Social work in Europe

New policies and challenges
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Different methods, same goal
Social care solutions in Europe

Social workers are stat to the challenges presented by the movement of generations of families across Europe and learning how to work across borders.

This supplement, published ahead of next week’s International Federation of Social Workers European conference in Iceland, throws a spotlight on some of the key issues facing the profession.

Find out what social workers in Kent have learned from Nordic colleagues about looking after unaccompanied minors. Discover how a pan-European project is creating a common child protection training package that could be taken up in eight countries - including the UK.

We also look at why the needs of older refugees and asylum seekers are often overlooked, even though their requirements are significant and why today’s social workers should have a better understanding of the dynamics behind human trafficking and its links to migration.

Why should a woman’s rights underpin everything a social worker does? We also talk to one UK academic who believes the profession must mobilise clients so their voice is heard. As the curriculum changes to meet the demands of globalisation and migration, we hear how social workers must challenge their own cultural assumptions, which can alienate others.

But this supplement also looks at the wider agenda. It considers the inter-country adoption trends and reveals how Iceland’s older people rely on friends and family for their care - even though the state pays their care bill.

Why is Scotland prioritising kinship care? And what can UK social workers learn from Finland in keeping children safe in today’s digital world?

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Yes, people need to be resilient, but they need to be adequately resourced as well

United, but under which banner?

European society is changing - and, with it, the nature of social work. Policies and procedures need to be set up to meet the needs of refugees and displaced communities, says David Brindle.
Older asylum seekers

Mary O’Hara reports

Mary O’Hara reports

Older asylum seekers often have greater specific needs than others, but they can be overlooked.

In addition, some older asylum seekers may suffer mental health issues resulting from the trauma of their refugee experiences.

Alfonso Lara Montero, policy director at the European Social Network, which monitors developments in social services in the EU, says that while older asylum seekers have greater specific needs than others, they are “often overlooked by refugee services”. Swedish social work researcher Jessica H Jonsson agrees. She says social workers are uniquely placed to help, but the needs of older asylum seekers have been largely overlooked in global social problems, such as forced migration, and rarely addressed by social work programmes or professionals, although social workers play a key role in supporting the rapidly ageing world.

Jonsson says it is important that provision for older asylum seekers is fully examined, including financial support, health and social care. There needs to be a “structural reform” to improve their living conditions, she says, revealing there are already positive signs of “note agent” work between social workers and health professionals.

Moore Foreman from University College Dublin, who has an interest in refugees on the margins of Irish society, says it is key that the problems within different national systems experienced by asylum seekers – including those who are elderly – are addressed.

Ireland’s system of direct provision where refugees are initially housed in “institutional” settings before being resettled means social workers are often the bridge to services. But success is dependent on social workers using their initiative, rather than having a formal system that meets refugees’ needs.

In the UK, social workers are stepping up to the challenges faced by this older client group and recognising that their role is not just to act as “gatekeepers” for statutory requirements, says Ruth Allen, chief executive of the British Association of Social Workers.

“This is a problem of our time on a big scale. Social workers have to bring a holistic approach to human need.”

No age limit for refugees

More must be done to understand and provide for the needs of older asylum seekers.

The Guardian | Wednesday 24 May 2017

In search of asylum

Applications made to EU countries

EU countries with highest number of applications (2016)

Asylum applications to the EU from people over 65 (2016)

How to care for young arrivals

The UK can learn from the Scandinavian approach to helping unaccompanied child refugees, says Richard Orange

The Nordic countries of Denmark, Finland, Sweden, Iceland and Norway account for 30% of unaccompanied minors in the peak year of the refugee crisis, 2015, compared with the EU’s total of 88,250. This has set their migration and social care agencies under unprecedented test.

“We didn’t have the systems in place for so many, and there were quite fast changes in the legislation,” says Anna Gärdegård, project leader at the Nordic Welfare Centre, and the author of a new report comparing the Nordic countries’ reception of minors. However, it is also forcing them to develop strategies from which UK authorities can learn.

Andrew Israël, corporate director of social care, health and wellbeing at Kent county council, says Britain has decided to follow a model similar to Sweden’s. Rather than the county where the child asylum seeker arrives being responsible for handling both their reception and their long-term care, the arrival county now arranges
Social workers should be encouraging young people to engage with politics.

Debbie Andalo reports

Social workers understand that principle, but they work under such pressure that it’s sometimes difficult to find time for reflective practice and take stock of whether they are working ethically and within the law. This is compounded by risk-adverse management and politicians who criticise often complex and difficult professional decisions.

Human rights

Andrés, people’s access to basic human rights, such as food, decent housing and education, has been called into question by government austerity programmes across Europe. She fears that social workers are too often seen as the agents, rather than the opponents, of these policies.

“When social policy does not respond to people’s basic need to survive and flourish, and human rights are neglected, things start to go wrong in social work,” she says. “Human rights are not a gift from the government; they are innate and inalienable.”

Bird Featherstone, sociology and social work professor at the University of Buckingham, argues that the curriculum should have more to say on human rights, which have been ignored at the cost of rampant inequalities in health and wealth.

“We should already be teaching trainees about one of the key factors behind Brexit, namely that those who voted for it came, in the main, from areas which have been left behind by globalisation, where life expectancy rates are lower by nearly 10 years than the most affluent areas, and where children are much more likely to be removed from their families.”

Recognising social workers as the upholders of basic human rights could be an antidote to these harsh facts, she says: “We would work alongside communities to help people flourish, give protection to the vulnerable, combat loneliness and challenge racism and discrimination.”

The state and the individual

Treading a fine balance of power

A social workers work within a statutory framework. Where they are not invited in by the individual or the family they do so as part of the state’s responsibility to protect vulnerable people. Any state intervention in European family life is undertaken in the context of Article 8 of the European Convention on Human Rights – the right to privacy in family life. When social workers are criticised, their intervention has either been too extreme or too minimal.

They have to be clear that their actions will be endorsed by law. However, it’s a very fine balance between an individual’s human rights and the powers that social workers have in protecting people from harm.

Social workers need to be clear that their actions will be endorsed by law

Social workers understand that principle, but they work under such pressure that it’s sometimes difficult to find time for reflective practice and take stock of whether they are working ethically and within the law. This is compounded by risk-adverse management and politicians who criticise often complex and difficult professional decisions.

Human rights should run through social work education, training and continuing professional development, and be reinforced through support and consultation. There is a real need to develop an understanding of the fundamental principles of human rights and social justice, and their implementation.

Part of this is about risk management rather than risk assessment. In risk assessment you take a snapshot of a particular moment in time, but helping people manage risk over a long period is much more complex. People manage their own risks in the longer term through the interventions of social work practice; risk assessment is part of that process.

Social workers want to make a difference; to work with people through change. However, we need to create the right working environment for this to happen. This can only be achieved through employers and employees working together positively for change.

Ruth Stark is global president of the International Federation of Social Workers, and was its human rights commissioner from 2004 to 2014.
Delays in kinship care can affect the child, but Scotland is speeding up the decision-making, says Rachel Williams

For children who cannot live with their parents, making a new home with relatives or friends can be a hugely positive alternative to care. However, in Scotland, delays to the organising of permanent kinship care are raising concerns that children are being left in limbo.

Carol Wassell and her team at Strathclyde University’s Centre for Excellence for Looked After Children (Celcis), have been looking at how the current system can be changed to identify cases more quickly.

The team is scrutinising data in 15 of the 32 Scottish local authorities to work out how long it takes social workers to decide whether or not to permanently place children in kinship care. One way of speeding up the process is to assess potential carers as soon as a child is taken into temporary care. This way, if it’s decided that the child cannot go home to their parents, they can quickly move to a kinship placement.

Sometimes we do the assessment of parental capacity to rule out whether or not the child can go home; in the current system that can take months,” says Wassell. “If it doesn’t look likely, we then start assessing kinship options. We’re saying that’s too late.”

Another option is to look at possible kinship carers within a year of a child being put on a local authority’s child protection register.

Wassell’s work is part of Permanence and Care Excellence, a project delivered by Celcis and the Scottish government in an attempt to reduce the delay in finding long-term, stable homes for looked-after children.

There have been successes already. In one local authority, where it took, on average, a year to make a permanence decision for a child, Wassell’s team set a target of reducing it to nine months - it has since come down to seven.

Looking at kinship case options is a challenging job for social workers, Wassell says. “It’s a big task. Parents can often be quite reluctant to tell you who may be around as an alternative carer for a child, because they do not have a good relationship with that person themselves.

“It’s extremely time-consuming because there may be seven or eight people who have to be assessed.”

But while assessing potential carers falls to the remit of social workers, it is crucial that any other agencies involved - such as health visitors, school nurses, educational psychologists and community mental health services - help identify them.

“There’s a wealth of in-depth information about who could potentially be around for that child,” Wassell says.

Exposing the family option
John Simmonds

The local authority has a legal duty to make sure the child is safe and the placement is working.

If people if they would step in to care for a child in the family who cannot be cared for by their parents and most would say yes. This would certainly be the case in an emergency and it’s likely that this would be the case over a longer period of time. That is not to underestimate the longer-term challenge, but it does reflect a fundamental issue of belief, loyalty and commitment that “family is best.”

The state has no role in approving these arrangements - although it may have a role in providing practical or other forms of support – and research evidence shows that, in the main, they work well for the child and the family.

The exception to this is where the child is assessed to be at risk from their parents because of abuse and/or neglect. It is then the absolute responsibility of the state to investigate and assess the child’s needs and circumstances, and take the necessary action as set out in law. There may be a range of issues at the heart of such situations - including drug and alcohol misuse, serious mental health problems, domestic violence and significant learning difficulties.

In such circumstances, a local authority has a duty to provide help to the family to address those problems, to explore the potential of the wider family in the short or longer term to care for the child, and seek the authorisation of the court to act where there is a significant dispute.

“The child must be at the centre of such action, but as must the family, unless there are strong reasons why that is not in the child’s best interest.

The intervention of the local authority and the courts is exceptional and here they do have the power and responsibility to assess and approve family members, usually as foster carers. For a family member or members to be subject to “investigation” and approval, is stressful. To continue after approval to have visits from social workers and other professionals can continue to stress. It is hoped that a good supportive partnership will emerge, but the stresses all too often outweigh the support.

Nobody wants to create more difficulties than the family is managing already, but the local authority has a legal duty to make sure the child is safe and the placement is working in the child’s best interests.

The case of seven-year-old Shanay Walker, who died of a head injury after being placed in the care of her aunt under a special guardianship order, illustrates what can go wrong. These situations are thankfully rare but dreadful to contemplate when they happen.

Family is best - that is what the evidence shows - but risk is present too. That is the challenge of delivering a system that places a primary focus on the child, and values the wider family, but is ready to intervene where necessary.

John Simmonds is director of policy, research and development at the CoramBAAF fostering and adoption academy.
Laura Keisanen: ‘Every child has the right to a safe childhood, both offline and online’

In Finland, police are investigating internet abuse, not just to children, but to those who would do them harm. Linda Jackson reports

Laura Keisanen closes the window on her computer and gives a sickened sigh. Images of a three-year-old girl being raped by a man in his 40s fade from the screen. Seconds later Keisanen’s attention switches to child sex abuse.

“I see traumatic images every day. Playing Tetris helps you cope.”

The work of the unit does not stop there. “The majority of people interviewed received either informal care from family or formal care, but not both. Informal help plays an important role in supporting older people to live as long as possible in their homes,” says Sigurgeig Sigurdardottir, co-author of the study and associate professor at Iceland University faculty of social work.

“Iceland has a strong tradition of informal care, but is family support being taken for granted?”

The survey, 94% had children, with 89% having children living within 25km.

Six in 10 had difficulties with basic household tasks; 54% of whom relied on help from family, while only 22% received formal care support.

“I believe that every child has a right to a good and safe childhood both offline and online,” she says. “Rapidly developing digital media is changing children’s lives and extending possibilities to find information, learn and communicate with others.”

Keisanen explains how the work of the “Nettipav” hotline involves the daily assessment, classification and analysis of reports using state-of-the-art technology. The hotline enables any user to report online imagery or activity related to the sexual abuse of children.

Figures show that in 2016, the Finnish hotline received nearly three million reports of material allegedly showing the sexual abuse of children. Some 20% were classified as illegal, and of these 90% involved children under 15. Another 17% offended children’s rights by sexualising young people, such as dressing 10-year-olds in revealing underwear intended for adults. The remaining images were classified as sexual content not illegal (38%) or involved material no longer accessible (28%).

Information deemed illegal is passed to the National Bureau of Investigation of Finland so laws can be enforced. Details about material hosted outside Finland is forwarded to the relevant country via the International Association of Internet Hotlines. This leads to the rapid removal of material and other measures.

Meanwhile help for adults, children and young people to identify problems and take action early is provided on a number of fronts by the digital unit. The Ohanavastuum.fi (take responsibility) website engages potential abusers to consider the consequences of their sexual activities directed at children, and provides tools for controlling their own harmful behaviour.

In a separate move, an online youth centre – netari – supports young people by providing opportunities to create friendships on the internet. Aimed at reaching children who may find it difficult to talk to adults, it has a number of different “rooms” in which young people can enter to make friends, find support for education and careers, seek help or have one-to-one chats with youth workers. Counselling is among the services offered and more than 1,000 10-25 year olds are helped annually. Support is also available through the mobile app Help.com where young people can talk with virtual police and experts, and trained volunteers at Victim Support Finland.

The work of the unit does not stop there. “We are constantly developing the service,” says Keisanen. “It is important that we can be flexible and help those children who traditional services might not reach. That has involved setting up a Christmas Eve chatroom, as Christmas is not a happy holiday for everyone, and online support for pupils following a stabbing at a school in northern Finland.

Different events can affect children in different ways.”

The state may be picking up the bill, but Icelandic families are keen to help, says Linda Jackson

It has been a fundamental right in Nordic countries for decades: older people facing their twilight years in Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden know that their health and social care will be completely financed by the state.

But research of people aged 65 and over in Iceland has found that despite the promise of their care costs being picked up by the taxpayer, many older people struggling with basic household tasks are being helped by their families instead.

“I know there’s a strong tradition of informal care in the Nordic states,” says Sigurgeig Sigurdardottir, co-author of the study and associate professor at Iceland University faculty of social work.

“Iceland has a strong tradition of informal care, but is family support being taken for granted?”

Iceland has a strong tradition of informal care, but is family support being taken for granted? Getty

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Will a Europe-wide approach to child protection help UK social workers accept other countries’ assessments? Kim Thomas reports

Universities across Europe, including Kent and Stirling, are involved in a project to design a set of training materials for child protection services that can be used by social workers in eight different countries.

The move is an attempt to create a common approach to child protection practice across Europe and, at the same time, allow social workers from different countries to learn from each other.

The project, which began in 2015, is led by Paul Rigby, a lecturer in social work at the University of Stirling.

Rigby says that while the theory behind social work at the University of Stirling, are involved in a project to design a set of training materials for child protection services that can be used by social workers in eight different countries.

Under communism, social work did not exist as a separate profession – in some countries it was still the remit of the church.

Today, says Rigby, UK social workers are often reluctant to accept assessments completed by social workers from beyond their borders, even though there is much good practice to be shared. “For example,” he says, “the former-Yugoslavian countries are well used to working with children traumatised through war and bombing.”

This reluctance needs to change.

“What we’re hoping to move towards is a consistent approach – we can’t have UK social workers travelling all over Europe repeating assessments that have been done in other countries.”

The project will deliver child protection training in five modules: assessment and interventions; incorporating theory into practice; developing practice skills, including good supervision; co-production with marginalised children and families, and the application of core values and ethics into practice. Each European institution will develop a case study for its own country as the vehicle for contributing to broader social work training.

The mass movement of children across European borders – second only to the US, with 5,648 children.

Selman, an expert in inter-country adoption from Newcastle University, says the trend in Europe is for countries that aren’t Hague compliant to require more stringent adherence to the Hague Convention which means that a lot of countries that aren’t Hague compliant were closed (to prospective adoptive Irish parents).

A key factor in the decision to look to the US for their second child was Ireland’s enactment of the Hague Convention on the Protection of Children and Co-operation in Respect of Inter-country Adoption. The international agreement is designed to regulate adoptions between countries and guard against abuses. But it means that countries that once may have approved adoptions from have been taken off its list.

old Hugo, who the couple adopted from Mexico. O’Flaherty began looking to other countries to adopt a child in her mid-30s (she is now 39) because domestic adoption of babies and infants in Ireland is rare. She says: “Ireland adopted a very stringent adherence to the Hague Convention, which meant that a lot of countries that aren’t Hague compliant were closed (to prospective adoptive Irish parents).”

There are still a few more hurdles to overcome, including monthly assessments until the adoption process is finalised, but at the end of three-and-a-half years working with an agency in Florida, and “after years of form filling and all the rest of it”, the conclusion of the family’s US adoption is in sight.
Social workers need to challenge their own values if they are to help those on the margins, says Mark Ivory

Volunteering at Calais’s now dismantled migrant camp, Dr Louise Irvine discovered a new kind of social work. She won the inhabitants’ trust through her work supporting children’s claims for asylum in the UK, but admits that it was a steep learning curve. “To support liberation in others we really need to liberate ourselves,” she says. “Migrants are escaping wars and entrenched poverty, brought about by conflicts, state policies and religious extremism, yet when they arrive at our borders they are treated as unwanted.”

Social workers are uniquely placed to challenge hostility towards migrants.

Social work curriculum needs to adapt to the impact of globalisation on marginalised populations. “This is a very different vision of social work that I’ve advocated,” she says. “The curriculum should offer not just the knowledge and interventions that migration challenges us to provide, but also address the social mindset of the educators and their trainees.”

But Lisa Hackett, West Midlands regional head for the fast-track children’s social worker training programme Frontline, says social workers have always required self-knowledge: “Social work education offers a lens through which students examine their own values and beliefs and how they feel about social differences and the factors that underpin them,” she says. “Social workers are in a privileged position because they get to examine their values and beliefs in a way few people can.”

Such self-scrutiny informs their response to cases like that of Kurdish-Iranian teenage asylum seeker Reker Ahmed, attacked by a gang at a south London bus stop in March. “You can say it’s just mindlessness, violence, but the important thing is to explain it,” Hackett says. “If we just remain outraged, we don’t have any understanding. Why do young people feel compelled to take that action? It may be that they feel on the periphery of society in terms of their own life choices.”

Almost 21 million people fall victim to forced labour globally, and there are thought to be up to 13,000 people trapped in slavery in the UK alone. In 2015, UK authorities identified 3,256 potential human trafficking victims. However, social workers need a better understanding of the dynamics of trafficking - and especially the way it is linked to migration - to help them identify those affected or at risk, according to Hilde Saarjoudt of the State University of New York.

“One of the biggest problems is that there is such a dichotomy in all the discourse,” said Saarjoudt, a PhD student from Iceland with an interest in human trafficking and migration. “It’s all about forced versus voluntary migration, legal or illegal migrants. But human trafficking isn’t black or white – it’s everything in between.”

A common misconception is that victims are always kidnapped, she explains. “Of course, kidnapping does happen, but you could also decide to migrate on your own and then end up in a situation where you are trafficked. You might have nothing, and then someone offers you a job as an au pair or a model, for instance. But when you arrive in the host country, you’re told that you have to pay for your transportation and documents, and need to work as a prostitute to pay the debt.”

Refusal is often met with violence or threats of it. “In cases where a victim is present illegally, traffickers often tell the victim that they’ll just get deported or end up in prison if they try to seek help,” she says. “Most victims are people who don’t have any opportunities in their home country - when people are in a vulnerable and desperate state they’re more likely to take these risks. Understanding that, especially in more affluent, westernised parts of the world, is often hard.”

Strict migration policies pose more problems for those seeking to identify and help victims, says Saarjoudt, who has served on an anti-trafficking taskforce in upstate New York. “If you got to a country where they know they might get deported, victims are very reluctant to step forward.”

She believes that social workers need more knowledge of the many forms of trafficking, which can take place within countries as well as across international borders; what makes people vulnerable; and the needs of the victims.

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