



eLEARNIG INITIATIVE

PRAISE:

Peer Review Network Applying Intelligence to Social Work Education

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Executive summary

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Partner Description: The Highland Council

www.highland.gov.uk

Organization: The Highland Council [HC] provides a wide range of essential local government services to a population of 210,000 people. The Council covers an area of 10,000 square miles- the largest of any Council in Scotland, and one of the most rural and sparsely populated areas of Europe. The Highland Council Social Work Service provides help and advice in many situations, including children in need of additional support and/or protection, adults in need of support due to disability or ill-health, learning difficulties, mental health problems, homelessness, drug or alcohol dependency, support for informal carers, and services to the Courts and people who have contact with the criminal justice system. Social Work Services in Highland work closely with partners in health, housing, education, the police and the voluntary sector to provide the best services possible to our clients.

Aims: There are five key objectives which underpin the Social Work Services in Highland: Firstly, to fulfil the statutory requirements for social work on behalf of the HC, Secondly, to provide efficient and effective services which take account of best value, thirdly, to involve and consult service users and communities in the planning and delivery of services, fourthly, to develop and sustain effective partnerships, and finally, to tackle disadvantage and promote social inclusion.

Teaching / Training Activities: The Social Work Staff Training & Development Team comprises four full-time staff, all of whom are Social Workers with experience in the delivery of social work education. This includes practice learning for social work trainees and continuing professional development.

Supporting Activities: The Team aims to foster a learning culture within the organization, recognising that this is a responsibility shared amongst all staff.

Project Role: Although the agreement with the project recognised the short time scale for The Highland Council to fully engage in all the activities of the project, a number of VCs have been commenced. In addition, case studies were supplied, together with chapters for the PRAISE book. Representatives attended the five meetings, and hosted a meeting in Inverness in June 2005.

Local Experience – Highland Council

Highland Context

Highland Region is one of thirty-two local government administrative authorities in Scotland and consists of eight political areas, with a variety of social and economic characteristics. The economy is largely taken up with agriculture, fishing, distilling and associated industries. Regeneration measures have resulted in gradual industrial development in parts of the authority.

Unique in many ways, Highland Region occupies one third of the landmass of Scotland, and is the seventh most populous local authority. While the main population areas are found around Inverness and Easter Ross, there are discrete and significant communities in many parts of the authority. It has a widely scattered rural population of some 210,000 across the biggest land area of any council in the UK, with relatively few large communities outside Inverness and including a number of island communities.

Unemployment levels are somewhat above the national average and there is significant seasonal unemployment. In the winter months the unemployment rate in much of Highland Region is far higher. The region experiences significant urban and rural poverty, often within particularly disadvantaged communities. But, the crime rate is low.

Over the last ten years the population has become gradually older at a slightly higher rate than the rest of Scotland. This is expected to continue over the next 16 years with a larger than average decline in the number of children and younger people and an above average increase (39%) in the proportion of households with adults over 65.

Depopulation has reduced the traditional career age group; this is a particular problem with an increasing ageing population, often retired incomers¹ and this is seen most acutely in the more remote areas. A higher than average proportion of older people in the Highlands already live in single person households. These factors create great pressures on community care services.

¹ A colloquial term for people who move into the region.

Access to services is a major problem as a result of great distances and lack of a comprehensive transport network. A major and continuing problem is how to provide quality services cost effectively and equitably across the authority. Residential and nursing home places are readily available but not always located in the area of choice. The recruitment and retention of staff is made difficult by the geography and also by seasonal employment within the tourism industry.

Geography creates similar pressures on services for children and families. Outside of the more populated urban areas there are difficulties ensuring equal access to services. This is particularly evident with regard to childcare provision, which is most required at those times of the year affected by peak employment patterns, and where sustainability becomes a critical issue during the winter months.

The Highland Council - partner in the project

HC is responsible for the provision of a wide range of services throughout the geographical area, including education, housing, consumer protection, roads and buildings, etc.

Social Work Services are provided through a dedicated department headed up by a Director of Social Work who is also the Chief Social Work Officer.

Social Work staff are employed primarily by local authorities and by voluntary organisations; few are employed within the private sector. Services are provided in communities, hospitals, schools, residential homes, day centres, prisons and an increasing number of specialist centres. The Social Work Department of the Highland Council is responsible for provision of a range of services.

This includes - Community Care – the care of adults in the community

Services for

- older people;
- people with learning disabilities;
- people with physical disabilities;
- people with sensory impairment;
- people with mental health difficulties;
- tackling substance misuse.
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Also, this includes the Criminal Justice Service

This is a full range of services provided through a partnership of authorities in the North and East of Scotland

Finally, there are Children and Family Services. More detailed information is provided, as this is the service area that provides the practice context for the VCs. Like Community Care Services, the provision for Children and Families is wide and varied involving services to

- Looked after children: These are children not able to be cared for by their parents and for whom the Highland Council takes responsibility.
 - Fostering and adoption: Currently there are children waiting for a foster placement. They are a wide range of ages and some have been waiting a long
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time. Groups of brothers and sisters are particularly difficult to place. The recruitment of foster carers is also a challenge for the Council. An Adoption Service is also provided.

- Through care and aftercare: New legislation and practice initiatives are being introduced across Scotland to support the particular needs of young people who have been looked after by the local authority as they move towards adulthood and independence. The Highland council have responsibilities for this in their area.
- Mental health: An audit of mental health (which included vulnerable children and children of primary school age who are looked after) identified high numbers with mental health problems. In response, initiatives to identify and meet the mental health needs of children and young people who are looked after have been introduced, including a dedicated specialist nurse, specialist support to social work practitioners from child and adolescent psychiatrists, and mental health worker posts based in local areas.
- Child protection: Following a major review of Child Protection practice and a number of Child Death Inquiries, The Scottish Executive² has established an improvement programme across Scotland. The Highland Council mirror the issues which face the rest of Scotland, including increasing numbers of children recognised as living in families affected by substance mis-use, alcohol mis-use and domestic abuse. The impact of emotional abuse and neglect continue to be recognised. Significant issues in terms of inter-agency working and working in real partnership with carers and families are being addressed as are our abilities to listen and hear the stories of children and young people. The question of whether the child protection system protects vulnerable children is constantly monitored.
- Children with disabilities: Approximately 300 children with disability receive a service. Local young carers' projects support between 70 and 80 young people. Family support workers in the youth action team support young people whose parents misuse alcohol and drugs.
- Youth Justice: Highland Council is tackling youth crime by creating a multi-agency youth action service. The service is led by social work and involves other local government services as, well as the prison service and a range of voluntary agencies.

² The Scottish Executive is the Scottish Government which, along with the Scottish Parliament, operates in a devolved fashion under Westminster, the UK Parliament in London.

The Complexity of the Task

In providing modern and effective social work services, this council, as for other local authorities in Scotland, face wide ranging challenges, in terms of:

- demographic change, most significantly growth in the numbers of older people;
- pockets of serious and persistent poverty, unemployment and deprivation in a number of urban areas and, though in fewer numbers, rural areas;
- increasing problems - often associated with deprivation - which individuals, families and whole communities face as a result of drug and alcohol misuse; and
- rising expectations regarding the reach and quality of support services and significant questions over the sustainability of some policy directions, notably how far the emphasis on increasingly providing care at home as opposed to residential settings can be taken.

Some of these challenges apply more acutely within the particular social, economic and geographical situation of the Highland Council.

Social work training and Education

Over the past couple of years, social work training in the higher education sector has been transformed with the development of new standards in education. Following a major review of social work education which recognised the complexity of the social work task, social workers will now be required to undertake a four years honours degree programme, bringing them into line with the rest of Europe. Prior to this there were a number of routes to professional qualification, the minimum being a two year non-graduate programme

The Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education has been established, which it is hoped will be a major contributor over the next decade and beyond through its funded projects, e.g., elearning, developing ethical and effective practice learning, etc., and as it joins up increasingly with professional education initiatives for teachers, doctors, nurses and others.

These measures are intended to attract new entrants and raise the esteem of the profession in the eyes of the public. In addition, financial investment has been made in high quality education for the social work leaders of tomorrow.

Recruitment and Retention of Staff

Within HC, recruitment and retention of appropriately qualified staff is problematical. This is also a national problem and at that level initiatives have been launched to attract people into the social care profession. Highland Region has no training establishment in its area to provide a supply of new staff and there are serious difficulties in attracting staff to and retaining staff in rural areas. Additionally, HC experiences particular difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff within hard pressed Care and Assessment Teams working with very vulnerable children and families. This highlights the perceived and experienced stress experienced by workers in complex high-risk areas of child abuse and neglect.

HC's central strategy is to train, develop and support their own staff, thus operating a *grow your own* policy. A number of initiatives have been established:

- Sponsorship of final year students;
- Bursaries for self financing students;
- An additional practice teaching post to enable a greater number of students to have practice/fieldwork placements in the council, recognising that this frequently leads to permanent employment;
- Work opportunities for unqualified staff as a pathway into a career in social work especially for those traditional groups under-represented in social work staffing, for example, men;
- Fast track scheme which will enable those who have relevant first degrees to complete a social work qualification in 18 months when they are supported by an employer.

The Project

The Highland council joined the project later than the other partners and this partly explains why, at the time of this writing, the process has not yet been completed and the outcomes of the project have not been evaluated. It has also taken longer than anticipated to have the project owned by a large bureaucratic organisation where externally funded and managed projects present unusual challenges

On a positive note, there is enthusiasm within parts of the organisation for the project and the opportunities for learning and practice development are appreciated.

1.1 Narration in Social Work Education and Practice

Story telling has been an important part of the social history of this northern area of Scotland and as a way of representing and understanding the nature of human experience it dates back thousands of years. All cultures have a legacy of stories and storytelling and therefore narration has an important place in terms of biography, history and literature, but also in helping people reflect on experiences, consider meaning and giving a sense of continuity by linking past present and future. The Highland culture, meaning both the Gaelic and Nordic parts, is rich in stories and has used this tradition effectively to create meaning and purpose. Indeed, much social development comes through listening to and understanding narratives – the stories people tell about their own and others' lives. Reminiscence, for example, a way of working with older people to attribute meaning to their lives, has been recognised as a significant social work practice skill.

Stories constitute basic structures, which we can use to make sense of our lives. Therefore, understanding narrative may be seen as fundamental to the practice of social work and, thus, the examination of stories provides a rich resource.

Social work, a practice discipline, has struggled to find its place in the high theory worlds of social science. One response has been to pursue a model of teaching and learning which focussed on helping social work students to make better connections between theory and practice (Fook, 1996). The post modern age saw a change and social work education was challenged to find an educational methodology which enabled learning in an increasingly complex and ever changing practice environment. Many professional programmes have been being influenced by the work of Argyris (1974) and Schön (1983; 1987). They argued for a new epistemology and adopted a reflective approach to learning and practice development.

It may be that social work educators are able to help students develop understanding of significant themes and issues arising in their practice through reflective examination of the stories people tell about themselves and others. Narrative analysis has as its base the theory of social constructivism and provides a framework for understanding patterns of meaning as seen in life histories, autobiographies, case studies, etc.

Stories invite teacher practitionerS and studentS to consider how people come to understand themselves and how this understanding influences behaviour, i.e., who we are, where we have been, where we are going and what we have gathered to make sense of the human experience.

In preparing social workers for today's complex and diverse service, this approach is especially appropriate for culturally sensitive social work practice because meaning is viewed in context, i.e., the personal within the social and cultural milieu. This heightens our understanding and respect for the client's culture and values.

The PRAISE methodology, while perhaps unfamiliar in terminology, fits well within the context of reflective practice, which, it may be argued, forms the cornerstone of all social work teaching and learning in Scotland. The provision of opportunity for workers at various stages of their continuous professional development is timely and planning is now in place to use the process of narration and VCs to support the education and practice development of discreet groups of staff.

Group 1

As referred to above, social work in Scotland has been deemed to be in crisis as the numbers of people applying for social work training programmes has decreased markedly and vacant posts remain unfilled widely across services but particularly within Children's Services where staff turnover is high. This is an issue across the country; findings indicate that careers in other professions are proving more attractive. Unfortunately, the Highland Council has experienced these difficulties to a greater degree than the rest of the country.

In response to this crisis situation the Scottish Executive has supported a number of initiatives to attract individuals to the profession. One of these is a fast track scheme for graduates that enables councils to employ graduate trainees who will be able to complete social work training in an 18-month period.

HC, following a *Grow your Own* policy, has appointed nine graduates to this fast track route and they will form a VC. The VC will be used to develop knowledge, skills and values to enable this group to provide evidence in meeting the core competencies required to achieve a professional qualification in social work, namely:

- Communicate and engage;
 - Promote and enable;
 - Assess and plan;
 - Intervene and provide services;
 - Working in organizations;
 - Develop professional competence.
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This piece of work may help to establish the core framework and curriculum of an in-service programme for this group of workers over the next few years in an effort to provide practice based learning in a more systematic and coherent way with clear linkages to the final competences required for the award of a professional qualification in social work.

Group 2

While Social Worker is a protected title in Scottish law, it is only now that a formal Register of the Social Work and Social Care Workforce is mandatory; this is in response to increasing needs to professionalize the status of social workers and a demand for greater public service accountability. All Social Workers who wish to practice as such will have to be registered with the Scottish Social Services Council.

Registration requires social work and social care staff to demonstrate their *continued fitness to practice* and provide evidence that they have engaged in activities that have developed their practice. Individuals must maintain a record of evidence to support their claim and employers have a responsibility to support workers in undertaking appropriate developmental activity.

Recruitment, again, is an issue that has evoked response at a national government level. Retention of staff, particularly within Children's Services, is also critical. The provision of professional services to vulnerable children and their families is an increasingly complex area of work with a high public profile involving workers in the assessment and management of risk. The responsibility resting on such workers is a heavy one. Support to frontline staff has also been a focus for government consideration and action. It is widely recognised that professional supervision, which historically has served four key functions, namely management, education, support and mediation, has become increasingly administrative, focussing on completion of tasks, decision making and freeing up caseload space to undertake new work.

Opportunities for reflection on and analysis of practice, identification of learning, etc., have become squeezed. Learning from experienced workers who share the same team room are no longer guaranteed; thus, high staff turnover sometimes means that a worker who has been qualified no longer than a year may be the most experienced worker in the team.

In this group the framework will be the Post-Qualifying Award in Social Work where workers can be assessed and credited for development of competence beyond the point of initial qualifications. The requirements for this award are:

- Demonstrate the development of competence since the point of qualification;
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- Work in a complex environment;
- Manage risk;
- Working with others;
- Decision making;
- Take responsibility for the learning of others.

To meet these requirements workers must demonstrate their ability to learn in a number of ways but primarily must bring forward evidence of their own ability to reflect analytically and critically on their practice. VCs will support this process. Group 2 therefore focuses on meeting the needs of this group of staff.

Group 3

Geographically based groups will provide a third opportunity to use the methodology. Because of the rural nature of much of Highland Region, it is important to look at the use of VCs across disciplines, potentially strengthening understanding and support within an interagency group who are involved in delivering a service to one family within a particular geographical area. The need for development of closer more effective interagency work has been highlighted in recent inquiries into child deaths, Caleb Ness and Kennedy McFarlane, and in the Scottish Executive Audit of Child Protection Services in Scotland *It's Everyone's Job to Make Sure I'm Alright*. This will strengthen inter-agency understanding, reduce feelings of isolation and increase the sense of shared responsibility in working with vulnerable children in remote and isolated communities. A group has been established in Inverness, the capital city of the region, and in Golspie, a more rural centre of service provision.

Use of Narration

Groups 1 and 2 use selected case studies (see summary following) and cases from their own practice. Experienced practitioners tell their own stories. The case studies have been selected to enable thinking, discussion and reflection of a number of topics, which it is agreed are highly relevant and desirable. These groups will meet at regular intervals with a study agenda.

Group 3 is not programmed so tightly and is presented with an occasional opportunity, but at regular intervals, for teams/groups across the Council area to meet for case discussions.

The Narratives

Case Study	Key Concepts	Practice themes	Learning themes
'Getting through the red tape'	language and cultural differences, mixed cultural and ethnic backgrounds, poor housing, poverty, abuse and neglect	Physical child abuse, working within Child Protection Procedures, the Children's Hearing System in Scotland, managing to deal with the bureaucracy of the Welfare State despite language and cultural differences, managing mixed ethnic and cultural backgrounds	Value of children; Needs of children, Parental responsibilities, Conflict of interests, Child protection and family support, Understanding adult relationships within a different cultural background, Legislation, State financial benefits
'No-one answers the door'	Drug addicted parents, young parents, family support, management of risk	Dealing with neglect through drug use, physical risk to child from drug using household, helping young people come to terms with their addiction, dealing with extended family relationships, Child Protection procedures, Childrens' Hearing System; the role of the Authority Reporter.	Attachment Theory, Outcomes of poor attachment, Effects of drug misuse on parenting capacity, Addictive behaviour, Assessment frameworks, Interagency working, Neglect, Thresholds for Intervention
'I met him on my mobile'	Poor attachment; neglect, teenage rebellion, teenagers at risk.	Dealing with dysfunctional families with a history of poor attachments, dealing with very young parents, preparing Court reports across geographical boundaries, disputed custody and access rights.	Attachment Theory, Understanding children's behaviour, Knowledge of court procedures across state boundaries, Risk assessment frameworks, Legislation
'They turned my	ADHD treatment, adoptive family, hyperactive child.	Step-parent adoption process; dealing with a family where one child's	Working in partnership with Families; ADHD - research related to

daughter into a zombie'		behaviour disrupts family life and results in parental depression, inter-agency working to secure best outcomes, use of drugs to treat child behaviours.	treatment and outcomes, Attachment theory, Legislation, Mental health
'Is sex bad then?'	Inappropriate child sexual behaviour, use of coercion, the parameters of normal developmental sexual behaviour	Professional interviewing techniques with children, Joint Interviewing procedures in Local Government, therapeutic intervention with children who display inappropriate sexual behaviour and developing programmes for this purpose	Inter-agency working, Values, Child Development, Sexual development, Communication skills, Managing behaviour, Values and attitudes
'She's pointing a knife at me!'	Physical abuse, parental learning difficulty, anger management, older child caring for siblings.	Child Protection procedures over time, dangerously threatening behaviour by parent despite caring relationship, managing demanding triplets, single parenting; domestic abuse impact on family, working with client with hearing impairment.	Attachment Theory, <i>Good Enough</i> parenting, research on young carers; research on twin/triplet behaviours, Impact of Domestic Abuse, Anger Management therapies, sensory impairment, Communication
'She set fire to the office'	Teenagers at risk; teenagers presenting challenging behaviour	Working with teenagers whose behaviour puts themselves and others at risk, 'dangerous' families peer pressure, resource issues.	Attachment Theory, Young people who self-harm, Challenging behaviour, Residential Care, Secure Accommodation and its impact on the young person, Risk assessment;

1.2 Evaluation of the Project

It is intended that the evaluation include both verbal and written feedback from the participants of each of the 3 groups. Verbal comments will be gathered at the end of each event and final comments will be sought through a written questionnaire, which will elicit views on outcomes for individual workers in relation to

- learning;
- links to core curriculum – qualifying or post qualifying requirements;
- process.

1.3 Conclusion

This project is welcomed within HC and there is enthusiasm for the methodology, which despite its unfamiliar concepts adapts well to the current language of reflective and critical practice within social work learning and practice development in Scotland.
