About this paper
In May 2014, IPPR published a report proposing the creation of a new programme called Think Ahead. The aim of Think Ahead is to encourage more graduates into mental health social work, and to give them greater on-the-job training in community mental health teams.

At the launch of the report, care minister Norman Lamb welcomed our recommendations and committed to supporting the development of the programme. IPPR is now working with the Department of Health to help design the key elements of Think Ahead.

Given the strong interest in this programme, we have received a number of questions about why it is needed and how it will work. This document is intended to answer some of the most frequently asked questions.

Why is this programme targeted towards graduates?
One of the main problems we hope that this programme will address is the fact that social work is not always seen as an attractive career option. Social work can struggle to attract the same level of applications as teaching, medicine or psychology – despite the fact that it is just as tough and rewarding a job.

We know that there is a growing appetite among graduates to work in mental health – psychology is now one of the most popular degrees at university, and the NHS clinical psychology courses are hugely oversubscribed, with 3,725 applicants competing for 594 places.

Unfortunately that enthusiasm hasn’t filtered through to the social work profession – social work is not always seen as a career of choice among graduates. For example last year fewer than 10 per cent of people who started training to be a social worker through the master’s degree route came from a selective university. The Think Ahead programme is being designed to try and make social work more attractive. Social workers play a hugely important role in mental health services, and we want to encourage more great people to join the profession.

We think it is good to have a diverse range of routes into the profession for different groups – including ‘grow your own’ schemes, degree courses and fast-track programmes. Our programme is simply an additional route into social work – it is not intended to replace routes that are available for other people.

Are you saying that having an Oxbridge degree will automatically make somebody a good social worker?
We are not saying that just because somebody has a good degree they will automatically be a good social worker. Our report is clear that social workers need a lot of other skills and qualities such as resilience, empathy, communication and a commitment to social work values. The Think Ahead programme will undoubtedly have to screen applicants for these skills and qualities.

What we are saying is that there will be a lot of talented and ambitious people out there who have the potential to make excellent social workers, but who just don’t have social work on their radar as a possible career option at the moment. We want to change that.

Are you saying that existing social workers are all bad at their job?
Our report is very clear about the enormous contribution that social workers make to mental health services. There are lots of great social workers out there – we are simply arguing that we need more of them. This is consistent with recent reviews by David Croisdale-Appleby and others, who have argued that social work should do more to attract a range of talented people into the profession.

Shouldn’t we have a programme for people with life experience rather than academic qualifications?
We make it clear in our report that there are a number of possible groups that this programme could target – this includes recent graduates but it also includes those who graduated several years ago and want to switch career. For example, we suggest this programme could provide a progression route for IAPT (Improving Access to Psychological Therapies) workers, or those working in allied fields such as housing and health.

The precise eligibility criteria for the Think Ahead programme is still being designed. In our report we suggest it should be targeted towards people with good degrees because that has been raised as a particular recruitment challenge in a number of official reviews and surveys – and our programme is intended to be a direct response to that issue. However, other ‘life experience’ would also count towards somebody’s application, so academic qualifications are not the only things that will help people get on to the programme.

Of course we agree that there are other groups of people who have a lot to offer the profession – including those with many years of experience in social care who might not have a degree – and it is important that there are also routes into the profession for them. ‘Grow your own’ programmes already provide a good pathway into social work for some of these groups, and we believe they could be expanded.

Why do you suggest more ‘on the job’ training?
Local authorities and other social work providers have told us that lot of social work students are qualifying without having had much experience of working in a mental health setting – and that means that they can struggle when they get into their first job. We know that having a good-quality work placement is essential for people who are training to be social workers. However, less than 8 per cent of placements are in mental health settings, and not all of these are high quality.

That means that a lot of people qualify as social workers without a real understanding of how to work in an integrated mental health team. That is unfair on them and on their employers. To give an example, during our research we met one newly qualified social worker who had done her university placement in a children and families team – she described how getting a job in a mental health team felt like ‘starting from scratch’. Think Ahead is designed to prepare people for the specific demands of working in an integrated mental health team.

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3 See http://www.iapt.nhs.uk/
There is not enough classroom study involved in this programme
The precise balance between classroom study and on the job training has not yet been decided. In our report we suggest that participants should spend up to 10 weeks on an ‘initial preparatory course’ to introduce them to the key theories and legal frameworks involved in social work. They will then spend the majority of the programme in a work environment (although there will be a number of additional ‘study days’ throughout the two years). We are therefore proposing a ‘blended learning’ approach that includes a mixture of classroom study and on-the-job training.

However, it is important to remember that a lack of high-quality practice education has been raised as an issue by many official reviews and social work organisations. Some degree programmes that are focused on classroom study do not always prepare students adequately for the workplace. The Think Ahead programme is intended to help address that by providing a greater emphasis on practice education.

We know that work placements are enormously important to the quality of social work education, because they provide students with an opportunity to apply theory in a real world environment. Other work-based training programmes such as Step Up to Social Work® and ‘grow your own’ programmes have proved very successful. We are therefore confident that a similar programme in mental health services can offer a high-quality experience.

It isn’t right to have a programme that is specialised on a specific element of social work – it should be a generic course.

We agree that any programme needs to cover the broad theories and interventions that underpin all areas of social work, and we are committed to try and reflect this in the Think Ahead programme. We believe that mental health lends itself well to a broader social work education. Mental health is an issue that affects all age groups and overlaps with many other issues that social workers have to address such as domestic violence, child abuse, substance misuse and dementia. It is therefore possible to balance a focus on mental health with a broader social work training. It is not uncommon for other professions, such as nursing, to combine a general education with a specialism in this way. And let’s not forget there are already effective social work programmes, such as Step Up, that have a particular specialism.

In our report we are clear that while participants will primarily be based in adult community mental health teams, they will also be expected to complete placements in other settings. We think this will help ensure a suitably broad education. However, the precise design of the Think Ahead programme has not been completed and we are looking forward to working with specialists on its content.

We also think it is important to have an honest debate about whether MA courses really provide the ‘generic’ education that their proponents claim. Social work students already end up specialising in certain areas depending on where they have a placement. So for example, if a student has a work placement in a women’s refuge then they will end up developing specialist knowledge in domestic violence. The trouble is that this process is not done in a systematic way, and is not linked to where students might end up working. Our programme will be much more strategic and transparent about where and how participants are specialising – and link this more directly to employer demand.

3 IPPR | The Think Ahead programme: Frequently asked questions
Will people on the Think Ahead programme get ‘special treatment’ in the workplace?
It is important to state that Think Ahead participants will not be treated differently in the workplace. They will be expected to complete a unified MA in social work – just like those on postgraduate courses. They will have to pass assessments in order to qualify as social workers – just like everybody else. They will be sat in the same office – just like everybody else. And they will not be eligible for a fast-track promotion after they have completed their programme: they will have to earn their right to get promoted, just like everybody else.

The programme is too short – you can’t train to be a social worker in less than two years
While debates about how many months a programme should last are important, what really matters is what you do with the time.

There are lots of different courses of varying lengths. The Step Up to Social Work programme started out as an 18-month course, but has recently decided to shorten that to 14 months. Most MA courses last for two years, but undergraduate programmes last for three. It is clear that courses of different lengths can provide good education and training.

The question we should be asking is: What will participants be doing with their time on their course? We would expect a fast-track programme to be very intensive – so you can fit more into the same period of time – and to include a certain amount of classroom contact. We would also expect a fast-track programme to involve more time in a ‘real world’ environment. Lectures are important for introducing candidates to the underlying theories, but it is on placement where social workers really learn their profession. By providing more time in a work placement than other routes, we think it will provide a better learning environment.

The exact details of the Think Ahead programme will clearly have to be designed with curriculum experts, the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) and others. We are therefore not in a position to confirm the precise number of months it will take participants to qualify as social workers. Other fast-track programmes can provide a guide to this – with participants qualifying after about 14 months – but Think Ahead may opt to take a different approach to the design of its programme.

The retention rates for a programme like this will be very low. We need people to commit to staying in the profession for a long time, not just two years.
The experiences of other fast-track programmes show that having a short programme is an important recruitment tool, but not one that necessarily translates into poor retention rates. Teach First is a good example of this. The two year ‘deal’ it offers to its participants helps to attract people into teaching, but many of them actually choose to stay. After five years in the job, 54 per cent of Teach-Firsters are still in teaching, which is only just below the 57 per cent of people who stay in the profession after studying via the university PGCE route. Any programme would clearly have to screen people according to their values and commitment to the principles of social work – that should help ensure we get people with a commitment to staying in the profession.
We also need to be clear that the current routes into social work do not require students to make a long-term commitment to the profession. Students can take a government bursary, study for two years, and then move on to something else (and the data shows that many of them do). It would seem odd to treat a fast-track programme any differently from this.

Of course we hope that Think Ahead attracts people who will have long careers in social work. However, even if people do decide to move on to other graduate careers, it is surely a good thing that they will take their knowledge of mental health social work and service users with them.

This programme is ‘too little, too late’ and does not address the real problems in mental health services
Some of our critics have argued that this programme is not worth doing because it will not solve all of the problems facing mental health services. We recognise that there are a huge number of challenges facing the sector – not least the funding crisis and difficulties with integrating services – and we put these into context in our report.

However, it would be impossible to design a programme that solves all of the ills currently facing the sector. Our report is not about the funding of services, and at no point does it claim to have all of the answers to these wider problems. Instead, we focused on a few specific issues, in particular the need to make the profession more attractive and to improve the quality of training for social workers going into multi-disciplinary mental health teams. We believe that these are important issues and we are confident that our programme will help to address them. In the long term, we hope that a programme of this kind might also help to stimulate wider recognition and change in the way mental health services are seen.

Think Ahead is a way to privatisate mental health services by stealth
Our report recommends that Think Ahead is established as a charity or social enterprise, not a private company – and it should operate on a not-for-profit basis.

It is important to remember that Think Ahead will only be involved in recruiting and training social workers (in partnership with employers and higher education institutions). As an organisation, it will not be involved in directly running or delivering mental health services. All the participants on the programme will be placed within community mental health teams – they will not be trained by private healthcare providers.

We proposed that Think Ahead is established as a charity rather than being run centrally by the Department of Health because we think this will help it to remain completely focused on its main goals and retain its own institutional independence. If Think Ahead was a scheme run by central government, it would be subject to competing demands and changing government priorities. The other benefit of running the programme as an independent organisation is that it can attract philanthropic support. Schemes such as Teach First and Frontline have managed to attract considerable philanthropic donations, meaning that these organisations are able to ‘top up’ government grants and do more valuable work in their areas than they would otherwise have been able to do.
Think Ahead hasn’t been regulated or evaluated
There isn’t a programme to regulate or evaluate yet – we are still in the early stages of this project. The Department of Health has announced its support for the creation of Think Ahead, and care minister Norman Lamb has put together a board of people to help get it established as soon as possible. The next step will be to complete a more detailed design for the programme – including its curriculum and how it will be delivered – and we look forward to working with various professional bodies and experts on this.

Once we have designed the programme in more detail, we will ensure that it goes through the HCPC regulation process – as well as the College of Social Work’s endorsement process. It is right that programmes are subject to strict regulation and quality assurance, and we would obviously expect the Think Ahead programme to stand up to the same level of scrutiny as any other social work programme.

Were social workers and service users involved in the research?
Our research was based on a number of sources, including surveys, secondary data sources, academic papers and official reviews. We conducted meetings and focus groups, and gave presentations to several hundred people from within the social work profession, and also visited community mental health teams. The project had a steering group consisting of representatives from the College of Social Work, ADASS, BASW, APSW, JUC-SWEC and the Chief Social Worker for Adults, as well as practicing social workers. We do not claim that everyone we spoke to agreed with our findings, and hope that is clear in the report. We are continuing to arrange visits and meetings as we develop the programme.

Our qualitative research included a visit to a service user group in Lambeth and a written submission from a service user group in Manchester. We appreciate that the voice of service users is important – and this voice could have been stronger in the research. We are grateful to the people who have pointed this out and we will make sure that service users are involved in the design of the programme over the coming months. Page 54 of our report clearly recommended involving service users in the recruitment process and design of the programme – and we remain committed to that.

Why would employers offer high-quality placements on this programme if they don’t do it already for students on MA courses?
There are four reasons why we believe employers will be attracted to this programme. First, it will give them a chance to tailor the education of social workers to the specific needs of their mental health teams. It will therefore more closely match the ‘supply’ of newly qualified social workers with the ‘demand’ for them from employers. Second, employers will benefit from the fact that this is a work-based training route – so the participants will be directly contributing to the teams in which they are placed. Third, the rigorous screening process that applicants will have to pass will give employers confidence in the calibre of people taking part. Fourth, some employers have reported high vacancy rates and difficulties recruiting suitable social work staff (although the

6 www.tcswn.uk/home/
7 http://www.adass.org.uk/home/
8 http://www.basw.co.uk/
9 http://apsw.org.uk/
10 http://www.juc.ac.uk/social-work-education-committee.html
11 https://www.gov.uk/government/people/lyn-romeo
picture on vacancy rates is complicated depending on the area of the country and the type of social work role – see our report for a detailed discussion of these issues).

**Aren’t there other ways to solve the problems you identify in your report?**

A lot of work has been done over the last 10 years to improve the recruitment and education of social workers, including changes to the curriculum, student bursaries, placement fees and the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), and the introduction of the professional capabilities framework. These have all made an important contribution to the profession. However, it is clear from the evidence presented in our report, as well as from recent official reviews, that progress has been slow and that recruitment and practice education remain a challenge. It is therefore time to try and address these problems in a different way. Think Ahead is an attempt to do that.

Of course, Think Ahead will only be one additional pathway into the profession and will involve a relatively small number of social workers in its pilot phase. It is therefore absolutely right to consider other ways to address the challenges facing social work recruitment and education. IPPR have written elsewhere about ways to increase the supply of statutory placements for MA courses and to improve workforce planning so that the supply of newly qualified social workers better matches the demand for them. We also welcome calls for better professional development for existing social workers. We do not believe that the Think Ahead programme replaces the need for action in any of these areas – it should be seen as one contribution to this wider programme of reform.

**Next steps**

Care minister Norman Lamb has committed to support a pilot of the Think Ahead programme. Over the next 6–8 months a team of people will be working on a more detailed design for the programme to help get it established. The elements we will be working on include a draft curriculum outline; identifying the best mix of work placements; determining the scale of the pilot; agreeing the precise length of the programme before participants qualify; settling on the best way to deliver the academic content; and ensuring that the programme meets HCPC requirements. If you have any feedback on these issues please contact Craig Thorley at c.thorley@ippr.org.