Supporting & Promoting Advanced Social Work

A guide for employers and practitioners
introduction

Major policy initiatives, such as Transforming Adult Social Care, Every Child Matters and the Mental Health Act 2007 highlight the importance of professional leadership in social work. Yet historically social work has offered little in the way of progression routes for those wanting to develop their knowledge and skills.

The introduction of the Post Qualifying Awards established a framework for continuing professional development for social workers. The MSc in Mental Health Social Work with Children & Adults provided by the Institute of Psychiatry reflects our commitment to the development of advanced social work practitioners. It is a long established programme which uniquely provides social workers with the skills and knowledge to work across different service user groups.

Students on the programme are employed in a number of settings including local authority adults and children’s services, mental health trusts, voluntary organizations and the independent sector.

Most social workers routinely come into contact with both children and adults with mental health problems.

This two-year part-time programme enables students to gain greater confidence and competence while working with people with mental health problems, benefiting service users and the agency where they are based as well as enhancing their individual careers.

This guide looks at how the advanced practitioner contributes to innovations in current practice and improved outcomes for service users.

the case for advanced practice

The demands of contemporary social work, particularly in multi-disciplinary environments and complex areas (such as mental health), require advanced practice skills. Cases such as Victoria Climbié and Baby P demonstrate the need for advanced social workers who can make use of the research and evidence base to create new forms of social work knowledge that inform and shape policies and practice. Developing experienced staff into advanced practitioners is essential to meet these demanding new contexts for social work.

A framework for staff development and service improvement that takes cognizance of the evidence base and enables practitioners to articulate the implications to their service users, carers and colleagues is essential.

The complexities of this challenge require practitioner leadership at the highest level. The development of the consultant social worker requires advanced practitioners who are not only familiar with the research, but are also conversant with research methods. They are able to use their knowledge to construct and influence service development that meets the needs and aspirations of their users. Such professional leaders are able to inspire those who work with them with the values, skills and experience of social work.

‘Good mental health is the key to better social functioning. A staff group that can recognise mental health issues can positively change outcomes for many children, young people and their families. We have a duty to do this, as recent events have proven.’

Service Manager
Children’s Services

‘For my organisation it is important to think about joint work with mental health social workers & other mental health professionals working with parents. Our focus is on the children.’

Senior Training Officer
Local Authority Safeguarding Children Board
What does it mean to be an advanced practitioner in social work? Does this role include a responsibility for leadership? With an increasing focus on inter-professional and multi-disciplinary work in both adults’ and children’s services, comparisons will be drawn with allied professionals such as doctors, nurses, teachers and psychologists. The new roles of Approved Mental Health Professional, Best Interest Assessor, Independent Mental Capacity Advocate and Responsible Clinician offer challenges and opportunities for social workers to contribute their specialist skills and knowledge in a wider range of settings.

Professional leaders are in a strong position to promote good practice, develop the evidence-base for social work and help to define future roles for social workers within mental health services. Advanced social work practitioners demonstrate their ability to offer advanced and reflective supervision, conduct original research and confidently assert the positive and unique contribution that social workers make to mental health services.

The essential elements of the advanced practitioner include:
• knowledge of theories informing practice;
• knowledge of the current evidence-base;
• the development of new knowledge through original research undertaken in the workplace.

Recruitment, retention and career pathways require flexible and innovative long-term personal and career development opportunities, spanning traditional organisational and sector boundaries and delivering a level of consistency across the workforce, which people using services seek.

Increasing and complex needs and long-term conditions require a confident, competent and empowered workforce with sophisticated skills in order to secure the dignity and improve the quality of life of those people receiving social care.

New models of care, delivering more personalised services across new settings, bringing together skills across different professional groups, and understanding the changing requirements within professional roles, can be led and championed by advanced social workers.

Mary Macdonald is Mental Health & MCA Training Manager and AMHP Lead for Kent County Council. In this capacity she has, over the last six years, been encouraging two to three senior social workers per year to undertake the Institute of Psychiatry’s MSc in Mental Health Social Work with Children & Adults. There are now a significant number of staff in Kent who have completed the programme, and she is herself a graduate.

Mary’s own experience of the programme’s emphasis on reflective practice, and the peer supervision it provides, made her appreciate the greater expertise and confidence that this kind of learning can engender. ‘I want the best trained workforce I can have. I look at the programme as a learning opportunity for senior practitioners who have otherwise reached the limits of their career development.’

From an employer’s perspective, the programme delivers advanced practitioners who are capable of fulfilling the role of consultant social worker.

The overwhelming majority of practitioners Kent has sponsored through the programme have gone on to assume a Practice Supervisor role, and Mary sees the programme as instrumental for developing people for this role. Many of the senior practitioners within the department are programme graduates.

With increasingly multi-disciplinary working, one of the major attractions of the programme is its strong social work focus. ‘Instead of looking at the lowest common denominator between disciplines, it celebrates the difference’, as well as highlighting the value that an advanced social worker brings to a multi-disciplinary team. However, the fact that the programme now accepts non-social workers is a plus. Kent, like many authorities, now employs nurses as well as social workers as care managers.

Another attraction of the programme is its defined commitment. ‘The programme takes someone away from the workplace one day a week over two years, which is easy to plan around.’

Case Study – Kent County Council

‘The course helped me to think more analytically & critically. I think this has supported me in providing better care. I also think it has helped me to support colleagues to think more analytically and critically as well.’

Senior Practitioner in Social Work/AMHP

‘I have altered my style and focus of intervention with a number of service users following the opportunities for reflection on practice offered in the first year.’

Senior Practitioner in Social Work Adult Services
Putting People First provides unprecedented opportunities for professional leadership. The key tasks provide the environment to think creatively, use entrepreneurial skills, and engage with a broad range of user and carer interests, employers and staff, voluntary and community interests in developing new responses.

The increased focus on integrating the care and support required by people using services and their carers requires greater coordination of services, challenges traditional organisational boundaries within and between services, and will need to generate new forms of joint support and service provision. It will also require joint working with NHS and Children’s services – ensuring a co-ordinated programme of workforce development.

Every Child Matters

The Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) is designing a career framework for social workers employed in a children and families’ context. The aim of this framework is to deliver a coherent and nationally recognised career structure that supports the development of a world class children’s workforce.

The government response to Lord Laming’s The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report has identified a number of important initiatives to support social work. These include the introduction of as new Advanced Social Work professional status to encourage the most highly skilled practitioner to stay close to the frontline, with better career progression and to ensure, over time, that all practitioners can study on the job for a Masters level qualification.

The policy drivers

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developing the advanced practitioner

The Post Qualifying framework provides opportunities to develop experienced social workers into advanced practitioners. However the benefits to employers of post-qualifying advanced awards in social work are often less apparent than they are to the individual practitioners undertaking them. A recent survey undertaken by the Institute of Psychiatry indicates the clear benefits to employers of supporting their skilled and experienced social workers to undertake these programmes.

Three key themes emerged from this survey: Firstly, practitioners undertaking advanced awards develop an increased confidence and ability to undertake complex casework, supervise junior colleagues and students and lead others. Above all, practitioners develop the knowledge and skills to provide professional leadership within their agencies. This includes making decisions in complex and demanding cases and taking responsibility for them.

Recent tragedies highlighted by the media suggest that professional leadership in social work needs strengthening and consolidating.

Secondly, practitioners studying for advanced awards that include a research component produce original research findings that are of direct benefit for the employer. Practitioners have influenced social work policy and practice in their agencies and beyond by disseminating a precis of their findings, leading training courses or publishing their findings in peer-reviewed journals. Advanced awards contribute to the evidence base for social work and they help practitioners to become more research-minded. As services are increasingly being configured according to ‘what works’, it is becoming more important to have practitioners who are skilled at evaluating the evidence base and sharing this with colleagues.

Finally, practitioners consistently report that they share their learning with colleagues and their teams and have subsequently become expert resources within their agencies. Through informal consultation and formal training opportunities these practitioners support the professional development of colleagues and lead practice innovations within their agencies. Practitioners with PQ advanced awards are not only the professional leaders of tomorrow: they are at the forefront of leading their profession today.

‘I am a more confident practitioner and have added research methods to my list of skills as well as a deeper understanding of Psychodynamic psychotherapy’

Senior Social Work Practitioner

‘This course enables good practitioners to become leaders and this is the only way, in my opinion, that we will address issues of poor social work practice and poor service delivery’

Practice Manager
Family and Children’s Services
the post qualifying framework

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<tr>
<th>level of qualification</th>
<th>typical roles &amp; responsibilities</th>
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<tr>
<td>Basic Qualification in Social Work Degree or Masters in Social Work, CQSW, CSS, DipSW or equivalent internationally recognised qualification leading to GSCC registration</td>
<td>Newly qualified social worker</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post Qualifying Award in Specialist Social Work Honours degree level Pathways in Child Care, Adults, Mental Health and Leadership and Management</td>
<td>Specialisation within front line social work Introduction to practice assessment/education (through the ‘enabling others’ module)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post Qualifying Award in Higher Specialist Social Work Post graduate diploma level Pathways in Professional Practice, Leadership and Management and Professional Practice Education</td>
<td>Senior practitioners AMHPs Best Interest Assessors Second to fourth tier management roles</td>
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<tr>
<td>Post Qualifying Award in Advanced Social Work Masters degree level Pathways in Professional Practice, Leadership and Management and Professional Practice Education</td>
<td>Advanced practitioners Consultant Social Workers Practice Supervisors Team and divisional managers</td>
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Where we fit in

The two year MSc in Mental Health Social Work with Children & Adults offered by the Institute of Psychiatry covers the whole of the ‘Professional Practice’ pathway in the Post Qualifying Award in Advanced Social Work. The programme’s focus on mental health highlights the fact that advanced practice in social work must engage with the mental health issues of service users and their families, even outside specialised mental health roles. The programme’s focus on the entire ‘life cycle’ means that it integrates issues of working with children, adults and families, and students come from a range of disciplines.

As described in this Guide, the Institute believes that knowledge of the evidence base, along with the ability to access, commission and conduct research, underpins advanced social work practice. Students on the programme bring current case work, which is examined and discussed within the group. In this way they are exposed to a culture of ‘reflective practice’ that stimulates their development as advanced practitioners.

Putting research to work

Research carried out by students on the Institute of Psychiatry’s MSc in Mental Health Social Work with Children & Adults is one way in which employers can immediately benefit from supporting students on the programme. Some recent projects include:

Mental health awareness training for police officers
Student Tony West became interested in the relationship between the police and people with mental health problems when he noticed that officers were often reluctant to attend Mental Health Act assessments. Researching the problem further he discovered that over half of those detained by officers in his borough were released on assessment. Having identified the need for better training of officers he went on to develop (and review) a training programme for police officers which improved the outcomes for service users.

Attitudes towards service users’ children
Student Karin Slack explored the attitudes of mental health professionals towards the needs of service users’ children. She found that while practitioners were overwhelmingly in favour of supporting children, their attitudes depended on their profession, setting and role. Most significantly, while many considered supporting children important, most did not see it as their responsibility.

The effect of crisis resolution and home treatment
Student Elaine Furminger was interested in the effect of crisis resolution and home treatment on assessments made under the 1983 Mental Health Act. She found that the presence of a Crisis Resolution and Home Treatment team was associated with a significant increase in the use of section 2 of the Act, although use of section 3 decreased.
questions & answers

Do social workers have to complete the specialist award before accessing the higher specialist and advanced awards?

Experienced social workers can access the higher specialist and advanced award without undertaking the specialist award if they can demonstrate professional competence at this level. Those who are interested in doing this should talk to their Learning and Development team about their development needs.

Is there a post qualifying award that is particularly suitable for social workers working with older teenagers, asylum seeking children or disabled children’s service, as neither the adult and nor the children’s pathways seem to meet this need?

Yes. Many social workers routinely come into contact with both children and adults with mental health problems. The MSc in Mental Health Social Work with Children & Adults provides a two-year, part time programme (one day a week) that enables social workers to have greater confidence and competence while working with people who are mentally ill, benefiting their service users and agency, as well as enhancing their career.

Students are taught innovative skills in mental health social work that are informed by recent research. At the end of the programme, graduates become advanced practitioners: the MSc programme is accredited by the General Social Care Council as a PQ Advanced Award.

Can other professionals access the MSc programme?

Qualified mental health professionals (e.g. Community Psychiatric Nurses, Occupational Therapists, Psychologists) who wish to develop expertise in psycho-social mental health practice with children and adults can apply to join the programme. Successful completion of the programme leads to the MSc Advanced Psychosocial Practice with Children & Adults.

How can we link the post-qualifying awards with career progression?

The focus on the knowledge and skills needed to make complex judgments and discharge high levels of responsibility at higher specialist and advanced award level fits with the new consultant practitioner role being developed by local authorities.

How are people who use services and carers involved in the programme?

The involvement of people who use services and carers in planning, teaching and assessment is an important part of the MSc programme.

How does the MSc programme link with the PQ Higher Specialist Social Work Award in Mental Health incorporating the AMHP requirements?

The MSc programme is an ideal progression route for practitioners who have completed the AMHP and wish to further develop their specialist skills and knowledge in mental health.

Students not only refresh their knowledge and learn and practise new skills – they are also taught how to critically appraise relevant empirical research studies and undertake their own original research.

As a result, social workers who complete the programme become leaders in their chosen specialty. Past students have gone on to influence the development of policy and practice in their agencies, or offer advanced supervision to less experienced colleagues. Others have chosen to enrol for additional training in psychotherapy or other therapies to further enhance their work.

Alternatively the MSc can be a springboard for students who want to undertake PhDs or other higher degrees. Some former graduates have moved into teaching and research in mental health social work. The involvement of people who use services and carers in planning, teaching and assessment is an important part of the MSc programme.

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