

Supplementary written evidence submitted by the British Association of Social Workers

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I gave evidence on 20 April 2016 at the Education Select Committee on Children's Social Work Reform on behalf of British Association of Social Workers (BASW).

I was very pleased to address the committee on a range of matters relating to children's social work reform and welcomed the opportunity to describe BASW's vision for the professional body for social work. This includes describing BASW's current achievements and future ambitions in fulfilling that role.

At the end of the session, panel members were asked to provide a detailed letter by May 11th the topic of which was clarified in a follow up email from the committee coordinator. We were asked to provide:

'.....a letter to the Committee setting out your ideas on what a professional body for social work should be responsible for and what it should look like.'

Introducing BASW

1. Before describing in more detail ideas about what the professional body for social work should look like in the future and how this relates to BASW, a short description of the Association may be helpful context.
2. BASW has been in existence since 1970. It was formed when several small social work groups and member-led bodies came together. The Association now has a paid membership of social workers and social work students across the UK of over 20000, the great majority of which are in England. The Association reaches many more through its outreach, conference and professional development activities. The paid membership trajectory has accelerated in recent years with a rise of 3000 in two years. BASW directly represents 20000 social workers, but its vision and commitment is to represent all of social work and to continue to increase membership.
3. The Association's growth in the last two years includes more local, member-led BASW branches across England, providing local access to seminars, lectures and other professional development activities and sharing of knowledge. The Association also owns the peer-reviewed British Journal of Social Work and Practice: Social Work in Action as well as providing a monthly magazine, Professional Social Work. There are a wide variety of member services and benefits offered including Continuing Professional Development (CPD) activities, support and advice for specific categories of members (including independent and freelance social workers, student and

newly qualified social workers), professional indemnity schemes, professional advice and employer representation, and the opportunity to become an active member within a variety of active and productive specialist interest and practice development groups. The Association also produces and commissions research, practice guidance and position statements. Since the closure of the College of Social Work BASW has hosted and continues to develop the Professional Capabilities Framework for the whole of social work and is managing the CPD endorsement scheme for independent and educational institution providers.

4. All aspects of BASW are focused on developing excellent practice and supporting social workers to achieve that. Specific different functions of BASW are delivered through different arms of the organisation with different governance arrangements. The Association itself is a not-for-profit company, governed by an elected Council. This body carries out many of the core functions detailed above. There are also charitable arms of the organisation which have specific constitutional aims. These include the Social Workers' Benevolent Trust for social workers in hardship, an Educational Trust which provides grants for CPD and development opportunities and the BASW Foundation charity. The last is a relatively new charitable arm, established to promote excellence and public benefit through practice development, research and knowledge exchange. It is this part of the organisation that we expect to take on an increasingly important role in professional standard setting and defining a profession-led CPD framework for the future.
5. The Association has grown and developed over the years but at its heart is its Code of Ethics which reflects both national and international good practice. BASW is the single representative body for the UK in the International Federation of Social Work and within its European regional body. One of the strengths of BASW is that it has UK wide membership and has offices in the four countries of the UK. It can both focus on the policy and professional specifics for each country and gain the benefit of sharing ideas and perspectives across borders, maintaining a rich knowledge of comparative evidence.
6. In 2015 BASW developed and adopted its ambitious 2020 Vision which cemented its commitment to developing into the unquestionably Strong, Independent Voice of Social Work and Social Workers.

Strong – We will build strength through unity of vision and purpose, and will strengthen the Association by increasing our membership, our services, and our influence across the four countries of the UK, in Europe and globally

Independent – We will maintain our independence from governments and from employers in order to be able to act in the best interests of the profession

Voice – We will ensure a strong voice in the media, and to governments and their agencies, in order to speak up for social work and social workers, and for all people and groups who use social work services, and

we will campaign and lobby in order to have the best possible influence on policy, legislation and practice

Social work – We will ensure that the profession retains ownership of its values, ethics, knowledge, education and practice, and we will defend, develop and strengthen social work as a unique profession rooted in social justice and respect for human dignity and worth

Social workers – We will provide professional advice, support for practice, training and development opportunities, and represent social workers individually and collectively.

7. Professional bodies that are successful in the long term have often been developed from the grassroots of the profession over a long period of time and changed in their form, status and functions over time. This is the case for the medical Royal Colleges (established in the nineteenth century) and bodies such as the Royal College of Nurses and the British Association of Occupational Therapists.
8. BASW has grown up as such a grassroots organisation, driven by and responsive to its members. The importance of our profession being ultimately driven by practitioner motivation for excellence and change was reinforced in the January 2016 DfE document on children's social care – A Vision for Change - which states:

The future we want to see is one where these excellent professionals do not shape their practice to comply with the diktat of Ministers, or guidance from Whitehall officials, or even the Ofsted framework – but rather they form a confident social work profession, constantly pushing the boundaries and redefining what works through rigorous and evidence-based practice

9. BASW shares this view and is the only body in England currently positioned to fulfil this role.
10. However, we are also clear about the need for further growth and development in the organisation to fulfil all our ambitions. This change process is being planned through the formulation of a 'Theory of Change' for the organisation. This is work in progress, but our aim is to ensure we have mapped and are addressing all the key factors driving the form, capability, governance, culture, leadership and activities of the organisation to ensure the organisation continues to develop comprehensively towards its goals. This includes ensuring BASW is positioned optimally, and as soon as possible, to take on more responsibilities on behalf of the profession and to be a more powerful voice for social work, for excellent practice and for the public we serve.

Defining a professional body

11. On the basis of case outlined above, we believe that BASW should be recognised now as the professional body for social work in England and, indeed, in the other three countries of the UK.
12. The term 'professional body' is used in England and internationally to describe a variety of forms of membership organisation which support and promote a profession, uphold and develop practice and promote accountability to the public.
13. Professional bodies follow different models and constitutions, but at their best they provide a strong professional identity and continuity for members while also providing the foundation for development to meet contemporary needs and an evolving evidence base.
14. The professional body – in social work and in other professions – therefore should be responsible for:
 - Sustaining social workers' motivation and connection to the wider profession and to peers throughout their career
 - Building and exemplifying professional pride, culture and identity
 - Making the profession an attractive career choice for people with the rights skills, talents and aptitudes
 - Working with educational sector and government to ensure routes into the profession remain sufficiently diverse, accessible to all the range of talents required, with enough capacity to meet emerging demand and sustain a healthy profession across the statutory and non-statutory sectors.
 - Speaking up appropriately for the profession when it may be unfairly criticised, being the visible, credible, honest face of the profession
 - Developing and maintaining the ethical basis and professional standards of the profession at qualifying and post-qualifying level (but we distinguish this from being the regulator –see below)
 - Driving research and knowledge generation that is profession specific and shared across professions. This includes supporting the continuance of qualifying courses and research within excellent universities and resisting the move to dislocate practitioner learning from academic research contexts.
 - Enabling discussion and debate across the social care and related sectors, with diverse stakeholders, including people who use social work services and their carers and families

- Providing assurance to the public served by the profession that its membership is focused on good practice and good outcomes for their benefit
- Holding the narrative of the history and evolution of the profession
- Maintaining and evolving profession-owned ethics and principles that can respond to – and which can also have continuity beyond – the changing requirements of (e.g.) specific government policies and funding regimes.

The relationship between the professional body and the regulator

15. Some professional bodies hold regulatory powers at qualifying level. Others hold national accreditation responsibilities at post-qualifying levels of specialism that are recognised in law or national policy and provide approval to practice or undertake specific areas of work.
16. Examples of this last type in England are the Royal Colleges in the medical profession which do not award or regulate basic medical qualifications, but which are responsible for setting examinations and awarding qualifications for higher attainment in their respective specialisms. These qualifications are statutory requirements for practice in those specialist fields of medicine (and may be internationally recognised). However the regulator for medical practice that investigates complaints and breaches in competence or conduct remains a separate, independent body, the General Medical Council.
17. Many professional bodies do not hold any qualifying or post-qualifying statutory accreditation or regulatory responsibilities, but provide a range of support, post-qualifying development, research, and standard-setting functions for members. This is the case currently for BASW but our ambition is that we become much more central to the setting and reinforcing of practice standards, particularly at post-qualifying level.
18. All professional bodies would expect to at least be consulted and, indeed, to have a lead role in defining professional practice and ethics and also to be centrally involved in the development of regulatory standards for the profession, even if the statutory regulatory function is not held by them.
19. BASW currently has its own well-used and well respected Code of Ethics for the profession which reflects national and international perspectives on core standards of practice for social, individual and family benefit. More recently, BASW has taken over responsibility for the social work Professional Capabilities Framework from the College of Social Work. This is a whole-profession, career and practice progression framework which is now being further developed by BASW to ensure ongoing relevance and utility for social workers in practice. This includes ensuring it can integrate with new and important developments in specific area of practice, such as the Chief Social Workers' Knowledge and Skills Statements (KSSs) for adults and children social work at qualifying, post-qualifying and supervisory levels, and other recent developments such as the capabilities framework for specialist forensic social work and standards for palliative care social work.

20. In the future we expect BASW as the professional body to have a key role in advising government and the regulator on professional standards and CPD frameworks. We would expect to an increasing role in setting post-qualifying standards.

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Should a professional body regulate?

21. The Professional Standards Authority makes the point that regulatory standards compliance and professional body functions (and any practice improvement arm) should be separate. When they merge, it argues, functions become blurred and less effective. In order to perform all the valuable functions described in preceding sections, a professional body needs to be able to represent diverse member views. This may include informed and constructive critique of regulatory standards, government policy or priorities.

22. Public protection and confidence, and maintaining fair, understandable standards should be the key purpose of the regulator. This translates into ensuring regulated professionals are assured of a fair and impartial hearing if their practice is called into question. The professional body, on the other hand, should be independent and profession-owned and have a much more diverse set of responsibilities which include maintaining excellent practice and promoting the importance of the profession in national life, but also a wide range of other functions that help to create and sustain the profession for the long term.

23. If primary regulators – and government led improvement arms – stray into ‘professional body’ territory, they risk failure on a number of counts:

- They may disable true and sustainable professional ownership of excellence by engendering dependency. Professionals cannot sustainably be ‘instructed in excellence’ rather they must own, create, develop, refresh and maintain it
- They risk reducing the territory for true collaboration between government drivers/policy makers and professional representatives and thinkers e.g. if there is an unnecessary and wasteful contestation for the ‘hearts and minds’ of the profession between government led bodies and professional grassroots bodies
- In practical terms, there may be an interference in the ability of the professional body to sustain and increase its membership e.g. if a statutory regulator goes beyond requiring payment for regulatory registration and requires payment for other functions – particularly in less well remunerated professions such as social work and nursing. This would undermine the capability of BASW to continue to grow and mature its role across England and, indeed, across the rest of the UK.

Advice and Representation functions of professional bodies

24. Some professional bodies combine promotion of excellent practice and commitment to public accountability with representation and advice for members. For instance, in nursing the regulator is the Nursing and Midwifery Council while the Royal College of Nursing (and the midwifery equivalent) is both a 'college' – promoting and upholding standards and informing the development of excellent practice – and a trade union with representative functions for individual members and a voice for nurses overall. Similarly, the College of Occupational Therapists is a charity arm of the representative member association (the British Association of Occupational Therapists) which also has a partnership with a trade union (Unison) to provide member advice and employer representation.
25. This is similar for BASW in that we have a well-established advice and representation service (provided by social workers thoroughly trained and specialised in this activity). BASW members can take up optional trade union membership in addition to the core advice offer if they so wish, but all members get an advice and representation service.
26. The intelligence gained from advice and representation functions directly informs our professional development activities. Advice and representation activities can provide deep insights into problems with performance, workplace cultures, systems and practices that can be thematically fed into learning and development activities. The fact that all advice and representation staff are firstly social workers who abide by the BASW Code of Ethics means that their representation is always informed by the crucial importance of good social work practice.

Future directions for BASW: Setting standards for post-qualifying practice and diverse specialisms

27. While supporting the notion that basic regulation should be carried out by a separate regulatory body – as is provided currently for social work in England by the HCPC and for medicine by the GMC – there is a clear role for professional bodies in working closely with regulatory bodies on agreeing basic standards.
28. We also believe in the future the professional body for social work should directly set and maintain standards at post-qualifying levels of practice and specialism. This is a practical consideration as much as a matter of principle; only a responsive, broad-based, profession-led body can understand and provide CPD support across all specialisms and niche areas of practice, and ensure all registered social workers are effectively paying attention to their ongoing CPD needs.
29. BASW knows and understands the complexities of practice and work settings across the profession. In England, there are 93000 social workers working in diverse settings and requiring a wide range of post-qualifying and accreditation or training opportunities. Less than one third work in children's social work and a smaller proportion still work in statutory child protection.

30. The government's attention currently to children's social work post-qualifying standards and new national awards is to be welcomed if it raises the status and improves the practice of social workers. However, as an Association we know that England's 93000 social workers (over 100000 across the UK) operate in hugely diverse settings and specialisms.
31. We also know that practice across specialisms and age groups is a crucial in many social work jobs requiring intervention where there is complexity and interdependencies in the welfare of people (e.g.) within family systems. While government policy is currently focused on specific and (in many ways) separate practice, knowledge and skill areas in adults and children's social work, our responsibility as a professional association is to ensure we promote holistic and specialist practice, in statutory and non-statutory contexts, particularly in the CPD for advanced and supervising practitioners.
32. We hope that that Committee sees the achievements, value and the potential of the Association and recognises that it is the foundation of a truly profession-led, excellence-focused professional body for the future of social work.

Recommendations to Committee

- The Committee should recognise the whole-profession, sustained, developmental purpose of a professional body which differentiates it from the focused and limited concerns of a regulator or an improvement arm (or other adjunct to regulation).
- The Committee should recommend that the professional body for social work is a member-led, self-sustaining, 'broad church' body that harnesses the energies and ideas from the grassroots up. BASW is the evolving embodiment of that in England (and across the UK). It is a financially viable, independent, medium sized organisation with the right resources ((60+ staff posts and sustainable income), capabilities and leadership.
- The Committee should endorse the view that the professional body will be independent of government but should be respected as a key partner for government wherever there is shared purpose in promoting effective social work and better outcomes. It should be able to act as a fair critic and robust reviewer of evidence without losing governmental respect and collaboration.
- The Committee should explicitly recognise that an effective professional body should provide a home for all of social work – across all specialisms and client ages. It should create effective platforms for learning and sharing amongst members, sustaining a flexible and widely informed workforce that can draw on collective wisdom and relevant professional history as well as supporting innovation and creativity.
- The professional body should uphold the core ethics and standards of the profession which can also respond to policy and research developments. In

BASW, the Code of Ethics and our 2020 Vision commitments are important parts of our framework of ethics and standards.

- The Committee should recognise BASW as the successor body to the College of Social Work, recognising it has taken on some of the most valued College functions (including the Professional Capabilities Framework, Continuing Professional Development Scheme, key written resources and the member-led 'Faculty' structure). Within its forward plans are the building blocks to further develop in its new role and position within the social work and social care sector.
- Over time, the professional body – BASW - should have an increasing direct role in defining the post-qualifying and CPD pathway for all of social work and should be recognised as a provider and endorser of CPD educational programmes. Over time, the Association may have a role in hosting nationally recognised specialist study and qualification systems. The committee should recommend that DfE and DH support the long term role of BASW within the national CPD system and should ensure BASW is fully involved in governmental developments and proposals

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