

# **SOCIAL SERVICES FRONTLINE PRACTITIONER ENGAGEMENT EVENTS 2016**

## **Report on events organised by the Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser, SG**

### **Introduction**

1. Scottish Ministers value the significant contribution of the social services workforce in delivering improved outcomes for individuals and families and in contributing to a more equal and socially just Scotland. The Scottish Government is therefore a key partner in the Social Work Services Strategic Forum (the Forum) which developed *Social Services in Scotland: A Shared Vision and Strategy 2015-2020*, published in March 2015. The Strategy, developed by the sector, recognises the wide range of developments already in train to improve social services. It also identifies the challenges which need to be addressed to further strengthen the sector. The Strategy sets out a range of actions designed to address those challenges under four action areas.

- Supporting the Workforce
- Understanding Service Quality and Performance
- Improving Use of Evidence
- Promoting Public Understanding

2. A key element in developing and implementing the strategy is the voice of frontline workers – ensuring that they are able to contribute their expertise, experience and knowledge to meeting the challenges and making improvements. The Office of the Chief Social Work Adviser (OCSWA) in the Scottish Government (OCSWA) is one of a number of stakeholders who in recent years have created opportunities for the practitioner voice to be heard within the context of developing and delivering the Strategy. In the period 2014 –2016 OCSWA has delivered a total of 19 front line practitioner events reaching a total of just under 1,500 practitioners.

3. This report summarises what we heard in the 2016 events building on the report already provided for the 2015 events. Where messages conveyed in this report mirror those reported in 2015 this is highlighted. This report is expected to be of use to the wide range of organisations, policy makers and other stakeholders with responsibility for ensuring that Scotland has a strong and engaged social services workforce.

### **Engagement Events - 2016**

4. OCSWA organised 6 practitioner events during 2016 reaching around 550 frontline workers. These were:

- 1 Event in May about Improving Child Protection
- 2 GIRFEC events in June – around the Children and Young People (Scotland) Act 2014
- 1 Event in September on the implementation of the Carers (Scotland) Act 2016
- 1 Event in November on Improving Supervision for Social Workers
- 1 Event in November on using Evidence and Knowledge to support Improvement

5. The Minister for Childcare and Early Years, the Scottish Government's Chief Social Work Adviser and Scottish Government's Professional Social Work Adviser supported the events, building on Ministerial commitment to the events in recent years, and in line with their continued commitment to engage with and seek to support frontline staff.

## **Feedback on the events**

6. Feedback from the events was in the main positive. Attendees valued the opportunity to network across sectors and services, sharing experience and practice and engaging in a meaningful debate on key common issues. The content of the discussions reflected the issues people were facing in their work and the events were seen as a helpful way to engage and learn.

7. Attendees valued the attendance and input from colleagues across the sector, from local authority and third sector managers, from organisations representing, supporting and regulating the the sector, and from Scottish Minister, the Scottish Government's Chief and Professional Social Work Advisers and civil servants. They felt better informed of policies made at national level as well as being able to influence national policy. A variety of informative speakers being able to share knowledge and practice across sectors as well as simplifying complex subjects was viewed as very beneficial.

8. Participants at the events expressed a particular appreciation for being consulted at the early stages of implementing the new Carers Act and valued contributing their views on anticipated practicalities at the point of delivery.

9. The feedback indicated a desire for attendance at the events to be widened to include a bigger proportion of health, independent and third sector practitioners to allow an opportunity for wider knowledge sharing and in line with integration. Some attendees also wanted representation from those most able to implement change i.e. front line managers, Chief Executives and those commissioning services.

## **The messages from the events**

10. This report captures, under each Strategy strand, topics of importance to front line workers who made valuable time to attend these events and whose contribution is very much appreciated. The report seeks to capture generic messages relevant for the workforce and to the Vision and Strategy. Other messages emerging in the specific themed events (i.e. child protection, supporting carers and GIRFEC) are set out in separate reports produced for these events.

11. Many of the significant topics raised across the events are similar to those raised by frontline practitioners in the 2015 events. Recurring messages included: time for reflective, practice/learning; sharing knowledge better across the sector, creating a supportive and caring culture and the need for quality leadership, support and supervision through managers that are more visible and have the right skills. On supervision there was a signal that both managers and staff want to ensure that wellbeing is a core part of the process. Managers are also keen to ensure that staff fears around decision making can be resolved.

12. Concerns about resources (including training budgets) and pressure on workers were still present. High caseloads, and concerns with bureaucracy and paperwork, were around particularly for those in child protection and working with children and families. Recruitment and retention of staff was still an issue. Concerns about eligibility criteria and yet providing early intervention and meeting existing need were raised, particularly by children's and families workers and those supporting carers.

13. Integration was a very live issue for people with significant benefits highlighted as well as challenges. Managers and staff in general feel it is important they understand their respective roles and responsibilities and there was a call for integrated learning opportunities to help staff understand a wide range of professional roles. Sharing information, and the

challenges of that, across roles/organisations was still a key issue. Different professional roles and how that impacts on risk assessment was a concern.

14. The pressures of implementing legislation at a time of significant change remained an issue – as was a call for simplification & standardisation of processes, systems and forms as a means of supporting the workforce and providing consistency of care/support.

15. Managing public expectations and raising the profile of the sector was still felt to be important particularly about resources, the cost of care and the need for individual responsibility. Again practitioners felt that it would be good to do more through the promotion of positive good news stories and also by valuing and nurturing the people in the workforce so that as a sector it could become more confident in itself.

16. Some new messages also emerged. These included:

- managers highlighted a challenge in addressing fear and anxiety about decision making which was being added to by the anxiety in workers caused by uncertainty around new policies and procedures in the world of integration
- lack of opportunities to grow managers on the job
- a strong message in child protection that multi-agency working is overly formal and process driven
- a need to continue support for the role of the Chief Social Work Officer in the context of integration
- implementing the new Carers Act well requires carer awareness across the workforce and it needed to be built into the core curriculums of health and social care workers.

17. A number of the messages which are set out in in this report are already being taken forward under the Strategy. Some might offer a new perspective and need to be considered in the context of the strategy refresh and the potential for agreement on new actions. Other stakeholders and other relevant Strategies/policies such as the AILIP which will also wish to consider how they taken account of the messages coming out of this set of events.

### **What Next?**

18. This report will go to relevant Scottish Ministers and the members of the Social Work Services Strategic Forum to further inform how the Strategy is taken forward. The Forum is currently considering whether any new activity is required under the Strategy so this report will help to inform that thinking.

19. The report will also inform work and priorities beyond the Strategy. It will be circulated to event participants and to all local authority Chief Social Work Officers and other stakeholders. We will ensure that relevant policy leads within Scottish Government and key stakeholders across the sector are made aware of it so that its findings can inform wider developments and their respective responsibilities for supporting and strengthening the workforce. We will also publish this report on the SG website. The more detailed reports produced on the GIRFEC, Child Protection and carers events are already with Scottish Government policy leads and are informing their work.

20. OCSWA is currently starting to plan another series of practitioner engagement events in 2017 and will work collaboratively with the members of the Forum, and front line workers, to ensure that we make best use of such events and that they continue to be a meaningful and valued opportunity for those who work in the sector.

## **SUMMARY OF MESSAGES FROM THE EVENTS**

### **SECTION 1: SUPPORTING THE WORKFORCE**

#### Practitioner views on what can better support the workforce?

a supportive learning culture with protected time to learn

protected time for supervision, peer support & mentoring – especially important for newly qualified social workers

engaged, visible, supportive & communicative managers with the right values and skills

better managed/reduced caseloads

early involvement in service planning, change programmes and evaluation

good quality and regular supervision SE

more caring and nurturing organisations and managers SE

less paperwork/admin and more time with clients

sectors & organisations being better at sharing learning & good practice

improved use of and access to technology to support practice/learning

not enough opportunities to grow and develop managers on the job

understand managers role and responsibilities

#### **Further detail on the views expressed**

##### **Learning and Development**

Not unsurprisingly the messages featured above were still relevant in 2016. The 2016 events continued to highlight what was said in 2015 about the importance of improving practice through effective learning, reflective practice, on-going personal development and knowledge exchange. Again positive messages about access to learning opportunities were heard alongside messages calling for more formal and informal learning/networking opportunities, particularly with other sectors (ie health, education) which was a particular message in the events on supporting carers and implementing GIRFEC. As in 2015 messages about reductions in training budgets and development opportunities were mentioned, particularly at the Supervision Event.

Better managed and reduced caseloads was a strong message that emerged from child protection workers and those working in children's services. Caseloads are impacting on social worker's learning, development and wellbeing and this emerged particularly in the Supervision event. At the same time a caseload tick-box approach to supervision was felt to be less valuable to social workers.

Particular new messages in 2016 included ones raised in the child protection event – these were about raising awareness of disabilities (i.e. Autism) across the sector and more training to ensure consistent standards of practice/delivery.

It was still felt that sectors and organisations, as well as different professions, need to collaborate to support effective learning and promote good practice. Face to face multi-agency/professional and cross-sector learning was still felt to be valuable building cohesion and improving joint working. Solutions which were also raised in 2015 included:

- multi-agency case working and reflective practice
- action learning
- co-location seen as key in supporting learning and development
- Job shadowing to help agencies understand the role of others.
- IJBs to be used as a vehicle for reflection and sharing

In the Child Protection event feedback highlighted that the relationships required for effective multi-agency working are affected by the impact of current working practices, which are in turn shaped by organisational restructures, increasing use of new technology, and a high focus on evidencing how performance indicators are met. It was recognised that these factors impact significantly on the level of both peer and senior practitioner support available to inform assessment and decision making. In child protection there was a strong message that multi-agency working is overly formal and process driven.

To effectively support implementation of the Carers Act – workforce training (social care, health and beyond) is felt important, particularly to raise awareness of the issues of carers, and their role/responsibilities. This could be done by rolling out EPIC (Equal Partners in Care) across all public services and across the Third Sector. This should also allow trust to build between carers and professionals. Professionals needed to see carers as providers of care/equal partners in care and not recipients of services, although they are that too.

**Technology** - Using technology better and more creatively is still felt to be key in supporting practice development, including the use of on-line forums. The issue of confidentiality and the need for careful use of technology continue to be highlighted but at the Carers Event the creative use of technology and social media platforms were seen as highly valuable in supporting carers. Access problems for front line staff and the Third Sector continued to be raised as was the need for simpler IT processes. The need for a more integrated approach to sharing information via integrated health and social care systems and also better links to Third Sector systems continued to be a significant topic.

**Information Management** - This issue continued to feature strongly in the events, particularly how information could be shared/managed. As in 2015 staff felt they needed better knowledge of local resources to effectively support clients. Building relationships across multi-agencies, such as regular hosting of open visits, was seen by some of those attending the child protection event as highly effective in building communication links, particularly around the informal sharing of information. Child protection practitioners highlighted that current processes of sharing information are difficult and a consistent approach is needed across agencies.

**Management**– The main messages continued to be that managers needed to be more visible and involved with front line workers, better understanding their role. This was particularly voiced in the child protection and GIRFEC events. The Supervision event attended by social work managers highlighted that workers also needed to better understand the role of the manager and their responsibilities.

Some practitioners still want managers to better support their wellbeing and to help manage caseloads. Child protection staff would benefit from better emotional support given they can be dealing with very difficult issues. Views on leadership were expressed, particularly around child protection. These defined quality leadership as articulating values, including and enabling staff to buy-in to a shared vision, in which frontline practitioners are made to feel comfortable and supported when taking difficult clinical decisions. Leaders could promote better that leaders and practitioners share the same values namely: prevention, early-intervention, targeted and appropriate support. It was felt that a disconnect needs to be addressed between the strategic vision articulated by senior leaders and the focus on the ground by practitioners. Core messages around child protection were felt to be diluted by the proliferation of policy instruments and unclear and inadequate statutory signposting.

In line with 2015 staff wanted managers to take account of their views on service delivery, improvement and change and to be better at planning and implementing change. Also, staff could feel disempowered with decisions sometimes being made by managers from a resource perspective. There was some recognition that managerial posts had reduced in number. The Child Protection event highlighted that Team leaders should be more empowered to make decisions on resources. It was felt that micro management and laborious accounting processes involving relatively small amounts of money, hindered directing where money was needed to protect children.

Solutions, similar to those set out in 2015 included:

- organisations doing more to grow their own managers
- more people doing management training

**Supervision** – Supervision is key in supporting quality improvement and workforce development. This was a particular message in the child protection improvement event where practitioners felt a definite need to allow sufficient time for support and supervision and the opportunity to informally debrief and reflect, all of which would better support their professional judgement and assessment. Practitioners in child protection also felt that managers need to identify and celebrate good practice and understand that everyday practice can involve extraordinary and emotionally fraught decisions. Managers attending the supervision event recognised the importance of supervision and that they needed to prioritise it. They also agreed that a helpful solution would be to have a culture of support where wellbeing and resilience formed part of the discussion.

Whilst this report does not cover the in-depth messages and solutions that emerged from the supervision event which are set out in a separate report some key messages are highlighted below.

In summary, managers of social workers (whom the event was targeted at) feel that ownership of supervision from both the supervisor and supervisee is vital and sometimes works well. Ways to aid a supportive supervision culture and environment include shared responsibility, encouraged mentoring and peer learning opportunities and well as empowerment for individuals to make their own decisions. Managers clearly want practitioners to make decisions and highlighted a challenge in addressing fear and anxiety about decision making which was being added to by the anxiety in workers caused by uncertainty around new policies and procedures in the world of integration.

Other challenges identified included inter-professional supervision across disciplines, unclear definitions and expectations of supervision and sustaining the balance between supervision and management. Other challenges include changing organisational structures, multi-disciplinary supervision and an unclear understand of roles within an integrated setting. Other challenges included differences in professional focus impacting on risk management – ie who holds the risk?

Delegates identified emotional intelligence, active listening, adaptability and flexibility as key required skills to deliver effective supervision. It was suggested that supervision cover legislative and policy challenges as part of the practitioner's learning and development. Managers felt that advice, guidance and support were important development tools. that A better knowledge of statutory responsibilities and having readily available risk assessment and training tools, were also highlighted as requirements.

**Pay** – As an issue this did not come up as much in 2016. This is not surprising as a key solution advocated in 2015 was the adoption of a living wage in the sector to address low pay and this is now in place. There were messages welcoming the Government's action on the Living Wage but also some concerns about sustainability and the funding/service pressures that could in turn be put on Third sector providers.

**Recruitment** - Recruitment issues were felt to be impacting on the quality of care in general but particularly around child protection. Disparity of filled posts across the sector and high health visitor caseloads have a significant impact on the work of social workers in child protection.

**Social Work Degree** - As in 2015 there was a view that the degree needed to be more relevant to practice – this came out at the child protection event where some practitioners **reflected that 'the approach to social work education is too generic and the option to specialise should be made available'**. There were still comments that social work education needed to focus more on practice-based learning. Solutions that emerged in the child protection event and which mirrored ones from 2015 were:

- the need for more specialist graduate certificates
- University programmes joining up to ensure a consistent approach

**Social Work Education** - a new and more explicit message was made in 2016 about the new carers Act and the importance of ensuring that to support effective delivery carer awareness needed to be built into core curriculums of key professionals across health and social care.

**Retaining Experienced Staff** - Improved caseloads and minimising admin and bureaucracy continued to be seen as key to supporting staff retention, particularly in child protection and children's and families services. Retention of staff in child protection was a key issue. Solutions similar to those offered in 2015 and particularly important for child protection practitioners included:

- increasing worker autonomy and minimising admin/bureaucracy
- filling vacancies quickly
- retaining staff through support and training

**Self-Directed Support (SDS)** – As in 2015 SDS - despite the significant improvements in outcomes it was realising for some individuals - was still felt to create extra work and pressure for staff. SDS was mentioned in particular in the carers event as a key vehicle for delivering a holistic and personalised approach to care and support both for service users and carers.

## SECTION 2 : UNDERSTANDING SERVICE QUALITY AND PERFORMANCE

### Summary of Practitioner views on what can improve understanding of Quality and Performance?

engaging earlier and better with workers, users & carers on performance activity

freeing staff from systems, processes, admin & data collection -

consistently good quality care seen as a key driver of improvement

resource concerns around delivering quality care

review and improve monitoring/evaluation approaches - nationally & locally

improve tendering & commissioning processes to support quality of care

### **Further detail on the views expressed**

**Service Quality** - Consistent service quality was still felt to be key in driving improvement, this included a strong message around carers accessing consistent support. Concerns about limited resources including staffing were evident in feedback around child protection. Challenges were highlighted in child protection and in GIRFEC around supporting early intervention whilst meeting existing need. The sector needs to improve early intervention and early support services. The proactive approach to early intervention needs to be consistent across local authorities and the sector as a whole. A collective understanding and definition of 'risk' and 'wellbeing' is needed particularly in child protection and GIRFEC where practitioners feel that there is a different understanding of thresholds across agencies, in particular how risk averse agencies are. Tensions between early intervention and eligibility criteria were expressed as a concern.

Standardising and simplifying assessment approaches/forms/procedures was still voiced by some practitioners, particularly around GIRFEC, as a key vehicle to deliver consistency.

Solutions offered included:

- managers and organisations to support positive risk taking
- services to be talked about in relation to need not hours
- managers, staff and different sectors to share the same language
- Communication between agencies needs to be improved and terminology needs to be shared to enable and improve a unified understanding.

**Evaluation and Monitoring** – Key messages still focussed on included more evaluation of policy implementation, an increased focus on personal outcomes and how to measure these, a need to look at what is measurable and to develop systems that capture feedback from users, carers, communities and the workforce. The importance of involving these groups early on was also reflected.

**Health and Social Care Integration** –Integration proved to be a ‘live’ and current concern for practitioners, probably more so than in 2015.

Practitioners indicated anxiety caused by uncertainty about new policies and procedures in a new integrated setting and concern about the reduction of training and development opportunities due to competing resources. Supervision across multi-disciplines highlighted the workforce’s concern of unclear understanding of roles and the differences in professional focus with potentially different thresholds. Clearer identification of responsibility was felt to be important particularly around delivery of self-directed support and improving support for carers. Strengthening the role of the Chief Social Work Officer was felt to be important. There is also a need to demonstrate why integration does not seem to be so visible on the frontline in some instances. In relation to improving support to carers streamlining health and social care interactions particularly around assessment and care planning and linking it to SDS would ensure a holistic approach.

Other challenges highlighted includes:

- Seemingly counterproductive policies and processes
- Blurring of roles
- Different social care models from a medical point of view
- Differences in professional focus/thresholds – impacting on who holds the risk
- Different IT systems was still an issue

Practitioners highlighted potential benefits of working in an integration setting, including a wider range of opportunities for different forms of supervision, coaching and mentoring.

Other benefits included:

- Streamlined service provision supporting VFM, consistency and duplication
- Quicker decision making
- Able to provide ‘day to day’ support without referral to other services
- Locality models with more partners i.e. housing and police
- Exposure to details of different professions and managers
- Managers gain better understanding of other professions, including OT’s and nurses
- Eases use of action learning as a means of supporting peer and group learning

## SECTION 3 :IMPROVING USE OF EVIDENCE

### Summary of Practitioner views on how to make better use of Evidence

improving skills in research/evidence

time for research & practice learning

more opportunities to engage in knowledge exchange

sectors need to share evidence /knowledge better

better promotion of national resources & knowledge exchange platforms

### **Further detail on the views expressed**

**Using Evidence** - The main messages were very much the same as in 2015, indicating a gap in training and skills around using evidence more effectively and around improvement methodology. Key challenges still included time to undertake and consider research; problems accessing research findings, including lack of IT, and not knowing where to find current and robust research. There was a call to protect time for evidence-based practice learning and research and to create more knowledge exchange events. There was also a call for evidence to be more closely linked to supervision.

**Promoting Evidence/Knowledge** - There remained a view, as in 2015, that the sector needs to better share its evidence and training resource, particularly from the statutory sector to the Third sector. As in 2015 better use of IT to share info was felt important but IT capacity across many organisations needs improved to support this. Creating accessible, national databases and promoting existing knowledge exchange platforms (SSKS) and evidence based practice resources such as IRISS and SSSC were strongly advocated in line with the 2015 messages. Peer support groups and Information Hubs were seen as critical.

Comments particularly in the carers event highlighted the competitive element that could be inhibiting sharing of good practice due to the self-interest of competing providers – as they competed for funding. A full report is available from the Improving Knowledge Exchange and Improvement Event which covers the issues, challenges and solutions in more detail.

## SECTION 4 : PROMOTING PUBLIC UNDERSTANDING

### Summary of Practitioner views on what can strengthen public understanding of Social Services?

raise awareness of sector with public & other key professionals  
consistent good quality care seen as a key driver of improving public perception  
sector being more confident in itself  
educating public about resources/cost of care/own responsibility  
more realistic expectations about social work – by public and other professions

### **Further detail on the views expressed**

**Public Perception and Understanding** Perception of the sector was not an issue that was explicitly discussed in the 2016 events unlike 2015 where it was a key discussion topic. That said it emerged in the events where raising public awareness about the sector was important for those working in child protection.

As in 2015 there were messages about improving awareness of the social work role with other professions – and vice versa – as part of the integrated delivery landscape. Managing public expectation was still felt to be important, as in 2015, particularly about resources, the cost of care and the need for individual responsibility. Again the Sector felt it could do more through the promotion of positive good news stories and also by valuing and nurturing its own workforce and being more confident in itself.

Raising awareness of the role of carers with the public, and the sector's workforce (as covered elsewhere in this report) was seen as vital in helping to identify carers, raise awareness of their issues and help ensure carers are seen as equal partners in the provision of care. This could perhaps be part of a wider public awareness raising exercise.