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## Best Practice for Social Work and ICT

In this chapter we make a set of suggestions as to how ICTs may be used to further the aims of social work in ways that accord with the values of the profession. Some of these suggestions are based on research findings that are discussed more fully later in the book, whilst other suggestions are, we acknowledge, rather more tentative in nature. We give some indication as to which is which.

Our ideas are framed as being about best practice in social work. The concept of 'best practice' is widely used in healthcare, as well as in business management and in the world of ICTs, to mean the most efficient and effective way of doing things: ways that use the minimum resources and yet give the optimum results. There is a danger that it can become quite a utilitarian concept. In the context of professional social work, often there are inbuilt tensions between the drive for efficiency and the need, for example, to respect the individuality of service users and to work at their pace. In their exploration of the concept of 'best practice' in social work Jones and colleagues argue that we must take into account the complexity and the difficulty of social work tasks where there are

no straightforward actions which could protect or promote the welfare of one person or group without possibly causing distress or even deeply hurting and restricting theirs and other's rights and freedoms. (Jones et al., 2008: 3)

In this book we follow Jones and colleagues' argument that best practice in social work must fit with a critical stance, and, as we remarked above, with the core aims and values of the profession. Best practice does not mean that the process or outcomes are perfect, nor that there are no constraints

on what can be accomplished, but it should indicate the best that could be achieved in a specific situation, with a specific set of people and circumstances. This book seeks to develop an understanding of best practice in social work that includes the use of ICTs.

The current chapter is divided into three sections. The first discusses overarching principles that may help to define features of best practice with social work and ICTs. The second focuses in on elements of best practice in service delivery, and the final section is about best practice in professional training and ongoing professional development of social workers.

## **General Principles of Best Practice**

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### ***A practice-led approach***

One of the commonest ways of thinking about ICTs is to regard them as tools that can be used for a variety of jobs. As new ICT tools are developed, so they are applied to existing tasks in ways that may enable them to be done more quickly, or more efficiently. But in applying ICTs in order to gain the benefits, it is often the case that the tasks themselves are changed in significant ways, regardless of whether or not any improvement is achieved.

One of us drafted this chapter. So, for example, in producing this text I am using an electronic word processor. In my case this is only marginally faster than the much older method of using pen and paper, but it has many additional benefits. The software corrects my spelling and grammar as I write, it keeps count of how many words I have written, and it enables me to send the text quickly and easily to my co-author for comment. But using a word processor has also changed the process of my writing in subtle ways. It means that I can experiment with ideas more freely, in the knowledge that I can move sentences around easily without the laborious process of having to cross out and rewrite. But it means that probably I waste more time on 'polishing' text, because there is no longer the need to concentrate on getting it right the first time. Word processors came into general use in the 1980s, and began to be more widely used in universities in the 1990s, so the example is dated. But new technologies continue to evolve, and a common pattern continues to be that, as they are developed, so new ways are found of using them to do existing tasks, and old ways of doing things are modified.

Social work has not been immune to this process. There is a tendency to see a new development in the field of ICTs, and possibly its application

elsewhere in business, commerce or industry, and to ask how the advantages of this new technology can be brought to social work. This can be thought of as a technology-led approach. It is not without merit, but there are significant dangers. In this book we argue for an approach to ICT that is practice-led and that puts social work first.

One of the dangers of a technology-led approach is that social work comes to be understood primarily in the light of the aims of ICT developers, and evaluated in their terms. For example, recent advances in networking mean that it no longer makes sense for workers in large social work organisations to store information on the hard drives of individual computers. Common practice is to use a central filestore that can be accessed by any authorised user from any computer on the network (or sometimes over the internet). This means that there are reliable systems for data backup, and it allows rapid sharing of information. But it means that social workers no longer need their own office computer – any will do – so that the sharing of computer terminals (often called hot-desking), and mobile and home working have become widespread. This makes sense from an ICT perspective, but what of the changes to social work practice? We know that social work is stressful work that has a significant emotional content (Howe, 2008). Working face to face with service users who may be distressed, angry or otherwise disturbing in their presentation means that the emotional and other support of colleagues is, for social workers, an essential ingredient in their practice. It may be that flexible, ICT-led patterns of working undermine the cohesiveness of teams of practitioners who meet each other less frequently and less predictably. So the use of networked filestores should not be understood and evaluated from an ICT perspective alone. We need a practice-led approach that takes into account the practice perspective and, in this case, draws attention to potential disadvantages.

In this example, and more generally, best practice means a practice-led approach to the use of ICTs. We have contrasted this with a technology-led approach, but it should be acknowledged that some elements of the latter approach coincide quite closely with what we might think of as management interests in social work. For example, the introduction of central filestores fits with the management goal of increased efficiency. This complicates the argument, because we do not wish to argue for inefficient organisations – there is no benefit in that to anyone. Instead we should recognise that the concept of social work practice itself contains a complex blend of the sometimes complementary and sometimes competing interests of service users, social workers and managers. Our argument (that best practice in social work and ICT means a practice-led approach) does not

exclude the interests of social work managers. More positively, adopting best practice and a practice-led approach means starting with social work practice, not with the ICTs themselves.

It is important to make a distinction within the term 'practice-led'. For much of the book we have in mind 'social work practice' when we use the term 'practice-led'. But we intend a broader meaning of the word practice. The practice of social workers, for example, is not the same as the practice of social work educators or even social work students. So when we come to Chapters 6 and 7, the agenda we address is led by the practice of learning, and by implication, the practice of facilitating that learning. The same widening of the distinction also applies when we consider aspects of ICT and service users. In Chapter 3 we give some illustrations of how the perspectives of professionals and service users part company regarding technology. Towards the end of that chapter we pose the challenging questions that arise when we suggest that it makes good, if provocative, sense to talk in terms of service user, carer and citizen-led ICT interests. Each of these discussions will caution against assuming that 'practice-led' will always mean 'social work practitioner led'. But it will always be set against 'technology-led'.

This is one reason why throughout the book we seek to understand particular contexts for social work and to ask which technologies are being used and why, and to understand how practice may be changing as a result. Best practice means that our assessment of those changes draws on the aims and values of social work as a whole.

### ***Best practice in shaping an ICT infrastructure***

Another of the dangers of a technology-led approach is the tendency in social work for purpose-built ICT systems to be experienced by those using them as profoundly user-unfriendly. In Chapter 4 we will consider a number of examples in some detail, but suffice to say that there is significant research and other evidence to show that social workers have found the introduction of electronic ways of recording and processing their day to day work to be at best distracting, and at worst frustrating and deeply unhelpful. One of the features of social workers' critique is that the design and implementation of such systems is being imposed on them by people who don't fully understand the job. ICT developers and the social work managers who commission and buy the products, so the argument goes, do not have sufficient understanding of the day to day realities of social work practice to come up with useful systems.

In fact, the literature about best practice in the design and development of ICT systems for organisations has long recognised this problem. Some have called for an ethnographic approach to ICT systems design: one that starts with ICT developers spending time within an organisation so as to gain detailed information about its working practices before starting work on ICT systems (for example Heath and Luff, 2000). But this approach does not entirely solve the problem. It continues to exclude users from the design process, and it is almost impossible to foresee all the implications of a new system by studying only the work practices that exist before it is introduced. Hartswood and colleagues (2002) argue for a process of 'co-realisation', by which they mean that ICT professionals and the 'users' of ICT systems should together create, implement, and continue to develop ICT systems. They suggest that the ICT professionals need to move beyond a narrow 'engineering' mentality and physically move to work for long periods within the organisation, not just in the design phase but, crucially, in the subsequent implementation phase. It is in this latter phase, when people actually start to make use of a system for the first time, that there is the most opportunity for users to shape both their own ICT-enabled practice and the development of the system. Yet most of the social work users of the ICT systems we will consider in this book had no contact with ICT professionals in the design phase, let alone during implementation.

If ICT professionals need to become immersed in the world and work of social work ICT users, then social workers, in turn, need to become more skilled in understanding and using ICT. Hartswood and colleagues argue that this happens naturally as a by-product of the co-realisation process that they envisage, particularly during the implementation phase, as users gain experience of the system.

As users become 'experienced' they develop new ways of using the system that in turn generate new ideas for its further development. Rather than users simply adapting themselves to the new system, co-realisation stresses a change not only in the user, but also in their use of the system as a set of working practices evolve through use. Furthermore, we would argue that through this process users gain more general IT competences and become better able to judge *inter alia* what is possible and what is not, what is simple and what takes time. (Hartswood et al., 2002: 24)

During the period we were writing this book, criticism of one UK government-led ICT system in social work, the Integrated Children's System (see Chapters 3 and 4), led to a review and to a commitment to allow continuing local development, in line with local needs. What is still

missing from policy is a commitment to bring ICT professionals and social work users of ICT closer together in a long term engagement. Such a development has the potential to lead to ICT systems that are configured by best social work practices and 'owned' by social workers, rather than continuing to have social work practice configured to meet the needs of ICT systems.

### ***Service users and ICT infrastructure***

The discussion so far about working together on creating ICT infrastructure for social work has been about the relationship between ICT professionals and social workers. Yet in recent years social work has begun to understand the value of listening to what service users have to say – not just about their own situations, but about wider issues in the shaping and delivery of social work services. Crucially, the organisation in England and Wales that is dedicated to supporting best practice in social work, the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE), argues that there is a central role in its work for people who use services (Social Care Institute for Excellence, 2010). Yet we should acknowledge that developing such a role is a complex task, not least because a significant proportion of 'users' of statutory services are 'involuntary' (up to a third in some studies) (Ferguson, 2005) and that special skills may be required for working in statutory contexts where 'service users' may resist attempts to control their behaviour and to get them to change (Hill, 2010).

So, given the current lack of involvement of social workers, and the complexity of involving service users, is it sensible to suggest that best practice in the design of social work ICT infrastructure should include both groups? The key argument is that the 'data' under discussion is directly or indirectly about service users and, despite the complex dynamics of statutory settings, service users have rights not only to access their data but also to have a say in how it is created, managed and shared with others. In our view there is an opportunity here to extend the kind of best practice with service users that has been championed by SCIE into the vexed area of ICT infrastructure.

### ***Consent, confidentiality, privacy and data security***

The increasing use of ICTs in social work raises some new questions in relation to consent, confidentiality, privacy and data security. However, in considering them we should be led by the relevant, local legal requirements and by the values and ethics of the profession, rather than by the logic of the ICTs themselves. Social workers have codes of ethics (for the

UK see BASW, 2002; for the US see NASW, 2008); and internationally see IFSW, 2005). Whilst these codes do not specifically highlight the use of ICTs, nonetheless we argue in Chapter 3 that these ethical principles should be used to guide best practice in the new contexts brought about by new uses of ICTs. In the US, the National Association of Social Workers has issued *Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice* (NASW, 2005) and we draw on that helpful document in what follows.

Best practice means that consent to a social work intervention which involves the use of ICT is required unless the service user lacks the capacity to give it, or the intervention has a legal mandate that overrides their wishes. This means that full information about data collection, storage and sharing systems should be provided for all service users as a part of giving information about the social work service. Most work will be carried out on the basis of informed consent, including consent to the use of ICT systems, but the choices of some 'involuntary' service users may be restricted by the legal mandate.

Various ethical dilemmas become apparent as we try to define the limits of confidentiality in modern social work. The primary right of service users to privacy means that securing the confidentiality of personal records remains the formal default position in all legal jurisdictions that we are aware of. But the operational need to share information with other agencies so as to provide a high-quality, coordinated service for service users, and the need to protect vulnerable people and, sometimes, the public as a whole, means that there is increasing pressure in the other direction. The use of ICTs has made it much easier to share information quickly and has, arguably, added to the assumption that data will be shared. We give the example of ContactPoint in Chapter 5. But best practice means not being driven to share information simply by the ICT-enabled ability to do so. The advent of email, for example, has probably led to more widespread inappropriate – and inadvertent – data sharing. Of course, it may be entirely appropriate to share information about a service user with another agency for the reasons given above. But best practice should continue to have regard to the legal and ethical framework for such decisions.

Concerns about data security have increased greatly with the growing use of ICT and with reported, high-profile losses of UK government data (Sweeney, 2009). Once again, best practice means that, at an individual level, social workers must comply with the relevant law and with agency procedure for data handling. For example, the Youth Justice Board lists the 'dos' and 'don'ts' of data security in a leaflet for staff (Youth Justice Board, 2008). This includes detailed practical advice about the encryption of data on laptops,



memory sticks, and so on. Best practice at the organisational level means that ICT systems must be designed with data security in mind. However, there is a trade-off between data security and ease of access, and some developments in social work ICT raise serious questions about the impact on civil liberties, as we will see in relation to ContactPoint in Chapter 5.

### ***Access to ICT***

Social work services and systems that are based on the use of ICTs must necessarily exclude those who do not have access to them. There may be many 'digital divides' (Norris, 2001) between and within countries in relation to access to ICTs that broadly match other well established inequalities, for example in relation to income, health and so on. But there is no simple correlation between digital divides and other forms of social exclusion, as evidenced, for example, by the effective use of online campaigning by disabled people that we refer to in Chapter 3. Following from social work's commitment to social justice, best practice means that social workers should be active in seeking to understand and to overcome digital divides. Insofar as social work services are advertised or delivered online, best practice means that we should seek to maximise accessibility, including for disabled people.

### ***Appropriate engagement with service-user-led ICT***

The discussion so far of the general features of good practice in social work and ICTs has been about the activities of professionals. But it is important to understand that service users are also making extensive use of ICTs, both independently and in conjunction with professional groups, and that this is a growing trend. We review some of this activity in Chapter 3. Now clearly it does not make much sense to suggest features of best practice in relation to the independent activities of service users, since the concept of best practice arises in professional contexts. But we suggest that social workers need to engage, for example, with websites set up and run by service users. Sometimes these may be critical of professional services and, depending on the nature of the critique, engagement may lead to service development. On other occasions, engagement may lead to joint action, for example in relation to service user participation in social work education. Social workers need to be aware of and to engage with the ways in which service users are making use of new technologies to communicate their experiences of social work services.



## **Best Practice in Delivering Social Work Services**

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### ***Online service delivery***

At the time of writing, few social work services in the UK are delivered entirely online, for reasons that we discuss in Chapter 4. The area in which there has been most growth has been the development of online counselling services, either in real time or asynchronous, where there may be a number of advantages to service users arising from the potential anonymity that it may provide. There is a UK Association for Counselling and Therapy Online (acto), with its own code of ethics (acto, 2010). This online counselling approach has been extended into mainstream social work with young people, with the NSPCC and Cafcass offering online support, including peer mentoring, to young service users.

The potential for misrepresentation (by professionals or by service users) means that best practice is for professionals to identify themselves clearly and accurately, and to take reasonable steps to verify the identity and contact information of service users. Websites should provide full details of professional name, qualifications, office address, contact details and links to appropriate regulatory or licensing bodies. In addition, those offering services online need to ensure the integrity and security of the computer systems they are using and to make arrangements to cover the possibility of server outage or breakdown. But these elements of best practice deal with what might be thought of as 'technical' issues. Of interest throughout this book are the ways in which technology mediates practice, and vice versa. So it is interesting to note that, according to acto, counsellors should 'be aware of and familiarize themselves with the differences between online and face to face psychological therapy and the impact that online work can have on the relationship between therapist and client and the therapeutic process' (2010). At the time of writing there appears to be some evidence in relation to outcomes (e.g., Murphy et al., 2009) but less to guide therapists in relation to the differences in process.

### ***Online assessment tools***

Whilst online service delivery might still be fairly unusual, many local authorities are developing ways in which members of the public can at least check their entitlement to community care services by completing online assessment forms, even if this is followed by a face to face assessment

by a social worker. In some authorities the aim is to carry out the assessments entirely online, though the resulting support services are necessarily delivered face to face.

The rationing of such services through the creation of eligibility criteria is, of course, a contentious area of social work. So it seems to us that best practice in the development of online assessments should pay attention to the issues raised by the concept of a 'digital divide' (see Chapter 3) and should include openness about the eligibility criteria, and about the basis on which decisions are made.

### ***Best practice in electronic recording and assessment protocols***

The influence of electronic recording and assessment protocols on social work practice is discussed in Chapters 4 and 5. It seems that this is an area in which the relationship between technology and practice is vexed. We report on recent studies that demonstrate that, whilst social workers see many advantages in using up to date technology to record their work, nonetheless they report serious misgivings about systems currently in use. These ideas about the features of best practice take into account those concerns.

First, as we have already argued, best practice means that social workers should play a full role, alongside ICT specialists, in developing ICT infrastructure. Second, recording systems should allow social workers to 'tell the story' of their work with service users in ways that make narrative sense. Social workers are often critical of the ways in which current systems force them to record different pieces of 'information' about service users in different computerised 'fields' in ways that make it difficult to understand the whole picture. At the very least, we need ICT approaches that are geared to handling larger sections of text – perhaps in the manner of e-books. Third, computerised recording systems should be easy to use and not get in the way of face to face work. We need to pay attention to the ways in which recording systems may influence the relationships between social workers and service users and design systems that support productive working relationships. Finally, we need to develop clear rules about privacy and data sharing that do not assume that personal information should be shared with other agencies simply because the technology exists to do so. Service users should continue to have control over their own data, even if there are some statutory contexts in which information may be shared with other agencies without the explicit consent of the person concerned. This is a difficult area in which law and policy are evolving rapidly.

## **Best Practice in Social Work Education and Ongoing Professional Development**

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### ***Social work education***

As we observe in Chapter 6, each new cohort of social work students has an increasing ease and familiarity with ICTs, both for study and for socialising. This new world of electronic social networks is the background against which developments in e-learning are taking place. Nonetheless, it is not necessarily the case that all students will have developed the specific technical skills required for making formal use of the burgeoning number of electronic resources that are available to them. Best practice in the use of ICTs in education means ensuring that students become familiar with the wide range of relevant electronic resources – many of which are discussed in Chapter 6 – and that they are equipped with the appropriate search skills.

At its best, the incorporation of Web 2.0 technologies into learning and teaching offers the opportunity to increase the amount of participation and interaction in learning. It allows, for example, for online group support for students on placement in geographically dispersed settings. It allows for connections with service users and other students in places and at times that would otherwise be impossible. But the ephemeral nature of Web ‘knowledge’ poses serious problems and means that best practice in e-learning must place an emphasis on critical thinking about information sources.

### ***Professional development***

As with social work education, ICTs open up access for social workers to a whole range of new online resources of varying types. Best social work practice demands a commitment to making use of these new resources and to developing a critical approach to the ‘knowledge’ contained therein. But ICTs also open up access to social learning networks, meaning that social workers can learn from and with people other than those in their geographical workplace. In Chapter 7 we note that such networks are often used not only for substantive learning in relation to specific topics, but also for the kind of peer support and encouragement that operates at a more emotional level. This may be surprising given the association between computerisation and ‘remoteness’ or lack of feelings, but the evidence suggests that people are adept at communicating feelings through text. Best practice should recognise the validity of learning networks in relation to both substantive learning about a topic and peer support. In Chapter 7 we

consider ‘communities of practice’ – one way in which this is being developed – and we suggest that these may have a significant role to play.

***Taking it further***

This paired exercise will be especially helpful at the commencement of a practice placement, or on newly taking up a practice post.

- 1 Find out what the agency policy is for data security and consent and obtain the evidence for this.
- 2 Identify the various points at which decisions about data access have been embedded in agency policy documents. What accessibility issues and potential digital divides does your assessment raise and reveal?

