

Cross-Party Group on Social Work

Tuesday 21 February 2023, 18:15-20:00

Minute

Present

MSPs

Fulton MacGregor (Convenor)
Paul O’Kane (Deputy Convenor)
Jeremy Balfour (Deputy Convenor)

Invited guests

Iona Colvin (Chief Social Work Adviser)
Ben Farrugia (Director, Social Work Scotland)
Jennifer Rezendes (Head of Policy and Workforce, Social Work Scotland)

Non-MSP Group Members

Anne-Marie Monaghan (Scottish Association of Social Work)
Ashleigh Colgan (Individual)
Calum Campbell (Social Work Scotland)
Caroline McDonald (Scottish Association of Social Work)
David Grimm (Individual Member)
Dee Fraser (IRISS)
Donald Macleod (SDS Scotland)
Donna Scott (Individual Member)
Fiona Culbert (Individual Member)
Jo Savege (Scottish Association of Social Work)
John Dalrymple (Radical Visions)
John McGowan (Social Worker’s Union)
John Watson (UNISON)
Jonathan Gray (Individual Member)
Joyce Johnston (Care Inspectorate)
Judith Turbyne (Children in Scotland)
Karin Heber (Scottish Association of Social Work)
Kate Ramsden (UNISON)
Lousie Palfreyman (British Association of Social Work)
Maria Nagy (Scottish Association of Social Work)
Patricia Munteanu (Individual Member)
Russell Hogarth (Individual Member)
Sarah Jackson (Scottish Association of Social Work)
Sarah McMillan (Scottish Association of Social Work)

Suzanne McGuinness (Mental Welfare Commission)
Zoe Sharpe (Individual Member)

Observers

Danielle Shull (Individual Member)
Iain Ramsay (Individual)
Jamie Aarons (OCSWA)
Joanna Macdonald (OCSWA)
Karen Hoyle (Individual Member)
Phillip Gillespie (OCSWA)
Rob Byrne (Member of Staff for Fulton MacGregor MSP)
Rod Finan (OCSWA)
Ruth Buchanan (Individual Member)

Apologies

Alison Bavidge (Scottish Association of Social Work)
Gary Spolander (Individual)
Jenny Miller (Individual)
Jonny Adamson (British Association of Social Work)
Keith Dyer (Individual)
Silvio Gigante (Social Work Union)

Agenda item 1 - Welcome and Introductions

Fulton MacGregor welcomed attendees to the fourth meeting of the Cross-Party Group on Social Work and asked for agreement of the minutes from the last meeting. John McGowan proposed the minutes, which were seconded by Jo Savege. Fulton provided a brief parliamentary update, noting the resignation of First Minister Nicola Sturgeon. Fulton noted that it is important that social work's voice is heard during the leadership contest. Fulton expressed his thanks to Nicola Sturgeon for his work on behalf of the Cross Party Group.

Agenda item 2 - Presentation

Fulton introduced Iona Colvin, Chief Social Work Adviser to present on the current policy context for social work. Iona explained her presentation would focus on the vision for social work, including current drivers and the future agenda. The current system is influenced by drivers such as cost of living and energy crisis, Covid-19, climate emergency, demographics, social attitudes and the war in Ukraine. These are all driving up the need and higher levels of demand for social work services. She highlighted that in the context of the system, there are about 40 pieces of legislation that govern social work practice. She summarised the current demands on social work.

Iona moved on to discuss the National Care Service Bill and the proposed National Social Work Agency. She talked about the commissioned research that is underway

looking at what is best for children's and justice services and the early work to consider what a National Social Work Agency might look like. She highlighted the current policy demands in social work and new bills making their way through the Parliamentary process that have capacity to impact social work practice. This included the UNCRC (Incorporation) (Scotland) Bill, Children (Care and Justice) (Scotland) Bill, Bail and Release from Custody (Scotland), Getting it Right for Everyone (GIRFE), and the Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy for Scotland. Iona finished her presentation by inviting questions and comments on any of these areas in the discussion later in the meeting.

Agenda item 3 - Presentation

Fulton thanked Iona and introduced the second speaker, Jennifer Rezendes, Head of Policy and Workforce at Social Work Scotland. Jennifer explained that her presentation would focus on understanding workforce pressures as evidenced in the publications *Setting the Bar* and *Taking the Wheel*. Social Work Scotland commissioned researchers to deliver a survey and in-depth discussions with social workers which culminated in these two reports. Jennifer explained that *Setting the Bar* was published to reflect the pressures the social work profession is facing, such as unmanageable caseloads, recruitment and retention challenges, increasing legislation and policy expectations and reduced budgets. *Setting the Bar's* aim was to pose the question of how much is too much for social work? The findings concluded that there is pride in the profession and the work social workers do. However, there is an ageing workforce, a growing administrative burden and increasing "moral distress" created by working in a way that does not align with social workers' professional values. Social workers value relationships with colleagues and people they work with and are committed to social work values. Yet there are challenges such as high caseloads and lack of time for preventative work. Jennifer explored what could be done for social workers. This featured a recognition of the (lack of) capacity of social workers, adequate training, support, and appropriate levels of resource. She noted how important it is for social workers to hear their voices amplified in the systems they work. Jennifer then presented on what Social Work Scotland is doing as a result of this research in collaboration with others. This includes the Advanced Practice Framework, the previously mentioned National Social Work Agency and leadership development. Jennifer finished up by saying that in *Setting the Bar 2: Taking the Wheel*, social workers highlighted that a range of actions were required to address levels at which decisions were made and support and promote social worker's using their professional judgement, which they are trained to do. Other areas for resolution include challenging unreasonable expectations, changing the way we talk about social work, better understanding of the profession, better preparation and support for the role and a positive working environment. These findings are being used to inform discussions at national leadership level.

Agenda item 4 - Presentation

Fulton thanked Jennifer for her presentation and introduced the final presenter, Ben Farrugia, Director of Social Work Scotland. Ben's presentation focused on how social workers can realistically participate in the co-design of the NCS and other policy initiatives with the current pressures they experience as highlighted in Jennifer's

presentation which highlighted concern about social workers' capacity. Ben used the metaphor of urban planning. He compared social work policy development to inner city development where there are many existing structures that need to be considered when planning new services. Ben described co-design as understood to be a process that goes beyond consultation where service users become central to the design process. In view of the National Care Service, he highlighted that the Scottish Government document states co-design is "to deliver that outcome within the constraints of what is possible and available". Ben highlighted that if the real experiences of social workers, student social workers and people with lived experience was to be captured accurately in the co-design, there must be real attendance to their capacity and time to do so effectively and meaningfully. He reminded people social work has a rich experience of co-design on all levels and in all operational areas. Co-design speaks strongly to social work values and can make implementation much more successful. He highlighted that co-design is not easy, as identifying people to be involved, such as social workers, requires consideration and negotiation with teams and managers as it impacts capacity. This issue may be emotive, complex and multifaceted requiring thoughtful preparation and support for people contributing. Ben finished with a summary of what social workers need in order to engage in co-design. This includes a commitment from leaders, permission from managers, confidence, clarity over what the ask is and time to build relationships in the co-design space, developing necessary skills. In addition, the power differentials in co-design groups need to be surfaced and addressed.

Agenda item 5 – Group discussion

Fulton thanked Ben for his contribution and handed over to Anne-Marie to facilitate the discussion around the presentations of the evening.

Anne-Marie explained the plan was to spend 30 minutes reflecting on presentations and the challenges and opportunities considering where social work is at the moment in terms of capacity and engagement, followed by 15 minutes discussion on what the group's messages would be to MSPs. She encouraged the group to raise a hand if they wish to contribute, comment or raise questions and comments in the chat box would be captured and included in the messages

Anne-Marie recapped the contents of the presentations and opened up discussion to the group. Points raised included

- Social work is often seen in isolation and suggested that there needs to be a clearer understanding of the role. Better IT might enable social workers to have better access to record and to participate in decisions more effectively. If local authorities don't use their pool of workers effectively, they will continue to run into issues. We need to use assistive and alternative technologies in social services. A concern was raised that social workers are often not given enough credibility for their professional opinions.
- Social work students on placement carry out "junior level" social work. Social work students should be consulted around leadership and changes in the profession. There is disparity around supervision and leadership in different placements which risks widely differing leadership practices in the workplace. Questions as to

whether the fast-track route to social work will address the recruitment and retention challenges in the profession.

- Time and how difficult it can be for social workers to take time from daily tasks to engage in development of policy and legislation. If co-design is time consuming it will be almost impossible to manage within the demands of the workloads for the profession. Social workers have reported to unions that they feel like they have lost purpose of the social work role and the sense of how it is unique amongst other professions in the wider health and social care landscape.
- A team leader in social work reflected on social work education. 90% of her team are newly qualified meaning there are few experienced social workers to support them. This makes the team leader role more challenging, especially as some of these newly qualified social workers never had a local authority placement. Complex pieces of work, such as child protection functions, become extremely challenging for early career workers and this contributes to burnout.
- A member expressed surprise that the Independent Review of Forensic Mental Health was not featured in Iona's presentation on systemic context of social work policy earlier. They sought confirmation that this is being considered and questioned whether the crossover between adult care and justice services is being considered. Iona stated that this reflects how much is on the agenda and confirmed that this is an area that is being considered in Government and offered to have a further conversation with the CPG member if they would like. Jennifer Rezendes updated that Social Work Scotland is carrying out some work around forensic mental health and community-based delivery of forensic mental health services.
- A concern came in through the chat box about many students not getting statutory placements. Due to the pandemic, students had a simulated placement in their third year and their final year is, therefore, the only placement experience. The majority of those in the CPG member's class did not have a local authority placement and this worries them in terms of her post-qualifying experience. Iona responded that she is very aware of these issues and OCSWA are working with the Social Work Education Partnership to improve this situation
- Another member noted that social work students are already under pressure, and this has been growing over the years. Social work students can be quite isolated. They deal with difficult situations and then also need to deliver on complex coursework. Lived experience is extremely important in implementation and co-design and commented on the point made by Ben about the importance of good facilitators in co-design. Ben reflected on this and stated that co-design is impossible without good facilitators who know how to address and manage power balances in the group.

Maria Nagy (SASW) highlighted points in the chat around involvement of students in co-design and considering the "new generation of social work".

Ben commented that a large part of social work resource is aimed at improvement activities. He suggested that the quality of implementation could be improved if we tried to pace and sequence developments, doing fewer big change programmes.

- Another CPG member felt that there was not a clear answer to how social workers could get more time to engage in co-design proposed that there needs to be a look at the admin demands placed on social workers as administrative support and resource is constantly being reduced. In addition, social workers must be able to return to preventative work to reduce long-term demand on social services. MSPs should call on the Scottish Government for more investment in frontline social work services.
- In health, there is an apprenticeship route, and this could be perhaps considered for social workers. There are many people with social work skills, however the academic expectations during training might make them decide against social work as a career choice.
- There was a request to ask MSPs to ask Scottish Government to recognise the value social workers bring to society. This could help the profession feel recognised.

Agenda item 6 – Concluding Remarks

Anne-Marie Monaghan (SASW) rounded up the discussion by stating that the comments made tonight will be used to formulate the Flash Report which is sent to all MSPs in the Scottish Parliament. She explained the content of the CPG discussion would be used to formulate the questions to MSPs as part of the CPG process. She handed back to Fulton for concluding remarks.

Fulton thanked everyone for the contributions, the speakers for their presentations and Anne-Marie for chairing the group discussion. He noted while social work falls under many portfolios, MSPs value and recognise the social work profession, and the role of the CPG is to keep reminding them of social work's pivotal role.

Fulton also noted that this is the first CPG on social work since the establishment of the Scottish Parliament and highlighted its importance in getting messages through to important stakeholders. He added that he can already feel positive changing attitudes on the Parliamentary campus and he welcomes the questions from tonight's session.

Fulton closed by thanking everyone for their hard work.