BASW England response to the Child and Family Social Work National Assessment and Accreditation System

Introduction

1. BASW is the UK's professional association for social work, led by and accountable to a growing membership of over 22,000 social workers. Our members work in direct social work practice, management, research and academic positions in diverse social work settings across the UK. BASW members share a collective commitment to the professional Code of Ethics, core social work values and principles that will secure the best possible outcomes for children and young people, adults, families and communities. BASW England is the part of BASW that focuses exclusively on social work and social workers within England, and represents our members' views from that country.

2. This is an extremely important consultation for the social work profession in England and therefore, we felt it necessary to provide a considered response on behalf of our members which goes beyond answering the questions on the response form. The format does not enable us to properly articulate views beyond the functional elements of the proposed scheme given that it only refer to details of implementation, making the assumption that the Proof of Concept has demonstrated that NAAS will be positive. BASW England has several expert groups including the Children and Families Practice, Policy and Education Group (CF PPEG) and the Professional Development Practice, Policy and Education Group (PD PPEG). These groups gave expert advice to compile this response. In addition, the CF PPEG devised a survey for BASW members in England to share their views with us about the NAAS which ran between January and early March. We received over 500 responses to this survey and have included a number of members' comments on the NAAS response form and have also attached a brief report to this response.

Summary of concerns

3. We genuinely welcome any improvements to the present system and are not averse to the intentions behind the NAAS which have merit. However, our view is that NAAS in its current form is most likely to have the opposite impact to that desired by Government. It risks creating a two tier children’s social work workforce through a costly and poorly designed accreditation system. It risks reducing the workforce in children’s services if social workers – including some of the most experienced - walk away from a testing regime they do not value. 61% in our survey said it would act as a disincentive to recruitment and retention. Many of our
respondents are also worried that what is proposed marks a further step towards separating the adults and childrens’ social work sectors, and indeed dysfunctionally narrowing the focus of work with children and families, conflating it with child protection social work. NAAS is not embedded in an ongoing CPD framework for the whole profession which is essential – not least because social work by its nature requires ongoing learning across the boundaries of specialism, even where a specialist focus in depth is also essential. NAAS is a single point in time, narrow testing regime which we know is no guarantee of ongoing capability. That requires an ongoing learning framework. We do agree that it could be useful to have an accreditation system for specialist roles but not in the form suggested - and not so early in a career.

4. Rather than this expensive, methodologically flawed and unpopular accreditation system, we believe the largely successful and sustainable Assessment and Supported Year in Employment approach should be developed further to enable the improvements in standards, knowledge and skills (and the evidence of attainment) the NAAS purports to be pursuing. It should be further embedded in a whole career CPD framework and BASW has a key part to play with other partners in redefining and providing resources for that. In contrast, NAAS is an unjustifiably expensive, educationally flawed and unpopular initiative and there are better ways of bringing about improvement.

Lack of consultation and involvement of the profession

5. It was very clear from the responses we received to our survey that our members feel very strongly that there has been a lack of consultation with the profession concerning such an important development. We are disappointed that the approach taken by the DfE from the onset has not been one of working in partnership with the sector and its leaders which breaks with the methodology of the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) which the sector largely embraced. In comparisons, consultations on the KSS included at least the opportunity for BASW to engage in a pre-consultation exercise to help shape the statement which our members appreciated; we have had no stake whatsoever in the development of the NAAS and we believe this is a mistake by government if the aim is the best and most widely appreciated scheme. A new initiative this significant in the training and career of a profession by this stage should have a broad consensus in relation to its purpose and focus. The results of our survey indicate that this is not the case, given that 50% of respondents do not support it, 23% only partially support it with lots of reservations and 60% of respondents believe that it should not be introduced at all. We consider this lack of engagement with the profession to be a significant failure and consequently, we assert that the fundamentals of NAAS need rethinking.

6. One of the questions this consultation raises for both our groups of experts and respondents to the survey is who is now defining social work in England – particularly social work with children - including determining the parameters of the knowledge base for practice? We are clear that this should not be an exercise that is dominated by one Government department (Department for Education) and consortia of private companies with limited input from HEIs. This is not comparable to how other professions are treated and defined.
7. We are also concerned that during the consultation period, the Government simultaneously started the procurement process suggesting the consultation is not a meaningful exercise: https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/0754181f-1ac5-4efd-a58d-0a88cc1ac613

Funding and best use of public money

8. In addition to raising ethical issues about whether this is a genuine consultation, we are concerned that DfE may yet again favour ‘for profit’ big business companies for the majority of this commissioned work, as has been the recent trend, rather than working predominantly with the expertise in the not for profit, HEI and professional sectors. Concerned about the proper use of public money, particularly in a time of austerity, our members want to know specifically what the process, including the Proof of Concept, has cost to date and what the projected costs are for the next stage. Only 3% of those who responded to the BASW survey consider the NAAS to be value for money.

9. It is surprising that whilst the consultation and its accompanying documents include an equalities impact assessment there is no financial impact assessment. We anticipate that this is going to be very expensive at a time when local authorities are being forced to cut their services by approximately 40%. We would like to know how the costs and benefits of what is being proposed compare with the present system put in place by the SWRB. If there are deficits, what would be the cost (including cash and opportunity of costs) of correcting the deficits, resourcing the support and education/training and assessment costs of the present system, for example, by extending teaching partnerships?

Concerns about proof of concept

10. As stated in the opening paragraphs, we have concerns about the Proof of Concept including the questions that were put to the social workers that participated in the pilots. They do not appear to have been designed to find out what social workers thought about the value of the whole scheme and how it compared with alternatives in terms of both value and cost. Participants were only asked to share very limited views about the experience of taking the tests. A number of respondents to our survey had direct experience of taking the tests and raised serious concerns about the efficacy of the methodology which we have highlighted on the response form.

Relationship of NAAS to pre-existing learning programmes

11. It is not clear what learning inputs would be available for social workers if preparing for NAAS and how these will link with existing CPD programmes provided by HEIs, for instance. There is also no clarity about how learning from previously undertaken courses will be taken into consideration e.g. those who have achieved Advanced Award, or PQ award under previous systems. In our survey, 58% of those
surveyed think that social workers holding these awards should be exempted from the NAAS. There appears to be a lack of recognition for hard work in achieving prior qualifications and we believe it will be de-motivating to some of the advanced practitioners whom local authorities need to retain.

Conclusion

12. BASW England has major concerns about the design and implementation of this accreditation system and asks the Department of Education to seriously reconsider whether the outcomes warrant the expenditure and whether these outcomes will really benefit both the profession and more importantly the service for service users.

Report compiled by Nushra Mansuri & Sue Kent, Professional Officers BASW England with significant input from Children & Families Practice, Policy and Education Group (PPEG) and Professional Capabilities & Development PPEG and other BASW members.