

ADCS Position Statement
The Assessment and Accreditation
of Three New Social Work Statuses

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(9 May 2016)

1.0 Introductory comments

1.1 ADCS welcomes the government's commitment to raising the quality of social work, Social Worker education and practice in order to improve the recruitment, retention and professional development of Social Workers. Child and family social work is complex and challenging and requires tenacious and highly skilled practitioners who are confident and able to make meaningful interventions that will protect and improve the outcomes of vulnerable children and families.

1.2 This is the first in what will be a short series of position statements on the assessment and accreditation of three new social work statuses. Given the complexity of this ambitious reform agenda, ADCS firmly believes that a 'programme board' style approach would help to ensure a common core understanding across all of the workstreams and provide reassurance that the right people are involved in these important developments.

1.3 The Knowledge and Skills Statements¹ (KSSs) published by the Chief Social Worker for Children & Families describe the standards against which child and family social workers will be assessed and accredited for three new social work statuses: Approved Child & Family Practitioner (AP); Practice Supervisor (PS); and Practice Leader (PL)

1.4 A plethora of policy questions remain unanswered, many of which will be subject to consultation in the summer. In June 2015 the Chief Social Worker established an expert reference group to work alongside and provide expert advice to DfE colleagues as the detailed developments of this ambitious reform agenda are developed. ADCS believes that the policy and implementation issues must be addressed together otherwise there is a serious risk that this reform agenda will, unintentionally, destabilise and demoralise the workforce. A short list of some of those unanswered policy and implementation questions appears towards the end of this paper. ADCS remains, as ever, keen and willing to engage with DfE colleagues on these and other important matters.

1.5 The journey from initial social work education through to PS level might be described as follows: new social worker graduates and enters the ASYE programme. At the end of the ASYE, employers can provide endorsement for those deemed to be suitable for accreditation as an AP. Once accredited, and after a suitable period of time, some APs may choose to move into supervisory positions and seek their employer's endorsement to enter the assessment phase, successful completion of which will result in accredited PS status.

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https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/338718/140730_Knowledge_and_skills_statement_final_version_AS_RH_Checked.pdf for approved practitioner. Published July 2014, and already implemented on ASYE programmes

https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/478111/Knowledge_and_skills_statements_for_practice_leaders_and_practice_supervisors.pdf for practice supervisors and practice leaders; published November 2015

1.6 The development of a 'talent programme' for aspirant PLs and the subsequent assessment and accreditation processes for PLs are happening separately and at a slightly slower pace than the development of assessment and accreditation processes for AP and PS statuses.

1.7 This short position statement does not focus in any detail on the AP and PS assessment processes which are currently subject to a proof of concept phase which is approaching completion. The assessment processes for each of these two statuses must be carefully calibrated in order to avoid negative bias, particularly with regard to ethnicity or age of Social Workers.

1.8 The assessment systems will need to be designed in parallel with separate support systems for those who fail to become accredited on their first attempt. In such cases, the focus of the supporting systems would be on the development needed by the individual to improve in order to attain the accredited status.

1.9 A list of some of the unanswered policy questions appears at the end of this statement; this list is not intended to be exhaustive and ADCS members look forward to continuing to engage with DfE to resolve these matters.

1.10 ADCS acknowledges the complex, multi-faceted nature of this reform agenda. As noted above, we are concerned at what seems to us to be a lack of coherent oversight over the entire work programme. Development of different strands of this work programme are happening in an atomised way: employer endorsement; development of the new regulatory body for social work; proof of concept for the assessment phases of AP and PS statuses; talent programme for putative PLs; developing methods of assessment & accreditation processes of PL status; development of a specialist CPD programme for Social Workers working in permanence; Teaching partnerships; development of various entry routes into the profession; and the link across to adult social work; engagement with Trades Unions and consideration of employer and employee relations.

2.0 Assessment and accreditation of Approved Child & Family Practitioner and Practice Supervisor statuses

2.1 The government's desire is that all Social Workers working in statutory child and family social work should be accredited. **In order to avoid the creation of a two tier children's social work profession, implementation of these two statuses should be mandatory, roll out at pace, and fully funded as a new burden.**

2.2 Voluntary implementation risks destabilising a fragile workforce. Moreover, it would be inappropriate for Ofsted to be used as a means of driving voluntary adoption of assessment and accreditation for example by including any judgements in future inspection frameworks about the numbers of accredited social workers in a LA or by making a judgement about LA employers based on proportions of Social Workers who fail the accreditation.

2.3 ADCS acknowledges that in implementing these two statuses, we are as a sector forcing specialisation in statutory child and family social work from an early post-qualifying stage in a social worker's career. We consider that there may be unintended

negative consequences as a result, which we should be alert to and prepared to address. There is also a risk that the implementation of these two statuses may hamper the continuous professional development and potentially therefore the retention of social workers who wish to gain a breadth of experience and knowledge across several domains of social care practice. The implications for social workers in LD/Transition teams, or in all-age services where there is currently fluidity across child and adult social work must be carefully considered. Above all, the expectations around accreditation need to be sufficiently flexible to be able to support the desired innovation in child and family social work practice.

2.4 There is a further danger of creating a second class social work profession – those that fail to become accredited in statutory child and family social work remain registered and move into non-statutory child and family social work (e.g. early help) or worse, that adult social work comes to be perceived as the Cinderella service for those who fail to become accredited. This is not only a concern about how the social work profession as a whole is perceived, but it is a concern that the link between adult and children's social work is broken. ADCS firmly believes that in order to address the needs of vulnerable children and young people in an holistic and sustainable way, that a systemic approach is required which includes breaking the cycle of adult disadvantage, much of which is driven by the impacts of alcohol or drug dependency or poor mental health on adults' ability to parent their children.

3.0 Employer endorsement

3.1 Employer endorsement will need to encompass the differences between recently qualified social workers seeking accreditation, and those with long-standing experience (i.e. stock and flow).

3.2 The focus on accrediting statutory child and family social work rightly puts local authority employers to the fore as the principal (if not sole) employer able to give employer endorsement. This raises interesting policy questions with regard to agencies.

3.3 The body providing endorsement to agency social workers must be the local authority which has direct experience of their practice. This endorsement should only be given after the agency social worker has been working on assignment in that local authority for a significant period of time. This would allow the local authority to have sufficient time to judge the practice of the social worker and make an informed decision with regard to endorsement.

3.4 In the short-medium term this could create a workforce supply crisis as many LAs continue to rely on locum/agency workers. In the longer term the agency market will no doubt adapt but potentially these developments will help to 'cool' the agency market which would be a desirable outcome.

4.0 Talent programme for aspirant Practice Leaders

4.1 DfE's early thinking on this is that there will be taught and 'real job' placement elements to this aspirant PL programme. ADCS agrees with this blended approach in principle.

4.2 ADCS believes that aspirant PLs should largely be developed *in situ*, supported by a centrally funded development programme to accompany aspirant PLs on their leadership journey. Coaching should certainly form part of the development programme and upon attaining accredited PL status ongoing mentoring from an experienced PL would be desirable.

4.3 Early thinking in DfE suggests that 'real job' full time placements lasting for 9-15 months including for a period of time in a 'challenged' LA. ADCS agrees that there should be taught and placement components to the aspirant PL programme, however full time placements of 9-15 months duration are simply inconceivable to anyone running a children's services directorate.

4.4 ADCS acknowledges that there is a real value in leaders of the future understanding how system failure comes about, however LAs in difficult circumstances must not become the temporary playgrounds for rising stars. LAs in challenging circumstances are not well served nor do they improve by parachuting people in who leave again after their placement is concluded, however good that person might be on their home patch. What LAs in challenging circumstances need is stability in their social care workforce and people with a shared commitment to a better future.

4.5 The idea of a placement in an 'inadequate' authority does not work if it is built around secondments, but there is a value in it if it can be linked to peer reviews and other improvement work, including short inter-authority placements organised regionally.

The taught element of the programme

4.6 In addition to the six specified practice elements of the KSS, in order to develop properly the breadth of skill required at Assistant Director level, the content of the taught programme needs to cover the following:

- Budget setting including designing savings programmes
- Use of data, including developing datasets and commentary and using data to improve performance and / or construct a business case
- Development and implementation of quality assurance programmes, including in a multi-agency environment
- Operating in the member domain
- High quality report writing for reports that go through the executive / cabinet cycle and enter the public domain
- Running a transformation programme
- Managing corporate litigation
- Media handling in a crisis
- Developing strategic partner relationships and leveraging them to make things happen

4.7 Much of this could be delivered through a taught programme in a "Masterclass" style. To support this there would need to be no more than two "placements" (in an overall developmental phase of 12-18 months):

Placements

4.8 One of those placements could be in another authority and one ought to be in the "home" authority. The elapsed time from start to end of these probably no more than 3

months, and the actual time spent away from the home authority in the "host" authority no more than 2-3 days per week in this period.

4.9 The purpose of each of these "placements" would be the delivery of a specific project which ought to cover one or more of the elements outlined above. The programme would add value to these "placements" by coaching and / or action learning sets throughout, so that the "live task" is accompanied by a relevant reflective supervision element.

5.0 Assessment and accreditation of Practice Leaders

5.1 ADCS believes that the **implementation of the PL status should NOT be mandated.**

5.2 Within LA children's social care, the responsibility for the quality of social work practice isn't solely the domain of one, or even a handful of senior practitioners.

5.3 ADCS members are not yet convinced of the arguments advanced by the DfE that PL status sits at Assistant Director (or equivalent) level, i.e. reporting directly to the DCS. There appears to be an unhelpful presumption that the aspirant PL programme will prepare participants for the role of Assistant Director in children's services as well as address children's social work practice leadership

5.4 A number of regions, through a variety of arrangements, are already commissioning and providing middle leadership programmes aimed at addressing their succession planning needs

6.0 A number of key policy and implementation questions remain unanswered including, but not limited to:

6.1 Mandatory or voluntary implementation?

6.2 Implemented at pace or phased in over a period of time?

6.3 Funding – who will pay, what will be funded and at what level?

6.4 What is the relationship between successful completion of ASYE and employer endorsement for assessment and accreditation for Approved Child & Family Practitioner? Is ASYE in effect a year-long employer endorsement process? If not, how do we manage the assessment burden on individuals?

6.5 Who is responsible for seeking and funding accreditation: individual worker or employer?

6.6 What might the salary implications for accredited Social Workers be?

6.7 Workforce supply and demand implications – if even 15% of Social Workers fail the assessment processes the implications for the sector, but more importantly the implications for vulnerable children, young people and their families, are profound.

6.8 How will implementation be rolled out?

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd (ADCS)

ADCS is the national leadership
association in England for statutory
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