

Research Summary

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The tasks and roles of social workers: a focused overview of research evidence

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Introduction

Options for Excellence is a joint DfES and DH-funded review of the social care workforce. Four task groups have been set up, each dealing with different aspects of social care. Task Group 3 is considering the roles and tasks of social workers. In order to inform the work of this group, the Thomas Coram Research Unit (TCRU) was asked to provide, within our responsive programme of work for DfES, an overview of relevant research and data in three main areas: the effective deployment of social worker time and tasks, improving cross-professional working, and attitudes to take-up of post-qualifying qualifications. The review is structured around the following five questions:

- How do social workers spend their time?
- How *should* they spend their time?
- What sort of social work tasks add most value to service users?
- What promotes cross-professional working from a social work perspective?
- What information is available on the take-up of post-qualifying training by social workers?

This review was carried out over a very short time scale in late February/early March 2006, and does not claim to be a comprehensive review of all available evidence. The aim was to draw together in one place relevant information from a variety of sources, including searches of bibliographic databases and key journals for selected topics, following up references provided by DfES, summarising findings from a recent comprehensive review of social work in Scotland, drawing on evidence gathered to inform the development of the children's National Service Framework and studies undertaken by TCRU researchers, and personal contact with researchers working in relevant fields to identify unpublished material. Although the review aims to cover social work in different settings, there is a bias towards social work with children and families, since this is the area where TCRU researchers have particular knowledge and expertise.

This briefing paper summarises relevant findings under each of the five research questions. More detail of the material reviewed, sources of evidence and full references are provided in the accompanying 38 page report.

1. How do social workers spend their time?

Sources of information for this question included work undertaken by DfES to inform the *Every Child Matters* Green Paper; email contact with researchers known to have undertaken work in this field; findings from selected studies within the DfES 'Costs and Effectiveness' research initiative; and other material identified through desk research.

Social workers typically complain that their work has become more bureaucratic and less client focused in recent years. Most time use studies find that direct work with service users accounts for a relatively small proportion (between a quarter and a third) of social workers' time. However, the reliability of this information is affected by lack of consistency in how activities are defined (for example what counts as 'direct' and 'indirect' work), differences in how data on time use is collected, and the typically small sample sizes. The national Children in Need survey, which adopts a broader definition of direct work that includes activities such as writing reports for courts, liaising with other professionals and evaluating assessment information, found that two thirds of social workers' time was spent directly helping children, young people and their families.

There is very little evidence that addresses the issue of effective deployment of social workers' time by considering outcomes for service users. A study in Sweden which reported better mental health services when social workers engaged in more indirect work, was methodologically flawed. In the UK, some insight into the factors that contribute to ineffective use of social workers' time are provided by a study of social work processes with looked after children. This found that a significant proportion of social work time is taken up with tasks such as finding suitable placements, repeating assessments for residential placements and travelling to and from placements where children were placed outside the authority. All of these activities were closely related to shortages of suitable placements and/or resources to fund the more expensive ones. The level of administrative support that social workers received and the adequacy of IT systems also had a significant impact on the number

of indirect client-related tasks they were required to complete.

2. How should social workers spend their time?

To further address how social workers *should* spend their time and the roles they might undertake, this overview drew on work commissioned to support the 21st Century Social Work Review for Scotland; relevant research carried out at TCRU; and other material found during desk research. Email contact was also used to obtain as yet unpublished information, for example early findings from an analysis of responses to a national consultation on the social work contribution to mental health services. A search of bibliographical databases using a range of search terms found very little of direct relevance to this area.

Evidence about the tasks that social workers alone should do is difficult to find. The current evidence base is weak, which reflects a lack of research in social work practice and the difficulties of evaluating social work interventions. Most of the available information concerns the values and approaches that represent the distinctive contribution of social work, rather than evidence about the impact of different aspects of their role on outcomes for users. A consistent theme in this literature is the central importance of relationships, working in partnership with service users, a holistic and strengths-based approach, and anti-discriminatory and inclusive practice. The quality of the therapeutic relationship between social worker and service user is cited as crucial to achieving successful outcomes, although this is rarely based on 'hard' evidence.

A small number of studies have examined organizational arrangements where other workers take on some of the tasks that social workers do, such as data recording or early assessment of requests for support, but results are inconclusive. Social workers themselves are often motivated to enter this work by a desire to work directly with service users, and reductions in this direct therapeutic role are likely to be resisted. However, the common perception among social workers that they spend too much time on paperwork or data input and not enough on face to face work may depend on

how the task of recording information is perceived and how well management information systems support social workers in their daily tasks. When data recording is an integral part of social work processes rather than a bureaucratic chore, and provides information that social workers need to do their job properly, it can be viewed quite differently.

A literature review for the Scottish Executive identified a number of current social worker roles including the social worker as advocate, counsellor, caseworker, partner, risk assessor, care manager and agent of social control, with the combination and priority of these roles varying depending on client needs and setting. The Scottish review proposes the creation of new roles to provide career progression for social workers, such as practice supervisor (without management responsibilities), consultant practitioner and lecturer practitioner. New paraprofessional and business/administrative support roles would also be created.

3. What sort of tasks add most value to service users?

An important starting point for considering what social workers should do is to explore which aspects of their current role and tasks are perceived as most helpful by users. A basic search of the SCIE database identified some relevant literature, and this was supplemented by information from other sources such as an overview of research studies involving users of social services and a user-led consultation exercise carried out to inform plans for adult social care services. Some of the studies identified cover the wider social care workforce, not just social workers, and most report users' views about the way in which professionals interact with them and the values underpinning this interaction, rather than the specific tasks that service recipients find most helpful.

Across the research reviewed, it was evident that what service users value most (regardless of whether they are children in need, parents, older people, people with a disability or with mental health problems or care leavers) are social workers who are able to develop and maintain relationships, who listen and who respect them as

individuals. The nature of the relationship between service user and worker appears central to people's perceptions of what constitutes quality. Empowering relationships, being treated as individuals, inspiring confidence, demonstrating respect by recognising what is important to people, ensuring they understand their entitlements, and acknowledging that they have expertise in their own lives are all seen as important. So are personal qualities such as honesty and reliability, and organisational factors such as being able to see the same person over time. The skills needed by workers to achieve good relationships include listening and communicating, counselling, and understanding and knowledge about local services. Service users believed that social care workers need the time to develop such relationships, which they often did not have due to the demands and pressures of their jobs.

4. What promotes cross-professional working from a social work perspective?

There are two types of multi-agency working which impact on the role and tasks of social workers: social workers operating in multi-agency settings (such as extended schools, children's centres and multi-agency teams) and joint working around an individual child or family. Both are key aspects of current government policy, and becoming increasingly commonplace.

The main sources of data for this question were reports from national evaluations commissioned by DfES of initiatives promoting partnership working (such as the Children's Fund and children's trusts); research funded within an ESRC initiative on multi-agency working; and overviews of relevant research previously carried out by TCRU researchers and others for the expert working groups developing the children's National Service Framework. Selected references from a database of resources on multi-agency working compiled by DfES were also followed up.

There is a wide range of literature which describes multi-agency working especially between health and social care professionals, in children's and adults' settings, and there is general agreement

over the factors which promote and hinder this. Relatively little research has reported specifically on the role of social workers in multi-agency settings, but the lessons from the more general literature are likely to be applicable to this group. They include the importance of strong leadership and vision, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and sufficient time and resources to support joined-up working.

Messages of particular relevance for the role and tasks of social workers in multi-agency working include the value of a 'key worker' or 'lead professional' who can facilitate the involvement of different professionals, and the potential significance of joint training in developing an awareness of other professionals' roles. Evidence on the benefits and disadvantages of co-location of services, for example placing social workers in schools or health settings, is mixed. More important appears to be the development of a 'communication mindset' among professionals. A key message is that joined-up working does not mean doing away with difference and that there is likely to continue to be a need for specific social work skills, rather than a blurring of professional identities. Successful partnerships appear to depend on clarity about the particular contribution of each service and on working across professional boundaries, but not the erosion of expertise.

5. What information is available on the take-up of post-qualifying training by social workers?

For this question, the main sources of data were a literature search of bibliographic databases for academic articles and an internet search to identify policy and review papers addressing the PQ framework.

Although the academic research in this area comprises a few small-scale local studies, the messages from all data sources are largely consistent. Two main reasons stand out for a lower than expected registration and completion rate for PQ Awards under the framework introduced in the early 1990s. The first is organisational issues, and the second is resource factors. These appear to be more important than the attitudes of social workers or any aversion to the PQ framework itself. In particular, workload

pressures, lack of support from managers and a variable mandate from national government about the importance of gaining the various specialist awards, as well as limited integration of PQ study into career progression, were important factors.

Despite the gaps in the literature, it seems that many social workers are put off applying or do not complete PQ courses due to such obstacles. Making the PQ framework succeed will require strong and effective partnerships between employers and educational institutions, and resolving the organisational and resource issues.

Conclusions

There is considerable overlap in the questions addressed in this overview, and the evidence needs to be considered as a whole. Although it was not possible in the time available to undertake a comprehensive review of the literature, there appears to be little research that compares the roles and tasks that social workers undertake in different settings or for different client groups, or that investigates the outcomes for service users when tasks traditionally undertaken by social workers are performed by other staff. There is, however, considerable agreement on the approaches and values that underpin social work practice, and on the qualities that service users seek in the professionals who work with them.

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