

LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND REGENERATION COMMITTEE

PUBLIC SECTOR REFORM AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

SUBMISSION FROM SCOTTISH ASSOCIATION OF SOCIAL WORK

Introduction

SASW is the professional association for social workers in Scotland. Most of our members work in local government or in partner organisations that help deliver some of the services designed by community planning partnerships. The work of social workers is often seen as being delivered in a statutory framework, for example child protection, mental health services and criminal justice interventions.

However the vision for social work services in Scotland was set out in the Social Work (Scotland) Act 1968 in S12 as the duty on local authorities to promote social welfare. This vision was reiterated in the Changing Lives Review (2006) and community capacity building was identified as a key element in promoting that inclusive and cohesive society envisaged back in the 1960's.

SASW members are therefore keen to contribute to public service reform and share their knowledge, skills and expertise not only about working with individuals, their families but also their communities and would suggest that empowering frontline staff as indicated in the Christie Commission Report will be key to ensuring effective public services in Scotland. We offer some observations from our practice across Scotland to help illustrate some of the issues we would like to see addressed in this inquiry.

Strand 1 – Partnerships and outcomes

Social Work is about helping people find that positive change in their lives. We have always sought to work towards integration of services and partnership working with the people who use our services. Our experience suggests that successful joined up services rely on skilful coordination that respects the diversity of the skills on offer, where people treat their service users and colleagues with dignity and respect and they are encouraged to think creatively and laterally about how to work with people either individually or in a group or community. Building strong teams to support people is essential in this process. This does not mean major restructuring that tends to slow down progress but demands cultural change to develop flexible teams designed to meet need, assess and manage risk and take account of often competing human rights.

One of the key elements is the leadership offered by elected members and managers in enabling different parts of their organisations to discover what frontline services are offered to the public across the board. To turn the phrase into the left hand knowing what the right hand is doing! This should include their partner

organisations. This would help people to be pointed in the right direction for the rights service or mixture of services.

One of the criticisms from members of the public is understanding how to plot a path to the service you need in the complexity of names (that often change) that are the matrix of public services.

Is the issue about integrating the services round the particular person and/or their family/community, as needed at that particular time, rather than assuming that everyone who needs one service will automatically need another that has been 'integrated'. We may have services for people abusing substances but one may be a young parent who needs help with looking after a child whereas another may be an older person who is experiencing the onset of early dementia. SASW would argue that flexibility to be creative in responding to people's needs will achieve better results, more effectively and efficiently to achieve that promotion of social welfare and social justice.

This then leads onto the question of budgetary control, and the different drivers of local and central government spending. We need to learn from what has not worked. An example is the public money spent in the criminal justice system. We now have laws that should enable more people to serve their sentence in the community, yet we continue to expand our prison population, under resource community payback orders and compared with other European countries process more people through the court system who would be better diverted out. Community Justice Authorities sit uneasily between local and central government and a radical revue of how money is spent in this system, akin to the reforms made to the juvenile justice system in 1968 with the introduction of the Children's Hearing system would again promote social welfare more effectively and efficiently.

We need to engage with people in communities to be involved in their own capacity building and again leadership and empowerment from local and central government will be essential in achieving cultural change. SASW would also suggest that a review of how frontline services engage with community planning services will be essential if we are to move forward. Change will not happen if people are not engaged in that process so outcome agreements have to resonate with the people expected to work with them.

Strand 2 – Benchmarking and performance measurement

The key issue for our members trying to deliver services has to be seen in the diversity of the geographical and demographic reality of living in Scotland. This requires different approaches to fit the locality and needs of the individuals and the areas they work in. To help us improve our services we need good qualitative research into what is needed so that we can then match our skills, knowledge and expertise. Child protection, mental health detentions or criminal justice services – where court warrants define the quality and nature of the work pose different issues in the islands to those in the central belt. There is a role for central government in

bringing together that diversity of experience to enable us to think through the commonalities but recognise and work with the diversity.

Strand 3 – Developing new ways of delivering services

The aim of every social worker is to work towards accessible local services. People do not want to have to travel to Manchester if they are deaf and mentally unwell because that is the place where the appropriate service is in the UK, they want somewhere close to family and local supports in Scotland.

There is always a tension between the effectiveness of locally based resources and the reality of economies of scale. Achieving that balance and the consistency of service across Scotland we recognise as a complex challenge.

We do know that prevention is better than cure and there are some key examples not only in the UK but from across the world that can enliven our effectiveness. In the Western Trust in Northern Ireland they have used research from USA and Australia to develop early prevention interventions and drastically reduced the numbers of children on their child protection register. We know that some of the projects set up and researched by NGOs like Aberlour are effective in preventing child neglect and harm to vulnerable people. What we are not good at doing is sharing what works and transferring that knowledge and expertise into other areas – we need to develop ways of turning pilot projects into mainstream local accessible services.

One issue that needs to be looked at is the employment pattern of people who work in these projects who move from one short term project to another. This affects their employment rights and their pensions and is not conducive to supporting staff in difficult work. We need to think about supporting people in key posts through career structures that recognise their increasing skill levels and value their contribution to changing lives.

Conclusion

SASW is keen to contribute to the development of public services in Scotland and to look at new ways of meeting the needs of people and their communities. We have some good foundations, not least of which was the inspirational Social Work Scotland Act 1968 on which the foundation of our current social work services are built. However it is now time to build on the Changing Lives Review and engage with wider communities to ensure that we can continue to work towards a socially just society.

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