

Submission to Labour Policy Forum on behalf of the Labour Social Work Group raising general issues about Labour's policy on social work and social care

www.laboursocialworkgroup.com laboursocialworkgroup@gmail.com

The Labour Social Work Group is a member-led group recognised by the Party. We seek to contribute to improved wellbeing and life chances of some of the most vulnerable members of society, by strengthening the place of socialist principles within social work policy and practice and within the broader social care services. We work towards achieving these aims through collective action in local groups and through participation in national policy debates both within and outside the Labour Party. www.laboursocialworkgroup.com

*The group is making a contribution to the **currently identified priority areas of mental health and early years services and plans to contribute to other priority areas when identified.** This submission is a more general one, urging Labour to develop a coherent policy towards social work, and in the meantime to provide a more robust opposition to current Tory policies that aim to undermine the profession's ability to stand alongside vulnerable people.*

Some underlying issues and concerns

- Labour's ambitions for better integrated and more cost effective health and social care services for people in all age and vulnerability groups, will be enhanced by an ethical, high quality and creative social work service.
- Social work, along with other public service professions, and the local authorities in which a large proportion of them are employed, is under attack by this government, whose thinly veiled aim is to move as much public service work as it can into the private (for profit), sector.
- In order to achieve this with respect to social services, it is introducing policies to limit the professional discretion of social workers, and reduce their ability to support and work alongside those with disabilities or living in disadvantaged circumstances who have been most badly hit by Tory policies.
- Changes imposed by the Department for Education to restrict the curriculum for qualifying and post-qualifying training (achieved through contracting with private sector accountancy firms with no depth of experience in the field) are pulling child and family social workers away from neighbourhood-based support to parents and children going through stressful times, and towards more exclusively coercive roles. Parents, many with disabilities, who are asking for help find themselves being investigated as neglectful, and children who, with appropriate support could live with parents or relatives are being permanently separated and placed for adoption with strangers (See our more detailed submissions on child and family services, and mental health).
- As with other public sector professions, limited resources and a shortfall in qualified professionals is resulting in more tasks that need a qualified and fully accountable registered professional being undertaken by those with lower level qualifications or none at all (teaching assistants, nursing assistants, legal executives advising parents in care cases).
- Although most apparent with respect to children and families, these changes apply across the age and needs groups, to services provided under the auspices of the

Department of Health and Department for Education, whether directly provided or commissioned from the voluntary or (increasingly) the private for profit sectors.

- The changes spelled out in the Children and Social Work Bill to social work regulation may on first glance seem benign – who could object to a separate Regulator for social work? Except that as currently worded the Bill gives unprecedented power to a government Minister to determine the parameters and content of social work practice and social work training, and to unnecessarily spend a large amount of government resource that is much needed elsewhere for the direct provision of services. These clauses of the Bill overturn the progressive Labour legislation that introduced in 2000 an ‘arms-length Regulator that greatly enhanced the status and qualifications of social work.

Steve McCabe MP in his response to the Queens Speech told it as it is:

We will not get better social work by trying to reduce social workers to the status of some kind of functional technicians carrying around a manual of dos and don'ts based on the latest ministerial fantasies. On adoption, of course, we had a definitive piece of legislation last year, but here we are in Foster Care Fortnight back with another bite at the cherry in an effort to make the courts do the Government's bidding.

Professor Ray Jones, in response to the Children and Social Work Bill wrote in *Community Care*

'I fear we may be walking into a nightmare of the demise of an independent profession of social work and the advent of social work increasingly politically controlled and even more as an agent of government.

Some cross-cutting issues for the Policy Forum to consider

- Labour needs to make links across services and professions, and expose the Tories' assault on democratically accountable public services, and public service professionals.
- There is a particular issue with respect to social work, since it has to follow the pattern of portfolio responsibility shadow cabinet set by. Unlike nurses, doctors, teachers and the police, who know which member of the shadow team to approach about policy issues that affect their profession, for social workers the shadow cabinet brief is split, principally between the Health and Education portfolios, but also Home Office (adult and child protection and refugees), Justice (Cafcass and offenders) and DCLG (local government funding and Troubled Families). The Labour division of social work amongst the shadow cabinet serves to reinforce the government view that social work is not one professional group with a distinct identity but merely employees who are adjuncts to the relevant health, education and Home Office professionals.
- In government, Labour brought in or strengthened progressive policies (just some examples- personal budgets for the disabled and older people; stronger family support services under the rubric of the *Every Child Matters* legislation; Sure Start children's centres; 'staying put' for care leavers; strengthening post adoption services for birth as well as adoptive parents and adopted children).

- It also initiated pilots which aimed to test out alternative approaches to problems in service delivery identified by child death reviews and the pressures on community and residential services for vulnerable adults (eg the Frontline social work trainee programme and the pilot 'social work practices'). These were opposed by the majority of social workers, educators and researcher, not for narrow self-serving reasons of protecting the status quo, but from well-evidenced concerns that by weakening local democracy and the training and professional standing of social workers they will impact negatively on the ability of social workers to work in partnership with vulnerable people and, in high risk situations, to exercise the fine judgements needed.
- As evaluated pilots with an end date to assess their costs, value and impact, these initiatives have now provided some interesting information about what changes may be helpful and also which directions not to go in. The evaluation of social work practice pointed to some benefits but all but one had re-joined their local authorities before the end of the evaluation, which concluded *'contracted-out organizations struggled to provide children in out-of home care with the consistency and continuity they require'*.
- Accountability for decision-making about the allocation of services, especially when resources are being cut to the bone, and about child and adult protection, must rest with local authorities and not any private company. Social workers need to know they are working on behalf of the public and not for enterprises whose prime duty is to their share-holders, risking a shift of their sense of responsibility and duty away from statutory aims and objectives
- The Coalition Government and now the Tories and their private sector advisors have shown no interest in lessons learned from the pilots initiated by Labour, and have moved ahead wholesale. The 'sunset clause' on social work practices was allowed to lapse and a Statutory Instrument (strongly opposed by some on the Labour benches, but to no avail given the nature of the Statutory Instrument process) now allows local authorities to outsource, even their safeguarding decision making duties. A 'mixed economy' of service provision by third sector agencies alongside local authorities (eg in foster care, home care, family support and residential care across the age groups) has always been welcomed and many social workers are employed in these settings. However, the principle that the direct accountability for life enhancing or life threatening social care decisions remains with registered social workers employed by democratically accountable local authorities has now been breached.
- As far as we are aware, to date the Labour front bench has not revisited the initiatives it set up as pilots, and critiqued the ways in which the Tories are extending them to further their privatising and anti-local government aims. As one of our members put it *'Labour still sees itself as compromised and unwilling to challenge strongly as it introduced the foundations of so much of what is now being driven forward - social work practices, venture capitalist-supported fast-track training programmes, policy advice from PWC, KPMG and others. Labour needs to unhitch itself from how it's agendas of the past have been corrupted and colonised to legitimise the current government's market and privatisation agenda'*.
- We urge the Labour party policy forum, in addition to its work on specific policy areas, to develop coherent over-arching policies to respond to the health, education social care and daily living needs of those most in need of assistance. This should

include policies to ensure an adequate supply of appropriately qualified generalist and specialist public service professionals, including social workers.

- It is especially urgent, whilst working up policies for a future Labour manifesto, for the members of the shadow team to devise strategies to oppose and wherever possible amend the raft of damaging legislation that is being rushed through. It has already had some success with pensions, working tax credits and social housing and is fighting hard on wholesale academisation in schools. A similarly assertive approach is needed to oppose the present raft of legislation impacting on social work services. There are links between the 'academisation' of schools, which has destroyed the collaborative neighbourhood approach central to Labour's **Every Child Matters** policies; the outsourcing of family support and child and adult protection decision making and services; the inadequate funding and fragmentation of services for adults and children with mental health and addictions problems; cuts in policing that make it more difficult for them to fulfil a neighbourhood safety role; assaults on the income and housing needs of those in greatest need.
- Adults and children with complex physical, mental health, and social care needs have come off badly under successive governments, whether the major government department accountable for the services they need has been Health or Education. Their chances of being appropriately provided for are even worse when policies fall between the two Departments, or are even more fragmented as under the present government. Part of the policy forum consideration should focus on the governance arrangements, nationally and locally, that will best ensure that they do not continue to be so badly served, and can benefit from cost-effective and well-coordinated services provided by the appropriate range of professionals with time to talk with, understand and attend to their complex needs.
- In addition to opposing the centralisation of decisions about professional regulation and training for social workers into the hands of Ministers (as has already happened with teachers, the police and probation services) the Labour policy forum should explore whether the **Ofsted** model of service inspection is appropriate to child and family social care services. Questions have been raised by our members about the competence of individual inspectors whose decisions can be precursors of downward spirals (with social workers leaving to join agencies and the burden of agency fees for Interim senior managers and social workers making it even harder for a local authority to recover. One of our members noted that:
'Ofsted reports seem now to be part of the political system with a conveyor belt from inadequate reporting to a Commissioner and/or new company replacing Councils. Is there a model that enables professionals rather than cracks a whip over them?'
- Though the underlying principles are the same across age and needs groups, detailed accountability and governance arrangements (particularly between health service commissioners and providers and local authorities) are likely to differ. There is much detailed policy work to be done. This quote is relevant to integrated health and social care services more generally and throws out a challenge to the Labour Policy Forum if the complex problems of those with whom social workers come into contact are to be adequately addressed.

'We are still trying to understand what types of integration will make the greatest impact in different contexts and for which beneficiaries.We need greater precision

as to exactly what type of integration is being proposed and between what services. At present there is often a dense conceptual and definitional fog accompanying integration (my emphasis). The term is being used nationally (and indeed locally) in relation to a diverse range of collaborative arrangements between a host of different organisations, services and professions in order to (hopefully) address a variety of complex issues.' Robin Miller, University of Birmingham Health Services Management Centre