Social workers' views of the Professional Capabilities Framework

By Sara Dunn and Alison Yeoman

Report for

The College of Social Work

March 2011

Professional Capabilities Framework Consultation: Qualitative analysis of online questionnaire results

Background

The Social Work Reform Board has published a draft Professional Capabilities Framework on which is it currently consulting.[1] The College of Social Work wished to gather views of prospective members in order to incorporate these into a report to the SWRB.

An online form was developed using SurveyGizmo. (See Appendix 1). The form itemised the 9 capabilities of the PCF, and then used the same set of five consultation questions as the SWRB, and allowed users to provide comments of up to 150 words.

An invitation to complete the online form was sent to 1704 prospective members on 3 March 2011 (see Appendix 2). The form closed on 16 March, by which time 233 individuals had completed the form.

Approach to sampling and analysis

The agreed sample for analysis was 100 responses (50.76% of the total responses by 11 March when analysis began, 43% of the total eventually received). These were selected using a process of stratification sampling by work-role. In the demographic data section of the questionnaire respondents were asked to tick all applicable boxes for the 'social work role' question. Since many respondents indicated that they had more than one work-role this was taken account of by dividing participants into the following six categories:

- o Frontline Social Worker (abbreviated in this report to FL)

- o Manager/Employer (Man)

- o Educator – respondents who indicated that they were involved in education, e.g. Social Work Practice Teacher, Lecturer, Trainer, etc. (Ed)

- o Frontline Social Worker with management responsibility (FLMan)

- o Frontline Social Worker and/or Manager with an additional role in education (FL/Man+Ed)

- o Other – respondents with work-roles that did not fit any of the above categories, e.g. Consultant, Senior Policy Advisor, Workforce Development Officer, Researcher.

The number of responses for each work-role group was:

- o Frontline Social Worker n=63 (32% of total sample)

- o Manager/Employer n=31 (16% of total sample)

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- Educator n=33 (17% of total sample)

- Frontline Social Worker with management responsibility n=4 (2% of total sample)

- Frontline Social Worker and/or Manager with additional role in education n=27 (13% of total sample)

- Other n=39 (20% of total sample).

To create a representative final sample, these percentages were reflected in the number of respondents from each work-role group to be included in the final sample of 100 participants. This final sample therefore comprised:

- Frontline Social Worker n=32

- Manager/Employer n=16

- Educator n=17

- Frontline Social Worker with management responsibility n=2

- Frontline Social Worker and/or Manager with additional role in education n=13

- Other n=20

A random-number generator was used to select the final sample from the total number of respondents within each work-role category.

Thematic analysis of the free-text responses was carried out using NVivo 8 qualitative data analysis software. These themes are presented below to give a summary of the key messages in responses to each of the five main questions and to the catch-all question. Key messages relating to the nine individual capabilities are extracted. Filtering of responses by work-role, years of experience and work environment (type of service/employer) was carried out for the major themes we identified (e.g. 'implementation challenges'). In fact, views tended to be well-spread across all groups of respondents. If a trend did appear to emerge from the filtering this is included in the findings. Overall, respondents' comments related to very similar themes, suggesting that an acceptable level of saturation was reached with this sample. In other words, no significant new themes were likely to emerge from any further data analysed.

In the sections that follow, the direct quotes are attributed using an Id number that reflects the respondent's unique identifier on the Excel spreadsheet produced by SurveyGizmo. The respondent's work role is also indicated. Quotes are corrected for spelling but otherwise left verbatim.

Summary of findings

The findings revealed general, if sometimes cautious, support for the Framework particularly as means to providing a sound foundation for the social work profession. Respondents valued the attempt to define roles and expectations within the profession in a process that would be measurable and would follow the full career-path of a social worker. They felt that the Framework would help to raise the profile of the profession and increase understanding of the role of social workers both for the public and within other professions whilst identifying features that distinguish social workers from other professionals. The fact that the Capabilities within the Framework could be evidenced, thereby making social workers more overtly accountable, was valued as a way of improving public trust in the profession.

Challenges identified by participants focussed around the problems of getting theory into practice. There was concern that those within the profession, at all levels and in all roles, should fully understand the implications of the Framework and commit to it as the only way of ensuring that it would be workable. It would need to be fully integrated with social work education and post-qualification development process and with existing standards and frameworks, although there was some uncertainty about how this might be achieved. Respondents cited environmental pressures including workload, economic constraints, the challenges of multidisciplinary working and of working in different environments as further issues that might impact on successful implementation of the Framework. They again stressed the need for commitment from all stakeholders, particularly employers and managers, to ensure that social workers received the support they would need in order to access the training and evidence-base necessary to achieve the required standards. They also expressed uncertainty about the actual process of assessing achievements.

Opinion was divided about the choice of 'Professional Capabilities' as a working title with 44 respondents confirming that they were generally satisfied with the term and 53 stating that they were uncomfortable with the choice. Those that liked the term said that it would help social work establish itself as a defined and accountable discipline. Those that disliked it cited a number of reasons including lack of clarity and negative connotations. Suggestions for alternatives were made but without clear consensus of opinion.

For the question relating to the choice of Capabilities and their appropriateness for the profession as a whole, opinion was again divided fairly evenly with 56 respondents providing comments confirming that they were basically satisfied even if they had some suggestions for improvement or specific queries. Forty-one respondents expressed doubts about the choice which mainly related either to the difficulty of ensuring that the Framework would be applicable to all the varied roles and levels within the social work profession, especially given the varied contexts in which social workers practise. Several comments did refer to specific individual Capabilities but again there was no consensus of opinion. There were suggestions that the Framework should be simplified by amalgamating some of the Capabilities but individual respondents had their own views on how this should be achieved. Along with calls for the Framework to be reduced and simplified there were suggestions on how it could be expanded to take account of practice-areas that respondents felt were not given sufficient prominence. A range of suggestions were made including the need to draw out the importance of 'people skills' and the need to take more account of partnership working.

Question 5 asked whether the Framework should be expanded to contain any other career levels or specific roles. Of the 84 respondents that provided comments for this question, 19 stated that they were basically satisfied with the roles and levels currently covered by the Framework. The remaining respondents provided suggestions as to further roles/levels that could be included and raised issues around career development and looking to other organisations/countries for precedents. The range of additional roles/levels suggested was wide and, on the whole, reflected individual respondents' own circumstances or interests. The exception to this was a group of comments (25) querying the place for managers (particularly senior managers) within the framework. This was of particular interest to respondents given the impact of multidisciplinary working in which social workers' managers may not themselves be qualified social workers and in view of the management commitment that would be required to ensure successful implementation of the Framework.

The final question gave respondents the opportunity to make further comments. Several used this as an opportunity to confirm positive views about the Framework whilst others reiterated concerns or suggestions for improvements.

In sum:

- Social work professionals value initiatives that contribute to the establishment of a robust, accountable and well-defined profession.
- Such developments promote a positive profile of social work in the public arena and encourage better understanding from other professionals.
- Challenges focus on the problems of implementing the Framework in practice, specifically:
  - o Ensuring commitment from all levels within the profession including management
  - o Taking account of the additional training and support that will be require
  - o Integrating the Framework with existing standards and education/career development processes
  - o Ensuring that the individual Capabilities can be measured and monitored effectively
  - o Making the Framework workable in the context of environmental constraints such as the economic situation and the range of environments within which social workers practise.
- Opinion is divided on the suitability of the term 'Professional Capabilities', several alternatives were suggested but without consensus.
- Opinion is also divided on the appropriateness of the Capabilities. Suggested omissions/changes seemed to reflect individual respondents' circumstances/interests without a general consensus being achieved.
- Individual priorities also influenced comments about roles/levels covered by the Framework although provision for management levels within the Framework was queried by several respondents.

Findings in detail

Q1: What are the strengths of the Professional Capabilities Framework?

Since this question specifically asked for opinions about the strengths of the Framework, responses were generally positive. Only two participants did not provide an answer to this question. Comments can be included in three main themes:

- consolidation of professional identity

- evidencing the profession, and

- clarity of the framework.

1.1 Consolidation of professional identity

A lot of respondents (67) provided comments that related to how the Framework could help consolidate the identity of the social work profession. This is within the context of multidisciplinary working and of sensitivity towards perceptions of social work held by both the public and other professionals. These issues are explored later in responses to other questions, but when asked to identify the strengths of the Framework several respondents suggested that it would help combat the 'vague way' in which social work has historically been viewed by the public and by other professionals.

'The development of a clear career framework for social workers, this will give standards that are national and not the piecemeal approach that I feel is present at the moment. This also gives the profession clear standards about the development of Social Work. In my opinion we are often not taken seriously because there is a lack of clarity about the work we do..' (Respondent 566 – Ed)

The Framework is seen to provide 'a sound foundation, upon which the profession of Social Work can be built' and to encompass 'the essence of social work with an emphasis on values that can be applied across all service user groups'. It is 'an articulation of what a professional social work professional needs to know and how to conduct oneself vis a vis the set capability.'

'It outlines broadly, and in a clear way, the areas with which social work engages. It encompasses the differing contexts in which social workers practice, which I feel is important as we become much more integrated with other professions and providers of care/support. It recognises the strength and importance of the role that the social work profession can provide society, and the supportive, nurturing role we can model to our colleagues and peers.' (Respondent 367 – FL)

Respondents liked the fact that the Framework clearly sets out the qualities expected of people entering the profession and the discrete skills and knowledge-base required by qualified social workers. It is seen to give clear definitions of roles and responsibilities and to cover the core expectations that are necessary for the promotion of positive social-work practices.

'It sets parameters and identifies social work as profession that is critically reflective and committed to social justice. Moreover it recognised that it is a dynamic (i.e. changing)

profession that is aware of its social and political locations.' (Respondent 420 – Other)

Several participants particularly appreciated the emphasis placed on ethics, social justice, (values which 'differentiate social work to other professionals values') and on the skills of analysis and critical reflection.

'The main strength of the PCF is that it triangulates the connection between Ethics and Values; Academic Theory/Research Evidence; and Professional frontline Practice that is needed for an individual to be able to be a rounded social work practitioner.' (Respondent 58 – FLMan)

Participant 33 (FL) liked the fact that the Framework shows how professionalism, ethics and values come first before building on these core ideologies with other theories, knowledge and skills. He/she felt that the progression seems natural and defines the role ahead of the 'career path'.

Another factor which prompted many comments is that the Framework covers all stages of a social worker's development and spans their career, leading to a more 'holistic' approach to the profession. The range of roles covered was commented on positively (e.g. the inclusion of 'advanced practitioner') as was the fact that it acknowledges the importance of management structure, since if the support structure is inadequate social workers cannot operate effectively. The Framework is seen to support practitioners and managers in easily identifying the qualities needed for a social worker to be effective whilst highlighting 'at a time when statutory service managers may not be prioritising the ongoing development of staff, the ongoing importance of enabling social workers to be able to carry out their work with up to date knowledge of social care, legislative and practice issues'.

1.2 Evidencing the profession

Related to the idea of consolidating the identity of the profession is the concept of 'evidencing' the process. The need to raise public confidence/trust in and understanding of the profession was highlighted by several respondents, as was a desire to improve the profile of the profession and for social workers to be given support in asserting their professionalism and challenging individuals or organisations that seek to undermine that professionalism. Respondents hoped that the Framework would help those outside the profession to understand it better whilst making the profession more overtly accountable. This would in turn help to legitimise the status of social work as a profession, making it 'more reputable' and placing accountability on individuals.

'All social workers can be judged against the capabilities and it will give managers and employers a chance to draw up proper job descriptions using the framework to subjectively measure outcomes and have clear expectations on the social workers. It will also allow the users to be informed of what they can expect from a social worker.' (Respondent 216 – Other)

The provision of nationally-recognised standards by which capabilities could be measured and monitored was welcomed. The Framework was seen to be easy to understand and could be evidenced in a way that would support confidence in the profession.

'Provides a framework within which can be developed incremental performance related outcomes so that everyone is clear the level of attainment which should be expected from each level/year of social work practice.' (Respondent 227 – FL/Man+Ed)

'As each SW progresses, clear guidance or reference points will emerge to indicate where and at what level each SW is practicing, what areas are strong, what areas require strengthening. Properly developed and carried out, this could be a very useful reference tool, to map a workers ' progression, justify why someone should progress, or be used as a frame of reference to why the social worker should receive additional, targeted support...' (Respondent 441 – Ed)

1.3 Clarity of the Framework

Thirteen respondents specifically referred to the clarity of the Framework. They used terms such as 'compact and easy to apply', 'clear and concise', 'straightforward', and 'clarity and simplicity – easy to see what you are getting at'. They liked both the language used ('the less complicated and jargon based the better') and the presentation ('it is useful to have clear and simple headline features identified').

'They capture the essence of what a professional social work organisation should be. In the main the summary nine capability points are in simple easy to understand language that must continually be used to help ensure that as a profession what is being said, learned, listened to, is always easily understood.' (Respondent 527 – Other)

Q2: What challenges and barriers need to be addressed in further developing this Framework?

All but four respondents made comments relating to this question. Relating back to themes emerging from Question 1, several used this opportunity to highlight concerns about the need to define the professional role. They cited the confusion felt by the public, the lack of understanding from other professionals, and the need to establish a clear identity for the role within the multidisciplinary environment.

'Need to further refine the areas of "difference" from other professions working in the health and social care arena whilst building on the "core competencies" that work across professions, e.g. within mental health.' (Respondent 72 – Man)

Two participants proposed that service-users' views should be canvassed since 'carers are an essential voice to hear' and that the Framework should be rooted in their views as well as those of social workers themselves.

In comparison to comments in Question 1 about the clarity of the Framework, some respondents to Question 2 stated that they found it confusing. They used terms like 'vague and very generic', 'open to interpretation', or suggested that 'the reduction of complex topics to simple words loses much of the depth of meaning' which does not 'reveal the depth of social work'. Some queried how the Framework would map to existing frameworks and standards or queried whether a new Framework was really necessary: 'feels like a duplication of what we have already signed up to in the GSCC code and code of ethics. Why reinvent the wheel – when could review existing frameworks'. Coupled with this was suspicion that practitioners might be cynical about yet another initiative. There was concern

that the Framework should integrate adequately with other frameworks. Those mentioned specifically were:

- Those being developed by ADCS and the National Leadership College for tier 1-3 managers.
- A national post-qualifying framework, to include the various levels of PQ/CPD development.
- A national framework with integrated academic and professional awards.
- Mapping the National Occupational Standards across to the new Framework.
- Concern that the system should be simplified with 'just one framework for evaluation competence at every level of professional development'.
- The 'fit' between the Framework and the GSCC code of practice.

However, by far the greatest number of comments in this section (57 in all) related to the challenges inherent in actually implementing the Framework. These comments can be grouped into four main themes:

- Awareness and change issues,

- Workload and pressures

- Environmental constraints, and

- Assessing and applying the Capabilities.

2.1 Awareness and change issues

Seven participants made comments relating to this theme either demonstrating their own cynicism about the Framework ('There is nothing inspirational there or nothing new either') or expressing concerns that adapting to change might be a difficult process for some social workers. They stressed the importance of supporting social workers through the change by ensuring that employers 'fully embrace' the framework and provide 'robust supervisions' and time for employees to develop skills. Respondents felt that social workers should be kept informed about the Framework and would need to be convinced of its value to the profession. One suggested that there may be some resistance to change given 'all that is going on with restructuring and the pressures in statutory work'.

2.2 Workload and pressures

Six respondents referred to the high workload of social workers and the pressure this places on them or to the stresses inherent in the job. These participants came from a range of work-roles but all had over five years' experience and all were employed by Local Authorities. Their comments included:

'The largest barrier is stress; in order to think and reflect on your practice you need time and my experience is that I am under constant pressure dealing with urgent and high priority cases.' (Respondent 322 – Man)

'Some local authorities don't put on sufficient training to meet the knowledge section. These areas are what I learnt during training and in my own time. Work is so busy it is hard to keep up. With all the cuts the local authorities are preventing/limiting us from section 4,7,8. It's ticking boxes to win prizes!' (Respondent 75 – FL/Man+Ed)

2.3 Environmental constraints

Leading on from the previous theme, the greatest number of comments relating to implementation challenges referred to Environmental constraints (33 responses). Again, the majority of respondents (25 of the 33) were employed by Local Authorities. The main themes emerging in this section were:

- Economic constraints and lack of support from management that prevent social workers from accessing training opportunities and evidence from current research. How to ensure that evidence is disseminated to social workers at a time when statutory service managers may not be prioritising staff development. One respondent highlighted agency workers in this context. Another commented that social workers must draw on and synthesise a disparate knowledge-base so that they are at risk of trying to be 'all things to all people'.
- Concern that Local Authorities would not offer similar levels of support to both qualified and unqualified social workers despite that fact that they have similar roles; or that they appear to treat services differently (e.g. giving Children's social workers preferential terms).
- Working within the bureaucratic culture that exists in some Local Authorities.
- Working in an environment where managers and senior practitioners may not themselves be qualified social workers.
- The challenge of working in partnership with health providers ('SWs professionals feel their status compromised by funding for welfare being allotted to Health. The partnership may be fruitful to a degree but how will the framework change the situation to one of equality?').
- How will the framework work with Advocacy and the introduction of personalisation and individual budgets etc.?
- The challenges associated with bringing together all the different roles within social work and the different systems employers currently use within departments.
- Fears that those in power see social work as an easy target for cuts.
- Ensuring that social workers are respected as a profession and are not 'made a scapegoat' for central governments' failure to resource health and social care.
- The pressures faced by social work education due to spending cuts etc. with student placements under threat as teams are amalgamated or dissolved.

2.4 Assessing and applying the Capabilities

The main issues in this section related to concerns about how to make sure that the Capabilities would be applied and would be measurable. For this to happen, participants thought it essential that the Framework be clearly understood and supported at all levels of the profession. It should also be integrated into the education process.

'Ensuring all social workers adhere to it and understand it. Ensure education including post registration education is appropriate and equips both students and qualified social workers to understand and work to it and ensuring that employers both support the basics and make it possible for staff to adhere to them.' (Respondent 324 – Other)

Many seemed unclear about the actual processes for assessing and evidencing the Capabilities in practice ('How are these to be demonstrated?', 'How would they expect to be evidenced in practice?).

Q3: What do you think of the term 'Professional Capabilities' as a working title for the Framework? Is 'capabilities' a word you are comfortable with in this context, or do you think a more appropriate term should be used?

Only three respondents did not reply to this question. Fourteen respondents simply stated that they were happy with the choice of term and 24 others were generally positive and provided additional comments supporting the choice of the term. They felt it would help the profession develop as a discipline: providing 'a set of quantifiable standards' to which social workers could aspire and encouraging social workers 'to take more responsibility for their own professional learning and behaviour'. Several said they liked the fact that it allowed for capacity for improvement whilst acknowledging that level of performance could also deteriorate, ensuring the provision of guidance for people who need additional support is on the agenda. They liked that fact that it would encourage accountability, meaning that social workers would have to demonstrate 'their abilities in these areas not just their knowledge' and that they are 'capable as practitioners and providers of a service' The term was described as 'good', as 'clearly understood and non-jargon' and as 'accurately' capturing 'what this is all about'.

'It sounds pretty good - more direct. The word "Capabilities" is an honest word and I think that it is one that describes perfectly that social workers need to be "capable" professionals and this term will help the public to understand the high professional expectations on them.' (Respondent 292 – Other)

Six respondents indicated that they were basically comfortable with the choice but suggested possible alternatives that they felt might be more appropriate, for example:

'I think it is acceptable but should we not automatically assume that any professional is capable of fulfilling their role to the best possible degree? I don't know if it sounds a bit patronising. What about 'Professional Aptitude Framework'? I think Aptitude is much more positive a term and sounds more polished and professional than 'capable'.' (Respondent 459 – FL)

Overall, 53 respondents indicated that they were uncomfortable with the choice of term, with 38 of making suggestions for alternative choices. Suggested alternatives can broadly be grouped as follows:

- Those proposing use of the word 'Skills' (e.g. Professional Skills Framework/Professional Skills Values Framework/Professional Skills Set)
- Those suggesting 'Competencies' (i.e. Professional Competency Framework)

- Those preferring a range of other terms including Professional Standards, Code of Ethics, Social Work Practice Framework, Professional Principles Framework, or something containing the concept of 'values'. One participant suggested changing the title to 'something along the lines of "Mission Statement"'.

Reasons for feeling uncomfortable with the choice of term can similarly be grouped into broad categories:

That it has negative connotations. This theme was raised by several participants who were concerned that the term could be associated with its use in different contexts (e.g. with work-capability or disciplinary procedures or with a scheme relating to sickness benefits).

Concern that it does not capture transferring skills and knowledge into practice. For example:

'We went down this route in mental health with the ten essential shared capabilities. I'm not convinced we captured the essence of what being capable means. It is not just about having the skills and knowledge it is about how these are used in practice.' (Respondent 235 – Ed)

That it is not clear enough (perhaps suggesting 'potential' rather than 'actual ability') or that it could be misinterpreted. For example:

'I feel capabilities could be used in the wrong context by others if a practitioner is weaker in some areas does this mean they are not Capable or to be able to practice effectively everyone has to be an expert in all nine capabilities.' (Respondent 477 – FL)

That it is too restrictive and does not take account of circumstances or of the fact that things are not always 'clear cut'. For example:

'It looks like we are talking about a set of abilities that could be measurable regardless of circumstances. It presupposes that capability is something that can be non-problematic and perhaps also oversimplifies the unpredictable client/service user versus professional social worker qualitative, not quantitative relationship in interaction. It needs further refining even if adding a qualifying adjective?' (Respondent 196 – Man)

Q4: Have we identified the right capabilities, and are they suitable for all social workers, no matter where they work or how experienced they are?

Only six participants declined to answer this question. Thirty-six simply indicated that they were satisfied with the Capabilities and a further 20 also stated that they were basically happy with the choice, with the addition of further comments confirming approval ('Yes, I think it is as comprehensive as it needs to be', 'Yes, these can be measured against experience and ongoing professional development), suggesting improvements ('Perhaps each section should make a link to why this is relevant to the service user'), or asking for clarification ('Yes although I'm not clear why diversity is separate to "values and ethics" and "rights" etc.').

Of the participants that indicated they were unhappy with the choice of Capabilities, most made points that could be loosely grouped under the theme of 'Content' and the remainder commented on the problems associated with making the Framework applicable to all within the profession. Comments made by this latter group focussed on the following:

- The fact that it is difficult to achieve standardisation given that social workers practise in different environments and services, each with its own purpose, priorities and expectations.
- Some features of the Framework are more appropriate for some levels than others ('I do not feel that "professional leadership" is relevant for newly qualified social workers, this could end up with some student social workers not passing this capability'). How will the final version of the Framework take account of different expectations at different levels?
- Some elements may not be appropriate to some roles within the profession (e.g. for those in management/teaching roles who are less likely to have contact with service users).
- In integrated teams the lack of evidence-base to support the qualities may result in them being undervalued.
- What will happen to social workers who do not have 'their piece of paper' to prove their capabilities?

Comments referring to the 'Content' of the Framework focussed on opinions about the nine Capabilities themselves and suggested alternatives/inclusions. There was a range of opinions about the individual Capabilities with participants proposing ways to amalgamate them or querying whether some should be included at all. To summarise:

1. PROFESSIONALISM: Respondent 240 (Man) felt that this Capability is 'meaningless'. Respondent 454 (FL) suggests that having Professionalism as the first Capability might suggest that it is a problem that needs addressing rather than a basic expectation on all social workers. This respondent thought that the 9 points could be condensed to 7 with subsections to give further detail. He/she also suggested changing the order so that the principal functions of a social worker (Capabilities 4,7 and 8) should come first.

2. VALUES AND ETHICS: Two participants (Ed, Man) proposed combining Capabilities 2-4 since they seem to overlap.

3. DIVERSITY: No comments

4. RIGHTS, JUSTICE AND ECONOMIC WELLBEING: Respondent 322 (Man) was uncertain about this Capability since, although it is an underlying theme of a social worker's role, 'we now "sign-post" people to the appropriate organisations'. Respondent 550 (Ed) queried the focus on 'economic' wellbeing and asked why this could not be broadened to 'general wellbeing' and poverty specifically.

5. KNOWLEDGE: One respondent thought this Capability could be an area of conflict with Capability 6 if they were not clearly defined in terms of what is being required (Other). Participant 240 (Man) felt that 5 and 6 should be merged.

6. CRITICAL REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS: No comments

7. INTERVENTION AND SKILLS: Participant 240 (Man) thought that this is unrealistic ('we cannot prevent harm, neglect, abuse, but what we can do is recognise it and help those involved identify different outcomes for their lives').

8. CONTEXTS AND ORGANISATIONS: Respondent 509 (FL) suggested that beyond the need to adapt to change, social workers should be encouraged and supported in taking a role in trying to develop services.

9. PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP: Participant 240 (Man) suggests adding this to the current Capability 1 as an explanation of 'professionalism'. Respondent 444 (Ed) did not feel that this is applicable for all roles and Respondent 509 (FL) also suggested that tasks in this Capability should be part of a more senior position to provide a basis for progression.

Overall there did not appear to be decisive opinion about the appropriateness of the individual criteria, although there was some momentum for the idea that some Capabilities could be merged thereby simplifying the Framework; the comments were based on individual respondents' interpretations and personal priorities. In terms of suggested additions to the Framework, areas identified as missing were:

- Collaborative practice and the importance of partnership-working
- An understanding that social workers function within a network of people of all ages and abilities etc.
- Differentiation between Children's/Adults services and inclusion of various specialisms
- Problem-solving skills
- Inclusion of 'Efficacy' – evidence that capabilities are being used to the right effect
- Recognition of the care/control conflict inherent in the profession
- Recognition of the conflict engendered by discussion of human rights ('whose human rights we are advancing')
- Issues around risk and vulnerability
- Leadership qualities
- More emphasis on practical qualities (e.g. working with people and what methods to use) rather than simple knowledge of theories etc.
- Explicit reference to relationship-building, emotional literacy, communication skills and the holistic approach to supporting users' wellbeing
- The importance of being a research-informed practitioner ('Please do not keep subsuming this under reflexivity. Other professions don't!')
- Greater differentiation of social workers' skills from other professions such as nursing etc.
- The inclusion of specific guidelines such as for child protection
- The inclusion of advocacy
- More emphasis on intervention and skills.

Two areas that were particularly highlighted in comments were the importance of 'people skills' and of working in partnership, both with service-users and in an increasingly 'inter-professional context' without losing sight of the core differences between social workers and other professions. Several respondents noted the value of softer skills including, communication skills, judgement and practice-wisdom.

'Like the competency framework before it, it is very procedures driven and makes it difficult to assess personal qualities such as emotional literacy and intelligence, the ability to contain emotional chaos of service users and the empathic humanness which allows the best social workers to work with resistance effectively'. (Respondent 235 – Ed)

Q5: The Framework covers levels from entry into the social work degree to advanced practice and frontline management roles, following the National Career Structure for Social Work that was recommended by the Social Work Task Force. Should the Framework contain any other career levels or specific roles? If so, what are they?

In response to this question, 19 participants indicated that they were satisfied with the levels and roles currently covered by the Framework and 16 did not reply to this question.

Excluding issues relating to management which are explored below, the further roles/levels suggested by other participants were:

Trainers (n=2)	Personal situation doesn't fit any existing category (n=1)
Social work academics/educators in higher education institutions (n=2)	Researchers in social work field (n=1)
Staff in mental health service and AMHP (n=2)	Social work assistants (n=1)
Residential social work/owners of provider services and care homes (n=2)	Social work consultant within mental health services (n=1).
Educators/educationalists (n=2)	Unqualified staff having to take greater responsibility (n=1)
Learning and development practitioners and managers (n=1)	Final year students (n=1)
More emphasis on those who have chosen to remain frontline workers (n=1)	Those providing training at pre- and post-qualifying levels (n=1)
Employed in private/voluntary sectors (n=1)	Law (n=1)
Palliative care (n=1)	Those working in specialist teams, e.g. in hospitals (n=1)
Social Care Workers and Support Workers (n=1)	Clinical practitioner (n=1)
Clinical practitioner (n=1)	

As can be seen above, there was little consensus in the suggestions for inclusion and many related to the individual respondent's own circumstances.

The exception to this was the group of comments relating to how the Framework covers managers. Twenty-five respondents raised this issue, mainly querying the place for

managers (particularly senior or strategic managers such as Assistant Director/Director of Child Protection) within the Framework, e.g.:

'Should there not be something more specific for managers? Their training needs are often overlooked, yet managers have to deal with accountability & responsibility. Managers carry risk and manage risky situations for their teams, where is there structure?' (Respondent 104 – Man)

'I think that is should include management leve;f social workers who manage social workers too, so they are fully aware of and signed up to the same set of 'rules' and this may prevent the same negativity from the Peter Connelly investigation.' (Respondent 290 –FL)

'I think that those managing social workers should also have a capability framework as with more multi-disciplinary teams being set up with health and social care professionals working together, some social workers are likely to receive their professional supervision (formal and informal) from non-social workers.' (Respondent 292 – Other)

This point that in some environments (e.g. councils) managerial posts in some services are not necessarily held by qualified social workers was raised by more than one participant.

We reviewed the data on this question according to a range of variables. There were no significant trends according to work role. However, more respondents came from the Childrens' sector (n=13) than from the Adult-service sector (n=8), 21 participants were based in Local Authorities (as opposed to 4 who were non-LA-based), and most (n=20) had over five years' experience.

Other themes which emerged from answers to this question tended to relate to career development/training and highlighted the following concerns:

- That the Framework should be clear about how much experience a social worker should have had before taking on additional responsibilities – could some capabilities be unique to certain levels which would also help employers know what to expect of people at different career-levels?
- Simply having qualifications does not lead to better practice. Any qualifications should be placed firmly in the practice arena.
- Could the Framework be introduced gradually over the first year to relieve pressure on newly-qualified social workers? Students could continue their professional learning through an evolving portfolio of how they feel they are achieving against the capability criteria.

Some respondents suggested looking further afield to other professions or other countries for ideas:

- Could specialisation begin at an early level (e.g. Baccalaureate level as in Canadian Child Welfare and Children's Services)?
- Could the scope of social work be broadened to include a wider range of roles e.g. therapists/people in community development as in the USA?
- Could lessons be learned from the fields of psychology/psychiatry/law etc. regarding placing the emphasis on professional identity and professional obligation rather than

on what is only for certain groups of qualified social workers at certain levels of responsibility?

- Should entry level for social work practice be the same as in the USA, i.e. Masters level for qualification and then a tested Licence to Practice which would encourage potential social workers to consider very carefully a decision to commit to the profession?

Q6: Do you have any other comments to make regarding the Professional Capabilities Framework?

Forty-two respondents provided additional comments although few new issues were raised at this point. Many used the opportunity to summarise their feelings, often positive, about the Framework and the work being undertaken, e.g.

'It is a truly commendable Framework encompassing all the parameters of social work professionalism. Thanks.' (Respondent 277 – FL)

'It has been long overdue.' (Respondent 346 – FL)

'I welcome it and look forward to this going some way in pulling back some identity for the profession.' (Respondent 371 – Man)

Some concerns were reiterated at this stage, particularly regarding how the Framework would integrate with all the other standards ('We already have lots of frameworks. I am not really clear of the purpose of this') and the challenges implicit in making it workable. Twenty respondents made comments relating to getting the Framework into practice. These respondents came from a range of work-roles and services but the majority (16) had over five years' experience. Their comments related to:

- The importance of matching the curricula of social work courses to the Framework and of linking into existing processes and procedures (e.g. into the appraisal system).
- The need to ensure that employers are 'on board' whilst acknowledging that that social work is about more than simply measuring how many assessments have been completed etc. The Framework would have to be mandatory otherwise employers might be tempted to opt out given the resource implications.
- The need for acceptance from social workers who must be comfortable to display the document in their offices to show who they are as professionals. They must also be given time and appropriate support in working to meet the capability criteria.
- The challenge of ensuring that social workers are able to evidence/demonstrate that they are fulfilling the requirements of the Framework – making sure that it is practical and measurable.
- The fear that future governments would 'change everything again'.
- A suggestion that further simplification would make the Framework more easily-applicable and hence more likely to work in practice. Similarly further clarity and clear guidance would enable it to be applied effectively.
- Concerns about maintaining commitment to continuing professional development if the Post-qualifying Framework is discontinued.

- The challenge of ensuring that other professions and the public 'value these rather nebulous ideals and see them as skills and contributions made specifically by social work'.
- The importance of ensuring that issues of race, culture, ability and use of language are properly accounted for and reflected in the staffing and management including board representation of the college.
- Fear that the Framework won't 'have any teeth'.
- The need for new social workers to have a forum where they can openly talk about their fears etc. and have their beliefs challenged.
- Anxiety that financial constraints will inhibit introduction of the Framework and fears that the detail of the Framework would discourage small-to- medium-sized voluntary agencies from recruiting social workers as the impression may be given that social workers require an elaborate framework to support their employment.

Reflecting on the future of the profession, one respondent stressed the importance of evidence-based practice (i.e. of the research-informed practitioner). Another expressed concerns about the future should the Professional Capabilities Framework lead to the introduction of licensure of social workers. This respondent supported the principle of licensure but was anxious that it should be based on skill-level rather than on service-type.

Professional Capabilities Framework: Consultation

WELCOME

Thank you for your interest in this consultation.

The Social Work Reform Board recently put forward a 'Professional Capabilities Framework' (PCF) for social work. This is a vital step on the journey to defining social work as a profession.

The PCF comprises nine core capabilities that are intended to set the standard for social workers' education and professional development. The PCF will be clearly linked to the career progression and seniority of individual social workers.

The Framework will be the essential reference point for other work, such as the new curriculum for initial training and the new proficiency standards for registration from the Health Professions Council.

So it is very important that social workers give their feedback at this consultation stage.

The College of Social Work is collecting social workers' views via a number of channels, including this online form. The views submitted to us via this form will be synthesised and presented to the Reform Board in the name of the College of Social Work as the view of the profession.

You are of course also welcome to submit your answers direct to the Reform Board at the Department of Education.

Your feedback here will be anonymous. Your comments may be quoted, but you will not be identifiable in any way.

Please complete this consultation form by 16 March 2011.

You will get the chance to be entered into a prize draw to win one of five College sponsored delegate places of your choice selected from:

Community Care Conferences [all links open in a new window]
NCAS Conference
LGA Conference

Thank you again for helping The College ensure the views of social workers are heard.

Maurice Bates and Corinne May-Chahal, co-chairs, The College of Social Work

If you have any queries about this consultation, please contact

Owen Davies, Public Affairs Advisor, The College of Social Work owen.davies@scie.org.uk

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About you

) How long have you been a qualified social worker?

( ) I am a social work student, not yet qualified

( ) Less than one year (NQSW)

( ) 1-5 years

( ) 6-9 years

( ) 10 years or more

) Which service area do you work in?

( ) Children's services

( ) Adults' services

( ) Mental health

( ) Other (please specify)

) Who is your main employer?

( ) Local authority

( ) NHS

( ) Voluntary or not for profit service provider

( ) Private service provider

( ) Self-employed

( ) Other (please specify)

What is your social work role? (Tick all that apply)

[ ] Frontline social worker

[ ] Manager or employer of a social work team or service

[ ] Social work practice teacher

[ ] Other (please specify)

The Professional Capabilities Framework

The Professional Capabilities Framework is contained in the Social Work Reform Board's report 'Building a Safe and Confident Future: One Year On'. You can download the report from the **Department for Education website** [link opens in a new window].

For ease of reference, we have summarised the nine capabilities in the Framework:

1 PROFESSIONALISM - Identify and behave as a professional social worker, committed to professional development

2 VALUES AND ETHICS - Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice

3 DIVERSITY - Recognise diversity and apply anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice

4 RIGHTS, JUSTICE AND ECONOMIC WELLBEING - Advance human rights and promote social justice and economic wellbeing

5 KNOWLEDGE - Apply knowledge of social sciences, law and social work practice theory

6 CRITICAL REFLECTION AND ANALYSIS - Apply critical reflection and analysis to inform and provide a rationale for professional decision-making

7 INTERVENTION AND SKILLS - Use judgement and authority to intervene with individuals, families and communities to promote independence, provide support and prevent harm, neglect and abuse

8 CONTEXTS AND ORGANISATIONS - Engage with, inform, and adapt to changing contexts that shape practice. Operate effectively within own organisational frameworks and contribute to the development of services and organisations. Operate effectively within multi-agency and inter-professional settings

9 PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP - Take responsibility for the professional learning and development of others through supervision, mentoring, assessing, research, teaching, leadership and management

Below are the five questions the Reform Board is asking consultees. Please tell us your views.

(Max word count 150 words each).

1.) What are the strengths of the Professional Capabilities Framework?

2.) What challenges and barriers need to be addressed in further developing this Framework?

3.) What do you think of the term 'Professional Capabilities' as a working title for the Framework? Is 'capabilities' a word you are comfortable with in this context, or do you think a more appropriate term should be used?

4.) Have we identified the right capabilities, and are they suitable for all social workers, no matter where they work or how experienced they are?

5.) The Framework covers levels from entry into the social work degree to advanced practice and frontline management roles, following the National Career Structure for social work that was recommended by the Social Work Task Force. Should the Framework contain any other career levels or specific roles? If so, what are they?

Any other comments

) Do you have any other comments to make regarding the Professional Capabilities Framework?

) Would you like to be entered into a draw to win one of five College sponsored conference delegate places?

( ) Yes

( ) No

) Your email address for entering the draw (it will be separated from your consultation comments)

_____

) Would you be willing to have a short (approx. 15 minute) follow-up phone call about your views with a researcher from The College of Social Work if required?

( ) Yes

( ) No

We will get in touch to arrange a convenient time to speak with you.

) Your telephone number

_____

) Please confirm your email address

_____

THANK YOU!

Thank you for giving us your views.

We look forward to reading them and incorporating them into our report to the Reform Board.

A copy of our report will be published on The College of Social Work website in April 2011.

Appendix 2: Invitation to participate

Take part in our Professional Capabilities Framework Research and enter our prize draw

Making your opinions count - Professional Capabilities Framework

The Social Work Reform Board recently put forward a 'Professional Capabilities Framework' (PCF) for social work. This is a vital step on the journey to defining social work as a profession.

The PCF comprises nine core capabilities that are intended to set the standard for social workers' education and professional development.

It is very important that social workers give their feedback at this consultation stage. Please give us your views today by taking part in our Professional Capabilities Framework online consultation at:

http://www.surveygizmo.com/s3/477281/PCF-consultation

The views submitted to us via this form will be analysed and presented to the Reform Board as the views of the profession.

Submit your views by **16 March 2011** for your chance to be to be entered into a prize draw to win one of five College sponsored places at your choice of selected Community Care conferences, the NCAS conference or the LGA conference (more information is provided at the start of the survey).

Thank you for helping The College to ensure that the views of social workers are heard.

If you have any queries about this consultation, please contact:

Owen Davies, Public Affairs Advisor, The College of Social Work
owen.davies@scie.org.uk

The College of Social Work does not send unsolicited emails. To unsubscribe from this mailing list please contact collegeinfo@scie.org.uk.

To find out more about the The College of Social Work, please visit our website: http://www.collegeofsocialwork.org/.

You can also contact The College of Social Work c/o the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) | T: 020 7089 9917 | F: 020 7089 6841 | Goldings House, 2 Hay's Lane, LONDON SE1 2HB