

North West References for Qualified Social Workers and Team Managers Procedure

Introduction

1. This procedure is intended to support the effective use of references for Qualified Social Workers employed temporarily via agencies in the region's local authorities. It seeks to create a transparent environment where, across the North West, references can be used support safer recruitment, the protection of practice standards and ultimately children and families.

Background

2. Local Authorities engage the services of agency social work staff to meet acute or short-term demands for frontline practitioners and managers. The quality of these appointments is crucial to ensure local and national standards of practice are met and maintained. The greatest demand for and use of social workers and managers is often in those local authorities undergoing significant change and/or on an improvement journey – frequently being subject to an Improvement Notice or considered to 'require improvement' following an inspection. This sharpens the need to ensure appointments are of sufficient quality.
3. A number of local authorities have reported concerns, both formally and informally, with the conduct and practice of Qualified Social Workers and their employing agencies. The use of references provides a significant opportunity to protect standards of practice and work with employing agencies to improve further.
4. It is acknowledged that the temporary nature of these appointments significantly fetters local authorities in following normal procedures to improve standards of practice. Circumstances giving rise to formal concerns being communicated to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) would also arise infrequently.

Responsibilities of local authorities providing references

5. Local authorities must ensure procedures, practice and routine communications are clear that references must not be provided by colleagues or team managers employed through an agency for Qualified Social Workers at the end of a temporary appointment. References for team/first line managers, in particular, must be completed and/or approved by a suitably senior manager (e.g. Service Manager) depending on local structures or where an agency team manager is in post.
6. Requests for verification of references by commissioning local authorities should be responded to as a matter of urgency whether verbally, in writing or both.

Responsibilities of local authorities commissioning Qualified Social Workers and Team Managers

7. The commissioning Local Authority must ensure that procedures, practice and communications are clear that all references for Qualified Social Workers and Team Managers are verified verbally as well as in writing or both as a matter of urgency and prior to any appointment.
8. Where applicable, commissioning local authorities will seek a reference from the previous local authority employer where gaps in employment in comparable LA roles exist. Commissioning local authorities will consult with local Human Resources leads as necessary to extend routine requirements for references to

longer periods and/or from more previous employers where recent employment history consists of a series of short appointments.

9. In order to ensure transparency, the commissioning Local Authority should ensure the relevant agency or individual is all aware that appointments of Qualified Social Workers and Team Managers must not be agreed until references have been verified verbally, in writing or both. Commissioning local authorities should be clear with agencies and individuals about expected standards outlined in paragraph 5.
10. Commissioning local authorities must encourage and support safer recruitment practice within agencies which ensures Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS) checks are reviewed; references are available from previous permanent employers; and that gaps in employment are robustly challenged.

Action to be taken in cases where concerns are raised during the verification process or thereafter

11. Where verification of references reveals that these have been provided by a colleague or first line manager (see paragraph 5), a suitably senior manager (e.g. Service Manager) within the commissioning Local Authority will contact their equivalent within the other Local Authority to obtain a suitable reference.
12. If requests by the commissioning Local Authority for verification of references, either verbally and/or in writing, are not met, a suitably senior manager (e.g. Service Manager) will address this with their equivalent in the other Local Authority.
13. All local authorities will ensure that any concerns result in communication to practitioners and managers to reaffirm standards in respect of references for temporary Qualified Social Workers (e.g. colleagues not to provide references) to reinforce standards.
14. In cases where concerns are sufficiently serious or have not resulted in a satisfactory response, the Head of Service/Assistant Director in the commissioning Local Authority should raise this with their equivalent. It is anticipated this will only be necessary in rare circumstances.
15. This procedure is not intended to replace the responsibility for all local authorities to pursue appropriate action with the HCPC and, if necessary, legally where there is evidence of falsification of references or substantiated concerns about 'fitness to practise'.

Review

16. This procedure will be **reviewed not later than 31 March 2017**