

In light of a review into children's social worker practice, experts outline where changes are needed

Workforce skills for the future

SOCIAL CARE

By Derren Hayes

A parliamentary committee has launched an inquiry into the skills and training of children's social workers.

The education committee inquiry aims to explore what children's social work looks like in 2019, focusing on the capacity of social workers to intervene early, as well as how they can access continuing professional development and support.

MPs on the committee will also scrutinise routes into the profession, including how recent training reforms and initiatives, such as graduate training scheme Frontline and Step Up to Social Work, have impacted on the workforce.

Committee chair Robert Halfon said the review is likely to pick up on long-term workforce concerns such as high rates of staff turnover, inadequate resources, social



Inquiry will scrutinise how recent training reforms have impacted on the workforce

worker caseloads and time pressures, and how these issues impact on practitioners' ability to meet statutory duties.

"We want to explore what social work looks like in 2019 and examine the skills and support that social workers need to keep children and young people safe from harm and to help them grow up to thrive," he said. "Children, young people and their families

receive vital support from social workers, yet those in receipt of social work support are often those who have the worst outcomes."

A call for evidence – which closes on 30 August 2019 – has asked for comments on social workers' ability to intervene early to support and protect children and to undertake multi-agency working. The committee will hold evidence sessions in the autumn.

Reaction to the inquiry has been mixed, with some calling for a more forward-looking approach.

Ray Jones, emeritus professor of social work at Kingston University, says the role has shifted from a focus on early help for children and families in crisis to one that is predominately about child protection.

"Social workers need to be embedded within communities not remote agencies," he says. "They need to provide continuity, so more attention needs to be given to retention and continuing professional development. And they deserve stable, wise and well informed leadership."

Jones says the high turnover of staff must be addressed to "do away with children being transferred between social workers". Andy Elvin, chief executive of Tact Care, agrees.

Here, Elvin and the British Association of Social Workers' Gavin Moorghen explain what they believe needs to change.

EXPERT VIEW INVEST IN RELATIONSHIP-BASED PRACTICE



Gavin Moorghen,
professional officer,
BASW

The current state of children and families social work could be much better. In a recent survey into the working conditions of 3,421 social workers, 40 per cent of children's social workers said they wanted to leave the profession, which is an indicator that there are serious issues.

Many of our members are telling us that the reality of the job they currently do isn't what they came into the profession for. While increasing caseloads plays a major role in this unrest, much is also down to the fact they are spending more time on computers and process-driven activities, rather than the all-important face-to-face, relationship-based and therapeutic social work they train for.

We need to move to a model of social work where we can sit down with children and families and look at building relationships. A culture of reflective supervision will be key, alongside an investment in frontline supervision which moves away from a purely performance management model to a renewed focus on feelings, thoughts and experiences, rather than systems and processes.

These elements are at the heart of BASW England's 80/20 Campaign, in which we have also identified examples of good relationship-based practice that leaves children and families happier with the service they receive and the outcomes achieved.

However, for this to work, we need a working environment that helps social workers do their jobs. This means fewer caseloads, more admin support and better technology so we can get on with the job of social work.

EXPERT VIEW VOCATIONAL SKILLS NEED IMPROVING



Andy Elvin,
chief executive,
Tact Care

Social work, like medicine, nursing and teaching, is a vocational profession. Professional knowledge is important, but you also need to be able to relate, empathise, mentalise and have the ability to support and enable positive change.

Social workers must be equipped with the skills, knowledge, support and supervision to allow them to engage positively with children and families. They must be able to help the family achieve positive change or act appropriately to arrange alternative care for the child if such change is not achievable.

Recent developments in social work qualification training have recognised this vocational element and courses

such as those run by Frontline (of which I am a trustee) have focused on this. Many traditional university routes also now have a focus on this.

I would advocate that we look at utilising social workers where they are most needed. Many of the children and young people TACT look after regularly complain about the high turnover of social workers they are allocated. We need to listen to our young people and consider not automatically allocating a social worker to every child who is in long-term care.

One of the significant factors in ensuring that alternative care is stable is the social work support the family is given. The skills needed to be a supervising social worker for foster, kinship or adoptive parents are different to those required in child protection work. This is insufficiently recognised and post-qualifying training and CPD needs to focus on this.