

A paper for consultation & comment

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HR's role in transforming Social Work delivery

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INTRODUCTION /

HR's role in transforming Social Work delivery

Many professionals play a vital part in keeping children and vulnerable adults safe. Alongside police officers, doctors, teachers and nurses, social workers play a critical role in this responsibility. This is why finding, developing and retaining social workers with the right skills and experience is so essential.

Recently the Local Government Association, published a report, 'Social Work: a toolkit for social workers and employers', which provided advice on how best to recruit and retain social workers, how to engage local media and how to implement the refreshed Employer Standards. The report identified the key issues for social workers, and suggested solutions to the retention and recruitment challenges facing councils.

To build on the success of this report, the then PPMA President, Louise Tibbert, canvassed HR professionals across Local Government. We invited HR teams and senior stakeholders were invited from a number of local authorities to discuss what are the HR issues around social work and what 'excellence' looks like. From this, we set out to develop a set of aspirations for HR practitioners working in this area for the first time.

This paper summarises the discussions and provides practical tips and advice. Since then, I am pleased to say that a few regions have also adopted the Memoranda of Understanding which have incorporated aspects of this guide.

A special thanks go to TMP for publishing the guide. TMP have a wealth of expertise in the recruitment to social worker positions, their expertise in contributing to the guide is much appreciated.

I am sure the booklet will assist HR professionals in managing the social care workforce effectively.



A white, stylized handwritten signature of Barry Pirie, consisting of a large, looped 'B' followed by a horizontal line.

Barry Pirie – President PPMA

THE STANDARDS FOR EMPLOYERS AT A GLANCE /

1. Clear Social Work Accountability Framework:

Employers should have in place a clear social work accountability framework informed by knowledge of good social work practice and the experience and expertise of service users, carers and practitioners.

2. Effective Workforce Planning:

Employers should use effective workforce planning systems to make sure that the right number of social workers, with the right level of skills and experience, are available to meet current and future service demands.

3. Safe Workloads and Case Allocation:

Employers should ensure social workers have safe and manageable workloads.

4. Managing Risks and Resources:

Employers should ensure that social workers can do their jobs safely and have the practical tools and resources they need to practice effectively. Assess risks and take action to minimise and prevent them.

5. Effective and Appropriate Supervision:

Employers should ensure that social workers have regular and appropriate social work supervision.

6. Continuing Professional Development:

Employers should provide opportunities for effective continuing professional development, as well as access to research and relevant knowledge.

7. Professional Registration:

Employers should ensure social workers can maintain their professional registration.

8. Effective Partnerships:

Employers should establish effective partnerships with higher education institutions and other organisations to support the delivery of social work education and continuing professional development.

As the standards say, good social work can transform people's lives and protect them from harm. The standards set out the shared core expectations of employers which will enable social workers in all employment settings to work effectively. For HR professionals to translate these ambitions into actions they need to consider the following questions:

What does 'excellence' in supporting social work mean for HR?

- Focus on what HR could be doing to support social work outcomes
- HR should be advisors, not just facilitators – providing challenge and standing up for best practice
- Understanding the potential hurdles when recruiting, e.g. avoiding clunky recruitment processes
- Have a consistent approach

Having identified the behaviours our respondents believed HR should be modelling excellence, we wanted to establish how HR could provide this support in practice. It was clear from the answers that 'buy in' from the whole organisation is vital:

- Supporting/championing new and innovative delivery models – for example at Hertfordshire they're trialling a new model for social work delivery bringing together multi-disciplinary teams to share expertise and improve outcomes for families by reducing bureaucracy and paperwork
- Recognising and rewarding good practice is really essential to help social workers feel valued – for example at Hertfordshire we have the Children's social worker awards which take place every year on national social work day in March.

Hertfordshire has also introduced two initiatives that have had a significant impact on the recruitment and retention of social workers:

- 1) Hertfordshire was the first authority in the country to launch an academy for children's social workers in 2009. Since then it has helped almost 200 newly-qualified social workers embark on their careers by supporting them through their first year of practice. It provides them with a high level of supervision and guidance, combined with reduced caseloads, so that they develop the essential skills and confidence they need.
- 2) In 2014 Hertfordshire launched its first Children's Services Leadership Academy specifically targeted at aspiring social work managers and leaders. 28 delegates have completed the programme so far and early feedback from the participant's managers indicates that the programme has not only inspired the participants but that in turn the participants are revitalising their teams. Participants reported feeling more confident, resilient and engaged as a result of attending the programme and several have already been promoted into team manager roles.

How can HR provide that support?

- Get buy-in from the ‘top down’ – ensuring that senior management are fully conversant with and committed to supporting plans to address the people issues
- Gain buy-in from the Recruiting Line Managers to ensure they understand the added value HR provides and seek their advice
- Maintain high standards and ensure quality and range of appropriate recruitment processes, e.g. Assessment Centres
- Share and promote ‘best practice’ with the organisation
- Support engagement and recognition of duty of care with candidates and employees
- Develop the right business models for each council to support effective recruitment and retention. Some authorities – such as Gloucestershire – have created a role for a dedicated Recruitment and Retention Manager, who provides a focussed conduit between the business and HR.

Others have brought the responsibility back to HR/handle centrally rather than be devolved, as in Norfolk CC

- Ensure that service managers engage effectively during recruitment processes with their potential future colleagues
- Embrace the challenge and change, understand the future of the service

Regional Memorandum of Understanding

- Many regions are developing agreements to collaborate on managing social worker pay and other processes such as referencing and sharing data. HR have a vital role to play in promoting these to establish regional approaches to managing the social worker workforce.

To fully support the new standards, HR teams will have to bring knowledge and experience. What's more, they'll need to learn, from experience, from the organisation, and from each other. We asked where this 'institutional knowledge' people management practice could be found in:

Has HR refined the approach to competencies and geared them to social work?

- Does HR need a better understanding of social work?
- Should HR take more of a lead on ensuring effective supervision, service provision, workforce planning; while social work managers focus on service delivery?
- Has HR developed the right incentives for a social work workforce?
- Does HR produce the right management information: vacancy rates, retention figures, exit interview details, copies of appraisals, engagement plans, crisis management, recruitment plans, marketing plans, etc.?
- Is there still too much 'personnel' work, not enough HR practice?
- Is HR expert on the modern world of recruitment and use of digital and social media?
- Does assessment focus on values based recruitment?

As well as focusing on best practice, we wanted to establish whether HR was perceived as understanding the unique pressures of social work. There are many examples of great partnership working between HR & Social Work teams, and we identified a number of challenges, and suggested areas for enhancement:

How HR Professionals can rise to the challenge:

- Are HR sufficiently aware of different delivery models?
- How can HR be proactive?
- How well does HR innovate and demonstrate added value?
- Is HR providing coaching or guidance on best practice?
- Is HR aware of and addressing poor management practices?
- Has HR refined the approach to competencies and geared them to social work?
- Does HR need a better understanding of social work?
- Should HR take more of a lead on ensuring effective supervision, service provision, workforce planning; while social work managers focus on service delivery?
- Has HR developed the right incentives for a social work workforce?
- Does HR produce the right management information: vacancy rates, retention figures, exit interview details, copies of appraisals, engagement plans, crisis management, recruitment plans, marketing plans, etc.?
- Is there still too much 'personnel' work, not enough HR practice?
- Is HR expert on the modern world of recruitment and use of digital and social media?
- Does assessment focus on values based recruitment? Are knowledge and skill based selection processes outdated?
- Should there be greater focus on longer term workforce strategies and solutions?

WHAT DOES EFFECTIVE MANAGEMENT AND SUPERVISION FROM AN HR PERSPECTIVE LOOK LIKE? /

This standard is about making high quality, regular supervision an integral part of social work practice.

Building on the feedback about what HR needs to deliver, we asked how it could be improved:

- Ensure clarity of HR role, and expectation setting
- HR should be supporting Managers with the whole range of HR interactions; supervision, coaching, appraisals, employee relations, managing, performance etc.
- Core competencies could be developed which are relevant to social care
- HR should open dialogue/open doors/open minds in considering future practice
- Social workers should have access to the right development and training programmes and the support to development themselves
- HR needs to better support services to identify specific service related training needs
- Encourage localism; work regionally to keep people local
- Evaluation: social care accounts for a high proportion of spend within any Local Authority. Is it working?
What can HR do to get insight and intelligence about improvements and efficiencies?
- Challenging employers to provide more flexible working – from reduced hours contracts and career breaks through to attachments with other employers to broaden their experience and emotionally recharge

LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT /

This standard is about social workers being able to build a robust and up to date knowledge and skill base through effective continuing professional development (CPD) and access to research evidence and best practice guidance.

Continuing professional development and enhancing management expertise are themes that are specifically referenced within a number of the National Standards. Our feedback provided the following thoughts and context around this area:

- Ensure there is access to appropriate and flexible 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. This 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 organisations with other professionals 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.)
- Establish a pool of quality assured training providers
- Establish a social work academy for NQSWs to consolidate their learning and knowledge from training and improving the quality of core assessments and other critical skill areas.

The standards urge employers to use effective workforce planning systems to make sure that the right number of social workers, with the right level of skills and experience, are available to meet current and future service demands.

REWARD & RETENTION /

There was much feedback around flexibility and 'creativity' in terms of total reward. Some authorities (and HR Teams) are conscious that, in a climate where benefits are generally being reduced, it feels counter-intuitive to look at further enhancing rewards for social workers and it may create challenges around Equal Pay. What's more, examples of where special initiatives have been implemented have often led to concern in other areas.

That said, with many authorities spending in excess of £6 million PA on agency workers – just in Children's Services – there is clearly a challenge for HR professionals. The appropriate solution will depend on local circumstances.

Initiatives to be considered may include:

- Payment of higher rates for out of hours work
- Use of career grade progression schemes
- Lump sum retention payments
- Development of incentivisation programmes market supplements
- Lump sum long-service payments
- Free or subsidised parking
- Competency based pay

A longer term, more productive and sustainable approach to aid retention is to develop stronger non-fiscal benefits which could include:

- Career break opportunities
- Flexible working hours
- Opportunities to work across teams
- Clear career progression and development paths
- Efficient and accessible tools to support work
- Payment of professional fees to qualified post holders
- Consider the appropriate working environment, for some a fixed base works best for others hot desking is popular.
- Establish a wellbeing strategy including:
 - Wellbeing roadshows
 - Personal resilience workshops
 - Blood pressure checks
 - Fitness clubs

MORALE & ENGAGEMENT /

The standards are specific in that employers should ensure social workers have safe and manageable workloads. However there are also other factors which influence morale.

It is widely recognised that jobs in both Adult's and Children's Services are some of the most stressful roles in the UK and that staff's emotional resilience and good morale are vital.

The following pointers should be considered within a wider Health & Wellbeing agenda:

- Upper and middle level management should take time to visit and listen to staff, not only in formal consultation exercises but informally
- Lead members for children's and adult's services should also get to know staff and the work they do
- Social workers should have access to and support from line managers, supervisors, peers and colleagues

Providing mentors – both informally and informally

- 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. In addition, develop retention strategies.
- Develop a no-blame culture and a supportive environment wherever possible
- Consider a rewards and benefits programme that goes beyond pay

Understand how your employer promise differs from other employers and articulate this in a clear 'Employer Value Proposition'.

RECRUITMENT – MARKET CONTEXT /

The standards ask employers to get a better understanding of the factors that influence needs and demand.

The national competition for experienced, qualified Social Workers – especially those working at Senior Practitioner and Team Manager levels – is well-documented and makes challenging reading.

There are an estimated 3,610 FTE vacancies for Children's Social Workers across the UK and supply is not predicted to meet demand until 2022.

With high levels of QSW turnover (1 in 7 left their LA in 12/13), many authorities are running with high levels of agency staff – 80% plus in some Boroughs.

Other Councils have resorted to extremely high levels of newly qualified Social Workers. In contrast some authorities have low turnover and no agency workers – for example Cornwall and Poole.

Whilst there is no nationally collected data around agency expenditure, across the East of England, councils have around 2,500 children's social worker roles and spend in excess of £30 million a year on agency social workers to cover their vacancies. (Information about London Boroughs is also available).

On the basis of 24,890 children's social workers in the UK, it would be reasonable to assume a national expenditure on agency social workers of over £300 million each year.

There are currently over 1,600 advertised posts for Team Leaders or Senior Practitioners on just two of the main job boards and, whilst some of these will doubtlessly be duplicates, it highlights the level of vacancies and competition.

Research by Community Care & TMP Worldwide amongst over 2,000 experienced Social Workers, published in October 2014, highlights the following:

- **10% of Social Workers are under extreme stress and actively considering leaving the profession.**
- **Only 24% are satisfied with their current employer, with 62% either actively looking for a new role or open to approach, should the right opportunity be presented.**
- **60% of Social Workers wouldn't recommend their employer to others.**
- **37% reported poor experiences during the recruitment process.**
- **52% of respondents agreed that they would be prepared to relocate.**

(Sources: DoE Mar 2014, Policy Exchange Jun 2013, Community Care/TMP research Oct 2014, PPMA Oct 2014)

As well as suggesting practical tools such as regular, detailed management information and social care focused competencies, it was considered that there was scope to look afresh at processes to ensure they were designed to maximise the potential of applicants. We wanted to focus on the processes, and asked attendees to define an efficient recruitment process:

WHAT DOES A GOOD, MORE EFFICIENT RECRUITMENT PROCESS LOOK LIKE? /

The standards identify that employers should both determine immediate staffing requirements and recruitment processes and help to ensure that sufficient numbers of social workers are trained to meet future demand.

Suggestions to streamline the recruitment process include:

- Candidates offered interviews within 48 hours – as seen in Surrey and Coventry
- Offers within a week
- Flexible application form policy (applicants can submit forms later if really necessary)
- Using CVs as applications
- Regular in person contact and ‘keeping candidates warm’
- Ensuring a consistent and continuous point of contact
- Using sifting process to identify the right candidates e.g. ‘killer questions’ used to quickly identify eligible applicants, as used effectively by Norfolk CC and Coventry CC
- Clarity of information and offer
- Better quality of inductions; include video to give candidates an idea of the role
- Include what the onboarding programme looks like during the recruitment process
- Exit interviews – with and without the Line Manager
- Review candidates who dropped out of the recruitment process
- Introduce more flexible working: career breaks, part-time, job share, alternative hours & highlight these in recruitment marketing

A speedy recruitment process has helped Coventry City Council, who recently recruited over 45 experienced Children’s Social Workers through one campaign. In addition to a hard-hitting advertising, a rapid and highly efficient recruitment process maximised the results.

Shokat Lal, Assistant Director (HR and Workforce Services) at Coventry City Council highlights elements of the process:

“...instead of a long application form, candidates could register their interest through responding to six straightforward questions on the microsite. Within two hours of any interest registered, candidates were contacted by telephone and informally interviewed. If appropriate to be taken to the next stage they were offered interviews within 48 hours if they wished. Whilst we understood that some would struggle to meet such timescales, we were rewarded with many candidates choosing to move quickly. Also key was to continue dialogue with them throughout the entire process and therefore not lose them...”

AGENCY WORKERS /

There exists a separate set of agency standards

Whilst most authorities had a level of agency workers – and an element of a contingent workforce was key to meeting demands – there are significant regional differences with some councils not using agency social workers. The high cost and variable quality of agency workers was the source of much feedback.

Key recommendations included:

- Develop regional approaches to managing supply and demand
- Better, tighter control of agency workers and their recruitment
- Better management of suppliers, e.g. agency worker suppliers and rogue expenditure: what are they doing to performance manage their agency workers?
- Maintain oversight of recycled and poor performing agency workers; map their history, training, case studies, good work, feedback, referrals etc.
- Make recruitment process fast and smooth to make it easy for social workers to take permanent roles
- Introduce initiative that agency workers cannot return to the same authority for 12 months or more

To help manage the demand and supply of Children's Social Workers, Directors of HR and Directors of Children's Services across a number of regions e.g. the East of England have signed a Memorandum of Cooperation.

Areas covered include:

- Harmonising pay rates with agency worker suppliers
- Encouraging moves into permanent roles
- Working to improve retention rates
- Strategic regional workforce planning – forecasting demand and supply
- Minimum standards for employment referencing
- Stronger links with universities on SW training
- Talent/leadership/succession planning for social workers, managers and future leaders

CONCLUSION /

The purpose of the discussion was to identify people management practice in supporting social work, and suggest improvements. We wanted to provide HR departments with a guide to best practice, and suggest how the employer standards for social work could effectively be implemented.

Respondents were clear of the need for a development programme to encourage social worker retention and growth. Communication was also a focus: there needs to be regular dialogue between managers, social workers and HR. Feedback identified the need for better management, with tighter oversight of suppliers, and rigorous performance management.

Perhaps the most important requirement was for an efficient recruitment process which identified and measured the competencies needed to succeed, while giving candidates an accurate preview of the role. Above all, outdated, slow recruitment processes should be modernised: when it comes to recruitment, speed, openness and honesty are key.

Ultimately, the research reveals that HR needs to:

- **Take an integrated approach to recruitment and employment**
- **Have slick and modern systems, policies and procedures**
- **Better understand what social work practice entails**
- **Champion the importance of developing staff**

As more and more social work employers put these principles into action, one thing is clear: recruiting talented individuals is only the first step – the bigger challenge is ensuring that they are fully engaged, managed and encourage to flourish throughout their employment lifecycle.

USEFUL LINKS /

The new Standards document:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6188796/The+Standards+-+updated+July+01+2014/146988cc-d9c5-4311-97d4-20dfc19397bf>

Agency Social Worker Standards:

http://www.local.gov.uk/c/document_library/get_file?uuid=aec724aa-61f1-426a-915c-652cfef9ba0b&groupId=10180

Media toolkit:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6637817/A+toolkit+for+social+workers+and+employers/e1ce6a1b-43c6-4ca4-aca5-93273a7168ac>

case studies:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6637817/Helping+social+workers%2C%20improving+social+work/3e38b09a-9d14-4978-8c0b-46aad75bc55c>

podcast:

http://www.local.gov.uk/web/guest/social-workers/-/journal_content/56/10180/6664471/ARTICLE

healthcheck:

http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6188796/L14-697+Social+work+healthcheck_06.pdf/19d491f6-73b1-4f45-8dc1-44b3da5d3fe0

Councillor guide:

http://www.local.gov.uk/documents/10180/6637817/L15-70+Members+guide+on+recruiting+social+workers_06.pdf/2930746e-6ac3-41b4-a3f2-cc2560d16573

Care act:

<http://www.local.gov.uk/care-support-reform>

Skills for care commissioning:

<http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Document-library/NMDS-SC,-workforce-intelligence-and-innovation/Workforce-commissioning/Guidev2oct12.pdf>

Skills for care readiness tool:

<http://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/Standards/Care-Act/Workforce-capacity-planning/Workforce-capacity-planning.aspx>

The College of Social Work:

<http://www.tcsw.org.uk/home/>

BASW:

<https://basw.co.uk/>

HCPC:

<http://www.hpc-uk.org/aboutregistration/standards/standardsofconductperformanceandethics/>

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