

Social Work Reform Board

**Building a safe
and confident
future:**

One year on

**Overarching professional standards
for social workers in England**

December 2010

Overarching professional standards for social Workers in England

Summary

In its final report ***Building a safe, confident future***, the Social Work Task Force recommended the creation of a single, nationally recognised career structure for social work which would:

- classify the main stages of a career in social work (from first year student onwards)
- make clear the expectations that should apply to social workers at each of these stages in a single overarching framework
- link eventually to the national framework for CPD
- be used by employers and unions to agree pay and grading structures which properly reward social workers in line with their skills, experience and responsibilities – including those social workers who stay in frontline practice.

(Social Work Task Force Recommendation 10)

1.1 The Social Work Task Force was concerned that there were too many sets of standards and outcome statements governing different dimensions of social work. The plethora of standards means that the social work profession in England does not currently have a single, comprehensive set of expectations of what should be required of social workers at each stage of their career – including expectations of students, new graduates and those in advanced roles. This has an impact on the profession's identity, professional development, workforce planning and recruitment to the profession. Service users and the public should also have more clarity about what they can expect of social workers. The national social work career structure recommended by the Task Force will bring greater coherence to what it means to be a social worker.

1.2 Over the past few months, the Social Work Reform Board has developed an overarching standards framework, which is called the *Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers in England*, which will support and inform the national career structure, and we are now seeking feedback on the progress we have made. The term 'capabilities' is used in many other professions and in social work internationally¹, and conveys to students, practitioners and employers that professional learning is not just about becoming competent in different areas, but about continuing learning and development throughout the whole career. We recognise that the term 'capability' may be problematic because it is used by some employers to refer to procedures instituted where there is a concern over an employee's performance. We would welcome views on the use of this terminology. Further development of the content of the framework is required and this paper also provides information on future phases of work in this area.

1.3 We are proposing nine capabilities that we believe are relevant and appropriate for all social workers, no matter their level of experience or the setting in which they work. The level at which social workers demonstrate these capabilities will build over time as they become more experienced. We are seeking feedback on these proposed

¹ Including *The Capable Mental Health Practitioner 2001*, *Key Capabilities in Child Care*, *Interprofessional Capability Framework (Scotland 2007)*, *Community Health Nursing*, *Higher Education Capabilities in Britain and Australia*, and *American Association of Social Workers Capabilities Framework*

capabilities and will refine them in line with the views we get back. When they are finalised, these capabilities will express what it means to be a member of the social work profession. The framework is expected to relate to, and influence:

- **Education and training:** by providing a foundation for developing the curriculum for the social work degree.
- **Continuing professional development:** by providing the foundation for post-qualifying training and by helping social workers and their managers plan development appropriate to their experience, needs and career aspirations.
- **Employment organisation and structure:** by helping employers to have a consistent understanding of what can be expected of social workers at different levels of experience. This will help employers organise their workforce to support progression, and help them to achieve the right mix of expertise within frontline teams and management. There should be progression routes available to high quality, specialist social workers which do not remove them from the frontline.
- **Performance management and appraisal:** by providing outcome statements and expectations for performance at different levels. It should also be a useful tool for employers' appraisal systems.
- **Regulation and registration requirements:** by aligning the framework with the minimum standards that social workers must meet to join and remain in the profession. At present these minimum standards are held by the General Social Care Council but from 2012 social workers are due to be registered by the Health Professions Council.

1.4 It is therefore extremely important that social workers, service users and carers, educators, managers and employers get involved in the design of this framework.

1.5 We, as the Reform Board, believe that the Professional Capabilities Framework should be owned by social workers, and we are exploring with the College of Social Work the potential for it to take on this role on behalf of the profession.

What can you do?

We would like to know what you think about the Professional Capabilities Framework:

Q1. What are the strengths of the Professional Capabilities Framework?

Q2. What challenges and barriers need to be addressed in further developing this framework?

Q3. What do you think of the term 'Professional Capabilities' as a working title for the framework? Is 'capabilities' a word that you are comfortable with in this context or do you think that a more appropriate term should be used?

Q4. Have we identified the right capabilities and are they suitable for all social workers, no matter where they work or how experienced they are?

Q5. The framework covers levels from entry onto the social work degree to advanced practice and frontline management roles, following the National Career Structure for social work that was recommended by the Social Work Task Force. Should the framework contain any other career levels or specific roles and, if so, what are they?

You can express your views on the proposals within this report by:

- Emailing the Social Work Reform Board at **information.swrb@education.gsi.gov.uk**
- Contributing to national and regional meetings, workshops and conferences, details of which will be posted on our website (**www.education.gov.uk/swrb**) and in our newsletter
- Sending your comments to your representative organisations and asking them to submit this feedback to the Reform Board.

Proposed Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers in England

Introduction

2.1 The Social Work Reform Board is developing the Professional Capabilities Framework which, when it is finished, will clearly set out how a social worker's knowledge, skills and capacity build over time as they move through their careers. As a first step in developing this framework, the Reform Board proposes that there are nine core social work capabilities which should be relevant, to a greater or lesser degree, to all social workers and social work students no matter their level of experience or the setting they work in.

2.2 The proposed capabilities are:

PROFESSIONALISM - Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development

Social workers are members of an internationally recognised profession, a title protected in UK law. Social workers demonstrate professional commitment by taking responsibility for their conduct, practice and learning, with support through supervision. As representatives of the social work profession they safeguard its reputation and are accountable to the professional regulator.

VALUES AND ETHICS - Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice

Social workers have an obligation to conduct themselves ethically and to engage in ethical decision-making, including through partnership with people who use their services. Social workers are knowledgeable about the value base of their profession, its ethical standards and relevant law.

DIVERSITY - Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice

Social workers understand that diversity characterises and shapes human experience and is critical to the formation of identity. Diversity is multi-dimensional and includes race, disability, class, economic status, age, sexuality, gender and transgender, faith and belief. Social workers appreciate that, as a consequence of difference, a person's life experience may include oppression, marginalisation and alienation as well as privilege, power and acclaim, and are able to challenge appropriately.

RIGHTS, JUSTICE AND ECONOMIC WELLBEING - Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic wellbeing

Social workers recognise the fundamental principles of human rights and equality, and that these are protected in national and international law, conventions and policies. They ensure these principles underpin their practice. Social workers understand the importance of using and contributing to case law and applying these rights in their own practice. They understand the effects of oppression, discrimination and poverty.

KNOWLEDGE - Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory

Social workers understand psychological, social, cultural, spiritual and physical influences on people; human development throughout the life span and the legal framework for practice. They apply this knowledge in their work with individuals, families and communities. They know and use theories and methods of social work practice.

CRITICAL REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS - Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making

Social workers are knowledgeable about and apply the principles of critical thinking and reasoned discernment. They identify, distinguish, evaluate and integrate multiple sources of knowledge and evidence. These include practice evidence, their own practice experience, service user and carer experience together with research-based, organisational, policy and legal knowledge. They use critical thinking augmented by creativity and curiosity.

INTERVENTION AND SKILLS - Use judgement and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support and prevent harm, neglect and abuse

Social workers engage with individuals, families, groups and communities, working alongside people to assess and intervene. They enable effective relationships and are effective communicators, using appropriate skills. Using their professional judgement, they employ a range of interventions: promoting independence, providing support and protection, taking preventative action and ensuring safety whilst balancing rights and risks. They understand and take account of differentials in power, and are able to use authority appropriately. They evaluate their own practice and the outcomes for those they work with.

CONTEXTS AND ORGANISATIONS - Engage with, inform, and adapt to changing contexts that shape practice. Operate effectively within own organisational frameworks and contribute to the development of services and organisations. Operate effectively within multi-agency and inter-professional settings

Social workers are informed about and pro-actively responsive to the challenges and opportunities that come with changing social contexts and constructs. They fulfil this responsibility in accordance with their professional values and ethics, both as individual professionals and as members of the organisation in which they work. They collaborate, inform and are informed by their work with others, inter-professionally and with communities.

PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP - Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others through supervision, mentoring, assessing, research, teaching, leadership and management

The social work profession evolves through the contribution of its members in activities such as practice research, supervision, assessment of practice, teaching and management. An individual's contribution will gain influence when undertaken as part of a learning, practice-focused organisation. Learning may be facilitated with a wide range of people including social work colleagues, service users and carers, volunteers, foster carers and other professionals.

2.3 We have developed and tested these proposed capabilities with a wide range of people from the social work sector, including social workers, social work managers, practice educators, academics and workforce development managers. They remain work in progress and will be further refined over the coming months in line with the feedback we receive. These proposed capabilities draw on models used in other professions and in social work internationally, and, in particular, a model developed over a four year consultation period in the United States. We are grateful to colleagues in the US for sharing their expertise².

2.4 Running through this framework are a number of cross-cutting themes which are so fundamental to social work that they will eventually be embedded within several or all of the capabilities, including:

- partnership working with service users and carers;
- communication skills;
- knowledge and application of the law; and
- use of evidence and research.

2.5 We intend to develop these cross-cutting themes, as well as the outcome statements that will describe each capability at each level of the framework, in consultation with the profession, service users and carers, employers, educators and with other professions. An illustrative example of how capability builds over time is attached in [Appendix 1](#).

2.6 In our next phase of work on this framework we intend to:

- Work with the College of Social Work to explore whether and when it will take on the lead role for developing and maintaining this framework;
- Populate the draft framework at each level and for every capability;
- Consider whether the framework requires other levels, such as for consultant level social workers, case conference panel and review chairs, and senior managers and other social work decision-makers (who may not be social workers themselves);
- Consider the relationship between this overarching framework and other standards in the system;
- Consider how the framework links with other professions;
- Explore the potential uses of the framework as well as cross-UK issues; and
- Understand the potential impact on social workers employed in different types of organisations in the statutory, voluntary and private sectors as well as on independent social workers.

² <http://www.cswe.org/File.aspx?id=40200>

The Principles behind the Professional Capabilities Framework

2.7 The principles upon which the Professional Capabilities Framework is based are that it should:

- Be owned, maintained and used by the profession, and applicable to higher education and employers;
- Be cost effective, feasible and sustainable;
- Support progression and the national career structure recommended by the Social Work Task Force;
- Fit with and influence the development of the other Social Work Task Force recommendations;
- Be straightforward;
- Be informed by current practice and developments, including from social work internationally and from other professions; and
- Be a professional rather than occupational framework.

How the Professional Capabilities Framework was developed

2.8 In summer 2010 we set up a small Standards Task Group to develop the Professional Capabilities Framework. The development process included:

- Consideration of evidence received by the Social Work Task Force during their review of social work in 2009;
- Reviewing and mapping professional standards used by other professions and in social work in other countries;
- Monthly meetings with regular progress reports to the Social Work Reform Board; and
- Two workshops with over 60 participants including social workers, student social workers, academics and workforce development managers.

What is meant by capabilities?

2.9 The use of the term ‘capabilities’ is intended to convey to students, practitioners and employers that professional development is not just about becoming competent in different areas, but about continuing learning and development throughout the whole career. A capability has been defined³ as: *‘an integration of knowledge, skills, personal qualities and understanding used appropriately and effectively – not just in familiar and highly focused specialist contexts but in response to new and changing circumstances’* and can include:

- A **performance** component which identifies what people need to possess and what they need to achieve in the workplace;
- An **ethical** component that integrates knowledge of culture, values and social awareness into professional practice;

³ Price, J Educating the healthcare professional for capability, in Kernick, D (ed.) *Complexity and Healthcare Organization: A View from the Street*. Oxford Radcliffe (p227-243) (2004)

- A component that emphasises **reflective** practice in action;
- A component that encompasses effective implementation of **evidence-based interventions**; and
- A commitment to working with new models of professional education and responsibility for **lifelong learning**.⁴

2.10 We recognise that some social workers will dislike the term ‘capability’, which is used by some employers to refer to procedures instituted where there is a concern over an employee’s performance. Nonetheless, after much development work and debate, we have concluded that the term ‘capability’ is the right one to use in relation to this framework. We are now seeking views on the impact of using this terminology.

Relationship with other standards

2.11 The proposed overarching framework is intended to act as a focal point for all other social work standards. The development of the framework has taken into account standards already existing in the system. It will not automatically replace all existing standards, but it is expected that, over time, all other standards will be reviewed to ensure good alignment with the framework. The Reform Board will work closely with the organisations which own standards that relate to social work, including those that apply across the whole of the UK, to ensure that there is better coherence and clarity about social work standards in the future.

Relationship with professional registration

2.12 The Professional Capabilities Framework will not replace the minimum standards for public safety set by the professional regulator. These minimum standards are used as the benchmark against which social workers are able to join and remain on the social work register.

2.13 Currently these minimum standards are set out in the *Code of Practice for Social Care Workers*, which is owned by the General Social Care Council (GSCC) with whom all social workers must be registered. From 2012, the responsibility for registering social workers and regulating social work education will move to the Health Professions Council (HPC), which will be renamed to reflect its new responsibilities. When this happens, the HPC’s *Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers* will be the new minimum standards for the profession and will be used to judge whether someone is fit to practise as a social worker. Until this transfer is completed, social workers and social work degree courses will continue to be regulated by the GSCC.

2.14 Although minimum standards are necessary to ensure that only people who are appropriately trained and are fit to practise are social workers, they should not define the profession. We believe that social work is much more than minimum practice,

⁴ The Capable Practitioner (Sainsbury Centre for Mental Health 2001) report, http://www.centreformentalhealth.org.uk/pdfs/the_capable_practitioner.pdf

and that this new framework will enable the profession to articulate its purpose and practise in a more sophisticated and coherent way. This is key to improving social work practice but also to improving the standing of the profession.

2.15 It is extremely important that the Professional Capabilities Framework complements the regulator's minimum standards if expectations of social workers are to be clear. We have mapped our Capabilities Framework against the GSCC's *Code of Practice for Social Care Workers* and examples of the Standards of Proficiency of other professions already regulated by the HPC, and have concluded that there are no conflicts.

2.16 The HPC is planning to develop and consult upon its Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers over the next few months so that it is ready to take on the social work register in 2012. The HPC has established a Professional Liaison Group made up of representatives of the social work sector to help them do this and the Reform Board and the HPC are working together to make sure that their respective standards fit well together.

Career grades and pay

2.17 During its review, the Social Work Task Force heard compelling evidence that suggested that social work skills, knowledge and responsibilities had been underrated in some job evaluation exercises, and this affected social workers' pay. The Task Force recommended that employers should review their job evaluations to ensure that social workers are fairly rewarded.

2.18 The Local Government Employers and the Trade Unions are taking forward this work in local government. They will report and consult on their work on pay and progression of social workers in their sectors over the coming months. We are working with them to make sure that the right links are made to support the implementation of the national career structure. Initial analysis as part of this work indicates that the Professional Capabilities Framework will fit usefully with the benchmark role profiles that they are developing.

Future ownership of the Professional Capabilities Framework

2.19 The Social Work Reform Board believes that the profession itself must own and lead this work. We are exploring with the College of Social Work whether they might take a leading role in developing and maintaining the Professional Capabilities Framework from Spring 2011.

Appendix 1

Progression through the proposed Professional Capabilities Framework - illustrative example of one element as it progresses through the levels of the framework

1. The Professional Capabilities Framework will need to describe the appropriate outcomes for each capability at each level of the framework. The table below demonstrates how outcomes for one capability might develop over time as a social worker becomes more experienced.

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Each capability will eventually be made up of a number of constituent parts. For the professionalism capability, these could include:

- Professional demeanour (behaviour, appearance and communication)
- Managing personal/professional boundaries in working with children, adults and families
- Use of supervision
- Planning own continuing education and training
- Use of self/emotional resilience
- Being an effective social worker while also promoting and protecting personal well-being
- Promoting and safeguarding the reputation of the profession.

2. The table below illustrates how outcomes for one element from the list above – **managing personal/professional boundaries** – might become more challenging and complex as a social worker progresses in their career. The comments and examples provided in the table are not an exhaustive list; there will be a range of ways in which social workers can demonstrate a capability at a specific level. As work develops on the framework, there will inevitably be some cross-referencing between capabilities.

Career Level	Outcome Statement	Comments/examples
Entry Level	Demonstrate awareness of the need to operate within professional boundaries.	Question at interview: e.g. What would you do if sent to assess someone and discover them to be a close friend or a relative?
Qualifying Level	Demonstrate the application of appropriate professional boundaries.	Understanding appropriate levels of self-disclosure about personal information. Links to direct observation for assessment.
Newly Qualified Social Worker/Assessed & Supported Year in Employment (NQSW/ASYE)	Consistently manage own professional boundaries, identifying and responding to circumstances that may significantly challenge those boundaries with support through supervision.	Positive use of self-disclosure where appropriate, and proactivity in bringing these issues to supervision/team discussion.
Social Worker	Critically reflect and analyse use of self in a wide range of contexts. Confident integration of self and professional behaviours across all working situations.	Would be demonstrated in more than one setting, e.g. court work, complex one-to-one work with service user or carer, multi-professional meetings.
Senior Practitioner – or Social Worker	Maintain professional boundaries and relationships consistently through sustained interventions with complex and challenging factors/situations.	Evident at least two cases, both of which include multi-agency/multi-professional situations.
	Model and articulate appropriate ‘use of self’ both within own agency and in multi-agency settings.	
Advanced Practitioner or Social Worker	<i>Optimum practice for this capability should have been reached at the senior practitioner level, but the capability is then applied in supporting others through Capability 9 - Professional Leadership</i>	Suggested outcome for Capability 9 in relation to professional boundaries: recognises ‘use of self’ and personal/professional boundary issues through professional development for which the practitioner is accountable.
Team Manager		
Practice Educator		

Membership of the Social Work Reform Board

The Social Work Reform Board met for the first time in January 2010 and is chaired by Moira Gibb CBE, who also chaired the Social Work Task Force. The member organisations on the Reform Board bring together representatives of social workers, employers, educators and service users to plan how, together, they can make reforms happen and report to government on progress.

The Social Work Reform Board has formed three main working groups to bring together relevant parties to develop plans to make the Social Work Task Force recommendations a reality. The working groups involve the different stakeholders interested in the social work reform programme. Their role is to inform and develop the recommendations and draft proposals for consultation to ensure that final arrangements work in practice. The main working groups focus on education, career development and standards for employers.

The Social Work Reform Board is also informed by the Social Workers' Reference Group, which ensures that the views and perspectives of social workers are at the forefront in developing the reform programme.

The following organisations send representatives to attend Social Work Reform Board meetings:

- A National Voice
- Association of Directors of Adult Social Services (ADASS)
- Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)
- Association of Professionals in Education and Children's Trusts (Aspect)
- Association of Professors of Social Work (APSW)
- British Association of Social Workers (BASW)
- Children and Family Court Advisory and Support Services (CAFCASS)
- Children England
- College of Social Work
- Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS)
- Department for Education (DfE)
- Department of Health (DH)
- General Social Care Council (GSCC)
- Health Professions Council (HPC)
- Higher Education Academy Subject Centre for Social Policy & Social Work (SWAP)
- Joint University Council – Social Work Education Committee (JUC-SWEC)

- Local Government Association (LGA)
- Local Government Employers (LGE)
- Mind
- NHS Confederation
- Princess Royal Trust for Carers
- Shaping our Lives
- Society of Local Authority Chief Executives (SOLACE)
- Unison
- Universities UK (UUK)

Government officials from the Devolved Administrations have observer status on the Social Work Reform Board and the following organisations also attend its meetings:

- Care Quality Commission (CQC)
- Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC)
- Higher Education Funding Council for England (HEFCE)
- Ofsted
- Quality Assurance Agency (QAA)
- Skills for Care (SfC)
- Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE)

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