



An evaluation of the National Advisory Forum and co-production: our first year

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Paper for the

Social Work England Board

Sponsor

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Executive Leadership Team

This paper is for

Discussion and Advising

Associated Strategic Objective

SO6: We will create spaces for people to support the development of our organisation, including policies, communication and engagement.

Impact: Risk Type and Appetite

Strategy - Hungry

1. Summary

An evaluation of the National Advisory Forum and co-production at Social Work England: a summary of our first year for the board.



Introduction

We set out to do regulation radically differently and we have committed to doing that by collaborating, engaging and listening to the voices in the sector. Co-production is about the people who are impacted by what we do having an opportunity to participate in and influence it. If we design our work without including those it most affects, we are in danger of making false assumptions, subsequently failing to capture the nuance of real-life experiences. We have a responsibility to make our work relevant and accessible to those it impacts. Co-production is the key to that, and the National Advisory Forum is the vehicle we have created to make this happen.

The forum provides expert support, advice, challenge, and co-produce the work of Social Work England in line with our corporate strategy. It is made up of registered and practising social workers, social work academics, social work students and people with lived experience of social work.

The role of the group is to act as a critical friend to Social Work England by bringing a wealth of lived and learned experience to the regulator, as well as acting as the main driver of co-production across the organisation and a means of embedding that in our ways of working.

The first round of recruitment for the National Advisory Forum took place in March 2020 when 10 people became the founding members. Covid-19 meant that the group did not meet for the first time until June 2020 and did so virtually – as all meetings and work have been done to date. A second round of recruitment in October 2020 welcomed 5 new members, bringing the total membership to fifteen. You can find profiles of all the members on our [website](#).

This evaluation report is an account of what the forum has achieved in its first year and suggested improvements as part of our ongoing commitment to evaluation.

We want to ensure that:

- Members find their role satisfying, rewarding and productive
- The group is running in a way which is inclusive and enables fair participation for all
- The group is operating in a way that is in line with the expectations of Social Work England
- The group establishes into a lasting forum which has sustained impact.

The findings of this evaluation report are grouped into themes and detailed, each with its own list of recommendations to be considered both by the National Advisory Forum and Social Work England. The recommendations were presented to the executive leadership team in September 2021.

Approach to the evaluation

A sub-group of the National Advisory Forum worked with Social Work England staff to co-

produce an approach to evaluating the work of the past year. This identified three key areas:

1. The individual experiences of members

- A reflective session facilitated by peers to offer a safe and anonymous space to discuss positive and negatives about their experiences of the forum. Social Work England staff did not participate so that members could share freely.
- One-to-one meetings were held with the Participation Officer with questions agreed by the group.
- 360 feedback was facilitated across the group and formed part of the one-to-one meetings.

2. The way the National Advisory Forum operates

- The terms of reference were reviewed in roundtable meetings chaired by an impartial party.
- The capacity and representation of the group was reviewed including our approach to recruitment.

3. The relationship between the National Advisory Forum and Social Work England

- Feedback was collected from staff who have co-produced pieces of work with members of the National Advisory Forum. This gained insight into the impact of co-production over the past year.
- Data was collected and reviewed around which teams and departments have worked with the National Advisory Forum to date.

Following these activities, themes were identified by coding the notes and responses. Recommendations were then formulated in response to each of those themes for the consideration of the whole National Advisory Forum and Social Work England's leadership team and board.

Theme one: culture and overall experience

A prominent theme which emerged from the evaluation was the culture that has been created within the National Advisory Forum. This was described in a positive way, often as fair, open, safe and respectful and something that the National Advisory Forum should continue to uphold.

In describing their personal experience members have described their roles as:

- **Beneficial** - being able to connect with people from different areas of social work practice and different parts of the country.
- **Rewarding** - being able to represent their area of social work and input their personal and professional insight built from their experiences.
- **Developmental** – having a positive impact on personal development through new experiences and new ways of working and developing skills as a result.

Sally, a member of the National Advisory Forum, said: *“I feel I have contributed sufficiently to make changes that impact the voices I want heard and am enjoying doing so because despite the virtual element the rapport and teamwork has been continuous. My confidence, skills and personal development have grown hugely over the last year also.”*

- **Contributing** - to a community where lived and learned experience is treated in an equal way and all members are respected.

Jillian, a member of the National Advisory Forum, said: *“I think the National Advisory Forum as a group works well and that even though most of us have never met in person, we have established good relationships and rapport. The group feels open and safe – I am not left feeling I cannot contribute. It feels like space is made for everyone. I have seen the ‘fruits of my labour’ make a tangible difference. This is good in terms of the National Advisory Forum having an important role in the organisation, but it is also affirming on a personal level that I have something to offer the organisation”*

- **Challenging** - promoting and championing the work of Social Work England, when sometimes it is unclear how actions have been agreed in line with organisational values, has at times proved challenging.
- **Difficult** - capacity and ability to get involved in work that is interesting due to other commitments has sometimes proved difficult. It has been noted that members have not felt pressurised by Social Work England to commit any time beyond their capacity.
- **Tested, but supported** - the role has taken people out of their comfort zones, in a positive way, including media work and presentations. Members have felt well supported with these challenges.
- **Frustrated** - the public responses, or lack thereof, to some issues brought to the attention of Social Work England has sometimes frustrated members. Some members have also felt conflicted about their identity in the social work community and as representatives of Social Work England as a result. National Advisory Forum members would value insight into how Social Work England decides on what public issues in the sector it responds to, what that response looks like and whether the National Advisory Forum could offer input into that process.

Theme two: co-production

Our approach and influence of the co-production work achieved over the last year has been celebrated and the influence that has had across various parts of the regulator has been acknowledged. However, it has been noted that this is not what most members envisaged their role entailing and the ‘doing’ of co-production has been more of a significant part of the role than anticipated.

In the first year, members of the National Advisory Forum have co-produced 53 distinct pieces of work across Social Work England. This is an incredible achievement and would not have happened without the significant time, energy and commitment that members have dedicated. As part of this evaluation, feedback has been collected from across the organisation on the co-production activity which has taken place.

Social Work England Team	Types of work co-produced	Number of pieces of work
Engagement	Social Work Week 2021 (acting as members of the steering group, acting as members of sub-groups across a range of areas including contributors panel, feedback session and communications). Engagement strategy Co-production training Co-producing policies	16
Policy	Awarding research tenders Contributing to the first <u>Social Work in England Report</u> Updating guidance on continuing professional development	14
Fitness to practise	Attending monthly Decision Review Group Reviewing guidance for employers	4
Communications	Media engagements and interviews Podcasts Blogs	7
People & development	Recruitment panels Presenting at all-staff meetings	8
Other	Development of service standards Recruitment to the National Advisory Forum Writing the terms of reference Co-producing the evaluation of the forum	6

Sally, a member of the National Advisory Forum, said: *"I have been so involved with so many pockets, in so many ways, and at no point have I ever felt tokenistic, unwelcomed, unable to be instrumental in challenge and subsequent change and because all aspects the team as a regulator have an underpinning desire to be genuine, honest, transparent and human."*

Katie Newbould, Policy Manager at Social Work England said: *"I've been impressed by the level of their expertise and the value of their input in the various processes they've been involved with. That would only increase if we were to improve the process at our end. I now consider co-production at the outset of every project and major piece of work I do, not just with the National Advisory Forum but with other stakeholder groups in the sector."*

Theme three: relationship with decision makers

There is motivation and energy from the National Advisory Forum to help Social Work England as an organisation to be the best it can be for the profession and those who receive social work services. Some members feel that a disconnect between the National Advisory Forum and the senior leaders of Social Work England is a missed opportunity for getting this right. This pertains particularly to the following point in the terms of reference: Make recommendations to the senior and executive leadership teams advising on the impact on the sector of our work, risk, readiness and professional and practice needs. For some

members it has felt that the group was intended to be strategic but in practice the experience has been more “hands on” and there is scope for the group to fulfil a strategic function more than it has had the opportunity to do to date.

The forum is particularly interested in getting to know the Board better and sharing the work and vision of the forum with them. They are also keen to engage with the leadership team at Social Work England to understand how co-production can be embedded across our work.

2. Recommendations

Following the evaluation, the National Advisory Forum have recommended the following to be considered both by the National Advisory Forum and Social Work England:

1. Create space for members of the forum to further develop working relationships with each other.
2. Share case studies to showcase examples of co-production.
3. Invite the communications team to share their strategy for communicating on behalf of Social Work England; agree a way forward for keeping the forum members briefed as necessary.
4. Deliver co-production training to all staff at Social Work England; articulate the value of co-production and facilitate co-production requests from across the organisation.
5. Co-production training to be delivered to senior leaders and the Board to encourage co-production requests to be submitted for areas of their responsibility.
6. The National Advisory Forum to proactively suggest areas and work where co-production could be taking place.
7. Feedback from co-production activities to be collected regularly and in a timely manner. Feedback to be given back to the organisation and to individuals where appropriate.
8. Social Work England to further promote our approach to co-production nationally, both with other regulators and within the growing co-production community.
9. Standing agenda item to be added to the Social Work England Board meetings giving opportunity to share National Advisory Forum and co-production updates.
10. The induction process of new Board members and senior leaders to involve meeting the National Advisory Forum.

11. Board members and senior leaders to be offered a 'buddy' from the forum.

3. Commentary

This work directly impacts on risks SPE02, SPE03, SPE04 and CRR02. By maintaining and improving a robust approach to co-production we mitigate lack of engagement from the sector and uphold our reputation as collaborative and focused on the ultimate impact of our specialist regulation on the public. Suitably resourcing and prioritising this work and thereby embedding it in our culture at Social Work England ensures that co-production is everyone's business, whatever role they play.

4. Conclusions

This evaluation report and the recommendations has been discussed by the National Advisory Forum and shared with senior leaders at Social Work England for consideration. An action plan will be created to move forward on the recommendations. Any additional comments and commitments from the Board would be welcomed.

Social Work England would like to take this opportunity to thank the members of the National Advisory Forum for the time and energy they put into this evaluation, as well as their overall commitment to the work of the forum, Social Work England and the social work profession.

5. Annexes

Theme Four: How the group works

Meetings and communication

The feedback on how meetings work and are facilitated was very positive. Members agreed that 90-minute meetings every 2 months felt appropriate in frequency and length. Some members reflected that the agenda could feel too busy and sometimes rushed without sufficient time for reflection and all members to contribute. Co-chairing meetings is an important power-sharing feature of the meetings and should continue. It was also felt that there is more scope for National Advisory Forum members to influence the agenda and bring their own ideas, topics and challenges to the regulator.

Members have reflected that written communication via Microsoft Teams rather than email is challenging and time consuming; email should be the primary method of contact going forward.

Members relish the prospect of being able to meet face to face however it must be acknowledged that may not be an option for some members and a blended approach must be taken with virtual participation given equal importance. It must be considered that for members who are able to travel to Sheffield for meetings, travel time will put a further strain on capacity if it is with any regularity.

Sometimes challenges are presented by the way co-production requests are distributed as they currently are not presented with any regularity which makes it difficult for members to commit to pieces of work when they have limited capacity and are unsure of work that is upcoming.

Anne-Marie, a member of the National Advisory Forum, said: “It has felt really meaningful, participation has been really valued at all stages. The values of engagement and participation has really exuded from staff across the organisation whoever that has been. Social Work England has really got that bit right.”

Terms of reference and membership

As the terms of reference stand there is suggestion for a joint meeting with sector partners. At the request of National Advisory Forum members this has not been progressed at this stage. At an appropriate time, this should be revisited as a topic for discussion and if there is no longer an intention for sector partners to be invited to meetings then it would be appropriate to remove this from the terms of reference.

There needs to be clarity on the term that each member is serving and when that term comes to an end. If people can apply for a second term on the forum that needs to be stated and also made clear what that process would look like. If there are limitations on the number of members who can serve a second term, that also needs to be clearly stated. It

was also acknowledged that it is important for the membership to evolve, and new people given the opportunity to share their lived and learned experience.

It was suggested that the current length of term should be amended to 'a minimum of one year and reviewed after three years for each member.' Three years would better reflect the industry standard for this type of group. This would also account for time which has gone into establishing the forum and ways of working, especially considering the limitations of the pandemic.

A considered and fair approach to the succession planning of members should be co-produced with members of the forum. This should include an option for those who do not want to serve a second term but have capacity to continue to contribute to Social Work England.

Recruitment

We want to ensure when new opportunities to join the forum are advertised, that as many people as possible can apply and the message reaches beyond people who are well versed and experienced in co-production activity. Recruiting in an open, fair and accessible way will ensure that we go beyond 'the usual suspects'.

Those involved recounted their positive experience of being involved in the recruitment of the newest members and expressed a desire for that approach to be continued in the future. This helped set the tone for the group and was also a valued part of the experience of applicants.

Any future recruitment should be guided primarily by gaps in our representation and those voices and experiences that have not yet had the opportunity to input into the forum and Social Work England. We will revisit the diversity data of the group as well as the skills and experience of members and use that to inform future recruitment.

Consideration should be given to the size of the group and the potential impact on its culture, the ability to form meaningful working relationships both with each other and with Social Work England. As a result, if the decision is made to increase the membership of the forum from its current levels it should be by a maximum of two social workers and two people with lived experience.

Recommendations

1. Meeting practices to be amended accordingly by the Participation Officer:
 - Highlight the agenda builder to members; co-chairs to circulate a call for agenda items in advance of the meeting.
 - Arrange face-to-face meetings when possible whilst reiterating there is no expectation for people to attend in person and facilitating a hybrid option.
2. Participation Officer to circulate co-production requests one a fortnight at the same time so members can plan their time and contributions accordingly. Where possible

there will be at least a 2-week lead in time before the work begins and an option of meeting times provided.

3. Review intentions around engaging with sector partners; take steer from the Director of Strategy, Policy and Engagement.
4. Amend terms of reference to alter term for members to three years.
5. Recruit four new members to the forum through identifying current gaps. Involve current members in recruitment process and advertise widely.