
Westminster Hall Debate 13 March 2018

The contribution of social work to society

Introduction

Civilized states have a range of systems in place to protect the most vulnerable in society. The profession of social work, and social workers, are part of those systems.

The term 'social worker' is recognised in law. Individuals cannot practice as a social worker unless they are registered with the appropriate regulator: the HCPC in England (shortly to be replaced by Social Work England), the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) in Scotland, the Northern Ireland Social Services Council (NISSC) in Northern Ireland and Social Care Wales (SCW) in Wales.

The number of individuals registered as social workers in 2017 was as follows¹:

England: 91,944

Scotland: 11,127

Northern Ireland: 5,754

Wales: 6,070.

The majority of social workers, across the four countries will be public employees, however, a significant number of social workers are also employed by the voluntary sector.

Social work practice is fundamentally about the practice of human rights. Social workers deal with situations where human rights collide: examples might include the right of the child to be kept safe *versus* the right to family life (social work practice in the area of 'safeguarding'); the right not to be detained in a hospital *versus* the right of the individual or the community to be kept safe (social work practice in the area of severe mental health problems); or, the right of a person to self-determination *versus* the right to keep adults safe (social work practice in adult safeguarding). But there are many other examples.

Social workers resolve these differences of human rights through knowledge of the appropriate law, statutory instruments, case law, government guidance, and good practice. Key to the social workers tool-kit is the ability to form relationships so that they can understand the needs of the *individual* and develop an appropriate response. Social work is undertaken working closely with other professions (health,

¹ Not all registered social workers are currently working in social work, and, of course, like any other profession, many of those who originally trained as social workers have moved into other areas of work.

teaching, police) and where fundamental human rights are at stake there are a series of checks and balances within the system.

Social workers practice under different legislation across the four countries that make up the UK, and work within differing public-sector organisations, across the four nations, nevertheless, what social workers have in common, both in ethics and practice, is greater than the very specific legal differences between the countries or different organisational settings.

Services to Children

Social workers work with five significant groups in this area: safeguarding ('child protection'), children who are 'looked after', unaccompanied asylum-seeking children, fostering services, adoption and children with a disability.

Safeguarding. Legislation allows a formal recognition of need ('children in need'), formal investigation of a potential safeguarding concern and, if a concern is genuine and significant, placement on the child protection register - a multi-agency tool for the management of risk. Safeguarding investigations are undertaken by social workers (and in a proportion of cases, jointly with police), however, many investigations result in a result of no further action, simply because the report is either well-meaning (but inappropriate) or simply malicious². The numbers in the statistics thus reflect a significant under-reporting of the amount of activity the process of safeguarding involves. The population of children represented by the categories of 'children in need' and numbers on the child protection register mask considerable turnover as families are either supported 'down' out of the risk zone, or need to go to the next step of care proceedings. Again, this turnover reflects considerable activity which is not reflected in the headline statistics.

In England there were 51,000³ children on the child protection register, in Scotland 2,723, Northern Ireland 2,132, and Wales 3,059.

'Looked after' children. For a proportion of children, where safeguarding issues cannot be resolved within the family, the only solution may be removal from the care of the family. In England, there are some 70,000 children who are 'looked after', 15,000 in Scotland⁴, 3,000 in Northern Ireland⁵ and 3,000 in Wales⁶. Overall, children and young people who are looked after are happy with their status⁷ and,

² See for example: Bilson, A and Martin, K (2016) *Referrals and Child Protection in England: One in Five Children Referred to Children's Services and One in Nineteen Investigated before the Age of Five*. British Journal of Social Work (2016) 0, 1-19.

³https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/656395/SFR61-2017_Main_text.pdf

⁴ Scotland classifies, and thus counts, 'looked after children' differently, so a comparison based on numbers is not possible.

⁵ This figure is derived from *Children's Social Care Statistics for Northern Ireland 2016/17* Department of Health. Here the figures are presented as percentages rather than numbers so we have based this number on an estimate of this percentage.

⁶ <https://stats.wales.gov.wales/Catalogue/Health-and-Social-Care/Social-Services/Childrens-Services/Children-Looked-After/childrenlookedafterat31march-by-localauthority-gender-age>

⁷ Selwyn, J et al (2018) *Our Lives Our Care: Looked after children's views on their well-being in 2017*. University of Bristol / Coram Voice.

overall, compared with their peers, the outcomes for looked after children are better⁸. Nevertheless, such children come with a significant legacy of problems from their upbringing and these will often persist. Each 'looked after' child will have an allocated social worker.

Unaccompanied Asylum-Seeking Children (UASC). If a child or young person arrives in the UK, without family and friends, and claims asylum, they can be categorised under this inelegant acronym. Under specific sections of the care legislation the state will care directly for such children and young people. The geographical distribution of these young people is heavily skewed towards 'ports of entry'. Each UASC will have an allocated social worker. While the numbers of UASC are numerically small - 3,175 across the whole of the UK⁹ - compared to the wider population of looked after children, arguably, as a whole, they have the most complex needs of all - combining both the needs of vulnerable young people who are 'looked after' plus the legacy of being an asylum seeker.

Foster care. Children who are 'looked after' are predominantly cared for in family settings. There are approximately 45,000 families who foster in England, 4,500 families in Scotland, 2,200 in Northern Ireland and 4,300 in Wales¹⁰. Each foster carer will have an allocated social worker both to support the family as they care for the most vulnerable of children and young people and to act as link person with the sponsoring organisation.

For a small proportion of 'looked after' children **adoption** is the best way to achieve permanent care. Prospective adopters are assessed primarily by social workers and the adoption agency (usually the local authority) will approve the prospective adopters. The social worker for the child will work closely with the social worker for the adopter to try and ensure the best match between child and adoptive parent(s).

Social workers have an extensive role in presenting evidence to courts and being cross-examined on that evidence. This is because all the most significant of decisions involving children involve the final decisions being taken by the courts. For example, in England, Care Orders, Special Guardianship Orders, Placement Orders and Adoption Orders. A key check and balance within the system are social workers who give independent advice to the courts. For example, in England, CAFCAS (Children and Families Court Advisory Service) employs some 1,200 social workers.

Children with a disability. Social workers, together with other professionals, work with children who have severe disabilities.

Services to Adults

Mental health. Social workers will work in a range of settings with people facing mental health problems. At the most severe end of the mental health spectrum are a

⁸ See for example, Berridge D (2006) *Theory and explanation in child welfare: education and looked after children*. Children and Family Social Work Vol 12, Issue 1, Feb 2006 pp 1-10.

⁹ The Refugee Council *Children in the Asylum System*. February, 2017.

¹⁰ The Fostering Network <https://www.thefosteringnetwork.org.uk/advice-information/all-about-fostering/fostering-statistics>.

range of powers that allow individual patients to be compulsory detained in a mental health ward and/or receive compulsory treatment. The total number of detentions under the Mental Health Act 1983, the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003, and the Mental Health (NI) Order 1986 was 96,057¹¹.

A key decision maker in this process of detention and/or compulsory treatment is a social worker. For example, the AMHP (Approved Mental Health Practitioner) is an accredited professional that has a formal role in these decisions. A range of professionals can qualify as AMPHs, however, the reality is that 96% of AMPHs are also registered social workers. Social workers provide a valuable counter-balance in the assessment process, since their training reflects not a medical interpretation of mental health problems and medical solutions but a model of social and environmental causes and social responses. A proportion of social workers will specialise in alcohol and other drugs working either in health settings or in independent agencies.

Older People. The majority of older people, will, with the help of their families and health services maintain their independence with recourse only to the health services. For a proportion of more vulnerable older people social workers are involved, ensuring that any independence is balanced with safety, and that vulnerable older people discharged from hospital have the required support services in the community¹². Social workers are also involved in adult safeguarding where vulnerable older people may suffer financial or domestic abuse. In England alone, there were over 109,000 adults that were the subject of a safeguarding enquiry under Section 42 of the Care Act¹³.

People with a disability. The majority of people with a severe disability are independent without the need for social work services. For a proportion of the most vulnerable (including individuals with a learning disability) social workers are involved in supporting individuals in the community, and for a minority of people with disabilities in residential settings.

Mental Capacity. The Mental Capacity Act (2005) created a framework for assessing and responding to adults who might lack capacity to make decisions. This might include the frail elderly, people with cognitive impairment (e.g. brain damage), or people with a learning disability. Best Interests Assessors (BIAs) take on the role of making decisions (for example, around accommodation choices) where it has been decided that people lack capacity under the Act to make such decisions. A range of professionals can qualify as BIAs including nurses, psychologists, OTs and social workers.

¹¹ NHS Digital, *Inpatients formally detained in hospitals under the Mental Health Act 1983 and patients subject to supervised community treatment. Uses of the Mental Health Act: Annual Statistics, 2015/16*. Nov 2016. Mental Welfare Commission for Scotland: *Mental Health Monitoring 2015-16*, September 2016.

Department of Health *Mental health and learning disability inpatients 2015/16* <https://www.health-ni.gov.uk/publications/mental-health-and-learning-disability-inpatients-201516>.

Welsh Government *Admission of patients to mental health facilities in Wales 2015-16*. August 2016.

¹² For example: National Audit Office (2016) *Discharging older patients from hospital*. London: NAO

¹³ <http://digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB30145>

Social work in health settings. Social work has developed a range of specialism within health practice including palliative care and renal care. At the time of writing Northern Ireland is progressing a programme of introducing social workers to primary care teams co-locating them with GPs and nurses.

Heritage

Social work has a heritage of almost 150 years. Born out of the industrial revolution, in a rapidly urbanising society, social work was a response to inadequacy, or the collapse, of traditional systems of care for the most vulnerable, and is generally dated to the establishment of the Charity Organisation Society (1869) and the start of the Settlement Movement (1884). Universities quickly developed programmes of university training and qualification. For example, Birmingham University has been training social workers continuously since 1908 while Edinburgh University has been training social workers continuously since 1918 - and thus celebrates its centenary this year.

Perhaps the most well-known politician in social work was Clement Attlee who authored '*The Social Worker*' in 1920¹⁴. Clem worked in social work in various settlements in London's East End while also teaching on the social work course at what became the London School of Economics. In '*The Social Worker*' Clem reflected the view that a vital part of social work was research - since social problems had to be better understood in order to develop the most effective response.

Education & Research

In the early twentieth century seminal studies of poverty were closely associated with the tradition of social work that grew out of settlements (e.g. Charles Booth's studies *Life and Labour in London 1886-1903*) and this tradition of research in social work has continued to develop. 26% of social work research in UK universities was judged to be 'world class' in the last (2014) REF (Research Evaluation Framework) assessment¹⁵. Today there are some¹⁶ 80 universities in England, 11 in Scotland, 3 in Northern Ireland and 8 in Wales undertaking social work education and research. Figures show that there were approximately 4,400 social work students in England¹⁷, just under 600 in Scotland¹⁸, an undisclosed number in Northern Ireland and 250 in Wales¹⁹.

Innovation

The combination of concern about social justice, poverty (in all its forms), human rights and intellectual engagement means that innovation – identifying and applying

¹⁴ After many years of being out of print the book has recently been republished.

¹⁵ Research Excellence Framework 2014: Overview Report by Main Panel C and sub-panels 16-26

¹⁶ The precise number varies slightly as courses and providers can change from year to year.

¹⁷ Skills for Care (Nov, 2016) *Social Work Education in England*. London: Skills for Care.

¹⁸ SSC: Workforce Skills Report 2011-17 Extended Version p 59)

¹⁹ Care Council for Wales: *The Profile of Social Workers in Wales*. 2015

practical solutions to social problems – has a vital role in social work. This tradition of innovation continues most strongly in the voluntary sector with a range of charities continuing to identify new forms of need and new ways of responding to them.

Social Work is International

Social Work is an international profession. The same issues that gave birth to social work in the UK also gave birth to social work in other industrializing nations of the late 19th century e.g. the USA. As social, economic and political circumstances have required other nations have established and developed social work services too. The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is the international organisation representing national social work practitioner organisations. This year the IFSW had 176 members - meaning that 176 nations had professional social work associations. While economic, political and social systems vary between these 176 nations, which are spread over four continents, what unites the profession of social work is greater than national differences. In recognition of this the UN recognises World Social Work Day on 20th March. Local, regional and national events are mirrored by five events organised under the auspices of the UN in Bangkok, Chile, Geneva, Nairobi, and New York.

Conclusion

In the introduction it was noted that social work forms part of the structures that civilized states fund and facilitate to support the most vulnerable. This has been evidenced in this note through the role that social workers play in delivering key statutory services in the UK, through the historical development of social work, through social work education and research and through the international presence of social work. In this context it is worth concluding on the formal definition of social work adopted by the IFSW and other international social work bodies:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing.²⁰

Contact:

Luke Geoghegan: Head of Policy and Research

Luke.Geoghegan@BASW.co.uk

Madeline Jennings: Public and Political Affairs Officer

Madeline.Jennings@BASW.co.uk

²⁰ ifsw.org/getinvolved/global-definition-of-social-work

