Social Work Task Force

Facing up to the Task

The interim report of the
Social Work Task Force:
July 2009

The Social Work Task Force reports jointly to the Secretary of State for Health
and the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families

DH Department
of Health

department for
children, schools and families

Contents

The Social Work Task Force was set up by the Government 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 is chaired by Moira Gibb, CBE. Membership includes employers from both public and voluntary sector, educators and researchers, service user representatives and the media, managers and front line workers. It reports jointly to the Secretaries of State for Health and for Children, Schools and Families, and is supported by the Joint Social Work Unit established by the two Departments.

The Task Force met for the first time in February 2009. It published its first report in May 2009, in a letter from Moira Gibb to the Secretaries of State for Health and for Children, Schools and Families. This letter is reprinted at the back of this document. The Task Force is due to publish its final recommendations in the autumn. This report sets out interim advice to government about the state of social work in England at present, and the nature and content of the comprehensive reform programme needed.

The advice in this report is based on an extensive programme of consultation and evidence-gathering over the past six months, as well as the shared expertise of Task Force members. (Full details of the evidence gathering work to date can be found at Annex A). The Task Force is supported by a Practitioners Reference Group and a Key Partners Group.

The Task Force remit covers social work in England only. Reform proposals will seek to reflect and learn from experience in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and will take account of the implications for devolved administrations.

www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf

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Foreword

**Moira Gibb CBE
Chair, Social Work Task Force**

Good social work helps people of all ages to be safe, independent and fulfilled when they might otherwise struggle. It is the frontline service in keeping children in our most troubled families out of harm. It also helps these families to flourish wherever possible. It plays a central role in supporting adults who find themselves vulnerable due to, for instance, growing old, disability or mental distress. These are all hugely important goals for the health and fairness of our society.

We in the Social Work Task Force have been gathering evidence about the current state of social work in England and listening hard to people who care about it. We very much welcome the continuing interest and involvement of social workers and managers from different settings, service users, other professions, employers, educators and national organisations. Our regional events, online surveys, Call for Evidence and visits to local areas, along with our Practitioners Reference Group and Key Partners Group, have all helped us to gain a rounded view of the problems facing social work.

Many of the key conditions that make for a confident, effective profession are not being fully met – not least having the right numbers of suitably trained staff in stable frontline teams. There is good practice, but not enough, and the profession is struggling to explain and demonstrate its effectiveness. The core functions of social work have become unclear in the minds of some and reduced to simple enforcement in others. And social workers have also been caught up in fierce and damaging public controversy about their role in harrowing cases of abuse.

On the other hand, the strong moral purpose of social work remains. In many parts of the profession, there is still huge determination to make a real difference in the lives of people. Although not yet fully harnessed, there are examples of improvement and excellence to draw inspiration from. Many service users are very clear about how much they value their social worker.

Equally, this is not a stagnant or static period for the profession. Individual employers and national government have been active in addressing workforce issues. But these measures do not yet amount to a full, system-wide, strategic response to the challenges facing social work.

It is now time to face up to the task of getting social work right for the future.

In our first report, we summarised the key messages we had been hearing from the field. In this document, our interim report, we are presenting our findings to date about the state of social work in England and setting out for the first time our thoughts about reform, with some early ideas for action and change. In our final report later this year, we will set out our full advice and recommendations to government. The Task Force continues to see social work as one profession, bringing its core expertise and specialist skills into partnership with the individuals and families who need them and with the other services that can make a difference. We want the profession to become more confident and more effective where it counts: on the frontline.

Already it is clear that reform which permanently transforms practice on the frontline will have to be far reaching and make demands right across the profession and the system that supports it.

Government will need to respond with new action and investment, taking forward the joint commitment the Department of Health and the Department for Children, Schools and Families have made to this agenda. Employers, educators and national bodies will need to strengthen the platform they provide for social workers to do a high quality job and to meet the expectations of service users and the public. And social workers themselves – individually, in teams, and as a profession – will need to raise standards, apply best practice and build new levels of confidence amongst the public. A new sense of partnership and common purpose must be forged between all of those involved.

Clearly, the challenges facing social work did not emerge overnight and full reform will take time. The supply of high quality staff is not a tap that can be instantly turned to full. Building real, durable leadership from within the profession will require patience and care. It will also take time to replace the current confusion with a new and robust understanding of the role and purpose of modern social work.

The job of the Social Work Task Force is to construct a programme of renewal for the long term. The need remains for all to take action in the short term to deal with pressing issues on the ground: in, for instance, training, staffing, the workplace environment, supervision, and morale. It is imperative that employers and others do whatever they can to resolve immediate problems within their remit.

There are many people within the profession and close to it who recognise the need for change and are ready to set out on a path to improvement. Our job now is to come forward with a full set of proposals which befit the importance of social work, which meet the current challenges, and which place the profession on a firm footing for the future.

Thank you for taking the time to read this report.
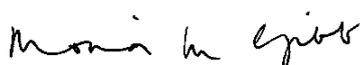
Moira Gibb CBE

Executive Summary

Introduction

1.   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.

2.   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. In these cases social workers are a crucial part of the frontline service reducing neglect and abuse.

3.   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 value to the public;

- 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; and

- well led at every level: in frontline 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.

4.   Social workers must play a leading role in keeping adults and children safe and thriving but they cannot act successfully on their own: they rely on co-operation 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

5.   The first report of the Social Work Task Force[1] 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 one:** We have been told that social workers feel they do not have enough time to devote directly to the people they want to help. They feel overstretched by staff shortages and tied up in bureaucracy.
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> **Theme two:** We have been told that social workers feel very frustrated by some of the tools and support they are given to do their jobs.
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> **Theme three:** We have been told that new social workers are often not properly prepared for the demands of the job and that the education system does not effectively support ongoing development and specialisation.
>
> **Theme four:** We have been told that the social workers do not feel that their profession speaks with a strong national voice or is well supported at national level.
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> **Theme five:** We have been told that systems for managing the performance of social workers are not driving quality first and foremost.
>
> **Theme six:** We have been told that the social workes feel that their profession is undervalued, poorly understood and under continuous media attack. This is making it hard for them to do their jobs and hard to attract people into the profession.

6.   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.

7.   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.

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1   See www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf

- 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 focus 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.

8. 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.

9. 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 into shortages.

10. 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.

11. 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

12. 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 the 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; and
>
> - 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

13. 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 accountabilty 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

14. 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.

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

The creation of a national college for social work

16.   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

17.   Assuring the quality of entrants into the social work profession, and creating a culture of continuous learning and development (CPD) on the frontline: both depend on a new era of improved partnership between employers and educators.

Clearer career progression

18.   Social work needs a common career structure which rewards expertise in frontline 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

19.   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

20.   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 (CPD);

- manageable workloads for frontline practitioners and managers;

- basic tools, including IT and communications technology, which work effectively; and

- access to research and learning about how their practice can have most impact.

21.   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 remodelling 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.

22.   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.

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 to protect them – 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 the 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; or
- having practical problems with money or housing.

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

23.   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 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 above and discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

24. 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.

25. 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

26. 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.

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

28. 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.

29. 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.

1: Social work in England today

This chapter summarises current barriers to the consistent delivery of high quality, effective frontline social work across England.

Widespread staffing shortages mean that social work is struggling to hold its own as a durable, attractive public sector profession, compromising its ability to deliver consistent quality on the frontline. There is no robust, standing system for collecting information on local and national levels of vacancies, turnover and sickness, and for forecasting future supply and demand. Local authorities are finding it hard to identify effective methods for managing the workloads of frontline staff. Staff shortages and financial pressures are making these challenges harder still.

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 and training are not producing enough social workers fully suited to the challenges of frontline practice. Readiness for practice of newly qualified staff, and the provision of practice placements within the degree course are causing particular concern. Arrangements for career progression, linked to development in professional expertise and specialisation, are inconsistent. There is no clear structure for social workers to plan their careers and their development as professionals. There is too little shared understanding about the division of responsibilities in education and training among higher education institutions, employers and social workers themselves, leading to frustration and unmet expectations on all sides.

There are different interpretations of the role and importance of pay in recruiting and retaining social workers. This is an issue which the Task Force will explore further over the coming months.

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 lacks a single focus of responsibility for promoting the profession, improving public understanding, spreading best practice and driving up its standards.

Social work is also in need of a clearer account of how its effectiveness should be judged. The impact of what social workers do is currently monitored at local level through a disparate group of performance indicators. There is a widespread view among frontline social workers that these indicators are measuring things such as the rate at which processes are completed, rather than the quality of service or outcomes for the service user. Frontline social workers think that their time and skills are too often being deployed in order to complete processes tied to targets and indicators – and not to provide a high quality service, tailored to the true needs and circumstances of service users. While timeliness of service is important in several ways, it is true that many of the current indicators focus on the completion of processes. The overall effect is a profession that sees itself at risk of being 'de-skilled' and becoming too mechanised in its approach.

The distinct role of social workers in modern public services is unclear. There are a number of competing perceptions among social workers themselves, service users, other professionals and the wider public. 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 media, compounded by the recent coverage of tragic cases involving social workers.

Many of these weaknesses can end up compounding one another, sometimes creating vicious circles in which service improvement becomes hard to achieve.

Introduction

1.1   Our over-riding concern in the Social Work Task Force has been, and will continue to be, frontline practice. We are interested therefore in what determines the quality of what social workers do on a daily basis, which will impact on the lives of the people they seek to support or protect.

1.2   As a first step, we set out in our initial report[2] six main themes that had by then emerged from our many discussions with frontline social workers and others about what may be holding social workers back from doing a good job.

2   www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf

> **Theme one:** We have been told that social workers feel they do not have enough time to devote directly to the people they want to help. They feel overstretched by staff shortages and tied up in bureaucracy.
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> **Theme six:** We have been told that the social workes feel that their profession is undervalued, poorly understood and under continuous media attack. This is making it hard for them to do their jobs and hard to attract people into the profession.

1.3   Responses to our first report, including through our Call for Evidence survey, show that these themes resonate strongly within and beyond the profession. They have proved useful in structuring the mass of further evidence submitted to the Task Force, helping us to extend, deepen and test our understanding of the issues[3].

1.4   This is, of course, not a static period for social work and there is a great deal of positive work in place. The implications for social work of the transformation of adult social care triggered by *Putting People First* are still being worked through. The Government's Action Plan in response to Lord Laming's progress report on child protection in England (which we responded to in our first report in May) also has many important implications for the profession. Equally, the Government has over recent months introduced a number of measures to tackle some of the big issues facing social work such as the frameworks for newly qualified social workers in adults' and children's services, the adult social care workforce strategy, and the programmes addressing recruitment, retention and training issues in children's and families' social work, which are being driven by the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

1.5   The Task Force also recognises that there has already been significant investment and reform in social work in recent decades. The profession has gained protected title; become a graduate level profession; introduced formal requirements for post-registration, training and learning as a condition for re-registration; developed Codes of Practice setting out the standards of practice and conduct workers and their employers should meet; and embedded the involvement of service users in the design and delivery of the social work degree. The creation of distinct adults' and children's services, and the development of more multidisciplinary and integrated methods of service delivery have brought with them new

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3   We are publishing alongside this document a report on the Social Wok Task Force Regional Events held earlier this year and a summary of our Call for Evidence survey results. See www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf

challenges as well as opportunities on the frontline, in social work management, in training, and at national and local leadership level.

1.6   However, the Task Force believes that social work has not benefited enough from previous reforms 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**.**

Staffing levels and use of time

> *"There should be more social worker posts – but we can't fill the current positions."*
> Local authority team manager
>
> *"My main concern is an ever increasing workload but an expectation of improving the quality of my work too."*
> Social worker

1.7   In order to function effectively, any workforce needs to have enough staff. It needs to have all or nearly all positions filled, to hold on to the best professionals, and to secure an appropriate supply of new, high quality entrants.

1.8   In social work, continuity and stability in the workforce is especially critical. Frontline staff and service users need time and continuity to forge relationships based on honesty, trust and a sound knowledge of the needs and risks involved as these develop and change. These relationships are hard to maintain when teams are running low on staff, in continuous flux or heavily reliant on agency staff who may come and go at short notice. Low retention of skilled and experienced staff can lead to delays in transferring cases between teams; confusion in the way thresholds are applied; placement instability for looked after children; and (when combined with poor record keeping) service users repeating the same information to a succession of workers[4].

1.9   There is no single, robust, rolling system for collecting information on local and national levels of staff vacancies, turnover and sickness in frontline social work, and for forecasting future supply and demand. The full picture of flows into and through training, and into and through the job market, is not available. This is an issue in itself for the design and implementation of reform.

1.10   However, the *2020 Workforce Strategy* published by the Department of Children, Schools and Families in 2008 was able to highlight the high vacancy rates affecting social work with children, young people and families. Survey data show a vacancy rate[5] of 9.5 per cent for

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4   See, for instance: *Joint Area Reviews 2007–08: Report on outcomes,* Ofsted, April 2009, Munro and Hardy. *Placement Stability – A review of Literature,*, DfES, 2006

5   2006 data from Local Government Analysis and Research survey. Further Local Government Association research published earlier this year found that, of those councils who experience recruitment difficulties, 89% had trouble recruiting experienced children social workers.

field social workers and a turnover rate of 9.6 per cent[6]. In social work for adults, parallel surveys show a very similar vacancy rate for field social workers – 9.4 per cent – and a slightly lower turnover rate – 7.8 per cent[7, 8].

1.11   Other public sector professions appear to enjoy much lower staffing shortfalls. Teacher vacancy rates, for instance, were running at 0.7 per cent for the same period.

1.12   More recent data from Unison suggests that the problem continues, with between a 10.9 per cent[9] and 12 per cent[10] vacancy rate nationally and considerably greater vacancy rates in Greater London and the Midlands.

1.13   Moreover, all authorities in London, West Midlands and the South West, and 92 per cent of authorities across England as a whole, report use of agency staff in children's social care. Heads of service in the children's sector report that this trend has been increasing in recent months[11]. A Department of Health/Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) review of social work initial training found employers raising concerns about the standard and experience levels of agency staff available and about their commitment to the post they are in[12]. Frontline social workers have also raised concerns with the Task Force about the impact high use of agency workers has on the continuity of service and care that their teams can provide. Reliance on agency staff can also represent a drain on scarce resources. On the other hand, the value of agency staff in providing a flexible response when demand for services is variable has also been raised[13].

1.14   When asked to give reasons for recruitment and retention difficulties, local authorities have cited a lack of suitably qualified applicants, and applicants lacking relevant experience, as the main reasons[14]. This was true of frontline social workers in both children's and adults' services.

1.15   All of this raises serious questions about the flow of staff into frontline practice from initial training and about the ability of the profession, and the local authority sector in particular, to hold on to the best and most experienced. Social work is struggling to hold its own as a durable and attractive public sector profession. Responses to the online survey which the Task Force ran as part of its Call for Evidence found that 92 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement 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." [15]

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6   CAFCASS, the single biggest employer and contractor of social workers in England, has a lower rate of staff turnover than the national average: 5.2%. In-house research suggests that Family Court Advisers tend to stay in post because of the satisfaction that comes from the job itself.

7   Local Government Analysis and Research survey

8   Most recent data was showing small but steady declines in vacancy and turnover rates in 2006 and the immediately preceding years.

9   Submission by Community Care magazine

10 UNISON Social Work Staffing Audit, 2009

11 Initial submission to Social Work Task Force, Children's Workforce Development Council. Local Government Association research published earlier this year suggests that around 5,500 child social workers are agency staff.

12 Unpublished

13 British Association of Social Workers submission to Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence

14 Local Government Analysis and Research survey

15 See initial report on Call for Evidence survey findings at www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf

1.16 Frontline social workers and managers have been able to describe to us the knock-on effects of staff shortages on supervision and training and on overloading of existing staff leading to sickness, 'burn out' and further shortages. This picture is borne out through research, which has found, for instance, that "difficulties in filling team manager posts (…) and periods of time with no manager at all contributed to a lack of support and oversight for hard pressed practitioners. In these circumstances, supervision falls by the wayside."[16]

1.17 There is also evidence of a strong ripple effect beyond the team and organisation directly affected by shortages. CAFCASS, for instance, has reported that high turnover rates and large numbers of vacancies in local authorities brings a risk that guardians take on tasks that should have been completed by a local authority social worker, contributing to the length of time it takes to complete a case and to backlogs[17]. Social workers working in third sector organisations (having previously worked in the statutory sector) have also spoken to the Task Force about hold ups in referrals and service provision which they attribute to staff shortages and increased caseloads in local authority teams.

1.18 We know that employers are adopting a variety of measures to tackle shortages of social workers on the frontline. Among the most widely adopted approaches in children's services is the training up of unqualified staff to become qualified social workers. In 2006, 68 per cent of authorities used this measure in relation to social workers for adults[18]. 78 per cent of authorities used this approach to tackle shortages in children's services. Authorities also scored this measure highly than all others for its success rate.

1.19 On top of staff shortages, local authority teams and employers are also struggling to find effective methods of managing sizeable, complex workloads of frontline staff in ways that give due weight to different levels of experience and expertise and also allow staff time to learn and develop as professionals. Management systems, such as time off in lieu of extra or anti-social hours, sometimes break down under staffing pressures.

1.20 Many social workers are also greatly concerned about the amount of time they now devote to administrative tasks rather than tasks that make best use of their time as professionals skilled in social work itself. The Task Force has commissioned a workload survey which will give us an up-to-date picture from across the workforce of how and why time is allocated as it is. This will inform our work looking at effective systems for managing workload, taking account of both scale and type of work which social workers are currently expected to undertake.

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16 *Analysing child deaths and serious injury through abuse and neglect: what can we learn? A biennial analysis of serious case reviews 2003–2005,* DCSF, 2008

17 CAFCASS Workforce Strategy 2007

18 Local Government Analysis and Research survey. Early findings from interviews with senior officers in local authorities, conducted earlier this year as part of the Social Work Task Force Workload Survey, also contain positive views about 'grow your own' schemes, alongside an acknowledgement of certain challenges. In-depth Social Work Task Force visits to local areas also uncovered use of and satisfaction with this type of scheme.

1.21   Social worker pay has also been raised in a number of different ways with the Task Force.

- Levels of pay are felt by some to be too low and not reflective of the importance of what social workers do and the pressures they currently work under. However, others have argued that levels of pay in themselves are not necessarily a decisive issue but assume importance because of wider problems with status, recognition and investment in training, support and the working environment.

- Pay differences within local authority teams between permanent staff and agency staff (who may not be handling the same complexity of cases) are a source of some frustration and disillusionment.

- Shifts and variations in pay between local authorities are causing some dissatisfaction and may be contributing to movement and turnover in the workforce, with authorities competing to attract staff and address shortfalls through localised improvements in pay and conditions[19]. This has led some to suggest that the profession needs a single national framework for pay and other conditions of employment in the statutory sector.

1.22   In summary, social work, as a crucial public sector profession, is subject to widespread and longstanding staffing shortages that must compromise its ability to deliver quality on the frontline. 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.

Tools and support

> *"The training for the service user database took four days, which is an indicator of how complex and time consuming it was. The system was not intuitive. I am someone who is fairly computer literate and it was a struggle for me."*
>
> Social worker, adult services
>
> *"How can you have effective supervision in an open plan office? I sometimes have to talk to my manager in a corridor just to avoid being overheard."*
>
> Social worker
>
> *"I think social workers should have more time with children but this won't happen unless more social workers are recruited and their paper work is cut down."*
>
> Service user

1.23   All professions will rely on certain tools and forms of support to get the job done and to be effective. Equally, no profession should be hamstrung by the tools it has to use on a daily basis. Over the course of recent months, our evidence gathering and direct engagement with the frontline have helped us to understand in greater depth the tools and support

19 See report on Social Work Task Force Regional Events: www.dcsg.gov.uk/Social Work Task Force.

needs of frontline social work and the problems currently affecting the profession in this respect.

1.24   We have found evidence of some social workers feeling overloaded, unsupported and de-skilled by some of the resources and systems designed to support their effectiveness. 68 per cent of respondents to our Call for Evidence survey, for instance, gave the highest possible levels of agreement to the statement that "social workers are not being given the tools and support they need to do their jobs".

1.25   The forms of support and resources needed fall into three main categories:

Practical support: the work environment, systems and equipment

1.26   One of the strongest messages from our surveys, regional events and visits to local areas is that a lack of effective practical tools and resources is exacerbating the pressure on social worker time caused by vacancies and high caseloads[20]. This in turn reduces the amount of time that practitioners are able to spend with people who use, want or might need services.

1.27   Fit-for-purpose computer technology is a prerequisite for an accountable, modern workforce, especially one which is expected to:

- trace, manage and make connections between changing needs and risks;

- share information with other professionals at critical moments in each case history; and

- produce reports that other professionals will rely on and which will have a major bearing on decisions affecting the lives of individuals and families (including within court settings).

1.28   The research report *How Social Workers Spend Their Time* also makes the point that difficulties can be exacerbated by a lack of familiarity and proficiency with using electronic recording systems in general[21] and sometimes these more general deficiencies are regarded as shortcomings of specific applications.

1.29   In our first report, we made the case for reforming the Integrated Children's System (ICS) and we set out our advice on how this should be done. The Government is now taking steps to improve ICS, which we welcome. These improvements now need to be realised at national and local level. The Task Force will stay engaged in making sure changes take hold and produce the difference that is needed.

1.30   We have also registered concern from social workers in adult services about the computer systems and technology they are using, with concerns about computer equipment itself common to both adults' and children's social workers. These issues require more discussion and investigation which we will undertake during the summer.

1.31   It is also essential for employers to recognise that social workers often deal with very personal issues facing people who use services. They need quiet space and suitable office accommodation to be able to talk in confidence with people and to reflect sensitively on the issues raised.

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20 Report on the Social Work Task Force Regional Events: see www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf
21 *How Social Workers Spend Their Time*, Research Report. DCSF-RR087

1.32   There is also evidence to suggest that workloads have increased as some of the resources to support practice, which were once available, are no longer in place. Social workers report an increase in the core administrative tasks that they were required to do such as faxing, scanning and taking minutes and in tasks such as organisation of multi-professional meetings.

Professional support: supervision and professional roles

1.33   Broadly speaking, there are three main recognised functions of supervision:

- Line management, which is about accountability for practice and quality of service. This includes managing team resources, delegation and workload management, performance appraisal, meeting the duty of care, and other people-management processes.

- Professional or case supervision with individuals or groups of workers to enable and support safe, high-quality practice. This may include reviewing roles and relationships, evaluating work outcomes, and making the most of opportunities for wider learning. It also includes support to recognise and manage the emotional impact of the work on practitioners.

- Continuing professional development of workers to ensure they have the relevant skills, knowledge, understanding and attributes to do the job and progress in their careers. Constructive feedback and observation of practice should be part of the learning process for workers and supervisors.

1.34   In all of these respects, supervision is vital to good frontline performance, helping social workers to be more efficient, more effective and better prepared for the challenge.

1.35   We have had extensive feedback from frontline social workers suggesting that, despite its importance, access to supervision is often threatened or put on hold due to staff shortages and mounting caseloads[22]. This includes time to reflect and learn as teams, which many practitioners report as important to effective practice and decision-making. Concerns about the size of supervision caseloads carried by many managers have also been raised.

1.36   In-depth visits to local areas conducted by the Task Force suggest that access to supervision can vary significantly between authorities but also within the same authority; and that (in the eyes of frontline staff) supervision tends to be process driven and dominated by case management, to the detriment of the other aims set out in the paragraph above. A submission to the Task Force Call for Evidence highlighted results of a recent survey of 450 social workers in which one-third of respondents said that their supervision is inadequate[23].

1.37   As stated in our first report in May, the Social Work Task Force is committed to looking not only at the need for guidance on supervision, but also training and development, standards, and possible workforce roles which may be needed to ensure that every social worker benefits from high quality supervision[24].

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22 Report on the Social Work Task Force Regional: see www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf
23 Submission by Community Care magazine
24 See first report of Social Work Task Force at www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf.

1.38 Evidence given to the Task Force has also highlighted a rise in new professional roles alongside the social work profession, taking on some tasks which may previously have been undertaken by social workers.

1.39 Whilst this is positive in some areas – for example the use of family support workers to supervise contact arrangements – it can result in the balance of work changing with social workers being left with the very complex, 'heavy end' work. Our evidence suggests there is a need to have a mixture of skills in teams, with clarity about who can take on certain key roles and a clear scheme of delegation. We will develop our thinking about this further over the summer.

Knowledge and evidence

1.40 Problems in access to information have also been raised with the Task Force as a key issue in frontline social work. This includes information on: current policies and procedures; local resources and referral processes; and research evidence of what works.

1.41 These practical problems raise broader questions about:

- what ultimately constitutes effective practice in social work;
- the overall evidence for how to make effective interventions[25];
- how effectiveness is judged and measured; and
- how to plan for supporting the effectiveness of teams and services in the round.

1.42 There is a strong need for greater access to a robust, shared evidence base, which identifies effective practice and supports its delivery on the frontline[26]. Social workers need regular and reliable access to this evidence base, and opportunities to help develop it, throughout their careers. They also have a personal professional responsibility to maintain their knowledge and update their skills.

1.43 In summary, the mix of practical and professional support to 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 the time needed to make good use of all of these resources.

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25 In its submission to the Task Force Call for Evidence, the former Commission for Social Care Inspection makes the point that there is insufficient research into effective methods of social work intervention in adult social care.

26 The consensus view of service users we met during our in-depth visits to local areas was that increased access to social workers would improve the effectiveness of practice. They did understand that this could not always be face to face (although this was preferable), but where this was not possible phone contact and direct communication were important.

Training, education and career progression

> *"Newly qualified social workers have a very steep learning curve when they come into a statutory setting"*
> Social worker
>
> *"The quality of teaching was not consistent. Some extremely good, some very poor!"*
> Social work student

1.44   In the initial report of the Task Force, we set out the main areas of concern in debates about the education and training of social workers.

- Lack of readiness among some newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) for the demands of working on the frontline, which has raised questions about: the quality of entrants to degree courses; the content and quality of the courses themselves; and employer practice in case allocation and the support and early professional development of new staff

- Problems with the availability and quality of practice placements[27], particularly in the statutory sector

- The suitability of current arrangements for continuous professional development and specialisation throughout social workers' careers and concerns about the extent to which employers and educators jointly support this.

1.45   Through evidence gathering, we have been able to further identify and analyse these issues.

Newly Qualified Social Workers and the social work degree course

1.46   59% of respondents to the Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence survey gave the highest levels of agreement to the statement that "new social workers are often not properly prepared for the demands of the job. The education and training system does not effectively support ongoing development and specialisation"[28]. However, agreement here was more qualified than with all of the other statements in the survey.

1.47   A recent survey of NQSWs in children's services found that one third believed that their social work course had prepared them for their current role fully or quite a lot. Most believed it had prepared them just enough. However, one in seven did not feel it had prepared them at all.[29] Another survey, focusing on adult social work found that about a quarter of NQSWs did not feel prepared by their qualifying programmes[30]. The frontline tasks for which NQSWs appear to feel most unprepared are: dealing with conflict; conducting assessments; report writing and record keeping; followed by time and case management, contracting services and court work[31]. Other research provides further evidence about lack of readiness in these

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27 Also referred to as Practice Learning Opportunities (PLO)

28 See initial report on Call for Evidence survey findings at www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf

29 *Newly Qualified Social Workers: A report on consultations with NQSW, employers and those in Higher Education.* CWDC. 2009

30 The Centre for Post-Qualifying Social Work, Bournemouth University, 2007: *Tracking The Learning and Development Needs of the Newly Qualified Social Workers Project.* The Centre fpr Post-Qualifying Social Work, Bournemouth University, 2007

31 *Newly Qualified Social Workers: A report on consultations with NQSW, employers and those in Higher Education* CWDC, 2009; Bates, Natalie *et al, 'Baptism of Fire': The First Year in The Life of a Newly Qualified Social Worker,* 2009

same areas and also highlights ongoing debate about who should take on the main responsibility for supporting the development of practical skills: social work educators or employers[32].

1.48 Evidence from all sources confirms that NQSWs could be better prepared for the reality of front-line practice. There are several factors which contribute to this, which go beyond the quality of initial education and training:

- A lack of consensus and differing expectations about what the initial education and training of social workers is aiming to achieve. We have heard that it is important to get the right balance of, on the one hand, *educating* students in terms of developing knowledge, critical and analytical thinking so they are better able to exercise judgement and apply knowledge to a range of situations; and, on the other hand, *training* students to carry out specific processes and prescribed tasks[33].

- The increasingly complex tasks which NQSWs are being expected to take on due to a lack of experienced frontline staff in some agencies (with some suggestion that tasks of such complexity would not be expected of practitioners in other professions after only three years of training).

- The environment in which NQSWs sometimes find themselves when entering the workforce and joining overstretched, poorly functioning and poorly supported teams.

1.49 We have heard evidence from many different quarters that too many NQSWs are being 'thrown in at the deep-end', leading some to 'burn out' and eventually leave, exacerbating the problem of high staff turnover. In an example of how problems in different dimensions of social work can end up compounding one another, staff shortages in turn limit the capacity of employers to engage with higher education institutions (HEIs) in delivering social worker education and, in particular, providing high quality practice placements.

1.50 The evidence strongly suggests that completion of a degree course should not be treated as, in effect, a full preparation for practice by employers understandably anxious to fill vacancies. NQSWs need time to find their feet and prove their readiness for full-blown frontline practice. We have encountered strong support among several stakeholders[34] for the successful completion of some form of supported and assessed 'probationary' year to follow completion of initial training. The evaluation of the social work degree, commissioned by the Department of Health, notes that "there will always be a stage between achieving a professional qualification and operating as a professional. It is important to recognise that qualifying education is not intended to produce 'proficient' or 'expert' workers."[35]

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32 Sharpe Research and King's Fund, *Into the workforce* research project (unpublished*)*

33 See, for instance, *Task Force discussions with social work academics*. CWDC research team, 2009.

34 Through, for instance, Regional Events and responses to Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence from Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS); The Higher Education Academy; subject centre for social policy and social work (HEA swap); and the Joint University Council Social Work Education Committee (JUCSWEC).

35 Department of Health evaluation of the new social work degree qualification in England (2008). This equates with other professions such as medicine, psychology and nursing where initial training is followed by further and specialist training before more complex work is taken on.

1.51   This evaluation of the degree is positive in most of its findings. It points out, for instance, that the degree succeeded in: increasing the quantity of students entering social work training by 40 per cent; increasing the time students spend in assessed practice through their training; and involving for the most part carers and people who use services in selection of candidates and design and delivery of the social work degree. Social work has retained a diverse student profile although the percentage of men entering social work training has continued to fall despite the introduction of the degree[36].

1.52   The General Social Care Council (GSCC), has recently reported that 75 per cent of HEIs offering the degree were judged to be providing well-run courses, which met government standards and requirements[37]. However, there was concern about 15 per cent of courses, requiring action plans for improvement to be put in place. A further 8 per cent required closer scrutiny where it was judged that providers were in jeopardy of not meeting standards and 3 per cent required intense remedial action. This led to suspension of student intakes in two HEIs. Findings from the Department of Health and DCSF review of social work initial training[38], and from the Task Force's own discussions with academics, confirm the variability in the quality of the social work degree.

1.53   This evidence also raises further questions about: the quality assurance of social work education; entrants to degree courses; curriculum content and specialisation.

> *Quality assurance:* The GSCC approves and monitors courses to ensure compliance to standards set by government. It does not set standards and does not directly assure the quality of provision of teaching and learning. It uses an enhancement model of regulation: where it is judged that providers are meeting the standards, but could do better, GSCC will work with the institutions concerned to improve standards[39]. We have heard from some stakeholders that this delegated model of regulation needs to be strengthened to ensure consistency of quality and that levers are needed which would more forcefully drive quality as well as quantity of provision.
>
> Specific concerns have been raised about the quality of teaching and delivery, including: levels of understanding among some educators about the demands of current frontline practice and about how theory is applied to practice; and the robustness and quality of assessment, with some students passing the social work degree who are not competent or suitable to practise on the frontline[40].

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36   Now at 16 per cent

37   *Raising Standards; Social Work Education in England, GSCC ,2009*

38   Unpublished

39   This is similar to other regulators of professional education, such as GMC and NMC.

40   For instance, NSPCC response to Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence and discussions with social work academics.

Calibre of entrants: There are a variety of views about the relative importance in selecting appropriate applicants for training of academic qualifications; intellectual capacity and agility; emotional resilience; broader life and work experience; other personal qualities; and of the impact of the widening participation agenda in higher education. Evidence from the majority of individual respondents, employer organisations and key partners to the Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence, and from Regional Events and in-depth visits to local areas, question the stringency of entry requirements (and in-course expectations) for degree courses. There is considerable variety in A level and other qualification points required for entry to social work courses; and a lower profile of A level grade requirements than in other professional courses, such as teaching and nursing. UCAS points for teacher training range from 176 – 474 with the majority being 240 – 340, compared to the range for social work from 128 – 371 with the majority between 200 – 300[41].

There is also significant anecdotal reporting of a lack of basic literacy, writing, numeracy and problem solving skills among some NQSWs. Currently there is a withdrawal rate of 17.5 per cent and failure rate of 3.2 per cent, a profile which is consistent with other professional degree courses such as teaching and nursing[42]. Approximately 90 per cent of those who qualify go on to register, but not all of these enter the workforce.

41 Guardian University Guide 2009. These figures do not take into account the 30 per cent of entrants to social work who already have a first degree.

42 Moriarty, J et al, *Hanging on a little thin line; barriers to progression and retention in social work education,* Social Work Education: The International Journal, 2008.

Curriculum content and specialisation: Initial evidence and feedback from employers, practice assessors and researchers leads to a conclusion that there are certain areas of knowledge and skills which are not being covered to the right depth in the social work degree. This may be due to gaps in curriculum content, how the curriculum is being delivered, or limitations on what it is possible for the course to cover in the time available – or a combination of these factors. The areas concerned include: development of more practice-based skills and application of theory to practice; concepts behind assessment frameworks and their practical application; child development and communication with children and young people; managing conflict, hostility and challenge; report writing; ICT skills; the impact of substance abuse and mental health problems on individuals, families and communities; working with other professions. Frontline social workers who have engaged directly with the Task Force have drawn attention to similar gaps in provision and have also mentioned: stress management; risk management; court performance; and reflective practice[43].

Clarity is needed about what should be expected from initial training and what should be covered in more specialist post qualifying training. Moreover, new social workers need to be able to draw productively on their academic education as they develop their practice skills.

Our evidence suggests that there is a majority view in favour of retaining the generic degree with more specialist training being achieved at post qualifying level and in the first year of employment[44]. This view is based on the understanding that all social workers need knowledge and skills in working with individuals of all ages, families and communities: "Children grow up with adults, who have a major impact on their development and well-being, and some of the risk factors for children flow from parents' physical and learning disabilities, mental health and substance misuse problems, and the incidence of domestic violence. The risks to be managed, and issues associated with safeguarding and personal liberty, in Adult Services are equivalent to those in Children's Services".[45] Organisations responsible for delivering children services, such as Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), NSPCC and Family Rights Group (FRG), together with child welfare researchers, assert that there is a good argument for specialisation in the final year of the degree but that any earlier separation "would risk losing the coherence of social work as a profession across adults and children and the family context in which children live"[46].

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43 See, for instance, report on Social Work Task Force Regional Events at www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf.

44 For example: response to Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence from Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS) and Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE); and GSCC registrants survey, December 2008

45 Association of Directors of Adult Social Services response to Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence.

46 *ADCS* response to Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence.

Practice learning

1.54 There is a strong consensus from all evidence sources that the provision of high quality placements is of fundamental importance in preparing students to enter the workforce. Currently, 50 per cent of student learning and skills development takes place in practice placements.

1.55 With the expansion of the social work degree courses and increase in placement days required from 2003, a great deal was done to try and ensure appropriate placements could be found for all. This included developing placements in a range of organisations, such as playgroups, prisons, schools and health facilities. These were intended as first placements with the aim of each student also having statutory experience[47].

1.56 However, current capacity issues including high vacancy and turnover rates, workload pressures and (in some eyes) the removal of the Key Performance Indicator on practice placements for local authorities have led to a reduction of placements being provided, particularly within the statutory sector. The identification of an adequate supply of suitable placements is now routinely identified as a considerable problem within research on social work education[48].

1.57 There is widespread concern therefore that not all students have had experience of a placement in a statutory setting. It has also been noted that some students are being placed in non-social work agencies, or that they are being taught and assessed on their practice by non-social workers. This is in contrast to other professions where there appears to be a commitment to senior level staff continuing to practise, passing on their expertise and knowledge to students.

1.58 We have also heard concerns about the suitability, expertise, support and development of practice educators (linked to the ending of the previous training[49]) for those who take on the role of teaching and assessing social work students. Some current initiatives are seeking to address these issues, such as the recent nationally agreed standards for the Quality of Practice learning[50]; the developing national standards for practice educators and pilots to achieve these; and the Social Work Development Partnership's[51] work to define and improve the provision of 'statutory placements'.

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47 Each student must have experience of "statutory social work tasks involving legal interventions". *Requirements for Social Work Training*, Department of Health, 2002

48 CWDC Research Team 2009; *Evaluation of the new social work degree in England*, Department of Health, 2008; Parker J., Doel M., Whitfield J. *Does Practice Learning Assist The Recruitment and Retention of Staff?*. Research and Policy Planning 24 (3): 179–195, SSRG, 2006; Shapton, M., *What Practice Skills should Students Learn on a Social Work Qualifying Degree Course? Seeking the Views of Practitioners.* Unpublished 2009; Graham Stuart MP, survey on quality and quantity of placements for social work students, unpublished, 2009.

49 The Practice Teaching Award for those wishing to teach and assess students in placements on qualifying training was incorporated into the previous Post Qualifying framework of courses in 1996.

50 www.skillsforcare.org.uk/socialwork/practicelearning/sw_national_projects.aspx

51 The Social Work Partnership Development is partnership of SfC, CWDC and GSCC

Continuous professional development and specialisation

1.59   Reviews have shown how complex training social workers can be, even in relation to a single aspect of frontline practice, such as assessment[52]. Assessment and other key skills like report writing, record keeping and court work develop considerably through practice. They need to be continuously refined in response to different settings, new approaches and changes in policy and legislation.

1.60   Emerging evidence from our regional events, in-depth visits to local areas, discussions with social work academics, and Call for Evidence has highlighted important challenges facing provision of Post Qualifying (PQ) education and training and other forms of continuing professional development (CPD). These include:

- Funding;

- the capacity of employers and practitioners to take up training; and

- the lack of systematic recognition or incentives – in large part because PQ is not linked to re-registration, pay structures or the Children's Workforce Development Council's emerging career framework.

1.61   The current PQ framework established by the General Social Care Council in 2006[53] introduced a practice-focused range of courses at varying professional and academic levels to accommodate those recently qualifying with the Diploma in Social Work and those graduating with a social work degree. Courses are commissioned by employers and practice is assessed in the workplace. The framework consists of five specialist awards covering: children, young people, their families and carers; mental health social work (incorporating the Approved Mental Health Professionals standards); social work with adults; practice education; and leadership and management.

1.62   However, the framework has been criticised for not meeting social workers' needs for specialisation in particular fields[54]. Particular gaps have been identified in opportunities for developing skills in, for instance, therapeutic work; emergency duty work; operating in dangerous family environments and dealing with deception, diversion and hostility; and joint interviewing with the police.

1.63   The Task Force has been told of the need for a 'culture shift' in organisations to support and value CPD of all kinds. Local authorities and other agencies need to build a culture that acknowledges the importance of practice informed by evidence[55], provides guaranteed time and opportunities for supervision and research, and links achievements to performance appraisals and management. Several respondents to the Call for Evidence, and social work academics, have highlighted the benefits of continuing interaction and exchange between teaching and practice institutions through shared learning opportunities and research.

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52 Crisp et al (1*) Learning and Teaching Assessment Skills in Social Work Education* and (9) *Learning and Teaching in Social Work Education: Textbooks and Frameworks on Assessment.* SCIE Knowledge Reviews, 2003 and 2005

53 The PQ Framework for social work education and training, GSCC, 2006

54 ADASS response to Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence and deep-dive reports

55 ADASS and SCIE response to Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence

1.64 Recent initiatives announced by the Government include supporting ongoing development for newer professionals, a pilot to support frontline managers, and support for middle managers and the development of a Masters in Social Work Practice[56].

1.65 In summary, there is real confusion currently about the education and training of social workers. There appears to be a lack of shared understanding about:

- the overall division of responsibility of HEIs, employers and social workers themselves, leading to frustration and unmet expectations on all sides;

- what precisely the different phases and settings for education and training are meant to achieve in the development of confident, effective social workers; and

- the range of institutions involved in social work education and training, resulting in confusion in the workforce about who is responsible for what.

Leadership of the profession

"Our job is to go out and protect people. But it feels like no one is protecting us."
Social worker

"Nobody made enough noise about the problems to insist ICS was changed."
Social worker

"Sometimes it looks as though the Government doesn't know where to put social work."
Social worker

1.66 Frontline social workers are deeply unsure about where to look for overall leadership of the profession.

1.67 On the Social Work Task Force, we are bringing the voice and experience of social workers, service users and their managers and employers into the heart of central government policy making. However, we have heard strong concerns both from Government Ministers and within the profession itself that there has not been a clear and coherent voice of social work to influence policy making and service design at national and local level[57]. 81 per cent of respondents to the Call for Evidence survey gave the highest possible agreement ratings to the statement that "the social work profession does not have a strong national voice and is not well supported at national level".

1.68 Currently, there are a number of different national organisations, operating to a range of remits, all of which have some bearing on how the profession is developed and led.

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56 This was announced by the Secretary of State for Children Schools and Families in March and is currently being undertaken by the Department of Health, DCSF, GSCC, JUCSWEC, BASW, CWDC, Skills for Care and Learn to Care.

57 *"It probably won't surprise you to know that I spend a lot of time meeting people like Kim, the teaching unions and representatives of other professions who work with children and families."*
"But looking back in particular to the period when we were consulting as we were drawing up our Children's Plan, it's a real surprise to me that people representing the children's social care sector weren't knocking on my door." Secretary of State for Children, School and Families, speech to ADCS conference, July 2009

The GENERAL SOCIAL CARE COUNCIL (GSCC) is responsible for setting standards of conduct and practice for social care workers and their employers, for regulating the workforce, and for regulating social work education and training.

The BRITISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORKERS (BASW) is a membership organisation representing social work and social workers in the United Kingdom. BASW campaigns on social work issues and seeks to provide a voice for social workers in social policy development nationally and internationally.

The CHILDREN'S WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT COUNCIL (CWDC) is an employer-led organisation covering the main children's workforce employers across the public, private, voluntary and independent sectors. Their work of CWDC is focused on the skills needs of over half a million people in the children's workforce across England, including those in social care.

SKILLS FOR CARE is an employer-led authority on the training standards and development needs of nearly a million social care staff in England. It funds support for improved training and qualifications for managers and staff and seeks to ensure that qualifications and standards adapt to meet the changing needs of social care workers, employers and people who use care services.

The ASSOCIATION OF DIRECTORS OF ADULT SOCIAL SERVICES (ADASS) represents all the directors of adult social services in England and Northern Ireland.

The ASSOCIATION OF DIRECTORS OF CHILDREN'S SERVICES (ADCS) is a national leadership organisation in England for the statutory directors of children's services and other children's services' professionals in leadership roles appointed under the provisions of the *Children Act 2004*.

UNISON is a public sector union with more than 1.3 million members, including 40,000 social workers, across the United Kingdom. Unison is on the National Joint Council for Local Government Services and negotiates pay and conditions for local authority and allied staff, including social workers.

The ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONALS IN EDUCATION AND CHILDREN'S TRUSTS (ASPECT) is the professional association and trade union representing professionals working in educational improvement, social care and children's services.

The SOCIAL WORK DEVELOPMENT PARTNERSHIP is a partnership led by CWDC and Skills for Care. Its aim is to support employers to work with higher education institutions in ensuring that people studying for a social work degree get a high quality experience of practical social work, and that social workers get high quality continuing professional development opportunities.

The SOCIAL CARE INSTITUTE FOR EXCELLENCE (SCIE) was established by the Government in 2001 to improve social care services for adults and children in the United Kingdom. Its mission is to identify and spread knowledge about good practice to the large and diverse social care workforce, and support the delivery of transformed, personalised social care services.

1.69 This list is not exhaustive. It does not, for instance, cover inspectorates, umbrella bodies for social work education or looser networks focusing on social work.

1.70 There will be benefits to diversity and flexibility in how social work is represented and led. However, despite this whole ecology of organisations, social workers still find themselves under-represented in the policy debates and public discourse that ultimately shape practice and conditions on the frontline.

1.71 Specific examples of this absence from public and policy debates put to the Task Force have included:

- the Mental Health Act, as an example of where social workers did not have a strong, collective voice in the development of legislation that would have a huge bearing on their work and to which they could have contributed valuable experience and expertise; and

- the public and media debates in the wake of the Baby Peter case, in which social workers felt there was no strong voice to explain and, where appropriate, defend the wider profession.

1.72 It has been repeatedly pointed out to the Task Force therefore that there is no single, clear focus of responsibility for the many activities that would drive the profession towards lasting improvement and excellence. These activities include:

- promoting the identity of the profession and improving public understanding;

- managing relations with other professions;

- making the voice of frontline social work heard in policy development and legislative change;

- disseminating best practice from and to the frontline; and

- supporting and challenging the profession to achieve excellence.

1.73 Strong leadership which takes ownership of these matters is crucial if the profession is going to take responsibility for improvement and reform over the long term. Responses to the Task Force Call for Evidence from the frontline and from several of the current national organisations recognised the need for a new set of arrangements, and expressed support for and interest in the creation of a new institution such as a national college.

Performance management

> *"The essence of a profession is when people make their own judgements and decisions, following consultation with others about what's needed. We've taken this out of social work. We have given it a very managerial focus. We've taken away some of the capacity of social workers to think for themselves."*
>
> Senior manager
>
> *"How can social workers help young people? Come down more often to see how the child's doing, take them out for a coffee, give them more space out of the foster house, and give them the chance to say how they feel about where they are placed."*
>
> Service user

1.74   The impact of what social workers do is currently monitored at local level through a disparate group of performance indicators[58]. We have encountered a widespread view among frontline social workers and line managers, several groups of other professionals, and some service users that these indicators are measuring such things as the rate at which processes are completed, rather than quality of service or outcomes for the service user.

1.75   This is matched by a concern that local authority social workers are being managed, and their time is being deployed, in order to satisfy processes rather than provide quality. Social workers with experience of statutory settings now operating in the third sector have drawn a sharp contrast with approaches they now encounter based on feedback from service users and first-hand judgements about quality by managers and others.

1.76   The timeliness of services is an important factor in quality, user satisfaction and achieving good outcomes. However, it is also true that many of the indicators do focus on the completion of processes and that the direct voice of the service user is weak in comparison.

1.77   The overall effect of this appears to be a sense of a profession that is, in places, at risk of becoming too mechanised and of being 'de-skilled' through an over emphasis on compliance rather than judgement. Social work is in need of a clearer account of how its effectiveness should be judged and how this could be incentivised in a new approach to performance indicators, inspection and evaluation.

How social work is understood and valued

> *"We are not like other professions. We don't have a clear version of what we do that gets us through the front door and into the lives of the people we can help."*
>
> Social worker, Emergency Duty Team
>
> *"The public don't understand what social workers do and why it is so important."*
>
> Adult service user

1.78   The role and purpose of social work is unclear to many.

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58 See Single Set of National Indicators, CLG.

- A review of the roles and tasks of social work from services users' perspectives concluded

  "All the signs are that the roles and tasks of social work have not been and are still not well known to the public or to service users. (…) Thus social work may be something the public has often strong negative views about, but equally it doesn't have a clear understanding of what social work is and what it does."[59]"

  The same review suggested that social workers need to be much clearer to service users about what they do.

- A literature review on the role of the social worker in the twenty-first century commissioned by the Scottish Executive concluded that the language of social work is "confusing and contributes to the lack of clarity about what social workers do. This means that there is no universally accepted idea of valid knowledge, skills or expertise for social workers."[60]

- The Key Partners Group of the Social Work Task Force – which brings together representative organisations from the social work arena and allied disciplines – identified serious gaps in the shared understanding of what social work is for, and what social workers do, as a central challenge for reform.

- Responses to the online survey the Task Force ran as part of its Call for Evidence found that 88 per cent of respondents agreed with the statement that "the social work profession is undervalued, poorly understood and under continuous media attack. This is making it hard for social workers to do their job and hard to attract people into the profession."[61]

1.79 Submissions to our Call for Evidence have highlighted related issues such as the lack, under law, of 'reserved activities' for social workers (in contrast with other regulated professions). Differences in practice about how thresholds for social worker involvement are set are also inevitably adding to confusion about the precise role of the social worker. All of these issues are causing concern on the frontline of the profession. Indeed, we have found that social workers themselves struggle to articulate the central role and purpose of the profession.

1.80 In adults' services, particularly, social workers are concerned about what the role of the social worker will be in the roll out of the personalisation agenda: whether case management will disappear; whether there will still be a need for the distinctive contribution of the social worker. In children's services, social workers are often concerned that their role is seen by many as simply one of enforcement in the hardest and most complex cases.

1.81 Social workers and others have helped the Task Force to trace the impact of this confusion on the frontline. This impact includes:

- frustrated expectations among service users and other professionals based on their pre-conceptions about what social workers should do; and

- a tendency among other professionals to see the social worker as the practitioner who will pick up the sundry administrative tasks associated with a case

59 Peter Beresford, *The Changing Roles and Tasks of Social Work from Service Users' Perspectives*, Shaping Our Lives, March 2007
60 *The Role of the Social Worker in the 21st Century – A Literature Review.* The Scottish Executive, 2005
61 www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf

1.82   This confusion about the role of social workers is compounded by problems with the public image and status of the profession.

1.83   Opinion surveys generally confirm that many people have mixed feelings about social workers. Submissions to the Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence have highlighted research suggesting that many of the negative perceptions of the public at large are shared by the wider children's workforce[62]; how social work is not held in the same regard as professions such as nursing; and how social workers often work in areas where there is frequently a lack of ambition and prevailing negativity about what people can achieve[63].

1.84   Social workers themselves are acutely aware of the impact on the image of the profession of cases in which children known to local services have died at the hands of parents or carers and in which there have been failings in practice, management and leadership. However, many also argue that society does not yet accept that a high quality social work service needs investment, effort, encouragement and high levels of professional expertise; and that society needs to attach greater value to the support to people in the difficult circumstances social work tries to address. They point to the personal and professional risks social workers sometimes have to take, which are not recognised or appreciated. A lot of excellent work, which might change perceptions of social work, goes unrecorded and unrecognised. In high profile cases where children have died or been badly hurt, social workers feel there is a lack of focus on the role of other professionals with social workers fulfilling the role of 'scapegoat'.

1.85   This state of affairs – with the profession struggling both to convey a clear sense of its role and purpose and a positive public image – has clear implications for recruitment and retention. However, social workers and others have also helped us to trace the impact on, for instance:

Morale: Social workers can feel besieged and undervalued, and this affects their day-to-day performance.

Access to services: Parents and others who need or could benefit from intervention by a social worker use bad publicity for social workers as a way of deflecting offers of support or challenge.

Returners: Adverse coverage in the media may deter social workers not currently practising from returning to the profession, cutting off a valuable source of experience and expertise.

Working with other agencies: Social workers deal with many different aspects of people's lives. Positive outcomes for social work, therefore, very often depend on joint working with other professionals. This becomes difficult when other professionals are not clear or confident about what social workers have to offer.

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62 *A*DCS submission referencing research published by The Lancet
63 GSCC submission to the Social Work Task Force Call for Evidence

Conclusion

1.86   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 into 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.

2: The future of social work

This chapter sets out the Task Force's ambitious vision for the future of social work, and the principles on which reform should be based. We say that 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; and

- address the full range of factors which influence the workforce.To ensure that it addresses the full range of factors which influence the workforce, reform must be built from a number of interdependent 'building blocks', founded on a shared understanding of the role and purpose of the profession. This chapter identifies these building blocks, sets out our current view of the changes that must be realised in relation to each, and how they are interdependent. It discusses the solutions that the Task Force is considering, which we will develop further over the coming months to inform our final recommendations.

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

The creation of a national college for social work

A national college is needed to give the profession a stronger and more cohesive focus and voice. This organisation could play a 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

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

Clearer career progression

Social work needs a career structure which rewards expertise in frontline practice and is closely linked to training and professional development. We are 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

A better 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 needs 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, 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;**

- **basic resources, including IT and communications technology; and**

- **access to research and learning about how their practice can have most impact.**

To support this, the profession needs clear guidelines on best practice around key responsibilities of social workers, how good quality supervision and CPD can be ensured and how workloads can be managed. We will also make recommendations in our final report about how remodelling 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.

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

In this chapter we also set out the 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 as a plain English description to help the profession meet the challenge of explaining to service users and the public what it does. This clearer understanding – along with its implications for the roles and tasks 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 the roles that social workers can or should perform, and the knowledge and skills that they need, to inform our final recommendations.

Introduction: our vision and ambitions

2.1   Our vision for social work is that this should become a profession that is:

- 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 value to the public;

- 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; and

- well led at every level: in frontline 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.

2.2   If we can achieve all of this, we believe we will have a confident, effective social work profession, capable of attracting and retaining the best people, and making a strong, dynamic difference to society and to service users.

2.3   Our vision is a challenging one. Achieving it will require a step-change in approach. New expectations, different behaviour and a much stronger shared purpose will be needed from everyone in the social work profession and every one who has a role in supporting it: individual professionals, managers, employers, educators, representative organisations; regulators and inspectorates; national bodies and central government departments.

2.4   We cannot afford to lower these ambitions. The problems described earlier in this report make clear why. Our consultations with people who know and care about social work, and the support this agenda is now receiving from government Ministers, give us confidence that people at every level are ready to rise to the challenges and opportunities of reform.

Principles to guide reform

2.5   To achieve our vision, and to overcome the challenges we have identified, the reform programme for social work 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 ensure good value for public money; and

- address the full range of factors which influence the workforce.

2.6   The recommendations that we will set out in our final report will be informed by these principles. They will seek to address all of the following factors which influence the quality and capacity of the workforce, and therefore the outcomes it can deliver:

- high quality and appropriate initial training;

- high quality ongoing training and development, and support for new entrants and re-entrants;

- that social workers on the frontline have the resources they need to practise effectively;

- that there is a clear career structure, with progression and clarity about professional, para-professional and support roles;

- selection and retention of the workforce we need;

- strong national leadership of the social work profession;

- public value and understanding of social work and its purpose;

- that the inspection and accountability regime supports social workers to improve outcomes; and

- that national and local government ('the delivery system') lead and manage the system in ways which enable and safeguard both effective practice and strong local leadership.

2.7   We see these as a number of interdependent 'building blocks'. We must get each individual element right, but, if they are to have their full impact on delivering the improvement we need to see, they must also come together to form a robust whole.

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 accountabilty 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

2.8   We hope that the Government will respond to our full recommendations by making a strong commitment to leading comprehensive change for the profession, and to investing in the reform that is needed. But our approach to reform cannot be 'top down'. Government cannot make the difference that is needed on its own. It will be critical to that change that everyone involved – employers, educators, inspectorates and regulators, social workers themselves and their managers – also face up to the task and make the difference that is needed.

The 'building blocks' of reform and the changes that are needed

2.9   This section explores each of the 'building blocks' of the reform programme. It sets out the Task Force's early views of the changes that are needed, their implications, and some of the interdependencies that must be recognised.

> Strong national professional leadership

2.10   The Social Work Task Force is strongly persuaded that, for reform to be successful, the social work profession must develop a stronger, more persuasive and more coherent voice in national policy making, local service design and public debate. To some extent, the Task Force itself is playing this role at present: we are bringing the voice and experience of social workers, their managers, service users and employers into the heart of central government policy making, and beginning to engage with the media and public debate. But our principal job is to make recommendations for change. Others will need to ensure that change happens and that the profession starts and continues on a confident path to improvement.

2.11   We are therefore exploring the case for a new organisation to support social work, which can play a role similar to that of the Royal Colleges that support the medical and allied professions. This might take the form of a national college for social work in England. Over the summer, we will work with the key organisations which would be affected, to consider how such a body could be founded and funded, and the roles and powers it might have. In particular, the Task Force is interested in the potential for the national college to have a key role in driving learning and best practice in social work and provide a strong voice which speaks to the media about the profession. We are also considering the roles it might play in bringing coherence to the professional and occupational standards which underpin different aspects of social work training and practice, and in relation to regulation of professional practice, training and education.

2.12   We do not yet have a view on the relationship such a body should have to existing national level organisations. We will work closely with those organisations, particularly the General Social Care Council (GSCC), relevant sector skills councils, Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) to draw on their expertise and experience and identify the approach which we will recommend. We will also consult the profession and the trade unions which represent social workers. Our remit extends only to social work in England; however, we will particularly need to consider the impact that creating such a body would have on the profession in all parts of the United Kingdom and consult with partners in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

| High quality, appropriate initial training | High quality ongoing training and development |

2.13 The selection of future social workers and the quality of initial training are critical to the capacity and competence of the social work profession. The experience of new entrants and the training they receive will have a lasting effect on the way that they develop as practitioners and, therefore, on the service users with whom they work. At the same time, we feel strongly that initial training can only be the start of the professional learning journey that every social worker must commit themselves to, and which employers, educators and the profession itself must support. Social work needs a much more robust culture of continual learning and professional development. Throughout their careers, social workers must be able and incentivised to access and engage with the research that can help them to improve their own practice and improve outcomes for the people they work with.

2.14 The training of social workers has received significant attention and investment in recent years, particularly in the new undergraduate qualification route. However, as the evidence set out previously makes clear, there are fundamental issues that still need to be addressed as part of the programme of comprehensive reform.

2.15 In relation to initial training, it will be critical:

- that there are clear, shared, expectations of initial training between students, employers, educators and government;

- that we can find both immediate and longer-term solutions to the challenge of providing high quality practice placements, properly supervised and assessed, which help to prepare students for practice in the statutory sector;

- that the regulation, inspection and funding regimes that support initial training work together to drive and secure quality;

- that the right people are attracted and recruited into social work, in the right numbers; and

- that the skills and knowledge that they acquire provides a strong foundation for high quality practice and for continuing professional development throughout their careers.

2.16 Some of the issues that the Task Force is particularly exploring in initial training include:

- how to attract the right people into initial training, including through appropriate entry criteria;

- the best way of ensuring that there are clear and shared expectations of the social work curriculum and that the right knowledge and skills are learnt to the right depth – this will include further consideration about the point at which specialisation in adults' or children's social work should be encouraged; and

- ensuring that we have the right balance between undergraduate and graduate entry paths.

We need to ensure that employers and educators work together on these issues, including how they support work-based entry routes into the profession and high quality placement experiences for university-based students.

2.17   The provision of social work courses is expensive and it is important to ensure that those most likely to succeed and enter the workforce as high quality social workers are selected, in tandem with a supply model to ensure we are training the right number of people. However, it is important to be realistic about what can be achieved through a three year initial training period.

2.18   Newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) need particular support and protection of time for learning and development in the early years of their careers. With this, they can consolidate their skills, develop their professionalism and embark upon successful social work careers. The Task Force welcomes the Government's investment in support for NQSWs in their first year of practice. However, it is essential to go further to protect this critical period of development. We are therefore actively considering the benefits of delaying full qualification in social work until graduates have completed (as well as their initial training) an assessed and supported year in practice and are looking at whether there should be constraints upon the types of cases NQSWs should be allowed to manage, or on the settings in which they can be employed.

2.19   Access to high quality, properly supported continuing professional development (CPD) must build on the strong foundation laid down by the initial qualification and first years in practice. CPD is also an urgent issue for the thousands of qualified social workers already in the profession. For both current social workers and social workers of the future, the profession must develop a strong and supported culture of learning. The Task Force believes that social workers need to take personal responsibility for their professional development, but they need to be supported to do so through their initial training and at every stage of their careers. This requires employers and educators to also commit to investing in and supporting the development of each generation of social workers, throughout their professional lives.

2.20   Opportunities for CPD need to be underpinned by a post-qualifying framework which not only gives access to training in specialist social work disciplines, but also supports ongoing learning and research by social workers throughout their careers. In this context, the Task Force welcomes the Government's commitment to developing a post-qualifying Masters qualification for social workers. We believe that it is critical that this opportunity is open to everyone in the profession and that it sits in the context of a much wider, more coherent framework for professional development.

2.21   At the same time, we must reflect on concerns that we have heard about the basic skills levels of some NQSWs and some who are already in the profession. It is critical that social workers who need to improve their communication, analysis and writing skills have support to do so. If we are aiming for a graduate level profession, we must also consider the needs of those who did not have the opportunity to achieve an honours degree level qualification under the previous qualifications frameworks.

2.22   The Task Force believes that to be successful the post-qualifying training framework needs to be linked much more explicitly to career structures, progression and Post Registration Training and Learning (PRTL) requirements for registration with the GSCC. Its success will be dependent not only on the standards and quality of the training and materials, but also on the shared engagement of employers and professionals: both sides must make the commitment of time and resources that will be necessary.

2.23   It is clear that the success of reform to education and training will need employers and educators to forge a new partnership for driving improvement. With the support of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, as well as the Departments of Health and for Children, Schools and Families, we are also working to bring together key influencers – employers, educators, regulators, policy makers and social worker themselves – for a 'summit' to identify how new partnerships for improvement can be forged.

> Resources which support
> and enable effective
> practice

2.24   The Task Force believes that to be effective in their practice, 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; and

- access to research and learning about how their practice can have most impact.

2.25   In our first report to the Government, we welcomed Lord Laming's recommendations about supervision and caseload management in children's services. High quality supervision and manageable caseloads are essential to successful social work in all settings. Guidance in relation to this should form an important part of the comprehensive reform programme. The returns from our workload survey are being fully analysed at present: these will provide the context for the Task Force to make more specific recommendations about how employers and managers can ensure that their social workers are supported to focus on the tasks that make most difference to service users.

2.26   It is clear to us already that to achieve change, many managers and employers will need to develop new approaches to how social workers use their time, and how they are supported. This will be critical if they are to fully address the capacity issues on the frontline and ensure that social workers are able to use their time effectively and improve the quality and impact of their practice. In parallel with our work on the roles and purpose of social work, and analysis of the workload survey, therefore, the Task Force will particularly be looking particularly to the evidence emerging from the current remodelling pilots in children's social

work and at learning from the ways in which work load issues have been addressed in other professions. We will make recommendations in our final report about how remodelling 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.

2.27   There are also issues which social workers, their managers and employers need to address now. Social workers need supportive, committed and challenging managers who listen to them and understand their work. Like anyone working in a pressured and stressful environment and carrying high levels of personal responsibility, they need their employers to have strong regard for their health, well-being and safety. In our consultation with social workers, we have heard of working conditions on the frontline and poor communication between staff and managers, which appear to threaten even these very basic expectations. We hope that this report, and the opportunities that we are setting out for the future, will help every employer and manager to take the initiative to consult with staff about the opportunities for improvement that they can implement locally and can make a difference immediately.

2.28   In many areas, some of these will relate specifically to information technology (IT). In our first report, in May, we made recommendations to the Government about how the integrated children's system (ICS) in children's services should be improved. However, we also made clear our view that many of the problems which have been associated with the system are founded on poor IT infrastructure and hardware at local level. The usability assessment which the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) has developed in response to our recommendations will be a helpful tool to authorities which need to identify such problems and it is important that every authority takes steps to make the improvements that are necessary.

2.29   The Task Force will continue to work with DCSF to see through the current set of improvements to the ICS. We are continuing to look at questions relating to how IT can most effectively support social work practice in both adults' and children's services to inform our final recommendations.

2.30   The capacity of managers to lead and manage services – and individual social workers – effectively is a critical dependency of the improvements that our reform programme needs to achieve. The Task Force will be particularly looking at what more needs to be done to ensure that managers themselves have manageable workloads and the capacity to access, understand and put in place the resources that social workers need.

> ### Clear roles and career structure

2.31   Developing a clearer career structure for social workers will be a key element of reform. This will play an important role in attracting and keeping the best people. It will help ensure that social workers are in roles which make best use of their skills and that they are supported and challenged to develop as professionals throughout their careers. As discussed above, highly competent social work managers are critical to our success.

However, management should not be the only progression route for talented front line practitioners.

2.32 The Government is currently piloting development of a new Advanced Professional Social Work role in children's services. Many authorities and employers have developed career ladders within their organisations, with senior social workers' and consultant social workers' roles in some areas. This is a welcome development. The Task Force will consider how far a national approach to setting career structure would be beneficial. In particular, we will look at how it might be related to the stronger framework for post-qualifying education and CPD discussed above.

2.33 More structured career pathways within the profession could have implications for the current arrangements for determining social workers' pay. We are considering the implications of this. We are particularly interested in whether or how different arrangements for determining pay and conditions could support comprehensive reform for the profession and the impact that this would have on affordable, equal pay arrangements and the flexibility of employers to lead and manage development of their workforce at local level.

2.34 The Task Force believes that career structures within social work should support career progression which allows social workers to develop specialist expertise in working with particular groups or in particular service areas as well as to move between different parts of the profession. We are particularly interested in roles which:

- would keep skilled and experienced practitioners in frontline practice working with service users; and

- would promote and reward the teaching and supervision of students and NQSWs.

We are also keen to explore career pathways which would encourage much greater interchange between research and practice.

2.35 A clearer career structure, with greater clarity about social work roles, would have implications for other social care and family support roles which are not filled by qualified social workers. The Task Force is also keen to see greater definition of these para-professional and ancillary roles. 'Re-modelling' of services should make best and most efficient use of their skills and those of people in non-social work roles. It would also support improved training and development opportunities for people in supporting roles including work-based pathways into the profession itself.

> Supply Strategy –
> understanding demand
> and influencing supply

2.36 If the reforms that we are discussing are to have the impact that they must, we will need a much more sophisticated understanding of supply and demand of social workers and how this can be managed. In *The Protection of Children in England: a progress report*, Lord Laming recommended that the Government should develop a national supply model for children's

social workers. The Task Force supports this and believes that it is important that the supply model also addresses the need for social workers in adult services.

2.37   Development of the supply model will require much more robust arrangements for collecting data (including vacancy rates) about how many social workers are needed and the capacity for forecasts to be made. This will need to be informed by the clearer understanding of the role and purpose of social work which forms the foundation stone of the reform programme. It should take account of how and where social workers are needed in integrated and personalised models of service delivery. It also requires a much stronger understanding than currently available of the demand for social work, and how demographic and societal changes affect it.

2.38   This must be a supply model which supports employers at local level to predict and plan for the social work capacity they need, and to influence the supply that is available. However, it will also need to operate on a national basis: in particular, we are interested in how the availability and funding of initial training can be related more effectively to projections of the need for social workers on a national basis and in different parts of the country. This is critical to developing a sustained supply of social workers to meet demand, and also to ensuring that best value is derived from the public money that supports students and pays for their training.

> Inspection and accountabilty regime supporting improved outcomes

2.39   The Task Force believes that regulation and inspection of the social work profession and education system should ensure that:

- social workers are properly prepared for practice;

- social workers can be held to account for the quality of their professional practice; and

- employers are also required to put in place the resources needed to support social workers.

2.40   As with supply, inspection and accountability must be underpinned by the clear understanding of the role and purpose of social work. They must support the reform programme in its entirety and will play a critical role in ensuring that social work is making and demonstrating a positive difference in outcomes for those who use its services.

2.41   The Task Force is particularly interested in the concept of a licence to practise social work. This might be attained after initial qualification and would set a higher standard for practice than the current GSCC registration, potentially addressing the issues relating to readiness to practise which we have identified above. Such an approach must also be supported by clear expectations of employers and equivalent mechanisms for holding them to account. We will be looking closely at plans to give statutory force to the GSCC code of practice for

employers. We are also interested in other approaches which would allow monitoring and licensing of employers providing social care services and wishing to employ social workers.

2.42   Performance management of the services within which social workers work is also important in securing high quality practice. In particular, we have highlighted to the DCSF that its review of the national indicator set for children's safeguarding should ensure that the revised indicator set will be successful in driving quality. We will make recommendations which relate to the wider regulation and inspection of the services within which social workers work, if we feel that these are necessary to support effective social work practice or to enable or drive reform.

> Delivery system providing strong local and national leadership

2.43   Effective frontline social work practice does not depend solely on the quality and confidence of individual social workers, the training they receive, and the time and resources they have to do their jobs. It also relies heavily on the people and organisations that support them and their expectations and priorities. These people and organisations include national government departments, regulators and inspectorates; sector skills bodies; higher education and other training providers; and employers and managers. Together, they form the 'delivery system' that supports social work.

2.44   If we are to achieve effective and lasting reform within the profession, it is imperative that all parts of the system have a shared aim. Individual roles, responsibilities and accountabilities need to be clear. This supporting framework, and the changes needed to achieve it, must be led by national government. It is important, however, that it develops through partnership and consultation so that all parts of the system understand their purpose and can play their role effectively.

2.45   The Government is currently considering the roles and remits of the Government-funded organisations which support both the children's workforce (including children and families social work) and adult social care (including adult social work). These organisations will have essential roles in our reform programme and may be affected by our final recommendations. We will ensure that we fully consider the impacts of our recommendations on these organisations.

2.46   As we have discussed above, the profession itself – through a new national college and through the unions that represent it – can also contribute to the effectiveness and focus of the delivery system. A new national college will have an important role in this and our recommendations will look at the relationships that such a body should have to existing organisations or any functions which it should be given.

2.47   The voice of service users is also critical: their insight is key at individual through to strategic level. The Task Force's final recommendations will be influenced by our continuing consultation and engagement with service users. It will also be important that we can build

on current practices to firmly embed the service user perspective in the leadership framework within which the profession develops.

2.48   Local leadership is also imperative – at political and chief executive level in local authorities and by other employers and service providers. Those running and commissioning social work services – and integrated services within which social workers have a role – must have both the resources they need and a clear understanding of the value of social work in achieving improvement in the outcomes of their target populations. As we have set out throughout this report, they also have considerable responsibility for engaging in the challenge of social work reform. In particular:

- a new partnership between employers and social work educators will be essential to the improvements that are need in training and development;

- in a reformed system, employers and commissioners will need to take full responsibility for ensuring that social workers and their managers have the resources they need to do their jobs effectively; and

- employers and commissioners have a critical responsibility now to work with their social workers and to learn from each other to find ways of ameliorating the difficult conditions in many areas of frontline practice.

> Public value and understanding

2.49   Social workers and many others have spoken to us about their concern around the poor public image and understanding of social work. The reforms we are outlining will create a profession that should be able to demonstrate its value through its day-to-day interactions with members of the public.

2.50   However, there will always be strong public interest in, and challenge to, the judgements social workers make in difficult cases. The media will always be interested in these and the public is always going to be influenced by the media. Social work as a profession, therefore, needs to improve its capacity to:

- engage with the media constructively and pro-actively;

- respond to coverage of high profile cases; and

- encourage journalists to tell stories about successful social work that makes a positive difference as well as covering controversy and cases in which things have gone wrong.

2.51   A national college for the profession will have an important role in explaining and promoting social work to the public. The Government can also act to improve the public image of the profession and is beginning to do so. The Task Force has very much welcomed the opportunities that Ministers have taken in recent months to meet social workers on the frontline and to speak positively about them in public. We consider that public demonstrations of commitment and confidence of this kind will play an important role in successful reform.

2.52 We also welcome the forthcoming marketing campaign, to be run by the Children's Workforce Development Council, to recruit social workers into the profession and believe that this could have a wider positive effect on public understanding of, and morale within, the profession. It is important that the messages which support this recognise the importance of social work with adults as well as children.

2.53 Social workers and their employers can also act to improve the coverage that social work receives in the media, and public understanding of the profession. We particularly encourage them to build strong relationships with the local media, and to be proactive in compiling 'good news' stories about the positive outcomes that social workers have helped to achieve. It is also important to recognise that any social worker could get caught up in a controversial case. While employers have a critical role in protecting social workers from inappropriate exposure, they should also support their staff to acquire the skills necessary to engage with the media in positive and proactive ways where this can help public understanding of what they do.

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

2.54 The changes that we put in place must be driven and underpinned by a much stronger, shared understanding of the purpose of social work. This must recognise the place of social work within increasingly integrated services and the personalisation agenda. It must enable social workers themselves, their employers and educators and others with key interests to identify the skills, knowledge and resources that contemporary social workers need and the roles that they can most appropriately play. We must be able to communicate this easily to the service users and the public, as well as within the profession and wider system. This understanding forms the foundation stone on which the 'building blocks' of the reform programme must be based.

2.55 The description of social work which we have developed, and which is set out below, provides the basis for a clear description of the profession so that it can explain itself to the public, and also forms the starting point for development of that foundation stone of reform.

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 to protect them – 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 the 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; or
- having practical problems with money or housing.

2.56   Building on this description, the Department of Health and Department for Children, Schools and Families have asked Skills for Care and the Children's Workforce Development Council to work with the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services and the Association of Directors of Children's Services, other employers and frontline staff, to develop a clear articulation of roles and tasks that social workers should perform, and the skills and knowledge they need, in adults' and children's services. They will report to the Task Force on this in September 2009. This work will inform our recommendations about all aspects of the reform programme and will have particular value in shaping our thinking about the content and structure of social work education, and informing development of a model for social work supply.

3: Next steps

3.1   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 gathering the views of service users on social work 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 will consider the recommendations of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee into the Training of Children and Families Social Workers, which will also inform our final recommendations to the Government.

3.2   However, we have also identified much of what needs to change in order to deliver comprehensive reform. Our task is now 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.

3.3   We will continue to discuss our emerging findings with frontline professionals and other key partners to make sure that our detailed recommendations take account of the changes they want to see. 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 increasing the understanding of social work, building on the new description we have put forward in this report.

3.4   To stay in touch with the work of the Task Force and identify further opportunities to be involved, please visit: www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf, or www.dh.gov.uk/en/SocialCare/DH_098322

Annex A: Evidence gathering and stakeholder engagement

The Social Work Task Force is engaging with a wide variety of stakeholders, from the frontline and elsewhere, and running a range of evidence gathering activities, in order to understand the challenges facing social work and the scope and content of potential reform.

Regional Events

Regional Events have been held in London (twice), Gatwick, Bristol, Newcastle, Leeds, Nottingham, Birmingham, Peterborough and Manchester. These events were heavily oversubscribed. However, over 1000 social worker and other linked professionals were able to attend. These events gave participants the opportunity to share their experiences of frontline social work and their views about what could be done to improve it. A parallel online survey aimed at practitioners who were not able to attend Regional Events received contributions from 500 individuals.

Visits to local authorities

A series of six in-depth visits to local authorities (usually lasting two days) included separate focus groups with practising social workers, people who use services, managers and directors, staff from higher education institutes and other professionals who work with social workers in each area.

Survey on the Integrated Children's System (ICS)

ICS users were given an opportunity to provide the Task Force with their thoughts on ICS through an online survey hosted on the Social Work Task Force website. Around 850 people responded to the survey, which contained 19 statements to which respondents were asked to rate each statement using a 0–5 rating scale.

Meetings with social work academics

Two meetings were held with over 20 key social work academics and researchers in total. These debates helped the Task Force to identify some solutions to the challenges and concerns which have been expressed about the quality and effectiveness of social work education in preparing graduates for social work practice.

Call for Evidence

The Call for Evidence was launched following the publication of the first report of the Social Work Task Force in May. In total, 370 individuals responded to the Call for Evidence survey online. Over 97 pieces of written evidence were submitted.

Literature review

A literature review has been undertaken to ensure that key messages from previous research and evidence are taken into account by the Social Work Task Force.

Workload survey

Over 1,100 social workers in adults' and children's services across 30 local authorities and a number of other organisations have completed a workload survey to establish more precisely how social workers are spending their time and what the issues are impacting most on their workload. This involved completing a diary exercise over a seven-day period. Additionally, telephone interviews were held with a number of participating social workers; and a survey was also undertaken of directors of services or their delegated officers.

Practitioners Reference Group (PRG)

The PRG is a group of 16 frontline social work practitioners, from a wide variety of settings, formed to help ensure that the Task Force's emerging ideas and proposals are informed by frontline social work practice and experience.

Key Partners Group (KPG)

The KPG contains representatives from a wide range of stakeholders and key delivery partners who will draw upon their knowledge and expertise to inform the Task Force's work. Members of the KPG include unions and professional bodies for frontline social workers as well as professionals working in wider children's and adults' services.

Annex B: Membership of the Social Work Task Force

Moira Gibb CBE
Chief Executive, Camden Borough Council

Bob Reitemeier
Chief Executive, Children's Society

Andrew Webb
Corporate Director, Children and Young People, Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council

Celia Atherton OBE
Chief Executive, Research in Practice

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

Kim Bromley-Derry
Executive Director of Children's Services, Newham Council

Sue Butcher
Head of Children and Young People's Services, Gloucestershire County Council

Richard Jones
Director of Adult Services, Lancashire County Council

Diane Mallett
Senior Practitioner and Practice Teacher, Darton Social Services

Helga Pile
Local Government Service Group, Unison

James Reilly
Director of Adult Services, London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham

Bridget Robb
Interim Manager (Professional Services) England, British Association of Social Workers

Deidre Sanders
Problem Page Editor, The Sun

Jivan Sembi
Head of Safeguarding, Coventry City Council

Jamaila Tausif
Team Manager, University Hospital of North Staffordshire

Sue White
Professor of Social Work, Lancaster University

Neil Wragg MBE
Chief Executive Officer, Youth at Risk

Maxine Wrigley
National Coordinator, A National Voice

The first report of the Social Work Task Force

Chair: Moira Gibb CBE
c/o Joint Social Work Unit
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www.dcsf.gov.uk/swtf

5 May 2009

**To: Ed Balls, Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families
Alan Johnson, Secretary of State for Health**

Dear Alan and Ed

FIRST REPORT OF THE SOCIAL WORK TASK FORCE

Social workers do some of the most valuable yet challenging jobs in our society. They support people at times in their lives when – perhaps because of bereavement, addiction, mental illness, disability, old age or because children are at risk of neglect or abuse – they are at their most vulnerable, and can be most difficult to help.

In order to do their jobs well, social workers need support from the public, service users, government, their employers, and those who train and educate, regulate and inspect them. At the same time, they must demonstrate and hold themselves accountable for practice which really makes a difference for the people who are letting them into their lives. The Social Work Task Force does not believe social workers are currently getting the support they need to maintain the consistent high professional standards the public rightly expects – but the profession must also take more responsibility for those standards itself.

The Social Work Task Force welcomes, therefore, the commitments that the Secretaries of State for Children, Schools and Families and for Health have made to improvement in the support received by social workers, and the recommendations of Lord Laming in his report "The Protection of Children in England". We have been asked to advise the Government on the content of a comprehensive programme of reform for the whole social work profession, across adult and children's services. This letter sets out our emerging view of the challenges we will need to address and opens our Call for Evidence. It includes our early response to Lord Laming's report, and our recommendations for the future of the DCSF's Integrated Children's System. Finally, it describes how we will work over the next few months, including actions we will take to ensure that we are hearing the views of front line practitioners, service users and members of the public as our recommendations develop.

We are due to make our full recommendations in October. However, it is already clear to us that reform for the social work profession must be driven by a range of stakeholders as well as the Government. Employers, Local Government, educational institutions, inspectorates and regulators, other professions, members of the public, service users and carers, and social workers themselves all have important roles to play. We need to work together to understand and find solutions to the

real capacity challenges the profession is facing and to develop a renewed and ambitious understanding of the role and purpose of social work now and for the future. The changes we need will take time to get right and to embed and will need long term commitment from all concerned.

The messages we are hearing

Good social work benefits everyone in society. Any one of us could need the support of a social worker at some point in our lives. At the heart of good social work is high quality professional practice. The Task Force believes that, for social workers to make a difference for the people they are working with, every engagement with that person and their family, and every activity to support them, must be of the highest possible quality. Every face to face interaction must have value, and so must record keeping, assessments, plans, court and tribunal reports and multi-agency case meetings and other professional products. To operate at this level, social workers must receive a high standard of supervision and education which supports them in reflective practice and in making complex judgements. These high standards need to be promoted and enabled by the profession and by the system in which it works.

To inform its full advice to government, the Task Force will need to set out what high quality practice means, and to be clear about any changes that are needed to the wider system to support social workers in delivering it. We have begun our work by inviting social workers, service users, employers and managers and other professionals to talk to us about their experience of social work and the challenges facing it. More than 1000 people, from across the spectrum of adult and children and families' services, including service users and other professionals, have taken the opportunity to get involved so far.

We have heard about a great deal of positive work which social workers are doing around the country and we know that there is excellent practice, innovative work and strong management in action in many places. We have heard from many social workers who would like to help in moving their profession onto a new footing and who want to be part of renewal which builds on the best of what is currently in place. However, many have told us that they working under severe pressure, and that this threatens their ability to ensure that their work is consistently of high quality.

We have more people to listen to, and much more evidence to collect and analyse. This letter gives us the opportunity to play back some of the messages we are hearing. These fall into a number of themes which are described below.

Theme one: We have been told that social workers feel they do not have enough time to devote directly to the people they want to help. They feel overstretched by staff shortages and tied up in bureaucracy. Pressures due to high caseloads and high vacancy rates contribute to this. It can also be about poor management or inflexible use of resources. Some people have said that the thresholds for cases are so high that they are not able to use their skills to work with service users in more preventative ways – even though this should reduce the need for crisis interventions overall. Others feel that they spend time on administrative tasks which are not good use of their skills and take time away from high quality casework. We have also heard that performance management regimes cause social workers to prioritise quantity and processes over

quality in some cases. Underpinning this, many social workers have told us that they feel that the purpose of social work is poorly understood by employers, other professionals, the public and to some extent, by social workers themselves.

- The Task Force is working to understand more clearly how social work time is used and why. We are conducting a workload survey of 1000 social workers which will help us to do that, and will also be looking – as Lord Laming has recommended – at how caseload management guidelines could help. However, we want to go further than this to ensure that there is a very clear understanding of how social workers' time and skills should be used to have the most value for service users, and that there is the capacity within the system to support this.

Theme two: We have been told that social workers feel very frustrated by some of the tools and support they are given to do their jobs. Many social workers have talked to us about poor IT support in children and adults' services. Some have very poor quality hardware. We have heard concerns in many areas that compliance with the Integrated Children's System makes record keeping a burdensome process and drives a model of practice which can be at odds with professional judgement.

We have heard that many social workers do not think they receive the amount and quality of supervision they need to help them to do their jobs confidently and safely, or that they are not well and supportively managed. Some complain that they do not feel valued and invested in by their employers or that 'work life balance' is hard to achieve. Some social workers have described work environments in which it is difficult to work on confidential issues or which are not welcoming to service users and which they feel that other professionals would not accept.

- The Task Force believe it is essential that social workers and their employers make the best use of the resources available to ensure that practice is well supported. We have prioritised our investigations into the Integrated Children's System at the Government's request and our recommendations about this are set out later in this letter. We are particularly concerned that all social workers should receive an appropriate level of high quality management and clinical supervision. This is critical to supporting their professional judgement and promoting reflective practice. We have welcomed Lord Laming's recommendations in this regard and want to go further to ensure that good supervision is supported by every part of the system. We will continue to listen to views and consider evidence about how social workers can best be supported to inform our recommendations.

Theme three: We have been told that new social workers are often not properly prepared for the demands of the job and that the education system does not effectively support ongoing development and specialisation. Many people have told us that new entrants to social work can lack the mixture of practical, analytical and report-writing skills they need to become effective professionals. We have heard complaints about the extent to which initial training courses prepare social workers for the work place. We have also heard concerns that the selection of students is not rigorous in ensuring that they have both the intellectual and interpersonal skills they will need. There are particular concerns about the availability and quality of statutory practice placements during initial training, and also about the expectations placed on social workers in their first years of employment. Some people have also told us about newly qualified social

workers who are working in situations so difficult that no initial training programme could prepare them to be effective.

Social workers need training and education throughout their careers, but we have heard concerns about the extent to which employers support this. There are also complaints about the quality and relevance of post qualification training, particularly in supporting social workers to develop specialist skills and expertise. We have also heard from social workers who would like to have much more access to research and academic learning throughout their careers, so that they can transfer the latest learning into their own practice and share learning from practice with the wider social work community.

- The Task Force is clear that these are challenges which employers and the education system must jointly understand and respond to and will be working with the major stakeholders concerned to develop a shared understanding and clear recommendations for change over the coming months. This needs to include ensuring that social workers are supported to develop throughout their careers and are able to specialise appropriately. We welcome the interest of the Children and Families Select Committee which is conducting an inquiry into some of these issues at present and look forward to their recommendations.

Theme four: We have been told that social workers do not feel that their profession speaks with a strong national voice or is well supported at national level. Social workers do not feel they are giving a clear and confident account of the purpose of social work and are failing to influence public policy, the media and national debate. Many people have expressed frustration to us that there was no strong professional voice explaining the social workers' perspective to the media or the public at the time of the media interest in "Baby P". Many social workers have also expressed frustration at an absence of strong leadership within the profession: the profession is not felt to be setting standards for itself and is, therefore, vulnerable to being 'done to' by government and others seeking reform. Some social workers look to government-funded regulatory or delivery bodies for this leadership, but do not necessarily find it there. Many have expressed confusion about unclear roles or overlapping remits of those organisations or find it hard to understand the work that they do.

- The Task Force is very interested in how the social work profession can develop stronger national leadership – including what we can learn from other professions. It hopes that its work will stimulate the profession to find its own strong voice and to be able to make recommendations to government which will support this. We also want to make recommendations to government which will ensure that the national organisations it funds use their resources well, to support high quality practice on the ground and provide good value for money.

Theme five: We have been told that systems for managing the performance of social workers are not driving quality first and foremost. We have heard concerns that inspection and performance management arrangements for social work education and for social work services do not do enough to measure the quality of provision. We have also heard from social workers and educators who feel that their performance is measured in mechanistic ways which privilege quantitative rather than qualitative outcomes. This makes it hard for professionals to prioritise high quality practice or to be guided by the needs of service users when they allocate

their time and resources. We have also heard that social workers do not always feel that their employers are held to account for giving them the support that the need, and that employers are not consistent in involving the regulator when there are concerns about the quality of practice.

- The Task Force believes that is critical that there are checks on the system to ensure social workers, and the services they work in, are achieving good outcomes for service users and making good use of public resources. Quality must be consistent between services and around the country. But performance management must be focused on supporting practice which improves outcomes for service users. We have also heard arguments that the inspection and performance management regime should have support for improvement and development as well as monitoring of quality at its core. These are critical issues that our recommendations will need to address.

Theme six: We have been told that social workers feel that their profession is under-valued, poorly understood and under continuous media attack. This is making it hard for them to do their jobs and hard to attract people into the profession. Many social workers who have spoken to us have said that they feel vilified by the media and that, as a result, their work is not supported or valued by the public. They find this demoralising – it contributes to high turnover rates in the profession and recruitment difficulties and makes it difficult for social workers to do their jobs well. They also say that public distrust of social workers creates barriers to engagement for people who may need social work support. At the same time, social workers have also said to us that they do not feel that the profession is good at articulating the role and purpose of social work: existing definitions of social work are not felt to reflect the reality of the role and its purpose and are difficult for members of the public, other professionals and even social workers themselves to relate to and engage with.

- The Task Force believe that a refreshed and easy to understand description of the purpose of social work is critical to improving public understanding and is also necessary to ensure that all elements of the Government's programme of reform are supportive of each other – for example to help employers and educators to work together with the same understanding of what social work training needs to achieve. We are taking forward urgent work to develop and propose such a description and will consult the profession, other professionals and members of the public about it over the summer to inform our autumn recommendations. At the same time, we feel it is critical that we engage directly with the media to begin to break through the negative cycle of poor media representation and negative public perceptions. We will continue to seek opportunities to enter and challenge public and media debate over the coming months.

Alongside this letter, we are publishing our Call for Evidence which will give organisations, individual social workers, other professionals and members of the public the chance to respond to these early impressions and to provide evidence which will help the Task Force to recommend solutions. We particularly want to hear from those on the front line and their managers about the innovative and effective approaches they are taking to delivering high quality services and overcoming capacity issues. Details of the Call for evidence are set out at Annex A.

Responding to Lord Laming's recommendations

When Lord Laming made his report "Protection of Children in England, a progress report" in March, the Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families asked the Task Force to advise him about how the recommendations relating to Social Work should be taken forward, and, particularly to accelerate our investigations into the Integrated Children's System (ICS).

The Social Work Task Force recognises and agrees with the problems Lord Laming has identified in children and families' services. The actions that he recommends will help to tackle some of the serious problems facing social work in those settings. In particular, we welcome his recommendation that there should be a national supply strategy for social work, his focus on supervision and manageable case loads and the emphasis he gives training and education for social workers so that they can develop the specialist skills they need to fulfil their roles, both through initial and post graduate training. We also welcome Ministers' commitment to take account of the impact of Lord Laming's recommendations on adults' as well as children and families' social work.

The challenges that the Task Force is identifying are complex and interrelated – and impact on the whole of the social work profession, including those who work in adults' services. We therefore believe that implementation of Lord Laming's recommendations will need to form part of a comprehensive programme of reform which must be broader. It must benefit adults' as well as children and families' social work, and it must be founded on a clear understanding of the social work profession we need for the future, as well as the challenges facing social workers today.

Our immediate advice on the implementation of each of Lord Laming's recommendations about social work is set out at Annex B. We will take full account of all of Lord Laming's recommendations in developing our full advice to Ministers about the shape of a comprehensive reform programme for the profession.

Integrated Children's System (ICS)

In our work on the ICS we have sought to engage closely with the people most affected: those who are using the system and those who design it. A sub-group of the Task Force including a number of additional front line practitioners, has met with front-line workers and with the suppliers, taken documentary evidence from Local Authorities, conducted an on-line survey of over 500 users and made ICS a specific topic at each of the Task Force's regional events. We needed to build a true picture of the effect of the system and the different ways it has been implemented in different areas. It is critical that our recommendations to government about changes build on those aspects of the system which have value, and do not create more disruption or bureaucracy.

Our conclusion is that ICS should be reformed so that it supports effective record-keeping and case management by social workers but should not seek to mandate a particular approach to front-line social work practice. There are a number of changes which we believe the government can make quickly to make local systems easier to use. In the long-term we consider that Local Authorities need to take stronger ownership of local systems on the basis of simplified national requirements. Whilst we have focused on ICS we are also hearing concern from social workers working with adults that they have similar problems with IT systems. It is important that any changes in ICS inform development and improvement in adult services systems also. Our full recommendations are set out in Annex C.

Immediate next steps

As the Social Work Task Force continues to develop its recommendations to government, we want to hear from as many people as possible not only about what the problems are but also about the possible solutions. The Call for Evidence which is published alongside this letter will enable individuals, organisations and members of the public to submit their views, and evidence about ways of delivering social work which are really making a difference.

We also want to begin the process of establishing a new understanding of the social work that society needs now and in the future. We will publish our recommendations about this when we make our interim report in July and will consult with the public and the profession about it.

We are also continuing to gather evidence which will give us a stronger understanding of the causes of current problems, including conducting a large scale survey of social worker work loads so that we can gain a full understanding of how they currently use their time and what influences this.

The success of our regional events has demonstrated the importance of enabling front line social workers and their managers to express their views, propose solutions and contribute to our work. So that we can increase the reach and impact of the Task Force and start to work towards solutions, we are:

- extending the membership of the Task Force itself to increase the input from people with fresh, direct experience of delivering services on the ground

- with the help of *Community Care* magazine, setting up a new reference group for practising social workers to contribute to our work.

- developing new channels for service users, including those whose voices may be seldom heard, to speak directly to the Task Force.

- continuing to use our Key Partners Group to engage with and challenge employers, professional bodies and government delivery organisations and others with a strong interest in the quality and future of social work to play a major part in this reform programme. In particular, we will be working to bring together social work educators and employers so that we can begin to establish a shared understanding of, and solutions to, the demands and challenges to which the social work education system needs to be able to respond.

The Task Force will publish its next report, which will focus on practice, and our response to the Call for Evidence in July. We will make our full recommendations to government in October.

We very much welcome the support our work has received from the Government over the past few months, and the work that Ministers and Secretaries of State have been doing to raise the profile of, and to secure investment in, the profession. We look forward to continuing to work closely with the Government as we develop our proposals for long term reform.

Yours sincerely,

Moira Gibb, CBE
Chair, Social Work Task Force

Annex A

SOCIAL WORK TASK FORCE CALL FOR EVIDENCE

A crucial part of the work of the Task Force has been to ensure that front line social workers, their managers and service users are able to be full and active partners. Therefore the Task Force has been gathering, and continues to gather evidence from a variety of sources. We have been holding regional events across the country. We have visited local authorities where we have talked to practising social workers, people who use services, managers and directors, staff from Higher Education Institutes and other professionals who work with social workers. We are undertaking a workload survey and have asked 30 local authorities and seven other organisations to help us with this. We have also established on-line surveys.

Some key messages are already emerging from these sources. These are set out in the letter from the Chair of the Social Work Task Force to the Secretaries of State for Health and for Children, Schools and Families.

The Task Force is now launching a Call for Evidence in order to formally collate information and literature relevant to these key messages and to identify other themes that may not have emerged as forcefully before now. The Call for Evidence will enable the Task Force to

further understand the key issues and correct any inaccurate perceptions

identify possible solutions to the challenges facing the profession by documenting examples of innovative systems and activities which work well in delivering social work.

We particularly want to hear from those involved in the day to day delivery of social work services for both children and families and adults about innovative and effective approaches they are taking to develop high quality services and overcoming capacity issues.

There will be 2 processes for evidence gathering

- Completing an on-line survey
- Formal submissions of substantial evidence in the form of published research, "grey literature" (i.e. completed or near complete but as yet unpublished) and newly written evidence

[The closing date for submission of evidence was Monday 1st June.]

Annex B

SOCIAL WORK TASK FORCE ADVICE ON THE RECOMMENDATIONS IN LORD LAMING'S REPORT, "THE PROTECTION OF CHILDREN IN ENGLAND"

The Secretary of State for Children, Schools and Families wrote to the Social Work Task Force on 12 March 2009 about the publication of Lord Laming's report "The Protection of Children in England". He asked that our work should take account of Lord Laming's recommendations and asked for detailed proposals for how his recommendations should be implemented.

The Task Force welcomes Lord Laming's recommendations. We believe that the comprehensive reform programme for social work, to which Ministers have committed, will need to address the issues Lord Laming has identified, but go further and be broader in its ambitions – particularly to benefit social workers who work with adults as well as those in children's services. Our detailed advice on Lord Laming's recommendations in relation to Social Work is set out below.

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
15	The Social Work Taskforce should establish guidelines on guaranteed supervision time for social workers that may vary depending on experience.	We agree that with Lord Laming that adequate and high quality supervision is critical to enabling effective social work practice – for social workers in adult services as well as those working with children and families. Employers and managers, as well as government guidance, have important roles in making sure that this happens. An approach which secures this will be an important part of the comprehensive reform programme which the Task Force intends to recommend to government.
16	The Department for Children, Schools and Families should revise *Working Together to Safeguard Children* to set out the elements of high quality supervision focused on case planning, constructive challenge and professional development.	High quality supervision must be available to all social workers and is a critical resource in supporting them in the professional judgements that they must make as a part of their practice. As part of the Task Force's advice on improvements to practice, we intend to look not only at guidance but also at the training and development, standards, and possible work force roles which may be needed to ensure that every social worker benefits from high quality supervision.

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
24	Develop the basis for a national children's social worker supply strategy that will address recruitment and retention difficulties, to be implemented by the Department for Children, Schools and Families. This should have a particular emphasis on child protection social workers.	The Task Force strongly agrees that there needs to be a supply strategy for social work – include those working with adults as well as in children and families roles. This will take time to develop and require strong leadership from central government. It will need to be supported by a clear understanding of the demand for social work – and local factors which impact on this – and will need to inform measures including recruitment, initial training, and succession planning.
	Work with the Children's Workforce Development Council and other partners to implement on a national basis, clear progression routes for children's social workers.	The Task Force agrees that the social work profession needs much clearer progression routes, and that these should be linked to training and development opportunities. Employers have an important role in securing these and the Task Force will work closely with CWDC and Skills for Care in making recommendations in this area.
	Develop national guidelines setting out maximum case-loads of children in need and child protection cases, supported by a weighting mechanism to reflect the complexity of cases, that will help plan the workloads of children's social workers.	Ensuring that social workers (including those working outside child protection and with adults) have manageable case loads – and that case load management does not itself create additional bureaucracy and distract from practice is a critical issue for the profession. The Task Force will make its recommendations about this in the light of its work it is taking forward to understand the workloads social workers currently have and the impact of this on practice in different parts of the profession.

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
	Develop a strategy for remodelling children's social work which delivers shared ownership of cases, administrative support and multidisciplinary support to be delivered nationally.	Remodelling in teaching appears to have had significant benefits for the profession and the quality of support it provides to children and young people – in particular by clarifying the distinctive contribution of the teacher and by bringing people with other roles and skills into the classroom. The Task Force is keen to ensure that its recommendations secure similar clarity of purpose for social work, and to explore the role of administrative, para-professional and other roles in working alongside social workers to provide the service that users need. Such changes would need to be supported by a strong and effective remodelling or change management strategy.
26	Work with higher education institutions and employers to raise the quality and consistency of social work degrees and strengthen their curriculums to provide high quality practical skills in children's social work.	The Task Force intends to work closely with higher education institutions, employers and the GSCC to set out plans to ensure that the quality of initial training is improved, with a particular emphasis on ensuring that students gain the practical as well as theoretical skills and knowledge they need to perform effectively in the workplace. These reforms need to be part of a whole system approach to supporting social work education and continuing professional development – including through post graduate qualifications – so that social workers are able to develop and reflect on their specialist skills and practice throughout their careers.

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
	Work with higher education institutions to reform the current degree programme towards a system which allows for specialism in children's social work, including statutory children's social work placements, after the first year.	The Task Force agrees with Lord Laming that it is critical that trainee social workers gain experience and knowledge to work in specialist areas, including children and families work. It is important, however, that early specialisation does not prevent social workers from gaining the full range of skills they need to work with adults, children and families. The Government's commitment to funding the NQSW year and postgraduate qualifications for social workers mean that there is scope for specialisation to happen later than in the second year of the initial social work degree. The Task Force intends to consider, carefully, the case for specialisation at different stages, to inform its recommendations about the shape of a reformed approach to social work education.
	Put in place a comprehensive inspection regime to raise the quality and consistency of social work degrees across higher education institutions.	The Task Force agrees that this is crucial and that an effective inspection regime, which supports improvement as well as regulation, should be a critical aspect of the reformed approach to social work education.
27	The Department for Children, Schools and Families and Department for Innovation, Universities and Skills should introduce a fully-funded, practice-focused children's social work postgraduate qualification for experienced children's social workers, with an expectation they will complete the programme as soon as is practicable.	Task Force welcomes Lord Laming's recommendation that children and families social work should become a postgraduate level profession. We also welcome Ministers' commitment to developing and funding a masters level qualification. This should form a key part of the reformed approach to social work education. It will be important that it is available to those working with adults as well as those working with children and families.

No.	Recommendation	Task Force Response
28	The Department for Children, Schools and Families, working with the Children's Workforce Development Council, General Social Care Council and partners should introduce a conversion qualification and English language test for internationally qualified children's social workers that ensures understanding of legislation, guidance and practice in England. Consideration should be given to the appropriate length of a compulsory induction period in a practice setting prior to formal registration as a social worker in England.	The Task Force strongly agrees that social workers who have qualified in other countries need to be well supported in entering the profession in England. It will consider carefully the evidence and legal basis for a conversion qualification to form part of this support and is also concerned to ensure that all social workers, including those who have qualified in this country, have high level skills in communication and written English to support their practice.
31	The General Social Care Council should review the Code of Practice for Social Workers and the employers' code ensuring the needs of children are paramount in both and that the employers' code provides for clear lines of accountability, quality supervision and support, and time for reflective practice. The employers' code should then be made statutory for all employers of social workers.	The Task Force agrees that it is critical that employers are held to account for the support they put in place for their workforce and are clear about when and how they should report cases of possible misconduct to the GSCC. Legislation will play an important part in this. The GSCC code for employees relates to all social care workers, not just to social workers. The Task Force feels strongly that the GSCC should consider developing a code of practice which is specific in addressing social work and that it should be proactive in ensuring that social workers and their employers understand and are familiar with the code and what it means.

The Task Force's advice in response to Lord Laming's recommendations about the Integrated Children's System (recommendations 17 and 18) is set out in Annex C.

Annex C

SOCIAL WORK TASK FORCE ADVICE ON THE INTEGRATED CHILDREN'S SYSTEM

Social Work Task Force – ICS review April 2009

Background

In March 2009, the Social Work Task Force were asked to review the Integrated Children's System (ICS) and make recommendations for improvement. A subgroup was set up chaired by Andrew Webb, Deputy Chair of the Task Force and Corporate Director, Children and Young People's Services Stockport Metropolitan Borough Council.

In order to gather as much feedback as possible to inform these recommendations, the sub-group have met with front-line practitioners, the 10 software suppliers, taken documentary evidence from Local Authorities (LAs), conducted an on-line survey of over 500 users and made ICS a specific discussion topic at each of the regional events in April.

This paper summarises that evidence and looks at what social workers want and need from ICS; what they have now; what can be done to help them immediately; and what needs to be done in the longer term to support them.

What is ICS and why do we have it?

In all the hundreds of pieces of feedback, it has become very clear to us that there is considerable confusion amongst front-line practitioners and managers about what ICS is, and importantly, what it is not. To be clear, the Social Work Task Force is not responsible for ICS. This section is included for information for people who are not familiar with ICS, and to set the context for the recommendations that we are making for improvements.

The ICS is not itself a computer system but a set of requirements for capturing and managing information necessary to work with children in need and their families. ICS has been developed, first by DH and then by DCSF, over several years in response to the findings of inspections, research and inquiries. These findings have demonstrated the need for conceptual systemisation in working with children in need.

The DCSF's stated aims for ICS are:

- All practitioners and managers, responsible for children in need, should work in accordance with the ICS conceptual framework, from case referral to case closure;

- Assessments of children in need should be completed with the necessary detail and within the required timescales;

- Case-based information should be aggregated through computer systems into management information, required for day-to-day service planning; and

- All practitioners should feel they are supported in their work by working directly with ICT systems that support ICS.

There are three parts to the DCSF's ICS requirements:

1. Conceptual Framework – a framework for assessment, planning, intervention and reviewing;

2. Data requirements – the data required to plan and deliver services; and

3. Exemplars – these demonstrate how information outputs from the IT systems should be structured.

LAs have used the requirements to develop or commission local ICS-compliant systems. Approximately 95% of LAs have bought in systems from external software suppliers. There are currently 10 suppliers providing ICS-compliant systems.

Does ICS, as it is currently configured, support social workers?

Social workers want and need tools which support and enable them to do the best possible for children, young people and their families. They recognise that good quality record keeping is important in performing that role, but good quality record keeping alone is not sufficient for them to do their jobs well. Practitioners also need tools which support good quality assessment and analysis. They also recognise that good IT systems, with the proper training, infrastructure and local leadership commitment, can support and enable good practice.

But the great majority of front-line social workers feel that ICS, as they currently experience it, does not support them well. They feel frustrated and sometimes angry about a framework and computer system that they see as bureaucratic and which can act as a barrier to good practice rather than supporting it.

The most quoted issues are in relation to the use of exemplars and forms. These are seen as forcing a model of practice that social workers don't recognise in their day-to-day work. Indeed, many feel that the exemplars and forms constrain their ability to use their experience and professional judgement by making them 'tick boxes' and input irrelevant information.

Many managers feel that ICS is helpful in ensuring compliance and for monitoring statutory Performance Indicators. However, many practitioners, and their first line managers, feel that ICS does not support them in their work because they are being used only for compliance monitoring and not for analysis or assessing quality of practice. They also feel that the forced timing of performance indicators, can create perverse incentives to make hasty and risky decisions, and can lead to poor quality assessments.

Many practitioners and team managers are frustrated with the amount of time it takes to input data into some of the systems. Issues include having to repeat the same data entry, not enough access to computers and systems crashing causing lost data.

The other major concern raised by practitioners is that forms and subsequent outputs are often poorly formatted and not understandable by service users or other professionals working with them. This is related to the practice model itself, the design of the forms and the inflexibility in the outputs from some of the systems. There are also significant issues in the way systems handle disabled children and their families.

Practically everyone we talked to sees the need for electronic record keeping in the modern world. People don't want to go back to paper systems, but they do want and need the IT systems they have to work properly and to provide the 'readability' afforded by paper records, alongside the accessibility delivered by electronic formats. We did receive a number of positive comments and there are examples of good implementations where practitioners feel ICS supports their work. However, these were the exception rather than the rule, and that needs to change.

The main problems can be categorised into three main areas.

- Local Implementation – There is huge variation in the quality of ICS systems at the local level. This is due to factors such as local corporate IT infrastructure, speed and reliability of hardware, senior management commitment and implementation planning, the specification of the systems themselves and the quality of the support from the suppliers;

- The procurement model adopted by government – Having Local Authorities (LAs) specify and procure their own systems has increased that local variation, along with the associated risks and issues; and

- Government ambitions for ICS – The assessment framework and the use of exemplars and forms mandate a model of practice that many practitioners do not recognise as helpful to their work and which can get in the way of a thoroughgoing analysis of the family's and of individual children's needs. Whatever the model of practice, an IT system is not the right way to enforce it.

Problems from all three categories are very often confused and conflated. This means that the aspirations of ICS are not recognised, nor the return on the significant investment made realised.

For all the reasons listed above, social workers need some immediate actions taken to improve their day-to-day working experience.

What can be done immediately with ICS to support social workers?

Some social workers say that ICS should simply be scrapped immediately, however we do not believe that is the right course of action. If we did not have ICS, alternative electronic record keeping systems would need to be created and implemented. This would cause significant additional work, disruption and uncertainty across children's social services. We know that short term actions have to be taken to ease pressures, however, we also need to think clearly about the future solution so that we get it right. Whatever is done now therefore cannot be allowed to hinder or prejudice that future outcome.

There are a number of key actions that can be taken by the DCSF, LAs and suppliers immediately to improve the working lives of social workers in relation to ICS:

> **Simplify the requirements** – DCSF should relax the ICS specification compliance criteria to allow LAs and their suppliers to revise or remove forms and exemplars from local systems. This does not affect LA's responsibility for compliance with the statutory minimum standards on record keeping, however they should have more flexibility in how they achieve that compliance. There is likely to be variability amongst suppliers in their ability to respond to this, but our view is that suppliers who cannot adapt their systems are not well placed to respond to any subsequent legislative changes.

Remove Phase 1C deadline – DCSF should remove the deadline for all LAs to have implemented Phase 1C by October this year**.** LAs who are in a position to implement Phase 1C should be encouraged to continue as there are important upgrades relating to court reports, fostering and adoption, including fixes to some of the output problems. However those LAs still experiencing problems with their Phase 1 and Phase 1B systems should be allowed to work with suppliers to concentrate on fixing existing issues;

Supplier Product Usability – DCSF should carry out an immediate and rapid Usability Review of each ICS system, along with the LA infrastructure and implementation issues related to that system. It should focus on identifying what LAs have done to enhance practice in their area, in particular it should highlight where the adaptation or removal of exemplars or forms has relieved working pressures. These should be published as soon as possible so that LAs and social workers can make immediate improvements. It will also enable them to share best practice and get value for money from suppliers, especially where LAs have had different implementation experiences;

Ensure local accountability – Each LA should ensure that a named senior manager is accountable for driving improvements in ICS in each LA. The accountable officer needs to ensure that the implementation is 'practice led', not 'IT led'. This will entail them consulting with team managers and social workers using the system. DCSF also need to be clear about their responsibilities in relation to ICS;

Provide procurement support – DCSF should provide procurement support to LAs to ensure that they are getting value for money and improve the quality of service they get from their suppliers;

Funding – DCSF needs to be clear on the funding available to LAs in this financial year so that they can get on with planning and implementation of upgrades to systems and hardware.

What can we do in the longer term with ICS to support social workers?

Social workers need more than just a functioning IT system. They need clarity of role, better training, more support and improvements in all the areas that the Task Force is looking at developing into a long term programme of reform. ICS therefore needs to take that into account, including the recommendations the Task Force will be making in October. The work of the Task Force on caseload/workload expectations and team working will also have an impact on any recommendations about the nature and role of IT in support of practice, reinforcing our view that this element of the Task Force workplan cannot be seen in isolation. But work should begin now by DCSF to conduct a fundamental policy review of the aims of ICS, the conceptual framework, data requirements and exemplars. This needs to take into account the views of front line practitioners and the wider work of the Task Force. The principal aim of ICS should be to support high quality front-line practice. As it is regularly reviewed in the future, it should be judged against this aim before all else.

In Lord Laming's report he recommended that the DCSF *"undertake a feasibility study with a view to rolling out a single national Integrated Children's System better able to address the concerns identified in this report, or to find alternative ways to assert stronger leadership over the local systems and their providers"*. We agree with Lord Laming, and believe that the short term actions we are recommending will start to assert the stronger leadership he calls for.

However, there is more to be done in order for the Task Force to set out its vision for the future of IT systems to support social workers. We believe that a feasibility study into a national system would not be helpful as it would cause planning and implementation blight at the local level, and it is likely that suppliers would stop developing and improving their systems. Perhaps more importantly, we believe that a national feasibility study is not required as the overwhelming feedback has been that ICS systems should be locally owned and locally led, within a simplified national framework.

We do however believe there should be a national study, led by DCSF, into the issues relating to interoperability of ICS with ContactPoint, the national eCAF, locally developed eCAFs, other local systems and links to Health and other professions. All these issues are causing significant concern in LAs and on the front line and need to be addressed quickly. This study should be completed by the end of July in order to feed into our wider work on the long term future of IT systems required to support good Social Work practice. We will set out that vision, and long term recommendations, when we produce our final report in October.