

Feature

Towards the end of 2008, Making Research Count (MRC) and the Social Work History Network (SWHN) used a London conference to consider in some detail the impact of the 1968 Report of the Committee on Local Authority and Allied Personal Social Services, led by Frederic Seebohm. Drawing on a wealth of expertise, the event considered what happened in the lead up to the report's publication, what it contained, and how this document has impacted on the social work profession over the 40 subsequent years.

This event, hosted by the Social Care Workforce Research Unit (SCWRU) at King's College London, featured a presentation from Keith Bilton, General Secretary of the Association of Child Care Officers (ACCO) 1966-1970 and later Assistant General Secretary of BASW until 1973. Mr Bilton recounted his first-hand experiences of the run up to, and implementation of, the recommendations of the Seebohm committee. Ray Jones, Professor of Social Work at the universities of Kingston-on-Thames and St George's London, then offered a comprehensive overview of developments in social policy, from the Beveridge Report in 1942 and final dissolution of the Poor Laws in 1948 up to the personalisation agenda of the present day.

Dr Barbara Prynne and Dr Joan Rapaport then reflected on the post-Seebohm era, drawing on preliminary findings of the working-life experiences of a small group of retired social workers, a study that is still to be completed (*Working with Dignity in Contemporary Social Care Settings: The contribution of working-life experiences and knowledge of retired social workers*. London, Social Care Workforce Research Unit, King's College London).

The following is a synthesised summary of key points to emerge from the debate.

Fragmented

The Seebohm committee was appointed in 1965 'to review the organisation and responsibilities of local authority personal social services in England and Wales, and to consider what changes are desirable to secure an effective family service'. The welfare services from the post-war period until the implementation of Seebohm's recommendations were fragmented and administered by a range of government departments such as health, education and the Home Office. Services focused on the individual, with needs seen in isolation and the emphasis on protection rather than care.

The Seebohm committee was set up at a time when there was a political consensus that social progress was achievable, and Government was much concerned with the co-ordination of the various services (health, education, income maintenance, housing and

social welfare) that made up the welfare state. According to the Seebohm report itself, the white paper, *The Child, the Family and the Young Offender* (1965), 'set out for public discussion the Government's provisional proposals for practical reforms to support the family', and 'foreshadowed' the later appointment of the Seebohm committee.

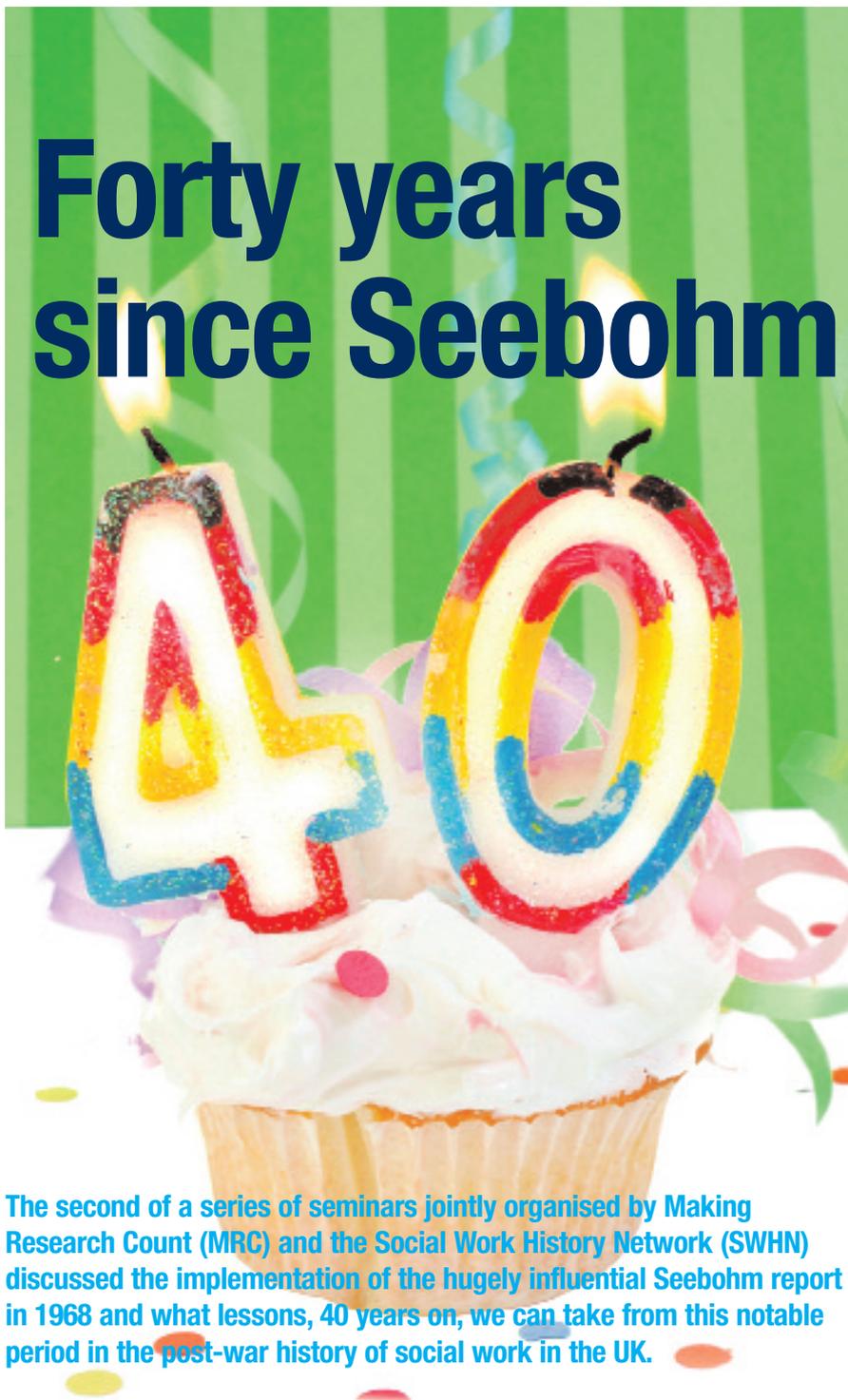
To demonstrate its independence from government, the Committee met on the premises of the National Institute of Social Work, with three of its ten members recruited from the ranks of social work. Even before its appointment, conflicting views about the future direction of services were evident. A number of Children's Officers, in line with Home Office thinking, wanted more powers to help families but a self-styled 'ad hoc' group, more closely aligned with the Ministry of Health – of which Richard Titmuss, civil servant, historian and teacher of social

administration was a distinguished member – was concerned that a family-focused service would exclude and possibly alienate a large number of individuals who did not have, or were estranged from, their families. It argued that these people needed services, so advocated instead a service focus.

Ad hoc

The Seebohm committee inclined towards the *ad hoc* group's viewpoint and recommended the introduction of a single local government social service department providing a community-based and family-orientated service, headed by a qualified director. It recommended new responsibilities beyond the existing welfare functions, including an extra concentration of resources in areas of high risk, with an emphasis on what we might now call community well-being and citizen participation in the planning and

Forty years since Seebohm



The second of a series of seminars jointly organised by Making Research Count (MRC) and the Social Work History Network (SWHN) discussed the implementation of the hugely influential Seebohm report in 1968 and what lessons, 40 years on, we can take from this notable period in the post-war history of social work in the UK.

delivery of services.

When the Committee reported in 1968, it was in a climate very different from that in which it had been set up. Radicalisation of trade union and student organisations meant that those who had been regarded as part of the progressive consensus were now seen by some social workers as part of an oppressive status quo. There was also a new respect for the role of local government, prompting local authorities to view the report as placing undue restrictions on their activities.

Unwelcome

The Seebohm report was unwelcome to Medical Officers of Health (MoH) too, who, under its recommendations, would face a diminution in their responsibilities. A number of local authorities, particularly in London, responded by merging their health, welfare and children's departments under the direction of the MoH, thus placing Children's Officers in subordinate roles. Ministers discouraged this model on the grounds that if too many mergers occurred then it would be impracticable to introduce Seebohm. The social work lobby was more vociferous. The Local Authority Social Services Act 1970 was implemented in 1971, partially introducing the Seebohm recommendations. Although amendments sought by the social work lobby to promote wider social welfare duties were not granted, the lobbying process had been a unifying experience.

Speakers during the SWHN event noted that the Standing Conference of Organisations of Social Workers (SCOSW), a coalition of eight social work associations, supported the full implementation of the Seebohm recommendations, including the establishment of generic social work qualifications. Significantly, generic courses had in fact already commenced in the 1950s, with initial experiences of generic training having generated optimism about this approach to practice. The Seebohm Implementation Action Group (SIAG), spearheaded by Tom White, then Deputy Children's Officer for Lancashire and a past President of ACCO, united some members of the Standing Conference of Organisations of Social Workers, and the associations of chief officers, in pushing for the full implementation of Seebohm's recommendations.

The Seebohm reforms, combined with the introduction of generic practice, helped pave the way for the birth of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in 1970, although the Standing Conference of Organisations of Social Workers had actually been in existence since 1963 with the objective of establishing a unified national association based on a minimum standard of

qualification. Incidentally, a suggestion that chief officers form a distinctive group within SCOSW was decided against on the grounds that it was impracticable, having undertaken complex negotiations about qualifications for BASW membership, to make a special case for unqualified chief officers.

The overnight change from specialist to generic social work posed many challenges for frontline practitioners. Accounts of some departments being dominated by social workers from one discipline, such as child care, where the care of older people may have suffered, emerge from frontline practitioners' recollections of the time. However, more positively, buoyed by a belief in the strengths of individuals (Ramon, 2002) and the potential of communities, some social workers engaged in innovative practice such as the development of self-help groups to prevent psychiatric admissions.

That said, the SWHN event heard reflections from some participants about how the quality of supervision started to suffer during this time because supervisors were still specialists, even though their teams now had generic caseloads. Although there was a general confidence in social work, there were also fears, debated in the press, that the benefits of Seebohm had been overstated. Tragedies, including the death of Maria Colwell, kicked to death by her stepfather in 1973, only further fostered such doubts.

Seebohm's birth was complicated by new responsibilities imposed by the Chronically Sick and Disabled Persons Act 1970 and local government reforms three years later. The economic crisis of the 1970s further impinged on the ambitions of Seebohm and led to the introduction of cost restraints and rationing that seemed reminiscent of Poor Law traditions. Financial constraints on social services' expenditure were exacerbated in later years with an increased emphasis on inspection and performance monitoring. Linked to this, the NHS and Community Care Act 1990 introduced the concept of care management which, speakers suggested, has meant a focus on financial, procedural and managerial requirements at the heart of adult services practice, rather than professional autonomy and flexibility.

From the mid 1980s to the early 1990s children's and adults services departments gradually separated within social services departments. This heralded the development of reconfigured services, albeit sometimes located in former Poor Law premises, dedicated to discrete client groups, such as children and young people, families and people with learning disabilities – reversing the Seebohm ideals of a single authority and genericism. By 2000, most local authority and

local mental health services had combined and were operating under jointly managed NHS trusts. The Children Act 2004 heralded the demise of social services departments and completed the disaggregation of children's and adult services in most instances.

In turn, specialist social workers are now often minority players in host agencies with far wider responsibilities than the agenda of their predecessor social services departments, with further implications for the future of the profession.

Speakers at the SWHN event suggested that during the long run up to the final report of the Seebohm committee, social work had gained increased credibility and, in spite of operating under different operational frameworks and from within different professional organisations, had united and engaged with academics and government to inform the debate about the future development of services – although it must be said that the views of people using services were not really evident at this point.

Spotlight

As a consequence of the media attention stemming from the case of Baby P, social work is once again in the spotlight, with serious implications for those on the frontline, as Liz Davies recently made clear in *Professional Social Work* [December 2008]. SWHN seminar participants agreed that social workers need to develop strategies to influence and respond to government policy and, in respect of this particular tragedy, to reframe the discussion and debate. This could be achieved, many argued, by building a strong professional identity and engendering a culture amongst social workers of belonging to their professional organisation (BASW), as happened before the formation of unified social services departments.

In addition, it was suggested, alliances should be forged with academics and politicians sympathetic to social work, plus social workers holding senior positions in the new, post-Seebohm, organisations. The endeavours of those who ploughed the pre-Seebohm furrow are still as relevant today as more than 40 years ago.

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