

Purpose, development and use of the Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers

Introduction

The Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) sets out the profession's expectations of what a social worker should be able to do at each stage of their career and professional development. Whilst it refers to the career stages set out by the Social Work Task Force¹, it is a professional, rather than an occupational framework. It is expected that the framework will be used by and for all social workers, in conjunction with the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) Standards for Employers².

The PCF provides the context in which the profession exercises judgement about the quality of practice, for individuals, teams and organisations. Such judgements are made in a range of ways: - individual social workers will want to plan their careers and their CPD; teams will be interested in auditing, updating and improving their practice; and organisations operate supervision, appraisal and career progression schemes. The PCF gives a common basis and steer to all this activity. Existing standards are being reworked to reflect the PCF, so that these will be replaced, rather than the PCF being an additional set of expectations.

With the transfer of regulation of social work to the Health Professions Council³, registration as a social worker will be subject to meeting their Standards of Proficiency for Social Work (currently out for consultation). These will be threshold standards for safe and effective practise that describe what social workers should know, understand and be able to do when they start practising, and throughout their careers. Together with the HPC 's standards of conduct, performance and ethics, the Standards of Proficiency will play a central role in determining registrant's fitness to practice, but they are not designed to support career development: this is the principle factor that differentiates them from the PCF. However there are similarities in terms of the standard set for the point of entry to the profession.

The PCF applies to all social workers in all roles and settings, including independent social workers. It helps to shape social work from the point at which an individual applies to a social work qualifying programme, through advanced levels to principal social worker (and potentially Chief Social Worker). Social workers in particular settings and roles will be able to define their expectations in relation to the PCF (an early example of this is the Munro Review recommendation about child protection social workers). This approach means that the PCF provides a dynamic structure, and will continue to be relevant as existing roles evolve, often as a result of research and innovation, and to any new social work roles the profession agrees in the future.

¹ Final Report of the SW Task Force (2009) Para 3.25 page 34

² <http://www.education.gov.uk/swrb/a0074263/standards-for-employers-and-supervision-framework>

³ Expected to take place in July 2012, subject to parliamentary consent, at which point the HPC would be re-named the Health and Care Professions Council

The framework will also apply to social workers in settings where the employer base is from another profession (e.g. health, education), in multi-professional settings and in private, voluntary and social enterprise organisations. It will be the responsibility of these employers to ensure that there is appropriate input to supervision, appraisal and CPD from a professional social worker of sufficient standing. Employers will also need to ensure that supervision is provided for accountability, professional reflection and development, to build practitioners' confidence and capabilities and their ability to promote the best outcomes for service users. Employers will need to consider their use of the PCF alongside the Employers Standards set by the SWRB, and ensure they work together. They will also need to take into account way in which the capability framework reflects the increasing skills of social workers to give a professional opinion, and will need to consider how such opinions are heard and acted upon.

The PCF gives a development framework for the social work profession in England analogous to those in other professions. It enables social work to be recognised as part of an international profession⁴.

Development of the Professional Capability Framework

The SWRB has agreed to develop a capability framework for social work, since they considered this would best provide a unified structure for professional development and life-long learning. The PCF for England was developed initially through the Careers Working Group of the SWRB, drawing on similar models used in other professions⁵ and in social work internationally, notably a model developed over a four year consultation period in the United States. We are grateful to colleagues in the US for sharing their expertise.

Current development is being undertaken on behalf of the SWRB by the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) in collaboration with SWRB partners and with the assistance of social workers at all levels of the profession. The profession's ownership and development of the PCF will be overseen by the College of Social Work, which will take over the stewardship of the PCF from the Reform Board in autumn 2011. It is anticipated that the PCF will be made available as a web-based document, with guidance available by clicking through to PDFs.

How the framework is made up

The PCF comprises nine capabilities. For each one, there is a main statement, an elaboration and a short working title. The nine capabilities should be seen as interdependent, not separate: they interact in professional practice, so there are overlaps between the capabilities, and many issues will be relevant to more than one capability. Understanding of what a social worker does will only be complete by taking into account all nine capabilities.

⁴ See IASSW/IFSW Definition of SW, and Social Work Ethics. <http://www.ifsw.org/p38001027.html>

⁵ SCIE scoping document

For each career stage, a number of 'capability statements' are specified. These draw on the experience of practitioners working at that level, in relation to the nine capabilities. The nature of the expectations will vary at different levels and across the capabilities. So, for example, there is a comprehensive set of expectations set for the qualifying level of social work, since this comprises the basis for professional development. There are however, fewer expectations at this level in relation to capability 9: Professional Leadership, whereas at other levels, such as social work manager, the weighting given to this capability is greater.

Whilst the career stages for the PCF are not descriptions of specific jobs, and employers use a range of job titles, work is in hand to look at the potential to link the work being undertaken by the National Joint Council on social work profiles and job evaluation with the PCF. How the careers stages will be used by employers will depend on agency size, function and local circumstances.

Assessing progression

An important part of how the PCF will be used is the assessment of progression from one career stage to another. Assessment will be undertaken by a range of organisations, in different ways, at different thresholds. It is important that all such assessments should be made holistically within each capability: whilst there will be several expectations specified within each capability at a given level, these should not be evaluated in isolation from each other. The essence of the capabilities framework is to support judgments about readiness to progress in a holistic way for each capability. This represents a different conceptual approach to the frameworks that have been used in social work previously, many of which have focussed on defining competencies at a given level, each one of which must be evidenced. The concerns articulated about those approaches suggest that judgements about overall capability may get lost where there is a micro focus on competence. It is anticipated that some exemplars for assessing the capabilities at different levels will be developed.

Progression between levels is characterised by development in terms of

- Level of confidence, underpinned by practice experience, reflection and deepening understanding
- The increasing ability to work independently and to collaborate on equal terms with members of other professions
- The quality of the judgments made, and the level of ability to explain and justify them
- Efficacy of the work undertaken and the outcomes achieved, including opportunities for preventive work
- The ability to take initiative, form constructive alliances and to act as a change agent

- The ability to engage effectively with situations of increasing complexity and challenge, for example those with
 - multi-agency input
 - complex family / organisational dynamics
 - serious hostility and conflicts of interest
 - multiple problems / disadvantages
 - multiple / significant risk factors
 - need to take into account the public interest
- The appropriate use of authority and challenge
- The ability and commitment to educate and provide professional supervision to others
- Demonstration of leadership, management and research

Narrative level descriptors

As a starting point, we have set out a general statement of the characteristics of each career level for which PCF capability statements will be specified. These stages were initially set out by the SWRB, and have evolved through debate with practitioners, employers, educators, and government policy. Changes in terminology have been incorporated into this document.

By the point of entry to SW qualifying programmes, prospective students should demonstrate awareness of social context for social work practice, awareness of self, ability to develop rapport, together with the potential to develop relevant knowledge, skills and values through professional training.

By the point of assessment of readiness for direct practice (prior to first placement), students should have demonstrated basic communication skills, ability to engage with users, capacity to work as a member of an organisation, willingness to learn from feedback and supervision, and have the basic social work values, knowledge and skills in order to be able to make effective use of first practice placement.

By the end of the first placement students should have demonstrated effective use of knowledge, skills and commitment to core values in social work in a given setting in predominantly less complex situations, with supervision and support. They will have shown their capacity to work with people and situations where there may not be simple clear-cut solutions.

By the end of qualifying programmes newly qualified social workers should have demonstrated their ability to apply the knowledge, skills and values needed to work with a range of user groups, the ability to undertake a range of tasks at a foundation level, and the capacity to work with more complex situations; they should be able to work more autonomously, whilst recognising that the final decision will still rest with their supervisor, and seek appropriate support and supervision.

By the end of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) social workers should have consistently demonstrated practice in a wider

range of tasks and roles, and have become more effective in their interventions, thus building their own confidence, and earning the confidence of others. They will have more experience and skills in relation to a particular setting and user group, and have demonstrated ability to work effectively in more complex situations. They will seek support in supervision appropriately, whilst starting to exercise initiative and evaluate their own practice.

At the Social Worker stage they progress to practice more effectively, exercising higher quality judgements, in situations of increasing complexity, risk, uncertainty and challenge. Through growing understanding they expect and anticipate, but do not pre-judge, the issues that may develop. They have greater confidence and independence (whilst accessing support when needed), and use their initiative to broaden their repertoire of responses; they have expertise in one or more areas of practice, and are familiar with local resource networks.

Experienced (Senior) Social Workers* are more autonomous in their role. They demonstrate expert and effective practice in complex situations, assessing and managing higher levels of risk, striking a balance between support and control, liaising with a wide range of professionals, including more senior levels. They manage complex caseloads, and offer expert opinion within the organisation and to others. They chair a range of meetings, offer expert support to case conferences, and produce high quality assessments and reports for a range of functions. They model good practice, setting expectations for others. They start to take responsibility for and become accountable for the practice of others, mentoring newly qualified social workers, and supervising the work of junior staff. They undertake capacity-building with individuals, families, communities, user groups and voluntary organisations, and contribute their views on service provision to commissioners.

At the next (Advanced) career level, three pathways are relevant: *Advanced Practitioner, Social Work Manager and Professional Educator (Practice Educator*)*. The three pathways, or areas of expertise, whilst distinctive, will not be mutually exclusive, and many social workers may wish to develop capabilities across the three pathways, reflecting their expected career progression. In different ways, all social workers at this level engage in the development of evidence-informed practice, quality assurance, staff development, management and leadership and they contribute to strategic development. For detail on the pathways see below.

Principal Social Workers have lead responsibility for practice in an agency, and can report the views and experiences of the front line to all levels of management. This level, a recommendation of the Munro Review has been accepted, but, as yet, the profession and employers do not have a consensus about how this role should be interpreted. Work is in hand to develop this thinking

* The terms in brackets are those used in the SWRB One Year On Report. The SWRB has since agreed the new terms.

Pathways for Advanced Social Work level (see above)

<p><i>Advanced Practitioners</i> have their practice with a specified user group recognised as exemplary, and provide leadership and professional wisdom to their colleagues and other professionals for work in situations of high complexity. They provide constructive challenge to enhance practice, procedures and policies, promote innovation, and introduce new ways of working from recognised sites of excellence. They contribute to knowledge in their field of practice, and make use of sophisticated, critical reasoning. They both model and facilitate reflective practice.</p>	<p><i>Professional Educators</i> facilitate the learning of others (students on qualifying programmes, those in ASYE and those undertaking CPD), enabling them to develop their knowledge, skills, values and practice. They support and develop other practice educators in their work, and identify and resolve difficult situations in respect of learning and practice development. They positively manage the interface with providers of education and training, by contributing to arrangements for selection, curriculum delivery, assessment and evaluation. They will be able to draw on contemporary research practice and best educational practice. They contribute to workforce development strategies in the agency</p>	<p><i>Social Work Managers</i> lead, motivate and manage a team (social workers and others), ensuring the service provided is effective, managing performance and quality assurance, resources and budgets appropriately, in collaboration with others in the agency and in other professions. They are knowledgeable about management within the public sector and in social work; contribute to the development of practice, procedures and policy and specifically the professional development of the team they lead. They are accountable for the practice of others and provide effective supervision, mentoring and coaching to enhance the quality of practice, undertake performance appraisals and investigate complaints. They will ensure team experience informs the wider organisation, and other service providers, and vice versa.</p>
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Introducing the PCF

The PCF will be managed and introduced by the College of Social Work from autumn 2011. Following some further development, different levels of the PCF will be introduced at different times. For example, the capability statements relevant for admission to social work programmes are included in the guidance shortly to be published on selection and admissions⁶. The statements relevant for the ASYE will be published in Spring 2012 ready for use in the autumn of 2012 as the first cohort of newly qualified social workers enter this level. The capability statements for qualifying programmes will come into effect from 2013, though many programmes are beginning to pilot their use. In many settings, the PCF will be used for appraisal and CPD planning. However the detail of work at higher levels will take place over time, and the specification of expectations about knowledge base will need to be made for different settings. It is important that a communications strategy is adopted that makes it clear that the PCF is a living and evolving document (rather than a completed work).

⁶ Higher Education Academy (SWAP) with the Joint Social Work Unit

