



Exploring How Flexible Job Design can drive the Retention, Recruitment and Performance of Social Workers

Summary report from a partnership event from Timewise and Skills for Care July 2016

Background

Taking forward the opportunities provided through integration and reforms in social work practice requires us all to think differently about how we support and organise social work resources to maximise their contribution and improve our resilience at organisation, place and regional levels.

The approach will be to improve flexibility within our services, considering the following three dimensions:

- Tasks (how processes, assessment, actions and monitoring are designed to support outcomes, integrated working gains, early support and smart task allocation, technology benefits)
- Place (locality integration of all resources, sharing expertise and capacity at area/subregion/regional level, mobility of resources, improved peer support, improved CPD/career development pathways); and
- Time (improved matching of resource and expertise to service demand, time utilisation, client contact, team contact).

This workshop was run to explore new ways of working in social work, specifically whether adapting to time, place and task based flexibility could improve the retention, recruitment and performance of experienced social workers. Attendees heard the latest insights on developing new ways of working for children's social work that will improve the resilience and performance of this vital service.

Context

Staff information, local and national research indicates that improving opportunities to work more flexibly, and promoting these at the point of hire, could have a real impact on improving retention and recruitment of social workers.

What we know about the challenges within social work that relate to flexible working.....

- The profession has a relatively high proportion of female staff, many of whom have their own caring responsibilities
- There is a relatively low proportion of part time, job share and other 'less than FTE' arrangements,
- Social workers, as standard work high levels of additional hours above the standard working week,
- Leavers indicate a lack of work life balance as an important factor. A survey of 2100 social workers found that 49% cited better work/life balance as a reason to leave (48% cited pay) Community Care analysis 2014



- The profession requires 'Non-standard' patterns of service demand, with peaks and troughs and the standard 9-5 employment contract has not been revised to adjust to how, when and where work gets done
- Frontline social workers complain of frustration with the proportion of time consumed by 'administrative' tasks, limiting flexibility on location and task.
- There is a shortage of qualified and experienced social workers.

What we know about the value of flexible working to employees and candidates....

- 8.7 million UK workers currently working full-time and non-flexibly would like to work flexibly [Timewise 2014 A flexible future for Britain?]
- 77% of flexible workers feel trapped in their current role [Timewise 2013 The Flexibility Trap]
- 1.9m workers overqualified and underutilised in low paid part time jobs [Timewise 2015 Improving Business performance and raising living standards]
- 63% of women returners surveyed by Timewise wanted to find a new part time job (*survey by Timewise with 1,968 women who had taken a career break for over a year*)

What we know about flexible working and recruitment....

- Over 8 million people already work flexibly, and a further 6 million people want to. That's 47% of the UK workforce, and many of these people will ONLY apply for a job that offers flexibility.
- Yet, beyond entry level jobs, people are competing for a handful of vacancies. Only 8.7% of jobs paid over £20K FTE are advertised as being open to flexible working options.
- The lack of flexible jobs is inhibiting job mobility. People are being 'locked out' of the chance to progress their careers and salaries, and employers are not tapping into their skills.
- 1.5 million people are currently trapped in part time jobs below their skill/salary level, because there are not enough quality flexible jobs to apply for. They have traded salary for flexibility, and their skills are going to waste.

Key Learning Points

The Timewise workshop was delivered in three parts

Building Insight

Timewise delivered a presentation to build insight on

- Understanding Flexible Job Design as a tool to drive performance
- Understanding Flexible Hiring to aid the recruitment and retention of key skills & talent
- Emerging good practice: learning points from other sectors with comparable issues

The full powerpoint is attached to this report as an appendix.

Review opportunities for flexible job design and hiring within social work

Participants were tasked with splitting into four groups to review opportunities for flexible job design across four components, with a view to scoping opportunities to build in greater flexibility to roles to aid recruitment, retention and enhance work/life balance, without compromising on service delivery.

Time

Considerations included: when does work need to be done, what are the peaks and troughs, what are the expectations for speed of response, where are there opportunities for job splitting to facilitate part time or job shares, what are the specific service requirements in terms of contactability vs availability

Location

Considerations included: when is office presence required, and when can home working be acceptable, how can outputs be measured, what is the expectation for *presence* or *contactability*, how is technology being used, how does the team manage communications?

Task

Considerations included: what are the fixed-volume tasks vs variable elements, is there scope to rotate tasks to minimise burn out, where else might the work go...delegating up, down or sideways, is there scope for task rotation across regions/teams, could a team based approach be used to schedule work differently.

Recruitment

Considerations included: who do you want to attract, do they need flexibility, if you were to offer flexibility what would you need to change in your recruitment process, who would need to be involved, where is there scope for building an alumni network?

Feedback from Participants

Below is a summary of feedback and discussion points raised by participants in the workshop with Skills for Care and also a previous workshop held with NW Employers and LGA.

Time

- There is scope to enhance better client servicing by adapting to a more flexible approach to how, when and where social workers work is done
- Contracted hours are still usually between 8.30am-5.30pm and out of hours activity is not always taken into account eg home visits often take place at 8pm
- Early intervention teams need to work evening and weekends. There is a need to adjust the standard hours contract to reflect this
- Need to be clearer on ratio of time required for 'on call' vs fixed
- Scope to consider 'blocked time' within hourly contracted hours to allow for evenings or non-standard hours. ie reserve 10% time in lieu, as opposed to banking 'time off in lieu' that can never be taken
- Consider contracts for 11am-7pm not 9-5 as alternative option
- There is a lack of 'protected time' to get administrative work done eg court reports
- Scope to pre-plan peaks and troughs in demand. option to map this and then review contracts/hours worked as a trial adjustment
- Need to adjust within the week eg if worked late then need to review expectation to come in at 9am following morning. Risk of exhaustion/under-performance/mistakes
- Scope to look at 'locked down' week ie maybe every one in eight for just office based catch up or CPD.

Location

- There is a culture of presenteeism – which according to CIPD research, costs twice as much as absenteeism.

- Confidentiality issues mean that there are limits on how much work can be done remotely
- Social workers need a safe space to 'come back to' and de-brief
- Value in exploring clear 'work from home days'
- If more place based and remote working was allowed there may be less requests for part time hours
- Business case is reduced sickness levels. Evidenced in other sectors
- There is a need to capacity build how to manage remote teams, and how to ensure they get support, are connected and are trusted
- Need to better support lone working
- Question – how is contact made? Where do people need to be
- Scope to explore sub regional partnerships

Task

- Assessing risk is key
- Limitations with splitting or redesigning tasks as some are statutory and have clear parameters
- Scope to map out what these are vs other tasks to explore in more detail when, where, how redesign options
- Opportunities to explore task rotation to alleviate pressures but challenge is who backfills the frontline functions

Recruitment

- We are a long way off adapting recruitment practices to be open to flexible working from day one as many teams still not able to work flexibly as it is
- Will require leadership change to review options to flexibility at point of hire. Need to educate members on benefits of flexibility and address concerns re risk
- There is a need to better understand parameters for flexible job redesign first, trial it within a team, department, locality, region, then once worked to be clear on flexibility options that can be accommodated for new recruits
- Need to be clear who we want to attract. May not want returners even if the roles can be advertised flexibly. Important to understand reasons for leaving
- Some Timewise Councils are already trialling a new approach within recruitment eg Islington
- Scope for exploring an alumni/leavers network to tap into, learning from other sectors developing women returners programmes
- We don't sell the profession or local authorities well enough as employers of choice. More important now as candidate driven market
- Existing recruitment processes take too long and are clunky. These need to be reviewed alongside any trials

Emerging practice within social work

The following have, through Timewise's consultation with our network, been identified as initiatives being undertaken elsewhere to enhance retention.

- Wiltshire CC: promising an 18 maximum caseload to new recruits
- East Sussex: offering mindfulness and career breaks for experienced social workers
- Coventry: 'Do it for Daniel' targeted recruitment campaign

- Catch 22 pilot in Cheshire: different team based approach with one social worker and family support workers team working with 80 children. Dfe 'Project Crew'
- Wigan: trialling multi team place based approach
- Local Government Association: 'Return to Social Work' campaign to be launched this year. Current resources for social work teams include a media guide and case studies of good workforce practice on the LGA website.

Key themes emerging: opportunities for change

A number of potential tactics emerged at the end of the workshop that participants felt would be worth pursuing

- **Job redesign:** There is scope within the current social worker role to adapt working patterns based on where, when and how work is done. A few options were felt to be worth exploring further:
 - analysis of split between fixed place and fixed time tasks to identify specific elements that could be 'flexed' to improve how work is managed, and ultimately enhance work/life balance whilst not compromising service. Such an approach to test adaptations to flexible working, would also need to take into consideration the risk factors involved, such as maintaining continuity of service with a child, OFSTED issues, confidentiality, and requirements for secure IT systems.
 - Identify 'champions' who are already operating in a more flexible way and promote internally
- **Team modelling:** there is scope to explore how to enhance team approach to building greater flexibility into how work is done. Elements to assess include substitutability eg where other team members can substitute for certain tasks with each other either ad hoc or on a more formal task rotation basis to backfill others who need a break from the frontline. This will involve mapping roles within teams, and reviewing in context of alignment to health.
 - Planned supervision needs to be reviewed if teams are working more remotely
 - A planned pilot should involve both OD, service leads and frontline workers to truly understand the operational issues
- **Leadership engagement:** there is a need to engage both members and Services Directors in the potential benefits of reviewing flexible job design and trialling one or two options.
 - A clear business case needs to be made, in order to support investment in a focused pilot and capacity building of teams to make it work.
 - Each organisation will have a slightly different 'Burning Platform' and HR and OD teams looking to propose a new approach need to frame within this organisational context
- **Flexible Hiring:** there is an opportunity for organisations that are embracing flexible working to look at adapting their recruitment processes. This will require several key tactics
 - Clear briefing to hiring managers from HR /resourcing teams to prompt a discussion on hours and location at the start of the hiring process
 - Clear articulation in job vacancy advertising that flexible working patterns will be considered
 - Case studies of existing staff working flexibly as part of any recruitment microsites etc to encourage applicants to see the cultural value placed on flexibility



Next steps

There are a range of existing resources and good practice examples available to support participating organisations wanting to trial a new approach to flexible working and hiring.

Timewise offers a range of advisory and training services, and has many examples of good practice from both local authorities and other sectors on our website www.timewise.co.uk
For further details please contact emma.stewart@timewisefoundation.org.uk

Should any organisations be open to flexible hiring we also offer the opportunity to promote and champion your approach through our national campaign www.hiremyway.org.uk
For further details and to find out how to get involved contact Daniela.Marchesi@timewise.co.uk