



## **Critical Social Work Practice**

*How effective are standards?*

### **Winifred**

Susannah Watson – there you are. Are the standards as they play out in your everyday working life a bit like a broken DVD that will come back to bite you on the bum? That's one of the world's greatest mixed metaphors! But you know what I mean.

### **Susanna**

I can't say that I have them pinned up above my desk and refer to them to help me decide what to do. I don't disagree with the codes of practice. I mean I think it's a sensible code to work by and I think yeah potentially it gives you a little bit more sense of being somebody who's slightly independent of the organisation that you work for, which could give you the sense of having a bit more kind of clout in terms of your own decision making. If you really were at loggerheads with your organisation you know if there was a decision that you profoundly believed that you had to make to abide by those codes of practice and the organisation disagreed I don't quite know what you would do about it. I suppose - I mean you would whistle blow. You would perhaps resign. I don't know. So I don't know how much they would help at that point.

### **Maggie**

I was going to give a concrete example of the use of discretion. Well it's in the case of child protection because recently in Scotland they tried to introduce mandatory information sharing in a Bill about the vetting and barring of people unsuitable to work with children and vulnerable adults. And there was a very strong response from the profession about: "Wait a Minute". We do actually need to keep some discretion and to be able to use discretion in the best interests of children in terms of sharing information because quite often if you just share information, because it's more than your jobs worth not, to because you are minding your back, because it's better to call in the child protection procedures – for your own sake than for the child's, you can actually be I think breaking the codes of practice and also breaking the kind of – the professional duty to protect a child. So I would say instead of it being at loggerheads with your manager, in some ways what we are saying as an agency, is use your professional discretion but do use supervision in order to check it out. Don't think that using your professional discretion means being out on a limb, going it on your own, deciding you know you will or you won't take a certain course of action. At crucial times you do have to and people need to know that they are responsible for their actions. But it's actually sometimes when you don't know what's for the best, to tell or not to tell, to keep a child secret until such time as you can organise something better than a very crude child protection assessment, then these things need to be checked out with experienced social workers and other professionals in order to really get to the roots of whether your action would be in the best interests of the child.

### **Winifred**

Susannah Watson, the thing always about regulations is what springs from them, which is paper work. How much of your time do you feel is spent servicing regulation.

### **Susanna**

I think it is quite a lot of the time. I mean I've been qualified about six years so some of it I've not been working as a social worker terribly long. Some of it - some of the sort of basic paperwork of community care I've kind of taken as read. It's just what's always been there in my experience. I think the -and some of that I actually think is quite positive. I mean you're - you're often recording information and then sharing that recorded information with the service user. So it is a way of actually being quite transparent with the service user about what is

being written and shared about them. And I think those sorts of processes are actually you know potentially quite - quite positive and it can also help to sort of think through a situation if you are writing it down and recording the views the views of other people. I think – I mean in the last few years I think what has mushroomed, which has been touched on before, is the sort of monitoring of performance of the department and we do spend a certain amount of time and it certainly causes a disproportionate amount of frustration, kind of recording things - the sorts of things that Andy was talking about, the sort of time scales for assessments and that kind of thing. So when you have finished an assessment you have to put it into the computer kind of you know when it was completed and all that information is then churned out at the other end and sent to the government. And I think because that – that's never going to be a priority for a social worker. If you have got a choice between either arranging an emergency placement for an older person one afternoon or getting your - your sort of reporting your monitoring information up to date you are going to be arranging the placement. And I would really question the accuracy of a lot of the information that's churned out at the other end when it's relying on - on practitioners to put it in.

### **Steve**

I think we are touching on a complex area here because when we are talking about what's often referred to as the 'performance framework' we really are talking I think about a mixture of things. We are talking about some things, which do stem from regulation in a sense that they are connected with the Commission for Social Care Inspection. But there's another aspect of it too, which is government targets and those government targets being implemented through a whole range of different levers that government has. So what is particularly complex about this is trying to identify what exactly is due to regulation and arguably kinds of standards and standards of service. What is to do with government targets because the argument has been made in social care and in health that those targets themselves can distort, potentially distort services, distort the amount of time people spend on certain things. Erm - provide a focus, which may not necessarily be the focus that those professionals think that they should have. Erm - now whether you should therefore see the rise if you like of a performance culture is entirely due to regulation or whether you should see it as rather more due to the focus on targets by New Labour and I guess by Gordon Brown in particular, is a mute point. I mean I think there is a - it's not clear to me that this is actually driven primarily by regulations. A lot of it seems to be driven by targets.

### **Winifred**

Could we turn now to the National Occupational Standards for England and Wales. How are they set and how are they meant to define in practice what is good social work?

### **Steve**

The National Occupational Standards are really at the moment come under the remit of Skills for Care and the Children's Workforce Development Council, which is a new sector Skills Council of Bodies that the government has set up. They're part and parcel of a major desire on the part of the government to make sure that every single job if you like in the country is covered by a relevant set of occupational standards. So it's not something unique to social care. It's not something specific to social care. It's a model really. It's a workforce model about setting standards of performance if you like.

### **Winifred**

So where else does it apply then?

### **Steve**

It applies in almost every other area. I'd be surprised if there are not some occupational standards governing broadcasting and journalism as well.

### **Winifred**

Well if there are I don't know what they are. But anyway –

### **Steve**

But the principle is there. It's not just specific to social care. What is I think interesting about the National Occupational Standards is that they've been built into the regulatory framework

for social work in a rather particular and unusual way for a profession so most professions are governed by a professional framework. And in addition there are sets of occupational standards, which are relevant to their work. . What has happened with social work is that when the new Degree in social work was set up, the National Occupational Standards for Social Work were built in to the requirements for education and training so that now when students follow a social work programme they are required to demonstrate that they can actually meet all those different occupational standards when they are on placement. So the whole thing is very tightly meshed together. So that's effectively what occupational standards are as far as training is concerned. But they're also supposed to govern practice and be a kind of underpinning idea about what the role of the social worker is. And in fact without going on at great length about it the National Occupational Standards are built around a number of key roles which social workers are deemed to be performing. The big problem with it all is of course these things get out of date and of course no sooner do you try to implement one of these frameworks then you have to review them and look at them again. And of course one of the things that's going on at the moment is with the driver towards inter-professional work, multidisciplinary work, people are now saying look, if we have all these different occupational standards governing different professions, aren't they actually going to drive practice apart. Shouldn't we be trying to simplify these things; bring them together? And there is an enormous project going on to try to integrate different sets of occupational standards. And I have to say I'm very thankful that I am no longer involved with this kind of thing because it's absolutely mind-boggling as you can expect. But some people are, and they are trying to integrate them.

### **Winifred**

How is it different then in Scotland? You have been describing the way training and practice dovetail in England and Wales, what's happening in Scotland?

### **Maggie**

Well it's interesting what Steve was saying and although we don't have the same terminology or even the same . we don't have the National Occupational Standards for instance but I think the two things are going on as well in that on the one hand there is becoming a greater clarity about what is the role of the social worker and recently we had a review of social work in Scotland - Twenty First Century Review - which produced a report called "Changing Lives" and part of that in a working group that I was a member of was the role of the social worker. And that came along at the same time as protection of title and regulation of social workers and registration of social workers so all of that was going on. But at the same time we have a new policy document: "Getting it right for every child". And there are similar ones for adult care but basically calling for social workers and other professionals to work more closely together, to share tasks, to have a common assessment framework etc. so the same two things are going on. And I think it's very interesting that in some ways what we established in the role of the social worker group is that you can't do joint work unless each person is very clear what their work is and there needs to be a very specific role for social workers in specific situations. Whether we have got the gap between the training of social workers where there are standards and clear outcomes are expected from social work education and then what goes on later on I think is a mute point. And it might be useful to think of some you know like the apprentice scheme. I think in Ireland you have to be qualified and practising for a year before you can become a social worker. And it's the same in other professions. So I think that might be one way of making sure of continuing education and some sort of occupational standards or a set of standards or knowledge and skills is actually present in the workforce that's practising.