

## Developing The College of Social Work

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### Summary

*This document, written jointly by The College of Social Work Development Team and BASW, provides a detailed overview of the proposed key functions and purposes of The College of Social Work.*

*The College Development Group is currently running a series of major consultation events across the UK. Working with Social Work sector professionals, service users and carers, the consultation events will explore and clarify the key values and strategic aims of The College, prior to its establishment as a legal entity in April 2011.*

### Introduction

Being a social worker is a very demanding but rewarding job. Social workers deal with very complex personal cases in often complex community and organisational contexts, which involve making difficult decisions about people and their lives. In England, the profession has a high profile but generally low esteem with the public, press and policy-makers. There remains a lack of clarity with employers, other professions, the media and the general public about what it is that qualified social workers can do that other professions cannot. The England Social Work Task Force identified that the initial and continuing education and training system for social workers can be confusing and incoherent with no clear career pathway or structure. Supervision and support for front line social workers can be very patchy and all too often focused on targets and performance management, sometimes at the expense of case work.

All of these factors make it an even harder job. Unsurprisingly, there are problems with recruitment and retention, leading to considerable frustration on the front line. The image of social work with the public

can make it even harder for social workers to build trusting and productive relationships with people who use social work services and their carers.

Social workers can find it difficult to influence other agencies and professionals and often feel 'damned if they do and damned if they don't' when making tough decisions about intervening, or not. When things go wrong, social workers are too often pilloried in the press. There are almost no stories about the difference that good social work can make to the lives of millions of people. In response to these chronic difficulties, BASW has campaigned for a College of Social Work and its arguments were fully accepted by the England Social Work Task Force.

The Task Force made the following recommendation:

*We are recommending the establishment of an independent national college of social work. This will articulate and promote the interests of good social work. It will give the profession itself strong, independent leadership; a clear voice in public debate, policy development and policy delivery and*

*strong ownership of the standards to be upheld.* (Building a Safe, Confident Future: The Final Report of the Social Work Task Force: November 2009)

This recommendation has already been accepted by the government in England. Discussions are taking place with the devolved administrations in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales and with the profession across the UK as to how this development should appropriately work with the different national arrangements for social work. As a UK organisation, BASW has a clear mandate from its member referendum to work for a single UK College, within which the appropriate national structures can be established.

The content of this article is based on the discussions that have taken place in England, but will be developed further as the four country engagement gathers momentum.

Thus far, it has been identified that the College of Social Work will:

- stand up for the profession in discussions with government, the public, regulators and the media;
- clarify the role of the profession;
- advise on training and professional development.

Many professions already have the support of a national college to support them. For example: The British Association and College of Occupational Therapists and The Royal Development Group is looking at these examples to make sure that The College of Social Work will be the equivalent for social workers, developing a College for the 21st century. We have an exciting and once in a generation opportunity to build a College for the social work profession that takes account of the unique College of Nursing. The College will highlight the relationship between social workers and the people who use social work

services, making the most of technological opportunities, and providing readily accessible resources to social workers.

### **Aspirations for The College**

In its first meeting, the Development Group considered what a college should do and the difference it should make. A facilitated discussion group considered the difference a college could have made at the time of the Baby Peter crisis. The group recognised that not all child deaths are preventable and that The College must cover all areas of social work practice, not just child protection. Focusing on the difference that a College could have made when things go wrong led the group to conclude that a strong college is needed to gain more clarity about what actions should be taken in times of crisis. Following this discussion, The Development Group published a paper outlining the proposed values and purpose of The College (Purpose and Functions of The College of Social Work: Consultation Paper). This paper was the subject of a series of wide consultations, which took place between May and September 2010.

The paper outlines the following proposed aspirations:

- **Leadership:** The College will provide leadership to the profession;
- **Excellence:** The College will enable and guard excellence in the profession;
- **Pride:** The College will have pride in, and bring pride to, the social work profession;
- **Partnership:** The College will actively seek partnerships with people who use services and their carers;
- **Independence:** The College will be independent and willing to challenge when necessary;
- **Led by the profession:** The College will mobilise the considerable expertise of the profession and its

members to inform all College activity;

- **Starting from strengths:** The College will build on existing good practice in the UK and overseas;
- **Collaborative:** The College will work collaboratively with allied professions, and with organisations affecting the profession;
- **Coherence:** The College will bring coherence and clarity to the profession.

These aspirations are the subject of consultation. Early responses indicate that the objectives do meet the aspirations of social workers and of people who use social work services.

### **Proposed strategic aims for the first three years**

The Development Group proposes the following strategic aims to guide the first three years of The College's development. These aims will be used as the organising principle for the development of the services of The College in its first years of operation:

- to be a powerful voice for the social work profession;
- to provide strong leadership for the profession;
- to develop The College;
- to work with people who use social work services and their carers;
- to be an international centre of excellence for the social work profession.

These aims are similar to those of other colleges.

These strategic aims mean that The College will invest energy and effort into working with the media and will call on its members to become actively involved in all aspects of its work, so that it has a strong and clear mandate from the profession to speak on its behalf. The College will need to be

influential with government, employers, the media and the general public. Early debates about how influential a non statutory body can be have been very interesting. A quick look at the work of the voluntary sector and the work of trade unions, suggests that non statutory organisations can be highly influential, provided that they have a strong mandate and work very effectively with the media. The College's mandate will come from a vibrant, active, involved and large membership base.

The College has no plans at present to ask for legislation to support its work. This is because, once The College is enshrined in legislation, it would lose independence and its functions could all too easily be subject to government policy changes. The College will flourish because social workers want to belong to it, rather than because anyone says they must belong to it. The wide consultation should tease out the priorities of social workers, so that The College can offer the benefits that are most needed at the right price.

### **Proposed objectives**

The Development Group proposes that to make a real difference to social work The College will need to:

- generate cultural change and raise the status and standard of social work;
- act as the source and guardian of high professional standards within and outside the social work profession;
- bring clarity and coherence by defining and guarding the reserved functions of the profession;
- improve public understanding and support for social work, through sustained public education and by representing the profession in the media and public debates;
- facilitate peer review and support to improve and develop the profession;

- facilitate employee union representation (via partnerships with trade unions);
- act as an essential source of advice to bodies who regulate, inspect and support social work and social care, and to organisations who deliver social work and social care; ensure that its work is grounded in how to best support people who use social work services, and their carers.

The Development Group has recognised that these objectives are long term and that generating cultural change could take at least 10 years to achieve. The Development Group wants to build a College that will be the key feature of the professional landscape of social work in the same way as colleges work for other professions.

The College needs to make a real and lasting difference to the profession so that social workers can make a real difference to the people they work with. To do that, The College will need to work within the regulatory framework for social work and to become very influential with the different bodies and agencies with statutory responsibilities for social work. The Development Group members will reflect the key stakeholders, enabling that process to begin right at the start.

### **Proposed functions**

In order to fulfil its objectives, it is proposed that The College will:

*Provide a strong voice for, and leadership to the profession.*

A feature of recent bad press surrounding social work indicates that no-one is speaking up for the profession. Similarly, serious case reviews seem to suggest that the opinions of social workers are not always valued by other professions, and that social workers can struggle to influence, let alone lead, other professionals.

The College will represent and lead the social work profession. It will:

- influence the development of national policies that impact on social work and social workers, acting as an advocate for the profession;
- build relationships and develop policies with other professional bodies on issues of common interest (e.g. occupational therapists, nurses, probation officers, teachers etc.), acting as an advocate for the social work profession;
- build relationships and develop policies with the academic community including researchers, lecturers and teachers;
- represent the social work profession in discussions with policy-makers in government, employers, the public, the media and other professions;
- establish links with, and become a member of international organisations, in order to learn from and share good practice in supporting social work, contributing to the development of European and International social work policies and practice.

### ***Defining the values and purpose of the social work profession***

The current and future role of social work in light of impending public expenditure cuts means that it is critical to clarify exactly what it is that only social work practitioners can do. The College will:

- set out and promote the values and purpose of social work – including a commitment to placing people who use social work services and their carers at the heart of the process;
- define and promote the reserved functions of social work (i.e. the activities which only qualified social workers can undertake).

***Developing, promoting and supporting standards***

Social workers should be working to the highest professional standards. The General Social Care Council regulates social workers and holds them to account in line with a Code of Practice. The College can help to raise the standards even further by building on the current work of the Social Work Reform Board and will work closely with social workers, their employers and the regulators in order to:

- agree, establish and promote professional standards for good practice, based on internationally agreed ethical principles. This should include clarifying the personal responsibilities of individual social workers, and what these standards mean in a range of different work settings.
- agree, establish and promote standards that employers of social workers should meet. This should include standards for employing, supervising, supporting and developing social workers at all levels of seniority. It should also clarify what social workers or other professionals should do if these standards are not in place or are not met. The College will work with the organisations that regulate employers of social workers (i.e. the Care Quality Commission and Ofsted) to ‘accredit’ employers who meet these standards.

***Providing guidance and support to the profession and allied professions***

Keeping up-to-date with the latest policy and practice in social work, and what it means for individual cases, can be difficult. The College will support social workers, other professionals who work with them and people who use social work services. Currently, people who use social work services and other professionals are unclear

about the role of social workers, their responsibilities and their duties. The College will:

- provide national practical guidance to clarify what good practice means in difficult situations at all levels of the social work profession;
- provide up-to-date information and guidance on issues affecting the profession;
- collect and disseminate knowledge, evidence and exemplars of what works.

***Shaping training and development***

Social workers need to use a range of complex skills, including excellent judgement, listening, negotiation and analytical skills, as well as hold appropriate qualifications. As with all professions, social workers are required to continue their professional development throughout their career. We have already received feedback about the variable quality of practice placements in initial training, the lack of clarity about where to find high quality and relevant ongoing and in-service training and the need to obtain specialist knowledge and skills for particular social work roles, for example in mental health, working with vulnerable adults, child protection, or sensory impairment. The College will improve the selection, training and ongoing development of social workers by working with those who select, train, employ and regulate them. The College will:

- agree, establish and promote standards for the quality of training;
- influence the development of a more coherent approach to the initial selection and training of social work students;
- promote learning when they are in practice and promote the ongoing training and development of the profession; be the source of expert advice to government on workforce

planning, working in partnership with the sector skills councils, employers and training providers;

- approve and promote the provision of Continued Professional Development (CPD).

### **Initial priorities for The College**

The Development Group proposes the following priorities for the first three years of operation:

#### ***Establish The College as a legal entity***

- Move from transitional arrangements to an established legal entity;
- Further develop dialogue with the devolved administrations and social work bodies in each of the countries of the UK, enabling The College to become a UK-wide body in due course;
- Define and agree governance and legal structure;
- Appoint Chair and Board members and agree board policies;
- Appoint Director and staff as required
- Develop the business model to achieve viability and sustainability.

It is hoped that The College will exist as an independent legal entity by April 2011.

#### ***Define the values and purpose of the profession***

- Gather evidence from existing work from the UK and internationally;
- Build consensus by fully involving the profession and those who use services and carers, as well as employers and regulators;
- Set out the values and purpose of social work;
- Set out the reserved functions of social work;
- Consult with social workers, members of the College, and other stakeholders

including service users, carers and regulatory bodies, on the proposed values and reserved functions;

- Agree, promote and uphold the values and reserved functions of social work.

This work is essential, especially in a climate of cuts to public expenditure. The majority of registered social workers are employed in the public sector (about 70%)<sup>1</sup> and, without sufficient clarity about what it is that only social workers can do, there is a risk that cuts to the profession will result in a loss of these aspects of critical importance.

#### ***Support improvements in the reputation of social work***

- Engage with social workers, people who use services, carers and allied professionals to demonstrate what social work can and does achieve;
- Develop and promote a narrative about social work, focusing on what social work is about and the context in which it operates, to employers, social workers, policy-makers, and the media.

It is important to recognise that, to improve the reputation of social work, The College will need to invest in high level public education activity as well as provide the leadership that the profession so urgently requires to help transform the public image of social work.

#### ***Develop standards***

- Gather evidence from existing work and standards from the UK and internationally;
- Build consensus by fully involving the profession, those who use services and their carers;
- Agree, promote and uphold standards once consensus is achieved.

The College will aspire to develop and promote 'gold standards' for the profession, promoting and leading good social work.

### ***Establish different types of membership***

Licensing arrangements will not be in place immediately but The College is consulting on and will then define future membership categories such as:

- Students (including those in employment who are not yet fully registered);
- Those registered/licensed to practice;
- Those qualified but not in practice;
- Associate membership for those with an interest in the profession (possibly non-voting).

The College is consulting on membership categories, membership benefits and the subscription price that people would be willing to pay. Decisions will be made by the Interim Board once the outcome of the consultation is known.

### **Specific benefits to members of The College**

Once the purpose, functions and aspirations for The College are agreed following the consultation period, The College will be in a position to start to offer benefits to members and prospective members. Looking at the benefits that other colleges offer suggests that some or all of the following are likely to be of importance:

- A regular news magazine;
- A peer reviewed journal;
- Professional indemnity insurance;
- Representation and employment advice (including partnership with trade unions);
- Practical guidance and advice, via a helpdesk and through publications;
- Practical tools and resources to use in social work practice;

- An annual conference;
- Online library with access to up-to-date information and research;
- Awards for study;
- Special interest groups (e.g. for newly qualified social workers, those working in mental health or child protection, or for practice teachers).

The consultation included specific questions about these potential benefits in order to gauge demand and interest.

### **Developing The College**

The College will be established as an independent organisation, led and run by social workers. Funding for the set up and logistical work covers England but the Development Group has agreed that The College will seek to become a UK body should this be desired in the devolved countries. A major consultation exercise involving the social work profession, people who use services and their carers, took place between May and October 2010.

The College will build strong links with trade unions and will work collaboratively with the various bodies that have statutory responsibilities for social work, working within the regulatory framework for social work.

A temporary Development Group was established in January 2010 to guide the initial development until the appointment of an Interim Chair and Interim Board. The Development Group comprised key stakeholders and handed over responsibility for leading the next stage of development to the Interim Board in Autumn 2010. The Interim Board were recruited via an open recruitment process. Membership of the Development Group and Interim Board can be found on The College website, **[www.collegeofsocialwork.org](http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org)**.

The Interim Board will guide The College into existence, ensuring that it is sustainable

and has sufficient members to be viable. The composition of the Interim Board covers different specialisms within social work and also includes a service user.

The precise role and activities of The College will be decided through an in depth analysis of feedback from the consultation process. The full reports of the consultation exercise have been submitted to The College's Co-Chairs and Interim Board and they will discuss these reports at their next board meeting in November. A college in this sense of the word means a membership organisation that supports a professional group, rather than a college which provides training.

### **Development process**

The development of The College is being facilitated by SCIE, an independent, not-for-profit organisation. SCIE has considerable experience of enabling the establishment of independent organisations, including the National Skills Academy for Social Care and C4EO.

SCIE has employed a small interim development team to support the Development Group and is providing communications expertise and staff alongside logistical support. Once the Interim Chair and Interim Board are in place they may decide to employ more interim staff.

A development process was devised and approved by the Development Group to ensure that the establishment of The College will be carried out in a manner that ensures that it responds to the needs and aspirations of the profession, and will be financially viable and sustainable.

SCIE has been provided with funding specifically for the set up and logistical support for The College; The College will be self financing through membership subscriptions once established.

### **Consultation**

The Development Group arranged a very wide consultation about the purpose and functions of The College. A range of stakeholders, including social workers, those who use social work services, those who employ social workers and specialist agencies were involved. The consultation took place between mid May and October 2010 and will inform the further development of The College. Details of the consultation process and the top-line findings from the events with social workers and the online questionnaire are now available online at [www.collegeofsocialwork.org](http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org).

Feedback from consultation events is now being collated and will be carefully analysed and reported to the Interim Board at their next meeting in November 2010. The feedback will be used to determine the legal form that The College takes, as well as the key priorities, functions and activities.

It was vital that social workers contributed to the consultation and had the opportunity to shape their College. Discussions are now underway about how best The College should consult with social workers in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Community Care hosted a forum to enable a series of discussions about the development of The College.

### **Challenges**

The formation of The College will have an impact on other organisations in the field. The Development Group comprises most of the key stakeholders, including BASW. These stakeholders will continue to be involved following the appointment of The Interim Board.

It is crucial that we all keep sight of the end game. We must improve the quality of social work practice and we must improve

public perceptions of social workers (including the media, policy-makers and people who use social work services). As long as we can keep a clear focus, it should be possible to determine how roles and activities of different agencies in the field can change and adapt.

Change can sometimes be difficult and uncomfortable. Those helping to create The College need to make use of the very best social work skills, insights and approaches to the profession. They will need to make decisions at a time of uncertainty and economic difficulty that will serve the profession well for the future, so that those people who need social work services can benefit from them in the long term.

**Footnote:**

<sup>1</sup> The State of the Adult Social Care Workforce in England, 2008. The third Report of Skills for Care's Skills Research and Intelligence Unit. Researched and compiled by Christine Eborall and David Griffiths, February 2008.

**Notes on Contributors**

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