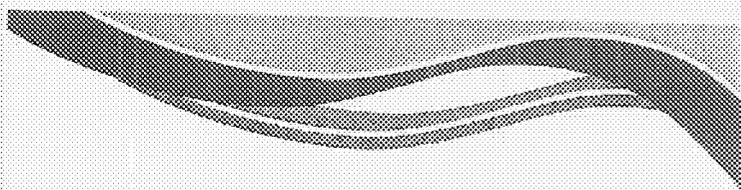


THE COLLEGE OF
SOCIAL WORK



● **Media ethics: experiences from
the social work profession**

A submission paper extracted from research conducted by

**The Centre for Health Communication Research and
Excellence, Buckinghamshire New University**

on behalf of

● **The College of Social Work**

Submitted as evidence to the Leveson Inquiry
into the culture, practices and ethics of the press

October 2011

The College of Social Work

The College of Social Work is currently being established following recommendations from The Social Work Task Force for the establishment of an independent college to articulate and promote the interests of good social work. The new College will launch formally in January 2012.

The College will be a strong and independent organisation which will promote and champion the positive aspects of social work, and will work hard to alter the negative perceptions that surround the profession. Its mission is to:

- Develop a strong profession, confident about the unique contributions it makes to the individuals, families and communities it serves, with a clear sense of its values, ethics and purpose.
- Be a powerful voice for the social work profession, when communicating with the public, policy makers, employers and the media.
- Improve public understanding of, and support for social work, by developing a positive and transparent relationship with the media and representing the profession in public debates.
- Influence the development of national policies that impact on social work, social workers, carers and the people who use social work services, acting as an advocate for the profession.
- Build relationships and develop policies with other professional bodies regarding issues of common interest (e.g. occupational therapists, nurses, probation officers).
- Build relationships and develop policies with the academic community, including researchers, lecturers and teachers.
- Build relationships with user and carer led organisations, so that we involve service users and carers in everything that we do.
- Represent the social work profession in discussions with policy makers in government, the public, the media and other professions.
- Establish links with similar organisations overseas, learning from and sharing good practice in supporting social work.

Further information about the College is available at: www.collegeofsocialwork.org

The Centre for Health Communication Research and Excellence

This document has been prepared for the College of Social Work by the Centre for Health Communication Research and Excellence (CHCR) at Bucks New University. CHCR is a new research centre that focuses on the communication challenges and issues within health and social care. It operates within the Institute of Applied Leadership based at Bucks New University's High Wycombe Campus. The Director of the centre and lead researcher for this project is Professor John Underwood.

Executive summary

- The College of Social Work warmly welcomes Lord Leveson's inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the press.
- This paper is a response to Lord Leveson's invitation to organisations and individuals to provide information that may be helpful to the inquiry.
- The Munro Review highlighted how the 'sustained nature of the negative media images of social work that have been commonplace'¹. The review cites studies showing that the 15 most common messages in press reports from 1997-1998 were negative with regard to social work and included: 'incompetent', 'negligent', 'failed', 'ineffective', 'misguided' and 'bungling'.²
- The Centre for Health Communications Research and Excellence has undertaken a research project for the College of Social Work involving an in-depth questionnaire completed by 736 social workers.
- 91% of respondents felt that media coverage of social work is generally unfair and inaccurate and just one person (out of 736) thought media coverage of social work is generally completely fair and accurate.
- 14 per cent of respondents (101) claimed to have personal experience of unethical journalistic practice and 19 per cent (139) claimed to know of other social workers who had such experience.
- This submission paper contains a number of examples of journalistic practices that social workers have experienced and which they consider to be unethical and unacceptable.

¹ *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final report*, Professor Eileen Munro, May 2011

² *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final report*, Professor Eileen Munro, May 2011

Introduction

The College of Social Work warmly welcomes Lord Leveson's inquiry into the culture, practice and ethics of the press. This paper is a response to Lord Leveson's invitation to organisations and individuals to provide additional information, which may be considered as evidence.

Media coverage of social care has a direct impact on social work professionals and the millions of people who depend on their support. The Social Work Taskforce (which reported to government in November 2009) and the Munro Review of Child Protection (May 2011) both concluded that the poor image of social work is a key factor in the profession's failure to thrive.

Social workers told the Social Work Task Force of their profound concerns about the way their profession is reported in the media and in its final report chair Moira Gibb CBE, says: 'There needs to be collaboration on addressing the poor image of the social work profession, which as it stands now is preventing good people from seeking to join the profession and speeding the departure of others.'⁵

The Munro Review also highlights how the 'sustained nature of the negative media images of social work that have been commonplace'⁴ impacts on recruitment and retention and, worryingly, how the resulting lack of confidence in social workers can put pressure on vital services 'making it more difficult to react quickly to the most serious of cases'⁵.

The review cites studies showing that:

- * media representations of social work and social workers have taken a 'hostile' position since the 1970s
- * the 15 most common messages in press reports from 1997-1998 were negative with regard to social work and included: 'incompetent', 'negligent', 'failed', 'ineffective', 'misguided' and 'bungling'.⁶

Clearly, we acknowledge that the profession itself must do more to promote positive examples of social care to balance the negative coverage and we acknowledge too the fact that some negative coverage of social work may be a fair reflection of poor practice. But we also feel it is important to understand better what role, if any, the culture, practices and ethics of the press have played in shaping the overwhelmingly negative media impression of social work.

To investigate this, the College of Social Work is working with the Centre for Health Communication Research and Excellence to obtain evidence of social workers' views on media coverage of their profession and their experiences of working on cases which attracted media attention.

⁵ *Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force*, November 2009, pp. 6

⁴ *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final report*, Professor Eileen Munro, May 2011, pp. 122

⁵ *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final report*, Professor Eileen Munro, May 2011, pp. 124

⁶ *The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final report*, Professor Eileen Munro, May 2011, pp. 122

This work has included a survey of over 700 social workers and a series of in-depth interviews. The full report of our findings will be published in the New Year, but we feel that some of the data we have gathered is directly relevant to the Leveson Inquiry and should be shared. We hope it will be useful and would be pleased to provide further information as required.

Specifically the information contained in this submission paper speaks to two of the key questions raised by Lord Leveson following initial inquiry seminars:

- *"The issue of stories that attract a high degree of press attention but subsequently turn out to be false was raised at the seminars. The Inquiry would be interested in submissions from editors, reporters and subjects of such stories - why they occur (what are the pressures that drive press interest), and how they occur (what checks and balances are or should be in place to stop this happening and why do they sometimes not operate)?"*
- *"Attendees proposed that the law, as it applies to everyone, should be the only constraint on the press. The inquiry would welcome submissions on whether, and if so why, the press should be subject to any additional constraints in relation to behaviour and standards, for example relating to accuracy, treatment of vulnerable individuals, intrusion, financial reporting or reporting on crime, other than those imposed by existing laws."*

Since the research being conducted by the Centre for Health Communication Research and Excellence has not yet been completed the College of Social Work does not seek to make or offer recommendations. This paper is offered simply as a contribution that we hope will help inform Lord Leveson's inquiry.

Research findings

The survey of social workers referred to above used open text responses and invited respondents to reflect on their own experiences of social care cases involving media attention, specifically with regard to perceived poor balance, unfairness, inaccuracy and unethical behaviour. The research team also conducted interviews with respondents to further explore their concerns.

Feedback ranged from minor complaints to serious concerns. Broadly, these can be categorised under four key themes:

1. Improper conduct – unethical journalistic standards, using illicit means of obtaining information, bullying and manipulation.
2. Imbalanced reporting and prejudice – including deliberate or malicious attempts to lay blame or scapegoat social workers, prejudice against service users.
3. Poor journalistic practice – including inaccuracy, poor fact checking, failure to offer the right to reply.
4. Ignorance – including poor understanding and knowledge of the complexities of social work, failure to include information which explains the context or complexities of social work cases, failure to understand that social workers cannot provide sensitive or confidential information.

Given the terms of reference of the Leveson inquiry we have focused information in this submission paper on category 1 responses.

Category 1 responses: Improper conduct

Over 100 of our 736 survey respondents claimed to have personal experience of journalistic unethical behaviour and 139 claimed to know of other social workers who had experienced it.

Many respondents provided information about examples of behaviour by journalists which they felt was improper, unethical or damaging to them, their colleagues or service users.

Comments relating to children and young people

- * Two social workers shared examples of payments being made by journalists to young people receiving social care. One also commented: 'Journalists required to speak to a young person directly - told that it was not appropriate due to safeguarding issues for that young person - approached young person directly and published story in exchange for cash'.
- * Two respondents told us about a young person being approached by a journalist despite being asked not to by social workers. another complained that an interview with a vulnerable young person had taken place without advocacy support being offered.

- * Many respondents expressed concern about media exposure of vulnerable people – one referred to some broadcast coverage revealing the name of a young person 'with no respect or regard to the surviving children and family, nor other young people closely involved', and another respondent referred to the use of photographs of children obtained via Facebook.

Comments relating to payments for information offered to vulnerable adults

Some respondents shared information with us about vulnerable adults in their care who had been offered money in exchange for information. For example:

- * One social worker told us about a case involving an adult with a personality disorder who had been subjected to sexual abuse. She contacted the media in desperation and was offered money to provide names and more details about her case. The result of the media coverage was extremely distressing for her and has jeopardised her position in relation to maintaining custody of her children.
- * Another respondent mentioned a very vulnerable individual who was the victim of an arson attack being offered money to sell their story.
- * Another case involved a client who was still in treatment for substance misuse being offered cash to sell a story to a magazine aimed at young people.

Comments relating to dishonest means of obtaining information

Many respondents gave examples of journalists lying or posing as service users, family members and other public services professionals involved in cases in an attempt to obtain information and gain access to staff.

- * One social worker we spoke to explained that this media practice was simply considered to be 'par for the course... all social work teams have to rely on good support staff and office protocols to ensure that sensitive information doesn't fall into the wrong hands'.
- * Two respondents were subjected to unauthorised taping of discussions with clients. One reported noticing a hidden tape recorder during a conversation with a client and a person introduced as her best friend: 'I asked some more questions and was informed that the second person present was actually a journalist who was doing an article for a national newspaper about the way drug using parents were treated by children's social care. My consent had not been sought for a journalist to be present. I felt this was unethical on 2 levels 1, I was being taped without my knowledge or consent and 2, the mother was being given false hopes by the journalist that she should be able to keep her children and that the social workers were tricking her.'

Comments relating to aggressive and threatening behaviour

Many respondents shared examples of what they considered to be aggressive or threatening behaviour or infringements of privacy.

- One respondent claimed that a journalist had threatened to expose their identity if they didn't answer the journalist's questions.
- Another commented that they had 'experienced a local journalist entering an ambulance and demanding the name and address of the patient, who was in shock. They did not declare who they were or why they wanted the information, which was then printed without permission'.
- Several respondents complained about overbearing face-to-face or door-stepping tactics that had been used on them, their colleagues or their clients including, lingering outside contact venues, following staff members home, using the electoral register to obtain addresses, waiting outside their homes and phoning them at home.

Comments relating to exploitation of service users and damage to care outcomes

Many respondents expressed concern that service users were given false promises and exploited for their stories and that the resulting media coverage had a damaging effect on them or on others.

- One respondent told us: 'I supported a self advocate with learning disabilities to be interviewed by the press, who was asked for his name and address. As an advocate I asked the person to think about if they wanted this information about themselves in the newspaper. They said no, however the newspaper printed their name and address alongside a photo. The person had clearly not consented to this and being identified could have presented them with some personal risk.'
- Another respondent told us about a case involving a parent with a learning disability who was led to believe that co-operating with a newspaper would help them 'get their child back'. This respondent was angry that the newspaper had failed to consider that their actions resulted in effectively 'cutting the service user off from a major source of support'.

Please note: a full report of the research findings will be published in the New Year.