

WLA report on recruitment and retention

The West London Development Board has a membership of eight Councils:

- Brent , Ealing , Harrow , Hillingdon , Hounslow , Tri-Borough (Hammersmith & Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster)

Our aim is to work together to develop a stable and well qualified social work workforce within west London. The work of the board is predominantly focussed on social workers and team managers.

1. Current position

For the past five years the west London boroughs have been working together, the initial aims of the programme board were to: Increase the recruitment and retention of social workers and team managers, develop a career pathway for social workers, provide bespoke professional development for front-line managers, collect useful and meaningful workforce data and enable social work practice.

The current situation is:

- **Retaining social workers** continues to be a challenge (42% had been in their current role for two years or more).
- **Recruiting experienced social workers** continues to be a challenge (retention rates for senior social workers have increased by 7% over the past 5 years to 53% in post for two years or more). However, some progress was made over the past four years with regards to recruitment and retention with social worker vacancy levels across west London dropping from 22% in 2009 to 13% in 2013. (It should be noted that there is some disparity between councils and the vacancy rates vary significantly)
- The number of **agency social worker** has varied greatly over the past 5 years. 2013 saw a low number for agency social workers (11%) whilst over the past 12 months the numbers, especially for experienced social workers, have increased significantly in the partnership with almost 50% of the experienced social workers being recruited from agencies. Rising salaries for agency social workers over the past 12 months are putting increased pressures on budgets with a result of teams not being able to effort to fill all social work posts.
- **Step Up to Social Work** has proved to be a highly effective programme to ensure good quality practitioners are entering the profession. Over the past four years the programme produced 57 social workers. Currently there are 33 students to qualify in 2015 with the aim to have another cohort of approx. 30 students to start in 2016.

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- 5 of the 8 authorities have signed up for the new '**Frontline**' programme and are expecting to start their first cohort in September 2014.
- A comprehensive **CPD programme** to obtain the specialist skills required for front-line practice has been developed for practitioners at all levels of the social work career. This programme ensures that all social workers are trained to a certain standard across the partnership. It is envisaged that the new 2015/16 programme will make clear references to the Professional Capabilities Framework so social workers are clear how the individual sessions support any identified gaps.
All authorities are actively involved in rolling it out and also nominating social workers for the individual programmes.
- The WLA partnership was an early adopter of the **ASYE** programme in 2012 with the aim to raise professional standards of newly qualified social workers by supporting and enabling staff to model professional capabilities and standards across the partnership and both, children and adult service. Over the past four years the numbers of NQSW's increased by 83%. This significant increase is a result of the difficulty frontline services currently facing when trying to recruit experienced staff. Authorities have also noticed that increasingly social workers leaving their permanent posts after one or two years being qualified to join agencies.
- The WLA acknowledges the importance of statutory experience for student social workers and developed a Placement Guarantee for **student placements**, encouraging qualitative good final year students to apply for posts within west London once qualified.
Recruitment from placements has increased by 42% (37) over the past 4 years whilst overall placements have fallen by 28% (129) since 2010/11.
- **Operational benchmarking**
The partnership frequently compares a variety of numbers relating to staffing and salaries to monitor and analyse where social workers and team managers are recruited from, what level of experience they have and how authorities relate in terms of salaries.
- To better understand why social workers are leaving within the partnership a **WLA Exit Interview** was developed and implemented in April 2014. A recent report on these showed that the reasons for leaving do not appear to relate directly to workloads or to lack of opportunities. They relate more to a poor work/life balance including high level of stress, salaries, leavers wanting to broaden their experiences and lack of consultation and communication.

Conclusion

Whilst some progress was made between 2009 and 2013 with regards to recruitment and retention the current climate is different and presents a number of challenges to authorities in the partnership:

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- Increasingly complex casework combined with high caseloads lead to stress levels social workers find difficult to balance. A recent WLA exit interview report showed that 77 % of leavers across the partnership found it very difficult to manage their work/life balance.
- In frontline social work there is an increase in agency social workers combined with difficulties to recruit experienced social workers.
- Social workers leaving most in frontline services, and where retained will move within the authority to teams where the breadth of the complexity of cases is not as high.
- Authorities have seen steady rises in agency rates, especially for experienced social workers and managers.
- There is a rise in social workers with one or two years' experience leaving their permanent posts to join agencies on salaries an equivalent permanent post is not able to match.
- Compared with other services frontline teams have a relatively high numbers of social workers qualified for less than 24 months.

Strategy

To tackle the increased usage of **agencies social workers** which results in substantial financial pressure on services the board suggests for authorities to look instead into the possibility to increase the numbers of permanent social workers in teams and also an increase in salaries.

This strategy could decrease caseloads, reduce stress levels and combined with the benefits of being permanent may sway social workers not to leave for agencies.

Identify where we have significant gaps in our workforce for roles that are difficult to recruit to. We will develop a strategy to address how existing staff can be retained and developed through the development of succession planning systems. We will encourage staff to become qualified practice educators working with students to develop their mentoring and management skills.

Continue to develop our **CPD Programme** to ensure that it meets the training needs of our front-line workforce and is in line with the Professional capabilities Framework set out by the College of Social Work.

Measuring the Impact of CPD Programmes

With significant time, energy and budgets committed to the development of the west London CPD programme we are keen to develop a model that measures the impact on practice.

Develop an **impact evaluation** process that will capture practitioners and managers perceptions of their skill levels at the start and end of a module, and after a period of time after the session ended to ascertain if the skills and knowledge have been applied to practice and made a tangible difference to service users.