

Written evidence submitted by Frontline

Background

Frontline is an independent charity set up in 2013 and inspired by Teach First. Our mission is to transform the lives of vulnerable children by recruiting and developing outstanding individuals to be leaders in social work and broader society.

We use a compelling attraction and selection process, adopting a high profile marketing approach joined with a method that identifies those with the right academic abilities and personal qualities to ensure we recruit outstanding individuals. We take an innovative approach to educating social workers to equip participants to bring about change with families.

The Frontline programme begins with an intensive, five-week residential summer institute. This is followed by a 12-month placement in a partner local authority using the unit model, where participants work in a team of four, supported by an experienced Consultant Social Worker (CSW). During this year participants spend over 200 days in practice, learning in practice – more than typical routes into social work. Upon qualification, participants will have benefited from 46 days of teaching and over 30 sessions with an academic tutor.

In the second year, once qualified, participants work independently and manage their own caseloads whilst continuing our leadership development programme, working towards a Master's degree and joining the local authority's Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme. Support in the second year includes access to a coach.

The first cohort of 104 Frontline participants began the programme in July 2014. Having spent a year in local authorities in Greater Manchester, Greater London, Buckinghamshire and Essex, they became qualified social workers in September 2015. The second cohort of 124 participants started the programme in July 2015. This year our third cohort of approximately 180 participants will be placed across these areas as well as our first new region, the North East of England.

DfE's Social Work Reform Agenda

Much of the government's social work reform agenda relates to improving the skills and capacity of the workforce by supporting high quality training and development. We are supportive of this approach outlined by the government and as an independent charity we are proud to play a critical part in this, as one of a number of routes into the social work profession.

All of our comments on the content, focus and breadth of the memorandum should be framed with an understanding that we are a relatively new initiative in social work. The focus of our comments is predominantly on the government's

strategy to supporting high quality training and development. Our very early experience as a new charity in this area is as follows:

Attraction

1. Frontline has put social work into the prestigious Times Top 100 list of graduate employers for the first time, and while just 10 Oxbridge graduates applied to start social work Masters programmes in 2012, a total of 184 applied to join our first cohort in 2014. This demonstrates that perceptions of social work are beginning to shift, and that it is possible to attract top graduates and career changers into child and family social work, thereby helping to raise the quality of entrants to the profession.
2. Frontline has worked to challenge perceptions around social work amongst graduates and career changers by: conducting a high-profile and competitive national recruitment campaign that promotes social work as a prestigious profession, adopting a rigorous selection process, developing a demanding graduate programme and emphasising social work as a leadership profession.
3. However, as a profession, social work continues to suffer from a perception of low prestige. The 'UK Graduate Careers Survey 2016' rated social work as having the lowest status when compared to other careers such as banking, teaching, law and the civil service.¹
4. It is clear that more attention should be given to attracting an increasing number of high potential graduates and career changers into the profession. This is a national challenge. At a time when the country's top employers are planning to expand their graduate recruitment by 7.5% in 2016² and offering increased opportunities for graduates in other professions, we need to redouble our efforts to make social work more attractive. The focus on attracting an increasingly talented pool of applicants into social work is a profession wide challenge and if we are to shift attitudes to social work in the coming decade in the same way we shifted attitudes to teaching in the last, we need cross-party support, the backing of the public and private sector, and consideration should be given to a national recruitment drive similar to the 'Get in to teaching' campaign

Practice Education

5. In their first year, Frontline participants work in teams of four as part of a unit under the supervision of a highly skilled and experienced Consultant Social Worker (CSW). The CSW performs the role of what is described as a Practice Educator on other routes. From our experience, the quality of CSW (and therefore the role of practice educators generally) has a significant bearing on the quality of experience and practice exhibited by participants. They play a fundamental role in developing, supporting and assessing

¹ High Fliers – The UK Graduate Careers Survey 2016

² [High Fliers – The Graduate Market in 2016](#)

Frontline participants and it is vital that the selection and training process for CSWs is rigorous.

6. There is an expectation that practice educators are expected to be accredited with Practice Educator Professional Standards (PEPS) at stage 2. However, our experience of assessing well over 100 candidates for CSW roles is that the PEPS Stage 2 accreditation bears no reflection of their suitability for the role on the programme.
7. The 2014 Croisdale-Appleby review, 'Re-visioning social work education' placed some emphasis on the need to improve practice education and strengthen the important role played by practice educators. But while the government's memorandum outlines the national assessment and accreditation system for the new levels of Approved Child and Family Practitioner, Practice Supervisor and Practice Leader, there is no mention of accreditation as it relates to practice educators. There is limited evidence that the current PEPS accreditation is a marker of quality in practice education.

Practice Models

8. In our education of social workers, we have found it particularly beneficial to focus on the methods of how social work is done. Taken together these methods are often described as 'practice models' and an increasing number of local authorities in England are able to describe the practice model they are using to work with families. We promote a particular approach to social work that centers around evidence informed methods of working with families – including systemic family therapy, motivational interviewing, and social learning theory. This is premised on a belief that social work needs to shift from process and compliance work to relationship based practice that is focused on helping families change for children to be safe.
9. Frontline participants are supported to apply these methods in their practice. We teach participants to do this by describing and educating them in the method. They are then encouraged to apply them. Frontline participants undergo regular observation and grading of their practice in applying these methods, with 7 graded observations throughout the first year on the programme. These observations allow us to ensure that participants are bringing about the positive change with the families they're working with before they qualify. As a result we are confident that those qualifying from the programme are proficient in a number of practice methods before qualifying.
10. Ensuring that those qualifying to become social workers through all routes are able to develop proficiency in a practice method, or number of practice methods, will become increasingly important as more local authorities adopt defined models of practice. This should be recognised in the government's strategy.

Leadership and development

11. Frontline is delivering the Firstline Programme for social work managers already operating at a good level. The programme develops their leadership skills to ensure that they are able provide excellent practice supervision to social workers and positively impact the social work system in which they are based.
12. The Firstline Research Report - 'Developing Outstanding Social Workers' clearly evidenced the necessity of strong leadership to enable practitioners to do the best work they can with children families.
13. Our learning across both the Frontline and Firstline Programmes is that in order for great social work practice to thrive, practitioners need great leadership and supervision to develop.

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