



BASW England Response to the Review of the Professional Capabilities Framework

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Framework**

BASW is the UK professional association for social work, led by and accountable to a growing population of well over 17,500 social worker members. Our members work in frontline, management, research and academic positions in all social work settings across the UK. BASW members share a collective commitment to those values and principles that will secure the best possible outcomes for children and young people, adults, families and communities.

We have elected to do a written response to this consultation as opposed to utilising the online facility as we are restricted by both the format and questions in making a corporate response on behalf of our membership in England. We would also not be able to share our response with our members to whom we are accountable if we did it virtually. We have already made contributions to this consultation through our presence at two of the consultation events in Birmingham and Leeds as well as being a member of the PCF Advisory Stakeholder Group. We do understand now more fully the sensitivities around TCSW's financial situation but were surprised at the modest number of consultation events and their capacity as we know that the demand for these was very much higher than places available and it is regrettable that more social workers were not provided with the opportunity to participate.

Origins of the PCF

It is fair to say, as alluded to in the previous paragraph that this consultation has taken on even greater significance in light of the announcement on 18 June 2015 about the closure of TCSW. The PCF was of course developed by the Social Work Reform Board, of which BASW England was a partner, after extensive consultation with the sector. Therefore, whilst TCSW are the custodians of the framework they essentially own it on behalf of the social work profession. It is important when embarking on this consultation to remind ourselves of the purpose of the PCF as envisioned by the SWRB. Essentially, its function is to guide learning and development through initial qualifying education, the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE) and continuing professional development (CPD) throughout a social worker's career. Progression has certainly been and continues to be a major talking point with regards to a career in social work in England - the 9 domains of the PCF were designed to be applicable to 9 different levels of complexity of work through a social worker's career. Lastly, the PCF was borne out of a response to concerns about a tick box and competence based approach of the National Occupational Standards (NOS) in social work education which it replaced.

Drivers for Change

The announcement by TCSW in December 2014 to review the PCF was described as follows in the press release: "a timely and robust evaluation of social workers' professional standards is underway in response to changes in practice, policy and legislation". This was greeted by our members and others with genuine surprise and in some quarters' exasperation. We heard from both higher education establishments and workplaces that the PCF was still relatively new and being embedded in practice and so it was considered by many too premature to review it. For example, TCSW's own endorsement scheme of social work education was only just coming to the end of its first cycle at that point and given that HCPC had only taken over the regulation of the profession in 2012, social work programmes had the dual task of trying to comply with the Standards of Proficiency as well as TCSW requirements. We heard very similar messages from our members in workforce development telling us that they had worked hard to make sure that ASYE programmes were underpinned by the PCF and complied with HCPC standards and yet with the advent of Government driven initiatives like the Knowledge and Skills Statements and Accreditation of Children's Social Workers, they were being asked to change tack undermining their previous efforts and causing confusion in terms of what agenda they were now being asked to follow and conversely abandon.

Some members have raised concern that the main driver for this review is political and notably the Knowledge and Skills Statements and accreditation for children and families social workers is influencing this agenda.

Social workers are very aware of the increasing political pressure being placed on the profession including a review of social work education vis-à-vis children and family's social work that was highly critical of academic social work programmes and essentially core social work values and principles. Inevitably, this is causing social workers to feel even more demoralised by a 'top down' approach rather than a 'sector led' one, which was after all the aspiration of the Social Work Taskforce when delivery for social work reform was remitted to the SWRB. At this point, we need to make it clear that the objections we are raising are not based on a reluctance to change – far from it! What we are arguing against is centralised prescriptive model, with what appears to be little input from the profession itself and which also is not prepared to take cognisance of the reforms that are already being implemented but rather usurping them and preventing any real consolidation. Social work ends up being caught in the 'rip it up and start again syndrome' akin to the experience of service users. Moreover, this continual moving of the goalposts inevitably undermines professional confidence which was something particularly championed by the SWTF, SWRB and Eileen Munro's in her review of child protection in England.

Principles of meaningful consultation

It is important that those tasked with making fundamental decisions about social work listen to social workers and afford the profession opportunities for meaningful consultation which can then hopefully result in the most positive outcomes in respect of the sector being able to lead on developments and thus have ownership of them; furthermore it is imperative that this is done in partnership with service users and carers.

We all know that this is a critical time for the profession as demand for services has steadily increased in the midst of both austerity and there is also in some areas a recruitment and retention crisis. We therefore, need reforms that will actually support the wellbeing and longevity of the profession in terms of reducing burnout rates and attrition. The profession needs to pull together to make social work an attractive and sustainable career by developing a proper structure for career progression. Speaking to BASW members about the PCF, they told us that it is still in its infancy and its reach is still quite limited to those engaged in pre-qualifying training and ASYE programmes. For example, social workers that are further along in their careers have not been afforded the same opportunity to address the PCF and its ongoing relevance to them is inhibited by work and time pressures - there is a real disconnect between the good intentions of the PCF to inform social workers professional development throughout their careers and the reality on the ground in this respect. Given these experiences, our members do not concur that "the framework has become well embedded across education, practice and employment, helping to define the capabilities that should be commonly demonstrated across the profession". It is our contention that there is still work to be done to ensure that it informs and supports social work practice at every level and not just at pre-qualifying level and at post-qualifying level for NQSWs. It needs to pervade all of social work.

It is important to say, that the views expressed by BASW members were also consistent with those expressed by the participants at the two workshops we attended as well as external groups of social workers we have had contact with comprising students and frontline social workers, practice educators, academics and those involved in workforce development. The social workers we consulted who have direct experience of the PCF do think it is working and made a positive difference to practice and are opposed to fundamentally changing it. This is an important point as one of the questions raised in the workshop was whether or not it was 'fit for purpose'. Social workers told us that they valued the PCF because its branding is strong i.e. the pictorial image, it contains equity between the dimensions, it enables social workers to move from competence to capabilities which supports a cultural shift for both

individuals and organisations to develop expertise across the profession, it exhorts all to take responsibility for the professional development of NQSWs, it helps with retention by illustrating progression opportunities, it is also useful for recruitment processes and it is critical to supporting good practice and continuous learning for the profession.

Can the PCF be improved upon?

Social workers also shared their thoughts with us about what could be improved including mapping the employer's standards, the HCPC standards and KSS for adults and children against the PCF. They would like to see greater standardisation for progression and a much more joined up approach between adults and children's social work rather than separation. The language of the PCF could also be modified in places to make it more accessible by expressing some of the terms in plain English; some content could also be removed to avoid unnecessary duplication and it would be helpful if much clearer guidance notes are provided on what is required. We think it is unhelpful to have the guidance divided between the TCSW and Skills for Care websites. As a profession we are already drowning beneath layers of guidance with the HCPC standards, the PCF and now the Knowledge and Skills statements. What is required is coherent management of a complex system and training programmes for all involved in the assessment of social workers, including line managers where knowledge can be variable at times. We also think that a central plank of this review must include proper and full engagement with service users and carers to ensure that the document is informed by their views and needs.

Crucially, the PCF should be at the core of pre and post qualifying social work training and practice and other developments need to adapt to work with it rather than the other way round. The question posed in the consultation is telling in this respect, worded "how can the PCF be refreshed so that works effectively in conjunction with." Putting the onus on the PCF to be pliable for its survival. Furthermore, in spite of the assurances that have been given by the DH and DfE and both chief social workers, there are real concerns amongst social workers that the PCF is at risk of being marginalised by reforms imposed by central Government which appear to be driven by a deficit model of social work that attacks the profession's value base and its ideals. Centralised prescriptive models have not served social work or service users well and that was certainly a strong message that came out of the work of the SWTF hence the reform programme put into place by the SWRB to try and change this. This untimely review unfortunately, feels like the clock is being turned back; a confident profession needs to be involved in its own development and not be sidelined when its views do not converge with political ideology.

Finally, a glaring gap has been left on the landscape following the demise of the GSCC in terms of the dismantling of the previous PQ framework for social workers. This has never really been properly addressed and therefore, to do so would strengthen the profession by not only contributing to high quality practice but also by encouraging more to stay in the profession as practitioners in order to grow an experienced workforce stabilizing services and providing the future workforce. This in our view, is an area that must be addressed in partnership with the sector by a Government that constantly states that it is committed to an improvement agenda for the profession.

Compiled by Nushra Mansuri on behalf of BASW England