

Nadhim Zahawi MP  
Parliamentary Under Secretary of State for Children and Families

16 May 2018

Dear Minister,

We are aware that you recently received a letter from the Association of Professors of Social Work, the British Association of Social Workers, the Joint University Council's Social Work Education Committee and the Social Work Action Network, dated 10 May. The letter aims to trigger a delay to the recruitment and development of future social workers through a model of programme similar to Frontline. Any delay would set back our efforts to improve the social work system for the children and families who need excellent services.

Frontline will only ever be one route into the social work profession. Under an existing contract, Frontline is currently working to bring approximately 450 new starters into the profession in 2019. This represents about 10% of those qualifying and the notice shared by the Department for Education for a future contract represents a similar proportion. 90% of other qualifying social workers will continue to qualify through more university-based routes.

There are a number of specific claims made in the letter that we want to respond to:

**Evaluation and retention.** The Frontline programme is the most heavily evaluated social work programme in the country. In a short five-year period, there have been three large evaluations. The independent study undertaken by Cardiff University, published in 2016, is the only study comparing practice quality for those graduating from different routes that we know of. The overall score of practice skill was rated by evaluators on a scale of 1-5, with Frontline participants scoring 3.77, other 'top universities' 3.25, and other universities 3.09. This difference was statistically significant and described by the evaluators as "impressive". Frontline is currently participating in a longitudinal study comparing retention rates for different entry routes. The data available so far shows that 67% of qualifying social workers from all routes go into practice (Skills for Care). The equivalent figure from the Frontline programme is 94%. After completing the two-year programme, 84% of Frontline participants remain in local authority social work. Comparative figures for other social work programmes are not published.

**Value for money.** An independent cost comparison study, also published in 2016, demonstrated that the net cost of social workers qualifying through Frontline is only 10.4% higher than those qualifying through traditional undergraduate routes. In light of the higher quality of practice skill exhibited by Frontline participants, this additional cost represents excellent value for money. Frontline has continued to reduce the per participant cost every year since launching. Frontline's local authority partners value those being brought into the profession, with satisfaction rates of 92% from the broad range of local authorities we work with. Demand from local authorities for taking participants on the Frontline programme has continued to grow and a third of all local authorities in England are now part of the programme. A large number of partners have now worked with Frontline over successive cohorts because it is central to their recruitment and retention strategy.

**Research.** Frontline directly supports social work research through a Research Partner contract and it indirectly funds it through a contract with a university for validating the Frontline programme at a Master's level. Frontline staff publish research (recently on observation of practice) and contribute to social work research conferences. Frontline can also drive up demand for applicants to study social work across all routes, including those at research intensive universities. The 2016 Cardiff study found that 13% of those applying to mainstream social work

courses at 'top universities' were positively influenced to apply through Frontline's own attraction campaign.

**Diversity.** Frontline is proud of the work it is doing to bring a diverse and talented group of new social workers into the profession. The cohort starting in 2018 is expected to be the most diverse yet. Final figures will be confirmed this summer, but of those currently placed to start in the 2018 cohort, 24% are BAME, 23% are male and 55% are the first generation in their family to go to university. This increased diversity has been achieved alongside maintaining a competitive ratio of ten applicants per place. The organisation knows that there is more work to do but it is building on success. It would be helpful if other social work programmes could routinely publish equivalent data.

This letter is co-authored by practice leaders, directors of children's services and chief executives of children's trusts from across the country. We run children and families social work services and have extensive experience of partnering with Frontline. The high and reliable quality of recruits and the organisation's focus on both practice and leadership help us deliver better services for children and families. Any pause, delay or disruption to future cohorts of new social workers entering through this route, or a similar one, would only harm our efforts to improve services for the most vulnerable children and families.

Yours sincerely,

**Carmel Littleton**, Corporate Director Children's Services, London Borough of Islington  
**Andy Couldrick**, Chief Executive, Birmingham Children's Trust  
**Tim Aldridge**, Director of Children's Services, London Borough of Havering  
**Sukriti Sen**, Director of Local Delivery Children and Families, Essex County Council  
**Steve Miley**, Director of Children's Services, Hammersmith & Fulham  
**Tony Theodoulou**, Executive Director of Children's Services, London Borough of Enfield  
**Sally Hodges**, Director of Children's Services and Skills, Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council  
**Nick Whitfield CBE**, Chief Executive, Achieving for Children CIC  
and Josh MacAlister, Chief Executive, Frontline

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Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS)  
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Local Government Association (LGA)  
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Chief Social Worker for Children and Families  
Shadow Minister (Children and Families)