



# **The Role of the Registered Social Worker in Contributing to Better Outcomes for Scotland: Guidance for Local Authorities**

**UNISON Scotland's response to the Role of the Registered Social Worker in Contributing to Better Outcomes for Scotland: Guidance for Local Authorities**

**September 2009**

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

- UNISON Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government's proposals to produce guidance for local authorities
- We welcome some aspects of the guidance including the definition of the role in the context of partnership working across all services.
- However, we feel the paper has a narrow remit to identify those tasks that **ONLY** Social Workers should be allowed to do. We believe social workers carry out and are very good at a wide range of tasks using their skills and training in a wide range of settings.
- We feel the guidance over emphasises initial crisis interventions and protective measures and omits very important roles outlined in the initial Scottish Social Services Council paper and in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Review.
- This narrow remit leaves us concerned that Local Authorities could take the view that unqualified staff are able to undertake many of the functions not identified in the narrow definitions given, provided they are supervised by a qualified worker.
- We think the document as a whole would benefit from a clear statement of what social workers will need to underpin their role and functions and to put in context the accountabilities identified.
- There is a concern that only 'protection' is referred to and not 'care and protection.'
- Rather than just implementing a risk management plan the carrying out of the risk assessment should be the function.
- We are concerned that the phrase "must retain accountability" could be interpreted to mean that a social worker can be accountable for these responsibilities without them directly engaging with the service user.
- We are concerned that the responsibility for care planning when children are accommodated away from home is not specifically included.
- In addition, the functions should include the assessment and support of carers, whether foster carers, kinship carers or adopters, which is a key role only a registered social worker has the knowledge and skills to undertake.
- There is a need to cover young offenders and the role for social workers in that sector
- We believe there should be an additional bullet point in paragraph 9 to cover the issue of mental health issues in relation to young people

## **INTRODUCTION**

UNISON is Scotland's largest public sector trade union representing over 160,000 members. UNISON Scotland represents over 25,000 members who work in the social care services, including many Social workers working in children's and family services, support and administrative staff, those involved with the justice service, home care staff, etc.

UNISON Scotland welcomes the opportunity to comment on the Scottish Government's Consultation on the Role of the Registered Social Worker.

## **GENERAL COMMENTS**

UNISON Scotland welcomes the Scottish Government's proposals to produce guidance for local authorities to highlight the role of social work and illustrating how it can contribute to better outcomes for Scotland and to set out those social work functions which must only be carried out by registered social workers. We have been pleased to support the other sets of guidance and frameworks that have arisen from *Changing Lives*, Report of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Social Work Review. UNISON continues to support the registration of social workers through the SSSC, the protection of title and the further identification of reserved functions.

We welcome some aspects of the guidance including the definition of the role in the context of partnership working across all services. However, we feel the paper has a narrow remit to identify those tasks that ONLY social workers should be allowed to do. Social workers carry out and are very good at a wide range of tasks using their skills and training in a wide range of settings. It is important that we do not define a social worker by only those tasks which only they can do. This could lead to a situation where employers choose to deploy them only to those responsibilities and not recognise and deploy them to duties where their skills have a significant role to play. This includes areas of preventative work, developing relationships with children and other service users, their families and communities. Therefore the paper should emphasise this point. (The paper produced by the Role of the Social Worker Group as part of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Review and Changing Lives report covered this issue. It referred to duties that only a Social worker should do, duties that a Social Worker could do as well as other professionals and duties that Social Workers' skills were very usefully deployed in.)

In particular, we feel the guidance over emphasises initial crisis interventions and protective measures and omits very important roles outlined in the initial Scottish Social Services Council paper and in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Review.

This narrow remit leaves us concerned that Local Authorities could take the view that unqualified staff are able to undertake many of the functions not identified in the narrow definitions given, provided they are supervised by a qualified worker. Indeed a worrying comment in paragraph 18 seems to open the door to this.

We also think the document as a whole would benefit from a clear statement of what social workers will need to underpin their role and functions and to put in context the accountabilities identified. These would include -

- Proper workload management systems and acceptable workloads to ensure they have the necessary time to build relationships and make assessments of need and risk
- Professional supervision to enable workers to reflect on their practice and to support them to make balanced decisions about managing risk
- Training
- Positive and empowering management and leadership
- Accountable and effective corporate management structures with clear lines of responsibility, communication and decision making

## **SPECIFIC COMMENTS**

### **Role of the Registered Social Worker**

We find the comments in paragraph 7 very helpful, but recognise that the accountability of the registered social worker to exercise these functions should operate within the context outlined above.

### **Care and Protection**

In paragraph 9, where it states that “where either children or adults are: in need of protection” there is a concern that only ‘protection’ is referred to and not ‘care and protection.’ It is recognised that often the two are linked and that other professionals will be concerned with and accountable for the care of service users, however, in relation to children ‘care’ and ‘protection’ are inseparable and it is registered social workers who would have the responsibility in this regard. The document should reflect this.

In bullet point 3 we would wish it stated that rather than just implementing a risk management plan the carrying out of the risk assessment should be the function.

In relation to the phrase “must retain accountability” which is used in the document we are concerned that this could be interpreted to mean that a social worker can be accountable for these responsibilities without they themselves directly engaging with the service user and relying wholly on the reports and information passed to them by other professionals or social care staff. Whilst these other staff, some of whom would of course be registered with the SSSC or other professional body and have their own professional accountabilities, are essential to the overall service delivery and the assessments being made, the registered social worker requires the time, resources and support to ensure they have all the appropriate information and service user contact to allow them to professionally fulfil their responsibilities. Without this they cannot be held accountable.

There is a danger that the role of the registered social worker is seen only in terms of “protection” and not in terms of “welfare” in its broadest sense. Social workers are accountable for providing a service to children and adults

in need of care as well as those in need of protection. Whilst protection may well be meant in its broadest sense, it is important that it is not left open to a narrower interpretation.

In the second set of bullet points we would like to see a greater emphasis on the role of 'assessment'. Making and co-ordinating assessments is a key function for which the registered social worker should retain accountability and underpins the 'recommendations' for which they are also accountable. Only a qualified social worker has the knowledge and skills base for this role.

Whilst it is implicit that social workers will need to make constructive relationships and engage in an assessment process in order to make 'recommendations' to Hearings and Courts and will need to have a lead role in reviewing and adapting risk management plans and care plans, the document would benefit from a more robust statement of these as key functions.

**Children accommodated away from home.**

We are concerned that the responsibility for care planning when children are accommodated away from home is not specifically included. It is as if the reserved functions stop at the point at which a recommendation to accommodate is made and yet much of the key assessment and planning work critical to good outcomes for children, takes place after that point and must be undertaken and co-ordinated by a registered social worker. This should be reflected as a key function.

We suggest adding responsibility for 'developing, implementing and reviewing care plans for children' through direct work with the child as reflected in the SSSC document.

It is worth noting that the original document on reserved functions stated

**"Children Looked After and Accommodated**

Social workers will have direct contact with the child in order to:

- assess and make recommendations about whether a child should be accommodated away from home;
- monitor the progress and make on-going assessments and recommendations on the needs and welfare of children who are looked after;
- provide the social work contribution to reviews of children including making recommendations on behalf of the social services agency to a Children's Hearing about the termination or variation of Supervision Requirements; and
- be responsible for through and after care assessments, recommendations and planning and active implementation."

We believe the above should be included in the new guidance.

### **Carers**

In addition, the functions do not include the assessment and support of carers, whether foster carers, kinship carers or adopters, and yet this is a key role which only a registered social worker has the knowledge and skills to undertake.

It is worth noting that the original document on reserved functions stated

#### ***“Child Care Provision***

- assess and make recommendation about prospective foster and adoptive parents and kinship carers;
- approve the recommendations of adoption and fostering panels; and
- monitor, supervise and review foster carers and, where appropriate, adoptive parents.”

We believe that the above should be included in the new guidance.

### **Young Offenders**

There is a need to cover young offenders and the role for social workers in that sector, including either where subject to compulsory measures of care or assessment for secure accommodation. Over 14,000 children per annum are referred to Reporters on offence grounds (it is around 40,000 for non-offence grounds) and there is a huge portfolio of skills and expertise in working with young offenders which seems to be minimised in the guidance.

### **Mental Health Issues**

We believe there should be an additional bullet point in the “responsibilities” section in paragraph 9 to cover the issue of involvement in mental health issues in relation to young people which is a vastly unrecognised area which creates added problems. In a survey carried out in 2003 it was shown that:

*“Among young people, aged 5-17 years, looked after by local authorities, 45% were assessed as having a mental disorder: 38% had clinically significant conduct disorders; 16% were assessed as having emotional disorders - anxiety and depression - and 10% were rated as hyperactive”.*

[http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme\\_health/Mentalhealth\\_Scotland\\_summary.pdf](http://www.statistics.gov.uk/downloads/theme_health/Mentalhealth_Scotland_summary.pdf) ,

This has to be recognised as an area for development and training across Scotland otherwise ongoing chronic problems are being missed. This is a key area of work for social workers in this field.

### **Criminal Justice**

See above comments re the use of the phrase “must retain accountability.”

### **Professional Leadership**

In the section on Professional Leadership we welcome the continuation of the role of the Chief Social Work Officer and the assertion that this person should be a registered Social Worker. However we believe that in addition only a registered Social Worker should fill the role of the Chief Inspector of Social Work within the new scrutiny body to replace SWIA. We also believe that in Higher Education a title of Professor of Social Work or Social Work Lecturer should be restricted to a registered Social Worker. In making these points we appreciate that the inspection process requires to have a broad professional basis and that the academic world benefits greatly from non-social worker perspectives (health, law, community development, citizen leadership are all relevant in both the inspection and education of social workers) however the professional leadership of a registered social worker in both areas is appropriate.

**For further information please contact:**

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