



## Children's Services Innovation Programme

### What do we mean by 'rethinking children's social work'? Some ideas to get you started.

The level of social complexity that we expect our social workers to manage and master is huge, but the way children's social work is organised and delivered can reduce the time that social workers have to work directly with families, reflect on their work, and develop their skills and knowledge of the evidence. We often put high levels of responsibility for children in the hands of social workers with the least skill and experience. Even our most skilled and talented social workers are sometimes struggling to cope with what they have to manage on a daily basis. Many social workers move too soon into management and other quality assurance roles, often because there are no career options available which make staying in frontline practice attractive.

This is why rethinking children's social work is one of two focus areas for the innovation programme.

#### **We want to start a conversation about how to spark more innovation across the system, particularly in relation to how we deliver and organise children's social work**

We are asking everyone in the sector to ask the fundamental question – *how* do we want our social workers and other professionals to help children and families with the highest levels of need and risk? *What* are we asking practitioners to achieve? And what kind of environment would *enable* them to achieve this?

Are there alternative practice models that can better support social workers to develop their skills, to do the work they came into social work to do and to be more effective in their work with children and families? What conceptual approaches can we develop, which will help challenge the unhelpful assumptions that hamper professional judgement? How can different organisational arrangements and professional practice frameworks free up practitioners to spend more time with families, so that they can help families change, and take decisive action to protect children?

#### **What is likely to drive improvement in children's social work practice?**

We have suggested a list of features below, which we think will be at the heart of successful new models. This is not a definitive list. We want to discuss and define the challenges for each of our focus areas with you, so this list is a discussion starter. The features we are suggesting are:

- Absolute **clarity about purpose, expectations and what can be achieved** for children and families within available resources. Being clear about this should help to define the behaviours, attitudes, skills and knowledge necessary to be part of the workforce.
- A **practice framework informed by evidence**, which underpins all statutory work with children and families. This needs to be supported by the very best professional development throughout the career path.

- Rather than an individual worker having to take on complex problems alone and in private, they can draw on the **resources, ideas and support of a whole team, who are all dedicated to the same children and families.**
- Rethinking who does what within the organisation, so **practitioners can focus on the professional tasks** that only they can do.
- Offering a more personalised and consistent service to the children and families by making sure more than one team member has the **knowledge and understanding of each case.**
- Everyday thinking and decision making influenced and challenged **by drawing on other professional expertise**, for example, paediatrics, psychology and psychiatry.
- Providing **a career pathway that keeps senior professionals in practice**, breaking with the traditional model which takes talented staff away from the front line when they get promoted.
- Senior roles staying part of the team, and getting involved with direct work through **coaching, teaching, modelling, supervision, and providing advanced and specialist help directly to families.**
- **Case responsibility being paired with decision making authority and access to resources.** The practitioner who holds statutory responsibility must be able to make most day to day decisions and access the resources they need to do the job expected of them.