



LGA/PPMA member guide

Recruiting and retaining qualified social workers



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Foreword

This guide has been prepared for elected members by the Local Government Association (LGA) and Public Service People Managers' Association (PPMA). It focuses on diagnosing the challenges in retaining qualified social workers (QSWs) and provides some thoughts on solutions which can also help manage the demand for recruitment. There is an emphasis on ways to ensure QSWs feel valued and supported and achieve a better work-life balance along with career opportunities.

The guide highlights useful resources available to help your council in assessing and understanding the challenges faced by social workers, including the Employer Standards for Social Workers and accompanying health check.

The LGA has commissioned detailed case studies which provide a check list of actions for your council, including suggestions around improved supervision and career support, collaboration with neighbouring councils and close working with higher education institutions.

Who and what this guide is for

As elected members you care passionately about the quality of services provided to children, young people and vulnerable adults. This guide is intended to help your efforts to improve these services with a focus on the urgent issue of retaining qualified social workers (QSWs) in your workforce which will in turn help to manage recruitment problems by reducing vacancies.

The LGA and the PPMA have collaborated to produce the guide which identifies the key issues that need to be addressed and gives a brief outline of resources available at a national level from the LGA, PPMA and others, as well as new resources that are in the pipeline. The aim is to help you reflect on the key questions and ideas to take forward in your council to prompt an open and informative debate. The core messages are that:

- The shortage of experienced QSWs is acute across the country but the detail of local circumstances varies and initiatives need to be tailored to local needs.
- All councils need to make sure that they understand the motivations and needs of the social workers they employ or seek to employ.
- Sub-regional and regional collaboration between councils is essential in understanding and shaping the market for QSWs – whilst pay is not a prime motivator for social workers, it needs to be right.
- Close working with local education institutions is very important in ensuring the delivery of high quality courses and that the talent you need is available.
- The role of Principal Social Workers as a voice for professionals in your council is increasingly important.

- As an elected member, you can take an active role by getting to know staff and their concerns, by making sure you are aware of activity in your council on social work reform and by taking a role in promoting positive media coverage.

The resources available to help you and your council include:

- case studies of innovative practice
- a short video on the retention of social workers
- the Employer Standards for Social Work and organisation health check
- the Epaycheck pay database and special report
- a media toolkit for councils, highlighting the importance of media relations in the retention of social workers.

The full range of material is available on a special section of the LGA website at www.local.gov.uk/workforce

Assessing and understanding the challenge

As members in councils with responsibility for social work and social care you will know that the vast majority of staff do a great job in very trying circumstances and remain dedicated, enthusiastic and professional. However, a number of staff find it difficult to keep up their enthusiasm and can become disengaged for a number of reasons which will be summarised later. Very often these people decide to work through agencies or even leave the profession all together.

Recent data sourced from the Community Care magazine annual survey confirms these impressions. Whilst overall vacancy rates have dropped as labour markets have tightened, the use of agency QSWs increased by a third between 2012 and 2013.¹

This is an unsatisfactory situation for councils; as a sector we put considerable resources into training and developing experienced social workers only to have to pay agencies for their services when they move on. There is a powerful argument for making sure that we retain more experienced staff in our workforce.

So what might help?

An LGA review of available research identified a number of factors that encourage individuals to join the social work profession as well as factors that cause them to leave. The two key motivating factors for social workers are the desire to help others and making a difference to people's lives. They often have commitment and passion for the local area which of course they share with many others but which can diminish unless other factors come into play. The process of disengagement can be accelerated by other factors.

QSWs stay in council employment when they:

- feel valued and supported with good management, good supervision, good initial and post qualifying training
- have a supportive team and colleagues providing advice, expertise and emotional support
- have good work-life balance and career progression
- have clear priorities and appropriate caseloads
- operate in an environment where reflective practice is the norm
- have effective administrative back up and IT systems
- have job security
- have access to flexible working practices.

¹ The survey found 6.5 per cent of all social worker posts across the UK were vacant in September 2013, down from 7.1 per cent in 2012. The fall appears to be largely due to progress in filling positions in adult services. In 2012, 7.5 per cent of social worker posts in adult services were vacant, but this fell to 6.7 per cent in 2013. Vacancies in children's services rose by one percentage point to 7.1 per cent in the same period. In 2012, local authorities were using an average of 16 agency QSWs across both children and adult social services; in 2013 the average was 22.

QSWs leave when:

- referral rates rise
- individual caseloads increase
- the support they've previously received diminishes
- the control which they believe they should have over their working lives is reduced
- they cannot use their own professional judgement
- local policy changes result in reduced allowances
- local pay rates are uncompetitive with those available nearby.

Case studies

The LGA commissioned a series of detailed case studies about recruitment and retention initiatives that provide responses to the needs of QSWs. The full report is available on the LGA website. The interviews covered a range of detailed questions looking at local recruitment and retention initiatives at all stages of social work careers from pre-recruitment to encouraging people nearing retirement to stay in frontline roles. **You may find these questions useful in prompting debate about the best way forward in your council.**

- In what ways do you work with higher education institutions in your area to ensure a good quality supply of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs)?
- Do social work leaders encourage continuous professional development and proper reflective learning through practice?
- How do you go about ensuring that NQSWs are job-ready?
- Do you use formal workforce planning to predict supply and demand and if so how?
- Do you regularly engage with your social work teams to understand their concerns?
- Do you implement and review the Standards for Employers of Social Workers?
- Do you have a Principal Social Worker role, which operates effectively?
- Do you have a clear career framework for social workers?
- How do you help QSWs focus on the most challenging cases with others looking after more routine work?
- Are you actively managing 'talent and leadership' and if so how?
- What steps, if any, do you take to encourage staff who have left full-time roles to come back into the workforce?
- Are you able to offer senior roles in front-line specialisms that help people to avoid moves into largely managerial roles to further their careers?
- Do you use exit interviews to understand why social workers leave?

The headline findings from the studies are shown below; **you may find them handy as a checklist in getting things started in your council:**

- the involvement of elected members is crucial in building effective recruitment and retention strategies
- QSWs can vote with their feet and move to what they view to be better environments so collaboration between councils is vital to ensure a proper distribution of the workforce
- neighbouring councils should in fact make every effort to develop shared approaches to a range of workforce issues
- a strong relationship with local higher education institutions is vital to ensure that newly qualified social workers come into post with the right skills and potential
- the role of Principal Social Worker is vital in providing professional advocacy
- building on the role of Principal Social Worker, a strong workforce development function for social work is very important

- varying career routes are needed so that social workers do not need to move into management to gain promotion
- proper succession planning is vital to ensure that leadership is always in place and teams are well-balanced
- salaries need to be properly differentiated and regularly benchmarked; retention allowances are often important
- strong, demonstrable adherence to the Employer Standards is seen as important
- an “academy” approach to learning and professional development can be very effective
- smaller, more focused teams with a balance of support and professional advocacy through consultant social workers etc. can pay dividends in controlling caseloads and improving engagement.

Recommendations

There is clearly no single solution to the challenges that are facing councils; all face a distinct series of issues and individual QSWs have their own pre-occupations and priorities. However there are steps that can be taken to attempt to achieve greater stability and individual career satisfaction and, in turn, achieve more positive outcomes for children, families and vulnerable adults; these can be grouped around five themes:

- staffing
- workload
- learning and development
- morale
- pay and rewards.

Staffing

- recruitment practice and market development are crucial to attracting the right people and your council should review its approaches and;
- develop media tools that will capture the attention of prospective employees and offer them something distinctive
- consider whether all social workers have an up-to-date clear job description and person specification which is reflective of the work they undertake and the skills they require
- identify your USPs – what are you offering candidates that may be unique to your council or area?
- ensure that the information about social work careers on your website is clear and prominent
- Assess whether anything can be done to improve timescales and quality of experience in recruitment processes.

Workload

- you should ensure that caseloads are fully monitored so that action can be taken to keep them at manageable levels and;
- wherever possible, consider giving social workers more autonomy to manage their own workloads
- you should explore flexible working options for social workers
- reduce bureaucracy to allow people to spend more time on casework and provide support staff if affordable.

Learning and development

- you should ensure there is access to continuing professional development and education, including leadership and management development, and/ or opportunities to develop into more specialist roles and;
- provide consistent, high-quality supervision that is both supportive and challenging
- offer more flexible targeted support and mentoring to individuals, with the possibility of a 'fast track' to identify and manage talent
- provide opportunities to spend time in other agencies with other professionals working in child protection, such as the police and schools
- consider ways in which those approaching retirement could be used to provide mentoring for example.

Morale

- you should encourage a no-blame culture and a supportive environment and;
- ensure that social workers have access to and support from line managers, supervisors, peers and colleagues
- upper and middle level management should take time to visit and listen to staff, not only in formal consultation exercises but also informally and;
- consider the impact of concerns about, for example, budget reductions or service transformation, and how these changes are communicated
- remember that inspections can be a time of stress; it's important to have a plan in place to support and communicate with staff during and after an inspection
- you should encourage a learning culture with a focus on reflective practice.

Pay and rewards

Basic pay has never been cited by social workers as a factor that prompts them to leave jobs, however when experienced staff move between employers they are naturally influenced by pay rates. It is important to assess the market properly when designing reward packages.

An increasing number of councils are giving social care staff additional benefits, including:

- payment of higher rates for out of hours work
- use of career grade progression schemes
- lump sum retention payments
- market supplements
- lump sum long-service payments

Non-pay additional benefits are available more frequently but are by no means universal. The main non-pay benefits available to social workers are:

- career break opportunities
- flexible working hours
- payment of professional fees to qualified post-holders
- mobile phone provision

Councils are recommended to join www.epaycheck.org.uk, the pay database developed by regional employers and the LGA to obtain up-to-date data. A special Epaycheck report on social work pay and market issues was produced recently and is available to download from the website.

The Local Government Association (LGA) is encouraging all councils to sign up to Epaycheck which offers great opportunities for efficiency through rapid access low-cost to pay data. At the click of a button it allows authorities to:

- benchmark themselves in comparison to other local authorities
- answer important questions on pay within minutes
- provide hard evidence to assist local decision making
- compare pay rates
- check market forces
- protect against equal pay claims
- support Job Evaluation review processes and inform thinking on corporate restructures.

Activity across all these themes can be planned and delivered systematically in a way that social workers can engage with through use of the Employer Standards as described in the following section.

The Standards for Employers and health check

What are The Standards for Employers?

The Standards set out the shared core expectations of employers which will enable social workers in all employment settings to work effectively. These expectations are being incorporated within self-regulation and improvement frameworks for public services and used by service regulators (Ofsted, CQC). All employers providing a social work service should establish a monitoring system by which they can assess their organisational performance against this framework, set a process for review and, where necessary, outline their plans for improvement. Employers should ensure their systems, structures and processes promote equality and do not discriminate against any employee.

The Standards for Employers at a glance:

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.

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.

Safe workloads and case allocation

Employers should ensure social workers have safe and manageable workloads.

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.

Effective and appropriate supervision

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

Continuing professional development

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

Professional registration

Employers should ensure social workers can maintain their professional registration.

Effective partnerships

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

In preparation for working on the Standards, the LGA and partners recommend that councils first carry out a **'health check'** to assess practice conditions: covering five areas:

1. effective workload management
2. pro-active workflow management
3. having the right tools to do the job
4. a healthy workplace
5. effective service delivery

Why do the health check?

The health check is an open and accountable barometer of workflow and barriers to effective practice. Doing it annually allows employers to track progress and ensures problems can be picked up and addressed in a timely fashion.

The health check can be an important part of an employer's retention and recruitment strategy because it means social workers feel that they are listened to and that the employer is pro-active in tackling the issues that affect them. It is also a way of enabling employers to provide a well led professional environment and for social workers to enhance their professionalism and practice more effectively.

Implementation of the health check

Organisations that have implemented health checks successfully have used a variety of methods to engage staff in the process including independently facilitated workshops, team briefings and focus groups. These have been used in combination with staffing and performance data, and anonymous surveys of social workers.

The health check process itself is usually a positive one for staff giving them the chance to air issues and be listened to. However, following up on what comes out of the health check is even more important. A clear agreed action plan – regularly monitored and reported back to staff – is crucial. The standards for employers provide the natural headings for what such an action plan might contain.

Working with Principal Social Workers (PSWs)

The emerging role and importance of PSWs has been mentioned already in this document. The LGA and PPMA agree with Government that all social work authorities should have at least one full-time PSW to act as a professional advocate and not simply designate this role as part of someone's wider job. If affordable, there should be a PSW for children's and adult's social workers. It is important to work with the network of PSWs as they develop their relationships with the national Chief Social Workers and the LGA will lead activity on this.

Other resources

Career guide

The LGA has just launched a career guide for local government which is available on www.local.gov.uk/workforce. Enhancements to career advice including online material will be developed during 2015.

Online recruitment toolkit

Skills for Care worked in partnership with the National Skills Academy for Social Care and produced an online values based recruitment tool kit for employers which can be found here: <https://www.nsasocialcare.co.uk/valuesbased-recruitment-toolkit>

Good examples from individual councils

Walsall MBC has created a social care jobs microsite that details the council's offer: <http://webwalsall.com/socialcarejobs>

Waltham Forest has developed a rewards and benefits programme that goes beyond pay which may help retain QSWs: <http://www.ambitious-socialwork.co.uk>

Further work agreed by LGA and PPMA in 2015

The LGA and PPMA have agreed to do some further work on social work employment during 2015. The general themes for this work are:

- **Pay and performance**
Examining the role of pay in social work careers and performance and thinking about wider labour market issues.
- **The wider “employer offer” to staff**
Thinking more deeply about rewards beyond pay and how they can be used more effectively.
- **Strategic workforce planning**
Focusing on local, regional and national approaches to managing supply and demand.
- **Social Work Leadership**
Examining approaches adopted to improving leadership skills.



Local Government Association

Local Government House
Smith Square
London SW1P 3HZ

Telephone 020 7664 3000
Fax 020 7664 3030
Email info@local.gov.uk
www.local.gov.uk

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For a copy in Braille, larger print or audio,
please contact us on 020 7664 3000.
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