Overview of implications of the Care Act for social workers and their employers

In recent years Care Management has been the dominant social work role. The Care Act provides the opportunity to reconnect with the professional role, think about what you bring to the table and how you use the architecture, the system to ensure people get the best possible personalised outcome. Until now, that has all got a bit lost in the volumes and the processes and the systems that have been placed on social workers. This has partly been because of the target driven approach of previous governments where everybody wanted to know how much we anticipate and how many people got this and how many people got that.

Luckily we’re drawing back from that, not just in Adult Social Care but across the whole of the public sector and actually I think Adult Social Care, Social Work and the values of Social Work and the disability movement and the people using services and the carers working closely with people like yourselves to have a different focus on what this is about. It’s about people, it’s about what’s possible, what can make a difference it’s about a more strengths based approach it’s about personalising giving people the opportunity to have as much control and say over what’s going to make a difference to their lives. We’re the facilitators, networkers and negotiators and we’re there to empower and enable people to have that same control in their lives whilst balancing often very complex things e.g a capacity to see when somebody makes a capable decision even if it’s an unwise decision, and when you have to take a more protective safeguarding approach. And there are demands now for social workers to be much more legally literate to really understand the legal framework and be able to demonstrate top quality analysis, assessment, judgement and be able to frame line their way in front of a judge or a court they get all the respect of being a good professional who knows how to present themselves in that setting.

So, a real challenge I think – the dumbing down of social work has been going on for a while so we need to get it back up there. In terms of the Care Act, guidance and regulations are out now so you have a chance to comment on them. The consultation finishes on the 15th August so please make sure you look particularly at the bits that relate to social work or social workers. If you feel it’s not strong enough do say that. When I started this post nearly a year ago there was very little referencing to social work so we had to really push the policy makers to include these references. Civil servants were reluctant because they didn’t want to be prescriptive in case Local Authorities didn’t want that. Actually they haven’t really any complaints. What organisations want is greater clarity and stronger guidance around how you use your social worker and what you want your social workers to do. So
please make sure you make those comments and what fits with what’s right for you locally.

There is going to be a good opportunity to get it right and a good chance to think through these things. But I guess the key areas that we want to pick up on are the roles which social workers have to play in the whole wellbeing principle. Now how you define wellbeing is not easy as there is not a legal definition of wellbeing but that’s the driving principle. All the principles of the Care act are good social work principles about valuing people, getting alongside them, empowering, supporting, least constrictive options etc. So it’s really founded on values and good practice of social work. Obviously promoting the personalisation agenda, personalising not just what care and support they get but how social workers relate and engage with them - tuning into that person working out what’s the best way to get alongside them. Some people will respond to a problem solving approach; other people need a much more person centred approach, giving them time to reflect and think about things, and some people working with their family systems.

I was at a Principal social worker’s conference on Wednesday that included principal social workers from children and families services. What was striking about that was people thinking about how much common ground there was in that everybody is looking to meet the needs of individuals in family systems and in communities, and that the skill of modern intervention is working in a systemic way with people’s social systems. This is really important and is a key message from me about this.

But as we go through we need to think about Wellbeing. Advice and Information - What’s going to be the key role for social workers? Usually you don’t have social workers at contact centres picking up the first contact to give advice and information but there is a role somewhere to give professional input to that system. The lesson learned in organisations where they removed social workers from this first level of contact is that they have had to bring some form of professional input back as other workers need someone to turn to, and things are being missed. It is not always obvious and that presents a problem.

What are your local arrangements for advice and information? Are you delegating to community and voluntary sector organisations? Are you delegating downwards within your organisation? Are you training customer service officers, do you get social worker to be involved in training and helping people? How do you prevent people from getting pulled into the system when they don’t have to?

Asset based capacity building roles are important at this point. Social workers can lead a strengths based approach to working with the local community.

People can get linked into things and feel a part of things and feel they have made a contribution. Yesterday I was consulting with users and carers on the mental health code of practice. One of the service users told a story about her life as a mental health service user, and how her health deteriorated at a certain point. What made a
difference was when she was referred for support at a community centre where she was engaged in the development of the service and her own solutions. Her whole life changed at that point. She started to feel that she had a contribution to make, that she made a difference, she was valued, her self-confidence improved and she said until then she thought she had failed, her family, her community. These stories are really important.

Another key area for social work is in thinking about Transition, how we work with families and children using models of intervention that promote positive change and resilience.

Making decisions about who is and isn’t eligible and who isn’t with the possibility of people appealing as they have every right to means the judgements and analysis must be absolutely sound. Social workers have the skills in assessment that support robust decision making in this area.

Direct payments, helping individuals to obtain personal and creative outcomes, using advocacy appropriately and working with complexity and conflict, are all ways in which social workers can take a professional role. Alongside this, working with families and carers and offering support in care and support planning especially in complex situations where there is a need to balance the needs and interests of a number of different parties.

More than ever social workers have a role in working with mental capacity, the deprivation of ability, use of the court of protection and decision making around safeguarding - making safeguarding personal.

Finally, Market Shaping is an important area for social work activity - giving people the opportunities to live their best possible lives through intervening at the micro level with individuals and small groups to commission person centred, flexible services from micro providers, and at the macro level, in terms of helping to inform the future shape of market development.

All of these are opportunities for social workers in the context of the Care Act.

*Transcription of the presentation made by Lyn Romeo – chief social worker for adult services 31st July 2014*