



Helping social workers, improving social work



Foreword

The sustainability and quality of the social work workforce has been an issue for many years and has been brought into sharp focus by tragic events such as the death of Baby Peter and recent child sexual exploitation enquiries. A skilled and confident profession is vital for improving care and reducing risks. This long-term problem requires sustained action.

There are many examples of good practice to be found in the work of individual councils and the Local Government Association (LGA) has commissioned a series of case studies to help identify and disseminate the best ideas. The initial studies are presented here with a brief discussion of the main issues and themes.

The LGA will look carefully at the key lessons from the study programme, including how best to enhance collaboration between councils, and will work with partners to take the best ideas forward.

The LGA is helping to promote excellence in social work employment by hosting the national Employer Standards for Social Work which have been refreshed and re-launched recently to give a clearer sense of what social workers can expect from a good quality employer. Details can be found at www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/employment-relations/-/journal_content/56/10180/3511605/ARTICLE

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1. Background

The social work workforce is fundamental to improving outcomes for vulnerable people and as a result is a crucial factor in local performance in children's and adult's services. In recent years the sector has put significant effort into workforce development, much of which has borne fruit - such as the successful introduction of the "assessed and supported year in employment" which helps the newly-qualified in their early careers. There have been positive partnerships with Government and others both nationally and regionally to deliver improvement.

However, many social workers choose to leave the active profession after a few years for a variety of reasons, including career stagnation; this makes it harder to retain experienced staff and puts extra pressure on less-experienced staff. As a result, many employers face both immediate and longer-term recruitment and retention problems across social work and especially in children's roles.

Current evidence suggests an increasing reliance on agencies to provide cover not just on a short-term basis but for longer periods as well. This raises questions not only about how to ensure that agencies serve the interests of employers and employees but also about whether other approaches are better-suited to improving the supply of good quality experienced social workers. There is a need to identify both short-term initiatives and longer-term sustainable solutions where possible.

A variety of initiatives are in place or in advanced planning and it is important to assess whether or not they will be effective and whether there are any gaps; if retention of experienced staff can be improved, teams will be better balanced and both indiscriminate recruitment and agency dependency could be avoided.

What makes social workers leave and what motivates them to stay

Social workers stay in council employment when they:

- feel supported with good management, good supervision, good initial and post qualifying training
- have a supportive team and colleagues providing advice, expertise and emotional support
- have effective administrative back up.

Social workers leave when:

- referral rates continue to rise (49 percent already work more than their contacted hours ¹)
- caseloads increase
- the support they've previously received diminishes
- the control which they believe they have over their working lives is reduced.

1 [http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1945/1/SWTF%20Workload%20Survey%20\(final\).pdf](http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/1945/1/SWTF%20Workload%20Survey%20(final).pdf) 2010

Social workers asked to identify a single factor that would improve their professional lives have made a number of suggestions, including:

- smaller caseloads
- improved IT
- improved post-qualifying training
- fewer targets
- more experienced social workers within teams
- more administrative support
- availability of clinical (or similar) supervision
- better salaries/more resources
- clear career progression routes

Data on vacancies and use of agency staff

Recent data sourced from the Community Care magazine annual survey shows that vacancy rates continue to fall but suggests that the gap is increasingly being plugged with agency staff.

The survey found 6.5 per cent of all social worker posts across the UK were vacant in September 2013, down from 7.1 per cent in 2012. The fall appears to be largely due to progress in filling positions in adult services. In 2012, 7.5 per cent of social worker posts in adult services were vacant, but this fell to 6.7 per cent in 2013. Vacancies in children's services rose by one percentage point to 7.1 per cent in the same period.

In 2012, local authorities were using an average of 16 agency social workers across both children and adult social services; in 2013 the average was 22.

Practitioner views

Councils would prefer to see most staff employed directly on a long-term basis, with agencies used for filling short-term needs only. A recent LGA event saw debate about how to encourage good people to join the direct workforce and stay. The event produced a number of ideas including:

- improved links with higher education establishments to enhance relevance of social work education
- greater emphasis on a clear career framework linked to appraisal, supervision and personal development
- clearer career pathways between children's and adult's services
- greater emphasis on shadowing, mentoring and career guidance
- opportunities for secondments between different sectors such as health and local government

These suggestions are all about demonstrating to individuals that they have good opportunities for enhancement and varied careers.

Clearly there is a need to ensure that the ideas and initiatives adopted by employers tie-in with the views expressed by social workers and the case studies which follow show how some councils have set out to do this.

2. What the case studies covered

The case study interviews covered a range of detailed questions:

1. How do you go about recruiting social workers?

- Is there room for improvement in recruitment?
- Do you have any recruitment difficulties?

2. How do you work with schools and pupils to encourage early thoughts about a career in social work?

- In what ways could early familiarisation with social work be improved?

3. In what ways do you work with higher education institutions in your area to ensure a good quality supply of newly qualified social workers?

- What do you think are the main strengths and weaknesses of social worker education and how could it be improved?

4. How do you go about ensuring that NQSWs (Newly Qualified Social Workers) are job-ready?

- Do you run an academy for example?
- If you do run an academy is this done in partnership with other councils?

5. Do you use formal workforce planning to predict supply and demand and if so how?

- How do you work with neighbouring councils to manage supply and demand?
- How do you work with your temporary and permanent recruitment suppliers to manage supply and demand?

6. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment?

7. How important are the Employer Standards in your relationship with social workers?

- How do you make use of the Standards?

8. Do you have a clear career framework for social workers?

- Does the framework help in retaining staff as they develop experience?
- Do you encourage career moves between children's and adult's services and vice versa?

9. Do you experience problems in retaining social workers with decent levels of experience and skill?

- What tools and techniques do you use to attempt to retain them if you do have problems?

- 10. Have you made any attempt to remodel services so that QSWs (Qualified Social Workers) focus on the most challenging cases with others looking after more routine work?**
- 11. Are you actively managing ‘talent and leadership’ and if so how?**
- How do you manage succession planning - collaboratively with other councils or on your own?
- 12. What steps, if any, do you take to encourage staff who have left full-time roles to come back into the workforce?**
- 13. Do you have (a) full-time principal social worker(s) or is it a designated role for someone with another main job?**
- Do you think you make the best use of the principal social worker role? Is the role itself unclear?
- 14. Are you able to offer senior roles in front-line specialisms that help people to avoid moves into largely managerial roles to further their careers?**
- Do you think that it is important for senior staff to remain in full-time practice?
- 15. What steps if any do you take to encourage newly retired and “downsizing” staff to stay involved so that their experience can be used?**

The range of questions allowed interviewees to focus on the main experiences of their council and the initiatives they have put in place to improve things.

3. Early headline points from the case studies

Case study analysis will be an on-going piece of activity but so far the councils involved have shown that they are working hard to ensure that they have a stable, good quality workforce by focusing on a series of factors and initiatives. Taken together, these ideas can help to build retention of the best staff into the system. Some early headlines are:

- The shortage of experienced social workers is acute across the country but the detail of local circumstances varies and initiatives need to be tailored to local needs.
- The involvement of elected members is crucial in building effective programmes.
- Social workers can vote with their feet and move to what they view to be better environments so collaboration between councils is vital to ensure a proper distribution of the workforce.
- Neighbouring councils should in fact make every effort to develop shared approaches to a range of workforce issues.
- A strong relationship with local higher education institutions is vital to ensure that newly qualified social workers come into post with the right skills and potential.
- The role of Principal Social Worker is vital in providing professional advocacy.
- Building on the role of Principal Social Worker, a strong workforce development function for social work is needed, wherever it is located or configured in the organisation.
- Varying career routes are needed so that social workers do not need to move into management to gain promotion.
- Proper succession planning is vital to ensure that leadership is always in place and teams are well-balanced.
- Salaries need to be properly differentiated and regularly benchmarked; retention allowances are often important.
- Strong, demonstrable adherence to the Employer Standards is seen as important.
- An “academy” approach to learning and professional development can be very effective.
- Smaller, more focused teams with a balance of support and professional advocacy through consultant social workers etc. can pay dividends in controlling caseloads and improving engagement.

4. Coventry City Council: a major recruitment and retention campaign acknowledges difficult issues from the past

The death of four-year-old Daniel Pelka in 2012 and a subsequent critical Ofsted report have led to a radical review of children's services in Coventry and a recruitment campaign to attract experienced social workers to the city.

Daniel's mother and her partner were convicted of his murder in 2013 in a high-profile case that included some criticism of Coventry City Council. Since then, the council has chosen not to shy away from the tragedy. It has put in place a comprehensive improvement plan and launched 'Do it for Daniel', a campaign to create a legacy of better services and improve the support package provided for social workers.

In common with the national picture, Coventry struggles to recruit and retain its own experienced social workers. Since Daniel's death there has been an acute surge in demand for children's services and some increased demand for adult services. Around £500,000 a month is spent on agency staff, which is acknowledged to be unsustainable. The city has no difficulty in recruiting newly qualified social workers, due in part to its close work with two universities, Coventry and Bournemouth. The big challenge is to retain them in the longer term and recruit to more senior posts.

Coventry is a small, compact city at the heart of England and is easy to commute to. However, it competes with neighbouring Birmingham and quieter districts to attract social workers. Shokat Lal, Assistant Director for HR and Workforce Services, says that many are drawn to the quieter surrounding districts of Warwickshire, which tend to have lighter caseloads and fewer complex cases, after gaining some inner-city experience. Others 'burn out' within seven or eight years and leave the profession. Against the backdrop of a national shortage of experienced social workers, this competition between cities and districts for "the same people from a small pool" is a major challenge.

The council works closely with Coventry University to ensure that social work students see Coventry not only as a place to study, but as a place to stay and make a career. Members of the training and development team act as a conduit between social work practice and theory, keeping tutors updated and supporting students on placement. The city also works closely with Bournemouth University, which runs its Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme.

Due to limited resources, the council does not engage in social work career promotion with schools, except for a presence at some job fairs. Instead it has chosen to focus on working with universities. There is a feeling that some universities should do more to vet candidates before enrolling them on social work courses to ensure they are suited to the job. Shokat Lal says: "There is some disparity between social work education and practice – the curriculum has not kept pace with where we are. The challenges we faced 15 years ago were completely different to those we face today, such as new and emerging communities, changing demographics and the use of social media."

Coventry offers ongoing training for social workers at all stages of their career. A team of practice educators provides intensive support for newly qualified professionals; as a result of this Coventry has very good retention rates for social workers in the early stages of their career. There is a strong emphasis on standards and social workers get free membership of the College of Social Work, plugging them into a source of continuing professional development. A clear career framework is in place which includes systems to manage talent and develop leadership skills.

The local authority recently recruited two principal social workers, one each for children's and adults' services, to act as a conduit between the council, universities and the profession (the standards frameworks, colleges and expected behaviours), ensuring that there is consistency in learning and practice and that teaching is relevant and engaging.

The 'Do it for Daniel' campaign, which was launched in September 2014, is an attempt to turn a tragic incident into a force for good. Shokat Lal says: "When a child dies, it deeply affects those who work in the local authority. People will make judgements about what we did and didn't do, but we have tried to create something positive that will help other children at risk in the city."

Coventry has renewed the package offered to social workers, which now includes a 'golden hello' along with manageable caseloads, recognition for hard work and better support. It has also improved the recruitment experience, for example by making it easier to apply, offering tours of the city and turning applications around more quickly.

The council knew that using Daniel's name in the campaign would be highly emotive, but it has received praise from within the profession for its honest approach. Bridget Robb, Chief Executive of the British Association of Social Workers, said: "I have been impressed by Coventry City Council's willingness to deal openly with the impact that Daniel's tragic death had both on its staff and the people of Coventry."

"Councils often face criticism for citing confidentiality as a reason why cases can't be discussed. This is a straight-talking campaign that turns this notion on its head and provides reassurance for potential recruits that hard truths will be acknowledged by children's services at Coventry."

www.doitfordaniel.co.uk

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5. London Borough of Redbridge:

supporting experienced staff through a range of positive workforce measures

As in many other local authority areas, the recruitment of experienced social workers and managers is a significant challenge for Redbridge, whereas recruiting newly qualified social workers is not a problem. For this reason a major focus is on retention, and a number of measures have been put in place that help staff to feel valued and supported and encourage their loyalty to the London borough.

Children's services in Redbridge has a workforce development team which has been pivotal in developing a recruitment and retention action plan for social workers via a working group. The manager of this team reports to the principal child and family social worker, a senior manager who is also the head of the learning, support and development service. This arrangement works well in promoting a 'learning culture' for the organisation.

The team provides dedicated support for children's social workers, support staff and other professionals, offering training and development opportunities throughout their careers. It also looks after newly qualified social workers via the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE), coordinates the Step Up to Social Work programme and organises student placements.

Lesley Perry, Workforce Development Manager, says: "Social workers tell us that one of the reasons they stay at Redbridge is the varied approach we have to learning and development activities. If you look at the factors that influence the motivation and loyalty of staff, learning and development is high up on the list."

Redbridge has a clear career pathway with a range of options for experienced social workers, including non-managerial roles. For example, non-case holding senior practitioners within the child protection service provide practice support to frontline workers. There are options for experienced social workers to move away from frontline care, for example into the quality assurance team or becoming an independent reviewing officer, paid at the lower end of the management scale. In this way, their knowledge and experience is retained. Within the social work grade itself, three levels have been introduced with different salary points. There is regular benchmarking of salaries against other authorities; a recruitment and retention allowance is also offered to staff.

Redbridge recently introduced a transfer policy, recognising that people sometimes leave a job simply because they want a change. It is now easier for social workers to move around within the service, as long as they have been in post for at least a year and both managers agree. For example, someone working in child protection might want to move to the looked-after children team, which involves more direct work and a smaller caseload. Lesley Perry says: "One reason people chose to work through agencies is that it provides flexibility and variety. Through the transfer policy we are trying to retain people by providing them with a different role and a new challenge. Workforce monitoring suggests that there is a reasonable balance of agency and permanent staff here in comparison to other London boroughs."

The service has a practice learning development manager whose main role is to support social workers on the ASYE (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) programme. A workforce with a high percentage of newly qualified staff has an inevitable impact on managers. While there are many advantages to newly qualified staff, including their enthusiasm and knowledge of the latest research, the ASYE demands regular supervision, a restricted caseload and protected development time. Providing dedicated support reduces the impact on managers and the rest of the team.

The principal child and family social worker leads group supervision with newly qualified social workers, providing them with an opportunity to raise concerns and share experiences. External experts come in to talk on various topics, such as mindfulness. Perry says: "It is a demanding job, so in recognition of this we are trying to build the emotional resilience of our newly qualified staff, and their managers, through workshops and other activities." Redbridge partners with a national organisation which provides a range of services and resources that support evidence-informed practice. While this involves a significant investment, it is seen as a great support and good value for money.

There are strong links with the University of East London and Redbridge is part of a consortium of local authorities that link together to provide the ASYE. The borough also has a "grow our own" programme, providing identified support staff with the opportunity to train as social workers through the Open University while remaining employed. At the other end of the scale, managers can access sponsorship to study for the social work Masters' degree.

Standards are taken seriously, and Lesley Perry is part of an LGA working group that has recently been refreshing the Standards for Employers of Social Workers. These set out what social workers should expect from their employers and provide a set of core values. Redbridge has two standards "champions", frontline social workers who take the message out to colleagues and report back on any issues.

The service monitors its work around standards and this is reported back to the chief officer. Perry says: "If we implement and maintain the employers' standards robustly, get them embedded in the organisation, then that will begin to address much of the retention problem. Social workers need to feel safe, supported by strong leadership and management and able to share with someone when they need to."

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6. Central Bedfordshire Council:

improving the support package for social workers to attract permanent staff

Central Bedfordshire Council was created in 2009, when Bedfordshire County Council and the former district councils were replaced by unitary authorities. Since then, thresholds for referring children to social care have been reviewed, and there has been strong political support and investment in social care to ensure that the council delivers safe, secure and good quality services to children and families.

As part of this work, between 2009 and 2013 Central Bedfordshire invested in a significant increase in social work posts. However, filling these roles with permanent staff has been a major challenge, and the authority found itself over-dependent on agency social workers. There was also a relatively high turnover of permanent staff. Gerard Jones, Assistant Director for Children's Services, says that this situation created financial pressure within the council and instability in children's lives. "Local authorities will always need some degree of flexibility in using agency staff, but too many makes it difficult to provide a consistent quality of service."

In 2014, the council embarked on a strategy to attract new permanent staff. It restructured the children's social care service to create smaller teams with clear accountability and clear levels of support. A consultant social worker post was piloted and is now being introduced in every team to help set high professional standards and support front-line workers. The result is small, well-supported teams with manageable caseloads. In 2013, the average caseload was around 30 children per social worker; in 2014 it had fallen to approximately 17. The looked-after children caseload is now much lower than many neighbouring authorities, at around 11 children per social worker. The changes have been well received by staff and have led to a significant increase in both quality of practice and outcomes for vulnerable children.

The council has also been working to simplify the management structure, removing unnecessary layers and focusing management resources on front-line decisions about children's lives. In June 2014 it launched the Central Bedfordshire Academy of Social Work and Early Intervention, in partnership with the University of Bedfordshire. This virtual learning environment provides learning and development opportunities for the children's workforce, including:

- supported routes into social work and early years services
- a high quality Assessed and Supported Year in Employment programme
- a practice unit for newly qualified social workers
- a broad range of continuous professional development, career progression and leadership development opportunities
- partnership work with the university to disseminate excellent social care research and support evidence-based approaches in practice.

The academy's aim is to create a talented, valued and stable workforce that can achieve the best for local families. It has enjoyed strong political support and is helping to raise the authority's profile as an employer, both regionally and nationally.

The recruitment challenge remains very tough due to the national shortage of experienced social workers, says Gerard Jones, and this is not expected to change in the foreseeable future. Central Bedfordshire's ethos is that while pay plays a part in attracting social workers, factors such as workload, support and career progression are key to retaining them. The authority is slightly increasing its market rate supplement as a result of a benchmarking exercise but is aware that this is only part of the answer.

Targeting high-quality newly qualified social workers through specific recruitment programmes is another focus here, and two additional practice educator posts have been created to support them. Workforce analysis is ongoing to ensure that the balance of experience is right and there is a phased programme to release the agency social workers. Jones says: "We don't treat locum staff negatively. They are part of our workforce and we support them, though in different ways to our permanent staff. We have a retention policy for locum staff as we expect to continue to need them to some extent. As a result, some have been with us for a long time. They are converting to become permanent staff at the rate of one or two a month, despite the lower pay, because they want to be part of our future and benefit from our long-term career support."

Performance standards in many areas are the best they have ever been. In August 2014, auditing showed that 60 per cent of cases were 'good' or 'outstanding', an improvement on previous years. The children's service was rated 'good' by Ofsted in 2012 and is aiming to become outstanding. In terms of the balance of permanent/agency staff, this moved from 50/50 in April 2013 to 60/40 one year later; by April 2015 it is expected to reach 70/30. The turnover rate has improved dramatically too. In 2013, around six social workers were leaving each month, but one year later this had fallen to approximately one a month.

Jones says that it has been important to keep elected members involved and engaged in the change process. There has been strong political and financial support for service improvement, and keeping members informed means they understand the context and the actions being taken. Nationally, although political and media interest in children's social care remains high, the great progress made across the country in improving safeguarding services is not sufficiently recognised and celebrated. Doing this would help to attract the very best recruits to the sector.

For further information contact Gerard Jones, Assistant Director – Operations, Children's Services, Central Bedfordshire Council: gerard.jones@centralbedfordshire.gov.uk

7. Hertfordshire:

leading on a regional approach to supply and demand of social workers

Hertfordshire is one of 11 strategic authorities in the East of England that have signed up to a Memorandum of Co-operation to help address some of the challenges in recruiting and retaining children's social workers across the region.

The idea arose from discussions between senior managers in different authorities around issues of concern, such as competition and the use of agency staff. From there it has grown into a project that focuses on supply and demand at a regional level, looking at issues such as introducing more strategic regional workforce planning, working with universities to improve the quality of social work education, collaborating on issues such as staff retention, harmonising pay rates and working with agencies to improve standards and reduce costs. So far the initiative only covers children's social workers but there are plans to expand it to adult social care.

Louise Tibbert, Head of HR and Organisational Development at Hertfordshire County Council and the regional project lead, says this approach could ultimately expand into working with other regions – and even at a national level. “It's about trying to influence on a much bigger scale. At the moment local authorities are tackling these issues individually, and we think that a regional and national approach will benefit everyone.”

Discussions are underway with locum agencies to see if some levelling out of pay rates is possible, one of the factors that pulls agency workers from one authority to another. There is even talk of standardising pay rates for permanent staff, although that would be a major challenge, as even at a regional level market forces are very different in different areas.

Hertfordshire experiences some difficulties in recruiting social workers due to a combination of a strong market for locums and the fact that it borders with London boroughs, so has to compete with London salaries. The county recruits to permanent social worker roles all year round via a dedicated website (www.hertsinvestsinyou.co.uk). It runs a newly qualified social worker academy which provides a six-month tailored programme to for new practitioners to develop their skills before joining front-line teams. While the academy currently has a focus on recruiting newly qualified social workers for Hertfordshire, they are exploring the possibility of running academies in partnership with other local authorities.

Not all newly qualified social workers join the academy programme, but all of them take part in the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE). This is seen as a solid and consistent way of preparing new social workers, helping them to develop confidence and gain experience in a supported way.

However, Anna Titmus, HR Manager, says that the ASYE does have some weaknesses. For a start, not every authority runs it as it is not mandatory. Without a loyalty clause in their employment contract (which is difficult to enforce), some social workers leave the local authority that has invested in their development once they complete the ASYE. There is also some inconsistency regarding the six-month probation period: ideally this needs to be aligned with the ASYE so that failure to pass the ASYE has meaning.

Hertfordshire has strong links with its two main university partners, which attend regular sub-meetings to update the local authority on their work, seek feedback and reach agreement on ways forward. Shadowing opportunities and placements are offered to student social workers. Work is underway with the University of Hertfordshire to develop a new Masters' programme and ensure that high-quality ongoing training is in place.

Lisa Burton, the council's Learning and Development Manager, says: "One way the relationship with education institutions could be improved is if there was a more co-ordinated response to the recent reports around social work education [for example the Croisdale-Appleby and Narey reports], as this will impact upon us all and will affect how we respond to demographic, legislative, efficiency and service challenges."

High-quality training and development opportunities are provided throughout a social worker's career. Succession plans are in place and some people are being actively developed for leadership roles through a leadership academy for social care, targeted at aspiring managers. Experienced social workers can apply for the next grade up or to become a senior practitioner. Anna Titmus says: "We find that, where it is used well, the career scheme works as a good retention tool."

Hertfordshire recently created the role of consultant social worker for practitioners who choose not to progress into management. They have a smaller case load of more complex work, enabling them to spend the rest of their time mentoring and coaching less-experienced colleagues. This is helping to retain social workers who want to continue front-line work but are keen for a new challenge.

The market forces supplement is reviewed annually to ensure that pay remains competitive. Social workers are kept in touch through regular newsletters, and the director of children's services runs focus groups with practitioners to keep updated on the issues that matter to them. The authority also gathers evidence on what social workers need from their working environment through new starter questionnaires and exit interviews.

For further information contact Anna Titmus, HR Manager, Hertfordshire County Council: anna.titmus@hertfordshire.gov.uk or Louise Tibbert, Head of HR & OD: louise.tibbert@hertfordshire.gov.uk



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