

Local Government Association (LGA)

Westminster Hall debate on the contribution to society of social workers

House of Commons

13 March 2018



Key messages

- Good social work can transform people's lives and protect them from harm. In order to achieve consistently high quality outcomes for children, young people and their carers, social workers must have and maintain the skills and knowledge to establish effective relationships with children, adults and families, and professionals in a range of agencies.
- Helping children and young people to fulfil their potential is a key ambition of all councils, but our children's services are under increasing pressure. Facing a funding gap of around £2 billion by 2020, demand for these services has also increased dramatically. On average, 90 children entered care every day last year, which also saw the largest annual increase in care numbers since 2010.¹
- Councils seek to support children to continue to live with their families where possible through family-based support and early intervention. Over the past decade, the number of children on child protection plans has increased by 83 per cent, compared to an increase of 21 per cent in the number of children in care.²
- Through the Return to Social Work programme we are offering free training to prepare former social workers to return to their careers in London, the West Midlands and the East of England. We are working with the Government to find ways to continue supporting the recruitment and retention of social workers in the next financial year.
- The LGA is part of the Social Work England Advisory Group and has been supporting calls for SWE to use its remit over qualifications to ensure that providers of social work courses work with employers to improve the quality and relevance of courses. It is important that the right forms of continuing professional development are available throughout social workers' careers.

Briefing

Background

Good social work can transform people's lives and protect them from harm. In order to achieve consistently high quality outcomes for children, young people and their carers, social workers must have and maintain the skills and knowledge to establish effective relationships with children, adults and families, professionals in a range of agencies.

¹https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/LGA_Bright%20Futures%20key%20stats%20and%20summary_November%202017.pdf

² Ibid.

Rising demand

The Department for Education's most recent figures show there were 72,670 children in care in England on 31 March 2017. Of these, 53,420 were cared for in a foster placement, including 8,830 placed with family or friends. 2,520 were placed for adoption, representing 3 per cent of all looked-after children.³

There are a wide range of care options available for children and different placements will work for different children. Social workers must always look for the best solution to meet the specific needs of individual children. Although adoption may provide a stable and caring home for many children and young people, the importance of fostering, residential care or special guardianship arrangements should not be downplayed.

A significant proportion of children will return to their families after a period in care, and a range of agencies will work with children and their families to help make this possible. 31,250 children ceased to be looked after during the year ending 31 March 2017.⁴ Of these, 32 per cent (9,980) returned home to live with parents or relatives, while 14 per cent (4,350) were adopted and 11 per cent (3,690) were placed in a special guardianship arrangement.

Funding pressure

Helping children and young people to fulfil their potential is a key ambition of all councils, but our children's services are under increasing pressure.. Despite measures in the Autumn Budget and the Local Government Finance Settlement, the funding gap facing children's services still stands at around £2 billion.

Councils have worked hard to protect budgets for essential child protection services, but funding pressures have led to difficult decisions elsewhere, often leaving children and young people unable to access support until they reach crisis point. Government funding for the Early Intervention Grant has been cut by almost £500 million since 2013. It is projected to drop by a further £183 million by 2020.⁵

Return to Social Work

Figures show there were 5,540 vacancies for child and family social workers in 2016, almost 13 per cent of the workforce.⁶ The vacancy rate for adults' social workers sat at 11 per cent in 2016.

Through the Return to Social Work (RTSW) programme we are offering free training to prepare former social workers to return to their careers in London, the West Midlands and the East of England.⁷ It comprises of 12 weeks of high quality training with hands-on work placements, coaching and mentoring. It follows the LGA's Come Back to Social Work campaign, which retrained 30 experienced social workers from adults' and children and families' social work in 2016-17.

³ Department for Education, *Children looked after in England, 2014 to 2015*. For further information, please see: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2014-to-2015>

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⁵ LGA, *Bright Futures*, https://www.local.gov.uk/sites/default/files/documents/LGA_Bright%20Futures%20key%20stats%20and%20summary_November%202017.pdf

⁶ National Minimum Dataset for Social Care <https://data.gov.uk/dataset/nmdssc>

⁷ <https://www.local.gov.uk/return-to-social-work>

Return to Social Work was open to qualified social workers with a minimum of two years' experience who have been out of the field for no more than five years. The deadline for applications was November 2017. The current RTSW programme will be completed in April and increase the pool of candidates for councils to recruit from within the three selected regions.

The Government Equalities Office have asked the LGA to bid for funding to run further Return to Social Work Programmes in the next financial year. The LGA are also part of a stakeholder group, led by the Department of Health and Social Care, to explore running a national campaign for social work to raise the value and profile of the profession and help recruitment and retention.

Social Work England

The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) currently regulates social workers in England alongside 15 other professions including art therapists and paramedics. The Children and Social Work Act 2017 sets out the broad legal framework for a new regulator, Social Work England, but much of the detail of the legal framework is to be set out in regulations.

It is intended that Social Work England will maintain a single register of social workers in England and set professional standards which individuals must meet as a condition of registration. Although SWE becomes a legal entity this year, it will not take full regulatory responsibility until next year.

The LGA is part of the Social Work England Advisory Group and has been supporting calls to give SWE a clear role in sector improvement, not just registration. This improvement role must be developed with key stakeholders such as LGA and should involve SWE using its remit over qualifications to ensure that providers of social work courses work with employers to improve the quality and relevance of courses. SWE can also have a role in ensuring that the right forms of continuing professional development are available throughout social workers' careers.

A clear timetable for the transition to SWE from HCPC should be set out as soon as possible for the benefit of social workers because of potential anxieties about personal records. As soon as the chair of SWE is in place they should take the opportunity to talk to employers about their requirements from the new system in order to ensure that registration does not put off potential social workers as well as experienced people who have left the profession but might consider returning; registration needs to be used to enhance recruitment not make it more difficult.