bring their professional skills to bear, to carry out the analysis and reflection that lead to good judgement, the impact of increasing other resources will be limited

- Professional support: supervision is an integral element of social work practice not an add-on. Through it social workers review their day to day practice and decision making, plan their learning and development as professionals, and work through the considerable emotional and personal demands the job often places on them
- Access to knowledge and evidence, with information on established practice, policy and research easily available for frontline social workers to refer to as they analyse situations, make judgements and come to decisions

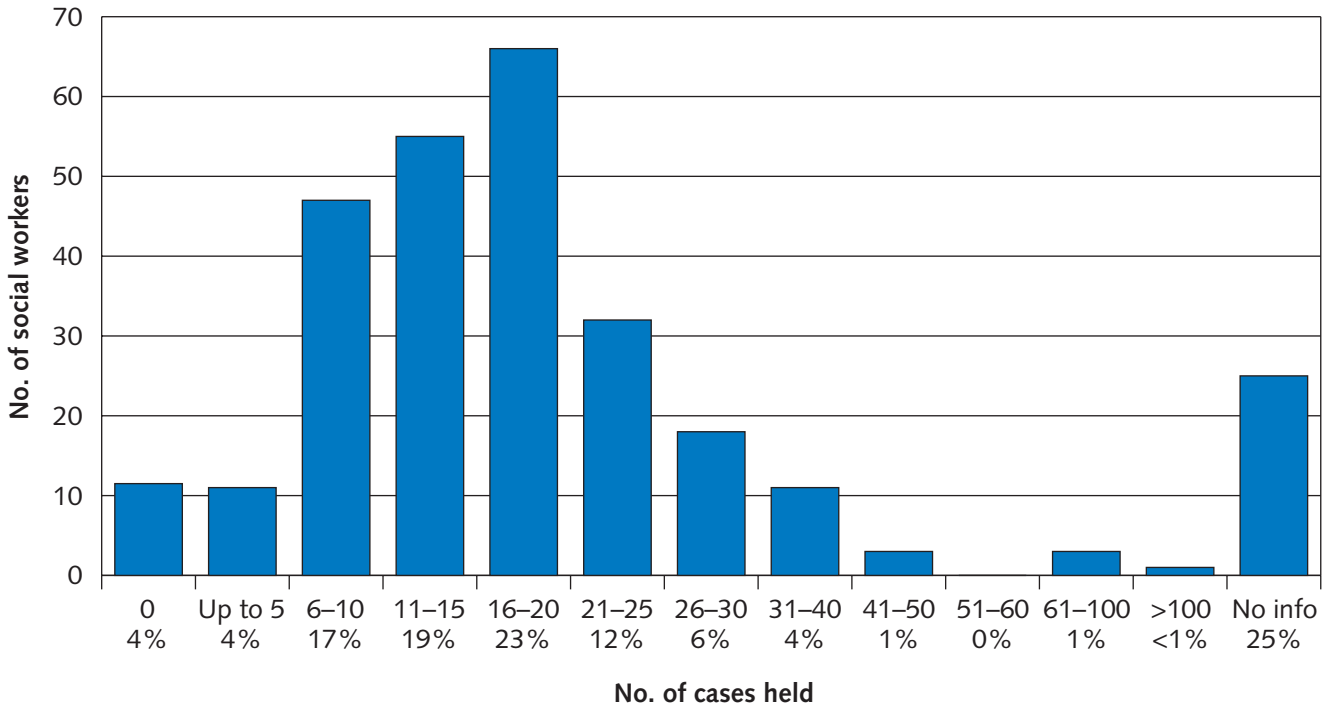
2.3 It is a key responsibility of employers to put in place the conditions in which well trained professionals can be effective and deliver high quality services. The pressures and risk associated with social work need to be fully understood and managed at the most senior (and highest paid) levels of the organisation – and not, as can sometimes seem to be the case, absorbed by frontline staff and their immediate managers.

Workload

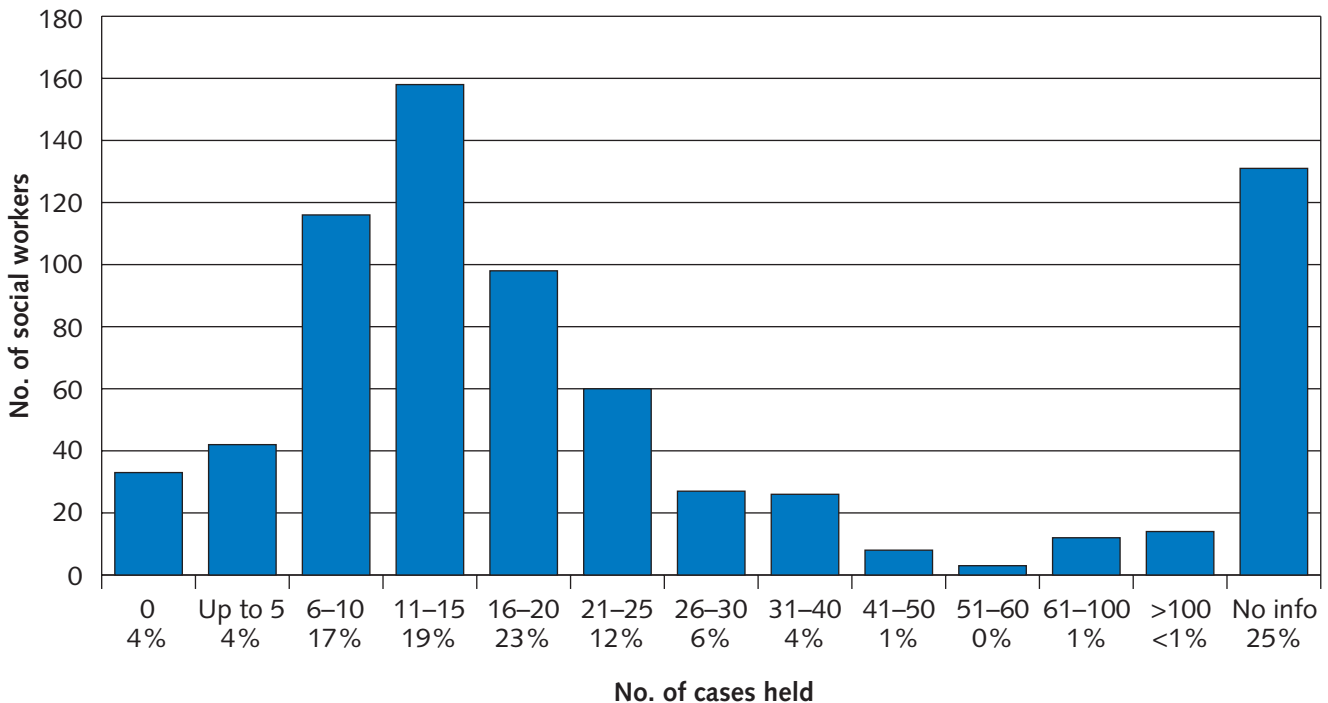
- 2.4** We are in no doubt that too many social workers are carrying caseloads which can be too high and make it hard for them to do their job well. There is very strong evidence that the absence of effective management of workload makes practitioners feel de-skilled, lowers their morale and can lead to poor health¹⁸.
- 2.5** In these circumstances, service users can end up with a patchy, unreliable service. In cases of serious risk, the judgement and decision making of social workers can be impaired.
- 2.6** However, while concern about caseload size is widespread, it is also clear to us that the imposition of a single ceiling on caseload size would be inappropriate and would not succeed. Among those who argue for such a ceiling, we have found a disparate range of views about where it should be set. The feedback the Task Force has received from organisations that have tried to implement formal caseload management systems (including weighted systems) suggests that they struggle to cope with all of the variables affecting practice on the frontline. Moreover, caseload management systems often do not include time for professional development and supervision tailored to the position of each practitioner, reinforcing the perception that these are an “add on” to real work, rather than an essential part of the social work task.
- 2.7** Over 1100 social workers contributed to a diary and survey exercise conducted earlier this year on behalf of the Task Force. The sample included social workers in children’s and adult services in 29 different local authorities and some in the voluntary and independent sectors. The tables below show initial findings on case loads. (The full report will be published in early 2010).

¹⁸ For instance, studies into the causes of child deaths found that poor management support and poor process had a negative impact on health and led to absenteeism and stress.

Active cases held by those working in Adult Services Departments



Active cases held by those working in Children's Services Departments



2.8 Our survey also found that 49% of respondents worked more than their contracted hours with 9% working considerably more than one extra working day.

2.9 Through the survey and other sources, we have been able to understand many of the factors that have a bearing on how caseloads comparable in size can nevertheless differ in the demands they place on social workers. These variables include: the qualifications and experience of social workers concerned and the supervision they are receiving; a social

worker's other non-case related responsibilities (e.g. maintaining links with outside agencies); number of hours worked weekly; the characteristics of the population served; the complexity of individual cases and the intensiveness of action needed at different points; variation in the administrative and practical burdens of different cases (e.g. travel, time in court, recording requirements, professional meetings); local practice in managing less active cases and in how cases are classified and counted (e.g. counting families as cases or counting individuals within families); wider workforce planning and how work is shared (or not) with colleagues outside the immediate team and service; and the impact of temporary absence through, for instance, illness.

- 2.10** The skills and awareness of line managers in balancing all of these factors are pivotal to caseload management. We have heard how good managers make continuous judgements about caseloads, sometimes running informal systems which they keep under review and which can be adapted to changing team circumstances. They avoid a mechanistic approach and have the confidence to escalate problems with workload to senior managers when necessary.
- 2.11** Our evidence suggests that it is the lack of a whole system approach to managing all of the pressures on workload – rather than the lack of a single caseload limit – that is having a detrimental effect on social work practice.

Supervision

- 2.12** Through supervision, social workers review their practice and deal with the challenges and stresses arising from their work; and managers can get to understand the current capabilities of the practitioner, helping them in turn to allocate cases appropriately. Supervision also provides an opportunity to consider matters not directly connected with workload or the job which may nevertheless be impacting on how well a social worker is performing. In short, high quality reflective supervision is essential to achieving a fair and balanced workload.
- 2.13** In our interim report, we identified the three main specific functions of supervision.
- Line Management – this includes managing team resources, delegation and workload management, performance appraisal, duty of care, support and other people-management processes
 - Professional (or case) supervision – reflecting on and responding to the challenging questions thrown up by practice and cases, including implications for the practitioner's welfare or safety; reviewing the roles the practitioner is taking on and their relations with the service user and with other professionals; evaluating the impact of actions and decisions; and capturing what can be learnt for the future from day to day practice
 - Continuing professional development – ensuring social workers are developing the skills, knowledge and experience to do their job well and make progress in their careers. Observation of practice and constructive feedback should be part of the process.

2.14 However, surveys continue to show that too many social workers do not get access to this type of supervision. As a result, they feel that their original skills are stagnating and they are not acquiring new ones. They become reluctant to think critically or creatively about the judgments they need to make and fall back on a more mechanistic approach to their work. They can begin to question their own effectiveness and experience 'burn out' through a combination of heavy workloads and low support.

Managers

2.15 It is clear from what we have learnt about both workload and supervision that skilled and confident front line managers are essential to good frontline social work.

2.16 We have heard about excellent practice in management and supervision. However, we are also concerned about the overall quality and consistency of frontline management, and the pressures under which managers and supervisors are working, on a number of counts.

- Professional supervision (see above) is often inadequate because line managers do not have access to training and development to help them to carry it out well. Even where training is available, managers are often too busy once in post to take it up.
- It is rare for the training offered to frontline managers to focus on how they support practitioners in becoming resilient in dealing with the emotional impact of the work, or on how they manage the performance of staff. In both areas, managers report feeling inadequately prepared.
- Time pressures on managers, and high numbers of staff reporting to them without any method for mitigating this, result in a need to focus narrowly on tasks and processes, and on meeting indicators, at the expense of concentrating on outcomes for service users and the quality of service.

Recommendations

Recommendation 6: Standard for Employers

The Social Work Task Force recommends the development of a clear national standard for the support social workers should expect from their employers in order to do their jobs effectively.

2.17 This standard should be agreed through the national programme for social work reform proposed elsewhere in this report (see Chapter 6). It should provide clear guidelines on

- how workforce levels can be managed and needs predicted – including how these relate to delivering a good service, taking account of the size of the local population, levels of disadvantage and other factors that influence need and demand
- how workflow can be managed – including practice in case allocation and assessing risks caused by unallocated cases with a view to establishing and keeping under review local caseload ceilings for different teams and services

- provision of supervision at individual and team level¹⁹
- meeting the needs of practitioners in relation to their safety and welfare
- practical tools and conditions – including technology, administrative support and the working environment
- access to research and practice guidance whether through: organisations led by the sector itself; tailored support from external experts in research and evidence; or national bodies²⁰ continuously sifting the evidence base and relaying the most useful information to the field as a whole in easily formats that are easy to find and use
- practice awareness among local leaders, directors and managers including
 - knowledge of and accountability for the strengths and weaknesses of social work in their area, and the realities of frontline practice, from the points of view of practitioners and service users
 - the presence of a senior manager who is also a qualified social worker and who oversees the overall health of professional social work in the organisation; advises it on how the standard for employers can be upheld; and is accessible to frontline staff²¹. (This manager would also be the person who oversees the framework proposed below for assessing of the “health” of their organisation on a range of issues affecting workload.)

2.18 We recommend that all employers providing a social work service should be required to assess their performance against the standard, take this through their internal review process, publish the results (including information on the caseload ceilings or controls they are operating), and set out their plans for improvement.

2.19 Employers should eventually be able to receive a graded kite mark award, recognising their success in meeting the standard, and to see their success or failure in meeting the standard reflected in inspection judgements.

2.20 If, in due course, voluntary adoption of the standard does not lead to tangible improvement in the practical and professional resources available to frontline social workers, the government should give consideration to direct intervention in statutory agencies falling short of the standard.

2.21 We believe strongly that employers can start to take action now to improve the support they provide to frontline social workers in managing their workload, and in preparation for the roll out of the full standard. We recommend the development in the short term of a tool that can be used at team, service and organisation level to determine how well workflows and workloads are being managed and which, in due course, can form the basis for developing the standard.

¹⁹ Responses to the Social Work Task Force workload survey highlight widespread of informal supervision within teams and between peers which is highly valued by many social workers.

²⁰ Such as SCIE (Social Care Institute for Excellence).

²¹ This role might have elements similar to those of the role given to Chief Social Work Officers in Scotland.

2.22 At Annex A, we are presenting an initial framework for helping employers and practitioners to take action now in assessing the “health” of their organisation on a range of issues affecting workload. This framework should be developed further in due course in support of the proposed standard for employers.

Learning the lessons from ICS

Effective information technology is a critical part of the support employers should put in place for social workers.

The Task Force has previously advised that the Integrated Children’s System (ICS) should be reformed so that it supports effective record-keeping and case-management by social workers – but that the system should not seek to mandate a particular approach to front line practice.

In response to our recommendations, and through consultation with social workers using the system and with local authorities, DCSF has changed its approach to ICS. It has established an improvement programme focused on

- simplification of the national specifications for ICS
- clarification that local authorities are responsible for the quality and usability of their IT, and for ensuring that it supports effective professional practice
- support to authorities in making local decisions about the future of their ICS systems, including: tools for assessing and improving usability; and guidance about how simplifications can be introduced whilst protecting the integrity of the system and continuing to support social workers to operate within the legal framework.

The first set of simplifications and guidance for ICS was issued by the DCSF in October²².

Change was bound to take time: local authorities have needed to make significant adjustments in order to respond to the new approach; some suppliers require long lead in times for change to their products supporting the implementation of ICS. As a result, the improvements have not yet made a difference for all social workers on the front line.

However, the Social Work Task Force very much welcomes this new approach to ICS from DCSF. The Department is starting to develop a strong model for working with the profession on issues that are important to front line practice. This needs to become the template for collaborative working that will be key to the success of reform as a whole.

In our interim report, we also noted that problems with computer systems are not necessarily limited to children’s services. It will be critical therefore that the work to improve ICS continues, with wider lessons learned and applied, as part of the wider reform programme for social work developed in response to this report.

²² www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/safeguardingandsocialcare/integratedchildrenssystem/ics.

Recommendation 7: Supervision

The Social Work Task Force recommends that the new standard for employers should be supported by clear national requirements for the supervision of social workers.

- 2.23** These requirements should mean that all organisations employing social workers are required to make a positive, unambiguous commitment to a strong supervision culture, to be achieved through
- a clear supervision policy
 - effective training and performance management for supervisors
 - strong leadership and example from senior managers
 - monitoring of the actual frequency and quality of supervision against clear statements of what is expected
 - compliance with established guidance on the features of good supervision²³
- 2.24** The Task Force would also expect minimum frequency levels normally to be weekly for first 6 weeks employment, then fortnightly for the duration of the first six months. After six months in post, this would move to a minimum of monthly supervision, with each session at least an hour and a half of uninterrupted time. Where the line manager is not a social worker, professional support should be provided by an experienced social worker.²⁴
- 2.25** In addition, effective organisations will wish to continue to develop peer and group supervision and the use of focused case discussion as part of a wider culture of learning and development.
- 2.26** Both frequency and quality of supervision is incorporated into the initial framework for assessing the “health” of organisations on a range of issues affecting workload (see paragraph 2.22 above).
- 2.27** Supervision is also an integral part of the proposed standard for employers (above).

²³ See, for instance, *Providing Effective Supervision* (Skills for Care/CWDC 2007). All supervision should be: based on a written agreement or contract; planned well in advance and only changed in exceptional circumstances; well-structured, allowing both the supervisor and the practitioner to contribute to the agenda; provided in an appropriate setting and free of interruptions; inclusive of all the functions outlined in the unit of competence properly and promptly recorded, with notes copied to the individual.

²⁴ These suggestions are in part based on guidance for newly qualified social workers in adult services, developed by Skills for Care.

Recommendation 8: Front Line Management

The Social Work Task Force recommends the creation of dedicated programmes of training and support for front line social work managers.

2.28 This programme should be at three levels.

- **Aspiring managers**

In order to move into a first line management role, prospective line managers should have access to training and development to prepare them for this step. This training should be in line with a nationally agreed set of learning outcomes and a standardised assessment framework.

- **Newly appointed managers**

This level of the programme could adopt a similar format to programmes for newly qualified social workers with: statements about the skills, knowledge and behaviour managers should be able to demonstrate by the end of their first year in post; and frameworks covering how their progress is recorded and assessed and the support they should receive.

- **Established managers**

The training offered at this level of the programme would seek to ensure that established managers have achieved, and can maintain and build on, a basic level of competence as both a manager and expert practitioner.

Chapter 3:

Professional Development and Career Progression

Summary

The Social Work Task Force is recommending a single, nationally recognised career structure. This new career structure would

- map each of the main stages of a career in social work from degree course entrant onwards, making clear the expectations that should apply to social workers at each of these stages
- give shape to the more coherent and effective national framework for the continuing professional development of social workers, which we are also recommending and which should incorporate the new Masters in Social Work Practice
- guide individual employers in how the social work task is best organised in localities with the right mix of expertise within frontline teams and how they should organise their workforce to support progression
- ensure that social workers are paid fairly, in line with their skills, knowledge and level of responsibility – with, in particular, progression routes available to high quality, specialist practitioners which do not remove them from frontline practice

- 3.1** In the interim report of the Task Force, we set out why improvements in continuous professional development, and clearer roles and career structure, would need to form important parts of the reform of social work as a profession.

Continuous professional development

- 3.2** Initial education is, of course, vital in its own right. Earlier in this report, we propose a reformed system of initial education and training for social workers, culminating in a new assessed year in employment as the final stage in becoming a licensed, practising social worker.
- 3.3** However, social workers need to learn and adapt more or less continuously, not least because change is part and parcel of social work: demographics, government policy, statutory and voluntary services, public expectations and the evidence base for effective

practice will all continue to evolve. Initial training should also therefore provide the foundation for career long learning and development.

- 3.4** High quality continuous professional development (CPD) allows social workers to extend and deepen their knowledge, skills and analytical thinking, to build up their specialist expertise, and to increase their confidence and adaptability.
- 3.5** Social work needs a culture in which professionals and employers take seriously their responsibility for developing the current and future generation of workers. A commitment to excellence in CPD should be a major part of this culture.
- 3.6** The current post-qualification (PQ) framework of nationally accredited courses, in effect since 2007, includes some excellent provision for both the adult and children's workforce. Where there are strong partnerships and good collaboration between employers and HEI – for example in commissioning, planning and developing current PQ courses – this has led to a more strategic approach to ongoing learning and the exchange of knowledge, more sharing of resources; and positive steps to develop and update practice.
- 3.7** However, CPD is not yet properly valued and supported in all places and organisations. We have heard that the framework as a whole is not sufficiently coherent, effective or widely understood, with weaknesses in choice, flexibility and relevance. Take up has varied across the country and has been disappointing overall. There are considerable barriers in many parts of the country to social workers undertaking courses, including lack of employer support and, particularly, a lack of time due to heavy workloads.
- 3.8** Social work lacks shared understanding of the overall direction, shape and content of its programme of professional development. The current position is a recipe for inconsistency, confusion and poor practice. It is bad for retaining people in social work and for the status of the profession. We need more employing organisations ready to support ongoing training and learning (as well as initial training), in support of a profession with a much clearer sense of what career long development should mean.
- 3.9** Success in improving CPD will therefore depend heavily on shared commitment from employers, educators and professionals. All must devote the time and resources that will be necessary to bring about a major shift. This must be incentivised through the standard for employers we recommend in Chapter 2. Organisations themselves have to take responsibility for developing a strong learning culture and be seen to support this culture in tangible ways. This could be achieved by, for instance, freeing up staff time for courses; supporting staff access to evidence, research and guidance on good practice²⁵; and allowing more informal activity within teams²⁶ to flourish when this is clearly raising expertise and improving practice. Individuals also have to take responsibility for their own continuous learning and – as is the case in other professions – for supporting colleagues and students to learn.

²⁵ Through, for example, journals, online resources and external experts.

²⁶ For instance: team discussions, journal clubs, taking part in research-focused practice and policy projects, e-learning, reading, meeting and exchanging learning with others etc.

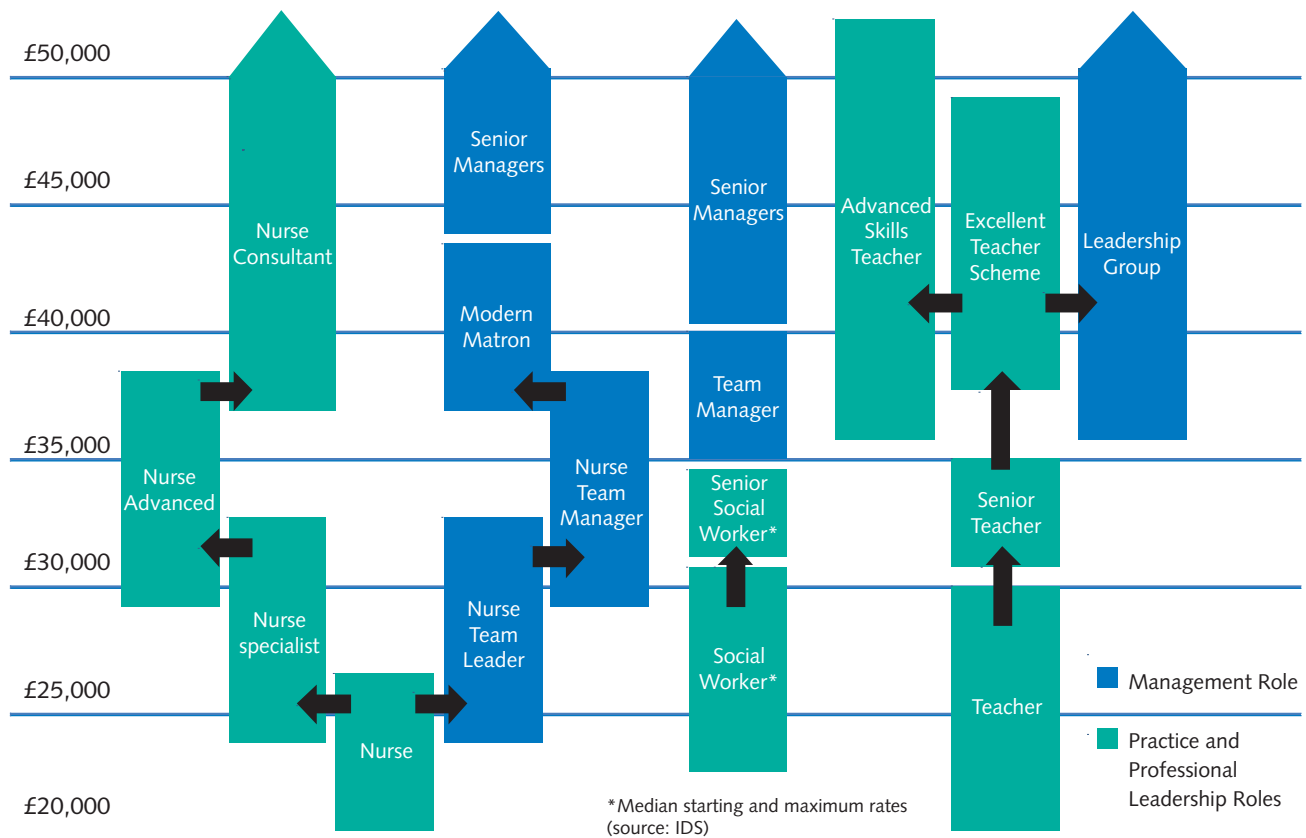
A profession and career with clear standards, expectations and structure

- 3.10** There are many sets of standards and outcome statements governing different dimensions of social work. However, the profession does not yet have a single, comprehensive account of what should be expected of social workers at each stage of their career – including what should be expected of new graduates and those participating in advanced social work education. Despite advances brought about through degree status and protected title, social work as a career and profession is still subject to too much inconsistency and uncertainty. In particular, there is no recognised progression route for keeping experienced, effective professionals in frontline practice. There is also confusion among educators and employers about what should be expected of newly qualified social workers (as discussed in Chapter 1).
- 3.11** As a result, organisations that educate, regulate, employ and support social workers lack a common frame of reference, making joint action difficult. People considering a career in social work lack a clear account of how a career in the profession can be structured. Those who plan services need to know what they can reasonably expect of social workers at different stages of their career and how they can support progression and professional development within their workforce. There is evidence to suggest differences in the way Job Evaluation Schemes are applied to social workers means that their skills, experience and responsibilities are not always adequately measured. Service users and the public should also be able to understand what they can expect of social workers, in accordance with their grade and experience.
- 3.12** In contrast to other professions, social workers are not able to make progress in their careers while staying in frontline practice. The diagram overleaf illustrates the possible career paths open to nurses, teachers and social workers.

Nursing, Social Work and Teaching Career Structures

Career Progression

Nursing, Social Work and Teaching Career Structures (2008 Pay Rates)



Recommendations

Recommendation 9: Continuing Professional Development

The Social Work Task Force recommends 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.

3.13 This framework should

- enable social workers to continue to develop specialist skills, and to develop as leaders and managers; and enable and support those without degree level qualification to continue to pursue CPD to degree level and above
- help develop the next generation of social work academics, and innovative practitioners (through, for example, opportunities to achieve qualifications at Doctoral level)
- inform performance appraisal systems

- support social workers in making progress through the single nationally recognised career structure proposed elsewhere in this report, with which it should be closely aligned
- produce standardised, consistent outcomes that are accepted as valid across the country – while allowing the appropriate levels of choice and flexibility in methods and styles of learning and development
- help bind together research, education and frontline practice so that these are all mutually supportive and remain so in the future

- 3.14** The mechanisms that could be used to encourage the shift in culture suggested by our recommendation include: links to the career framework and the licence to practise scheme also proposed in this report; and the inclusion of CPD in discussions between social workers and their managers concerning workload or appraisal.
- 3.15** The new framework should build on the best parts of the current PQ framework and reflect what has been learnt from innovative models of delivery (including courses jointly designed and delivered by employers and higher education institutions; and bespoke courses which have been developed for a very specialist market). The Masters in Social Work Practice, to which Ministers are committed²⁷, should be incorporated into the framework as one of its main features.
- 3.16** There are also benefits in supporting more diversity of opportunities linked to individual needs and career aspirations. It is important that social workers can undertake less formal activities for their learning and professional development. These can include specialist short courses, peer group support, action learning groups, research and shadowing of other professionals. Many potentially valuable in house, locally provided courses or specialist courses are often not accredited or certificated – in part because of the absence of a consistent framework for CPD.
- 3.17** Ongoing learning, training and development under the framework should be treated both as a responsibility *and* an entitlement – and incorporated into workload planning, performance management and appraisal.
- 3.18** The new framework should be one of the developments taken forward through the programme for social work reform we propose in Chapter 6.
- 3.19** We are aware of the barriers and difficulties arising from current vacancy rates and workload pressures which are affecting all areas of service delivery, including CPD. It will be important to release capacity in the system to give managers and social workers the time, resources and space to develop a learning culture and improve the impact of CPD. However, the expected impact of CPD in producing more effective practice and better services, and improving retention, suggests that it will pay dividends in the longer term.
- 3.20** The Task Force would also welcome the Care Quality Commission (CQC) and Ofsted commenting in inspections on how well employers support professional development.

²⁷ Announced by the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families in March 2009.

Funding

3.21 In order to support opportunities for all social workers to access CPD, discussion will be needed with the Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE) about whether the current ELQ (Equivalent Level Qualification) rules can be reviewed. These rules restrict funding for those who already have a Masters degree in undertaking further study at Masters level. They would hamper those who have qualified for practice with an initial Masters qualification in taking a more specialist Masters degree as part of their CPD.

Renewal of registration

3.22 The current requirements for renewal of registration as a social worker should be urgently reviewed and made more demanding. This should include clear evidence of how the learning undertaken has led to improvements in practice.

3.23 The regulator of social work education should in the longer term be asked to consider linking licensing and re-licensing (under the 'licence to practise scheme proposed in Chapter 6) and to the career framework described below.

Recommendation 10: National Career Structure

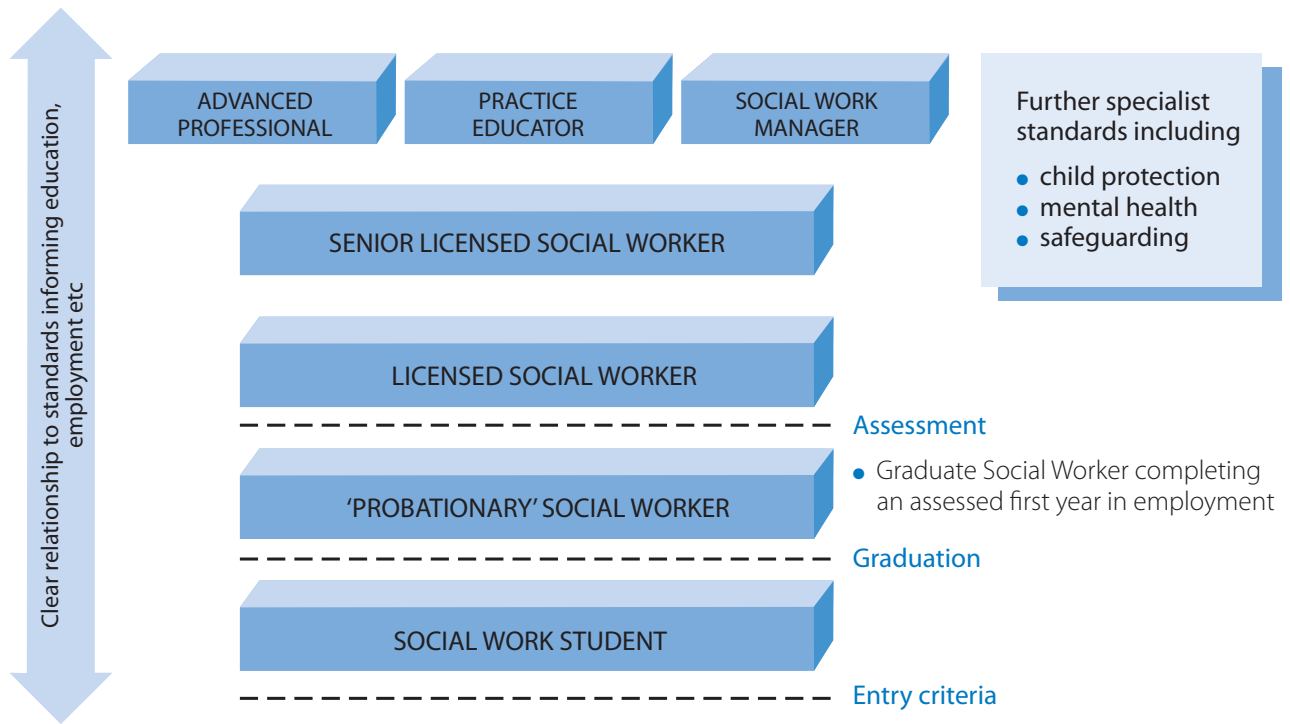
The Social Work Task Force recommends the creation of single, nationally recognised career structure for social work.

3.24 A **single nationally recognised career structure** should

- classify the main stages of a career in social work (from first year student onwards)
- make clear the expectations that should apply to social workers at each of these stages
- link eventually to the national framework for CPD (above), the forthcoming Masters in Social Work Practice and the 'licence to practice' scheme proposed in Chapter 6
- be used by employers and unions to agree pay and grading structures which properly reward social workers in line with their skills, experience and responsibilities – including those social workers who stay in frontline practice

3.25 The diagram below illustrates the career structure that the Task Force is recommending.

A Clear Career Structure with Clear Expectations at Key Points



- 3.26** The detail of what is expected at each level, and the assessment process, will need to be worked through by the profession, employers, educators and Government, as part of the comprehensive reform programme. The development of expectations or standards of social workers at each level must be fully informed by the profession itself.
- 3.27** We would like to see these expectations being developed and consulted on as soon as possible. This should take place as part of the national reform programme for social work proposed in Chapter 6. These expectations will be needed in order to guide many aspects of reform, creating shared expectations of what the system should be supporting social workers to be able to do at each stage of their career. They should give employers, educators and the profession clarity about knowledge and skills development and career progression.
- 3.28** They will also help employers to organize their workforce to support progression and help them to achieve the right mix of expertise within frontline teams and management – with, in particular, progression routes available to high quality, specialist practitioners which do not remove them from the frontline.

Pay

- 3.29** Social worker pay has been raised in a number of ways with the Task Force, and the concerns we have heard were summarised in our interim report.
- 3.30** Pay for new social workers is comparable to other professions. However, there is evidence that a clearer career structure, with opportunities to progress to greater responsibility and higher pay, while continuing to work on the front line, will help recruitment, promote retention, and ultimately improve the quality of frontline services.
- 3.31** The Task Force has also seen evidence that suggests social workers have done badly in the job evaluation exercises carried out in some local authorities, which underrated their knowledge and skills. This has led to them being paid less than other professionals with comparable expertise and knowledge.
- 3.32** We believe these issues need to be resolved by setting out clearly defined levels of skill, responsibility and role, which can be reflected in local authority grading structures in order to deliver pay progression. This would provide agreed and nationally recognised career progression, while leaving to local arrangements the structure and size of individual teams.
- 3.33** We also recommend that, as part of the standard for employers (see Chapter 2), employers should review their job evaluation of basic grade social workers to ensure that their knowledge and skills are being fairly rewarded. We are making recommendations founded on the current national agreement on local government pay, as both employers and unions have told us they are willing to act swiftly to make significant change a reality. However, if this turns out not be the case, we believe that the government should consider whether a national pay body is needed to ensure social workers are fairly rewarded.

Chapter 4: Leadership

Summary

The Social Work Task Force recommends the establishment of an independent national college of social work.

This will articulate and promote the interests of good social work. It will give the profession itself strong, independent leadership; a clear voice in public debate, policy development and policy delivery; and strong ownership of the standards to be upheld.

- 4.1** In our interim report, we explained how social work lacks a single locus of responsibility for promoting the profession, improving public understanding, spreading best practice and driving up its standards. Social workers are unsure about where to look for leadership of their profession, and for representation in the policy debates that shape practice and conditions on the frontline. Through an online survey of social workers conducted since publication of the interim report, we found further strong support for the creation of a college of social work with the kinds of responsibilities we recommend below.

Recommendations

Recommendation 11: National College of Social Work

The Social Work Task Force recommends the creation of an independent national college of social work, developed and led by social workers.

- 4.2** We anticipate that the remit of the college will develop and grow over time but, from the outset, the college should assume permanent responsibility for
- promoting the public understanding of social work as a public service and a profession
 - providing an independent voice for social work in public and media debate and reporting publicly on the state of social work in England
 - representing the interests of effective social work and the views of the social work profession in the development of changes to policy, legislation, education and regulation

- bringing to light excellent practice in social work and promoting its wider adoption
- agreeing and articulating high standards for the profession and working with employers, educators, government and the public to ensure that all parties have the same expectations of what makes high quality social work practice
- relations with other professions and similar professional bodies

4.3 In particular, working through the proposed board overseeing the national reform programme for social work (see Chapter 6), the college should act as the voice of the profession in the creation of the nationally recognised career structure and the new standard for employers (both proposed elsewhere in this report). We would like to see it in place quickly, so that it can play a strong and formative role in the development and implementation of the reform programme which must take forward our recommendations.

4.4 The new college will need to establish itself as a credible, well informed and above all independent voice for social work and for the profession. It should strive to secure the full backing of social workers, who will need to see it as their organisation – one that acts effectively in the interests of good social work and which reflects their values and experience. It should therefore aspire to having universal membership among social workers in England and may wish to explore opportunities to extend its reach to other UK nations.

4.5 While the college should be a vehicle for promoting the views and interests of social workers, it must above all speak out for and promote the interests of good social work as a whole. Trade unions and professional associations which represent social workers, employers, academics, HEI and service users should all have a role in helping the college to become established.

4.6 The College will need to work with social workers to determine independent funding and governance arrangements and its long-term priorities and functions. It is clear to us at this stage that there are a number of issues that the college will need to consider and resolve in the short and medium term. These include

- membership arrangements and fees – and the expectations the college has of its members
- the role of service users: given the nature of social work, it will be essential for service users to have real influence within the work of the college – the college should commission further work on how this could be done most effectively and act quickly to put these measures in place
- the relationship between the college and other bodies involved in social work
- relations between the college and social workers in other parts of the United Kingdom and how these membership might be broadened over time to be available to social workers practising in these places

4.7 The college needs to be involved in the reform programme, and the key developments flowing from it, from the early stages. Interim 'shadow arrangements' for the national

college should therefore be set up as soon as possible, beginning with an independent appointment process for key roles in establishing the college.

- 4.8** We believe that central Government should provide logistical support to the profession in establishing the college, including by funding it for the shadow period. The new institution will need to be strong enough from the outset to assume its key responsibilities (as set out above and in the next chapter) in the short and medium term. This should be done in such a way that the necessary independence of the college is not compromised.

Chapter 5: Public Value and Understanding

Summary

The Social Work Task Force is recommending a new programme of action on public understanding of social work, creating greater openness about the profession, in which the proposed national college should play the leading role. Action should include a sustained approach to raising and maintaining public awareness of what social work entails and the contribution good social work makes to society. The public description of social work originally developed by the Social Work Task Force for our interim report should be adopted, finalised and used by the national college for this purpose.

- 5.1 Social workers have spelled out to the Task Force how deeply concerned they are by the way in which their profession is reported on in the media and by the low levels of understanding of the role and purpose of their profession.
- 5.2 They have expressed their anger at how social workers often appear singled out for the blame in the aftermath of the tragedy of a child's death. They have also expressed their frustration at the reluctance – and in some cases blanket resistance – among some employers to allow them to engage with the media about the positive difference they are making or to talk (within agreed boundaries) about the pressures, dilemmas and difficulties of the job.
- 5.3 Several senior journalists have also spoken to us about this issue. They have emphasised time and again the absence within social work of real media expertise. In particular, they have spoken about
 - a poor flow of information when difficult stories begin to break, even to those journalists who are knowledgeable and sympathetic – this is symptomatic of a culture of defensiveness that often serves only to exacerbate the media frenzy
 - the lack of a clear, strong voice for social work in the national debate, explaining the true nature and demands of the job
- 5.4 The public image of the profession seems therefore to be unremittingly negative, with damaging consequences for recruitment, morale and public perceptions.
- 5.5 It is compounded by low levels of understanding of the exact role and purpose of social workers and of the real demands of frontline social work. The media focus on harrowing cases of child abuse has also led to worries that social work has been reduced to high-end

child protection in popular understanding, thus disregarding other important aspects of social work.

- 5.6** This lack of understanding affects not just the wider general public. Colleagues from other professions and service users can also be unclear or confused about what they should expect of social workers, leading to misunderstanding and frustration on all sides.
- 5.7** Our interim report set out in further detail the impact on social work of its image in the media and confusion about its role and purpose. However, there is some encouragement to be found. It seems that many people do appreciate the vital and often difficult role social workers have to play. The enthusiastic response to the government's recent *Help Give Them A Voice* and *Be the Difference* campaigns demonstrated how the public can take a positive interest in social work, when messages about it are communicated in the right way²⁸. Equally, some surveys of public opinion show that perceptions of social work and social workers are more positive than might be imagined.
- 5.8** It seems clear, however, that as long as service users, the public, other professions and the media remain unclear about the role, purpose and value of social work and social workers, the profession will struggle to be fully confident and effective.

Recommendations

Recommendation 12: Public Understanding

The Social Work Task Force recommends a new programme of action on public understanding of social work.

- 5.9** This programme of action should include
- a sustained approach to raising and maintaining public awareness of what social work entails and the contribution good social work makes to a fair, caring and civilised society
 - a long term strategy for media relations helping the media to understand social work on an ongoing basis and at times of heightened interest
 - the development of clear lines of responsibility for handling information when a news story involving social work breaks, nationally or locally
 - a continuously refreshed "bank" of stories and case studies that help to illustrate good social work practice, creating a benchmark for the public of the positive impact social work can have
 - employers taking responsibility for promoting constructive relationships between frontline social workers and local media and able to draw on expert advice in handling stories as they break

²⁸ This two-phase recruitment campaign was launched online in August 2009 and thereafter on TV and radio and in print. Around 32,000 people have registered for further information on how to become a social worker.

- systematic use of statistical data and other information on performance to create a balanced, accurate picture of public understanding of the quality and effectiveness of social work
- a regular survey of public understanding of and attitudes towards social work that would measure the impact of effort and investment

5.10 The national college should adopt the public description of social work presented in the interim report of the Task Force and develop this further for use in the programme of action described above. As suggested in the previous chapters, service users need to have real influence within the work of the college and we would expect to see this reflected in work on the public understanding of social work.

5.11 The proposed national college of social work should play the leading role in organising and delivering this programme of action. In doing so, the college should be able to call on high quality media expertise.

5.12 It will also be important for Government ministers to continue to use their platforms for communicating with the public to explain and promote social work and its importance to the nation. Measures should also be put in place so that service users and the wider public are able to engage with and easily understand both this report and the reform programme that will follow it.

Chapter 6:

A Cohesive and Purposeful System

Summary

The Social Work Task Force is recommending the development of a licence to practise scheme for social workers; a new system for forecasting levels of supply and demand for social workers; and the creation of a single national reform programme for social work, overseen by a reform board of employers, educators, the profession and service users who must work together to ensure that our recommendations make a real difference.

Introduction

- 6.1** In the earlier chapters of this report, we put forward wide ranging recommendations for direct changes to how social workers train for, practise, lead and represent their profession.
- 6.2** In this final chapter of the report, we make a series of other recommendations covering action needed to underpin long-term, system-wide improvement and reform. These changes would be less immediately visible in terms of how the profession prepares for and operates on the frontline and for how it presents itself to the public – but all will be essential to success. Effectiveness on the frontline depends heavily on having a cohesive, purposeful system behind it.
- 6.3** This chapter also contains our advice on things that government, employers and others can do now to tackle capacity problems, which will otherwise hold back reform and see current problems grow more entrenched.

Licence to practice system

- 6.4** Implementing the assessed and supported year in employment proposed earlier in this report (see Chapter 1) would clearly mean amendments to the current arrangements for registering as a social worker, which allow registration on being awarded a degree. However, we also know that the requirements currently governing renewal of registration (involving 90 hours of continuous professional development every three years) are loosely defined and not rigorously monitored. There is also a clear ongoing need to ensure that the arrangements governing registration support effective regulation of the profession in the interests of effective practice, safe conduct and public protection. The current code of

practice is not sufficiently focused on social workers as a distinct body of professionals. As a result, it is not driving up standards. The role of the GSCC as regulator of the profession is not clearly understood and is sometimes confused or conflated with other roles.

Recommendations

Recommendation 13: Licence to Practise

The Social Work Task Force recommends the development of a licence to practise system for social workers.

- 6.5** Under this system, practitioners would first acquire and then maintain their status as social workers (and their ability to be employed as such). This would be achieved through demonstrating that they have kept to high standards of continuing competency and professional development.
- 6.6** A licence to practise would replace current requirements for re-registration with a system that is more rigorous and transparent about tangible improvements in knowledge and skills. It would reflect the change brought about through the assessed year in employment which would have to be completed successfully prior to the first award of a full licence.
- 6.7** The Task Force hopes that the licence to practise system will develop to include a renewal requirement which relates to effective continuing professional development, associated with an entitlement to the time and training needed to support this. In the meantime, current requirements for re-registration should be urgently reviewed and made stronger and more demanding. This should include clear evidence of how the learning undertaken has led to improvements in practice. In the longer term, linking licensing and re-licensing to specific job roles – and eventually to career pathways and the career framework as described in Chapter 3 – should be considered.
- 6.8** A dedicated code of practice for social workers should be developed to underpin the licence. The content of the code should be communicated clearly to the profession, employers, service users and the wider public, with the proposed national college of social work playing a prominent and ongoing role in this process.

Social worker supply

- 6.9** We do not have a system for analysing or forecasting the overall demand for and supply of social workers in England. There is a lack of reliable 'real time' data on the characteristics of the workforce and trends within it (e.g. vacancy rates). Equally, there is no agreed model for estimating and influencing the number of social workers needed in local areas.
- 6.10** As a result, workforce planning at local level and national levels, and the planning and resourcing of education and training, are severely hamstrung. This situation is not tenable in the long term.

Recommendation 14: Social Worker Supply

The Social Work Task Force recommends a new system for forecasting levels of supply and demand for social workers.

6.11 This system should include

- regular, reliable and proportionate gathering of workforce data which supports the understanding of national and more localised supply and demand
- centralised data analysis and expertise, which can
 - bring forward improvements and modifications to current data collection
 - model policy, demographic and other changes onto overall numbers of social workers needed in future years
 - advise on the implications of these changes for education, training and continuing professional development
- partnerships overseeing workforce strategy, planning and innovation at the level most appropriate to local and regional needs. These partnerships would allow employers to collaborate better with one another and with the higher education institutions who educate new social workers locally.

6.12 Developments along these lines will also help to inform future recruitment campaigns and to evaluate the overall impact of reform on creating a profession that is capable of attracting the right people in the right numbers.

6.13 It will take time to develop and bring into use a model along these lines, in large part because of the paucity of data currently. In the meantime, employers and HEI will need to get together now – as some are doing – to make the best arrangements locally.

National reform programme for social work

6.14 It will be difficult to make progress with all of the preceding recommendations in this report while responsibility for the overall health of the profession stays fragmented. Employers, educators, the Government and the profession itself all need to act differently. There is a need for a much more collaborative approach between key partners to strengthen social work, with demonstrably high levels of accountability for action taken, including collective action.

6.15 Reform of the scale and scope implied by these recommendations is likely to require a ten year commitment with concerted action over the next five years in particular.

Recommendation 15: National Reform Programme

The Social Work Task Force recommends the creation of a single national reform programme for social work.

- 6.16** This programme would drive the delivery of our recommendations and should secure rapid action and improvement, and lead to sustained commitment from employers, educators, the profession and government over the next ten years.
- 6.17** The government will need to show strong leadership and commitment in making reform happen. 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. Employers, educators, regulators, and the existing bodies representing social workers must also all sign up to a shared and sustained programme of work.
- 6.18** The reform programme should therefore be overseen by a new reform board, reporting to Ministers, and reflecting this need for collective responsibility. Overall progress in delivering reform should be reviewed and made public annually. The voice and influence of service users should be built into the whole reform programme from the start. The programme should oversee delivery of all the recommendations made by the Task Force, including development of the standard for employers, the national career structure and the supply model.
- 6.19** Once the core expectations for the national career structure (proposed in Chapter 3) are established, the Task Force believes that they should be used to rationalise the plethora of standards and outcomes statements which are currently used to inform different aspects of social work training, development and education. The objective should be that all aspects of the system – initial education, employment and continuing professional development – are designed to support social workers in developing their careers and competencies, underpinned by a shared understanding of what they are expected to achieve.
- 6.20** Collective action will clearly need to be taken at a more local level, as well as nationally on some matters. This includes close collaboration between employers and educators to ensure there are adequate numbers of: places on social work courses; high quality practice placement opportunities for students; and suitable entrants to the workforce. The board overseeing reform should move quickly to understand local, regional and sub-regional partnerships, where these are currently in place, and also how other professions organise themselves to handle these issues. It should bring forward advice on how local employers and higher education institutions can best work and plan together on questions of education, training and local workforce supply.
- 6.21** As we said in our interim report, we are concerned about the number of different national organisations, operating to a range of remits, all of which have a bearing on how social work is developed and led. Despite the presence of these organisations, social workers still

find themselves under-represented in a variety of ways, and we are also worried about the impact of such confusion and complexity on the effectiveness and efficiency of reform.

6.22 Our proposal for a national college should resolve some of these deficits but we are also recommending Government action should include rationalisation of the delivery organisations, partnerships and standard setting mechanisms which currently contribute to confusion and inefficiencies in workforce improvement. If the profession is to become more confident and more effective, it needs to be supported by organisations that are more clearly focused on the improvement of social work.

6.23 Government action should also include

- continued joint commitment and leadership across departments in support of the national reform programme – with rapid action to ensure that the programme is put in place and gets swiftly underway and that it becomes mainstream business in the relevant departments
- the necessary investment to make reform a reality at all levels, especially on the frontline – our proposals have implications for resources and legislation which the government will need to work through as quickly as possible if momentum is to be maintained
- strong logistical support to the profession to enable it to establish an independent national college
- ensuring the performance indicator regimes that influence social work do not privilege the completion of processes at the expense of service quality or outcomes for service users, and that they avoid perverse incentives and measures for which there is no supporting evidence base – as set out in our interim report, the Task Force heard strong messages that the profession is, in places, at risk of becoming too mechanised and de-skilled, through an over emphasis on compliance rather than judgement
- intervening strongly whenever any of the ambitions and recommendations for social work set out in this report are at risk of not being achieved

6.24 Some of the reforms the Task Force is recommending will take time to be implemented in full and to produce change on the ground. It will not be possible to put some into effect until the capacity within the system has increased. It follows that managers, employers, higher education institutions and regulators, as well as Government, must all act quickly to ensure they are providing the best possible support to people who need social work services *now* – and to the people who are charged with delivering these services.

6.25 In particular, we recommend that

- DCSF and local authorities should continue to improve the Integrated Children's System (ICS), by translating national specifications into tangible improvements to local systems, making ICS more straightforward and effective for frontline social workers in children's services

- local government should consider how resources can be reallocated to make a difference on the front line – central government must support local government to manage high pressures on front line services, including through making resources available
- employers should engage in frank and open discussions with frontline practitioners and managers about the reality of practice on the frontline, the burdens practitioners are carrying, and how they can improve services – they must avoid letting the anxiety caused by unmet need to be held by the most junior members of the service
- both formal and informal piloting of the remodelling of social work services should be encouraged and incentivized, building on what is being learnt from work already underway

6.26 Taken together, we feel that the fifteen core recommendations in this report provide a solid platform for the reform of the social work profession and the improvement of frontline practice. We end this report where we began: social work has arrived at a watershed. This is a moment of opportunity that all of us need to seize.

Annex A:

Organisations and workloads

The Social Work Task Force believes that the people who organise, deliver and receive services are ultimately best placed to understand how local services should work. However, when seeking to make improvement, it can be difficult to find the best starting points for analysis and then action.

As discussed in Chapter 2 of this report, we are presenting an initial framework for helping employers and practitioners to take action now in assessing the “health” of their organisation on the range of issues affecting workload. This framework should be developed further in due course in support of the proposed standard for employers.

The framework looks at 5 key areas which we know all make a significant contribution to the development and delivery of excellent services.

The framework is to support organizations to undertake a self assessment against the 5 areas, identify current strengths and plan to tackle areas for improvement.

The framework is not designed to act as a check list, but as a mechanism to promote debate at all levels of the service.

It can be used at team, service and organisation level. It should be the basis for discussion at each of these levels, with a requirement in place that staff have been involved in the response at each level and a mechanism for recording areas of disagreement. Where this is identified, a mechanism for reviewing the assessment, usually by a manager of another team or at a higher level, should be included.

Each organisation should also clarify how frequently they will undertake a “health check” and what the process for audit and reporting should be, including at least an annual report to lead member for both adult and children’s services.

The framework is not designed to be prescriptive and can be adapted to meet the needs of each organisation. However, the following prompts may be of use in promoting analysis and debate:

Effective workload management

Vacancy rates – including

- current unfilled posts
- posts covered by agency/temporary staff
- posts which are filled but where staff are absent (e.g. long term sick, maternity leave)
- turnover rates

Workload – including

- numbers of cases held by each full time equivalent
- average hours worked by staff on a weekly basis
- current levels of TOIL and leave to be taken by team members
- number of supervision sessions which have taken place – is this in line with organisational policy?
- staff attendance at CPD opportunities as planned in performance appraisal – how often is training cancelled/re arranged?
- additional responsibilities e.g. student on placement, acting as mentor to other team member, undertaking action research

Pro active workflow management

- Number of unallocated cases
- Re-referral rates
- Changes in workflow over time (peaks and troughs)
- How unallocated cases are risk assessed
- The escalation process for unallocated cases and alerts to senior managers
- How many cases are allocated to the team/manager/duty
- Delays in transfer of cases between teams
- How often workers are required to cancel meetings with people who use services/ other professionals in an average week due to re-prioritisation of work
- Specific blocks to work flow which need to be considered e.g. efficiency of commissioned services, relationships with other agencies, transfer between teams/ services

- Is the most efficient use of skills being made within the team and wider service? Are social workers undertaking tasks for which their skills are primarily required or could they be done more effectively by someone with different skills e.g. an administrator, para professional or other professional group either within the service or via a commissioned arrangement?

Having the right tools to do the job

Access to equipment – mobile working, IT access including to the internet

Access to professional services to support case work– translators, legal advice etc

Access to resources e.g. research, library facilities

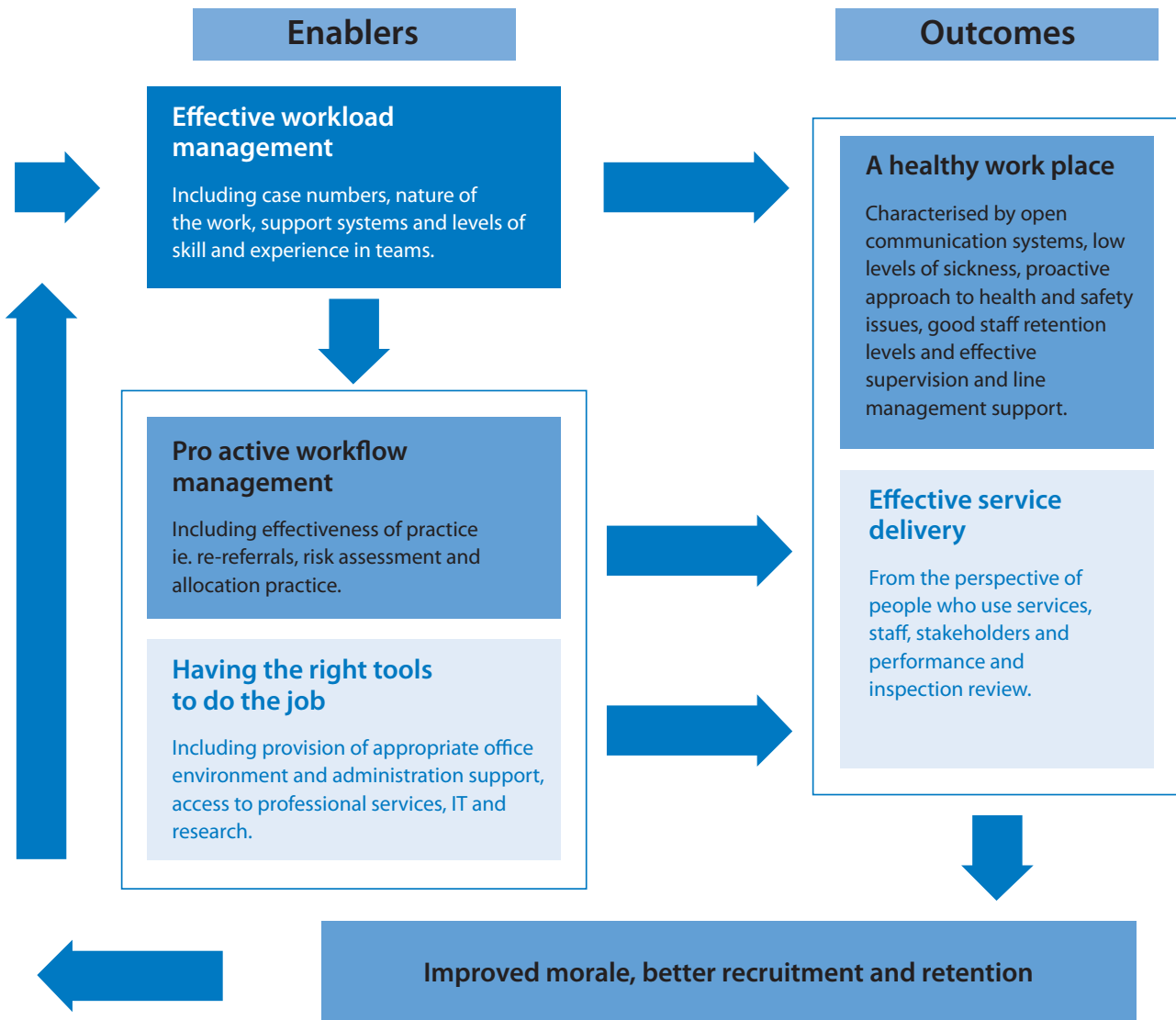
Appropriate office space e.g. desk, office chair, access to quiet space.

A healthy work place

- Is there a system in place to monitor frequency of supervision and quality of it in order to ensure effective practice is supported?
- Is 360 appraisal in place?
- Is there an employee welfare system in place and are staff aware of how they access it?
- How often do team meetings take place?
- Are staff able to contribute to the agenda?
- Are senior managers accessible/visible in the service?
- How are stress levels monitored on an individual and service basis?
- Is there a whistle blowing process and are staff aware of what this is?
- Are there processes in place to ensure staff welfare e.g. risk assessments of roles/ activities, call back/monitoring processes to ensure safety whilst working away from the office base including out of hours ?
- What are the sickness levels in the team/service and what is the pattern over time?

Effective Service Delivery

- Findings from compliments, comments and complaints
- Feedback from service users
- Feedback from stakeholders/other professionals
- Staff survey results
- Exit interview analysis



Annex B:

Facing up to the Task: the interim report of the Social Work Task Force

Executive Summary

Introduction

When people are made vulnerable – by poverty, bereavement, addiction, isolation, mental distress, disability, neglect, abuse or other circumstances – what happens next matters hugely. If outcomes are poor, if dependency becomes ingrained or harm goes unchecked, individuals, families, communities and the economy can pay a heavy price.

Good social workers can and do make a huge difference in these difficult situations. They are needed now as much, if not more, than ever. Their professional skills and knowledge can help people to take back control of their lives, through a genuine partnership between the social worker and the service user. When this is not possible, and people are at serious and significant risk, social workers can use statutory powers to resolve the crisis.

A profession that meets these expectations will need to have certain characteristics.

Our vision for social work is a profession

- confident about its values, purpose and identity
- working in partnership with people who use its services, so that they can take control of their situation and improve the outcome
- working cohesively with other professions and agencies in the best interests of people in need of support
- demonstrating its impact and effectiveness and, therefore, its public value
- committed to continuous improvement, with the training and resources it needs to be effective and a vigorous culture of professional development
- understood and supported by employers, educators, government, other professionals and the wider public
- well led at every level: in front line practice; in influencing the shape and priorities of local services; in setting and maintaining the highest possible standards within the profession; and in influencing policy developments and priorities at national and political level

Social workers must play a leading role in keep adults and children safe and thriving but cannot act successfully on their own: they rely on cooperation and action by other agencies and professions. At a time of more integrated working among professions, and more personalised ways of delivering services, everyone concerned needs to be clear and confident about the distinctive skills, powers and responsibilities that social workers have to offer.

Social work in England today

The first report of the Social Work Task Force set out six main themes about the current obstacles to the delivery of consistently high quality social work across the country, as they had emerged from initial evidence gathering and extensive discussion with stakeholders.

Theme 1 “We have been told that social workers do not have enough time to devote directly to the people they want to help. They are overstretched by staff shortages and tied up in bureaucracy.”

Theme 2 “We have been told that social workers are not being given the tools and support they need to do their jobs.”

Theme 3 “We have been told that new social workers are often not properly prepared for the demands of the job. The education system does not effectively support ongoing development and specialisation.”

Theme 4 “We have been told that the social work profession does not have a strong national voice and is not well supported at national level.”

Theme 5 “We have been told that systems for managing the performance of social workers are not driving quality first and foremost.”

Theme 6 “We have been told that the social work profession is under-valued, poorly understood and under continuous media attack. This is making it hard for social workers to do their jobs and hard to attract people into the profession.”

The Task Force has since sought further evidence and views on the six themes in order to draw its initial conclusions about the current state of social work in England. Responses to our first report, including through our Call for Evidence survey, show that these themes resonate strongly within and beyond the profession.

Our findings to date, and the evidence behind them, are set out in detail in Chapter 1. We have developed a strong picture of the state of social work in England today and the nature and scale of the challenge. In summary

- Social work is struggling to hold its own as a durable, attractive public sector profession. Widespread staffing shortages are seriously compromising its ability to deliver quality on the frontline.
- The current mix of practical and professional support to frontline social workers is inconsistent and sometimes inadequate. To be effective, social workers need appropriate technology and equipment, secure access to supervision and robust sources of research and information – and enough time to make good use of all of these resources.

- Current arrangements for education, training and career progression are not producing – or retaining – enough social workers suited to the full demands of frontline practice. There is simply not enough shared understanding about the division of responsibilities in education and training among higher education institutions, employers and social workers themselves.
- Social work lacks a single locus of responsibility for promoting the profession, improving public understanding, spreading best practice and driving up its standards. Social workers are unsure about where to look for leadership of their profession, and for representation in the policy debates that shape practice and conditions on the frontline.
- Social work is in need of a clearer account of how its effectiveness should be judged. Currently, some parts of the profession feel it is at risk of becoming “de-skilled” and too mechanised in its approach.
- The distinct role of social workers in modern public services is unclear. This has consequences on several fronts: how social workers are deployed; the attitudes and expectations of service users and other professionals; the capacity of the profession to attract new recruits; the formation of policy; and the poor image of the profession in the public and the media.

Many of these weaknesses can end up compounding one another, causing a vicious circle in which service improvement becomes hard to achieve. The poor public image and understanding of social work create problems for recruitment into the profession. Combined with difficulties in educating and training social workers, they contribute to the staffing shortages which compromise the profession’s ability to deliver a good service, and which put pressure on the workloads of existing staff. These pressures can in turn squeeze out time spent with service users and time spent on supervision, reflection and analysis, all of which make possible the fine judgements at the heart of successful social work.

This situation is further aggravated when practical resources are missing or not fully suited to the demands of the frontline, and when management systems seem to privilege process over effectiveness, absorbing more social worker time. The cumulative effect means that it can be hard to retain staff, feeding back in to shortages.

Lack of leadership for social work as a whole means that problems are not yet challenged effectively as they emerge and coalesce, and that the profession is not in position to both drive up and defend its standards.

The Task Force recognises that there has been significant investment and reform in social work in recent decades. However, we believe that social work has failed to benefit fully from these opportunities because the profession has not enjoyed strong leadership, self-confidence or a clear, shared understanding of the contribution it can make to better outcomes; and because reform has lacked the necessary scope and ambition. Reforms have been taken forward in ‘silos’, without full partnership and shared understanding between everyone who needs to be involved – including service users – and without full recognition of how different parts of the system influence one another.

The future of social work in England

There is now an opportunity to get things right. We want the recommendations in our final report to act as a catalyst for successful reform. Our recommendations to government will build on what is best in the profession and the current system, and be informed by the four principles set out below.

Reform must

- be based on partnership, with government, the profession and all parts of the system which supports it taking responsibility for change
- be underpinned by a shared understanding of the role and purpose of social work
- recognise that change takes time, and make the best possible use of available resources
- address the full range of factors which influence the workforce

Reform: building blocks and recommendations

This diagram shows the “building blocks” of the reform programme which the Social Work Task Force will put forward in our final report later this year. Each building block will be essential to successful reform and each has a vital role in supporting the others.

High quality, appropriate initial training	Resources which support and enable effective practice	Strong national professional leadership
High quality ongoing training and development	Supply Strategy – understanding demand and influencing supply	Public value and understanding
Clear roles and career structure	Inspection and accountability regime supporting improved outcomes	Delivery system providing strong local and national leadership

Founded on a clear understanding of the work that we need social workers for, and of how their effective practice can improve outcomes

Chapter 2 discusses some of the issues that need to be addressed in relation to each of these building blocks, and the connections between them. It also sets out some of the possible solutions that the Task Force will be considering and discussing with the sector over the coming months.

We are already clear that our recommendations will address the following.

The creation of a national college for social work

This is needed to give the profession a stronger and more cohesive focus and voice. It could play an important role in representing social work in public debates and policy development, promoting the profession and improving public understanding, spreading best practice and driving up standards.

Greater partnership between employers and educators for the improvement of social work education

Assuring the quality of entrants into the social work profession, and creating a culture of continuous learning and development on the front line, both depend on a new era of improved partnership between employers and educators.

Clearer career progression

Social work needs a common career structure which rewards expertise in front line practice and is closely linked to training and professional development. We are also looking at how this should relate to arrangements for determining pay at local or national level.

A much more sophisticated understanding of supply and demand

The Task Force believes that a brighter future for social work depends on an appropriate supply of suitably qualified applicants into stable teams with the right mix of experience. The supply, recruitment and retention of social workers is therefore a central issue for reform. As a prerequisite for improvement, there need to be robust and durable arrangements for understanding and forecasting supply and demand across training and the job market. This will be needed to inform workforce planning at local level, national recruitment campaigns, and the planning and resourcing of training provision.

Securing the resources social workers need to be effective

In order to make a real difference to those they work with, social workers need

- time to spend working directly with service users, their families/communities and other professionals who have a role in supporting them and to reflect on their actions, advice and judgements
- high quality professional supervision and time for reflective practice and continuing professional development
- manageable workloads for frontline practitioners and managers
- basic tools, including IT and communications technology which work effectively
- access to research and learning about how their practice can have most impact

To support this, the profession needs clear guidance about how time should be spent, how supervision and CPD can be protected and how workloads can be managed. We will also make recommendations in our final report about how re-modelling can help to make best use of professional social work time, and also draw on the resources of others in social care and administrative roles, to provide efficient and effective services.

Following the advice from the Social Work Task Force in May, the Government has committed to improvements to the Integrated Children's System (ICS), an issue which has been of great concern to frontline practitioners in children's services. These improvements now need to be made a reality at national and local level. The Task Force will stay engaged in making sure changes take hold and make the difference that is needed.

A clearer common understanding of the role and purpose of social work

The Task Force has developed a new description of social work as a first step towards a much stronger common understanding of the role and purpose of the profession. It has been developed in plain English to help the profession meet the challenge of explaining what it does to service users and the public. This clearer understanding, along with its implications for the roles and tasks of social workers can or should perform and the skills and knowledge they need, will become the foundation stone of the reform programme. We will be taking forward further work, with partners, to develop a clear articulation of these requirements, to inform our final recommendations. The description is set out below and discussed in more detail in chapter 2.

Public Description of Social Work

Social work helps adults and children to be safe so they can cope and take control of their lives again

Social workers make life better for people in crisis who are struggling to cope, feel alone and cannot sort out their problems unaided

How social workers do this depends on the circumstances. Usually they work in partnership with the people they are supporting – check out what they need, find what will help them, build their confidence, and open doors to other services. Sometimes, in extreme situations such as where people are at risk of harm or in danger of hurting others, social workers have to take stronger action – and they have the legal powers and duties to do this.

You may think you already do this for your friends and family but social workers have specialist training in fully analysing problems and unmet needs, in how people develop and relate to each other, in understanding the challenging circumstances some people face, and in how best to help them cope and make progress. They are qualified to tell when people are in danger of being harmed or harming others and know when and how to use their legal powers and responsibilities in these situations.

You may think that you'll never need a social worker but there is a wide range of situations where you or your family might need one, such as

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

Where we think it is needed to achieve reform, we will also make recommendations for changes to inspection, regulation, and the activities, roles or remits of the national organisations which support social work.

Much of this report is inevitably focused on social work in the statutory sector. This is the bedrock of social work in England. It is also where challenges are most widespread and most acute. However, as a Task Force, we are very aware of the diverse settings in which social workers operate. We are determined to develop proposals that will lift the whole profession and be felt in every setting.

Next steps

The Task Force will continue to gather evidence about the issues facing social work. We will, for instance, complete our literature review and the analysis of submissions to our Call for Evidence, with a particular emphasis on solutions and good practice that could inform our recommendations. We are developing a questionnaire to help with gathering the views on social work of service users and we will work with a range of organisations that can help us in this task. We will also receive findings from our workload survey, which will help us to establish a much clearer, detailed picture of how social workers spend their time and the pressures and influences involved.

We also await, and will consider, the findings of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee report into The Training of Children and Families Social Workers and will consider their recommendations.

However, we have identified at this stage much of what needs to change in order to deliver comprehensive reform. Our task now is to put together a detailed programme of reform which will deliver our vision of a strong and confident social work profession for many years to come.

We will continue to discuss our findings with frontline professionals, service users and other key partners to make sure that our detailed recommendations take account of the changes they believe are needed. We will be talking to higher education institutions, employers, regulators, and other key partners in social work reform about what they can do to deliver the right environment for the profession to change and grow. We will continue our work on improving the understanding of social work, building on the new description we have put forward in this report.

Annex C: Membership of the Social Work Task Force

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Chief Executive, Camden Borough Council

Andrew Webb

Corporate Director, Children & Young People, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council

Anne Beales MBE

Director of Service-user Involvement, Together – Working for Wellbeing

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