

**REFORMING PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK  
TRAINING**

**A Consultation Paper**

**October 2000**

*Department of Health, Social Services & Public Safety*

# **REFORM OF PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK TRAINING**

## **FOREWORD**

The provision of high quality services depends on the availability of a confident and competent workforce. This leads to a new focus on workforce training and development. The social care workforce needs to be better trained, confident and capable of working across boundaries in a partnership with its users, continuously updating its knowledge and skills and clearly linking training and development to career progression.

We have a clear frame of expectations for Workforce Development in the Social Care Sector through the Training Strategy (A First Class Service) developed by the Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services (TOPSS). It is now beginning to be implemented.

However, social work has a specific contribution to make to delivering appropriate quality services. It emphasis on rights and responsibilities, citizenship and participation. In future social workers will be working in a variety of settings. They will not necessarily be working in social services offices. This points to the need for effective practice to be underpinned and updated by knowledge combined with the flexibility to suit the particular circumstances. Social workers need to respect and work in partnership with users and their families, to analyse the situation and communicate with all involved.

Recent Social Services Inspections have shown social workers need to re-discover some of the core skills of assessment so that decision making and care planning are based on a sound analysis and understanding of the persons unique personality, history and circumstances. Social workers own skills need to be seen as a resource to be used and offered in the assessment. This requires a clear definition of the future role of social work to ensure that best use is made of the skills and experience of qualified staff. It also calls for a radical consideration of the future structure and content of social work training.

The mechanisms for delivery of professional training and social work have changed only slightly over the past 30 years. However, the social care sector and the needs of its service users, as well as the general social environment and the profile of the workforce, have changed markedly. This consultation paper sets out the background to the need for reform, the nature of the reform required and a set of proposals for change.

It is also no longer acceptable to assume that a qualification gain at the age 25 or 30 will equip professional staff for all the challenges they face many years later. We would welcome views on how to increase the uptake of post qualification training and whether changes are needed in terms of the nature, volume and accessibility of training opportunities, and if so, how movement in the right direction can be encouraged.

As with qualifying training, we will make firm decisions on the way ahead in the light of responses to consultation and our broad policy objectives.

Bairbre de Brún

October 2000

## **REFORMING PROFESSIONAL SOCIAL WORK TRAINING**

1. This paper reports the outcome here of Stage II of the review of the functions of Central Council & Education Training Social Work (CCETSW), which focussed primarily on the arrangements for specifying, resourcing and regulating qualifying training in social work. Its purpose is to inform consultations on the proposed reforms.

### **Background**

2. The proposals arise from the review of CCETSW. They are the product of work spread over a period of 2 years, which has involved extensive consultation with all the social care interests in the field and academia. At the end of the first phase in December 1997 the Government announced that CCETSW would be abolished when a regulatory Social Care Council (SCC) was created. At the same time, it was announced that, in a second stage of the review, the functions currently discharged by CCETSW, as the statutory regulator and promoter of social work training would be examined in more detail.
3. The attached CCETSW Review Stage II Report, addressing in more detail the main findings of the various projects, which together considered all aspects of the content, delivery and regulation of professional social work training.
4. The report on the detail of the review undertaken on the 2 year Diploma in Social Work is contained in "Review of Diploma in Social Work" JM Consulting.

### **Why Reform is Needed?**

5. The recent Policy Position Paper "Regulating The Social Services Workforce" Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety (DHSSPS) and the Training Organisation for the Personal Social Services (TOPSS) Training Strategy 2000-2003, "A First Class Service" set out a challenging agenda for social services. They recognise the pivotal importance of a competent, confident workforce in delivering the modernisation agenda. Social workers, though numerically a small proportion of the social care workforce, will play a vital part in modernising services. They are dealing with many clients who have the most difficult, complex needs and others who need close support. Social workers work in a multi-disciplinary environment. They are called upon to make some of the most taxing judgements, often at short notice and unsupported by colleagues, about, for example, the most appropriate

interventions in the lives of children and their families or people with mental health problems. Social workers also should be in the vanguard of best practice, setting standards for others to follow. It is, therefore, essential that social workers are educated and trained to a high standard so they are equipped for these demanding roles and able to promote independence, social inclusion, and general social well-being.

6. The outcome of the recent review of social work training, the most crucial elements of which have been carried out by independent management consultants, provides strong evidence that professional social work training is in need of radical reform to ensure the supply of sufficient social workers of the calibre that Government, social services employers and the general public expect. The current qualification for social work, the Diploma, has outlived its usefulness. Recent major changes in social services in legislation and importantly, in the expectations of the public and of service users, mean that new social workers require improved preparation and training.
7. Maintaining the present system is, therefore, not an option, nor can the necessary improvements in the knowledge and skills of social workers be achieved through minor adjustments in the current training system. A more radical approach is required for 3 reasons:
  - (i) 2 years is too short a period in which to provide the intellectual capacity, depth of knowledge and practical skills commonly associated in other professions with graduate level training;
  - (ii) consistency of education and practice learning cannot be achieved while the education is left to a system that still fails to engage employers at the right level as fully participating partners; and
  - (iii) both quantity and quality are vulnerable to changing education policies not specifically tailored to support professional education and the associated service needs.

It is therefore not possible to achieve the overall objectives of a quality education, a stable Higher Education (HE) system, high level commitment from employers and cost effective management and regulation, while the financial resources remain entirely in the HE funding system.

## Policy Objectives

8. The Proposals in this paper are designed to deliver:
- a whole period of higher education and training of sufficient length to give the beginning professional the necessary level of knowledge, ethical base and associated assessed competence in practice underpinned by occupational standards; and
  - a comprehensive system of post-qualifying education and training to foster continuing professional development and to ensure advanced skills are available to deal with the most complex cases.

## The Nature of Reform

9. There are 7 key areas for proposed reform:
- the threshold level of knowledge and skills for social workers should be set at graduate level;
  - the professional entry qualification should be gained at a minimum through a 3 year degree programme or equivalent followed by an assessed pre-registration year leading to qualified social worker status keeping open avenues for a range of people and securing effective employment input;
  - the regulator should revise the standards specification to ensure full coverage in both academic and practice learning of the required outcomes and assess compliance with this in the process of approving social work training programmes;
  - one strategic partnership of employers and education providers (replacing 3) should be established to secure the appropriate volume and spread of qualifying training, including placement provision from employment, to meet regional needs;
  - DHSSPS should directly commission social work education from local providers (working together in the single strategic partnership);
  - DHSSPS should implement a single system of funding social work students to ensure equity and efficiency in social work training; and
  - to ensure appropriate specialist and advanced competence in the workforce, DHSSPS should commission further development of post qualifying education and training to cover the full range of service settings

and groups as well as management skills including multi-disciplinary training initiatives as appropriate.

## **The Proposals in Context**

10. While these proposals (discussed in more detail below) are far reaching, they are judged to be essential to both fulfil the Department's purpose to contribute to the health and well-being of people and to meet 2 key policy objectives for promoting independent living and safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children. They are also wholly consistent with other parts of the Government's education agenda. The approach advocated is very similar to the plans for reforming nurse education set out in "Making a Difference". Nurse education is already directly purchased by the DHSSPS. The Department is currently working towards greater control of training arrangements for Professions Allied to Medicine (PAMS) to ensure a health care workforce sufficient and fit for purpose. The proposals are also similar to the position in initial teacher training.

## **PROPOSALS FOR CHANGE**

### **Threshold Level of Knowledge**

11. The threshold level of knowledge and skills for social workers should be set at graduate level. Modern social work practice is already and will become increasingly complex and challenging. Social workers are dealing with society's most vulnerable, damaged people with a multiplicity of needs. Social workers are required to operate in a multi-disciplinary environment with other professionals in the Health & Personal Social Services (HPSS) and elsewhere, and to make multi-factorial decisions about interventions that have a major impact on the lives of users. They need independence of judgement allowing them to operate without immediate management support and the kinds of professional support networks common in other professions. Social workers, therefore, need more than a set of competencies. They need the critical thinking, analytical and inter-personal attributes associated with professionalism. This would enable them to challenge and adapt practice to individual needs.

*Views are now invited on this proposal.*

## Professional Entry Qualification

12. Professional entry should follow completing a 3-year degree programme or its equivalent plus an assessed consolidation year in employment. To accommodate graduate level education and training will take longer than the current minimum of 2 years. What is now needed is a new degree level programme spread over 3 years, based in college, but including practice based learning. It should be designed to ensure a proper balance of input from higher education and employment so that those completing the programme are fit to begin employment in the social work field. This should be followed by a consolidation period of one year in employment, which should include inputs from higher education before assessment by the regulatory body for registration as a qualified social worker. The objective is that at the end of the whole period of education and training, students gain a degree from the appropriate university and qualified social worker status from the regulator. The latter could in due time take the form of registration with the proposed Northern Ireland Social Care Council (NISCC).
  
13. The Government's policy generally is to widen the access gates to higher education in order to create a more diverse workforce. Social work has a good record in achieving just that. In moving to a new degree programme for social work it is inevitable that some people will be lost for whom training to a degree would be difficult. However, in keeping with the Government's general approach, it is important for social work to continue to have in it people with varied backgrounds and experience. Ideally social work should closely reflect and draw on local communities. Steps, therefore, need to be taken to keep the access gates to professional training as wide as possible. This can be achieved through:
  - credit-rating previous appropriate professional education and experience including NVQs and relevant employment;
  - extended use of open and distance learning; and
  - full use of HE Access Programmes, Modern Apprenticeships and National Trainee schemes.

It is important to note, in this context, that here social services employers in both statutory and independent sectors have a good record of achievement in providing access to vocational qualifications. There are already examples of staff having progressed from vocational, through professional to advanced qualifications.

At the other end of the scale it is important to attract postgraduate entry to social work training for those who have already obtained a degree. Their previous experience in another graduate discipline will enrich the profession

and assist in meeting the objective of a diverse workforce. However, the award at basic qualifying level should remain primary degree with higher-level academic awards being reserved to post professional development.

*Views are now invited on this proposal.*

### **Standards Specification**

14. The development of a national social work training framework underpinned by occupational standards is required. Merely lengthening the period of training will not be enough to guarantee a consistent supply of social workers fit for purpose. This can only be achieved by the statutory regulator prescribing a training framework, which clearly specifies the defined core knowledge, and competence required of the newly qualified practitioner. The framework could also cover other matters such as, for example, student selection criteria and which parts of the training must be undertaken within a multi-disciplinary student group to be deemed effective. Rigorous specifications for student assessment would be essential. The regulatory body in association with the Quality Assurance Agency for higher education would test for compliance with all its requirements at regular intervals.

*Views are invited on the need for a local framework.*

### **Strategic Delivery**

15. Social work training has been delivered since 1989 by partnership of employers and educators approved by CCETSW. The report from the management consultants, JM Consulting, acknowledges that local current partnership arrangements are efficient in comparison with those in England. Respondents to the consultation here, nonetheless, identified areas for improvement such as the elimination of any duplication of effort in addressing common problems. It was also suggested that regional strategic planning could be improved. It is, therefore, recommended that one strategic partnership be established to replace the current 3 partnerships to provide a strong lead for professional social work training here. This would allow employers to supply effective senior level representation more efficiently.

*Views are invited on one strategic partnership.*

## Direct Commissioning of Training

16. It is proposed to seek a transfer from Department of Further & Higher Education Training (DFHET) of the HE funding for social work education and directly commission the training. As things stand the social work HE supply side is characteristically small-scale and inherently vulnerable within the university system. If DFHET decides, as in recent years, to implement a policy controlling student numbers (Maximum Aggregate Student Numbers [MASNs]), this can adversely impact on DHSSPS workforce objectives, e.g. the increased numbers of qualified social workers needed to implement the Children Order. If a university chooses to leave the social work field for any reason, the HE resource money is simply lost to social work. In order to re-engineer reliably a quality supply side, able to respond to the social policy needs of Government and social care employers, it is proposed to seek to gain control of the HE funds by an expenditure programme transfer from DFHET to DHSSPS. This would allow DHSSPS to commission directly from the HE system the training needed. The experience of the Department which directly commissions nurse education is that clear purchasing power enables a better balance between employers and academic freedom, hence the plans to introduce a similar system for other health professional education here. Implementing this recommendation would place professional social work training on the same footing as other HPSS disciplines.

*Views are invited on the proposed change.*

## Funding Social Work Students

17. Recent years have seen the number of applications for social work training decline, as have secondments from employment. Changes in the financial support for students have led employers and university tutors to demand Government action to halt the current rate of decline. Employers have been concerned about the difficulties experienced in recruiting sufficient qualified social workers to allow full implementation of the Children Order and to secure sufficient levels of qualified staff for other programmes of care and service settings including residential child care.
18. Financial pressures on students are also causing concern. Recent research by CCETSW here shows 83% of students (a majority of whom are over 30 years of age) having to supplement their bursary with paid employment while undertaking their professional training. Clearly this reduces the time and energy available for study (including practice learning) and if not addressed will reduce the benefit to be gained from the proposals in this paper. As it stands, tutors and practice teachers have voiced concerns about the impact of relative poverty on these students and their families as well as its impact on the quality of the learning experience. Further, as word spreads about these

pressures, it may be contributing to the decline in applications and consequent workforce deficiencies.

19. It is obviously essential to attract and retain students of the right quality and number to meet workforce needs. The numbers applying for training have declined by 22% since 1995 and there is no evidence that left alone the situation will improve. There will almost certainly be a number of successful applicants who do not take up a place. Secondment schemes currently in place were originally developed in the 1980s to train staff for the job they already held. There has been a steep decline in the numbers of secondments particularly from the statutory sector (from 66 in 1992 to 32 planned for 1999). The position now is that some training places remain unfilled each year. Therefore, part of the answer to maintain the supply of newly qualified social workers is a new financial support regime for students and perhaps opening up the potential for employers to seek new recruits for secondment rather than depending on the existing workforce. The Department and Boards have recently introduced a Pilot Trainee Scheme with an anticipated 30 trainee posts.
20. The total number of students to be secured through a trainee scheme is a matter for judgement. Final targets for social workers will be a matter for further discussion with employers. The best judgement at present is that given the state of the workforce we will continue to need at least 200 new social workers each year. The Employment Survey, 1997/1998, of newly qualified social workers commissioned by SSI from CCETSW, confirms that 93% quickly secured employment here on completion of training.
21. The consultation process during the CCETSW review revealed that employers valued highly the more mature newly qualified recruits available from the postgraduate and employment based programmes. The more mature outputs from the 2-year route non-graduate were also more highly valued than the younger, less experienced outputs from the 4-year degree programme. At present, only 25 of those qualifying each year are undergraduates. There would be implications for the employers if the supply of 200 per annum were through mainly undergraduate recruits. The implementation of any new arrangements should be reviewed at the end of the first student cohort. It will be particularly important to monitor both applications from and recruitment of undergraduate students subject to matters arising from the Dearing Report.

*Views are invited on the funding of social work students.*

### **Post Qualifying Education and Training**

22. Post Qualifying (PQ) education and training for social workers has not been addressed elsewhere. Here we have been successful in implementing the CCETSW framework for PQ education and training through the PQ

Partnership. This partnership consists of the 3 Universities (including the Open University), the Further Education (FE) sector, all statutory agencies and effective voluntary sector representation.

23. Its record speaks for itself. At October 2000, 198 of 445 Post Qualifying Awards were achieved by candidates here, and at Advanced Level 41 out of 162 Awards.

It is, therefore, intended to maintain the current Education and Training Partnership arrangements.

24. It is recognised that the system needs additional investment to develop training, which will ensure that all client groups, service settings, and practice innovations are well covered. Despite the successful record, employer commitment could be improved. The current position reflects the enthusiasm and energy of candidates and a relatively few committed people from HE and employment. It is intended to involve employers in discussions about both the allocation of resources to secure additional development of training opportunities and about the implementation of systems to ensure all newly qualified social workers embark immediately on a programme of continuous development in keeping with the TOPSS Training Strategy 2000-2003. Such a system will be essential when the Government's proposals for regulating the PSS workforce come into force.
25. Finally, PQ provides an opportunity for other disciplines to co-operate with the social work partnership to ensure that, where appropriate, the benefits of shared training are fully used. At present, as most funding for postgraduate training in other professions is outside the employment arena, it is rare for bodies such as the Postgraduate Medical Council to contribute and such examples as exist have either been funded by social services or by higher education investment.

*Views are invited on Post-Qualifying development.*

## Conclusion

Views are invited on the proposed reforms

- *the threshold level of professional social work training should be set at graduate level;*
- *the basic qualification for a social worker should be based on 3 year degree level, plus a consolidation year in employment, while ensuring that entry criteria are not set so high as to deter people from varied backgrounds and experience from applying;*
- *a local social work training framework should be developed on the basis of occupational standards;*
- *one regional strategic social work training partnership should be established;*
- *DHSSPS should seek to secure from DFHET the money in the HE & FE system for social work education and use it to commission social work education and training directly;*
- *the introduction of a new trainee social work scheme; and*
- *development within the PQ Framework to ensure wider coverage at this level.*

Responses from individuals and organisations are invited on the above proposals and should be sent in writing to:

Chief Inspector  
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