



# Knowledge and Skills for Child and Family Social Work

## *Consultation response*

### **Introduction**

The Children's Society is a leading charity committed to improving the lives of thousands of children and young people every year. We work across the country with the most disadvantaged children through our specialist services and children's centres. Our direct work with vulnerable groups including disabled children, children in or leaving care, refugee, migrant and trafficked children, allows us to listen to the most vulnerable children and put their voices at the centre of our work.

We run 11 projects supporting young people in care and 13 specialist projects working with children who run away or go missing and/or are at risk or victims of sexual exploitation. We also run services that deliver emotional support, psychological interventions and counselling for children who have experienced domestic abuse and/or sexual exploitation. Many of the children we support are very vulnerable young people who have come into contact with child and family social workers on numerous occasions.

We welcome this consultation to further develop the statement written by the Chief Social Worker (Children and Families) aimed at standardising the education of child and family social workers and increasing rigour. Our submission is informed by learning from our direct work with vulnerable children and young people.

We have also included a copy of the statement produced by the Chief Social Worker (Child and Family) which contains the revisions that we would make in order to include our recommendations in the document.

### **Summary of key points**

- We welcome this consultation. It is vitally important that children and young people's experience of social care support is of the highest standard, consistent and adequate to help them be safe, develop and flourish.
- Knowledge of the UN convention on the rights of the child should be the starting point for any person wishing to train as a child and family social worker.
- Participation of children and young people in decisions made about their lives and understanding why certain decision have been made, is vital to ensuring the best outcomes for children, enabling them to develop positive relationships with their social worker. Child and Family social workers should be able to use a variety of techniques to facilitate participation that is meaningful, meets the communication needs of a child and allows the child or young person to exercise genuine and informed choice over their lives.

- Social workers should be able to act as a gateway to a variety of services, advice and assistance. As such social workers need to be effective advocates for the children and families they are assigned to. They need to understand local and national policy contexts and be confident in adopting a variety of techniques to secure adequate assistance that the families they are responsible for need.
- Social workers also need to have good knowledge of the needs of specific groups of children and young people, such as: young migrants, young people at risk of trafficking or exploitation, young runaways, young carers and young people at risk of sexual exploitation.
- We agree that social workers need to have good understanding of child development and knowledge of impact neglect and abuse has on children depending on their age, family history and other circumstances. We strongly urge for the inclusion of a specific section on adolescent development and neglect as we believe currently this group of children are at risk of not receiving the support they need due to the mistaken beliefs that they are sufficiently resilient to cope independently with problems in their lives.
- Many vulnerable families are also families in poverty. Social workers must understand the consequences of poverty on parenting and child development. They must be able to help families build financial resilience.
- Child and family social workers do an extraordinarily difficult job. By the end of their first year in post it is vital that they have a deep understanding of their own resilience. They should be able to identify their personal indicators that they are beginning to struggle and know where to access help and how to manage the stress of the job.

**Question One: Is there anything else that should be included in the statement which sets out what a child and family social worker needs to know and be able to do?**

- **Knowledge of children's rights**

Increasingly social work is seen to be about safeguarding children and managing the risks to their wellbeing. Keeping children safe is a serious undertaking, but the focus on risk is eclipsing the basic principle behind social work – to enable children to participate in society and thrive by ensuring children's human rights are observed and fulfilled. The UN convention on the rights of the child 1989<sup>1</sup> should be the foundational document for modern social work with children and families. The convention goes much further than a narrow focus on protecting children and includes various additional rights centring on participation in society and the provision of important needs like education and shelter.

Social work is a provision that the state has put in place for the most vulnerable children and families in order to protect them from harm but there has never been enough focus on how social work can allow children and their families to fully participate in education, the economy or wider society.

At the end of their first year, a child and family social worker should be able to explain and critically evaluate their role in ensuring that a child's rights are upheld.

**Recommendation 1: In section 1, 'the role of child and family social work', there should be an explicit mention of the responsibility of each social worker to ensure that the rights of the child, as stated in the UN Convention on the rights of the child 1989, are upheld.**

<sup>1</sup> United Nations convention on the rights of the child (1989) [http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC\\_PRESS200910web.pdf](http://www.unicef.org.uk/Documents/Publication-pdfs/UNCRC_PRESS200910web.pdf) [Last accessed October 8 2014]

- **Child's right to participate in decisions about their life**

In order to ensure a child's rights are observed and protected it is critical that children and young people can meaningfully participate in the decisions being made about their lives. The Children's Society has made a core commitment, in all of its work, to listen to the voices of children and young people and this commitment should be mirrored in social work.

Social workers should be able to listen to the concerns of children of any age – from birth to age 18. This will involve different techniques for different age groups. It is vital that children are listened to effectively. The Serious Case Reviews examined in Ofsted's Voice of the Child report highlight the need for this addition to the statement. Ofsted's main finding stated that most children were failed by social services because:

"the child was not seen frequently enough by the professionals involved, or was not asked about their views and feelings"<sup>2</sup>

In too many cases where a child is seriously harmed, or dies, listening to their voice and hearing their concerns could have saved them. We urge that the provisions relating to communication are strengthened so that all new child and family social workers learn how to listen to children properly and really hear their worries and concerns.

**Recommendation 2:** *In the section 5, 'effective direct work with children and families', we welcome the focus on communicating with children and young people but feel that more focus should be placed on listening to their needs and concerns, as children give voice to them. All child and family social workers should recognise the importance of giving children a voice and of allowing them to meaningfully participate in decision making about their lives.*

The reason that we have placed so much focus on the UN Convention and the right to participate in decision making about their lives is that too often children struggle to be heard. Social workers should facilitate participation within their day to day work, but they should also be aware that sometimes they will need to speak on a child's behalf, if that child's voice is to be heard by other adults. Child and Family Social workers need to recognise their role as advocates, and to be able to put it into practise. They should also be able to identify circumstances where they might not be the best advocate and a third party would be better placed to help.

**Recommendation 3:** *In section 1, 'the role of child and family social work', the role of the social worker as an advocate for the children they work with should be included. Social workers need to be champions for the young people they work with securing them access to the best possible services and help. This should be done from a position where they are informed about the wishes and desires of the child after having listened carefully to their needs first hand.*

**Recommendation 4:** *Some children who have complex communication needs or who do not feel that they have a good relationship with their social workers will require the support of an independent advocate to help them communicate their wishes and feelings. Social workers need to know about children's right to be supported by an independent advocate and ensure that children can access this support as needed.*

- **Understanding the impact of neglect on adolescents**

Society at large is well aware of the consequences of neglect in childhood and the statement of the chief social worker reflects this with a clear focus on childhood development and the consequences of neglect in the section 2 on 'child development'. Whilst this section covers 0-18

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<sup>2</sup> Ofsted (2011) 'The voice of the child: Learning lessons from serious case reviews'  
<http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/surveys-and-good-practice/t/The%20voice%20of%20the%20child.pdf> p4 [Last Accessed 6 October 2014]

year olds our research suggests that most professionals working with young people regard adolescents very differently compared to younger children in relation to both their needs and the potential for them to be neglected.

Our research study, *Safeguarding Young People*<sup>3</sup>, conducted with the University of York and the NSPCC, found that professionals often perceive adolescents to be less at risk of harm than younger children (and sometimes believed that they put ‘themselves at risk’). Professionals also thought that adolescents were more able to cope with the effects of maltreatment – that they developed resilience by default as they became older (a misunderstanding of the concept of resilience). They also falsely believed that teenagers were more likely to remove themselves from abusive situations. These misperceptions can result in significant safeguarding issues and risk for young people because professionals wrongly think that adolescents can cope.

Furthermore, as Thornberry *et al* (2010) found, persistent maltreatment during adolescence has ‘stronger and more consistent negative consequences...than maltreatment experienced only in childhood.’ These effects include criminal behaviour, mental health problems, substance misuse and health-risking behaviours. So not only is there a safeguarding risk, but the consequences of adolescent neglect for the young person in question, and society, are long-term and entrenched.

**Recommendation 5:** *As such, we recommend that in section 2, ‘child development’, a passage is added that makes explicit reference to adolescent neglect, its characteristics and consequences. We believe that currently this group of children are at serious risk of not receiving the protection they need due to the mistaken belief that they are more resilient and able to cope with the issues in their lives.*

- **Children in the immigration system**

In order for social workers to better understand the complex needs of children who are newly arrived in this country we recommend that they have a basic understanding of the asylum and immigration system through training. Social workers should also receive an introduction to the international child protection issues at play in many of the countries where unaccompanied children come from, including experiences of endemic violence, war, torture and persecution. Social workers should understand that many of these children come from countries where no child protection system exists and therefore the agencies and processes involved in their care in the UK will likely seem very unfamiliar to them.

For their first year of practice, we recommend that new child and family social workers focus on the knowledge required to competently deal with these issues. Vulnerable high-risk cases should not be allocated to newly qualified social workers with little experience which is a problem our services frequently experience. Cases need to be allocated to staff with experience, where newer social workers are able to shadow and learn about the issues involved before taking on cases on their own.

**Recommendation 6:** *In section 8, ‘the law and the family justice system’, the need for child and family social workers to have a good knowledge of the national immigration system, the asylum process and related laws must be included so that social workers can effectively deal with the consequences of the system on the child.*

- **Trafficked children**

Local authorities are the first responders for children who have been the victim of the serious crime of human trafficking. Our recent research into trafficking highlighted that local authorities

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<sup>3</sup> The Children’s Society (2010) ‘Safeguarding Young People’  
[http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/research\\_docs/Safeguarding%20Young%20People%20-%20Responding%20to%20Young%20People%20aged%2011%20to%2017%20who%20are%20maltreated.pdf](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/research_docs/Safeguarding%20Young%20People%20-%20Responding%20to%20Young%20People%20aged%2011%20to%2017%20who%20are%20maltreated.pdf) [Last Accessed October 6 2014]

are failing to identify cases<sup>4</sup> and that training is not always reaching those frontline professionals who are best placed to identify trafficking<sup>5</sup>. Our practitioners regularly see referral forms to the National Referral Mechanism that are very poor in detail and quality. Such forms tend to lead to negative decisions which have significant impacts on these vulnerable children. Again we urge for a focus on providing child and family social workers with a knowledge about these offences, whilst providing shadowing opportunities for them to learn about making good referrals from more experienced child and family social workers.

**Recommendation 7: Child and Family social workers have a responsibility, as local authority employees, to act as first responders in countering serious crimes like human trafficking. In section 8, 'the law and the family justice system', there should be the inclusion of a provision requiring knowledge of the signs of trafficking and how to make effective and appropriate referrals. This should cover issues of children trafficked into UK for the purposes of exploitation as well as children, including British children, being trafficked within the UK for the purposes of sexual exploitation.**

- **Children who have experienced sexual exploitation or those at risk of sexual exploitation**

We welcome the inclusion of child sexual exploitation in the section 4, 'abuse and neglect of children'. However, in our work with young people who have been sexually exploited, one of our real concerns is not just the recognition of CSE and safeguarding against it, but the attitudes of professionals towards the young people who have been sexually exploited. Often professionals perceive young people who have been involved in sexual exploitation as "troublesome", "promiscuous" or even "slags who knew what they were getting themselves into" rather than vulnerable young people<sup>6</sup>.

**Recommendation 8: The statement needs to include a specific reference to the professional attitudes that social workers need to display and expect from other services working to safeguard children. As such, we recommend the inclusion, in section 9, 'professional ethics' of a passage stating the need for child and family social workers to have both sympathetic understanding of issues like sexual exploitation but also to be able to challenge other professionals for their prejudices and lack of understanding.**

- **Young runaways**

Running away is an indicator that a child needs help and it should be added to the section on 'abuse and harm of children' as a risk indicator of different forms of harm to children. The Children's Society's 'Still Running' Reports suggest that children who do not live with their families are three times more likely to runaway than children who do<sup>7</sup>. As such, many runaways will have had interactions with children and family social workers who cannot be allowed to ignore running away and write it off as childishness or immaturity.

Running away is a significant risk factor for a number of activities and experiences that could serious harm a child. 70% of children who are victims of CSE have had a history of running

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<sup>4</sup> Franklin, A. and Doyle, L. (2013) *Still at Risk – A review of support for trafficked children* [http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/still\\_at\\_risk\\_-\\_full\\_report\\_-\\_refugee\\_council\\_the\\_childrens\\_society.pdf](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/still_at_risk_-_full_report_-_refugee_council_the_childrens_society.pdf) [Last accessed October 6 2014]

<sup>5</sup> The Anti-trafficking Monitoring Group (2012) *All Change: Preventing trafficking in the UK* [http://www.ecpat.org.uk/sites/default/files/atmg\\_all\\_change\\_2012.pdf](http://www.ecpat.org.uk/sites/default/files/atmg_all_change_2012.pdf) [Last accessed October 6 2014]

<sup>6</sup> APPG for runaway and missing children and adults and the APPG for Looked after children and care leavers (2012) 'Report from the joint inquiry into children who go missing from care' p7, [http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/joint\\_appg\\_inquiry\\_-\\_report...pdf](http://www.childrensociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/u32/joint_appg_inquiry_-_report...pdf) [Last accessed October 6 2014]

<sup>7</sup> The Children's Society (2011) 'Still Running 3' [http://makerunawayssafe.org.uk/sites/default/files/Still-Running-3\\_Full-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://makerunawayssafe.org.uk/sites/default/files/Still-Running-3_Full-Report_FINAL.pdf) [Last accessed October 6 2014]

away and one in five runaways will have some kind of risky experience like begging or stealing<sup>8</sup>. Child and Family social workers must be able to recognise the signs that a child may be considering running away and be able to identify the reasons why a child ran away after they have been found.

**Recommendation 9: By the end of their first year, children and family social workers should be able to spot the warning signs of young runaways' behaviour, understand the underlying drivers and know the best ways of keeping returned runaways safe in the future. Running away should be included in section 4, 'abuse and harm of children'.**

- **Impact of poverty and debt on families**

The Children's Society's and Stepchange's recent report The Debt Trap found that an estimated 2.4 million children are in families living with problem debt<sup>9</sup> and the Institute for Fiscal Studies now estimates that by 2020 child poverty (after housing costs) will have risen by 1.1 million since 2011<sup>10</sup>. For some time to come, child and family social workers will continue to have to support families that are living in significant poverty that has far reaching consequences on a parent's ability to care for their children.

The statement developed by the Chief Social worker clearly recognises the impact of this poverty on children's life chances – establishing that child poverty, and its consequences, are something social workers should know about by the end of their first year. This does not go far enough in our view. By the end of their first year in practice we would want child and family social workers to be able to assist in opening basic bank accounts, supporting families to access money advice and housing services and help the families they work with in financial planning.

The evidence on the consequences of poverty to child development is solid. Only 27% of children on free school meals in England achieve 5 A\*-C grades at GCSE for example<sup>11</sup> and the consequences on life expectancy are severe – the Marmot Review found a difference of seventeen years life expectancy between those people in Britain growing up in the richest and poorest neighbourhoods<sup>12</sup>.

If social work is to be holistic and result in significant benefits for families then financial inclusion needs to be considered as such we recommend that practical skills in improving a family's finances can be demonstrated by child and family social workers after one year in the role.

**Recommendation 10: We welcome the decision to include specific mention to the impact of poverty on children and families in section 1, 'the role of child and family social work'. We urge the final document to go further by ensuring that child and family social workers are able to increase the financial power of the families they work with through a focus on financial literacy and inclusion after one year in the role. We would include this aspect in section 5, 'effectivedirect work with children and families'.**

- **Young carers**

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<sup>8</sup> The Office of the Children's Commissioner's Inquiry into Child Sexual Exploitation in Gangs and Groups, Interim report (2012) 'I thought I was the only one. The only one in the world' [http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content\\_636](http://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/content/publications/content_636) [Last accessed October 6 2014]

<sup>9</sup> The Children's Society and Stepchange (2014) 'The Debt Trap' [http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/debt\\_trap\\_report\\_may\\_2014.pdf](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/debt_trap_report_may_2014.pdf) [Last accessed October 6 2014]

<sup>10</sup> Institute for Fiscal Studies (2014) 'Child and working age poverty in Northern Ireland over the next decade: an update' <http://www.ifs.org.uk/bns/bn144.pdf> [Last accessed October 6 2014]

<sup>11</sup> Department for Education (2013) 'GCSE and Equivalent attainment by pupil characteristics in England, 2012/13' [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/280689/SFR05\\_2014\\_Text\\_FINAL.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/280689/SFR05_2014_Text_FINAL.pdf) [Last accessed October 6 2014]

<sup>12</sup> Fairer Society, Healthy Lives – The Marmot Review (2010) (<http://www.instituteofhealthequity.org/projects/fair-society-healthy-lives-the-marmot-review/fair-society-healthy-lives-full-report>) p16 [Last accessed October 6 2014]

There are over 166,000 young carers in England who have to dedicate significant amounts of their time and energy caring for other family members. Their situation as carers is often compounded by a number of additional complex needs. Young carers are likely to come from families who are £5,000 worse off than comparable families without a young carer and attainment at GCSE is around the equivalent of 9 grades lower than their peers<sup>13</sup>.

**Recommendation 11:** *Young carers often do not receive the support they deserve. In section 3, 'adult mental ill-health, substance misuse, domestic violence, physical ill-health and disability' there should be a specific mention of the potential role of children as carers. By the end of their first year, child and family social workers should be able to recognise when a child is being called upon to perform the duties of a carer, assess whether or not they can cope in this role and put in place effective strategies to help families build their own resilient coping strategy for poor adult health including supporting them to access adult social care services.*

- **Knowledge of own wellbeing and resilience**

In September 2013 the vacancy rate for children's social worker positions in England stood at 14% with an annual turnover rate of 15%. At the same time there were 17 children needing the attention of each full time social worker. On average a children's social worker takes one day off due to sickness every month<sup>14</sup>. It is clear that children's social work is a demanding field to work in and that staff face enormous challenges both in terms of workload and the emotional resilience required.

Healthy social workers, with an appropriate workload and the job satisfaction associated with low turnover rates would be better placed to deliver the care and support that children and families need. As such we would encourage the inclusion in the statement of a passage relating to the importance of the emotional resilience of child and family social workers. By the end of their first year child and family social workers should know how to monitor their resilience and wellbeing and they should have a clear understanding of how they can receive help, if they need it.

**Recommendation 12:** *Displaying professional ethics as a child and family social worker is more than just the demonstration of professional attitudes and behaviours. Child and family social work is an extremely difficult job and in order to be professionals, social workers must be aware of their own resilience and wellbeing. By the end of their first year in the job child and family social workers should be able to recognise when they might be struggling emotionally and be able to seek support from the appropriate sources.*

- **Working with other agencies**

The Children's Society welcomes the section of the statement on 'organisational context' as a significant step forward in embedding multi-agency working within the social care system. In our work we come across two challenges, time and again, that we would include within the statement explicitly.

Often when child and family social workers are making decisions they are doing so without a complete picture of the child in question. Child and family social workers must be aware of what data other agencies collect about children and young people and about the most effective strategies for ensuring that this data is safely and securely shared between organisations.

In order for this to happen it is crucial that child and family social workers also know how other agencies work, to a significant degree of detail. As such, as such the statement should set out

<sup>13</sup> Hounsell, D (2013) 'Hidden from View: the experiences of young carers in England' [http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/hidden\\_from\\_view\\_-\\_final.pdf](http://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/sites/default/files/tcs/hidden_from_view_-_final.pdf) p5 [Last accessed October 6 2014]

<sup>14</sup> Department for Education (2014) Children's Social Work Workforce: Key numbers as at September 2013) [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/287259/Social\\_Work\\_Workforce\\_2012-13\\_SFR\\_v1.3.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/287259/Social_Work_Workforce_2012-13_SFR_v1.3.pdf) [Last accessed October 6 2014]

that social workers should have working knowledge of agencies like the police, housing services, NHS bodies, schools and local charities, to name just five. We feel that, in order to ensure the “multi-agency support network is properly utilised and effective”, as the statement sets out, child and family social workers must know more about these agencies and this must be made explicit by the statement.

**Recommendation 13: Include the necessity of knowing the specific workings of the procedures and policies of partner agencies and the most effective strategies to ensure that data is shared.**

**Question Two: Are there any parts of the statement which are not set at the right level for a child and family social worker to be able to know or do, at the end of their first year of practice? If so, what are they?**

The Children’s Society thinks that the statement is pitched at an appropriate level and would urge the inclusion of the above recommendations as additional content over any re-writing that increases, or decreases expertise. For child and family social workers at the end of their first year in practice, we argue that it is more important that they understand the breadth of their role and understand the context in which they work rather than having developed particular expert knowledge.

**Question Three: Do you agree that the statement should not prescribe particular social work theories or methodologies?**

The Children’s Society agrees with the decision to avoid specific theories or methodologies. New ideas and innovations in social work occur every year and the freedom to test out new methods and explore new approaches allows practice to develop and improve. The inclusion of specific, and centrally approved models of social work, is unlikely to lead to improvements in children’s lives and as such it is an unnecessary addition.

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