Leadership and Social Work in the UK: Valuing its Potential

A roundtable discussion

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the issue of leadership hasn't been discussed that much in social work. This is surprising, as all social workers will have experienced the tangible impacts of leadership in their organisations and teams, for better or worse. People commonly report that open and respectful communication with leaders is central to communities developing trustful relationships for service change and development. And for those who seek to demonstrate leadership in senior or practice roles, it often feels that they are left to themselves to work out key issues such as what it involves, how is it done, and can we do it better?

On 11th March 2022, social work practice, policy, and academic leaders from across the UK came together for a roundtable on the opportunities and challenges of leadership. Their conversations built on work undertaken at the University of Birmingham to explore the different approaches to leadership within each of the home nations. This involved a desk-top review of policy, practice developments, research and evaluation, and discussions with a practice and academic lead within each country.

This report is a summary of the roundtable. It opens with a brief introduction to leadership. Whilst this content was not part of the discussion, it has been included to provide context for those who are new to the topic of leadership. Whilst there is much in common in relation to values and challenges, social work legislation, policy, and structures in relation to leadership diverge across the UK. We think this can be a source of strength as each one has much to learn from good practice from the other nations, with such examples presented throughout the report.

The roundtable was not an end point but a staging post for further work and reflection on social work leadership. If you are interested in being involved do drop us a line, our contact details are on the inside back cover.

Professor Robin Miller, Convener, Editor
Dr Luke Geoghegan, Editor

CONTEXT

Introduction to leadership

Leadership can be a major force for positive change (think Nelson Mandela or Malala Yousafzai). Leadership exercised well in social work can also make a real difference for people, communities, and practitioners. Leadership is often seen as the preserve of senior managers but this is mis-apprehension. Those responsible for leading teams or services are central to developing a climate in which practitioners feel valued and supported, and thereby able to demonstrate creative and person-centred social work. Furthermore, all of us can think of front-line practitioners who by exercising proactive and courageous informal leadership have made a real difference to both families and colleagues and the practice of colleagues.

Power, especially when concentrated in one person, can be seen as a problem due to the danger of one view dominating and other perspectives therefore being crowded out. However, the model of 'single individual' leadership remains stubbornly entrenched in society. In social work too, leadership in organisations is invariably focussed on one person. In statutory services for Adults and Children and Families there is one director with a core legal responsibility, a model which is replicated in the voluntary sector, although here the preferred title is chief executive (CEO). While there are structures and systems to soften this model (political leaders have a cabinet, directors have a senior leadership team, charity CEO's have their trustees) the individual senior leader retains much of the accountability.

Alongside the human tendency to look up to the great leader, this model might well reflect the practical considerations that organisations, and their constituent parts, if led by more than one person (a job-share, committees, cooperatives) tend to work more slowly in making decisions - and in a fast-moving situation this can be fatal. Indeed, group decision making processes might not be able to reach a decision at all and one role of leader is to hear all the arguments but to make the final call. And, in a climate when accountability is rightly sought, 'single individual' leadership in social work is likely to be around for some time.

Reflecting the lack of leadership diversity in most sectors, the collective profile of those currently in senior leadership roles in social work do not reflect the general make-up of the workforce, let alone communities. This is true of the statutory sector and in social work education. This presents a real challenge, not only in terms of demonstrating social work's core values, but because inclusive and diverse leadership and management teams ultimately make better decisions.

Leadership and management

The terms leadership and management are often used interchangeably and can have overlapping functions, but in fact leadership and management practice make different contributions. Leadership is about creating a vision and working with a wide variety of groups and individuals to achieve that vision. For example, social work directors positively influence health organisations (in Adult services) or the police (in Children's services) even though they have no management responsibility for either group. Similarly, social work team leaders will engage in relationship building with local community stakeholders and other services to encourage them to work better together and so improve co-ordination of support.

Management is more about implementing existing processes through administering and maintaining systems and procedures. Many of the world's most impactful leaders don't manage organisations at all (think, for example, of Greta Thunberg or the Dalai Lama). This means that being a manager doesn't automatically make you a leader, and that social work practitioners can act as leaders in their setting without having any formal management responsibility. That said, managers are also more effective in achieving change if they are also able to demonstrate leadership. It is worth noting too that management is an important role by itself - without good organisation, leadership visions will be rarely realised on the ground.

There are comparisons with supervision in social work. This has sometimes been reduced to performance management, with tasks given by the manager to the social worker for checking in a subsequent supervision. There is a growing move to reinstating social work supervision as a space for reflecting about what is happening, looking at alternatives and evidence, and deciding ways to progress. The well-being of the social worker is an important component. Such coaching and mentoring models are less task oriented and focus more on the development of the individual to improve their social work practice. While there is not a hard and fast distinction, perhaps those who see themselves primarily as managers tend to use the process of supervision as a task-oriented exercise, while those who act as leaders tend to see supervision as an opportunity for coaching and mentoring.

Models of leadership

A wide variety of models have been put forward as to what leaders do, how they should lead, the associated activities and behaviours, and to what extent the skills and attitudes can be learned. Historically, the initial focus was on personalities who had innate characteristics to make them naturally great leaders. Thinking then moved to consider what were the core styles, traits, and behaviours necessary to be a leader, and how these could be selected for and developed within individuals. More contemporary models have moved away from primarily considering '*the*' leader, to instead framing leadership as a distributed and relational activity which is as much about those who are following as those who are leading, and which must adapt to the context in which leadership is being demonstrated. A leadership approach may work for one situation but be ineffective for another. Perhaps reflecting that social work is fundamentally about working with people, rather than telling them what to do, leadership in social work plays down 'single individual' models. Instead, there is greater engagement with approaches which are seen as more values based, inclusive and collaborative. If such leadership can be demonstrated within the 'managerialist' approach of many organisations is one to be debated. Furthermore, organisational cultures, can sadly become toxic. An important role of leadership is to challenge such behaviours and seek to create a safe and supportive environment.

THE ROUNDTABLE

The roundtable was structured around three questions:

- *What stands out for you in relation to the different approaches to social work leadership within each of the home nations?*
- *What do you think are the main opportunities to further strengthen leadership within the social work profession?*
- *What contribution should social work make to leadership within an integrated health and social care system?*

Has leadership been a focus in social work policy and practice?

The important contribution of leadership to improving the quality of social work practice and therefore better outcomes for individuals and families has been recognised in all the nations of the UK. The nature of this interest and support varies between country. Common initiatives introduced include – embedding social work leadership within formal governance structures at a national and / or local level; facilitating networks in which leaders can share challenges and associated learning, and contribute to national debates over policy and practice; leadership development programmes for supervisors, middle managers and / or senior managers; embedding of leadership capabilities within professional and / or managerial career frameworks; and, emphasising the role of leadership within policy and practice guidance. Despite all these efforts, none of the nations in the UK are confident that good leadership is consistently demonstrated at practice and senior levels.

Is social work leadership distinct?

Social work has always recognised the importance of multi-agency working and its connection with other professions due to shared challenges and many common values. Participants also argued though that all professions, including social work, have their own unique context, culture, roles, and influence, which will make aspects of their leadership distinct. Social work, for example, operates within an environment which has often been subject to crises due to austerity measures

LEADERSHIP WITHIN SOCIAL WORK POLICY

The Northern Ireland Learning & Improvement Strategy for Social Workers & Social Care Workers (2018) includes Effective Leadership & Management as one of the six priorities. Aims of the policy include: 1. Leaders and managers of social workers and social care workers at all levels will be equipped with the skills they need to provide professional leadership and management, coaching, and the development of others. 2. Leaders and managers will work collectively to appropriately influence relevant policy and strategy and the future development of social work and social care. 3. The future leaders of social work and social care organisations will be nurtured, encouraged, and assisted to develop the knowledge and skills they require.

or high-profile and critical reviews, and in responding to such challenges leaders can build on their experience of supporting individuals and families who are undergoing a personal crisis. Similarly, social work's strong commitment to values of co-production and diversity and working alongside people, families and communities provides a distinct set of leadership skills.

> '**So leadership in crisis is part of what we need to know …[but]…if you're thinking about politics, politics is equally marked by crisis and change and rapid flux**'

Despite such distinctiveness, social work has often been incorporated within leadership initiatives in the broader social care sector, or with education or health as part of integrated care and system initiatives. This may mean that the leadership skills developed are not sufficiently tailored to a social work context, and that there is a missed opportunity for the social work profession to gain confidence in their own contribution as leaders. Alongside that, there was also an acknowledgement within the roundtable that the differences with other professions can be overemphasised and that there is potential for shared learning from practice and research in other sectors.

The roundtable also agreed that the lack of research regarding leadership and social work makes it hard to make an informed judgement about the level and form of distinctiveness.

What models of leadership are used in social work?

There appears to be no one model of social work leadership promoted across the UK. Several commonly drawn are - distributed, compassionate, servant, collaborative, and systems models of leadership. All of these emphasise that the role of the leader is to benefit a wider community through respectfully engaging and encouraging others rather than serving their own interests:

> '**…rather than managerial type leadership, that kind of leading from being alongside people or behind people actually, often from people, is the model that sits comfortably with our practice what we do when we're working with people**'

LEARNING FROM CLINICAL HEALTHCARE LEADERSHIP

The Healthier Wales Workforce Strategy 2020 places compassionate leadership as a core foundation for the future development of the health and social care workforce, including in social work. This focus on compassion leadership has principally arisen within clinical healthcare leadership. This was due to its strong ethical principles, the need for greater empathy in the workplace to reduce stress and burnout, and its potential for achieving sustained improvements. There is therefore potentially a good connection with the skills required by social work leaders (see the article by Schaub et al 2021 in the British Journal of Social Work for further discussion).

The roundtable noted that these models emphasise the role of leaders in passing on their structural authority. This reflects the tradition within social work to disrupt existing power dynamics to facilitate greater voice and influence for those who are disadvantaged and excluded within society.

> 'Actually this is not good enough, let's do better here, let's bring in more voices'

However, the roundtable also noted that despite such a commitment to shared decision making, leadership couldn't always be about consensus. Those with leadership responsibilities are often involved in making hard and contested choices in which compromise may not be accepted by those with differing perspectives.

> '…if we're all nicer to each other and we work collectively then we'll be great leaders' and that's stereotyping there. But you know being in a leadership role, whether that's as an individual or you're part of a team that is leading something complex or you're having to make difficult decisions. Maybe something's happened and you have to accelerate what you do down a particular line because there's an urgency. And that's hard individually and it's hard collectively'

Adopting a model of leadership has sometimes been due to the influence of other sectors rather than an assessment of their relevance to social work. Models developed in health services have been particularly influential. This may reflect the considerable investment in leadership development and research within health care professions and organisations in comparison to social work. It was highlighted in the roundtable that there were other models which may be as relevant, but which were not well represented to date in social work policy or practice.

AN ALTERNATIVE MODEL OF LEADERSHIP

Host leadership builds on its underpinning metaphor as those who organise social events create spaces in which people can connect and be creative together. Leaders should similarly be pro-active and respond to new situations as they arise from the interactions between others (principle of response-ability). A good host is not detached, but rather spends time interacting with others (principle of co-participation). They must foster new connections between people whilst also protecting the gathering from those who would unhelpfully disrupt (principle of gate-opener). Finally, like a good host, leaders should be there to welcome those who first arrive and support people until the end (principle of Alpha & Omega).

Does social work support leadership throughout professional careers?

Much leadership development to date in social work has been focussed on those undertaking management roles. Senior managers have generally had greater access to educational programmes and peer networks. There are also some examples of leadership development opportunities for middle managers and practice supervisors. Leadership by practitioners is less recognised and supported, and leadership is not commonly a major component of social work qualification programmes.

Supervision was recognised an opportunity to encourage and develop the influencing skills of frontline practitioners. It was highlighted that social work's commitment to ensuring that those in practice have regular opportunities to reflect and improve was maintained even through the worst of the pandemic.

'But actually how do people lead? What are we doing when people lead? …And I think that's the sort of thing that social workers coming through their careers often don't really get sighted on or don't get a chance to really explore'

DEVELOPMENT PROGRAMMES FOR PRACTICE LEADERS

The Practice Supervisor Development Programme was funded by the Department for Education in England to support up to 1000 social workers taking up their first role in which they were responsible for supporting and developing the practice of others. Aims included empowering practitioners to build confidence, mobilising academic knowledge and practice expertise, and working in partnership with the sector. The programme also engaged with organisational culture due to the key role that employers and leaders play in enabling high-quality learning.

What does research tell us?

There are very few empirical studies exploring the nature or impact of social work leadership within the UK. This reflects the limited international evidence base of leadership within the profession. This is a major issue as policy, practice and development cannot be founded on current and robust evidence of how best to lead and support leadership within the organisational, professional and policy context. Research in other professions and sectors may be relevant to social work if the differences are sufficiently recognised. Furthermore, it was highlighted that even when research that relates to social work leadership does exist, there is insufficient awareness of its findings. As a result, evidence is not informing national or local decision making in relation to practice, policy and education of social work leadership.

RESEARCH INTO LEADERSHIP WITHIN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The University of Stirling undertook a review in 2015 of how leadership is communicated and taught in social work qualifying education. The study began with a literature review and followed with interviews with expert informants from Higher Education Institutions across Scotland. Participants reflected that good leadership practices were often synonymous with good social work practices, with the activities of a leader often being closely aligned with the role and responsibilities of a social worker in practice. Despite this, these participants reported that 'leadership' was rarely explicitly discussed on issue for qualifying social work education.

'It's really struck us how few …would say 'we're doing this approach because actually there's some really good evidence that would suggest this is a good way of doing this'. That's just not part of the kind of language or decision making that we often use'

Can social workers lead systems?

Better collaboration between health, education, social care and wider public services has been a long-term aspiration across the UK. This continues to be promoted in policy and practice, with system leadership being increasingly highlighted as an important enabler. This requires organisations, and therefore those who lead them, to look beyond their individual pressures and share resources with partners to benefit local people and communities. Social work has many skills and values related to system leadership, including understanding alternative viewpoints, co-producing with communities, and positively responding to conflict and difference. A previous example of the positive influence of social work was the shaping of practice within integrated mental health teams and partnerships.

'…there's always been such a clear statutory role for social workers in terms of the Mental Health Act and what they have to do. The doctors can't operate alone, they have to work with approved social workers as they were and then approved mental health professionals. So probably that statutory role and lever and needing to have your social workers as part of those teams has helped.'

Whilst local examples of good practice do exist, social work has not yet been able to sufficiently demonstrate a strong influence on integrated care systems. This may be due to leaders from other sectors being better resourced so that they are better represented in strategic discussions. However, social work could also be more confident in expressing its potential contribution - at times other professions articulate the benefits of social work leadership more than the profession itself. A connected issue in relation to leading across systems is that there are often few opportunities for social workers based in different contexts (e.g., adults and children services, statutory and voluntary sectors) to engage with each other. This results in a loss of learning from other social work leaders and prevents the development of a shared leadership identity.

BRINGING TOGETHER LEADERS FROM ACROSS SOCIAL WORK AND SOCIAL CARE

Initially funded by the West Midlands Social Work Teaching Partnership, the strengths-based leadership programme led by the University of Birmingham and the Social Care Institute for Excellence supports leaders to reflect on their practice in relation to leadership of self, teams, systems, and change. Open to practice leaders within children's and adult services and across the social care and health system, the programme enables learners to engage with research, theories and practice experience, to apply their learning through a series of work-based activities, and to develop a community of leadership practice.

Conclusion

All the nations of the UK have recognised the importance of positive leadership to create organisational cultures and climates which will facilitate quality social work practice. There are good examples of leadership being encouraged in policy and practice guidance, embedded in professional competences, and supported through education and development. However, there is still much more that can be done individually and collectively by the home nations to ensure social work leadership fully builds on its diverse strengths and grows throughout a professional career. Social work should learn from evidence of leadership in other sectors and by critically considering other theory and models but the lack of evidence within the professional and organisational context of social work must be urgently addressed (see appendix 1). Social work can lead collaborative working across sectors and with communities but needs more confidence in its credibility as a leader of systems.

APPENDIX 1: OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH

Leadership offers profound potential while lack of effective leadership presents real risks. There is a pressing need to build an empirical dataset on leadership in social work. Building this dataset would have three advantages:

- Despite all the constraints it is imperative that current and future social work service users receive the best possible services. Understanding leadership, and what leaders do, are central to delivering this.

- It would allow training and development to be more focused and applied more effectively both for existing leaders and future leaders.

- Diverse leadership teams make better collective decisions. Understanding leadership, and making it more transparent, would greatly improve the routes into leadership for a more diverse group of people.

A dataset might include:

- A granular understanding of what social work leaders do. For example, how do leaders aim to allocate their time between different functions of their role (for example, long term planning versus crisis management, budgeting, performance management, staff support and development)?

- What models of leadership do social work leaders espouse and how do they implement them? This self-reporting needs to be compared against an ethnographic study of what leaders actually do and how they do it.

- What aspects of leadership does social work have in common with other non-social work leadership and what aspects are unique to social work?

- Does social work leadership add anything distinctive to multi-agency working?

This dataset would need to cover a vertical slice of the organisation, reflecting the reality that leadership functions (or fails to function) at all levels of the organisation.

References

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Resources

Academi Wales is the centre for excellence in leadership and management for public services in Wales

Research in Practice provide a repository of resources and tools for practice supervisors

Social Care Institute for Excellence has a range of virtual resources relating to systems and strengths-based leadership.

Step into Leadership has resources and information to develop leadership across all levels of the social services workforce in Scotland

How this document came about

University of Birmingham and BASW have a shared interest in leadership and potential learning through different approaches taken in the home nations. A desk-top review was undertaken with the support of ICF. RM discussed the findings with an academic, practice / policy and BASW lead in each of the home nations. The roundtable was held on Friday 11th March and began with a short presentation of the findings from the review and home nation discussions. The first draft of Leadership and Social Work in the UK: a roundtable discussion was written by RM and LG. The participants then had the opportunity to fact check and comment on the text before the final version was produced.

Acknowledgements

Disclaimer

The function of a roundtable is to promote, summarise and disseminate knowledge and debate. The collective views expressed in this document are not necessarily the views of any one individual contributor, BASW or the University of Birmingham.

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