<u>Strengthening leadership in social work: the importance of the four 'C's</u>

Leadership in social work is not only demonstrated by the senior managers of its organisations, but also within the team leaders and front-line practitioners who seek to inspire and support others to reflect the purpose and values of the profession. Over the past twelve months BASW and the University of Birmingham have been exploring the value of social work leadership and how it can be realised. A roundtable event with practitioner, policy, and academic colleagues across the UK highlighted good examples of leadership being encouraged in policy and practice guidance, embedded in professional competences, and supported through education and development. However, it was also agreed that much more can be done to ensure social work leadership fully builds on its diverse strengths and grows throughout a professional career.

To facilitate further learning a webinar focussed on leadership in social work was held on the 31st October 2022. Alongside reflections from each of the home nations, BASW and the University, were a rich diversity of contributions from attendees who posed searching questions, shared their insights, and provided alternative perspectives. Alongside confirming that there is much interest in this aspect of social work practice and a need for further support and development, the discussions identified four key themes – 'compassion', 'connection', 'collaboration' and 'capacity'.

Compassion: emotional intelligent and practically carting leadership is needed more than ever due to the challenging circumstances which our society faces. Many social workers are themselves experiencing financial challenges alongside trying to support individuals and families with the many harms related to poverty and growing structural inequalities. Leaders must be responsive to the challenges that staff face whilst also maintaining focus on the needs of communities. As one participant shared, "we need to think of how leadership can ensure such compassion for staff doing some of the most stressful and demanding work in often conflictual settings". This can result in a dilemma for social work leaders – how to encourage their teams that there is the hope of positive change whilst being honest about the growing challenges that many face. Such moral distress takes its toll on leaders too, as they can also experience a sense of powerlessness to respond to the anxieties and frustrations of their staff. Being compassionate to self was therefore seen as an important quality for leaders which should be encouraged by employers and supported through approaches such as mindfulness. As one participant highlighted, "recent development work has shown the contribution of self-care along with providing care and protection to clients and service users".

Connection: one mechanism to cope with the increasing anxieties faced by society and staff would be for leaders to develop a psychological distance and is perhaps one of the symptoms of 'managerialism'. As one participant shared: "we can pull away from sitting alongside people due to the inability of being able to offer all we know is needed to keep people safe and well.". This was though seen as being the wrong approach which ultimately would worsen, not improve, the underlying difficulties. Instead, the importance of leaders remaining connected with practice, and the experiences of people and communities, so that they could understand, engage, and represent the current challenges was emphasised. Building on the previous issue of self-compassion, the contribution of peer support between leaders was highlighted to reflect on such experiences and consider how to respond. As one participant commented: "leadership roles can feel very isolating,

strengthening connections through peer support and opportunities for shared learning and equipping leaders to challenge using social work values."

Collaboration; reflecting the drive across the UK on greater integration in health and social care, and better joint working with the education, housing and criminal justice sectors, there was much discussion on collaboration. The potential 'loss' of the leadership voice of social work is a major concern through being crowded out by colleagues in health. This has ramifications not only for the profession but more importantly for the marginalised people and communities whose perspectives social work can represent. Or as one participant suggested: "stand up and be counted in challenging social injustice and politically-chosen austerity targeting people who are already poor and marginalised." There were though examples provided of more positive collaboration – for example one area transformed a previously health orientated 'clinical cabinet' into 'health and social care practitioner forum' in which social work was "welcomed and valued".

Capacity: understandably, the challenges of recruiting and maintaining a sufficient workforce were raised on multiple occasions. This has considerable impact on the role of leaders, through diverting their attention from more strategic opportunities to more immediate staffing related crises and making it more difficult to build coherent and compassionate teams. It was also recognised that positive leadership is one of the enablers to addressing these workforce issues. As one participant voiced it: "better working conditions and working culture, better leadership are key to retaining and recruiting". Capacity issues are also being experienced within leadership due to increased turnover within senior and practice leader roles.

Despite the many challenges raised, there was though still a sense of optimism and belief in the potential of social work leadership. As one participant put it: "really agree with that idea of us not stretching our professional skills and knowledge far enough into the leadership role. Social work has a lot to offer." Reassuringly, each home nation shared examples of current and emerging initiatives which would encourage and support future social workers to develop into compassionate, connected, collaborative and capable leaders.

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