

Every Professional Matters

Sustaining Professionalism within Integrated Children's Services

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1. Introduction

The integration of local children's services in England is proceeding relatively rapidly today, generating significant changes to established patterns of service management and delivery. In January 2007, the Children's Services Professionals' Network (CSPN) published '*United Minds, United Purpose*' as a charter for modern professionalism in children's services. CSPN is a grouping of thirteen individual specialist and professional associations, established to facilitate the exchange of information between member associations and to exert collective influence with relevant government agencies. Its common binding interest is the promotion of the whole welfare of children and young people, together with their families, at the heart of professional development and evolution within children's services.

'*United Minds, United Purpose*' set out general and operating principles of partnership working and the contemporary bases to high-level professionalism, within the context of the implementation of the *Every Child Matters* (ECM) agenda for children's services. Now, three years later, in the light of experience, it is appropriate for CSPN to identify challenges intrinsic to the rollout of this agenda which have emerged in practice. This new document also further considers what modern professionalism means.

In considering the role and functions of specialist professions within integrated service provision, the argument is advanced that sustaining and supporting distinctive and specialist professional expertise within integrated provision is an important ingredient for its overall success.

2. Context

As stated in '*United Minds, United Purpose*', CSPN is committed to progressing the principles and practice of *ECM* with its five intended outcomes for all children and young people. In re-emphasising this commitment, CSPN expresses its broad support for the *2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy* which reinforces the Government's ambition detailed in the 2007 Children's Plan that "this should be the best country in the world for children and young people to grow up in".

Chapter 2 of the *2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy*, "Challenges for the workforce and the Government's response and vision" reaffirmed the Government's desire that everyone who works with children and young people should be:

- **ambitious** for every child and young person;
- **excellent** in their practice;
- **committed** to partnership and integrated working;
- **respected** and valued as professionals

While the attributes of being professionally qualified and professionally accountable are implicit in these four aspirations for the workforce, CSPN would seek explicit reference to these factors as this strategy evolves.

The strategy recognises that fulfilling its ambitions entails encountering and overcoming a set of key challenges, which included concerns over:

- continuing high levels of vacancies in some professions and geographical regions
- the quality of initial training
- the low status of certain professional groups
- the clarity of purpose of some professions
- the quality of future management and leadership

- the provision of effective high-quality early intervention support to those children and young people at the most vulnerable end of the spectrum of need
- effective integrated working between professionals from different backgrounds and services

In the current financial climate, with significant, and increasing, budgetary pressures on local authorities and other children's workforce employers, the precise scale of future spending reductions is unknown but represents a major cause for concern.

The contention that specialist professions should retain distinctive approaches within integrated provision in no way undermines CSPN members' unequivocal pledge to surmount obstacles and work towards the stated ambitions. In fact, issues that arise out of a number of the concerns expressed in the Government's strategy help to explain the main reasons for this paper.

3. What is Professionalism?

In order to put the case for distinctive professionalism, it is necessary to recall its nature. Research by Deloitte and Touche in 2007 suggests that a broad consensus regards the following characteristics as traditional professionalism's familiar range of components, some or all of which tend to feature within the structure of individual professions:

- *Acting in the client's interests:* members offer professional judgement, objective advice or guidance and act in the best interests of the client
- *Code of practice:* members observe a code of practice or conduct that describes the desired standards of behaviour
- *Entry standards:* in the form of examinations that are not easy to pass and require an initial period of study
- *Ongoing competence:* maintaining a high degree of competence and expertise involving training and continual professional development
- *Regulation:* effective regulation, increasingly in the form of an independent body, responsible for setting disciplinary procedures and monitoring behaviour
- *Member accountability:* members are subject to an objective form of censure and are accountable to the profession for any breach of expected technical and ethical standards
- *Enforcement and discipline:* the nature of censure is usually sufficiently punitive to encourage members to maintain standards in line with requirements but sanctions may include being named and potentially barred from the profession and therefore unable to practice

The detailed application of such frameworks needs to be profession-specific. Children's services professionals strive to maintain public trust and confidence by strengthening their commitment to professional standards, including an obligation to display ethics and integrity and to continuous learning and improvement.

Moves towards integrated teamworking should not erode such individual professional systems and structures, but should ultimately assist their evolution.

Similarly, the issue of *ongoing competence* carries with it a strong implication of the value of retaining specialist professional development. The recent emphasis on joint training within children's services is beneficial to integrated developments, but should not grow at the expense of dedicated professional provision.

Underpinning these characteristics, CSPN sees the crucial significance of core values and ethics and the Network considers appropriate economic and social standing, and the specialist nature of information and knowledge processes, as part of the basis to professionalism. In *'United Minds, United Purpose'*, CSPN highlighted:

- the maintenance of high national standards and the imperative of full accountability, responsibility and sharing of expertise supporting systematic multi-faceted specialist and cross-specialist Continuing Professional Development, supplemented by periodic reviews of frameworks of professional competence to meet contemporary demands.
- the promotion of a broad understanding of roles for trained and respected high-level professionals who deploy specialist skills, knowledge, understanding and values.
- a new emphasis on the importance of people skills and communication, characterised by demonstration of behaviours which engender trust and promote supportive, open and flexible environments for professionals in the field.

3. New Challenges

Local government in England is already feeling the impact of the deep economic recession. The present 3-year financial settlement for local councils set a formula grant (i.e. excluding special grants) of £27.5bn for 2008/9, constituting the tightest settlement for a decade. Despite LGA lobbying efforts, central government refused to improve this settlement and is indeed insisting on higher levels of new efficiency savings to be recouped within each year. The LGA publicly noted that "finding further efficiency savings, given the tight settlement and difficult economic climate that is placing pressure on income and demand for services, will be very challenging" The next overall government spending settlement from 2011 will almost certainly be considerably harsher for most areas of public service, regardless of the political make-up of the Westminster government following the 2010 general election. In addition, the voluntary sector is experiencing both reductions in charitable donations from the public as the recession exerts downward pressures on employment and income levels, and lower returns from financial investments in common with other sectors, constraining its own capacity for effective service delivery.

The recent Deloitte research report "Turning the Tide – Opportunities for Public Sector Organisations in an Economic Downturn" stated "in light of recent cost pressures and renewed levels of dependency among specific customer groups ... (public sector bodies) will need to encourage greater innovation across their businesses. They also need to review traditional service delivery models and achieve better quality and more cost-effective public services by diversifying their delivery channels, utilising customer data more effectively and actively managing social enterprise markets".

It is quite clear that such local service redesign and related developments in organisational management, together with the recommended diversification of delivery platforms, can exert significant pressures on hitherto unchallenged professional assumptions and approaches within children and young people's services.

4. Maintaining Professionalism

The question is how to respond to these and other challenges. The explosion in knowledge technology and communications, with a reduced “mystique of experts” and greater “client” knowledge and expectations, the growth of intra-specialisms with narrower fields of expertise and the development of new professions, as well as continuing globalisation, need to be seen as indicators of a different future.

However, now is precisely the time for professions to reassess their role, approach and position and reinforce professionalism per se. Children’s services professionals need to focus on improved standards of provision and engendering (not demanding) trust, so enhancing their professional reputation. Within this, a continued concentration on ethics that will reinforce high-quality standards is valuable, as is the strength of continuing staff professional development in promoting better levels and forms of provision.

There can be little doubt that integrated, multi-professional, multi-agency children services delivery is vital; silo working and professional over-sensitivity or jealousy must be challenged. However, integrated service delivery is intrinsically complex. These approaches bring with them complications and complexities with some potential for obstructive bureaucracy and high integration costs.

Such dangers should be guarded against, while developing sound methods for reconciling conflicting professional judgments. Where professional tensions exist, they are resolved most effectively by the professionals involved, rather than by unnecessary structures. Structures have developed because of past failures in this respect; a challenge to professions is to make positive responses to calls for effective joint working. The challenge to management is to minimise complexity; service recipients require simple, intelligible and cost-effective delivery.

The overall response in developing integrated services and multi-professional teams needs to find ways of utilising similarities across professions while celebrating differences and not accepting dissimilar approaches as a basis for tension. Professional trust is key; this only develops from mutual understanding which, in turn, takes time to engender joint activity. The “salad not soup” analogy for the modern children’s workforce is now well-known and should influence local structures for integrated working. The sum should be greater than the constituent parts in integrated teams, certainly not the reverse, and the aim is to blend distinctive professional skills, experiences and knowledge to improve services.

In some areas, recent developments have included the formation of new ‘professions’ or job roles often overlapping with existing roles. CSPN considers that some hybrid roles can cause confusion, create a lack of clarity in terms of accountability and even introduce elements of competitiveness unfavourable to integrated working. A professional ethos within children’s services should be based upon co-operative, though distinct, professions.

On the key issue of accountability, local authorities or other children’s services employers set required outcomes, service standards and expectations which should be aligned to professional standards set at a national level. Thus professional bodies and networks as well as employers, should play a role in terms of overall accountability and regulation.

A further aspect in dealing with the challenges is investment in workforce planning to reduce bureaucratic processes and allow professionals to give priority attention to professional tasks.

Finally, it is vital to seek to overcome the potential alienation and detachment of practitioners with the growth of “hot-desking” and working from home, both increasingly common features of the life of many children’s services professionals. Colleagues need to remain ‘in touch’ with each other by sharing a form of work environment with those from related disciplines not

just to promote integrated working but also to provide opportunities for mentoring and coaching and for skills development. The principled 'push' is for co-location, but working practices are too often going in the opposite direction.

Flexible staffing arrangements certainly require effective ICT facilities, regardless of where the workforce is dispersed, as a consequence of developing the notion of a single children's workforce. Communication considerations must be taken into account and the capacity for constructive informal discussion and social intercourse around the workplace, as well as formal meetings, also incorporated into children's services planning wherever possible.

At the heart of sustaining professionalism, though, is the need for the children's workforce to become 100% qualified at foundation degree level in specific skill bases, while allowing for flexible access routes through accumulated experience.

5. Leadership and Management Needs

A particular challenge, which generates a need for specific detailed consideration, is the area of leadership within the framework of integrated children's services. Leadership and management of and across the workforce, to ensure a common understanding of when and how they should be working together, needs effective leaders and managers. It involves specific skills in setting a clear vision and direction for the local workforce, bridging cultures and ensuring that local systems and practice are effective and robust.

The originality of most local children's services organisations, the lack of previous integrated children's services careers, and the overall complexity of the whole agenda pose significant challenges to leaders and managers.

Senior managers themselves must therefore be supported in their own development and possess the experience and skills they need to lead integrated services and people from backgrounds different to their own. Leading multi-professional or integrated settings, and supervising people from a variety of different professional backgrounds and working with partners from other services, demands a whole new skill set.

Managers and leaders in and across children's services have a wide range of significant development issues. These include -

- developing the capacity to learn to reflect on their own leadership and management practice. Exploration of techniques of reflection within continually evolving roles will support professional work and help to deal with emerging dilemmas.
- being responsible for developing appropriate approaches to forming strategy and rendering it an ongoing process, paying particular attention to how ideas from professional practice are incorporated and integrated, and how key stakeholders can be involved.
- understanding how professionals learn and provide a context where professional practitioners are willing to share learning from their practice.
- understanding the importance of current and future technological developments that allow access to and the sharing of knowledge via the formation of professional networks.

- learning how to facilitate the career development of professionals through strong continuing professional development policies and also deploying modern frameworks of professional competence.
- placing trust in professionals so that creative ideas for the future can be considered and embracing the future of professional work by demonstrating behaviours that reflect confidence in supportive, open and flexible environments.
- developing as commissioners of services and understanding commissioning processes with outcome-focussed approaches.

Managers at all levels, including executive ranks, are now responsible for services that exert a significant impact on children and families, inevitably covering areas where they lack professional training or even an element of professional knowledge. Issues of high-quality professional supervision and line management of individual professions will inescapably arise within integrated services. Again, this reinforces the valuable role that professional bodies can help to fulfil within accountability and regulatory frameworks.

Matrix management structures, which involve two or more lines of staff accountability and reporting, of a vertical and horizontal nature (the latter to professional peers), are well-established in a variety of modern organisations and reflect a familiar theme within management theory and literature today. They necessarily involve a level of investment in securing genuine workforce involvement and engagement, and in staff training and development. In the specific context of children’s services, this model – properly designed and adapted to local circumstances- can directly assist the maintenance of professional expertise and the consistent application of professional standards. In some cases, this may involve cross-authority collaboration.

All genuinely distributed leadership systems, to fully reflect and support the wide range of today’s education and children’s services and the key overall objective of their successful integration at local-level, deserve careful advance thought, design and introduction. However, insufficient attention has been paid, as yet, to this broad area. The recent article on “Collective Leadership of Local School Systems: Power, Autonomy and Risks” by J Lumby of Southampton University (“Education Management, Administration and Leadership”, 2009), points to some of the practical problems involved in developing effective system leadership. Given the persistence of institutional and individualist tendencies, the moral dimensions of partnership working and service integration may well require clear reinforcement within future leadership training and development (described as a “need for greater axiological content”) and further dedicated research.

CSPN argues that management of professions in integrated services therefore requires on-going consideration in key respects in promoting the delivery of ever-more excellent children’s services.

6. Conclusions

The impact of ECM has seen the children’s services’ landscape dominated by new systems that seek to embrace: -

- effective integrated service delivery
- multi-agency working
- integrated working
- locality working
- multi-disciplinary working
- broad-based partnership planning

It is apparent that, from the viewpoint of children, young people and their families, what is important is effective service delivery. The other five features are organisational means to

the particular end of integrated service delivery; matters that are less the immediate concern of children, young people and families.

The essential questions now facing individual children's services professionals do not entail reservations about the need for or value of these developments. They relate to how to operate within integrated frameworks while retaining specific professionalism, maintaining core values and sustaining core practices. The potential erosion of professional specialisms should be monitored, identified and countered.

Restructuring within children's services continues; imminent budget constraints for local authorities will generate further reorganisation and reconfiguration of services. The degree of executive understanding of specialist services will continue to vary and there are a host of organisational models to assist integrated children's services. Effectiveness is the aim; integrated working -not always integrated teams - is the ultimate purpose.

This requires cooperative ways of working that maximise the benefits of blended skills with a suitable combination of clear leadership and professional ownership. Professional identity needs to be retained, with strong national accountability, and regulatory frameworks that reinforce high-quality local service delivery. The challenge is how this can be achieved consistently across all areas and all children's services professions. CSPN seeks to underline the major gains to be derived from co-operation without loss of professional identity or expertise.