

JSWEC CONFERENCE PRESENTATION

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10 July 2008

I was asked to talk about social work in the light of “people, place and politics” – the theme of your conference. That’s pretty wide-ranging, so I’ve taken that to mean nothing less than the state of the profession itself! I was also asked to think specifically about the role of social work education in that context.

We’ve become used to thinking of social work as a profession in crisis, subjected to constant change; clinging to its values like an eroding piece of rock while the sands slip away under its feet.

There’s an element of truth in that. I want to talk about three fundamental issues for social work. First, it is increasingly difficult for social workers – either in individual practice or in developing service models – to respond directly to the needs of service users. Second, policy-making has reacted to tragedies affecting children, or to a desire to reduce costs, and has relied on structural solutions to achieve change, without specifically considering the impact on the people delivering services – an oversight that could absolutely never happen in, say, the NHS. And third, we have moved increasingly towards the enforcement of individual responsibility and the minimisation of risk to organisations, under governments of both the main parties – which one could argue is directly in opposition to the natural instinct of social workers to promote organisational responsibility towards the individual, and protect the individual from risk.

I’ve just made three sweeping generalisations! So in the remainder of this speech I want to unpick some of that, and examine – under the three themes I outlined just now – the way in which policy-makers’ approach to “people, place and politics” has affected social work.

But I also want to look at what we need to do about it, and specifically the role that the people in this room can play.

I just want to explain where I’m coming from. I’m not a social worker myself. I’ve observed social work at close quarters for many years though, first as a general social affairs journalist, then as a specialist writer and more recently as Editor of Community Care magazine until 2005, and most recently in NCH, which is – both culturally and in its service delivery – profoundly a social work organisation.

One of the key changes I have seen over that time is the increasing difficulty of responding to need, both in practice at individual level, and – more markedly – in the development of services. Of course it is idealistic to believe that social work was ever able to respond to need unhampered by other considerations. But the development of markets in social care over many years, since the initial “purchaser provider split” in the early 1990s, means that any service provider must now meet the demands of the marketplace, otherwise it will not survive. And the most obvious characteristics of the marketplace in children’s services, to use the example I know best, are the short-term nature of purchases, which automatically work against the needs of children and families; and the lack of evidence that the operation of the market responds to an understanding of need except at the most general demographic level.

In fact, commissioning priorities are generally governed by cost, and by the policy direction set by government, whose claims that policy responds to identified need are deeply suspect given the pressures of public opinion, media debate, and finance.

In NCH, we have outlined a process by which we will develop and improve our services. It's called "needs to outcomes", which describes a process or chain reaction dependent at one end on the undertaking of research to identify need, and at the other end on our Outcomes Framework – which provides a detailed mechanism for frontline practitioners to record the difference we make to children and map this against the Every Child Matters 5 outcomes and their equivalents in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. I believe it illustrates an ideal process for social work to flourish, in which we first identify need and then develop plans to shape practice and services in response to that need, and messages which we will promote to policy-makers, the public and other audiences in order to increase understanding of both the need and our proposed solutions. We then develop service models, and ultimately measure the impact of our work using the Outcomes Framework. Fantastic. The difficulty comes in the middle, where we have to use all the tools in our campaigning, lobbying and marketing toolchest to try to influence commissioners and policy-makers to pay attention to what we've learned about need. Easier said than done! But if we don't, we won't be able to develop sustainable services that actually meet the need we've identified. The uncomfortable reality, though, is that the first thing some commissioners would ask about this process is "hope my money isn't being spent on any of this"!

In order to get services to respond to need, we have to manage – or even subvert – the market.

Of course, to some extent, the tension between responding to need and being an agent of the state, with all the very different drivers that implies, is at the heart of social work itself, which – as everyone here will know – has traditionally occupied three positions, sometimes separately and sometimes at the same time. These have been described differently by different researchers and commentators, but could be summarised as: the therapeutic function, in which practitioners act alongside individuals to overcome or come to terms with the difficulties they face; the function as agent of the state, in which the practitioner is the expert, providing practical help to individuals as part of an overall design to address social problems; and the role as agent of social justice, in which the practitioner consciously empowers oppressed individuals to overcome the failures of social policy.

In practice, social workers move between these three functions, which can easily become contradictory and often become controversial. Meanwhile, the policy environment is not simple either: the inherent contradictions which I have just alluded to in the creation of a market where the service user is so rarely the customer are only one example of this. There are lots of other examples. One would be the contradiction between the Schools White Paper of 2005, emphasising increased autonomy for schools to promote attainment and the emphasis in Every Child Matters on promoting integrated services focused on much broader outcomes, delivered within and around schools.

The impacts of structural change on individual social workers are not difficult to see. And this brings me to the second main point I outlined at the start of this session: the fact that change has repeatedly been instigated without specific reference to its effect on social work as a profession. Obviously, for example, the impact of the commissioning environment on an organisation like NCH is mirrored in the impact on the social workers we employ, whose desire to work longer term with children and

families – which often led them out of the local authority and into NCH in the first place – can be undermined by short-term contracts which are too rigid to permit innovation, even in response to need.

But the mixed economy has also had clear impacts on social work in local authorities. In children's services, the purchaser provider split has effectively meant many social workers no longer have the freedom to employ all of the three approaches to practice I mentioned above, with these being split between the statutory and independent sectors, and most of the therapeutic emphasis and opportunities to promote social justice concentrated in the work that is contracted out. Coupled with the increasingly high thresholds for services, leading to a stressful "gatekeeper" role for local authority social workers, this amounts to a profound change over time to the role performed by social workers in local authorities, and this in turn has affected both recruitment and retention of those professionals.

Last year and in the first part of this year, I was a member of two very different working groups, who both came across this issue from different perspectives. One was the Commission on the Future of Social Work convened by the Conservatives' shadow minister for children Tim Loughton; the other was the working group convened by DCSF as part of the Care Matters agenda to look at the feasibility of Social Work Practices. Both of these groups quickly identified the fact that in all major structural change visited upon the functions formerly provided by social services departments, the impact on social work as a profession had never been seriously considered by government. The encouragement of the mixed economy by successive governments is only one example. Others include the far more recent split between children's and adult services, and the development of direct payments.

It is actually difficult to determine what the government envisages as the role of social work in the future. The intention to break down "silos" between professions is clear, and innovations like the "common core of skills and knowledge" and the "common assessment framework" are clearly intended to help achieve this. But the role of social workers is not identified specifically within the Children's Workforce Strategy. This is not to say that other professions have a high profile – the emphasis is on outcomes and the services required to achieve them. But unlike other professions, social work simply does not have sufficient presence either with government or in society generally to advocate successfully on its own behalf. Indeed, it is clear that some aspects of the way the profession operates are seen as inimical to the social policy direction of the current and recent governments. We often hear "more teachers", "more police officers", "more nurses" cited as a policy aim, but not "more social workers".

This brings me to my third main point: the increasing disconnect between the values of social work – and, I think more than any other profession, social work is defined by its values – and the values promoted by both government and opposition.

Let's look at this in terms of people, place and politics. First, the people social workers support. Not only are they the most vulnerable, and have been becoming increasingly vulnerable over a prolonged period. They are also those who are ignored, hated, marginalised, blamed and stigmatised. And any attempt to understand them is open to criticism. It's easy to highlight the knee-jerk reactions of, say, the Daily Mail. But the challenge that this presents is more complex, more fundamental, and closer to us all than it sometimes appears. There are no easy "goodies" and "baddies". Even those of us who work in the social care sector can be challenged by the need to understand and support those who cause huge damage to others. To take a personal example, I have found the recent news stories of young

people torturing and sometimes even murdering adults with learning difficulties deeply disturbing and upsetting. But NCH is right now supporting a young man who is facing imprisonment for doing just that, probably miles away from his family; a sentence which is likely to exacerbate rather than help overcome the complex set of factors which led him to his most appalling – but by no means first – violent crime. Let's not forget that his victim was a social work client too, of course.

These people – and certainly in this case both the young man and his victim – are often pushed into the places where most of us don't want to be. Since the 1980s we have increasingly housed our most vulnerable and most challenging fellow citizens together, in places rarely experienced by commentators, politicians or even other public services.

And finally, the politics: an intense and continuous battle between what's electable and what's right, on every front – not only in terms of the fundamental financial issues and the consensus about how much redistribution the electorate will bear, but also between our desire to improve the lot of others and our fear, anger and frustration at their disengagement, fecklessness, violence. Social workers put themselves right in the heart of that conflict. Not surprisingly, they are continually caught in the crossfire.

I hope now I've outlined the three huge challenges to social work: a difficulty, for several reasons I've outlined, in responding to need either in practice or in service development; constant policy and structural change with no consideration of the impact on the profession; and a disconnect between the values of the profession and those of successive governments.

Because of the particular characteristics and roles of social work, these are more difficult to weather than they might be for professions with a better understood role, more public support, and which are less values-driven. Nevertheless, they remain primarily external to the profession. The struggles social work faces are not caused by inherent weaknesses or deficits in the profession itself. And it's vitally important that we hear that loud and clear.

Nevertheless, social work is under significant stress and in need of a compass.

I believe that's where the people in this room come in, because that compass can only be the truth. In other words, knowledge: the truth about need and the truth about what works. And that is what social work education provides, or should provide, at every stage in a practitioner's career. Knowledge about need also enables social work organisations like NCH and others to campaign and influence both the policy environment and the market for services – a critical activity which social workers need to understand far better because it helps create the climate in which their practical response to need can flourish.

There is perhaps more difficulty than ever before both in discovering the truth and in making sure it is heard. Some government departments are notorious for concealing inconvenient research findings, because they might point to a different policy direction. It is perhaps rarer than ever to hear a politician champion a truth which runs contrary to public opinion or current moral panics. And it is far easier to obtain funding for research which is likely to confirm the already-determined direction of policy rather than that which is either felt likely to challenge policy, or ventures more into the unknown. You know these facts better than I do.

But standing against those facts are some important examples of the compass which research can provide. To take one example which I know about because it involved

NCH... Sheffield Hallam University was commissioned by government to evaluate services aimed at families who are at risk of losing their homes because of antisocial behaviour – most of these services are provided by NCH. The research highlighted excellent social work practice, creative service design, and the acute and complex needs experienced by these families. It has directly influenced government in its response to antisocial behaviour. It has provided direct knowledge to practitioners about both need and the best response to it. And by generating publicity around the research, organisations have been able to have an impact on public opinion and public understanding of the reality of these families' lives, and what is required to achieve transformational change in their behaviour and wellbeing.

At individual practitioner level, if knowledge is the moral compass that can help steer social workers through the immense and competing pressures they face, and avoid them becoming disoriented, then support for practitioner researchers must be more important than ever. It's fantastic that work is going on between the Children's Workforce Development Council and Making Research Count (a consortium of departments that is part of the Centre of Excellence for Children's Services and Outcomes) to provide better support and opportunities for practitioner researchers.

It's also important to mention that despite what I've said about the political climate over the last couple of decades, and the undeniable fact that in general terms the tone of political and public discourse has been damaging for social work and – much more importantly of course – for those it seeks to help, there is an opportunity now for new ideas. We have a government in serious difficulty, losing discipline and consequently experiencing a weakening of "group-think", and we have an opposition whose policies are still far from fully formed. It's genuine window of opportunity, before the polarisation and simplification of the electoral battleground.

The other important activity is that being undertaken by the Social Care Institute for Excellence, which is seeking ways of ensuring social care agencies are genuinely steered by the truth and by knowledge, despite the pressures of policies and markets that I have outlined. The model of organisational excellence which SCIE has outlined, if taken seriously by organisations, can only help ensure social work keeps an eye on its compass.

SCIE is also involved in a multi-agency social care research collaboration with the Economic and Social Research Council, to begin the work of linking social work – initially through local authorities but we certainly hope through the voluntary sector too – to the research agenda.

And SCIE has a seat on the management board of the National School for Social Care Research announced by Ivan Lewis in May.

This is not a commercial for SCIE! But I would argue that the most important thread linking all these developments is SCIE's determination to take knowledge down to the front line. On the practitioners' and employers' side, they simply must see the vital importance of this and consciously initiate the considerable culture change required for social workers to take full advantage of it.

In conclusion then, I think I've taken about 20 minutes to tell you what you undoubtedly knew already! Social work educators and academics have never been more critical to the future of the profession. In fact, as many of the traditional structures in which social workers found themselves reinforced and reaffirmed are dismantled, the moral compass of social work is more than ever dependent on you. And maybe that's as it should be. Maybe the example of other professions tells us

that structures can come and go, but an undeniable, independent and well understood body of knowledge is exactly what makes a profession unassailable.