1 WHAT DO SOCIAL WORKERS DO?

Key Points of Chapter

- You can thrive rather than just survive as a social worker
- Social work is kinetic and volatile – it will never stand still
- Social work is a contested moral and political activity
- Social work is not a 'win–win' occupation
- Social workers need a strong knowledge base
- Social work offers a range of opportunities and different ways of working
- Social workers need a work–life balance

Proposed Professional Capabilities Framework areas covered in this chapter

- Professionalism
- Values and Ethics
- Critical Reflection and Analysis
- Contexts and Organisations

(Social Work Reform Board, 2010 – see Appendix 1)

Draft Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers in England covered in this chapter

2 Be able to practise within the legal and ethical boundaries of their profession
3 Be able to maintain fitness to practise
10 Be able to maintain records appropriately
11 Be able to reflect on and review practice

(Health Professions Council, 2011 – see Appendix 2)

INTRODUCTION

Most people 'know' what social workers with children and families do. They 'know' because they read the papers and watch television, where hardly a week passes without another 'failing' of social workers being lambasted or without some ineffectual soap opera caricature being on screen, usually in the role of child snatcher. A little knowledge is dangerous, however, and we want the social workers of the future to have a lot of knowledge, to be proud to be social workers and to be effective because they have finely honed skills. Headlines such as 'Youngster turns life around after trust built up with social worker' or 'Abused mother thanks social worker for protecting her children' are unlikely, partly because they do not fit with the media's expectation of a social work story and partly because the vast majority of social work is a private affair wherein ethical considerations, such as respect for confidentiality, rule out the broadcasting of its many success stories.

Those of you considering entering the social work profession or already in the profession have not chosen an easy career and you are unlikely to be the type of person seeking accolades and personal glory. However, we all like some positive strokes for the work we do and there is no doubt that the current environment in which social work with children and families takes place is heated and volatile and rather lacking in such positive strokes. This is all the more reason for you to seek out the positives in your work, to be effective in your practice and as sure of your ground as you can be in a profession that is neither an exact science nor a business, but a contested moral and political undertaking. Social work has increasingly acquired the attributes of traditional professions, such as regulation and protected title, but has some strong distinguishing factors such as its political essence, its '**use of self**' and its commitment to social justice.

One way of looking at the complexity of the social work world is using the model that we call the **Kinetic** Pie (Figure 1.1).

Social work is critically influenced by global and UK social and economic policy and social attitudes, and the amount of money available for the government to allocate to social work largely determines the size of the pie, a pie that is increasingly regulated by laws, policies, and procedures. Let's look at a slice of this pie and see what ingredients lie within (Figure 1.2).

In the real world of social work, the various ingredients of this pie are volatile and ever moving, in other words, kinetic, and despite the sayings you may often hear in your
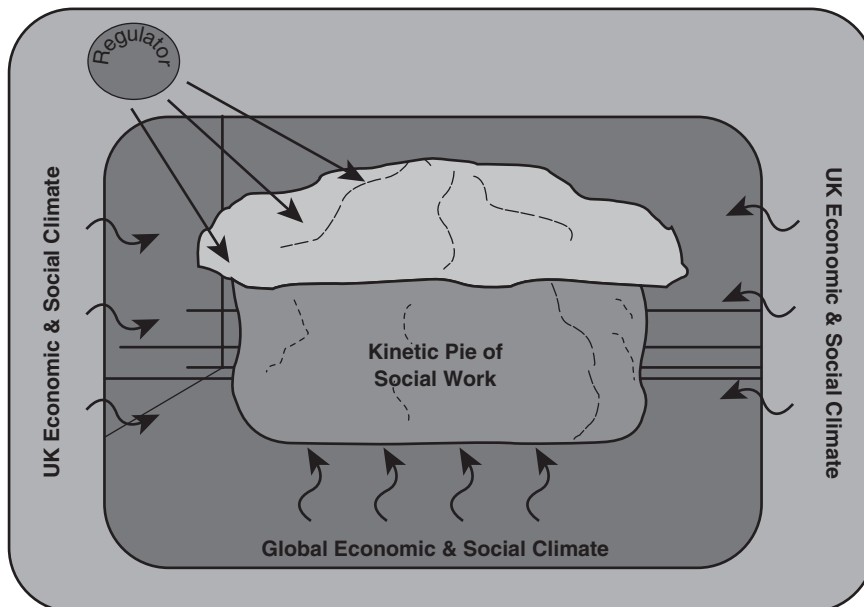

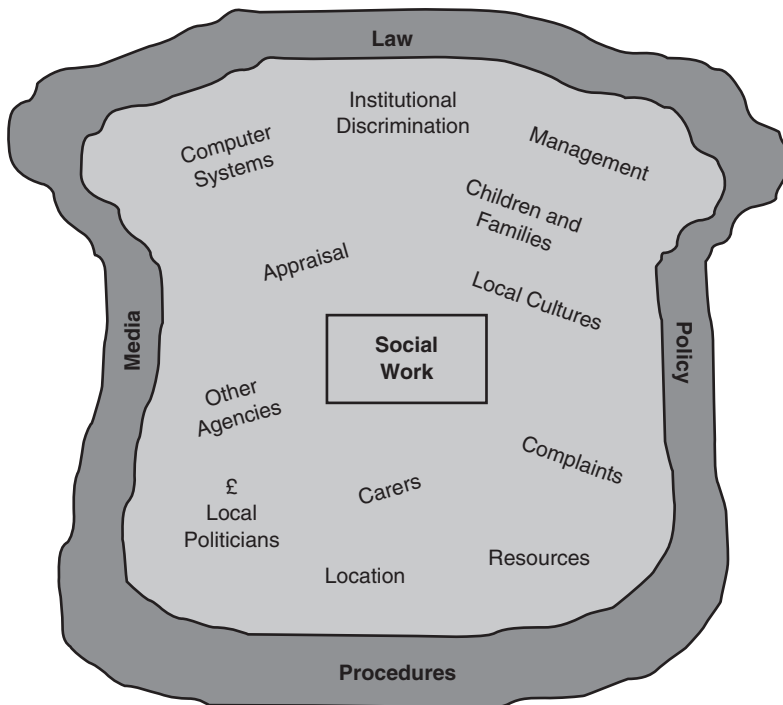Figure 1.1   The kinetic pie of social work

Unwin, 2011a

Figure 1.2   A slice of the kinetic pie

Unwin, 2011b

work settings – such as 'When things settle down'; 'When we are fully staffed'; 'After the reorganisation' – the reality is that if you want a career that is settled, routinised and clearly respected and understood by others, then social work is not for you. Social work will never 'settle down' – it is a contested activity, whose modes of delivery and priorities change as society changes. Social work today is very different from social work even 20 years ago although the personal and relationship needs of families and communities for help and support have in many ways stayed the same – it is the social work responses to those needs that have changed beyond all recognition, as this book will explore.

Reflective point

What other 'ingredients' might go to make up the kinetic pie from your experience/view of social work with children and families?

Although we have stated above that in many ways the needs of families and communities have stayed largely the same over the past 20 years, in what ways have changes in society developed that constitute greater risks to children and families?

A QUESTION OF BALANCE

Trying to get a balance between the rights of parents, children, your profession, your organisation and your responsibilities towards the wider community, while at the same time being aware of the regulatory and press scrutiny of your work makes for a very demanding job. Make sure that you find support by joining professional organisations such as the **College of Social Work** and that you receive sufficient personal support from friends and colleagues. New ways of working may mean that you find yourself in a workplace that does not have a traditional office space and does not therefore offer the team support that social workers would have historically been afforded on a day-to-day basis. Such support is critical, particularly in your developing years as a social worker, and you will need to find ways of obtaining it, should this be the type of working environment in which you find yourself.

The media have been a significant influence on public perception of social work in recent years, and partly in an attempt to reverse the almost universal negative images of failing social workers and children being let down by the system, the **Social Work Task Force** (2009) invited the agony aunt from *The Sun*, Deirdre, to join the task force as a member. There were a range of differing reactions to this very unusual step but in many ways it can be seen as an innovative attempt to try to get a more balanced view from the tabloid press about the complexities of the work carried out by contemporary social work teams. The ingredients of the kinetic pie (Figure 1.2) are indeed complex and it is difficult to relay these complexities to other professionals or to family and friends.

Some student social workers and **newly qualified social workers** (NQSWs) sometimes find it difficult to talk about their work role in social situations and we would strongly encourage you to try to be honest about the work that you do and not try to fudge the question when asked about social work. Some workers have reported just saying that they work for 'local government' whereas others have fabricated their occupations rather than face a barrage of enquiry and criticism about the alleged shortcomings of social work. Far better would be to spend some time preparing how you would present your job to people in social situations. Also, try to engage people in a balanced discussion rather than stay quiet and thereby perhaps colluding with the negative stereotypes and images of the social work profession that do not accurately reflect the everyday realities of social work achievements.

THE SOCIAL WORK REFORM BOARD (2010) AND THE *MUNRO REPORT* (DfE, 2011b)

The Social Work Task Force was instigated by the New Labour government in 2009 as a result of a series of enquiries into the failings of social work across both adults and children and families services. Its brief was to produce new systems, models and training provision for social work in England that would produce a better quality social worker, better working conditions and therefore hopefully lead to a culture wherein social work is valued and appreciated for the good work it does. The recommendations of the task force, as adopted by the Social Work Reform Board (2010: 25), are as follows.

1 **Calibre of entrants**: that criteria governing the calibre of entrants to social work education and training be strengthened.
2 **Curriculum and delivery**: an overhaul of the content and delivery of social work degree courses.
3 **Practice placements**: that new arrangements be put in place to provide sufficient high quality practice placements, which are properly supervised and assessed, for all social work students.
4 **Assessed Year in Employment (AYSE)**: the creation of an **assessed and supported year in employment** as the final stage in becoming a social worker.
5 **Regulation of social work education**: more transparent and effective regulation of social work education to give greater assurance of consistency and quality.
6 **Standard for employers:** the development of a clear national standard for the support social workers should expect from their employers in order to do their jobs effectively.
7 **Supervision**: the new standard for employers should be supported by clear national requirements for the **supervision** of social workers.
8 **Frontline management:** the creation of dedicated programmes of training and support for frontline social work managers.
9 **Continuing professional development:** the creation of a more coherent and effective national framework for the continuing professional development of social workers, along with mechanisms to encourage a shift in culture which raises expectations of an entitlement to ongoing learning and development.
10 **National career structure**: the creation of a single, nationally recognised career structure for social work.
11 **National College of Social Work**: the creation of an independent national college of social work, developed and led by social workers.
12 **Public understanding**: a new programme of action on public understanding of social work.
13 **Licence to practise:** the development of a licence to practise system for social workers.
14 **Social worker supply**: a new system for forecasting levels of supply and demand for social workers.
15 **National reform programme:** the creation of a single national reform programme for social work.

The current NQSW role is likely to become a mandatory AYSE as social work follows the route of other professions such as teaching and nursing in the creation of an assessed first year in practice, which all NQSWs will have to successfully complete in order to work as social workers. This year should be characterised by a protected caseload, which will demand an increase in resources at a time of severe financial constraints. In addition, the Social Work Reform Board has developed an overarching standards framework called the **Proposed Professional Capabilities Framework for Social Workers in England (Social Work Reform Board,** 2010), which is referred to at the beginning of each chapter in this book (see Appendix 1 for full details of these capabilities). This framework is designed to support and inform the national career structure and is relevant to all levels of staff within the new structure. The term 'capabilities' has been used to confirm that learning and development is a continuous process throughout the whole career of a social worker. As indicated in Figure 1.3, each of the nine dimensions is relevant for all levels and demonstrates a development of capability over time and through progression, rather than being a 'one-off' achievement.
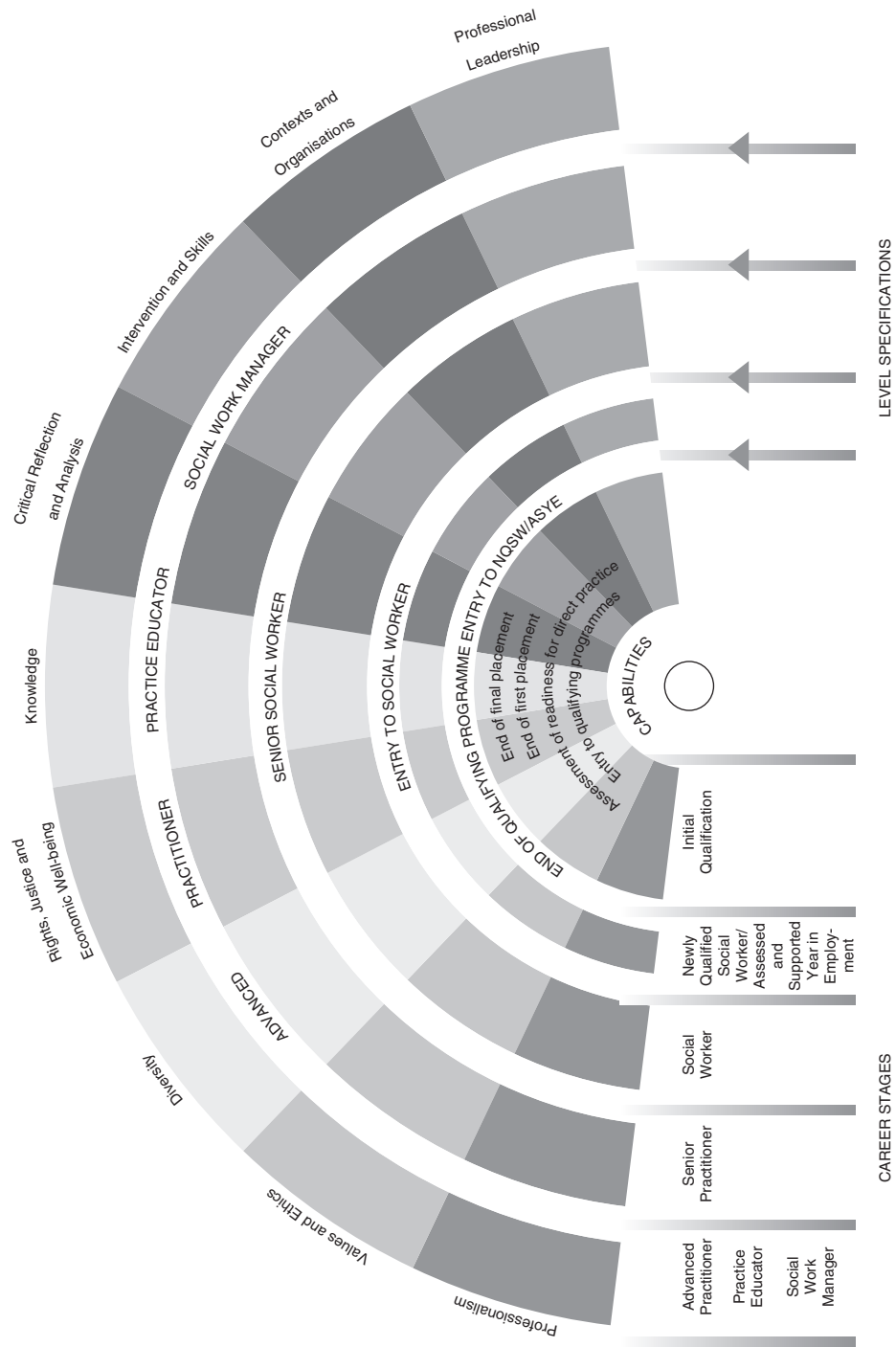
Figure 1.3   The proposed professional capabilities framework (Social Work Reform Board, 2010)

The *Munro Report* (DfE, 2011b), which looked specifically at child protection systems in England, made the following key recommendations:

- The Government should remove the specific statutory requirement on **local authorities** for completing assessments within often artificial set timescales, so that professionals can give equal weight to helping children, young people and families, as well as assessing their problems.
- Local services that work with children and families should be freed from unhelpful government targets, national IT systems and nationally prescribed ways of working. They should be free to re-design services that are informed by research and feedback from children and families, and that pay more attention to the impact on children's safety and welfare.
- A change of approach to Serious Case Reviews (SCRs), learning from the approach taken in sectors such as aviation and health care. There should be a stronger focus on understanding the underlying issues that made professionals behave the way they did and what prevented them from being able properly to help and protect children. The current system is too focused on what happened, not why.
- The introduction of a duty on all local services to coordinate an early offer of help to families who do not meet the criteria for social care services, to address problems before they escalate to child protection issues.
- **Ofsted** inspections of **children's services** should add more weight to feedback from children and families, directly observe social workers' interaction with children and families, as they do when inspecting schools, and pay more attention to whether children have benefited from the help given.
- Experienced social workers should be kept on the frontline even when they become managers so that their experience and skills are not lost. The expertise and status of the social work profession should be improved with continual professional development that focuses on the skills that are needed in child protection.
- Each local authority should designate a Principal Child and Family Social Worker to report the views and experiences of the frontline to all levels of management. At national level, a Chief Social Worker would be established to advise the Government on social work practice. (DfE, 2011b).

Taken together, these two reports set the scene for what should be a very exciting time for social work, with more opportunity for time spent with children and families, less bureaucracy and a new Ofsted inspection regime that is more focused on outcomes and unannounced visits.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

The Social Work Task Force was also charged with looking at issues of recruitment and retention in social work. Curtis et al. (2010) report that, at eight years, the expected working life of a social worker is considerably shorter than that of other human services professionals. Netten and Knight (1999) estimate that a doctor's average working life is 25 years whereas Curtis et al. state that 15 years is the average career span for a nurse. Clearly, this is not a situation that should prevail when we are looking to establish social work teams that have experience, knowledge,

wisdom and the resilience to offer long-term and consistent relationships to the children and families in the communities where they work. Young people in particular comment that what they really want in a social worker is consistency, someone who sticks around for a significant part of their life, rather than an unfamiliar person who flits in and out of their life (McLeod, 2010).

'Damned if you do, damned if you don't' tends to be a phrase that reflects the public image of social work; social workers either intervene too late and do not prevent a child's death (Laming, 2009) or alternatively they intervene apparently unnecessarily in private family business and remove children on occasions when this should never have happened (Beckett et al., 2007). Most people coming into the social work profession are motivated by humanistic reasons and want to carry out a meaningful role in society, while hopefully enjoying the benefits that come with a professional job:

> Most of my mates said I was mad and that if I was smart I would follow them into accountancy or banking. I really wanted to make a difference in people's lives though and to get a job with a human touch. (Barry, 21 years, BA Social Work Student)

> I know that it is not going to be an easy job as a social worker – that's not why I am going into it. I did not have the best childhood myself and would like to think that I could play a part in helping ensure that others do not have to go through what my mum and me went through. (Sobia, 32 years, MA Social Work Student)

Many social workers have a personal drive or motivation, rooted in their own life experiences and many have a political perspective on the world and are committed to the principles of social justice. **Statutory social work**, in other words, work carried out in **children's social care** teams in local authority settings, where much of the work is regulated by law and a range of guidance and regulations, requires a worker who is comfortable with the use of authority and who is able to recognise that many of the decisions with which they will be involved will not lead to happy **outcomes** for all concerned.

Reflective point

How comfortable are you with 'authority'?

Reflect back on instances in your work, family or community life when you have experienced authority being used in both positive and oppressive ways.

How do you think these experiences have shaped your likely approach to authority in a social work role?

ENFORCER OR CHAMPION OF THE OPPRESSED?

Much of statutory social work is not a 'win-win' situation and in the traumatic, dysfunctional and often tragic lives that characterise many of the families who come

to the attention of statutory children's social care services, there are often no ideal solutions. Although one hopes that all decisions that are made are genuinely child-centred, the kinetic pie's ingredients (see Figure 1.2 above) also include those of resource limitations, different **thresholds of eligibility**, different interpretations among different agencies about levels of need and risk and it is often difficult to realise some of the aspirations for quality outcomes that social workers may wish to effect in the lives of the families with whom they work. Professional social work in statutory settings is about balancing the role of enforcer of **legislation** and policy with being a champion of the oppressed. There is also scope for therapeutic interventions with children and families even within statutory services, although much of this intervention may be brief in nature. It is important to remember, however, that even the briefest of relationships can be significant in a young person's life, and in many of our own lives we may have been profoundly influenced by a person, for example, a teacher, relative or other professional, who we felt was authentic and who made a difference to the way we perceive and run our lives.

Reflective point

Can you think of a person who had a significant effect (positive or negative) on your view of life, even if you perhaps only knew that person for a short or brief period?

- What do you think it was about that person that led to this effect?
- What skills/attributes might you have that has an effect on others?
- Are these all positive effects? If not, are there aspects of your presentation of self that you will want to work on in order to become an effective social worker?

THE DIVERSE SETTINGS AND ROLES WITHIN SOCIAL WORK

Social work in the voluntary or **independent sector** can offer different types of opportunities and challenges to a professional social worker and it may be that during your course of study or in the early years of your career you choose to experience a number of different settings, some of which will afford a greater opportunity to engage in **relationship-based practice** (Ruch, 2010). Effective social work takes place in diverse work settings and across a diversity of communities, the social work profession having a strong commitment to equality of opportunity and to inclusive social policy. In order to be effective, social workers need to win community support and this will often mean taking the time to ask about and read about the cultures and mores in the communities where you work. Fear of the '**race card**' being played or some misunderstandings around **political correctness** mean that certain issues that are pertinent to effective social work are not often discussed in teams and communities. This 'don't go there' culture needs to change if we are all to develop better

BUREAUCRACY – MAKING IT WORK FOR YOU

Some newly qualifying social workers find themselves overwhelmed by the amount of paperwork, IT and bureaucracy that surrounds their jobs, particularly in statutory positions. However, with self-awareness, experience and support, it should be possible to get your working life in perspective and to find the right job that fits your own value base and motivation. This will include finding a job that provides an appropriate balance between administrative work and direct work with children and families. Such balance may be more likely to become reality if some of the recommendations of the *Munro Report* (DfE, 2011b) and the Social Work Reform Board (2010) come to fruition. Despite the welcome focus in such reports on the need to free social work of the shackles and strictures of systems and bureaucracy, work such as the preparation of court reports and involvement in the reviews of **looked after** children should not be seen merely as paperwork, but as administrative duties that advocate for and protect children. Sometimes the systems that overlay social work are unduly cumbersome, however, and these should be challenged whenever a fresh face on to the job perceives them to be unhelpful in making professional decisions around their work.

Some commentators estimate that children's social workers in statutory teams spend approximately 80 per cent of their time or four days per week behind a computer or carrying out other functions in meetings (Social Work Task Force, 2010). This is not a situation that should be allowed to continue and the Social Work Reform Board (2010) is charged with reducing the 'red tape' that has come to so dominate much of contemporary statutory social work (DfE, 2011b; Social Work Reform Board, 2010).

Reflective point

It may well be that in your new settings you can identify paperwork and procedures that could be simplified, without presenting any risk to children or to the accountability of your organisation or profession.

How might you present any such suggestions to management?

It is interesting to note that some team members with whom you will work seem to spend far more time than others in the office rather than out visiting. Management has a responsibility here and effective management would ensure that there was some parity between workers and their ability to complete administrative tasks while at the same time spending the requisite amount of time with their children and families. Student social workers have reported being under such pressure in some teams that

they have been asked to write reports on children and families whom they feel that they do not even know as individuals. This is clearly a dangerous and unacceptable state of affairs and any such requests should be challenged at the earliest possible opportunity. Social workers are required (see Health Professions Council (HPC), 2011) to be IT and systems competent rather than rely on the tradition of administrative support to carry out a range of supporting technical duties. There has been no systematic evaluation of these new ways of working to date (see Coleman and Harris, 2008) and the effect of such systems in terms of support for social workers and accessibility for children and families can only be estimated. The removal of local office presence and the removal of collegiate, office-based support can be viewed purely as a business strategy, designed to save money rather than improve the social work service.

The current reality is that many social workers use systems of **mobile and flexible working** that rely on hand-held computers/mobile phones in their daily work and hence it is imperative that these systems are mastered. However, our advice is that they are not mastered in such a way that social workers become enslaved to such systems but in a way that administrative tasks can be dealt with efficiently, communication be swift and effective, and staff (in theory at least) freed up to spend time carrying out their social work roles within their communities.

WORKING IN VOLUNTARY OR PRIVATE SECTOR SETTINGS

One of the great advantages of social work is that there are many different contexts in which your work could be carried out, ranging across work in **children's centres**, **adoption** and **fostering** teams, youth justice teams, outreach work and work in **interdisciplinary** community-based settings such as medical centres. Many of these settings are to be found in the independent sector, where charities and private-for-profit businesses all work towards meeting the legislative and social care needs of children and their families. Your choice of social work job will be governed by a range of factors such as the prevailing job market, your **value base**, the potential to carry out therapeutic work with children and families, your preference for statutory work and your wish to be part of a team that is traditionally, or is not, office based.

The underpinning factor will probably be your value base in terms of a preference to work in state, voluntary or private organisations. Some smaller voluntary and private organisations (e.g. independent fostering agencies) do offer benefits of shorter lines of communication and often are more specialised in focused roles. You should be aware that there are business/moral tensions within all these organisations, particularly in for-profit organisations, which may not sit comfortably with your value base. This is not to say that all private sector care is inherently bad, more that the overriding value base in the private sector to be profitable can compromise ethical decisions regarding children and families. Equally, one cannot state that all local authority or statutory care exemplifies good, ethical child-centred decisions and much of the dissatisfaction within statutory social work teams (e.g. Collins, 2008) stems from what is often seen as an overly bureaucratic and delaying process, particularly where decisions seem to be made at various levels above the social worker's head.

Doing away with unnecessary delays in making decisions about children's lives was a core principle of the 1989 Children Act. Unfortunately, this is one core principle that has not been delivered, delays within the legal system in particular making it difficult to expedite certain decisions in children's lives. An increasing tendency of social workers to have to refer every decision back to '**management**' is not helpful for the child or colleagues such as foster carers. An effective social worker should know the extent/limits of their autonomy in decision making, whether this be about budgets or risk. Being unable to make decisions about routine matters on the spot is ineffective social work and the nebulous layers of management/administration that still seem to exist in many social work settings must be challenged if your working day is to be effective and only contain the stresses that come from the nature of your work, not the systems that surround it.

USE OF SELF

Reconciling the limitations of any social work job call for a balanced and mature perspective that starts from knowing your own strengths and values. Knowing who you are and where you are coming from is a core quality that will have been explored on your social work course, social work being the profession more than any other where use of self is uppermost. Even professions such as counselling and medicine can often practise in ways in which the use of self is a marginalised or denied role and the message that comes over to children and families can be that you are dealing with a professional who is unlikely to share any particular humanity or life experiences with you. Appropriate use of self/self-disclosure and boundary negotiation are essential to effective social work (see Appendix 2 draft standard 2 – HPC, 2011).

> ### Reflective point
>
> - How aware were you of your 'use of self' prior to considering a social work career?
> - How well do you 'know yourself'?
> - Do you 'see yourself as others see you'?
> - How might you find out more about 'use of self'?
>
> Areas for your development such as use of self will be constantly reflected on during your social work career and the aspiration is that year on year you will become a better social worker and that your confidence, your use of self, your personal and professional development, your knowledge of legislation, procedures, managerial systems and the needs and strengths within the families and communities with whom you work will be enhanced. There are still many people in social work with over 30 years' experience and it is to be hoped that those of you reading this book will be social workers who will commit similar lengths of your life to social work and that you will be part of reversing the current reality wherein the average social work professional life is a mere eight years (Curtis et al., 2010).

CHAPTER SUMMARY

Social work with children and families is a complex and demanding job that is kinetic, ever-changing, at times volatile and dangerous and at times satisfying and fulfilling. An effective social worker needs a sound knowledge base, personal coping systems and to be aware of the standards against which their everyday work should be constructed.

Social work, despite attempts to bring in models from business, is not a 'win-win' undertaking. As you begin to experience a range of settings, you will be able to decide where you can be most effective and what roles are most likely to bring you that necessary work–life balance.

FURTHER RESOURCES AND READING

Barefoot Social Worker website – This is a radical and passionate take on the problems facing social work (www.radical.org.uk/barefoot/).

Barnardo's website – This is a well-respected children's charity, which has carried out much innovative work with children, families and communities (www.barnardos.org.uk/).

Children's Voice website – Consistently missing from the myriad of serious case reviews and enquiries is the voice of the child. This excellent website goes some way to rectifying this failing in social work (https://sharestreet.cwdcouncil.org.uk/ChildrensVoice.aspx).

Community Care Inform website – This is a very helpful and authoritative web-based resource which consists of contemporary information from academics and practitioners across a range of children and family issues (www.ccinform.co.uk/home/default.aspx).

Department for Education (2011b) *The Munro Review of Child Protection. Final Report. A Child Centred System.* London: HMSO. This recommends proposals for reform in order to meet the needs of children and families and support social workers to provide a good service (www.education.gov.uk/publications/.../Cm%208062.pdf).

Health Professions Council (2011) Standards of Proficiency for Social Workers (England) Professional Liaison Group (PLG) (www.hpc-uk.org/assets/documents/10003381Item05-enc3-draftstandardsofproficiency2-SOPs.pdf).

Social Work Reform Board website – A useful website that contains all the details of the workings of this government commissioned body set up in 2010 to reform social work in England. The Board has strong links to the *Munro Report* (www.education.gov.uk/swrb).