

Searching for the Holy Grail – Excellent Staff and Carers who Work with Children

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Introduction

Since Utting's report, *Children in the Public Care* (1991), Warner's seminal report, *Choosing with Care* (1992) in England and Wales, and *Another Kind of Home* (Skinner, 1992) in Scotland, social work managers responsible for recruiting and selecting staff and carers who work with children have been exhorted to improve the methods they use. However, a quick glance around Scotland today would show that since the early nineties not much has changed. The reasons for the relatively low level of change are many, but the imperatives from reports, inquiries and more general literature (Gulbenkian Foundation, 1993; Cullen, 1996; Social Work Services Inspectorate, 1997; Marshall et al, 1999; Waterhouse, 2000) have combined to signal one consistent message: transformational change is needed in the difficult process of selecting staff and carers who work with children.

The *Children's Safeguards Review* (Kent, 1997) stated once again that staff and carer selection needed to be more rigorous and systematic. One of Kent's recommendations (Recommendation 16) was that funding should be made available by the then Scottish Office to support a development begun by the former Tayside Regional Council Social Work Department. Tayside Council was the only Scottish member of a consortium of English and Welsh local authority social services departments who were working on a process for improving the selection of staff in residential child care. Progress had been made on the development of competencies for residential child care practitioners and first line managers.

In 1998 funding was made available for three years to a consortium of four local authorities (Aberdeenshire, East Dunbartonshire, Edinburgh City, and Perth and Kinross [lead authority]) to develop a toolkit for the recruitment and selection of social work staff and carers who work with children. This became the Scottish Recruitment and Selection Consortium and it undertook a comprehensive programme of research, testing, piloting and consultation on recruitment and selection methods. In March 2001 the Toolkit was delivered by the Consortium and subsequently published by the Scottish Executive (Scottish Executive, 2001). There then followed a further period of extensive consultation and, at the time of writing, discussions are being held with key stakeholders

about the implementation of the Toolkit's proposals.

The Toolkit covered the selection of volunteers and foster carers, but for the purposes of this article staff who work with children will be the main focus.

The process

The process for the development of the safer selection methods has been largely one of examining methods used in other disciplines and other industries to identify their relevance and contribution to social care and social work. What has emerged is a model that contains the elements of best practice in staff selection that seem to offer the greatest improvements for social work staff and carer selection.

The Consortium firstly undertook a documentary analysis of job descriptions and person specifications for all the posts of staff in Scottish child care social work and social care (eighteen posts in all). This was followed by individual interviews and focus groups with foster carers, staff and line managers. The data collected were analysed through a commercial software package and used to produce a set of capabilities, initially twenty-six for each role. These capabilities are based on those derived by Boyatzis (1982). The twenty-six were reduced to the nine most significant capabilities for each post in order to reduce complexity and to give a manageable set of criteria for the assessment of candidates. These capabilities are described as 'the human qualities, attributes or abilities which contribute to excellence in a particular role', and vary according to the nature of the role, the setting in which the job is based and the level of the post. Typical titles for these capabilities are emotional awareness; flexibility; interpersonal understanding.

Capabilities were developed for eighteen posts from practitioner, including foster carer, to head of service (depute director) for all the children's services: foster care; day care; fieldwork (children and families social work); residential care and community resources. These were sent out to social work agencies across Scotland for comment and after even more amendment they were finalised as the basis for the Toolkit.

Having arrived at the capabilities, a range of selection methods based on assessment of candidates against the relevant nine capabilities for each post was developed and piloted in the Consortium authorities. Gradually a process emerged that Consortium members felt they could own and implement in selecting their own staff and carers.

The methods

Human resource (HR) managers have argued for many years that the major

difficulty with the staff selection process, as executed by managers in the public sector, has been the lack of attention, time and priority afforded it. Most managers would accept that its priority should rank very highly indeed – securing the best staff must be a critical part of delivering high quality services to service users. However, many managers find it difficult to allocate this task the time it deserves.

The method most commonly used and upon which most emphasis is placed in social work and social care is that of the panel interview. Research evidence has identified the many and significant weaknesses of this method (Tyson and York, 1996; Roberts, 1997), and these weaknesses have been rehearsed many times by HR managers and advisers. One of the complications in the world of social work and social care management is that managers sometimes overestimate the utility of the skills they are able to transfer from social work itself. While these are useful, they are no substitute for the use of selection methods that are based on careful job analysis and build on a reasonable period of observation of the applicants (Woodruffe, 1993; Weightman, 1994). A process is needed that permits the selectors to spend time observing applicants while they undertake tasks that are simulated aspects of the role itself. Best practice in other industries relies much more heavily on creating these opportunities through a series of exercises and tests over a period of at least a day. The shift away from a panel interview as the main or only method towards a more extensive and sophisticated process seems to have been hard to achieve in social work and social care.

The term most commonly used for this more complex type of approach is an assessment centre (called a selection centre by the Consortium to avoid confusion with the assessment centres that are a part of the vocational qualifications assessment procedure). In such a centre, which is a process rather than a place, a group of applicants is brought together for a whole day to take part in a range of group and individual exercises that focuses on particular aspects of the role.

A systematic and objective method for observation, assessment and scoring of applicants is used by selectors. The programme and exercises, for a group of up to ten applicants, are designed by trained staff to give applicants a range of opportunities to demonstrate their skills, knowledge and experience. This acknowledges that some people are better in one-to-one situations and others better in groups, and that good performance may be necessary in several different types of setting. The exercises are matched with the appropriate range of capabilities, and this matrix forms the basis for the observation and scoring. The assessment of applicants needs to be undertaken by trained assessors, supported by appropriately skilled administrative staff, with each selector observing and scoring no more than two applicants. Good accommodation for the process is an absolute necessity. Adequate suitable space for the exercises, waiting periods and for individual exercises is crucial for the successful running

of selection centres.

The model is further strengthened by the addition of a personal interview (in England and Wales often called a 'Warner Interview') (Warner, 1992; Support Force for Children's Residential Care, 1995) and a screening interview. The personal interview, which is again undertaken by specially trained staff, is an opportunity to probe attitudes and behaviour. This type of interview is designed to ensure that applicants' boundaries are not likely to be problematic by exploring attitudes to issues such as sexualised behaviour and child abuse. The screening interview, which could be combined with a personal interview, is where the candidate's application form is carefully and systematically examined, with the candidate, to ensure that there are no unexplained gaps in employment history and that reasons for leaving previous employment give no cause for concern.

Documentation surrounding the whole process is specially designed to collect the information needed for a well informed decision about applicants. This includes a dedicated application form (rather than a corporate one that spans a number of posts and disciplines) and a specifically-focused reference request form. Careful exploration of the application form by a staff member of HR staff in the screening interview can usefully identify areas that need to be pursued with referees, with former employers or with the applicant at interview.

This process is, to say the very least, labour intensive. Selectors need to be present for the whole of the day of the selection centre and then to participate in a 'wash-up' for two to three hours the next day. The 'wash-up' is the part of the proceedings where all the information, including references, application form and scores from the exercises for each candidate is brought together to arrive at a decision about appointability. In addition, time needs to be spent on briefing the members of the interview panel so that the interview can be used to focus on the most important issues.

Good practice demands that we should find ways of involving young people in the selection of the staff and carers who work with them (Kent, 1997; Kiraly, 1999). This, however, is a complex and difficult process to get right. The Consortium investigated this area and made recommendations in the Toolkit (Scottish Executive, 2001) that young people may be involved in one of several ways. One would be to prepare and support a group of young people to meet with all applicants, as a group or individually, to ask them specific agreed questions. Another would be to invite care leavers to participate in the panel interview. Again preparation for this is vital. In both cases young people need to know precisely what their role is to be and the level at which they are to be involved in the decision-making (Kent, 1997). Further, the communication link between the young people and the panel interview needs to be very clear and to work effectively.

The role of the Panel Interview

Despite the relatively low validity and reliability of the Panel Interview in predicting future performance in a job role (Psytech International, n.d.; Tyson and York, 1996), there is a place for it in the selection of staff. It is a useful point at which to explore issues connected with the 'fit' of the individual within the staff group and for the particular local circumstances. It is an important opportunity for the line manager to influence the selection and make-up of their own staff group. Managers quite rightly want to influence the process at critical points and experience shows that managers should stay close to the decision-making part of the staff selection process, as the relationship formed at this stage is a critical factor in forming team and organisational loyalties and commitment (Tyson and York, 1996).

What might an ideal process look like?

An ideal process might be spread over three days, though they do not need to be three consecutive days. On day one applicants would produce their certificates, evidence of identity and other documentation, and have their screening interview and their personal interview (Scottish Executive, 2001). On day two applicants would attend the selection centre, on day three, in the morning, the Selectors would meet for the 'wash-up'. Applicants could be brought back for their panel interview either that afternoon or at a later date.

A Possible Model?

Given the number of trained staff needing to be involved in the process, one possible solution might be to separate it into four parts, with the parts being carried by different people. The first part is the job analysis, preparation of the job description and person specification. These aspects need to be carried out by the employing organisation as managers will know best the requirements of the role. The second part comprises what are loosely described as 'the checks'. These are the checks made into criminal records (Scottish Office, 1996), the Scottish Social Services Register (the Register), the Register of Unsuitable Adults and the applicant's references. The references need to be carefully followed up to check on such things as the employment record and reasons for leaving employment. The third part of the process is the selection centre, which comprises the exercises relevant to the role, and where trained selectors assess the capabilities of applicants. Included in this part would be the screening and personal interviews. The fourth and final part of the process is the panel interview, where key managers direct questions to the candidate in order to complete their picture of the applicant and to gauge her or his match with the team and the role. The panel interview also gives applicants an opportunity to satisfy themselves that they fully understand the requirements of the role.

In order to maximise the efficiency of the process, it is possible to separate the parts out. All of the process is predicated upon job analysis and definition being carried out by the employing organisation, and the employers' preparation of a job description and person specification. The second and third parts of the process, that is the record checks and the selection centres, could be carried out by a centralised team of trained selectors and administrators who routinely design and run the record checks and the selection centres. These checks and selection centres, along with the screening and personal interviews, could be used to identify which of the applicants were deemed to be 'capable' (or competent) and appointable for the role. This group of applicants, a smaller number than those on the original short list, could then attend a panel interview, the fourth and final part of the process.

The splitting of the process along these lines would have the benefits of sparing employers the necessity of spending time on the longer and more technical assessment process while bringing the managers' influence to bear at the most critical aspects of the process for them – design of the job, matching appointable applicants with local requirements and the making of a final decision.

An Outline of How the Process Could be Carried Out		
Carried out by Employing Organisation	Carried out by Centralised Team	Carried out by Employing Organisation Managers
Job analysis and definition	Short listing	Panel interview
Preparation of job description	Identity check	Final decision to appoint
Preparation of person specification	Verification of qualifications	
Design and placing of advertisement	Records checks	
	Screening interview	
	Selection centre	
	Personal Interview	

Implications for employers

The most significant implication for employers is that the technical aspects of the process - the assessment of capability of applicants – would be carried out

by a team of staff from outwith their own organisation. For some, this might feel like the loss of a significant part of the selection process. However, experience around Scotland shows that this is the part of the process for which, in general, managers have the least appetite. Their interest seems to be mainly in the face to face panel interview. If this is the case, managers will be spared the time taken for detailed planning, setting up, administration and implementation of the selection centres, and their efforts will be focused on the part of the process which holds the most appeal and where they have the most impact.

At the end of the selection centre process managers would be offered a (relatively) short list of applicants who would be deemed appointable, and from whom they could choose, knowing that the rigorous checking and the thorough assessment of capability of applicants had been carried out. The panel interview could then focus on issues of matching – with the local team and environment – and pursuing issues identified as relevant by other parts of the process.

Implications for applicants

The news for applicants is more complicated. The least positive aspect of this system, if adopted throughout Scotland, is that more of applicants' time will need to be spent in the selection process itself, although there is no reason why the overall process should need to be spread over a longer period. Some employers are already using aspects of a selection centre approach with its attendant requirement of additional time over and above that needed for an approach using only a simple panel interview. Many are not, however, so currently it is possible for applicants to choose not to apply for posts where the longer process is in use if they so wish. An all-Scotland approach will remove the element of choice.

The benefits to applicants are that attainment of a new post by this more extensive process will bring with it much greater opportunity for assuring a good 'fit' between the applicant and the role, with less likelihood that a mis-match might take place. In addition, applicants will be able to rest easy that their abilities – and their development needs – are well known to their employers and managers. Development needs are less likely to be problematic and more likely to be met, resources permitting.

A system that is applied across Scotland will have the effect of ensuring that all applicants will be required to participate in this new process. It will not be possible for those who have something to hide to avoid the more rigorous process by choosing to apply to the social work agency that does not use such an effective method. This effectively obviates the vulnerability that some, particularly the smaller, agencies might experience if they are not themselves able to mount the more complex and resource-intensive methods.

Implications for service users

Service users, children and their families, will be able to have confidence in a process that is as good as we know how to make it. Given the very high profile accorded to some of the past institutional and foster care abuse, it must be a source of some anxiety to children and their families that something similar might happen to them. This fear will compound the complex and painful feelings experienced by children and their birth families at the separation they must endure.

Although safer selection is the main reason this more involved process was developed, it is also an improved method in other ways. The match between appointee and post is a better one and this should result in higher standards of practice at all levels. Higher standards of practice in individual posts will, in time, raise the quality of work across children's services to the benefit of children and their families.

What about the future?

At the time of writing, it is clear that the Scottish Executive is keen to implement the proposals laid out in the Toolkit, and discussions about the best way to do that are currently being held. The Scottish Social Services Council and the Care Commission will certainly have an interest in how they are implemented, as the proposals link both to the Register, to the Codes of Practice for both employers and employees, and to the inspection of services.

For those involved in the design and implementation of this process, it should be possible to take some satisfaction from knowing that much research, thought and road-testing has gone into the development of the method, and that for now, it is the best we know we can do. It may be that tomorrow, next week or next year, we discover that there is a better way of carrying out staff and carer selection. If that is the case, then we must adapt what we do to take account of the new developments. Meantime, the implementation will need to be carefully monitored and evaluated so that when the process is more widely used, as much can be learned about it as is possible. This will ensure that the methods are effective and fit for purpose, and the modifications that come about as a result of wider application keep it fresh and relevant.

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