

Excellent social work with older people: a discussion paper

TCSW Adults Faculty

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THE COLLEGE OF
SOCIALWORK
The voice of social work in England

Introduction

The College of Social Work is the voice for social work in England. We advocate for practice improvement and policy change to increase the impact of social work. The aim of this project is to create the conditions and opportunities for social workers to improve the lives of older people through ensuring that they receive excellent social work.

We know that excellent social work with older people and their carers makes a real impact. It strengthens families, neighbourhoods and communities, and it helps to ensure that vital resources are used in the best way possible. It is an essential part of high quality social care – but it remains all too often overlooked, under-resourced and inaccessible to the people who stand to benefit from it.

As the Adults Faculty at the College of Social work, we are committed to changing this. This paper sets out our initial thoughts on why and how we should ensure social work with older people is recognised as a specialism in its own right. We also consider the conditions for practice that will be necessary to make this ambition a reality. This is an interim discussion paper, and we welcome responses from social workers, employers, older people, their carers and families.

Why now?

Promoting social work with older people, and ensuring it is of consistently high quality, is not just a matter of responding to need – it is also a question of social justice. Social workers are a crucial source of expertise for older people and their families who are often facing difficult life decisions in the context of a complex market of care goods and services. Excellent social work, offered at the right time, can help older people to live independently, reduce social isolation, access the right range of support, maintain family and community links, and reduce unnecessary hospital stays. As well as the obvious human impacts, there are clearly savings to be made by reducing demands on acute care and keeping people connected to community networks.

The importance of embedding excellent social work is growing ever more urgent, as:

- Approximately 60% of users of local authority services are older people. This demographic is set to surge over the next 15 years. By 2030 the number of people in Britain aged 85 and over will have increased by an incredible 100% since 2010, and those aged 65 and over will have increased by 50%.
- Rising eligibility thresholds mean around half a million people who would have qualified for social care support five years ago are no longer entitled to receive it.
- Older people are the largest group using NHS services.

Furthermore, there is a real opportunity to prioritise this now, as the 2014 Care Act is implemented and a wide-ranging public debate about ageing and funding takes place.

What does 'excellent' look like?

As a basic starting point, we believe that excellence means older people and their carers having access to a social worker with the capabilities to help them when they need it. It also means that other professionals and non-registered staff in social care and related agencies or services have access to advice and input from social workers when they need it, too. This should be the same for all older people, regardless of whether they are funding their own care or receiving state support, and regardless of the amount of care and support required.

Secondly, we believe that excellent social work with older people should be recognised and visible. As a result, social workers would seek to work in this fascinating and life-changing area. Older people, and those who care about them and support them, would know that social work was a service that could benefit them. In some places and some of the time, this is already true. It needs to be true everywhere.

The building blocks for excellence: skills and capabilities

Excellent social work with older people would require social workers to be able to obtain, maintain and develop the skills that they need throughout their career. We believe that:

- Specific capabilities for social work with older people should be identified at all levels of social work practice.
- Specialist options should be available in social work degrees, postgraduate education and continuous professional development.
- The specialism of older people's social work should be recognized and reflected at practice level.
- Evaluation and research should be conducted to identify, share and embed good social work practice which improves the experience and outcomes of older people.

Priorities for action

We are proposing that:

- Employers of social workers are clear with the older people in their communities about the ways that social work can support them
- Social work with older people should be recognised by employers, commissioners and the wider social work profession as a specialist area of practice
- The role of social workers in policy and guidance relevant to older people should be clarified and strengthened
- Research evidence should be properly utilised to ensure social work with older people continues to evolve and improve
- The lived experiences of older people should be central to the continued improvement of this form of social work practice

Questions from you

We want to hear from you:

- How should we define excellence in terms of social work with older people?
- What difference do you think excellent social work can make?
- How can social work with older people be better recognised and valued?

You can email <mailto:michael.simpson@tcsw.org.uk> with your views, or take one of our short surveys here:

- For older people, their carers and families: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YG56HM5>
- For social workers, managers and employers: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/s/YGPD59Z>

The deadline for responses is **Tuesday 24th February at 5pm**.

Next steps

We will shortly be holding 2 workshops with older people, their families and carers – one in the North of England, and one in the South. More details will be available soon, and if you are interested in attending please let us know. We will be publishing the final report in spring of this year.

To keep in touch with this work, register for our regular e-bulletin by filling in the short form at the bottom of our website homepage: <http://www.tcsw.org.uk>

Follow us on twitter: [@collegeofSW](https://twitter.com/collegeofSW)

Authors: *Bernard Walker* (Chair) and *Gerry Nosowska*, TCSW Adults Faculty.

We are the centre of excellence for social work in England, upholding and strengthening professional standards to the benefit of the public.

Find out more at <http://www.tcsw.org.uk>