



Response to New Inquiry into Looked After Children in relation to:

The Government's proposals for change relating to the role of the practitioner (including training and workforce development) as outlined in the context of Care Matters: Time for Change White Paper

Submitted on behalf of the organisation **research in practice** (www.rip.org.uk)
Written by Colleen Eccles, Assistant Director c.eccles@sheffield.ac.uk 0114 2226484
research in practice, The University of Sheffield, 343 Fulwood Road, Sheffield, S10 3BQ

Introduction

research in practice actively supports a network of over 100 public and voluntary sector agencies across England and Wales in using an evidence-informed approach to improve services and outcomes for vulnerable children and families.

We limit our response to comments in Care Matters: Time for change white paper and provisions in the Children and Young Person's Bill relating to elements relating to the role of the practitioner. We have worked closely with children's services for over a decade. Our roots are firmly in children's social care, focusing primarily on promoting positive outcomes for children through the delivery of evidence-informed services all levels of organisational structure, including front line practitioners. Our response specifically relates to the following parts:

1. Remodelling the children's Social Care workforce
2. Social worker training development and links to recruitment and retention
3. Social work practices

1. Remodelling the Social care workforce

1.1 Care Matters: Time for change responds to the need for reform of the social care workforce in direct contact with children and young people drawing from analysis of response to the Green Paper. At its heart is the challenge to create an environment where children and young people have a stable relationship with their social worker who can give them adequate time and with whom they can develop trust. Our experience reflects the general consensus that while pockets of good practice exists, under current structures social workers have not been able to provide continuity of care. We therefore welcome the remodelling pilots that are being undertaking with the Children's Workforce Development Council and would advocate for careful design and evaluation of the 30 pilots (although we understand that since the White paper was published there are now only 18). It will be less possible to identify general trends across 18 pilots. However, even then the very different nature of Local Authorities across the nine regions and other structural change occurring alongside the pilots will influence findings. What may happen is that pockets of good practice emerge that cannot be attributed to any particular intervention. However, if an approach is adopted where the agencies share knowledge across piloting areas, and are transparent about their methods, successes and failures, the potential for developing a sound qualitative understanding of what works through the development of case-studies and testimonies is significant. A generous timescale for piloting and evaluation negotiated with those participating, is recommended.

- 1.2 We welcome further investment in ICT to enable social workers to work flexibly and make more efficient use of time. We would add that ICT investment also potentially increases the ability of social workers to link to research sites and analytical tools which in turn aids them to make evidence-informed decisions. One frustration of developing on-line and multi-media learning tools has been the inconsistency across local authorities in the provision and access of ICT. It is not simply provision that is the issue but also the importance of ensuring on-line and disk access is enabled. A current Change Project led by research in practice has focussed on this area. The Change Project 'Growing Digital' is currently working with a team of social work managers to develop on-line learning to better enable analysis in assessment and to conduct on-line assessments that link key research messages to assessments.
- 1.3 In relation to the Integrated Children's system, we would welcome findings from the evaluation of the pilots about what has been found to be effective in relation to implementation and its impact on core processes and services for children and families. We have anecdotal evidence from some of our agencies that due to the drive for efficiency; focus on systems reform and restructuring, that social workers are losing the ability to focus on children and family needs and are becoming increasingly system focussed. This anecdotal evidence arises from networking with leaders of evidence-informed practice within our agencies and also through developing case-study workshops where expert facilitators work with social workers to get them to re-focus on need.
- 1.4 It is encouraging that the white paper builds on evidence and research that was presented in the green paper. We particularly welcome the desire to learn from international examples of social pedagogy, as expressed in paragraphs 7.10 and 3.59. In recent years evidence such as that from the Thomas Coram Research Unit¹ has shown the possible benefits of adopting the approach. The ethos fits in with the UK Government's current aspiration for a holistic approach to the provision of services for children. The white paper mentions pilots in residential care. To adopt the approach more widely, there would also need to be a value shift and links with Universities who are potential providers of academic learning in relation to social pedagogy. The research indicates that this would involve considerable financial investment.

2. Social Work Training and Development and links to recruitment and retention

- 2.1 We are enthused by further endorsement in the white paper of commitment to social work training and skills development and look forward to the forthcoming Children's Workforce Strategy which will aim to develop skills and knowledge in relation to the aspects of workforce reform addressed in this response and would hope that the strategy continues to place emphasis on the importance of evidence-informed practice and the role the approach plays in developing a workforce with the ability to analyse complex information and develop evidence-informed decisions.
- 2.2 We are particularly committed to encouraging better performance by social workers undertaking assessments and building care plans. Our work over the last three

¹ Petrie P, Boddy J, Cameron C, Heptinstall, E, McQuail S, Simon A, Wigfall V, (2005) *Pedagogy – a holistic, personal approach to work with children and young people across services: European models for practice, training, education and qualification* Thomas Coram Research Unit, Briefing Paper June 2005

- years developing guidance for social workers using research evidence in court² has focussed on practice improvement in developing evidence-informed assessments, plans and reports for court. Alongside this work the NCB have developed tools to aid analysis in assessment³. Both projects provide practical materials that are rooted in practice. We are passionate about delivering training and skills development agendas that link the research and practice worlds together. Local Post Qualifying Consortia should continue to develop effective partnerships between employers and Universities in order to provide education that has local practice relevance.
- 2.3 We also support the work done by SCIE⁴ which underpins the GSCC's commitment to working towards full participation of services users and carers in the development of the social work degree. It is heartening to see in the White paper reference to supporting access for Carers to the new social work qualifications framework. This participation also has the potential to help refocus social workers on need rather than services.
- 2.4 Particularly welcomed is the proposed 'newly qualified' status for social workers which has the potential to increase confidence and competence of the workforce and aid quality assurance in relation to service delivery as reflected in current practice in health and education. To illustrate why we think this is important we can take an example from the Change Project referred to below² which found that newly qualified social workers were often unprepared and lacking in experience to give evidence confidently in the family court. Many agencies had a policy that social workers would not be put in this position until at least two years into practice. However this was not a reality for all social workers and practice and support varied across the country.
- 2.5 In paragraph 7.12 specific reference is made to developing training in relation to safeguarding, child development and the capacity to deliver evidence-based interventions. In the summary to the chapter it also mentions attachment. Developing skills and specialisms in these areas will significantly impact on a social worker's ability to make professional assessments and may well reduce or at least make more obvious where further expert opinion is required. Tool 4 in the forthcoming publication Evidence Matters: Social work expertise in the Family Court⁵ was developed from looking at the National Occupational Standards, PQ and Degree frameworks and induction standards. It lists the areas of practice that a social worker is expected to have knowledge in. Any one of the 56 areas listed could potentially be an area of specialism and the tool brings home the very broad range of skills a social worker is expected to have. We welcome that the white paper expresses commitment to explore with partners options for greater specialisation in social work qualifying degrees both at undergraduate and postgraduate levels.
- 2.6 There are concerns within the research in practice network about Post Qualifying no longer being linked to a Performance Indicator. Where money was ring fenced PQ had a status of priority. This also encouraged the development of recruitment and retention strategies that linked PQ to probation and progression. The Government must do everything it can to encourage local authorities to support PQ and Continuing Professional Development if the aspirations in the White Paper are to be achieved.

² Eccles C, Erlen N (2006) *Social Work and the Use of Research Evidence in the Family Court* research in practice, Dartington,

³ Dalzell R, Sawyer E (2007) *Putting Analysis into Assessment* NCB

⁴ Levin E (2004) *Involving Service Users and carers in social work education* SCIE

⁵ Eccles C, Erlen N, (2008) *Evidence Matters: Social work expertise in the Family Court*, research in practice (forthcoming)

2.7 Over the past five years research in practice has aimed to link the continuing professional development methods we provide with beneficial accreditation mechanisms, in order to maximise the benefit to professionals engaging in CPD. We believe that much more could be done to ensure that high quality training and development is recognised. In particular we feel that the requirements for Post Registration Training and Learning do little to ensure that the CPD social workers engage with has any element of quality. Much more could be done to link PRTL with recognised the diversity of high quality training providers and also link with common induction standards.

3. Social Work Practices

3.1 In responding to the Green paper, research in practice raised concerns about the introduction of Social Work Practices. Since that response the power to enter into arrangement for discharge of care functions now has prominence in Part 1 of the Children and Young Persons Bill, along with provisions for piloting. We welcome plans to pilot and reiterate what is stated above about ensuring that effective evaluation plans are put in place to maximise the benefits of the piloting process, ensuring that evidence can be drawn out about reducing staff turn-over, increasing time with children, decreasing social work time spent on bureaucratic requirements. Although assessment of the impact of SWP's on longer-term outcomes for children and young people will be difficult, if not impossible to achieve during the period of these pilots, inclusion of their views in the design as well as participation in the evaluation will be valuable.

3.2 We hope that our concerns that this model might undermining the drive towards effective evidence-informed front line practice will be taken on board and that positive steps are taken to maximise the role of Social Work Practices as possible sites for developing practice knowledge and research. We are in support of the aspiration's behind SWP's set out in Consistent Care Matters⁶ although to deliver these a change in culture would be required to protect SWP's from becoming embroiled in the same restraining bureaucracy in which social workers currently operate. National and International research shows that such a climate is not conducive to recruitment and retention. SWP's need to be driven by need and not systems and if that can be achieved the potential for them being more effective in developing positive and enduring relationships with looked after children may be significant.

Conclusion

We fully support the Government's endeavours to improve social work practice in relation to Looked After Children. We are enthused by the Government's focus on practice improvement in this area and are advocating for keeping evidence-informed practice high on the agenda in relation to workforce reform. Maintaining a focus on children and young peoples needs and being able to reach best decisions through understanding what works and applying critical skills in relation to assessments and care plans is central to what we try to achieve when working with practitioners. We are pleased to see these issues covered in the White Paper and that aiming for continuity of care for Looked After Children is at the heart of the proposals.

⁶ Le Grand, J (2007) *Consistent Care Matters: Exploring the Potential of Social Work Practices*