



Social Work: a toolkit for social workers and employers



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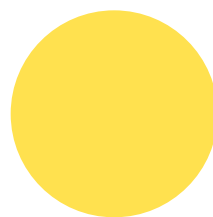
Introduction

Alongside parents, carers and communities, many different professionals have a role to play in helping to keep both children and vulnerable adults safe. Health visitors, police officers, doctors, nurses and teachers play a crucial role in this, but there is no doubt that social workers bear uniquely important responsibilities.

This is why having sufficient numbers of social workers with the right skills and experience, doing the right things at the right times, is essential for high quality protection systems for children and adults.

Councils are currently operating within a national and regional context of both increased customer and professional demand. Expectations placed on social workers are expanding to meet with heightened anxieties around keeping children and vulnerable adults safe; and the movement to up-skill the profession to equal standing with peers in education and health.

This toolkit provides advice on how best to recruit and retain social workers, how to engage local media and how to implement the refreshed Employer Standards.





Must knows: retention and recruitment of social workers

Key issues for social workers

A review undertaken by the Local Government Association (LGA) identified a number of factors that encourage individuals to join the social work profession as well as factors that cause them to leave.

The two key motivating factors for social workers are: wanting to help others (this is the key driver); and making a difference to people's lives.

The Department for Education (DfE) and Skills for Care (SfC) have worked with partners to develop and implement the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) which supports the needs of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) in their first year in practice. The ASYE includes a progressive and holistic assessment of practice made by the employer against The College of Social Work's PCF (professional capabilities framework), and sets out the support that NQSWs should receive through supervision, workload management and professional development.

Following consultations by the Chief Social Workers in the autumn of 2014 further developments relating to the ASYE are anticipated.

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 per cent already work more than their contacted hours¹)
- caseloads increase
- the support they've previously received diminishes
- the control which they believe they have over their working lives is reduced.

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.

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

Recommendations

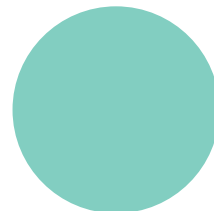
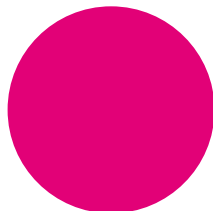
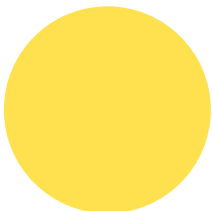
There is clearly no single solution to the retention and recruitment challenges that are facing councils, but there are steps that can be taken to attempt to achieve greater stability and satisfaction and, in turn, achieve more positive outcomes for children and families.

Studies have shown that councils have a number of options when considering how to improve levels of social worker recruitment and retention and these can be grouped around five themes:

- workload
- staffing
- learning and development
- pay and rewards
- morale.

Workload

- Ensure that all social workers have a reasonable caseload.
- Wherever possible, consider giving social workers more autonomy to manage their own workloads.
- Reduce bureaucracy to allow for frontline work. Some councils for example employ support staff who undertake administrative work on behalf of social workers.

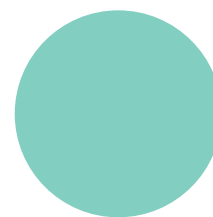
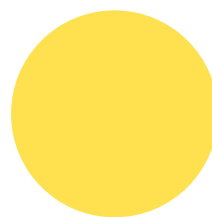
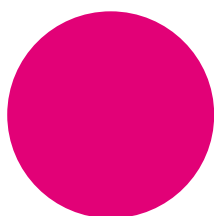
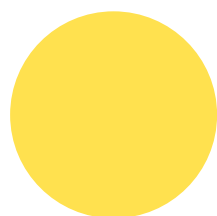


Staffing

- Recruitment practice and market development are crucial to attracting the right people with the right skills and values. For example Skills for Care worked in partnership with the National Skills Academy for Social Care and produced an online values based recruitment tool kit for employers which can be found here: <https://www.nsasocialcare.co.uk/values-based-recruitment-toolkit>
- Consider whether all social workers have a refreshed, up to date, clear job description and person specification which is reflective of the work they undertake and the skills they require.
- Work to reduce the use of agency staff to a minimum. A settled, stable workforce can help to improve standards and the quality of practise. It can also allow less experienced social workers to feel more supported and create opportunities for good training and development.
- Develop media tools that will capture the attention of prospective employees and offer them something different. For example Walsall have created a social care jobs microsite that details the council's offer: <http://webwalsall.com/socialcarejobs/>

Learning and development

- Ensure there is access to continuing professional development and education, including leadership and management development, and/or opportunities to develop into more specialist roles.
- Provide consistent, high-quality supervision that is supportive and challenging, focusing on the needs of the worker, and that includes time for reflection and mentoring.
- Offer more flexible targeted support and mentoring to individuals, with the possibility of a 'fast track' to identify and manage talent.
- Recognise and value the existing skills that staff possess and use these skills to develop further learning and development.
- Provide opportunities to spend time in other agencies with other professionals working in child protection, such as the police and schools. In some instances councils and partner agencies have developed successful approaches to multi-agency working that have been supported by the co-location of officers from different agencies.
- Consider ways in which those approaching retirement could continue to be employed in some way by introducing flexible retirement packages (to provide mentoring, supervision, etc.).



Pay and rewards

Basic pay has never been cited by social workers as a factor that prompts them to leave jobs however when experienced staff move between employers they are naturally influenced by pay rates. It is important to assess the market properly when designing reward packages. Councils are recommended to join www.epaycheck.org.uk, the pay database developed by regional employers and the LGA to obtain up-to-date data.

An increasing number of councils are giving social care staff additional benefits, including:

- payment of higher rates for out of hours work;
- use of career grade progression schemes;
- lump sum retention payments;
- market supplements, and;
- lump sum long-service payments.

As with all incentives offered to a particular section of the workforce, councils will need to ensure that they have a proper market justification for the payment to avoid potential equal pay pitfalls.

Non-pay additional benefits are available more frequently but are by no means universal. The main non-pay benefits available to social workers are:

- career break opportunities
- flexible working hours
- payment of professional fees to qualified post holders
- mobile phone provision.

Morale

- Upper and middle level management should take time to visit and listen to staff, not only in formal consultation exercises but also informally.
- Lead members for children's and adult's services should also get to know staff.
- Social workers should have access to and support from line managers, supervisors, peers and colleagues.
- Consider the impact of concerns in the wider council workforce about, for example, budget reductions or service transformation, and how these changes are communicated.
- Inspections can be a time of stress. Have a plan in place for how you will support and communicate with staff during and after an inspection.
- Develop a no-blame culture and a supportive environment wherever possible.
- Consider whether a rewards and benefits programme that goes beyond pay may help retain social workers, such as the scheme used by Waltham Forest: <http://www.ambitious-socialwork.co.uk/rewards-and-benefits/>

Case studies

The LGA has identified a number of good examples of councils working successfully to recruit and retain social workers in their areas, and is always keen to hear of others that can be usefully shared with colleagues across the sector. The document can be found here: <http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6637817/Helping+social+workers%2C%20improving+social+work/3e38b09a-9d14-4978-8c0b-46aad75bc55c>

Contact us at info@local.gov.uk if you have a good example of your own to share.

Employer standards

The Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England were refreshed in May 2014 and set out the shared expectations of employers which will enable social workers in all employment settings to work effectively.

The Standards give social work employers and those working in social work access to a pool of professional resources and information that incorporates the essentials of what supports good social work practice. They aim to benefit every social worker in a council, health or the voluntary sector by clearly identifying the development opportunities, resources and accountability arrangements that employers should have in place to ensure they are providing the right level of support to social workers for their everyday work and continuing professional development.

The Standards bring together an updated set of core values that are shared across councils, health and social care partners, ensuring that social workers can expect the same levels of support across all social worker roles in all organisations. There are eight individual employer standards that cover all levels of employees from managers to student social workers. These fall into three over-arching areas of focus that social workers should expect:

- a well led professional environment – including effective planning and workloads
- enabling professionals – with effective management and supervision
- enabling practice – with effective development.

All employers providing a social work service should establish a monitoring system by which they can assess their organisational performance against this framework, set a process for review and, where necessary, outline their plans for improvement. Employers should ensure their systems, structures and processes promote equality and do not discriminate against any employee.

The Standards are set out in a framework which is designed to be used as a practical resource by all employers including councils and health and social care partners in their local areas. The framework can be incorporated into local self-regulation and improvement and is also designed to be used by regulators such as Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission. There is an audit tool to assess how you are meeting the Standards and an action plan to help improve the way which social workers help to deliver better outcomes for users.

The areas covered by the audit tool are:

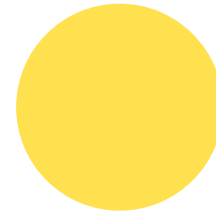
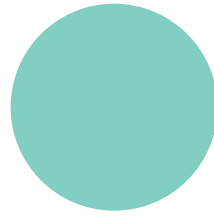
- Clear social work accountability framework – informed by knowledge of good social work practice and the experience and expertise of service users, carers and practitioners.
- Effective workforce planning – systems should be used to ensure that the right number of social workers, with the right skills and experience are available to meet current and future service demands.
- Safe workloads and case allocation.
- Managing risks and resources – ensuring social workers can do their jobs safely and have the practical tools and resources they need to practice effectively.

- Effective and appropriate supervision – ensuring social workers have regular and appropriate supervision.
- Continuing professional development – providing opportunities for effective continuous professional development, as well as access to research and all relevant knowledge.
- Professional registration.
- Effective partnerships – consider collaborations with other councils to tackle regional recruitment and retention challenges, or other partners such as higher education institutions, to support the delivery of social work education and continuing professional development.

Further information on the Employer Standards and how they can benefit councils can be found here: http://www.local.gov.uk/workforce//journal_content/56/10180/3511605/ARTICLE



Media



Unlike many professions which are trusted to help during times of need, social workers are largely invisible to the general public, until something goes wrong. That is when often it is social workers, rather than police officers, health workers or teachers, upon whom the spotlight is shone.

This can have a direct impact on recruitment, with what starts as bad headlines resulting in a spiral of decline in the workplace that can lead to demoralised staff who are hard to keep hold of and potential new candidates looking elsewhere for jobs.

Indeed, the LGA's own research in the wake of the Peter Connelly case found that six out of 10 councils in England had problems retaining staff – a 50 per cent rise on the year before. In the same study social workers said they had been “run through the mill” and criticised unduly, something which caused many to leave the profession.

If the only time the public hears about the work of social workers is following a crisis, such as a number of recent high profile cases involving child protection, it's not surprising that portrayals of social workers in the news often reflect negative stereotypes and social workers themselves have become wary of opening up to the media.

In a recent survey 85% of social workers agreed that “negative stories about social work in the media make my job hard to do”².

Why carry out a media campaign?

With an ongoing and growing demand for vital child protection services and support for vulnerable adults, there has never been a more important time for councils to look to recruit and retain vital social workers.

A proactive social worker media plan is an essential part of doing this. Working closely with local, regional media, council communications teams can play a crucial role in recruiting and retaining more social workers by promoting the work social workers carry out to transform lives and correcting negative perceptions associated with the job.

It is important to promote the things we get right and demonstrate that social workers make a difference. This has many benefits and will help to keep parents, carers, children and the wider public better informed, raise the status of the profession, highlight the need for more social workers, attract new people to the profession, help to build trust in the sector and boost internal morale.

About 50,000 social workers currently work for councils, acting as a safety net for children, families and vulnerable adults across the country. But the average social worker only stays in the profession for seven years.

² Guardian Social Lives survey of 400 social care staff, May 2014

“I feel really strongly that the general public, the media and the Government do not fully appreciate what my working day entails. Perhaps there would be a greater understanding and respect for social workers if they were able to experience it.”

Asked why they had entered the profession, “making a difference” and “wanting to help others” are the two factors that social workers frequently use. For change to occur media work should aim to connect with these primary motivations.

Where possible media work should include stories which:

- Allow local people to put a name to the currently perceived faceless world of social work.
- Put real people at the heart of what we do. Personal or human interest stories often create the most impact.
- Help your residents understand what social workers do and how tough, but rewarding, the job is. Show where social workers have had to make difficult but vital decisions to protect individuals from harm.
- Encourage people to want to join the profession.
- Clearly demonstrate where the work of social workers has played a part in supporting local children and vulnerable adults. Every day a social worker will do something that is ‘everyday’ for them but that is amazing for someone they’ve helped – tell people all about it.

- Dispel the myths around the role of social workers.
- Highlight what the council is doing to recruit more social workers, including specialist campaigns.
- Highlight what the council is doing to value its existing social workers, including helping with workload and supporting learning and development.





“negative stories about social work in the media make my job hard to do”

This can be achieved by:

- Planning a steady stream of proactive press releases.
- Striking up professional relationships with journalists who are interested in this field. The sensitive nature of the work social workers carry out makes it all the more important to work closely with and provide briefings to key journalists covering the subject.
- Providing opportunities for journalists to spend time with social workers going about their day-to-day work, but be honest about what the journalist can expect and what you can provide.
- Being clear about what you want to say by using strong and consistent key messages.
- Putting out accurate and timely information and correcting misunderstandings.
- Ensuring spokespeople are given clear briefings and prep-plans for interviews.
- Challenging the secrecy around social services. There is an understandable automatic response by any organisation dealing with social services. It's your job to question this.
- Providing support to social workers by explaining why talking to journalists helps, offering someone to accompany them, ensuring it doesn't compromise their primary job of protecting children and accepting they will express their own opinions.
- Providing media training for staff so they feel better equipped to speak to journalists.
- Establishing a relationship of trust with your social workers. To be able to provide the best advice, communicators need all the facts, good and bad.
- Giving a voice to social workers allowing them to talk about the challenges and complexities of the job.
- Using 'social work champions' to promote the work your council does locally.
- Linking media work into local and national campaign or social worker days, weeks or months. This could include world social worker day.

Examples of proactive media work

Social workers need to be allowed to engage with the media. A documentary following the work of child protection officers in Bristol shows what can be achieved.

www.theguardian.com/social-care-network/2012/jan/25/protecting-our-children-bbc-documentary

Coventry City Council

Working with the media

Working with the media on children's social care calls for sensitivity, the ability to turn a complex situation into a simple story and – most of all – honesty. This has underpinned our approach to raising the profile of children's social care issues over the past five years, and helped us share the story of the work we do, our challenges and our issues, with a wide audience.

Working with highly respected filmmaker Roger Graef several years ago on a series of Panorama special documentaries following Coventry social work teams on the frontline helped millions of TV viewers get a better understanding of the amazing jobs social workers do every day around the country.

More recently the publication of the serious case review into the death of Daniel Pelka, the four year old Coventry schoolboy brutally murdered by his mother and stepfather, put us back in the national spotlight. We were honest with the media, our residents and our staff about our failings, open about what had happened and clear about what we needed to put right.

It would have been easy, of course, to retreat from the spotlight once the media had moved onto another story. But we've chosen not to do that; children's social care needs and deserves national debate and attention. We need more good social workers to deliver change for the better in our services.



Our social worker recruitment campaign “Do it for Daniel” is, once again, honest about the impact of his death on us all. The campaign focuses on Daniel – not to get cheap and easy headlines (although we've had a lot of media attention as a result of the campaign) – but because it would be disingenuous to pretend it hadn't happened and hadn't had a massive impact on us all.

Of course there's a good package to go with the recruitment campaign as we try and attract the best, but the honest acknowledgement of the massive challenges we face in protecting vulnerable children in Coventry is, I think, as important as the pay and perks for social work professionals. Early signs in the first month since the launch of “Do it for Daniel” are good; the campaign has, no doubt, divided opinion, but people are talking about it, the issues we've raised and our approach is beginning to see great social workers come forward to work with us.

The best legacy we can provide for Daniel is better protection for our children. The best support we can give social workers joining us to protect children like Daniel is absolute honesty about the challenges we face together.







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