STATEMENT OF SOCIAL WORK ROLES AND TASKS

“People value a social work approach based on challenging the broader barriers they face. They place a particular value on social work’s social approach, the social work relationship, and the positive personal qualities they associate with social workers. These include warmth, respect, being non-judgemental, listening, treating people with equality, being trustworthy, open, honest and reliable, and communicating well. People value the support that social workers offer as well as their ability to help them access and deal with other services and agencies.”


“Social workers need to understand more from a child’s perspective about any situation......[they need] understanding of a person’s feelings and to understand all children are different...With children in care, they need to always know they have someone they can turn to and talk to...You just want people to listen, understand and be there on a regular basis.”


CONTEXT

Remit
1. In September 2006, the Ministers for Children and Care Services in England commissioned a statement of social work roles and tasks. This is part of the programmes to modernise social care for children and adults. The statement is designed to serve several purposes. It will help to focus and improve social work practice, and increase the confidence of people using services and the public in what social work offers. It will clarify the distinctive contribution social work makes to public services and the wellbeing of the community, and enable scarce social work resources to be better used. It will underpin social work education, training and regulation, and inform workforce planning. The statement has been the subject of extensive consultation. It reflects the views of people who use services, of social workers and their employers in all sectors, and of many other stakeholders in social care and beyond who have been involved in its preparation.

Policy framework
2. Social work operates within a framework of constantly developing policies and legislation for children’s and adults’ social care, and for related fields like health and education. Despite generally rising prosperity, people and society face some challenging social problems. Social work makes a key contribution to the wellbeing of individuals, families and communities, and works with other agencies and disciplines to deliver coordinated support.
• Ensuring the welfare of older people, both in their own homes and in residential care, presents real challenges. These will increase as the proportion of very old people rises, and with it the demand for support. Social work at its best can help older people maintain their dignity and independence, widen their choices over how and where they receive support, protect them from abuse, and reduce admissions to hospital.

• Disabled people of all ages rightly expect to be treated as full citizens in control of their own lives, taking the same opportunities and risks as other people. Social work at its best can help disabled people, including those with learning difficulties, to enjoy their rights as full and active members of their communities, free from discrimination and abuse.

• People with mental health problems want to be free from abuse, stigma and discrimination, and supported to recover, get jobs and homes, and take their place in society. Communities want to be free of the fear of violence they associate, mistakenly, with mental illness. Social work at its best can meet both needs.

• Children in care deserve a fair deal. We need to ensure that they have the security and support to do better at school, and improve their prospects as adults. Social work at its best can enable the state to be a better parent, and help children thrive and fulfil their potential.

• Society wants every child to be free from the threat of abuse, neglect and exploitation and have opportunities to succeed. Social work at its best can safeguard vulnerable children, ensure they get the care they need, and help families to overcome problems and stay together.

• Unhappy children without supportive families can get involved in crime and violence, in substance abuse and teenage pregnancy. Social work at its best can help to turn children away from anti-social behaviour and self-harm, and enable people to be more effective parents.

• Some individuals and families behave in ways that are unacceptable and pose a threat to the wellbeing of others. Social work at its best can confront children and adults firmly and constructively with the consequences of their actions, and help them change their behaviour.

• Some communities experience long-standing multiple deprivation and disadvantage, and suffer from stigma and social exclusion. Social work at its best can help communities build on their strengths, develop their own solutions and create networks of support for their members.
The social work context

3. Social workers are held to account in various ways for the work they do. All social workers must be registered with the General Social Care Council, meet its qualification requirements and abide by its code of practice. The title ‘Registered Social Worker’ is protected in law, and action can be taken against anyone claiming to be a social worker whose name is not on the register. Social workers are accountable to the law, to their employers, to people using their services and to the standards set out in the GSCC code. They have to deal with the tensions caused by this multiple accountability.

4. Social work takes place within a framework of law and regulation. Wherever possible, social workers aim to work in partnership with the people they are helping, encouraging them to keep control of their lives, express their views and take part in decisions that affect them. Sometimes they have to balance their personal involvement in people's lives with the ability to stand back, make judgements and reach hard decisions in order to protect vulnerable people or to exercise control. Some duties, particularly in local authority social work, are laid down in great detail. Regulations prescribe procedures for assessment, investigation and joint working with allied disciplines. Social workers may have to use legal powers to intervene in difficult situations, and may need to override the wishes of individuals and families in order to safeguard a child or adult who is at risk.

5. People are generally keen to manage their own affairs with a minimum of interference. Many prefer to assess their own needs and organise their own support. This is changing the way some social work tasks are defined. Much day-to-day social work has a clear preventative role, supporting parents and carers, reducing the risks of abuse and neglect, preventing family breakdown, and helping people maintain or recover their independence. Skilled social work often avoids the need for compulsory action, and enables children or adults to remain safely in their homes. It assists people in finding their own solutions to complex problems, whether by changing their behaviour or navigating the system of public and other support services. Social work also works with health, education, housing and other agencies, helping people achieve joined-up solutions as well as making best use of public funds. A core task of social work is the development of working partnerships with other professionals and agencies.

6. To perform at their best, social workers require active support from government and from the public. Many social work roles help implement government policy and are essential in enabling local councils, schools, the NHS and the justice services to deliver their responsibilities. Government is responsible for ensuring resources are sufficient to meet needs and maintain standards of good practice. Employers must provide good quality supervision, learning support, IT and management systems, and working conditions. The media need help to understand the risks social workers have to manage and the high levels of responsibility they carry. Social workers themselves should be proud of their profession and willing to speak out about what they do.
And most important, a stronger partnership is needed between social workers and people who use the services they provide.

**WHAT IS SOCIAL WORK?**

7. Social work is a world-wide profession. The following is a widely accepted international definition:

“The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.”

8. Social work roles tend to be more elastic than those of many other professional disciplines, for a variety of reasons:

- Social work has to take account of people's needs, circumstances and relationships as a whole, rather than focusing on a particular condition or delivering a defined service.
- Increasingly, social workers are working in partnership with people to co-produce solutions matched to their strengths and preferences, and jointly securing the best possible outcomes.
- In enabling people to exercise control and choice, social work has to respond to demands for more personalised solutions, to be flexible in finding new ways of working, and adapt to people's changing situations.
- Social work as a profession plays a key role in mediating between the individual and the state, and determining when it is necessary for the state to intervene in the lives of individuals and families.
- Social work's remit for negotiating with other agencies and coordinating support from various sources often takes it into the territory of other services and professions.
- In agencies, both statutory and voluntary, which help people excluded by other services, it can be difficult for social work to draw hard and fast boundaries round its roles.
- Social work is an evolving profession, constantly responding to new policy aspirations, expanding knowledge and rising public expectations.

9. In practice, social work can be recognised by a distinctive combination of features, analysed in more detail in the following sections:

- The situations and characteristics of people who receive social work support or intervention, and the functions which require social work.
- The kinds of outcomes social work enables people to achieve.
- The particular combination of knowledge, values and skills it possesses, drawn from a range of academic disciplines and practice learning, and transmitted through specified education and training.
• The evidence base for social work practice, including lessons from social research, practitioners' reflections on their working experience, and the expertise of people who use services.
• The methods and approaches it applies to assess, record and respond to the needs of children, adults, families and communities.

Situations and characteristics of people who receive social work support or intervention

10. Social work helps children, adults, families and communities in a wide variety of circumstances and through a range of statutory and independent sector agencies. It often works with people in situations where other services have been unable or unwilling to help. Social work knowledge and skills are particularly relevant in complex family and social situations where there is a need to assess and make judgements about high levels of risk and uncertainty, conflicting interests and difficult choices, and to take action appropriately. Sometimes, the social worker's roles and responsibilities are defined in law, regulations, guidance and procedures. Many situations are unpredictable, however, and decisions on appropriate action require skilled professional judgement.

Social workers characteristically find themselves in lead roles where:

• the social or family situation is complex, and a mix of factors needs to be assessed before help can be provided [e.g. Concerns about a child's attendance, performance or behaviour at school may be linked to family stress, parental depression, physical or sexual abuse, poor diet, language problems or bullying]
• the child, adult or family has difficulty building trusting relationships but they need skilled help from a worker who is able to win their trust [e.g. A husband is carer of a partner with early dementia, is ashamed of her condition, resists help, is wary of strangers, and there are signs of adult abuse]
• a social situation contains clear risks to a child or adult, there is uncertainty about the best form of action to take, and both taking action and not taking action could have serious consequences [e.g. A single mother is dependent on a violent partner who poses a threat to the children, requiring his exclusion or their removal]
• assessing risks and responses is made harder by unpredictable factors like family conflict or emotional stress [e.g. A person with enduring mental illness may be able to self-manage medication and remain stable except when disputes arise in the family, when they are more prone to self-harm]
• the child, adult or family may put themselves or others at risk of harm and a response has to balance the individual's interests and the well-being of others [e.g. a couple with learning difficulties are assessed as lacking sufficient skills to be safe and effective parents, and fear support will be intrusive or lead to loss of their children]
• the child’s, adult’s or family’s living conditions, finances, behaviour or
other circumstances are causing problems and likely to result in social
exclusion [e.g. neighbours may seek care for an older person who is
depressed and reclusive, self-neglecting and prone to infection-related
confusion, but the person may not want care]
• the behaviour of a child, adult or family causes concern or is
unacceptable to neighbours or society, but evidence for action is not
strong [e.g. neighbours and the school report anxieties about the
general wellbeing of a local child, but solid evidence of neglect or abuse
is not forthcoming, and prejudice may be a factor]
• the child, adult or family is facing serious difficulties, choices,
bereavement, loss or other major changes which they need help and
support to manage [e.g. the loss of a caring partner leaves an older
person unable to cope practically or emotionally, and uncertain and
anxious about choosing among available alternatives]
• standard ‘off-the-peg’ services are inadequate to the person’s needs,
and a creative approach is required to help them find the solutions that
are right for them [e.g. a severely disabled young person and his family
want to make the best use of flexible budgets to design an innovative
support system giving him maximum independence]
• a disaster or emergency creates a need for urgent, wide-ranging
support for victims [e.g. immediate and continuing work with people
whose lives have been disrupted by floods or terrorist bombings]

Functions requiring social work involvement

11. All of these situations require skilled social work. Some may involve roles and
tasks identified in legislation and guidance. Social workers may carry
accountability for decisions (in conjunction with their agency) about whether
to use legal powers or initiate emergency protection procedures. They may
for instance have to judge whether a child or adult at risk should be removed
to a place of safety, or whether an alternative approach would prevent the
need for compulsory action. They may be the social worker for a child in care,
responsible on behalf of the local authority for carrying out the duties of the
corporate parent and ensuring the child’s health, wellbeing and educational
progress. Law, regulations and guidance shape work with children and
families involved in court proceedings, both civil and criminal. They define
how joint assessment of social and nursing needs of disabled and older
people is carried out, and set the frameworks for inter-agency and multi-
disciplinary working in children’s and adults’ services.

12. In a few instances, legislation or guidance stipulates that a role should be
performed only by a social worker, or names social work as one of the
professions approved for particular roles. The Independent Reviewing Officer
who monitors the progress and care plans of children in care must be an
experienced social worker. Under the guidance on Working Together to
Safeguard Children, a qualified and experienced social worker should lead the
core assessment as part of an enquiry into whether safeguarding action is
required. Social workers may be approved mental health professionals under mental health legislation, or carry out “best interests” assessments when a person may be deprived of their liberty under the Mental Capacity Act.

13. In other circumstances, employers are responsible for determining which situations require the deployment of a registered social worker, who may work as part of a team with social care workers and other professionals.

An experienced social worker should always be involved:

- where investigation and action may be needed to safeguard children, adults and families from abuse, neglect, or exploitation;
- where there is a need to assess risks and plan responses if a child or vulnerable adult may cause significant harm to themselves or other people;
- where there may be a need to remove a child from their parents or carers, or an adult from their home to a place of safety;
- where there is serious likelihood of family disintegration or relationship breakdown which threatens to impair health and wellbeing;
- where parents are unable to look after their children, and for each child who is in care;
- where a person is in need of support or care but unable to exercise mental capacity or provide informed consent;
- where the future home, care or custody arrangements are disputed; and
- where people are being assessed as foster parents or adopters.

Outcomes of social work

14. Social work aims to enable people to overcome problems and achieve the outcomes they want. These typically include:

- more control for people over their own lives and the decisions which affect them;
- economic and financial wellbeing and a decent standard of living;
- ability to exercise human and civil rights and be active citizens;
- family stability and opportunities for children to thrive and achieve their potential;
- secure and stable alternatives for children and young people unable to stay with their families;
- safety and freedom for children and adults of all ages from abuse, harassment and discrimination;
- presence in the community for people whatever their disability, and access to the same opportunities as everyone else;
- ability to maintain or recover independence, solve practical problems and enjoy the rights and benefits of independent living;
- reduction of risks to people’s physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing, including people providing care and support to relatives and friends;
• choice of living and support arrangements for people to match their requirements and preferences;
• timely access to high quality support and care that adapts to people’s changing needs and circumstances; and
• ability to remain in their own home as long as possible, and not be obliged to enter institutional care unless this is their choice.

Knowledge, values and skills

15. Initial social work education and training should equip people with the distinctive combination of knowledge, values and skills the roles require. These include:

• respect for the equality, worth and human rights of all people, and for their individuality, privacy and dignity;
• commitment to putting into practice equalities and diversity principles, recognising and dismantling barriers, and challenging discrimination against people using services, carers, families and fellow-workers;
• skills in assessing, jointly with people and families, their circumstances, strengths, needs and preferred outcomes;
• understanding of individual, family and community dynamics;
• skills and knowledge to deal with hostile and aggressive responses to social work intervention, without putting their own safety at risk;
• knowledge of the frameworks of law, policy and regulation affecting social work practice;
• skills, knowledge and judgement required to recognise and evaluate levels of risk to children and adults, assess possible measures to reduce and manage the risks, and take appropriate action;
• skills in enabling people to exercise choice, be involved in decisions affecting them, and use resources to secure the outcomes they want;
• skills in communication, particularly with and on behalf of children and adults with limited ability to convey their own views and wishes;
• skills in negotiating and coordinating services provided by networks of social care staff and family carers;
• understanding of the roles and functions of other professions and agencies, and skills in collaboration and multi-disciplinary teamwork;
• information-sharing, negotiating and advocacy skills to assist people in obtaining resources, services and benefits;
• skills in effective record-keeping and use of records to review progress and learn from practice; and
• commitment to continuing personal and professional development and the acquisition of advanced and specialist skills and knowledge.

Knowledge and evidence for practice

16. Drawing on a range of academic disciplines, formal research, feedback from people using services, and the experience and reflection of social workers and supervisors, a body of evidence is developing about what works well in social
work, in what circumstances, for which groups of people. Increasingly, this knowledge base is drawing on international experience, both through access to the variety of overseas as well as UK academic and practice journals, and with greater numbers of staff working in the UK who qualified abroad. People using services and front-line practitioners are developing research skills and taking an increased part in defining research questions, conducting research and interpreting the results. Their distinctive perspectives are enhancing the lessons to be drawn from research. They are also contributing to learning cultures in organisations, and a growing research awareness among practitioners and managers as well as people using and providing services. Shared knowledge is an important tool for increasing the independence and control of people using services, and their influence over how social work is practiced and services designed.

Methods and approaches

17. Methods of working in social work have evolved over a long period, rooted in common core principles but reflecting changing legal and policy frameworks, social attitudes and expectations, and relationships between professionals and the public. Key features include:

- social models of assessing people’s situations and working with them to overcome barriers to participation and independence;
- practice that seeks to put power in the hands of people to manage their own situations, with the social worker as facilitator;
- work that integrates individual, family and community dimensions in a creative balance;
- distinctive approaches to understanding and working with risk, recognising the need to safeguard those who are vulnerable whilst enabling people to take the risks that go with ordinary everyday living;
- modern approaches to established casework skills and methodologies, working systematically and in an integrated way to keep a focus on people’s practical, social and psychological wellbeing;
- applying and extending principles of personalisation, which are themselves consistent with social work at its best, to help people find individual solutions to their situations; and
- effective joint working with other disciplines, other social care staff, volunteers, foster parents and advocates.

Tasks of social work

18. In undertaking their roles, social workers perform a variety of tasks. Not all of them are exclusive to social work, but social workers carry them out as an integral part of enabling people to achieve the outcomes they want. Many are common to work with people of all ages in many different settings and sectors. Some tasks are specific to work with adults, or with children and families. Often, both the children and the adults in a family need help or
support, and the social worker has to be competent to understand and work with both children and adults.

19. Some of the principal tasks undertaken by social workers include:

a. building relationships with people who need support, winning their trust and finding good ways of communicating with them;
b. working with the person or family who needs support to help them assess their situation, decide what they want to achieve, overcome barriers, and obtain support that feels right for them;
c. aiding people who wish to do so to assess their own needs, identify resources, make decisions, and arrange and manage their own support;
d. providing or arranging advocacy for people who do not have a voice, and helping them to be more in control of their own lives;
e. undertaking brokerage roles, developing creative approaches to the use of all available resources to extend individual choices, avoiding the trap of making people fit the services available, and being sensitive to unspoken needs;
f. helping parents develop the skills and understanding to be more effective in meeting their children's needs for care, development and control;
g. supporting the physical, intellectual and emotional development of children and young people who need help, and helping disadvantaged people of all ages improve their health and wellbeing;
h. arranging good-quality alternative care for children and young people whose parents cannot care for them, and for adults who can no longer manage in their own homes;
i. helping children and adults to overcome the problems of disability, negotiate the transition to adulthood and achieve independent living, access direct payments, individual budgets and other funding, and secure personal assistance, equipment and employment adjustments;
j. helping people in poverty to improve their financial position, informing them about their entitlements, and supporting them to access training, work opportunities and benefits;
k. agreeing with people the purposes and outcomes of support, regularly reviewing the fit with people’s changing needs, involving people in co-recording progress and concerns, and agreeing adjustments and plans for ending contact;
l. enabling people who are dissatisfied with the services they receive, including social work services, to make use of representations and complaints systems to seek explanations, apologies and redress;
m. helping to ensure that public resources are allocated and any charges applied fairly, and informing commissioners of any evidence that the type, scale or quality of services is not matching needs;
n. seeking to promote social justice by challenging neglect, discrimination and exclusion, and helping to build safe, strong and caring social networks and communities; and
o. encouraging integrated working with social care workers, with other professions and agencies, with networks run by people using services, and
with community support groups to improve the way services are coordinated and to better understand one another’s roles.

19. Social work tasks with children and families and with adults may be shared between social workers and assistants, support or care workers with the appropriate skills. Not all the tasks arising in the course of working with a child, adult or family require the full expertise of a social worker. New roles are emerging, supported by new forms of training, and it is possible for others to undertake and perhaps specialise in tasks which have traditionally been parts of the social work role. The basis for allocating tasks, and models of co-working between social workers and other staff, should be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. The social worker should retain case responsibility and a coordinating and supervisory role, to maintain integrated support and accountability. At the same time, a clear message from children in care and other people using services is that they place a high value on continuity and consistency in their relationships with their social workers. Developing assistant roles should not be at the expense of partnership working on a more equal basis between people using services and social workers, and enabling and equipping people to do more for themselves,

WORKING WITH OTHER PROFESSIONS

20. Social work works closely with other professional disciplines, including the various nursing specialisms, teaching, occupational therapy and other health professions, psychology, counselling, medical consultants and general practitioners, early years workers, police, youth justice and offender services. Multi-disciplinary teams have increased in number and variety in children’s and adults’ services, as a means of giving people access to a range of expertise, improving coordination and making best use of scarce professional skills. Social work is good at building bridges with other disciplines and agencies, and helping overcome some of the barriers and gaps between different professions which can create difficulties for people with multiple or complex conditions using several services. It is sometimes necessary to be flexible about boundaries so as to avoid people being referred unnecessarily from one source of help to another, and having to give the same information to different workers. Social work has a tradition of not sticking rigidly to professional or agency boundaries where greater flexibility serves people’s best interests.

21. Social work should be clear and confident about the expertise it has developed, the distinctive contribution it makes and the features of its work particularly valued by people who use its services. It also has a responsibility to feed its knowledge, values and approaches into the work of joint teams to inform their culture and widen their frame of reference. Professionals working together in multi-disciplinary settings, in children’s centres or community mental health teams, for instance, are likely to become familiar with one another’s areas of expertise, and able to apply a common core of knowledge, whilst recognising when a particular professional’s skills are
required. Social workers who are outposted still need access to good professional supervision, learning and development opportunities, up-to-date knowledge support and links to relevant policy and practice developments.

“People using services highlight the importance of the relationship they have with a social worker as key to the positives they associate with social work practice. It is this relationship which is the starting point for building trust and supporting people’s self-empowerment. People refer to the strengths of the informality, flexibility and warmth of this relationship.”

“My ideal social worker would be a good listener, caring, reliable, punctual, understanding, and would help me have a say in reviews.”