

BASW England Response to Independent Evaluation of the Professional Capabilities Framework

June 2024



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The professional association for social work and social workers

Introduction

BASW England welcomes this independent evaluation of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). This statement is our response to its findings and recommendations, and outlines what BASW England will do and lead on next in relation to the PCF.

BASW England has been the custodian of the PCF on behalf of the whole social work sector in England since 2015 when it was legally transferred to BASW's charitable arm upon the closure of the College of Social Work. Following extensive sector consultation, it was reviewed and refreshed by BASW England in 2018. At that time the new version was endorsed by the Chief Social Workers for both Adults and Children.

However, the PCF has not been independently reviewed at any point, and there is scant research into its usefulness, acceptability and implementation across the sector. In 2023, BASW England commissioned an external, independent rapid review and evaluation as a starting point to understand how it is being used and valued contemporarily, with no influence from BASW England upon the research analysis, findings and recommendations.

Professor Jermaine Ravalier (previously of Bath Spa University, now of Buckinghamshire New University) and his team of researchers have achieved the brief with a small pot of funding for which they are very grateful. They have been scrupulous in giving an authentic picture of the findings from the primary research with social workers and from the literature review.

This is not a comprehensive evaluation and we are clear about the limitations of the scale, methodology and time available. This evaluation is a very helpful signposting document for further work on the PCF, how it is used and how or whether it should be further developed within our current professional landscape in England.

This document outlines what BASW England will do next in response to the report and that includes what further work we need to do to deepen understanding of the relevance and value of the PCF within our sector, what developments are needed and how it relates to the other regulatory and non-regulatory standards and educational drivers within the English social work landscape.

Next steps

BASW England has committed to undertaking a 'Phase two' of this *PCF evaluation and reform* process within which the recommendations and further emerging ideas will be explored more thoroughly, wider consultation will be carried out and developments in the PCF content will be taken forward.

Phase two will run from July 2024 – January 2025. A project plan and information on how to get involved will be shared widely across the sector before and during that time.



BASW England response to the recommendations

► Recommendation One: Signposting Frameworks

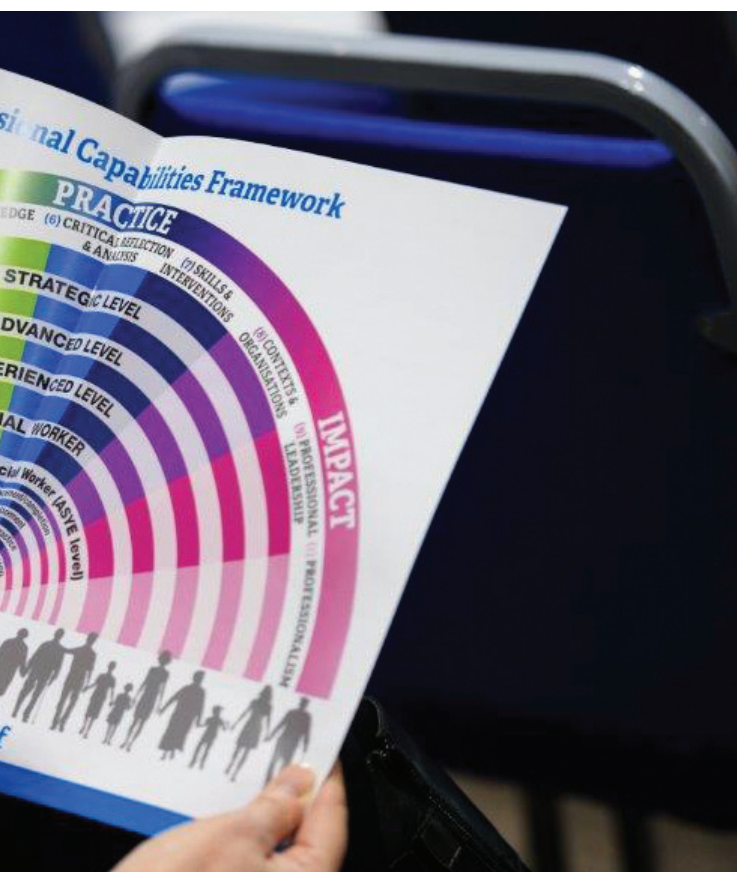
We propose that the PCF should be an overarching framework for social work practice and signposted to within the PCF documentation, or at most built into PCF practices. We suggest, however, that the PCF should be the leading framework, with others feeding into it, because of its holistic nature.

BASW England welcomes the confidence in the value of the holistic approach of the PCF that has come through the evaluation report. This is an encouragement to consolidate and develop its position as the overarching framework in England. This confidence is based in the research findings which showed considerable ongoing buy-in to the PCF and practical application amongst respondents in educational, practice, leadership and research roles. We also note there were divergent views and the critiques of the PCF will enable us to develop it further.

We add that the current positioning of the PCF has become more complex in recent years as there are now several frameworks used to train, develop and uphold practice standards in social work in England. These have been developed since the PCF was first published and, while regulation remains unified across the whole profession, many of these newer frameworks split the profession increasingly between social work with children and families on the one hand, and adults of all ages on the other. The PCF is founded on the concept that all social work should be rooted in generic, holistic capabilities even though specialism is also required. This is an approach valued and currently considered successful in other disciplines, such as occupational therapy, as the report notes.

Further recommendations in the report go on to highlight the ways in which the PCF could be strengthened, reformed in some of its content, and be brought to life more through case studies and learning tools. The deliverability of recommendation one is interconnected with further development of the PCF to meet contemporary needs and to position it distinctly in the professional and regulatory landscape in England. This includes strategic discussions and negotiations with stakeholders, policy makers and politicians about the future and the potential of the PCF and whether the PCF can retain its integrity and purpose while evolving in ways that clarify its relationship with other frameworks and standards.

BASW England will pursue Recommendation One in phase two development on the basis of developing the PCF and undertaking strategic discussions and collaborations with key stakeholders including those responsible for different aspects of social work standards, learning and career development frameworks.



► Recommendation Two: Social Justice at its Heart

Social justice is at the heart of the social work role. While Justice and Rights are already one domain within the PCF, we recommend that social justice should clearly be reflected in every one of the domains.

BASW England welcomes this recommendation as it highlights the core of social work's approach to empowerment of people, upholding and defending human rights and social inclusion, and personalising support, choice and control. This echoes BASW's Code of Ethics for social workers. This recommendation may challenge the current format of the PCF, but this is a valued challenge and one which may help promote social work's distinctive capabilities and value within multi-professional environments. There is an opportunity to amplify the relationship between social justice, equality, diversity and inclusion and to show how the PCF can be responsive to people's social rights and needs. It also points to supporting social workers as activists and rights advocates.

BASW England will further investigate and consult on the potential of this new emphasis and how it may be embedded and expressed in a revised format, with refreshed content and promotional tools/examples.

► Recommendation Three: Integration of the Super Domains

Practitioners and those within social work education are unclear how the super domains work or what they are for. The super domains need to be more clearly described and discussed, and should be re-imagined (perhaps including, as above, social justice).

The Super Domains were introduced through the 2018 refresh of the PCF, following consultation evidence that a way of understanding the nine domains via three clusters could be useful in understanding and remembering the framework.

BASW England will review the super domains in Phase two, to evaluate whether the format and approach has brought any tangible benefits to the use and understanding of the PCF.



► Recommendation Four: An Improved Career Framework

While it is clear how the PCF is useful for those earlier in their career, for those who are more experienced and in more complex roles it is less so. Therefore, the career framework needs to be re-thought, particularly for those in the higher reaches of the profession.

BASW England recognises that the PCF has been most associated with initial and early career learning and practice development. It elucidates capabilities at four levels within the qualifying period and has been used extensively in universities where qualifying programmes have been assessed against the PCF. It has also been used for Assessed and Supported Year in Employment programmes for newly qualified social workers.

One of the key values of the PCF, as evidenced by largely positive feedback in the university sector, is that it is a valued and well used educational/pedagogic tool as well as a description of capabilities. Its neat conceptualisation, attractiveness, depiction of a learning journey and holistic notion of integrated 'capabilities' support the development of professionalism in a holistic way throughout qualifying training.

The relevance of the PCF to more experienced practitioners – who may have undertaken specialised training and may be working to specialist standards – is much less clear and there is less evidence of it being used in such contexts.

During the time of the PCF evaluation being carried out, the Department for Education started to implement the recommendation to develop an Early Career Framework (ECR) for social workers in children's social care from the Independent Review of Children's Social Care report ('*Stable homes built on love*') in 2022. This is work in progress. Currently it is not being replicated in or joined up with social work development opportunities in adult social care.

BASW England will undertake further development and consultation work to enhance the PCF career framework at more experienced and/or more complex role levels. Through this BASW England will promote the PCF as a key tool in sustaining a unified career framework for the whole profession (with specialisms relating back to core capabilities).

This will include liaising with the Department for Education, Department for Health and Social Care and those involved in developing the ECR for social workers with children's social care as well as with the regulator Social Work England and other stakeholders.



► Recommendation Five: An Emphasis on Reflection

Reflective supervision is key to social work practice, but respondents suggest it is not discussed clearly enough in Domain 6. Reflective supervision (what it is, and how to do it) therefore needs to be more thoroughly discussed within Domain 6.

Reflective supervision (along with critical reflection) is a cornerstone of social work practice development and of the emotional and professional support practitioners need. This is an important challenge from the evaluation which also promotes the need for more tools and resources for educators and social workers to enable achievement of the capabilities. These will need to recognise the different learning needs regarding reflection at all stages of career and types of job role.

BASW England will explore how well reflection is covered in the PCF during phase 2 of the PCF evaluation and reform project and will look to underscore and expand on our commitment to this importance capability, for practitioners, supervisors, educators and leaders. We will review Domain 6 (Critical Reflection and Analysis) and cross reference with other domains.

► Recommendation Six: Professional Leadership

While leadership is easy to demonstrate for those who have leadership roles, those in the earlier stages of their career find it an almost impossible domain to demonstrate. We recommend that either the title or description of this domain needs to more clearly outline what professional leadership is expected – particularly of those earlier within their career.

This is a very interesting finding from the evaluation. It suggests there is a lack of explanatory material and effective training to help particularly newer social workers and students understand what is meant by 'leadership' in the PCF. It also suggests work needs to be done to clarify what is meant by 'leadership' at the training and early career stage.

There is considerable ongoing discussion in our sector about the nature and definitions of leadership in social work. Further work on the PCF could draw on this work and provide a practical and theoretical contribution to defining and promoting appropriate and distinctive leadership approaches in social work. As suggested in recommendation seven, the PCF could offer illustrative examples and clearer explanations at all levels of the PCF.

BASW England will consult and involve educators, managers of ASYE courses, social workers and students in the professional leadership domain and consider whether developments/ revisions are required and consider development of more learning resources.

► Recommendation Seven: Illustrative Examples

The PCF is a good overarching framework for social work education, development, and practice. However, we suggest that more (tangible) examples of each domain (and, where appropriate, super domain) are presented within the PCF literature.

As noted in the responses to previous recommendations, BASW England agrees with this recommendation to create more tangible and accessible learning resources in relation to each domain.

BASW England will consider priority areas for the development of learning and implementation resources and examples to aid the use and application of the PCF at all levels in social work.

► Other BASW England actions in response to the independent report

There are other some implications in the report for the PCF and for actions by BASW England and across our sector. These will also be considered in phase two of the PCF project and can be summarised as:

- Better articulating the generic/whole profession ‘capability’ approach that underpins the PCF and how it contrasts with other approaches to skill, knowledge and competence development
- The role of PCF in relation to positive and strong social work identity at individual and peer/collective levels
- How the PCF can better support the closing of the ‘education/practice’ gap that is often reported in terms of newly qualified social workers finding themselves unprepared for the workplace.
- Articulating the case for ‘One Profession’ and maintaining this identity throughout careers
- Creating a refreshed communications and external relations strategy for the PCF
- Engage more with social workers about the future and the value of the PCF



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