

By email: consultation.responses@socialworkengland.org.uk.

01 December 2022

ADCS response to Social Work England consultation on its strategy 2023 to 2026

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd. (ADCS) is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services (DCSs) under the provisions of the *Children Act (2004)*. The DCS acts as a single point of leadership and accountability for services for children and young people in a local area, including children's social care and education. ADCS welcomes the opportunity to respond to Social Work England's (SWE) consultation on its strategy for 2023 to 2026.

Regulation and protection

ADCS welcomes efforts to simplify and improve the fitness to practice process. It is important that, where possible, the process is as efficient as possible during what will inevitably be a stressful time for those who are undergoing investigation. A greater use of local resolutions may help resolve concerns more efficiently and earlier and we welcome efforts to speak with employers to understand how local processes are working. Wherever possible and appropriate, restorative approaches should be used to address fitness to practice concerns. Such approaches will not only reduce the costs and stress associated with the fitness to practice process, they may also have longer term benefits given the workforce challenges facing the sector. Consideration must also be given to the process for referrals for agency social workers as employer responsibilities are significantly different in relation to this fluid cohort of staff. ADCS members continue to raise concerns regarding backlogs in fitness to practice inquiries and increased delays in practitioners discovering the outcome of an investigation and we hope these proposals help mitigate the issues.

SWE's commitment to encourage and support all social workers to adopt CPD as a valued and regular part of their professional life is positive. However, for practitioners who are re-registering as social workers by submitting evidence of CPD, ADCS members would welcome greater assistance from SWE in identifying those social workers who are yet to complete and submit their CPD. For many social workers with challenging caseloads, finding time to complete and submit their CPD can be difficult, and this may not always be fed back to their manager promptly. Local authorities employ a large number of social workers, some significantly more than others, and so attempting to manually identify which of their staff have yet to submit CPD is an unnecessarily time-consuming process. ADCS therefore urges SWE to provide local authorities with a list of those social workers who have yet to complete their CPD when requested to do so.

Delivery and improvement

The consultation suggests SWE broaden out its leadership role including a focus on early career development and specialist roles. Regarding specialist roles, it is important to recognise that social work and wider children's services such as early help services are part of the same continuum and should not operate in silos. Children and families will often engage with a range of professionals and volunteers who support different specific needs but ultimately are working towards the same goal. The use of restorative and relationship-based practices to support children and families is an example of an approach by which professionals of any discipline can seek to work with children and families so that they can find their own solutions to problems. It is important that both early help and child protection practitioners can work effectively with each other and a wider range of professionals through common approaches, such as these, based on shared values that are held across the wider children's workforce, not just social work.

The focus on anti-discriminatory, anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice is welcome. We know that children from Black and minoritised backgrounds are overrepresented in the youth justice and care systems and in school exclusions. We must do more as a sector and as a society to stand up for change, to challenge ourselves and each other and to ensure anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice is at the heart of our work with children and young people if we are to achieve a fairer, more tolerant society. It is equally important that we have a workforce that is diverse and reflects the communities we work with. Whilst this is in the gift of employers, there is a role here too for education and training providers. However, a limited number of bursaries which have been frozen for several years pose a direct barrier to equality, diversity and inclusion in the workforce. At a time when many people are struggling with the rising cost of living, there is a clear need to do more to attract more people into the profession and the use of bursaries provides a real opportunity to bridge this gap. Indeed, the current recruitment and retention crisis being experienced within the sector emphasises the paramountcy for additional and adequate bursary funding across all entry routes.

Other comments

The growing use of agency child and family social workers and the extortionate costs associated with them is having a direct impact upon the type and quality of support local authorities can offer children and families. Relationships are at the heart of social work, yet the use of 'project teams' of social workers is often incompatible with building strong relationships with children and families. However, local authorities are often left with little choice but to hire an entire team of staff rather than a single social worker which would be their preference. ADCS would welcome further engagement from the regulator in helping local authorities reduce the use of agency social workers.

The sector faces a recruitment and retention crisis which requires a national focus on improving social work sufficiency. All efforts to raise the profile of social work would be welcome. One such option is a national recruitment and retention campaign,

which focuses on the importance of stability and clearly explains that good, relationship-based social work can, and does, change lives for the better.

If you would like to discuss any of the points raised in this response further, please contact Policy Officer Matt Cunningham via matt.cunningham@adcs.org.uk.