

**Change for Children? The challenges and opportunities for the
children's social work workforce**

Anna Gupta

Lecturer in Social Work
Royal Holloway, University of London

&

James Blewett

Lecturer in Social Work
Royal Holloway, University of London
&
Social Care Workforce Research Unit
Kings College London

Please address all correspondence to:

Ms Anna Gupta
Department of Health and Social Care
Royal Holloway, University of London
Egham, Surrey TW20 0EX

Tel: 01784 443379

Email: Anna.Gupta@rhul.ac.uk

Introduction

Child welfare services in Britain are currently undergoing far-reaching change with a view to securing a range of improved outcomes for all children and young people (DfES 2004). Existing agencies are being restructured, and the services they provide realigned, in order to give greater emphasis to meeting the needs of all vulnerable children, both children in ‘need’ and children ‘at risk’. This is in recognition that there have been long-standing barriers to access in respect of universal and targeted services for both these groups. The staff who work with children and young people are central to the achievement of these objectives. The *Children’s Workforce Strategy* (DfES 2005) seeks to create a more ‘joined up’, cohesive workforce that is attuned to the needs of all children, particularly those in difficulties. It sets out the straightforward but ambitious aims:

‘The Government’s vision is that of a world-class children’s workforce that:

- *Is competent and confident;*
- *People aspire to be part of and want to remain in – where they can develop their skills and build satisfying and rewarding careers; and*
- *Parents, carers, children and young people trust and respect.’* (DfES 2005, p.3).

However a number of major issues of both quantity and quality confront the achievement of these aims for the children’s workforce. There have been chronic problems in recruiting and retaining workers in a range of child care settings (Audit Commission 2002; DfES 2003; Rolfe 2005). The implications of these deficits are so serious that failure to analyse and address them will inevitably significantly undermine the laudable ambitions of Government. This challenging

scenario has, to some degree, been explicitly acknowledged by policy makers in the *Children's Workforce Strategy* (DfES 2005) consultation process.

The crisis in children's social work is particularly acute. The various shortages have been highlighted in a range of recent evaluations of initiatives such as Sure Start Local programmes (Tunstall *et al.* 2005), and the Children's Fund (Mason *et al.* 2005). These findings highlight the need for a more specific understanding of the experiences and perspectives of social workers. Indeed a clear understanding of the strategic and operational perspectives of social workers is essential if Government is to make good its promise to develop stable and effective services that can both safeguard *and* promote the welfare of society's most vulnerable children.

This paper seeks to contribute to this process by examining the views of a sample of social workers in London. The data was collected in July 2005 through a series of focus groups, held with social workers undertaking the London Post Qualifying Child Care Award at Royal Holloway, University of London. The Post Qualifying Award in Child Care was specifically designed to assist qualified social workers to meet the complexities of working with children and families. The authors believe that an overview and discussion of the perspectives of this key group of child care professionals can both help illuminate understanding of the current state of social work; and provide positive pointers for future policy and practice.

The Current Policy Context for Workforce Development

The Post Qualifying Child Care Award emerged from the modernisation agenda that New Labour embarked upon following their election to office in 1997. Shortly after the election they received Sir William Utting's report *People Like Us* (Utting 1997), which among other messages identified deficits in the children's social work workforce. This reinforced the findings of inquiries into child deaths and the influential cohort of research into the child protection system (London Borough of Greenwich 1987; The Bridge Consultancy 1995; DH 1995). The Government presented its response to Utting (DH 1998a) and supported this with the *Modernising Social Services* White Paper (DH 1998b). This led to the *Care Standards Act 2000* that paved the way for the General Social Care Council (GSCC). The Post Qualifying Child Care Award therefore represented a strategic element of workforce reform, whereby Government sought to improve the quality of children's social work through more robust post qualifying training. The two areas that were prioritised were to increase social workers' knowledge of child development theory and enhance levels of research mindedness. This it was hoped would in turn promote social work as an expert profession, with social workers able to confidently analyse and manage complexity.

The *Victoria Climbié Inquiry* (Laming 2003), which influenced the proposals set out in *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES 2004), contains much detail on the problems faced by some local authorities in the late 1990's. Unfortunately evidence suggests the situation has not improved, in part due to significant supply pressures in relation to social workers. In response to a monitoring exercise undertaken by Skills for Care (Eborall 2005), 91% of local

authorities reported that they were having difficulties recruiting field social workers in children's services. Many local authorities have actively sought to recruit workers from overseas. The recruitment of new people to the profession is one way of tackling the crisis in social work and to this end, a recruitment campaign has taken place and financial support is available for students undertaking qualifying programmes. However attention must also be focussed on retaining experienced and newly qualified staff, if Government's vision of developing a confident and competent workforce working to improve the outcomes for most socially excluded children is to become a reality.

Every Child Matters: Change for Children (DfES 2004) stresses the merits of an increasingly diffuse boundary between different child welfare professionals; and argues that the workforce must be looked at in a more holistic way. In common with other recent workforce reform in the public sector, its lack of emphasis on the role of social work points to Government scepticism about the capacity of the traditional professions, such as social work, to deliver the change agenda. In the original green paper (DfES 2003), discussion of the role of social work is limited to the recruitment and retention difficulties. The *Children's Workforce Strategy* (DfES 2005) broadens this discussion beyond recruitment and retention of staff to the strengthening of multi-disciplinary practice and of the importance of management and leadership. In the Foreword, Margaret Hodge, the former Minister for Children, Young People and Families made it clear that she sought the views of all involved in child welfare:

'I want to debate these propositions with all those involved with the children's

workforce, so that we can draw on the very best of current thinking and innovation.'(DfES 2005, p.2).

A Close up View of the Perspectives of Social Workers.

It often appears to be the case that social work views are only sought as respondents in specific commissioned research studies, or as individual members of the workforce in any one agency. Their collective views are of considerable, although traditionally unexploited value to policy makers at the local and national level (Beresford & Croft 2004). The authors therefore determined to use the *Children's Workforce Strategy* (DfES 2005) consultation process as a tool for collecting the views of a specific sample of social workers in London, and to explore the resulting data to identify key themes.

A series of focus group discussions were held with candidates on the London Post Qualifying Child Care Award programme. All candidates are qualified social workers from twenty-six London boroughs and two voluntary organisations. In total forty-six social workers participated in the discussions. The majority of this diverse group of social workers were women (75 %) and almost half came from Black or other minority ethnic backgrounds. It was felt they constituted a cohort who could provide important messages on issues of recruitment, retention and good practice.

The semi-structured focus group discussions were organised around the first three questions in the strategy document (DfES 2005, p.82) relating specifically to social work, namely:

- 1) What more could/ should Government do to promote a career in children and families' social work?
- 2) What additional measures would support children and families' social work:
 - Increased supply?
 - Improved stability?
 - Greater quality?
- 3) How can we ensure that existing best practice once identified and quality assured, really is embraced in other areas?

The responses of the groups across all three questions have been aggregated and an interpretive approach has been adopted to analyse responses and identify key themes. Four main themes recurred:

- The image of social work;
- Bureaucracy;
- Professional authority;
- Defensive/reflective practice.

In this paper we have tried to give a tangible voice to the social workers in the groups and therefore have included verbatim quotes to give a first hand impression of the views they expressed.

The Image of Social Work

There was a universal belief in the dominant image of social work being a negative one. This was seen as contributing to low morale and to a sense of not being valued for the difficult and complex tasks being undertaken. Participants identified this as a key obstacle in the recruitment and retention of workers. The

continuing media image of social workers as either incompetent in their role of protecting children, or over-zealous and interfering unnecessarily into the lives of families was felt to be extremely damaging to the profession. Respondents believed strongly that there was the need for Government to positively promote the image and work of social workers, not only as part of an advertising campaign, but in their everyday communications with the media and public. The overall perception of respondents was of a very ambivalent attitude towards the profession by Government.

“The Government needs to acknowledge and promote social work as they do other public service workers. Social workers also need to be mentioned alongside nurses, teachers and police officers”.

“The positive role of social workers needs to be linked to wider political agendas of reducing inequality and social exclusion”.

“The profession needs to be more valued and increased awareness of the complexity of the knowledge and skills required”.

Bureaucracy

Paperwork and inputting of data into management information systems were seen to now dominate the work of social workers, and participants felt this left little time for building relationships with children and families, which was their primary motive for entering the profession. The consistent overwhelming message was that they had chosen social work because they wanted to work directly with vulnerable children and families, in order to improve their life chances. However the time available for this is becoming increasingly limited due to having to complete a multitude of bureaucratic tasks. There was some acknowledgement that the

administrative function is a necessary part of the work. However the completion of administrative tasks is all too often taken as the criteria for good practice. Agencies place considerably less value on good communication and effective relationships with children and families.

“Too much paper work and surveillance – I feel like a distrusted administrative worker”.

“What is measured is the timescales for assessments, but not the quality of the work, or that more time maybe needed. Good quality social work is not valued”.

“Job satisfaction comes from building relationships and trying to affect positive change in children and families lives, not from filling in forms”.

Professional Authority

The third recurring theme, linked closely to the issues discussed above, was the threat to professional authority posed by the increasing dominance of performance targets and resource-led decision-making. These phenomena were seen as taking place at the expense of child-focussed assessments and interventions. Professionals’ judgements and recommendations, based on the need to safeguard and promote the welfare of a child are frequently ignored, if they fail to coincide with the organisation’s current agendas and priorities. Alongside the increased demands from bureaucratic tasks, the social workers believed that they retain less and less responsibility for making decisions. All too often the mechanism for taking the *essentially resource led decisions* is a panel of managers, by definition not the staff working face –to –face with the child or family in question. The social workers in the groups felt this process undermines their own professional

confidence, as well as on occasions, placing practitioners in situations where their professional ethics are actually compromised.

“Our professional judgements are constantly undermined if it doesn’t suit the performance targets”.

“Decisions are often made on the least expensive option not necessarily the one based on the social worker’s recommendation”.

“We want to develop our professional competence. That is why we are doing this course, but our managers don’t value this and it can be more demoralising because you know what you should be doing, but have no time and resources”.

Reflective / Defensive Practice

Although the participants recognised the importance of critical reflection and evidence-based practice, they felt that in current context of high workloads and the dominance of performance targets, opportunities for them to practise in these ways is very limited. Time to develop relationships and to use their skills to effect positive change is restricted and the work undervalued. Although there were some exceptions, most participants experience supervision as a task focussed, management-led process, rather than one where they have the space and support to critically analyse and reflect on the complex work being undertaken with children and families from very diverse backgrounds. The demands on their time were such that some felt there is almost an imperative to overlook complexity, as to acknowledge it could have resource implications in terms of staff time.

“Supervision is dominated by management priorities, with limited focus on practice issues”.

“More emphasis is needed on preventative work both before and within the child protection system”.

“Workloads are too high and too few resources to offer a family after assessments”.

“Create a learning not defensive environment throughout the organisation”.

Discussion of the Findings

The picture painted of the working environment in many London local authorities through the responses of these social workers is similar to that described elsewhere (Audit Commission 2002), and it would seem that morale, professional confidence, and ultimately the services to children and their families are not improving. It is accepted by policy makers that change needs to occur, hence the *Children’s Workforce Strategy* (DfES 2005) consultation process. However the reasons for the crisis in children’s social work and the nature of the changes required are extremely complex and remain contested. We now look in more detail at the implications of the views expressed and locate them within the on-going debate about workforce development. We have structured our discussion of the findings around three key inter-related policy and practice considerations:

- The impact of initiatives to audit and assess performance;
- The case for relationship based social work; and
- The wider role of social work in preventative and protective services.

We believe these policy and practice considerations should be central to the discussions around the current change agenda if it is to develop and sustain a competent and stable workforce. If they are taken seriously and addressed by local and national policy makers, we believe they could inform fundamental changes to

organisational culture and structure, which will be necessary to achieve the desired reforms.

The Impact of Initiatives to Audit and Assess Performance

An overwhelming message from the focus group respondents was their dissatisfaction with the overly bureaucratic nature of their job, which overshadowed the more satisfying and effective tasks involved in developing relationships and working directly with children and families. The performance targets, upon which local authorities are assessed, are seen as based on quantitative not qualitative measures. Value is placed on the completion of the tasks, rather than the quality of the work or extent to which interventions are tailored to meet the complex and diverse needs of individual children and their families. An Audit Commission study (2002) into why social workers leave identified a main factor as staff feeling overwhelmed by bureaucracy, paperwork and targets. Webb (2001; quoted in Houston & Knox 2004) concludes that the bureaucratisation of child and family social work is strangling social workers' use of discretion and undermining their professional efficacy. The responses of participants concur with Houston & Knox's (2004) assertion that these organisational factors have contributed greatly to a recruitment and retention crisis, and must be addressed if any significant improvement is to take place. As one participant commented: *"I didn't go into social work to be a bureaucrat, but that is what I have become. There is far too much paper work, with very little time to work directly with children and parents"*.

The increasingly bureaucratic nature of child care social work needs to be considered in the light of responses to numerous child death inquiries, as well as wider trends of performance management in public services. The findings of the Climbié Inquiry (Laming 2003) were depressingly familiar to those of many child death inquiries over the past two decades. Many authors have considered the reasons for the apparent failure of the implementation of recommendations to improve practice. Successive enquiries inevitably recommend additional procedures, the implementation of which can be easily measured. For workers and agencies this has led to a way of working where the focus becomes not making the *right* decision, but making a *defensible* decision (Howe 1992; Dingwall *et al.* 1995). If procedures are followed, workers protect themselves from censure in cultures where blame features strongly, however, this does not necessarily mean that the welfare of children will be better safeguarded and promoted (Banks 1995; Parton 2005). Reder and Duncan (2004, p.102) suggest that a fundamental failing of inquiries/ reviews is that ‘the analysis of the problem and the nature of the recommendations are not at the most useful level, since they mainly focus on bureaucratic, instead of human factors’. Cooper (2005) laments that the Laming Inquiry similarly falls into this genre of the public inquiry report, by failing to look under the surface and consider in depth the relationship between policy change and the reality of child protection practice.

The increasing reliance over recent years on procedures and bureaucracy in social work has been given further impetus by the overall drive to audit public services, including the Performance Assessment Framework, which leads to a ‘naming and shaming’ of local authorities with one or no stars. Munro (2004) identifies the

factors that have led to the drive for greater accountability in public services, including the desire to control our environment and become 'risk-free', as well as a desire to ensure cost effectiveness. She argues that the process of making social work 'auditable' is in danger of being destructive, creating a simplistic description of practice focusing on achieving service outputs with little attention to user outcomes. These audits collect data that is easily measurable, quantitative data that has reasonably high reliability, but questionable validity. This is a general criticism of the audit process in the public sector. Pallot (1999, p. 45) suggests that 'the reliability of measures has been emphasised at the expense of their usefulness'. Tilbury (2004, p. 232) argues the case for the measurement of effectiveness to focus on outcome measures, as well as process and output measures, 'because case events that derive from agency decision-making are not good measures of client outcomes'. She highlights some of the adverse consequences of an overly reductionist system of current performance targets, including the effect in defining the role of social work and apparent 'objective truths' about good practice. Coote *et al.* (2004) point out that there is a wider trend toward finding out 'what works' in health and social care. They argue that as the ideological differences between mainstream politicians have narrowed, debate about the efficacy of public services has taken place from a technocratic perspective, with politicians arguing on the basis of competing audit findings about who can manage services most effectively.

The responses from the focus groups include concrete examples of this theoretical debate over the adverse consequences for both workers and service users, of such managerial approaches. "*What is measured is paper output not work with*

children. All managers care about is getting the assessment finished on time". In other words all too often what is seen to be valued and rewarded is the adherence to performance targets, irrespective of the complexity of child and family's needs or appropriateness of assessments and interventions. *"Looked after reviews take place within the timescale, even if the young person, carers or social worker are not able to attend"*.

Social workers felt their professional judgement is not valued or supported, particularly if contrary to performance targets. The specific example of adoption targets highlights the dilemmas for practitioners, and the possible adverse consequences for children. *"We are scrambling around to find more children to be adopted or else we will lose our three star status and hundreds of thousands of pounds, yet adoption may not be right for all these children"*. Research findings stress the need for any decision about a permanent placement for an individual child to be made after a detailed assessment of their needs, wishes and feelings. (Sellick *et al.* 2004). In the context of a drive to meet adoption targets, the ability to maintain the individual child's welfare as paramount may well be compromised (Gupta 2002). Participants in the focus groups spoke of their professional competence being undermined and professional ethics at times being compromised. Managers under pressure to meet the organisation's target requirements are often less open and able to provide a supervisory context that enables critical reflection on the complexities of providing effective services. In the light of such perceptions, it is clear that organisations need to recognise that pressures towards poor decision making about children negatively impact on children and extract a heavy emotional cost from their staff. Many experienced

and committed managers may also feel professionally dissatisfied, compromised and eventually leave. One of the participants suggested that there should be “*a performance indicator for staff retention*”.

Evans and Harris (2004) caution against seeing increased managerial control as automatically curtailing discretion and suggest that the political and ideological contexts in which professional discretion is executed are complex and multi-dimensional, and based on a gradation of freedoms of professionals. They argue that ‘professionalism can be seen as the guarantee of an individually appropriate service by some, while for others it is a buffer to protect them from responsibility for difficult rationing decisions’ (Evans & Harris 2004, p. 891). Audit and inspection clearly have a role in terms of professional and political accountability for services, however an exploration of the intended and unintended consequences of the indicators must take place in order to refine these in ways that minimise adverse outcomes for children and families, as well as social workers’ morale and professional confidence. Tilbury (2004, p. 238) suggests that a set of indicators that measures all the dimensions of performance – process and outcome, effectiveness and efficiency – is simply a starting point and performance data must be used in conjunction with other methods of evaluating and developing services. This approach reflects an acknowledgement of professional discretion in terms of the process of social workers’ interactions with children and families, which we discuss in the following section. The views of our social worker sample underline the urgent need for a change in organisational culture, but this must be a process that is supported, not hindered, by central government initiatives.

The Case for Relationship Based Social Work

A consistent problem identified by participants in all the focus groups was the dissonance between their original motivations for entering the profession, their professional knowledge and value base, and the realities of their work, particularly in frontline local authority services. *“Create more time for relationship-based social work. It is what we and families want and need.”*

A study undertaken in Australia by Wagner and colleagues (2001) found a strong link between job dissatisfaction and workload-driven, as opposed to client-driven factors. Factors identified as important to job satisfaction included a sense of personal achievement in relation to good outcomes for clients, worker/client relationships, and personal coping strategies. They highlighted the intrinsic value of direct work for job satisfaction and the importance of employers valuing, facilitating and supporting this work. Good record keeping and transparent assessment and decision-making procedures are clearly important. However it is essential that they be used as a means of improving service delivery and accountability not as an end in itself.

Not only does a retreat from relationship-based social work into increased bureaucracy affect the morale and job satisfaction of social workers, it inevitably impacts on children and families who frequently end up feeling alienated, misunderstood and angry (Houston & Knox 2004). In a project working with families who had experienced social work interventions, service users highlighted the importance of having the time to build a trusting relationship based on both parties having the child's interests at heart (ATD 2005). The benefits of good

quality, relationship-based social work have been highlighted in numerous research studies (DH 1995). Brandon *et al.* (1999 p. 202) found examples of highly skilled, tenacious and caring practice ‘which give cause for optimism about the ability of properly trained, resourced and supervised social workers to provide an effective helping and protective service based on well established principles of psycho-social casework’. Quinton (2004, p.184) comments in an overview of Government-funded studies that ‘emotional support is important in all supportive relationships; some parents relied on services for emotional support’. In Bell’s (2002) study, children articulated the qualities they valued in their relationship with social workers, namely the development of trust; the worker’s availability and reliability and their concern. These issues are acknowledged in the *Every Child Matters Green Paper* (DfES 2003) and a commitment made to undertaking ‘a comprehensive workload survey to look at how to increase the time spent working with children and families, by cutting out unnecessary paperwork’(p.90). In addition there is also recognition of the importance of skilled social work practice with the suggestion of developing a ‘consultant social worker role at a very high level of practitioner’ (DfES 2003, p.91).

Cooper *et al.* (2003, p. 26) suggest that ‘without attention to how we construct a framework in public services for children that sustains and validates the importance of relationships, we do not believe that this work can be made safer or more effective’. Effective relationships based on trust are not only important for work between social workers and service users, but also between workers, their supervisors and senior managers. Laming (2003) identified the centrality of good quality supervision in services charged with safeguarding and promoting the

welfare of children. By its very nature, work with children in need, particularly those who may be suffering significant harm, is emotionally charged. Rustin (2005) in her analysis of the report into the death of Victoria Climbié (Laming 2003), discusses emotional defence strategies that workers employ to avoid mental pain in child protection work. A supervisory context, which allows for the emotional impact of the work to be safely reflected upon is required to facilitate good practice and professional confidence in working with children from very diverse backgrounds. Unfortunately in their Social Care Institute for Excellence funded study on managing risk and minimising mistakes in children's services, Bostock *et al.* (2005) found the prevalent culture in local authorities one of blame rather than one that fosters openness, creativity and a celebration of good practice.

The case for reclaiming the centrality of relationship-based social work is very strong in terms of increasing job satisfaction and a more stable workforce, as well as promoting positive outcomes for children. However this cannot be successfully implemented without the necessary time and support being offered to workers in a context where the process and outcome of work is valued and rewarded, not simply the outputs.

The Role of Social Work in Preventative Services

Over the past decade numerous studies and writers have highlighted the dominance of the protective duties of child care social workers, at the expense of preventative, supportive service provision (DH 1995; DH 2001). Whilst policy developments such as the implementation of *The Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DH 2000) attempted to refocus services, the

responses by participants in this study and the findings of other studies, indicate a system continuing to be primarily providing a reactive child protection service, rather than preventative family support service (Cleaver *et al.* 2003). The role of local authority social work practitioners has been increasingly restricted and therefore defined by these tasks. One of the participants stated “*We are only involved when there are child protection concerns – if I’m honest I think our practice is quite defensive.*”

Whilst research studies (DH 2001) have identified good practice by social workers, the overwhelming picture painted by the media is one of the familiar dichotomy of incompetence in protecting children and conversely punitive over-intervention. Child protection work is inherently conflictual and by its very nature ‘a risky business’. Denney (2005) analyses the impact on various aspects of our society to become ‘risk-free’ and ascribe blame when things go wrong. In this context, a profession primarily defined by the task of protecting children from abuse whilst at the same time minimising coercive state intervention, is inevitably going to continue to receive a negative press with the consequence of low recruitment, morale and retention rates.

Although social work with children has become increasingly defined by the centrality of child protection, or safeguarding in the current parlance, the professional knowledge, value and skill base would suggest that social workers should also have a pivotal role the provision of preventative family support services. The ecological approach, which underpins the *Framework for the Assessment of Children in Need and their Families* (DH 2000), is a key

component of social work training and occupational standards (CCETSW 2000; TOPSS 2000). The Climbie Inquiry (Laming 2003) highlighted the importance of the provision of a continuum of services along the family support/child protection spectrum, and reinforced the centrality of assessments of risk in the context of wider assessments of children's needs. 'It is not possible to separate the protection of children from wider support to families. Indeed, often the best protection for a child is achieved by the timely intervention of family support services' (Laming, 2003, p. 6). In the increasing development of multi-disciplinary services, social work can bring together the perspectives of other professionals in understanding and responding appropriately to the complex assessments of children's resilience and vulnerabilities. Parton (2005, p.131) explains that a characteristic of social work is that 'it both inter relates with and is dependent upon a number of more established discourses, particularly law, health/hygiene, psychiatry and education'. This is just as relevant to prevent children being harmed, as it is to protect children from further harm.

Cooper *et al.* (2003) argue that structural change is likely to be inadequate as a solution for the current problems in child welfare provision. Cultural change is also needed, with the systemic principles of trust, negotiation and authority being central to the process. They suggest that a more comprehensive preventative service allows for more time for trust and negotiation to occur, and authority to be able to be used more effectively, when needed. Social workers can be embraced as a central part of these services, or can remain and further retreat into the narrow role of 'risk assessors'. To do the latter, we argue, would be unnecessarily defensive and perpetuate the problems of recruitment, retention and the provision

of effective services, so vividly described in *The Victoria Climbié Inquiry* (Laming 2003).

The new preventative agenda provides great opportunities to develop effective services and there is now a potential to redefine the role of social work, both in the minds and experiences of the public, as well as those of the social workers themselves. Giving social workers a central role in multi-disciplinary early intervention initiatives, such as children's centres and extended schools could assist in the provision of varied opportunities available to social workers in situations where professional intervention at an earlier stage is more likely to be both welcomed and effective. However to date there has been limited Government guidance and clarity on the role of social work in the development of services as outlined in *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES 2004). Tunstall et al.'s (2005) study of Sure Start Local Programmes suggests a lack of a central role for social work in early intervention services to date. The authors recommend that professionals from different disciplines need at an early stage to be engaged in strategy development to overcome the boundaries of the relationship between the statutory and voluntary sectors. The *Children's Workforce Strategy* (DfES 2005) sought responses on the how Government can recruit and retain children's social workers. Placing social workers at the centre of the new preventative service agenda could change the perception of social work, improve the job satisfaction and contribute to better services. However without central government direction and guidance, this is likely to happen in very disparate ways, with limited effect.

Conclusions

Michel Foucault (cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow 1982, p. 187) stated that ‘people know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does’. Just as social workers must reflect on the impact of their actions on service users, so must politicians, policy makers and managers evaluate what ‘what they do does’ to social workers, social work as a profession, and the services provided for children and families. The responses of the social workers participating in the focus groups convey a vivid picture of the impact of the current policy context on local authority service provision in London. The findings, however, are very similar to other studies, and if Government truly intend to provide a stable, competent and effective children’s workforce, they must critically analyse and address the problems underlying the crisis in the profession central to the task of safeguarding and promoting the welfare of children most in need of ‘mattering’.

Whilst the professional development of social work staff does have some intrinsic importance, the relevance of this discussion is much wider. The concerns raised by the participants have a direct impact on, and many indirect implications for the children and families who use services. The perspectives of the social workers should not be seen as the beleaguered and defensive cries of a profession on the retreat. Rather they should be seen as legitimate and offer some extremely valuable insights into how the improvement agenda can be taken forward. We have argued that it is important that creative ways are sought to reduce the bureaucratic load on social workers and that performance targets are refined to

offer a more sophisticated framework for quality assuring practice and measuring outcomes.

While issues of recruitment and retention are crucial they must also be linked to the qualitative development of the workforce. For example policy makers, employers and academics will need to think about how they can provide training and more widely promote a culture in which the relationships with families are valued. Reflective practice is crucial if social workers are to avoid mechanistic responses to complex human problems and sustain a sophisticated level of analysis in their work. It is also clear that the social workers felt that they have skills and knowledge that are helpful to children and families across the spectrum of those who are vulnerable. The major changes heralded by *Every Child Matters: Change for Children* (DfES 2004) therefore offer the opportunity to ensure that social work retains and indeed strengthens its presence in preventative services.

The *Children's Workforce Strategy* (DfES 2005) is a welcome and important element of the strategic development of child welfare services in Britain. It is an acknowledgement that structural change will be meaningless unless it is accompanied by the significant development of the capacity and quality of the workforce that deliver services to children and families. The perspectives of social workers provide valuable insights into the challenges faced, as well as important pointers as to how these challenges can be met and overcome.

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