

Children's Social Care Workforce: Recruitment, retention and development

Practice and Principles

Introduction: Aims & Objectives

- A priority for NWADCS is to *support a resilient Children's Services workforce at all levels* including ensuring sustainable and effective recruitment, retention, and development of the children's social care workforce.
- Our aim is to showcase and advocate the work, energy, and innovation undertaken by local authorities, gathering collective knowledge into this Practice and Principles document to be disseminated across the region.
- We hope to reduce variability, identify areas for improvement, and share good practice to the benefit of the workforce and subsequently children and families.
- Finally, this document will seek to aid local authorities with the implementation of a children's social care workforce strategy and bring together allied workstreams including the region's response to the Independent Review of Children's Social Care and testing alternatives to use of commercial agencies for temporary social workers.



Context: Children's Social Care Workforce

"The greatest strength of the children's social care system lies in its workforce" (*Independent Children's Social Care Review 2022*).

- There has been a longstanding concern about the retention of experienced social workers in the sector. COVID-19 and the impact of the cost of living pressures have only increased these challenges, no longer contained to frontline roles with higher turnover rates observed within leadership roles.
- Workforce is high on the agenda within the whole of the public sector, including our partners health and police services. This will inevitably have a further impact on demand within children's social care including in key areas of rising concern, especially children and young people's mental health.
- It is widely recognised that workforce issues are systemic and therefore, to facilitate effective long term sustainable change, its likely that we will need national reform. An increasingly collaborative, sector-led approach whether locally or regionally should contribute to these efforts recognising there is no single solution.
- NWADCS have engaged with colleagues across the region to understand and develop ideas across the regional footprint and as a result, many of the findings of that consultation form the basis of this document.
- Reimagining CCSC Social Care discovery project revealed: *"The negativity and lack of public knowledge around their role not only made them question why they were in this job, but reluctant to even admit to being a children's social worker"*.

Principles: Key points



This document will be aligned with the following guiding principles.

- Strong organisational culture focused on relationships, values and inclusivity.
- Commitment from senior leaders – including local authority Chief Executives - to work with Department for Education and Social Work England to support and address workforce sufficiency within Children's Social Care.
- Workforce strategy to have a planned, resourced, and coordinated approach to recruitment, retention and development of a sufficient and high-quality workforce.
- Meaningful engagement with the workforce and children and families, to establish their views, ideas and challenges creating a feedback loop to ensure responses are informed by qualitative data.
- Strategic commitment to what matters most to the workforce “feeling valued and making a difference” – attentive to key enablers including manageable caseloads and clear responsibilities.
- Attractive pay and benefits packages including flexible working offer.
- Supportive workplace including reflective supervision and access to high quality peer support and development opportunities.



Organisational culture and leadership

Environment of trust and autonomous approach, for example enabling social workers to manage small amounts of money, flexible working, given permission to be creative and innovative. .

Organisational Culture : A sense of family, staff, feeling valued, seen, and heard are key indicator, meaningful and regular engagement activity. Social workers report that 'making a difference' is their key priority, the organisation is critical, in providing the environment in which social workers can flourish. which may link with a sense of home and dedicated office space.

Contributing Factors

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion:

Including development programmes such as Staff College BALI/Cultural Competence programme, NWADCS LeadHERship programme for WoC with Institute for Change and Disability and Inclusion staff groups.

Leadership:

Critical role including visibility amongst the workforce including: weekly e-mails, daily updates during Ofsted, Practice Weeks, shadowing, 'floor-walking' and learning circles are ways in which this can be achieved.

Reimagining project insight:

High performing areas talked very naturally about a 'family feel' to the social work workforce and how this was embedded over a long time in the organisational culture and memory...

Organisational Survey's and Leadership Programmes:

[SWORD Survey Research in Practice](#)

[Frontline Pathways Programme](#)

[LeadHERship Programme: Women of Colour](#)

[Supporting wellbeing remotely: Leaders' Briefing \(2021\) | Research in Practice](#)



Workforce Strategy, Collaboration and Voice

Local Authorities told us that oversight and input from Chief Exec team, and wider council senior management, which includes both Children's and Adults is critical to the development and implementation of a workforce strategy document. However, key partners including Senior Management (Council and Children's), Workforce Development and HR colleagues are key to driving the action plan forwards. Consideration is also being given the Local Authorities working together on a regional basis to develop a strategy and MOU to respond to the workforce challenges, this has include Chief Exec and DCS collaboration. *(See London pledge below)*

An important aspect that must feed into any workforce strategy is the voice of the workforce with children and families in mind. This document has made use of survey's undertake by the Reimaging CSC Workforce, Independent Review and BASW survey's to reflect a workforce voice.

The following slides, will include insights into the various strands to be considered as part of the workforce strategy from insights gathered in consultation with the NW region. Much of the focus of this P&P will focus on the recruitment and retaining 'more' social workers. However, it might also be worth considering, that 'more' may not be the only answer, but solutions may also lie in the wider workforce. Therefore, thinking about the matrix of staff and what we need in terms of skills and knowledge may also help workforce pressures, as well as outcomes for children and families. The innovation Model, Family Safeguarding may be one example of that.

Knowsley

The workforce sufficiency strategy document; *supports the development of a coherent, detailed overview and action plan across for the Local Authority.*

It is has commitment and oversight from Chief Executive and is *jointly produced by Children's and Adult Social Care.*

They have recruited an operational post to drive the action plan forwards.



Recruitment: Communication and marketing

- Building relationships with schools, colleges, and Universities - raising awareness of the social care sector, and highlighting the pathways into the sector is a growing line of operational practice within LA's. Consideration may be given to reaching those on related degrees, (many of the Frontline and Step Up social work students, have undertaken first degrees).
- Harnessing the opportunities of social media - utilising 'community of care' to communicate with the public and potential candidates, involving practitioners in communication and marketing campaigns.
- Use of recruitment events – considering both virtual and in person opportunities, make the most of opportunities to reduce requirements during application processes including through 'on the day' interviews.
- Effective targeting – establishing a connection between your workforce and your communities through communications activity. Findings from our *Reimagining* project noted 80% of permanent social workers live within 20 miles of their employing local authority.

Insights

- 30% of social workers applied due to team/manager
- Examples of a dedicated recruitment platforms <https://www.childrensocialworkmatters.org>
- [Young People in Health and Social Care Workforce](#)



Recruitment: Entry Routes

- Consider all entry routes in children's social care - provide a diverse mix including Frontline, Step Up and Apprenticeship programmes as well as traditional higher education and statutory placements.
- Explore specific mechanisms to bridge the gap between final placement and the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) such as guaranteed employment before the end of placement.
- Local Authorities report some success of converting agency into permanent roles – do you have a specific mechanism to quickly support this?
- The Independent Children's Social Care Review reported that 77% of social workers leaving permanent employment are leaving the sector all together - consider your approach to a 'return to social work programme'
- Overseas recruitment is an area in which many Local Authorities are exploring for the first time.
- In terms of regional collaboration, some Local Authorities hope to foster an enhanced offer of support, through seconding staff to other Local Authorities.

Resources

[Tripod Partners Recruitment | London and Luton](#)

[Nottinghamshire County Council - what are the different routes into social work?](#)



Recruitment: Processes

Human Resource services and systems are key in promoting effective recruitment

- Review your local processes and identify blockages – do approvals to advertise posts, burdens on frontline managers or other factors cause delay?
- Streamline applications - consider shorter application forms, on the day interviews and assessment days and consider offers to all applicants who meet required standards during interview.
- Resilience in recruitment – acknowledge the realities of turnover and retention challenges, consider an ‘always on’ approach to recruitment through rolling application programmes and ‘over establishment’ recruitment
- Review local recruitment incentives – adopt a cautious approach to use of ‘golden hellos’ with experience of HR services in the region demonstrating limited evidence of effectiveness in recruitment. These may be most effective deployed to incentivise conversion from agency to permanent roles.
- Use authentic local voices – involving frontline practitioners and children and families in the recruitment process is regarded positively in the region.
- Getting references right – ensure a robust and timely references process with some local authorities report simple steps such as contacting former employers by telephone.



Recruitment: Local authority insights

A local recruitment process

- Utilise virtual recruitment events, to showcase specific roles, and general vacancies, and have included representation from the service areas at those, so prospective applicants can hear specifics rather than talking about Wigan generally.
- Consulted with our staff to ask them what is good about working in Wigan, so we could be confident our staff were behind our campaign.
- Featured their own staff in our images for our recruitment campaign so they were genuine.
- Send a new starter pack to new employees before they join us.
- Worked closely with comms to have a presence on Linked in, Twitter and Facebook.

Principal Social Worker, Wigan

"We streamlined our recruitment process requiring CV only. Applicants will also hear back within 24hrs. Following which, they are invited to an assessment centre, (run weekly), soon after."

Values based recruitment: Is based on 'showing us' and demonstrating values and behaviours, with a focus on softer skills. Moving to group interviews enabled us to do this.

HR Strategic Business Manager,
Manchester





'Making a Difference' and Recognition

- Social workers reported that 'making a difference' is the key determining factor that influences them remaining in their role. Therefore, providing an environment that enables workers to have a sense of pride and achievement is critical to retention.
- This could include growing and developing which encompasses a sense of having the skills to do the job. This could be achieved within in-house development and training in methods such systemic, restorative practice and motivational interviewing.
- Organisational Opportunities: Practice Week, Learning Circles are also ways in which learning can be facilitated more directly internally and highlight good practice. Alternative ways of making a difference could include engaging in research and innovation projects.
- Do you seek feedback from children and families and partners to inform recognition processes/feedback into supervision, for example in the form of check in's with family at significant points, i.e. on closure. (making a difference feedback loop)
- Do you hold celebration events and nominate staff for nationals awards, i.e LGC and MJ and undertake 'shout out'/newsletter from SLT to practitioners, highlighting good practice. *How do you make space for recognition within team meetings?*

*Reimagining
Children's Social
Care Workforce
project insight:*

"The social workers we heard from stressed the importance of making a difference to the lives of families, and their need to deliver meaningful work."

Insights

- "To support the Early Career Framework, the Department of Education should work with an independent pay review body of experts, to set and introduce national pay scales which better recognise and reward the development of expertise. *Independent Review of Children's Social Care*
- Capacity Findings: 69% report that they can access the training they need to do my best work.
- Staff reported that they wanted "...managers [who] know how to praise staff to increase morale, not just criticise."



Retention: Pay and Benefits

Pay, Terms and Conditions have the capacity to both attract and retain...

- Retention payments and market supplements – broadly two types including ‘market supplement’ approach generally non-pensionable additional payments that can be withdrawn, but not ‘recovered’. Use of ‘golden handcuffs’ – this is a payment for each year for a set period and may be recovered if an employee leaves before that time period.
- Removing disincentives to retention – offering non-salary benefits including through reimbursement of professional fees, car parking, bridge/tunnel tolls and costs associated with checks by Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS).
- In-house paid opportunities - commonly used for out of hours and residential services. Some LAs are also offered offering opportunity for overtime. As with more established mechanisms like Emergency Duty Team (EDT)/Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) roles, this requires effective monitoring and management of workload and hours.

Reimagining project insight:

“If you’re doing just enough, you might as well do that for more money”.

Pay was chosen as the **top reason (48%)** a social worker would consider **leaving** their current employer. Especially, when other aspects of the role become more challenging, such as the **staff morale**





Retention: Terms and Conditions

Ensuring permanent positions with local authorities are competitive and remain attractive is a key factor in retaining talent into the sector. When surveyed, only 39% of social workers believe their benefits package is equal or better to what is offered by similar employers, with a similar proportion responding they could secure more favourable benefits elsewhere.

The variability in the value of benefits has been challenged and consideration may be given to a enhanced bespoke offer, to considers that colleagues need are changeable over time. For example, sometimes they want the flexibility for further study, or family life, other times it might be the offer of an extended leave to travel.

Common terms, conditions and benefits reported include

- Annual Leave – consider both the introduction and removal of mandatory unpaid annual leave carefully. Work with staff to ensure mutual benefit from parental leave and extended leave.
- Alternative working patterns – use of regular alternative working patterns such as 9 day fortnights can be a meaningful way to offer genuine flexibility.
- Flexible/hybrid working – strike a balance between the importance of flexibility with the need for teams to engage in person. Consider ‘team days’ in the office or an agreed balance of days in eachh week.
- Transport - car user allowances and free parking remain valued as incentives.
- Pensions – *Reimagining project* identified pensions as a valued benefit by 59%, a recognition that different benefits may only be appealing in some life circumstances.

Opportunities to make flexibility a reality

Offer part-time or alternative working patterns for vacancies

Protected day for teams to take recurring flexi/TOIL

Career break opportunities, including extended leave

Hybrid and home working.



Retention: Workload and Hours

“Caseloads are king” - there is a clear link between retention and caseloads. Social workers regularly work an additional 10 hours a week (BASW survey). While many local authorities take measures to ensure social workers can use TOIL, as a sector, it appears that to undertake hours outside of your contract, has become normalised.

- Manageable caseloads – consider better utilising data to establish a baseline to compare, evaluate and improve. Seek to understand the impact, including on retention rates, of where protected caseloads are already used for ASYE and and Senior Practitioners.
- Complexity – with many social workers reporting that average caseloads don't reflect the true picture due to an increase in complexity, consider how capacity for effective relational can be utilised best.
- ‘Tools to do the job’ – understand and respond to concerns raised by social workers if they report duplication or delay due to issues with case management systems or poor ICT.
- Administrative support - the amount of administration required, often requiring time consuming systems and processes, can further negatively impact on social workers.
- Alternatively qualified practitioners – mirroring some of the findings of the Independent Review of Children's Social Care, local authorities are increasingly deploying other practitioners to ensure social workers are better enabled to focus on their role.

44% report an impact on work life balance.

“By far, when asked how if there are some things your employer are doing that are not so great for you in your role, the most frequent response was around workload and the expectation to work all hours needed”
Reimagining project



Development: Supervision and Support

Supervision and support with both the professional and emotional demands of the role is widely accepted as critical. Our social workers, continue to tell us that psychological support is an important part of the offer within the workplace.

Do you collect data on timely supervision and under quality assurance activity to reflect the importance of supervision in your organisation?

- Effective management oversight, support with decision making within reflective supervision. Some LA's offer additional reflective supervision from a specialist service or workforce development team. Children's social care works with potentially dangerous situations and so checking decisions and providing a second opinion is important. When done well, social workers describe feeling supported to hold risk. However, audits can easily become compliance checks rather than a meaningful consideration of practice. (*Independent Care Review*).
- Local Authorities provide protected peer spaces in different ways, including 'pod reflect' sessions, (as part of systemic practice), learning circles and consultations.
- Clinical Supervision is also being incorporated, on a 1.1 basis or with teams to explore the psychological and emotional impact of the work, which could mitigate against vicarious trauma. Coaching and/mentoring to provide individualised support.
- Holistic Therapies: lunchtime yoga/massage offer, walking and exercise groups could be offered to support general self care.

Research in Practice
Resources

Virtual Supervision
[Virtual supervision: A supervisors perspective](#)
| [Research in Practice](#)

Reflective Supervision
[Reflective supervision](#) |
[Research in Practice](#)

[Supporting practitioner wellbeing: Practice Guide \(2022\)](#) | [Research in Practice](#)

Reimagining Children's Social Care Workforce Insights

- 42% report a poor relationship with manager, team, or employer led to them leaving for an agency role.
- 58% report that supervision 'helps me to improve my practice'.

Development: Training and Progression



Development and progression are key to retention within the workforce, it is widely accepted that within Children's Social Care the limited progression and development opportunities other than management opportunities.

- Many LA's are developing a bespoke development offer for AYSE's, in some cases being extended to NQSW's in Year 2 and 3.
- A clear and visible development programme from AYSE to experienced social workers and leaders could support more proactive conversations in regards to career aspirations and development.
- Progression - including opportunities to enable staff to progress as well as stay attached to front line work. These roles may include, Advanced Practice, Practice Improvement roles (e.g. Lancashire), Practice Educators, Principle Social Worker rather than service leadership, or Pan Children's Services roles such as routes like Designated Social Care Officer (DSCO) for SEND.
- Opportunities for specialism/different experience, this could include internal secondment, or opportunities for shadowing. Tension between multiple demands/narrowed experience were reported by the workforce in the Reimagining CSC findings.
- Manchester employ a 'learning organisation' culture – for example 'wise Wednesday' are protected time for team reflection. They also support, facilitate and contribute financially to the development of experienced social workers, undertake Post qualifying and PhD / Leadership and Management courses, which is mutually beneficial as the learning is brought back into the LA.

Reimagining Children's Social Care Workforce Insights

- Not surprisingly, 79% responded that career progression was important to them.
- 46% moved to progress with only 45% believing there opportunities within their local authority.



Development: Salford ASYE Academy

The primary aim of the ASYE Academy is to create an environment for newly qualified social workers in which they can make the transition from student to qualified social worker.

The Academy Principles:

- A 'nursery' for ASYE's – support that is bespoke and flexible to the individual as they progress.
- Thorough and intensive support is provided within the Academy team. There is a whole service approach to the supportive offer, for example senior leadership also complete skills sessions such as analytical writing.
- Close observation and supervision, enables thorough assessment of needs and gaps in newly qualified social workers, but equally enables a matching process as they move out to their permanent post.
- ASYE's will be supported and assessed at review points, alongside the panel which is attended and chaired by an independent academic social work colleague.
- Continuity of support is maintained following ASYE's as they are provided with ongoing reflective supervision.
- Salford have noted that impact of the ASYE Academy on the wider workforce, they are retaining ASYE's, as well as, enabling a reduction of caseloads across the service, which supports the wider retention strategy.

"I have received a lot of support from ASW / Manager during my time in the academy, where I have co-worked cases with my assigned ASW. At times my cases have been complex, where regular supervision and 1-1 reflective sessions on the concerns have been very useful".

"Big strength of the Academy is that you join as a cohort. I moved from a different local authority so found it really helpful in having a cohort to join; this was useful in feeling more integrated, being able to learn from one another as we all had different experiences, having more support from the ASYEs, and as I have progressed through my ASYE it has been beneficial to have more people in this local authority that I have been able to build working relationships with from the start outside of my CPCIN team".



Feedback

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