

# Reforming Social Work



Improving social worker recruitment,  
training and retention

Ed Holmes,  
Guy Miscampbell  
and Benedict Robin



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## About Our Research

As part of this programme of work, we launched a call for evidence asking social work students, current social workers, and past social workers for their thoughts on the challenges facing the profession.

Alongside this we spoke in depth with over 20 social workers and managers about their day-to-day experiences and how they thought training, practice and other elements of the profession should change. We also held focus groups with children in care and social work students. We also consulted professional organisations, charities, and practitioners involved in the social work profession. In addition we sent out 173 Freedom of Information requests to Local Authorities asking for details of their staffing arrangements, vacancy rates, turnover rates, and pay scales.

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# Executive Summary

Social workers play an essential and often unrecognised role in the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. For individuals and families who come into contact with them, the services and guidance they provide can be essential, providing guidance, support, and access to vital services. The goal of this report is to highlight ways in which the social work profession can be reformed in the face of significant challenges to effect improvement in the lives of the most vulnerable.

## A challenged system

For social services to be effective, they must have enough skilled, motivated, and qualified staff. Unfortunately, the long-term outlook for the social work workforce is bleak. The profession faces two key problems: the recruitment of social workers with the right skills and retaining the most effective and experienced social workers. More importantly, failing to develop an effective social work workforce this means that vulnerable groups in society do not get the support or help they need. This report outlines barriers to achieving this which include:

- **High vacancy rates.** Of 155 Local Authorities (LAs) surveyed, 13 per cent had a vacancy rate of over 20 per cent and 50 per cent had a vacancy rate of over 10 per cent in 2012.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the wider sector has a vacancy rate of just 0.6 per cent.<sup>2</sup>
- **Poor recruitment of new social workers.** Newly-qualified social workers have difficulty finding employment despite high vacancy rates, with 27 per cent of NQSWs in England being unemployed in 2011.
- **Long-term supply shortages.** Our research carried out using the Centre for Workforce Intelligence Supply and Demand model suggests that even with optimistic projections of the proportion of social work students moving into the profession the supply of social workers will only be close to equaling demand in 2022.
- **Insufficient experience and training.** A key problem is that many potential employers are reluctant to take on newly qualified social workers as they are not thought to have adequate experience. Employers are normally looking for up to two years post-qualification experience when hiring. This suggests that they may not believe that the current level of social work education prepares students for practice.
- **A shortage of high-quality placements.** Just 54 per cent of placements were statutory in 2009–2010. This presents a ‘catch 22’ situation where students need experience to gain work, but are unable to gain experience without being offered work in the first place.

<sup>1</sup> 155 local authorities, responding to Freedom of Information Requests.

<sup>2</sup> Public Administration, Defence and Compulsory Social Security (ONS Vacancy Survey, Labour Market Statistics May 2013), [http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778\\_307508.pdf](http://www.ons.gov.uk/ons/dcp171778_307508.pdf)

There are also significant problems with the retention of effective social workers:

- **High turnover rates.** More than half of local authorities have a turnover rate of over 10 per cent, and nearly one in ten over 20 per cent.<sup>3</sup>
- **Evidence of low morale** with the average annual leave of absence due to sickness being 60 per cent higher than the national average.
- **Low expected working life**, with an average of just 7.7 years for females and 8 years for males, significantly shorter than comparable professions.
- **Perceptions of high caseloads.** A survey by the British Association of Social Workers found that over 70 per cent of social workers view their caseloads as ‘unmanageable.’
- **Limited opportunities for promotion** with social workers often having to leave the frontline to advance their careers in administrative or managerial positions.
- **Excessive paperwork.** Dissatisfaction with how much time is spent on administrative tasks is common. Estimates from a social work recruitment agency suggest that 35 per cent of a social workers’ time is taken up directly by administrative tasks and just 15 per cent of it is spent with service users.

Connected to these problems is a perception within the profession that a small minority of extreme cases where social workers have failed unfairly colours public opinion, and that where social work interventions are successful, they are usually not visible, reducing morale. For example, a 2009 Comres poll for the Local Government Association found that 42% of respondents said the reputation of children’s social workers had ‘got worse’ in response to the ‘Baby P’ scandal.

Combined, these issues present significant issues for the social work profession, from short-term issues around turnover to the longer-term need to ensure newly-qualified social workers are appropriately trained, recruited and experienced. Most importantly, without reform these circumstances could increasingly damage the consistency and quality of services that some of the most vulnerable individuals and families receive.

## Constraints on reform

Combined with significant workforce challenges, social services will also have to cope with increasingly limited resources. A combination of constrained public expenditure, inadequate structures and demographic changes mean that simply increasing spending is unlikely to be either a viable option or a sufficient cure either in the short or the long term. Specifically, social services will have to cope with:

- An ageing population, with 18 per cent of the population aged 65 or over by 2015. The Association of Directors of Adult Social Services have estimated that these demographic pressures alone will produce a 3 per cent per year growth in demand for adult social services.
- Budget reductions across children’s social care, falling in 154 of 171 LAs in 2011/12 according to data from the NSPCC.

3 155 local authorities, responding to Freedom of Information Requests.

- Budget reductions in adult social care spend in 96 of 151 LAs according to data from the NHS in the range of 2% to 7% per year.
- Other pressures on demand, particularly increasing number of children needing to be taken into care.

In an environment of constrained public expenditure, addressing these issues in the short term will require a focus on reforming services and training to deliver greater outcomes with limited resources. These challenges also provide an opportunity to address some of the longer term structural issues which have affected social work for decades. In particular, the tendency to conduct enquiries and make policy changes in reaction to major scandals risk over regulation and constraining the ability of social workers and local authorities to operate flexibly and adjust their resource allocation. This is a problem which an environment of constrained budgets renders all the more urgent to resolve.

### The direction of reform

With these constraints and challenges in mind, this report lays out recommendations to improve the state of the social work profession and the provision of social services. We also recognise that the profession has been the subject of large scale reforms over a number of years, including the work of the Social Work Reform Board and, most recently, the Munro Review. For this reason, many of our recommendations draw from and build on existing reforms and research.

The fact that social services departments are the responsibility of local authorities limits the effects that central policy direction has. However, there are still effective ways in which policy at the national level can drive important improvements. The reforms advocated in this report include:

- Establishing a ‘teaching organisation’ status to encourage LAs and other bodies to take on more students for social work placements.
- Allowing charities and third sector providers to gain ‘teaching organisation’ status and breaking down barriers to them providing practice placements at an equivalently high standard.
- Encouraging LAs to engage with innovative methods to cope with increasing practice placements, including the feasibility of student units.
- Making the best use of available budgets by tying receipt of the social work bursary to employment as a social worker, with repayment if this condition is not met.
- Embracing fast-tracked social work education, with a focus on designing a suitable short curriculum and recruiting the most able individuals and career-switchers.
- Establishing more diverse career routes for social workers, including an emphasis on development of ‘practice educator’ positions to supervise training and continuing professional development.
- A greater consideration of the benefits that multidisciplinary units and preventative action can have on social work outcomes and finances, as highlighted by the Reclaiming Social Work programme.
- Further experimentation with Social Work Practices, with an emphasis on refining lessons learnt from the initial wave of pilots.

These recommendations will not solve all the problems social work faces, but their implementation will help ease many of the pressing challenges and take the first steps towards securing a highly qualified and sustainable workforce in the future. They provide a vital chance for the government to embrace reform, and to guarantee that social services will continue to be provided for the most vulnerable in society.

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## Summary of Recommendations

**Recommendation 1: LAs should be expected to provide a set number of high quality placements for social work students, proportional to the size of their social work teams.** LAs should report their performance against this measure and poor performing LAs held to account.

**Recommendation 2: Government and The College of Social Work should establish ‘teaching organisation’ status and guidelines to award and regulate it.** This should be awarded to LAs delivering a large number of high quality placements. Achieving this status should be reflected in assessments undertaken by Ofsted and the Care Quality commission.

**Recommendation 3: LAs judged to be performing poorly in providing high quality placements should be required to work with a partner LA who has been awarded ‘teaching organisation’ status in order to improve their performance.**

**Recommendation 4: The College of Social Work should enable external organisations to gain ‘teaching organisation’ status if they can demonstrate that they are providers of quality student placements equivalent to those provided by LAs.** This status should have the same content and supervision requirements as LAs.

**Recommendation 5: LAs should cooperate with third sector organisations to provide statutory tasks which can be carried out by supervised students on placement.** This cooperation could be based on, but by no means limited to the model the SWEET project operates on. For instance, some LAs granted ‘teaching organisation’ status may want to create a formal partnership with such an organisation and, potentially, a supporting University.

**Recommendation 6: Such organisations should seek to be self-sufficient on the basis of the funding which can be provided by student placement fees.** This will enable their primary purpose to be solely providing quality placements and will make a business model which focuses on the provision of such placements more feasible.

**Recommendation 7: Universities and government should be more flexible with the financing of student placement fees, including paying a significant sum up-front rather than at the end of the placement, with potential for claw-back.** This should allow such business models to become more feasible by reducing concerns about cash-flow and increasing the ability to take on more students.

**Recommendation 8: In order to increase their capacity for placement provision, LAs should be encouraged to set up ‘student units’ for students to undertake their practice placements with.** Implementing this approach should be supported by the Department for Education to evaluate the success of this method.

**Recommendation 9: Setting up ‘student units’ should be seen as an opportunity to implement more diverse career structures for social workers, with a specific focus on the creation of a ‘practice-educator’ route.** This role would allow more senior social workers to see career progression while still remaining on the frontline. Practice educators should have a lower caseload but supervise ASYE and placement students.

**Recommendation 10: If LAs do not take up such arrangements, those LAs failing to deliver sufficient quality placements should be required to reorganise along these lines on a pilot basis.**

**Recommendation 11: The Department for Education should make the receipt of the social work bursary conditional on taking up a position as a social worker or in a related profession such as social care for a given period (for instance three years). The bursary should be repaid if this condition is not met. Government should consult as to how best to implement this approach.**

**Recommendation 12: The Department for Education should support the establishment of a fast-track social work training scheme which amalgamates the best features of both the Step Up to Social Work and the Frontline models. This scheme should:**

- Base its recruitment criteria on finding the most effective social workers rather than targeting a specific group such as graduates; and
- Combine the budgets of both schemes to ensure that there is clarity about their future and that recruitment into fast-track schemes continues.

**Recommendation 13: The Department for Education should carry out a subsequent evaluation of the fast-track scheme, and seek to apply relevant lessons to conventional social work education.** This would help spread best practice within social work education in the long-run, as well as helping calibrate social work education courses to the needs of employers.

**Recommendation 14: The move towards more diverse career structures and, in particular, the creation of a “practice educator” route, should not be confined to LAs who introduce student units.** All LAs should be encouraged to introduce these part frontline, part educator/management roles as a way to develop expertise for a teaching organisation status and a way to allow social workers to progress while retaining contact with the front line.

**Recommendation 15: Practice Educators should also have responsibility for overseeing plans for Continuous Professional Development and Supervision so that social workers have a better chance to progress and develop their skills.**

**Recommendation 16: LAs should consider how to encourage agency social workers to re-enter LA employment.** This would be desirable due to the skills that some of the more experienced social workers could bring to their positions and especially to the practice educator role. It would also exploit what should be a diminishing role for agency work as longer-term workforce stability is achieved, and be cost-neutral as the cost of the agency social worker is simply paid in a direct wage rather than a fee to the agency.

**Recommendation 17: LAs should consider the role of multidisciplinary units and shared risk in any future reorganisation of their children's social work departments.** This would help facilitate greater support for a rebalancing of the risk calculus, and a focus on early intervention. To facilitate this change government should consult on and disseminate best practice on this topic, drawing on the RSW model.

**Recommendation 18: The Department of Health should seek to expand the evidence-base regarding whether and how the lessons of RSW could be applied to Adults' social services.** This would require a comprehensive evaluation of the lessons which can be learnt from the implementation of the RSW model, as well as coordination between the various bodies which provide Adult's social services. This analysis should include a focus on structures to support preventative care, as well as a focus on the structure of social work units in order to provide the best form of support possible.

**Recommendation 19: Government should further investigate Social Work Practices, specifically seeking to analyse which factors make them more effective. Particular attention should be paid to how stronger working relationships could be built between the SWP and the relevant LA.** This could include a further wave of pilot schemes as well as further evaluation of which social work tasks can be effectively undertaken by Social Work Practices.

**Recommendation 20: Government and LAs should take action on the barriers preventing third-sector providers and other groups from taking part in the tendering process for the establishment of Social Work Practices.** This is an important step both to improving the quality of service provided in the long-run as well as increasing the amount of providers who can be part of service provision through Social Work Practices. Specific steps could include examining the financial barriers preventing their establishment, or providing expert advice during the tendering and setup phases.

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# 1

## Social Workers and Workplaces

### The role of social work

Social workers play an essential and often unrecognised role in the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. Whether through safeguarding at risk individuals, commissioning support services, or providing access to a wider support network, this constitutes an important public service. As the Social Work Task Force has noted:

“When people are made vulnerable – by poverty, bereavement, addiction, isolation, mental distress, disability, neglect, abuse, or other circumstances – what happens next matters hugely... Good social workers can and do make a huge difference in these situations.”<sup>4</sup>

The importance of these services comes not just from enhancing individual well-being, but also from identifying and preventing harm and using a wide range of skills and services to rectify problems before they become more severe.

#### Box 1.1: A brief history of the social work profession in the UK

Subsequent to the Beveridge Report in 1942, Local authorities were given responsibility for social care, either directly delivered or through independent institutions supervised by the local authority (LA).<sup>5</sup> However, social work was generally confined to operating “in the shadow of the large institutions of the welfare state.”<sup>6</sup> Through the 1960s the welfare consensus saw a further expansion of the role of the state in social care. However, there were repeated calls for the organisational restructuring of social work, following a number of failings in standards and conditions of care.<sup>7</sup>

These developments led to the publication of the Seebohm Report (1968) which marked the most significant attempt up to that point to professionalise the role of social work. The report also opened the door to a more holistic and community based approach to care, suggesting greater attention be paid to supporting the families of those in care and causing specific Social Services departments to be founded for the first time.<sup>8</sup> Over time the profession continued to evolve beyond this point with the Barclay Report (1982) attempting to look more closely at how the role of social work should give support first and foremost to informal local networks and develop them where they are “weak or non-existent.”<sup>9</sup>

In more recent times an increasing emphasis has been placed on social work and its role in providing services. The Quality Strategy for Social Care (2000) aimed to provide local delivery of a central government agenda and set national standards to be achieved

4 Social Work Task Force, “Facing up to the task: the interim report of the social work task force”, Department of Health and the Department for Children, School and Families, 2009.

5 Thane P, *Memorandum Submitted to the House of Commons’ Health Committee Inquiry: Social Care Health Committee Inquiry: Social Care* (Oct 2009), History & Policy.

6 Ibid

7 Harris J, *State Social Work: Constructing the Present from Moments in the Past*, *British Journal of Social Work* (2008), pp.667–9.

8 Ibid.

9 Ibid.

through local policy and implementation.<sup>10</sup> Since that point there have been a number of more radical reforms such as the 2003 introduction of the requirement to obtain an honours-level degree in social work to practice, and the phasing out of the Diploma of Social Work.

More recently, reform of social work has been driven by the work of the Social Work Task Force and the Munro Review. Implementation and evaluation of many of these reforms, as well as debates around the ‘professionalisation’ of social work and the content of training are on-going, with the latter being the subject of a government review.<sup>11</sup>

## What we mean by social workers and social work

Social work is a broad term for various services for adults and children. For children, it can involve coordinating fostering, adoption and residential care, supporting at-risk families, dealing with issues such as neglect and abuse, and providing support for young offenders. For adults, it includes dealing with issues such as domestic violence, homelessness or addiction, as well as providing support for dealing with old age or disability, including involvement in nursing and care homes.

The varying requirements for each of these means that models of social work practice are extremely diverse. The role of each social worker will depend upon varying factors, including the demographics of the area, family circumstances, changes in social policy, and the history of service users. In this respect it is hard to generalise a definition of what a social worker is.

Broadly speaking, a social worker acts to support individuals and families, rectify situations where they are in danger, and help them build the capacity to support themselves. This involves identifying the challenges and problems their clients face, as well as coordinating or providing care to overcome those issues. Social workers fulfil a range of statutory duties placed upon Local Authorities (LAs) in both children’s and adults’ social care. Fulfilling these duties includes:<sup>12</sup>

- Identifying those in need of social work services;
- Determining the challenges that an individual or family faces, and their causes;
- Determining if those causes have wider implications for other family members;
- Working with that individual or family to overcome those challenges;
- Legally intervening in extreme cases such as child protection;
- Providing or commissioning services to achieve these goals;
- Co-ordinating with other relevant bodies such as the police or health services;
- Recording all relevant actions and distributing relevant information; and
- Assessing results and adapting their actions accordingly.

If carried out well, these actions can effectively tackle the problems an individual or family faces, resulting in better outcomes and lower costs to the taxpayer in the long-term. On the other hand, if these actions are not carried out effectively, problems go unresolved, leading to more entrenched problems requiring more expensive interventions in the long-term.

Two examples of how social work interventions can work well or badly are given in Box 1.2.

<sup>10</sup> [http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH\\_4009379](http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.dh.gov.uk/en/Publicationsandstatistics/Publications/PublicationsPolicyAndGuidance/DH_4009379)

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/review-announced-on-social-work-education>

<sup>12</sup> Department for Education, “Statutory duties of local authorities,” 2013.

### Box 1.2: Social work – two case studies

#### Case study 1: A positive social work experience

A boy aged 12 was referred by the community safety team to the LA due to parental neglect. He had been found on the streets late at night and had been reportedly engaged in anti-social behaviour. Police referred the boy to the LA because when they had spoken to him, he said his mother did not care about him as she 'was mad' and his father was never at home.

The LA social worker picked up the case as an initial referral. She went to the house but was unable to contact anyone. She persisted and on her third visit noticed a woman in the window of the sitting room. She signalled to the mother who said that she would only speak to her through the letter box. Again, the social worker persisted and held a conversation through the letter box. Following two more exchanges like this over the course of the next few days, the mother let the social worker into the house. She was also able to make contact with the father who worked away from home regularly as a builder, and was in despair at his wife's mental state.

It was determined that the mother was agoraphobic and had not left the house for three years, putting huge strain on the household and rendering her incapable of caring for her son. The social worker was able to provide support both directly and through the local mental health team in order to help the mother tackle her problems with anxiety and depression. The social worker helped the mother and son to repair their relationship and to instil confidence in the son that his mother would get well. The family is now in a much better position, with the boy progressing well at school and household income benefitting from the mother working part-time as a hotel receptionist.

#### Case study 2: A negative social work experience

A thirteen year old boy was listed as an open case to a youth offending team. His behaviour was gradually becoming worse and his mother could not control him. He was aggressive and having difficulties in school. She felt she was not getting the support she needed to improve her care of the boy and eventually self referred to an LA social work department for help.

The LA, overstretched on account of staff retention issues, identified that the youth offending service were working with the boy and closed the case based only on a short telephone call to the mother. The mother then called the NSPCC helpline who re-referred the case, which was responded to in the same way by the LA. Community safety became a problem as the boy was found out on the streets late at night and began to get involved in petty crime, prompting a third referral.

At the same time the boy was permanently excluded from school. His mother was becoming more desperate, and referred herself to the LA again, disclosing mental health issues. The LA referred the mother to a local social enterprise offering relationship-based family support. However, the outcome of the referral was not followed up as the social enterprise had not felt that the mother met their criteria as the issues were of a 'child protection' nature which were deemed too severe to warrant their involvement.

No agency managed to take a holistic view of the family, or address the mother's own needs. Eventually the boy was taken into custody six months later, and the LA was mandated to provide a secure residential placement. The mother, so distressed by the outcome of the case, was admitted to the hospital having taken an overdose and her youngest child was placed in temporary foster care.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>13</sup> Case study kindly provided by Dr Karen Broadhurst, University of Lancaster Department of Applied Social Science.

Box 1.2 demonstrates that effective provision of social work has significant effects on both the outcome for families and individuals and overall costs to the taxpayer. Where intervention is effective, it can prevent increased costs and worse outcomes over the long term.

However, there is a perception within the profession that the public view of social workers is often determined by a small minority of extreme cases, rather than the less visible work that they do, leading to a negative view. There is some evidence of this: for example, a 2009 Comres poll for the Local Government Association asked whether the death of ‘Baby P’ had affected their views of the social work profession. 42 per cent responded that their perception of children’s social workers had “got worse” and only 54 per cent responded agreed that in general children’s social services were effective in protecting children.<sup>14</sup>

### How social work services are structured

LA social work departments are generally divided into teams dedicated to specific areas of social work. Social workers then handle their cases either individually or as part of a team. Services are either provided in-house, in co-ordination with other LA bodies, or through commissioning independent providers.

In recent years there have been several attempts to reorganise social work departments. Two examples of innovation in organisational structure and practice are the Reclaiming Social Work (RSW) model pioneered in Hackney, and the Social Work Practice (SWP) pilots commissioned by the Departments for Education and Health. In later chapters we will review the effectiveness of these approaches alongside other social work reforms in the United States and Australia.

As the case studies in Box 1.2 illustrate, social work often involves teams interacting with many different services. A social worker may have to work with local health services, court services and numerous other third sector providers and bodies. This means that social workers are best viewed as one part of a much wider system of health and social care. A social worker must thus have a good understanding of the bodies they are interacting with, as well as knowledge of how services are commissioned, particularly qualifying thresholds. They must also be able to effectively communicate the needs of social work service users to other bodies through effectively diagnosing, recording, and communicating the issues they face. Social work should thus not be viewed as one isolated service but instead as one of the first points of contact in identifying, preventing, and rectifying various health and social care issues.

### Training and the professionalisation of social work

Since 2003, in order to qualify as a social worker, an individual must attain an Honours degree in social work,<sup>15</sup> with the title reserved only for qualified individuals from 2005 onwards.<sup>16</sup> There are multiple routes to achieving the degree, generally entailing three years’ study for Undergraduates or two years as a Postgraduate, both including two-hundred days’ worth of practical placement as a compulsory requirement. Examples of the content studied as part of this process can be seen in Table 1.1.

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14 Comres, “Social Work & Child Protection Survey,” 2009.

15 General Social Care Council, “Raising Standards: Social work education in England,” 2008–2009.

16 UK Border Agency, “Home Office, Internal Caseworker Guidance,” 2008.

**Table 1.1: Examples of social work university curricula**

Course	Year 1 Core Curriculum	Year 2 Core Curriculum	Year 3 Core Curriculum
<b>Southampton Solent University – BA (Honours) in Social Work</b>	Communication, Sociology, Society and Social Work, Human Growth through the Life Course, Introduction to Law for Social Work, and Preparation for Practice (including 5 days shadowing).	Social Work: Forming Partnerships and Working with Others, Developing Legal Perspectives, Social Work Methods and Investigations, and a 100-day practice placement.	Extending Professional Competence in Practice (100-day practice placement), Research and Social Work and Risk, Responsibility and Resolution. Optional Specialisation in Adults, Children and Families, or Participation, Partnerships and Networks.
<b>Middlesex University – BA (Honours) in Social Work</b>	Preparation for Professional Practice, Life Span Development, Social policy and social work.	Research, Law for Social Workers, Social Work Models and Methods, and the Initial Professional Practice Placement (100 days).	Final Professional Practice Placement (100 days), Social Work Contexts and Applications, and a Practice Specific Elective in Adult Needs and Access to Services or Children, Young People and Families.
<b>Middlesex University – MA (Honours) in Social Work</b>	Law for Social Workers, Social Research Methods, Social Work models and Methods, Initial Professional Practice Placement (100 days)	Social Work Contexts and Applications, The Individual and Society, Final Professional Practice Placement (100 days), Practice Specific Elective in Adult Needs and Access to Services or Children, Young People and Families	N/A
<b>University of Central Lancashire – BA (Honours) in Social Work</b>	Social Work Law and Policy, Human Growth and Development, Sociology, Social Problems and Social Work, Learning Skills for Social Work, Interpersonal Skills, Collaborative Working in Health and Social Care, Preparation for Practice (30 day placement).	Psycho-Social Studies, Users and Carers: Experts by Experience, Social Research, Issues for Social Work, Social Work Processes and Intervention, Collaborative Working in Health and Social Care, Practice Placement (80 days).	Working with Adults, Working with Children, Families and Young People, Comparative Social Care in Europe, Research in Practice, Collaborative Working Health and Social Care, Practice Placement (90 days).

Source: Southampton Solent University, Middlesex University and the University of Central Lancashire (social work course curricula).

A social work bursary is available to help with the costs of studying and amounts to up to £4,575 a year for those studying outside of London, and £4,975 for those studying in London as of 2012/13.<sup>17</sup> Reform of the bursary was a topic recently under consultation,<sup>18</sup> the result of which was to retain the postgraduate bursary, as well as the undergraduate bursary for the 2nd and 3rd years of study, and capping the overall number.<sup>19</sup>

The requirements for the education and expected competencies of a social worker are regulated by the Professional Capabilities Framework, set out by The College of Social Work.<sup>20</sup> The social work curriculum focuses on ‘generic’ social work education, for both adult and children’s social services. For example, a social worker dealing with children will still need to have skills in communicating with parents, as well as diagnosing and potentially solving issues which may affect the

17 National Health Service, “Social Work Bursary: Academic Year 2012–2013 – Application notes for students on full-time undergraduate courses,” 2012.

18 Department of Health, “Reforming the Social Work Bursary: A paper for consultation,” 2012.

19 “New social work bursary details set out,” Department of Health 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-social-work-bursary-details-set-out>.

20 ‘Professional Capabilities Framework’, College of Social Work, <http://www.tcsow.org.uk/pcf.aspx>.

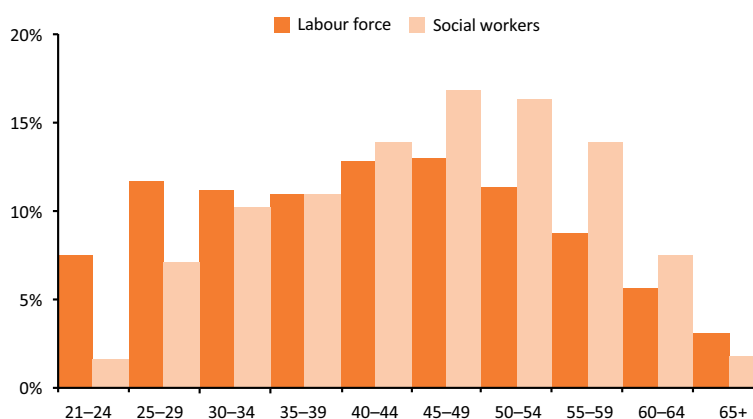
wider family. The adequacy of this approach and the wider content of social work curricula are an ongoing matter of debate.<sup>21</sup>

Once a student has qualified, recruitment generally occurs on an LA basis. Since March 2012,<sup>22</sup> whilst in their first job as a professional social worker, Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) must also complete an Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE), with the aim of helping them develop their skills within a rigorous, evaluated format. From the position of a NQSW there is, in principle, the ability to progress to more senior positions within the department, unit, or social work as a whole. However, as we will outline in Chapter 2, this has not always been realised.

## The workforce

In 2011 there were 42,847 full-time equivalent (FTE) qualified social workers working for LAs in England, either in frontline practice, or management positions, split between Adult Services (22,827) and Children's Services (20,020).<sup>23</sup> This represents around half of an estimated 87,442 qualified social workers with the rest having left the profession altogether, or working in non-LA roles which may not require a social work qualification.<sup>24</sup> In terms of demographics, around 40 per cent of social workers are over the age of 50, compared to 29 per cent for the general workforce. The age profile of the social work profession can be seen below in Figure 1.1.

**Figure 1.1: Percentage of workforce by age, 2010**



Source: Centre for Workforce Intelligence Supply and Demand Model, Labour Force Survey.

This distribution is likely to shift dramatically in the next few years. The removal of the minimum age of qualification as a social worker (previously 22),<sup>25</sup> combined with the introduction of a bursary in 2003<sup>26</sup> and an 126% increase in social work degree acceptances by universities between 2003 and 2011<sup>27</sup> has led to a:

“...marked change in the age profile of new students, with the proportion aged 24 or under almost doubling from 20% in 2003/2004 to 39% in 2007/2008 (including 15% aged under 20), whilst those aged over 35 fell from nearly a half to less than a third of entrants over the same period.”<sup>28</sup>

21 For example, see Jo Moriarty and Jill Manthorpe, “Controversy in the Curriculum: What Do We Know About the Content of the Social Work Qualifying Curriculum in England?”, *Social Work Education* 2013, <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/02615479.2012.761689>.

22 Dame Moria Gibb, “Social Work Reform Board, Letter Introducing the ASYE,” 2012.

23 Centre for Workforce Intelligence, “Supply and Demand Model”, 2012.

24 Centre for Workforce Intelligence, “Workforce Risks and Opportunities: Social Workers,” 2012.

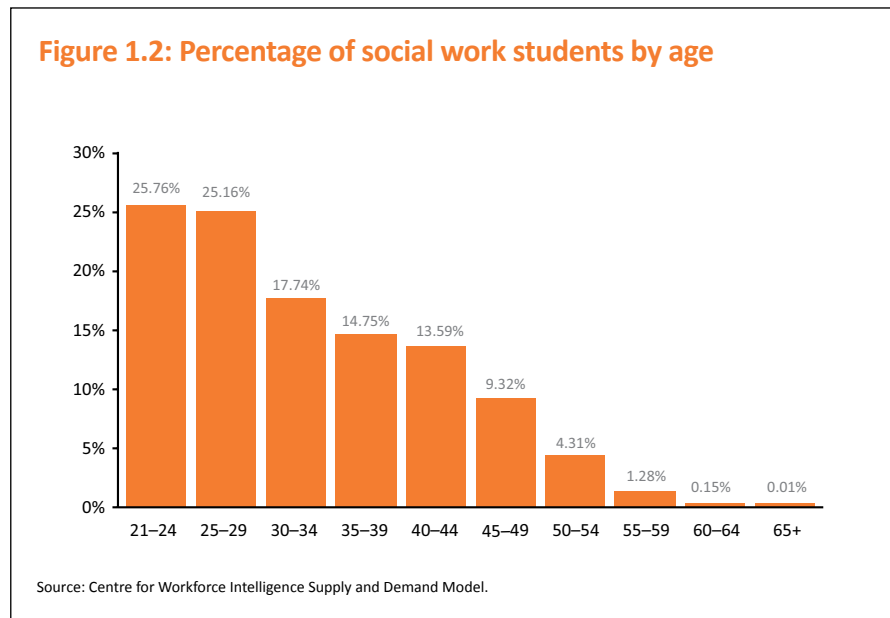
25 Boddy, J., and Statham, J., “European Perspectives on Social Work: Models of Education and Professional Roles”, Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London, 2009.

26 Moriarty, J, et al., “The Social Work Bursary in England: Impact of Funding Arrangements upon Social Work Education and the Future Workforce,” 2011.

27 Authors’ own calculations, UCAS Statistical Enquiry tool.

28 Boddy, J., and Statham, J., “European Perspectives on Social Work: Models of Education and Professional Roles” Thomas Coram Research Unit, Institute of Education, University of London, 2009.

The result has been that in 2011, over 50% of social work students were aged between 21 and 24. The full breakdown can be seen in Figure 1.2. Combined with the fact that a significant number of social workers are likely to reach retirement age in the next twenty years, based on current trends, this suggests the profession is going to become steadily more reliant on recent graduates from university, who may not have extensive prior life experience.



These individuals are also unlikely to have previous degree-level education, with only around 21%<sup>29</sup> of students studying the postgraduate degree. Social work education will thus have to play an increasingly important role in preparing students with skills which would previously have been developed through previous relevant experience.

## An evolving profession

There is no doubt that the duties and training of social workers have been the subject of continuous change and reform. Remarkably, even just considering vulnerable children, there have been a reported 400 Acts of Parliament, strategies, funding streams or initiatives in the period 1987–2008.<sup>30</sup> The most significant reforms are often driven by public reaction to particularly tragic or shocking failure in the system, which act as an impetus for action.

Perhaps the most obvious example of this is the Laming Report of 2003, following the death of Victoria Climbié.<sup>31</sup> The report gave 108 recommendations for various reforms to child protection. It was preceded by the Care Standards Act 2002 which, amongst other things, established the General Social Care Council (GSCC), a body with responsibility for regulating the profession of social care. This move was complemented by the establishment of the Social Care Institute for Excellence in 2001 with the goal of disseminating best practice and the honours-degree qualification for social work in 2003.

There have also been a large number of reforms since then. Most notably, the Social Work Task Force report of 2009, focused on training<sup>32</sup> and made 15

29 Authors' own calculations, Centre for Workforce Intelligence, "Supply and Demand Model", 2012.

30 Action for Children, "As long as it takes: a new politics for children," 2011.

31 Lord Laming, "The Victoria Climbié Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Lord Laming," 2003.

32 Social Work Task Force, "Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force," 2009.

recommendations, with implementation entrusted to the Social Work Reform Board.<sup>33</sup> More recently, the GSCC was abolished, with its duties being handed over to the Health Professionals Council in 2012.<sup>34</sup> A summary of the reforms currently underway is detailed below in Box 1.3.

### Box 1.3: Ongoing reforms of social work – the Social Work Reform Board

Implementation and delivery of social work reform is the responsibility of several organisations, including the College of Social Work, Local Government Association, Departments of Education and Health and the Centre for Workforce Intelligence. Key aspects of it are:

- Development of the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF), which now covers all levels of social work, including ensuring that capabilities at more advanced stages adequately reflect different career pathways;
- Promoting the Standards for Employers and Supervision framework;
- Further moving towards both encouraging and recording continuing professional development, with a long-term view to encouraging further progress;
- Strengthening the quality of entrants into the profession;
- Altering the social work degree curricular and practice placements, informed by The College of Social Work, and guided by partnerships between Higher Education Institutions and employers;
- Developing new practice placement arrangements, including supporting partnerships;
- Implementation of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment;
- Developing guidance on the Careers Framework to clarify its use for social work professionals and employers;
- Developing the social work supply and demand model.<sup>35</sup>

There are also several reforms to come. The most recent phase of reform was signalled by the findings of the Munro Review. This focussed on children's social work and was published in May 2011.<sup>36</sup> It noted that social work itself had become overly bureaucratic with negative effects on the workforce and its wider ability to safeguard children. To rectify this it suggested a number of policies, which are summarised in Box 1.4.

### Box 1.4: The Munro Review of Child Protection

Reporting in May 2011 the Munro Review of Child Protection sought to provide a comprehensive series of suggestions for improving children's social care through creating a 'child-centred system.'

Policy recommendations to achieve this included but were not limited to:

- Revising the statutory guidance for dealing with cases related to protecting children;
- Substantially reforming the inspection framework to include other bodies involved in a child's journey through receiving help;

33 Social Work Reform Board, "Building a safe and confident future: Maintaining Momentum. Progress report from the Social Work Reform Board," 2012.

34 UNISON, "GSCC abolition – new registration system for social workers from 2012," 2010

35 Social Work Reform Board, "Building a safe and confident future: Maintaining Momentum. Progress report from the Social Work Reform Board," 2012.

36 Munro, E., "The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system," Department for Education, 2011.

- Sharing of best practice learning and techniques, along with more comprehensive approaches to review and redesign social work delivery;
- Placing a duty on LAs and statutory partners to secure the sufficient provision of local early help services for children, young people and families;
- Increased coordination between employers and higher education institutions to ensure social work students are prepared for the challenges of child protection work;
- Improving the quality of practice placements, creating and awarding a special 'teaching organisation' status for employers, and using 'student units' in placements;
- LAs designating a Principal Child and Family social worker who was both a senior manager with lead responsibility for practice in the LA, and who is actively involved in frontline practice;
- Creation of the Chief Social Worker post in government, to advise the government, and speak as a figurehead for the profession.<sup>37</sup>

A number of the Munro Review's suggestions are yet to be implemented, including the introduction of student units, policies to increase the quality of teaching placements, and the introduction of teaching organisation status. On the other hand, certain key elements such as the simplification of guidelines have already been implemented, with the reduction of the 'Working Together' guidelines from around 400 pages to 21, for example.<sup>38</sup>

## A path forward

In the best cases, effective social work can improve lives immeasurably. However, in the worst cases, the problems faced by the most vulnerable are exacerbated, resulting in worse social and health-based outcomes. The workforce plays a very important role in public service delivery and in improving the lives of many of the most disadvantaged individuals and families in our society.

However, this workforce is in a state of transition as older workers retire and younger recruits take their place. This challenge, coupled with the fact that LAs will need to adapt to providing key services in an environment of both increased demand and reduced resources, suggests that more reforms might be needed in the future. Recent reforms to the profession, along with the direction advocated by the Munro Review, point towards an increased role for flexibility and discretion of individual social workers and away from bureaucratic series of guidelines. However, for this to work social workers must have the requisite expertise, support and training to make the appropriate decisions under pressure. This highlights the vital role in training and equipping NQSWs with the same competence and skills as existing experienced social workers. Given the importance of this task, there is a clear need to examine the current performance of training and if, and how, it might be improved. Chapter 2 will outline the problems facing the profession, and the barriers to achieving this goal.

Any further reforms must be approached carefully, however. The diversity of social work and social workers means that any attempt to apply one-size-fits-all policies onto all LAs is likely to be counterproductive. Key to this will be allowing social workers to operate within a framework that provides both accountability and a suitable degree of autonomy. Such models will be discussed in Chapters 4 and 5.

37 Munro, E., "The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system," Department for Education, 2011.

38 The London Safeguarding Children Board, Briefing on the revised Working Together to Safeguard Children and related guidance, 2012

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# 2

## An Imperfect System

This chapter outlines the problems and challenges facing the social work profession. It will highlight the issues in developing and retaining a highly skilled and motivated workforce. It will also discuss how the organisational structure and working conditions of many social work departments constrain the effective provision of services. Last, it will note the budgetary situation LAs face, and how this poses serious challenges to social work services, but also offers a unique opportunity for effective reform.

### Too much work, not enough workers?

The first question to ask of the workforce is whether supply of social workers matches demand. In particular, an existing shortage of social workers is itself a cause for concern since it is likely to be compounded by projected workload increases in the next twenty years. Increases in problems such as dementia<sup>39</sup> and children being taken into care<sup>40</sup> are key drivers of this.

“Problems facing social work have been dominated by discussion of high vacancy rates combined with problems recruiting and retaining high-skilled staff”

This situation is modelled by the Centre for Workforce Intelligence (CfWI) Supply and Demand model (CWISD), which was commissioned by Social Work Reform Board and kindly supplied to us by the CfWI for use in this report. The model measures demand by surveying

reported activity levels in both adult and children’s services, multiplying by the amount of time taken to complete it to deduce the Full-time equivalent workforce needed to fulfil demand. It then projects future demand using population projections from the Office of National Statistics to produce its baseline set of figures.<sup>41</sup>

These projections are based on the assumptions that 60 per cent of undergraduate students, 75 per cent of postgraduate students, and 67 per cent of internationally qualified students will obtain social work jobs. As depicted in Figure 2.1 below, they reveal an ongoing projected shortage of social workers, the majority for Children’s social workers and a (perhaps surprising) small surplus of Adult social workers.

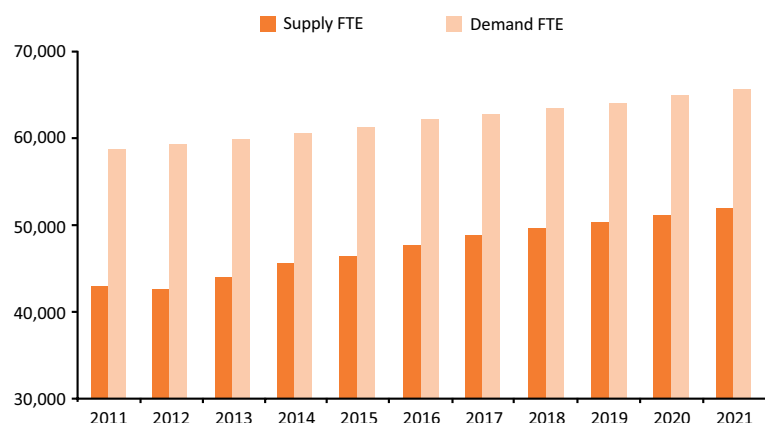
This model is not perfect. It does not show us how dynamic effects might affect either supply or demand nor whether demand should to be met through increased number of social workers, different working practices or through reform of policy. However, it does give us a picture of the scale of the challenge. The following sections consider how social worker recruitment and retention issues might be tackled and time more effectively used.

39 The King’s Fund, *Care demands and dementia*, See: <http://www.kingsfund.org.uk/time-to-think-differently/trends/disease-and-disability/care-demands-dementia>.

40 Department for Education, “Statistical First Release: Children looked after in England (including adoption and care leavers) year ending 31 March 2012,” 2012.

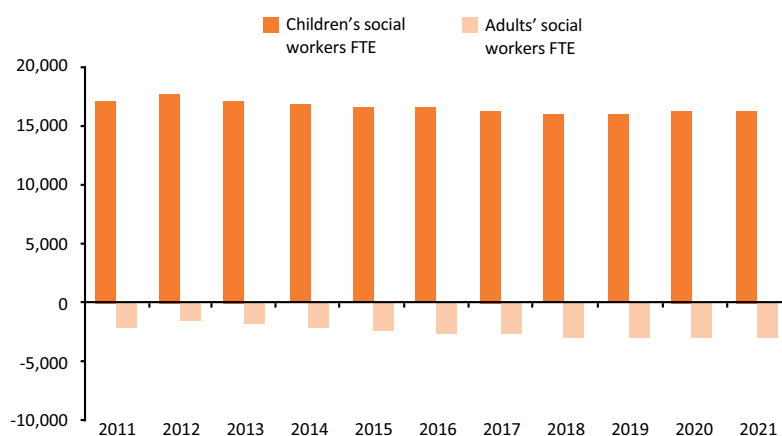
41 Centre for Workforce Intelligence, “Social Worker Supply and Demand Model: User Guide,” 2012.

**Figure 2.1: Total social worker predicted supply and demand (2011–2021)**



Source: Centre for Workforce Intelligence Supply and Demand Model, 2012.

**Figure 2.2: Excess demand for FTE social workers in adults' and children's social work (2011–2021)**



Source: Centre for Workforce Intelligence Supply and Demand Model.

42 BBC News, "Social worker shortage 'a crisis,'" 2009. See: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk\\_politics/7866827.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7866827.stm).

43 CommunityCare, "Social worker vacancy rates down across Britain, 2011," See: <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/articles/20/09/2011/117476/social-worker-vacancy-rates-down-across-britain.htm>.

44 Department for Education, "Experimental Statistical Release: The Local Authority Children's Social Care Services Workforce report," 2011.

45 CommunityCare, "One in nine social work posts are vacant in England," 2009. See: <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/articles/15/04/2009/111289/one-in-nine-social-work-posts-are-vacant-in-england.htm>.

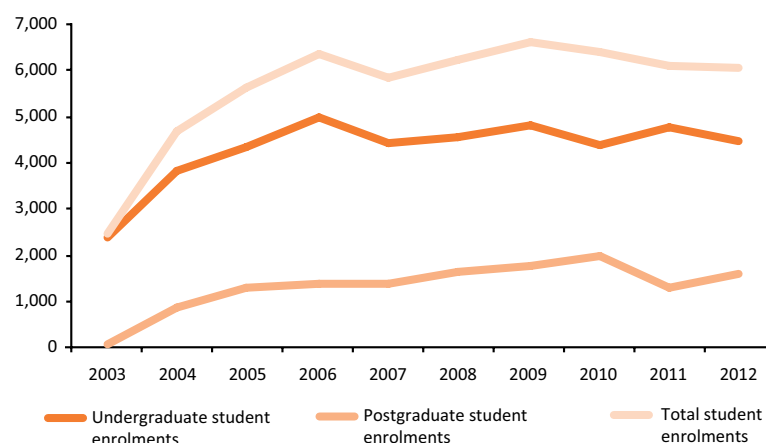
## Recruitment

### Vacancy rates and social work training

In the past few decades, assessment of the problems facing social work has been dominated by discussion of high vacancy rates combined with problems recruiting and retaining high-skilled staff.<sup>42</sup> Following the introduction of the non means-tested social work bursary in 2003 and the increased uptake of social work degrees, vacancy rates have begun to decrease,<sup>43</sup> suggesting that the recruitment issue is now less acute. For example, 6.1 per cent of posts in Children's social work were vacant in 2011,<sup>44</sup> compared with an estimated 10.9 per cent vacancy rate in all social work posts in 2009.<sup>45</sup>

As shown in Figure 2.3, a key driver in this trend has been the marked increase in enrolment in recent years, more than doubling between 2003 and 2006.

**Figure 2.3: Enrolments in social work undergraduate and postgraduate qualifications (2003–2012)**



Source: Centre for Workforce Intelligence Supply and Demand Model, 2012.

However, enrolment and vacancy rates are only one piece of a larger picture. For example, because of withdrawals and deferrals only 3,729 students actually qualified in 2011.<sup>46</sup> Combining this number with social workers qualifying abroad and coming to England, brings the number of potential new social workers to around 4,000 a year. Headline vacancy rates may mask deeper problems as posts can be filled with temporary agency staff, rather than being left vacant. To assess the extent of this problem we submitted Freedom of Information (FOI) requests to local authorities in England and Wales. When including posts filled by temporary agency staff as vacant posts, of 155 responses, 13 per cent still had a vacancy rate of over 20 per cent and half had a vacancy rate of over 10 per cent. This suggests that for some LAs problems recruitment suitably qualified staff still persist.<sup>47</sup>

We have already seen in Figure 2.1 that this suggests a significant shortfall in the flow of new social workers. By using the CWISD model, we can see how this figure might change if we assumed that every NQSW finds employment in social work.<sup>48</sup> When we do this, we see that, even under this unrealistic assumption, this would mean that the supply of social workers would only equal the demand for social work provision in around 2022.<sup>49</sup> A direct comparison between this amended model and the baseline is presented in Figure 2.4.

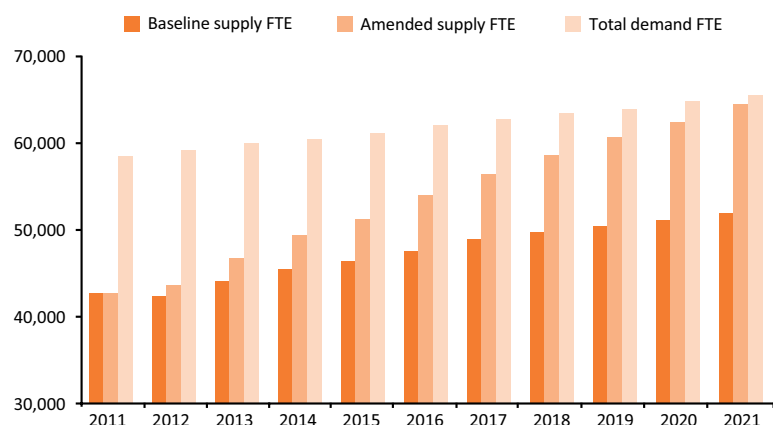
However, while overall supply would equal demand, this would be explained by an increased oversupply of adult social workers, whilst a shortage of children's social workers would persist. Figure 2.5 demonstrates this situation and suggests that a reassessment and rebalancing of the workforce would still be necessary even if total demand and supply matched.

<sup>46</sup> Centre for Workforce Intelligence, *Supply and Demand Model*, 2012.

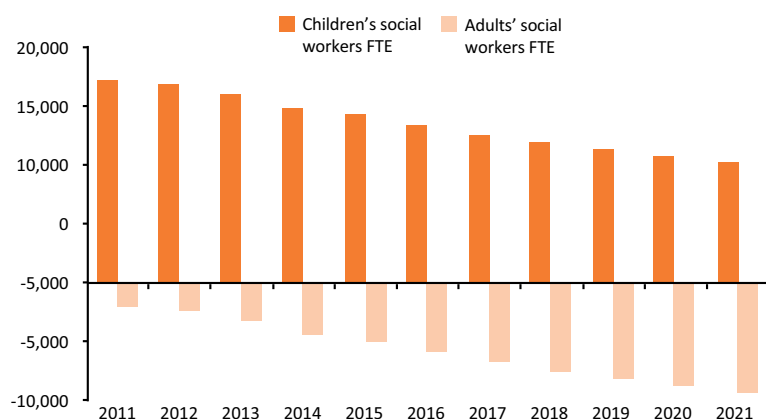
<sup>47</sup> Results from Freedom of Information Requests. For further information contact the author.

<sup>48</sup> This assumption is extremely unlikely as it does not reflect the barriers NQSWs face when entering employment, the desire to switch careers, or other factors which could prevent them practicing social work.

<sup>49</sup> Authors' own calculations, Centre for Workforce Intelligence, *Supply and Demand Model*, 2012.

**Figure 2.4: Amended model and baseline comparison**

Source: Centre for Workforce Intelligence Supply and Demand Model, 2012.

**Figure 2.5: Amended model excess demand for FTE social workers in adults' and children's social work (2011–2021)**

Source: Centre for Workforce Intelligence Supply and Demand Model, 2012.

Of course, this figure becomes even more problematic due to the difficulties newly qualified social workers face when attempting to find employment. Given the existence of a relatively high vacancy rate across many LAs and the prospect that these will continue to exist for many years, one might assume that NQSWs could be relatively sure of obtaining a job upon graduation. However, this does not appear to be the case. In 2011 it was reported by *Community Care* that 27 per cent of NQSWs in England were unemployed; it is unclear how many of the 64 per cent who found employment did so in qualified social worker positions.<sup>50</sup> Whilst this can be explained to an extent by the reductions in recruitment employers may be making in response to budgetary constraints, the prevalence of significant vacancy rates suggest that this is not the whole story. This means that,

50 CommunityCare, 'Quarter of new social workers in England remain jobless after a year,' 2011, See: [http://www.tcsnw.org.uk/uploadedFiles/TheCollege/CollegeLibrary/College\\_produced\\_documents/180811b.pdf](http://www.tcsnw.org.uk/uploadedFiles/TheCollege/CollegeLibrary/College_produced_documents/180811b.pdf).

while the number of students studying social work has increased, on its own, this is unlikely to be the solution to workforce issues.

### A mismatch of skills

The difficulty NQSWs face when finding employment demonstrates a paradox: on one hand employers are often suffering from high vacancy rates and, on the other, available workers are unable to find employment. The reason is fairly simple: the combination of tight budgets, along with increasing scrutiny of the profession, a large amount of statutory duties imposed on LAs and a mismatch of skills mean that social work departments face difficult decisions when hiring.

In particular, doubts about the inexperience of newly-qualified staff mean that there is often an unwillingness to accept the risk of taking them on, with the cost of further training and concerns about the quality of social work education being significant barriers.<sup>51</sup> Anecdotal evidence from recruitment agencies suggest that employers look for up to two years of post-qualifying experience.<sup>52</sup> As such, they are significantly less likely to take on NQSWs when compared to experienced staff and may even deliberately leave a post vacant if no applicant is considered suitable.

The fact that vacancy rates within key areas persist is indicative not just of the fact that employers have a preference for social workers with more experience, but also that NQSW training is viewed by many as incomplete. Combined with budget constraints meaning that employers may be unable to contribute to further training, it is unsurprising that many employers want to hire social workers who are immediately ready to practice. Together, this suggests a systemic problem with social work education.

Recent attempts to rectify the inexperience of NQSWs include the introduction of the ASYE, a scheme which entails monitoring and ongoing assessment of a NQSW during their first year of employment.<sup>53</sup> Despite the usefulness of this move, there is reason to be sceptical about its ability to incentivise the hiring of NQSWs. Notably, the associated costs which come with this approach, such as protected workloads and increased supervision may put employers off recruiting the staff as they cannot spare resources, leading to many NQSWs lacking the time or support for training and supervision.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout our discussions with various social workers we discussed the experience and suitability of NQSWs for social work. A reoccurring theme was that a key determinant as to whether or not a NQSW was likely to find employment was the quality of the 200 days worth of practice placement they had undertaken. Indeed, the College of Social Work have described this experience as “the cornerstone of social work students’ learning.”<sup>55</sup>

Unfortunately, quality placements are in short supply.<sup>56</sup> This is partially due to stretched resources limiting the ability of several employers to take on students, combined with the fact that there is little reward or incentive for doing so. The result is a shortage of high quality placements which offer experience interacting with statutory cases, meaning that fewer NQSWs get the experience which employers are looking for, and which is required to adequately fulfil available positions. Such ‘statutory placements’ have fallen from 59 per cent of the total in 2006–2007 to just 54 per cent in 2009–2010.<sup>57</sup> Summarising these findings in 2012, the General Social Care Council commented that “ensuring a sufficient number of relevant practice placements that are of the required quality is an ongoing challenge.”<sup>58</sup>

51 CommunityCare, “70% of social workers worry about their newly qualified colleagues,” 2012.

52 CommunityCare, “It’s employers who demand two years experience, not agencies,” 2011.

53 Dame Moria Gibb, “Social Work Reform Board, Letter Introducing the ASYE,” 2012.

54 Guardian Social Care Network, “Newly qualified social workers have no time for training, study finds,” 2012.

55 The College of Social Work, “Practice Learning Guidance: Overview of new arrangements for practice learning,” 2013.

56 Association of Directors of Children’s Services, “Written submission to the Social Work Taskforce from the ADCS: Recommendations for improving training and support for social workers,” 2010.

57 Statutory Placements were classified by the General Social Care Council as placements which gave students experience in working on statutory tasks and holding statutory duties. Given that this is a key part of the majority of Local Authority social work, individuals with this experience are generally viewed more favourably when it comes to recruitment.

58 General Social Care Council, “Regulating social work education (2001–2012),” 2012.

Part of the problem facing the profession is solving this mismatch of skills. In some cases already high quality NQSWs are well prepared by their education and work experience to go on to successfully find employment. Those who do not face difficulty in gaining sufficient experience due to the scarce nature of statutory placements. The status quo does not sufficiently encourage either educators or employers to contribute to the development of NQSWs, with a resulting misallocation of resources as social work positions go unfilled and NQSWs are unable to find employment.<sup>59</sup>

## Retaining social workers

The second key factor in ensuring an adequate supply of appropriately skilled social workers is to tackle problems surrounding retention, including cases of burnout, high caseloads, and insufficient support for social workers. These issues are covered below.

### Coping with caseloads

Polling by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) found that 77 per cent of social workers describe their caseloads as ‘unmanageable,’<sup>60</sup> a sentiment reflected in our interviews. This is perhaps reflected in a very high level of turnover.<sup>61</sup> Of 155 Local Authorities, well over half experienced a turnover rate of over 10 per cent and nearly one in ten experienced a turnover rate of over 20 per cent.<sup>62</sup>

High turnover is a problem for two key reasons: first, if an individual leaves social work it represents a loss on the investment made on their training. Significantly shorter careers of social workers means that despite similar total training costs, the cost of training per year of service is significantly higher in social work than in similar professions.<sup>63</sup> Second, social work is a profession in which a high premium is generally placed on practical experience. Individuals leaving represent the loss of an opportunity to retain a member of staff who can share experience with newer members of staff.

However, turnover figures are only part of the story. One study found that the average annual leave of absence taken by social workers of 11.8 days was 60 per cent higher than the national average.<sup>64</sup> These problems can be particularly acute for NQSWs who are often thrown in at the ‘deep end’ with little support.<sup>65</sup>

### Too much paperwork, not enough social work

This high rate of stress and turnover within social work is caused by a number of factors. The most obvious is the challenging nature of the work which, whilst rewarding when successful, can be demoralising when unsuccessful. In addition to this, one of the most common comments revealed during our interviews with frontline social workers was that the system they worked in was overly bureaucratic, with many complaining that emphasis was placed on process. This conclusion is also mirrored in numerous reports and reviews.<sup>66, 67, 68</sup> Whilst efforts are being made through restructuring and a reduction of guidelines in various areas of social work, the wider issue relates to the administrative process. Estimates from the social work recruitment agency Liquid Personnel suggest that 35% of a social workers’ time is taken up directly by administrative tasks. Just 15% of it is spent with service users.<sup>69</sup> Social workers we discussed this with

59 Moriarty J, Manthorpe J et al, ‘Making the Transition: Comparing Research on Newly Qualified Social Workers with Other Professions’, *British Journal of Social Work*, 2011, 41, pp. 1340–1356.

60 British Association of Social Work, ‘The State of Social Work 2012,’ 2012.

61 Curtis, L., Moriarty, J., and Netten. A., ‘The Expected Working Life of a Social Worker,’ *British Journal of Social Work* (2010) 40, pp. 1628–1643.

62 Results from Freedom of Information Requests. For further information contact the author.

63 Curtis, L., Moriarty, J., and Netten. A., ‘The Costs of Qualifying a Social Worker,’ *British Journal of Social Work* (2011) pp. 1–19.

64 Independent, ‘“Shocking” sickness rates in social work’, 2009.

65 Social Work Task Force, Facing up to the task, 2009.

66 Munro, E., ‘The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system,’ Department for Education, 2011.

67 Social Work Task Force, ‘Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force,’ 2009.

68 Lord Laming, ‘The Victoria Climbié Inquiry: Report of an Inquiry by Lord Laming,’ 2003.

69 Liquid Personnel, ‘Social Work: the typical working week’ (infographic), ‘2012, See: <http://www.liquidpersonnel.com/wp-content/uploads/Social-work-the-typical-working-week-infographic.jpg>.

highlighted it both as one of the main barriers to them practicing effectively and as an increasing source of frustration, contributing to a lack of satisfaction with their work.

Whilst a level of administration and record-keeping is necessary and inevitable, the majority of frustration came from the quantity and unnecessary duplication. Whilst the IT systems used by each employer can vary, in Children's social services they are generally variations of the Integrated Children's System; a framework which was rolled out nationally in 2007<sup>70</sup> and has come under significant criticism from social workers who have commented that the system is impractical, complex and repetitive. Several of these issues were raised in a DfE report in 2009;<sup>71</sup> relaxation of the framework and attempts at improvement have been ongoing since then.<sup>72</sup>

These difficulties were reflected in comments and feedback we received from those working in Adult's social services as well. Issues highlighted included:

- That information cannot be cross-entered to multiple personal files, meaning that the same information will have to be re-entered multiple times for each member of a family;
- The number of irrelevant but compulsory information fields, meaning that time is spent recording redundant information;
- The fact that isolated bits of information filled into forms are viewed by many social workers as less useful for building a complete profile of an individual or a family than more holistic summaries;
- That the IT of social work departments is frequently incompatible with that of other local departments. The result is that data which may need to be shared with other local bodies have to instead to be gathered again, or be manually transferred.

### The image of the profession

Another common observation from social workers is that they feel their profession and the work it did is undervalued, with the perception that media focus on the profession is heavily concentrated on extreme cases in children's services where social work interventions fail. They often feel that successful social work interventions are rarely seen except by the people who are directly affected by them. Similarly, the dominant stories surrounding adult social care are of abuse or neglect such as in the Winterbourne View case.<sup>73</sup> Social workers thus often feel that these stories and perceptions come to dominate the public discourse, whilst giving little or no acknowledgement to the positive work they do.

We should note that this is not an isolated complaint in the public sector, however. Many public servants are known to feel uncomfortable when thrust into the limelight due to high-profile (if rare) cases of failure, such as the Stephen Lawrence case for police officers<sup>74</sup> for example. It is also common that bigger cases where potential tragedy is averted are underreported, such as the response of MI5 to planned terrorist attacks after the London bombings of 7th July 2005.<sup>75</sup> The impact this has on morale, retention and recruitment is difficult to quantify.

Nevertheless, it is hard to disagree that a key contributory factor of low morale within social work is likely to be public perception.<sup>76</sup> In a more immediate

70 Department for children, school and families, "About the Integrated Children's System (Archived webpage)," See: <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/20100202111805/http://www.dcsf.gov.uk/everychildmatters/safeguardingandsocialcare/integratedchildrenssystem/abouttheintegratedchildrenssystem/about/>.

71 Department for Children, Schools and Families, "How Social Workers Spend Their Time: An Analysis of the key issues that impact on practice pre- and post Implementation of the Integrated Children's System," 2009.

72 Department for Education, "ICS improvement," 2012.

73 BBC News, "Timeline: Winterbourne View abuse scandal," 2012, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-bristol-20078999>.

74 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2000/dec/14/ukcrime.lawrence>.

75 <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-21878867>.

76 Burns K, "'Career Preference', 'Transients' and 'Converts': A Study of Social Workers' Retention in Child Protection and Welfare", *British Journal of Social Work* 2010, <http://bjsw.oxfordjournals.org/content/early/2010/11/29/bjsw.bcq135.full>.

sense, it also shapes the views service users have of social workers, making it significantly harder for them to work with that individual or family constructively to overcome the issues they face. Data demonstrating the perceptions of social workers is unfortunately not commonly collected, and when it is it is often tainted by collection shortly after a particularly high profile failure limiting how useful it is. However, polling carried out by Comres on behalf of the LGA after the Peter Connelly incident found that only 52 per cent of respondents would recommend a career in social work to a friend or family member.<sup>77</sup> Several studies have found the public perception of social workers to be at best mixed,<sup>78</sup> but not universally so.<sup>79</sup>

### Retaining and promoting skilled staff on the frontline

As noted in Chapter 1, social work is still characterised by a rigid career structure which was criticised heavily by both the Social Work Task Force<sup>80</sup> and the Munro Review.<sup>81</sup> This provides few incentives for social workers to stay, or opportunities to advance their careers, especially for those who want to continue to practice on the frontline. Furthermore, it has the undesirable result of taking away talented frontline workers who do achieve promotion and putting them in managerial position where they no longer practice. This applies to the career structures of both Adult's and Children's social work and was summarised by the Munro Review:

*"The absence of alternative routes for promotion often means the best, most talented and knowledgeable practitioners often leave Local Authority frontline practice to work in the voluntary sector, where they are able to spend more time directly engaging with children and families, or move into Local Authority management roles."*<sup>82</sup>

The impact this has on the retention of skilled social workers, particularly on the frontline, is clearly problematic. Such a 'flat' career structure also hampers the ability to develop diverse career advancement paths which could offer the opportunity to develop more specialised positions or combining management and training duties with frontline practice. Such positions will be discussed further in Chapter 4, and were strongly endorsed by the Munro Review.<sup>83</sup> However, progress on this front has been limited.<sup>84</sup> The reforms advocated in the Munro Review were confined to Children's social care, meaning that these problems persist in Adult's social services. Until the career path a social worker can expect to face is rethought, it is likely that difficulties retaining skilled staff in frontline positions will persist.

## The financial context

We have highlighted the pressing challenges that exist in recruiting and retaining skilled social workers in challenging frontline positions. Alongside these challenges is the issue of budgets. Constrained local authority budgets mean that simply increasing the amount of money spent on social work is unlikely to be a realistic option. The problems we have outlined in this report also cast serious doubt on the effectiveness of such a policy. Many are caused by structural impediments within the social work system, rather than a lack of resources *per se*. We note that local government spending on social care increased by a generous

77 Comres, "Social Work & Child Protection Survey," 2009.

78 <http://www.ipsos-mori.com/Assets/Docs/Archive/Polls/seed.pdf>.

79 Veigel R, 'Community Perceptions of Social Workers', University of Texas 2009, [http://dspace.uta.edu/bitstream/handle/10106/2043/Veigel\\_uta\\_2502M\\_10473.pdf?sequence=1](http://dspace.uta.edu/bitstream/handle/10106/2043/Veigel_uta_2502M_10473.pdf?sequence=1).

80 Social Work Task Force, "Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force," 2009.

81 Munro, E., "The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system," Department for Education, 2011.

82 Munro, E., "The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system," Department for Education, 2011.

83 Munro, E., "The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system," Department for Education, 2011.

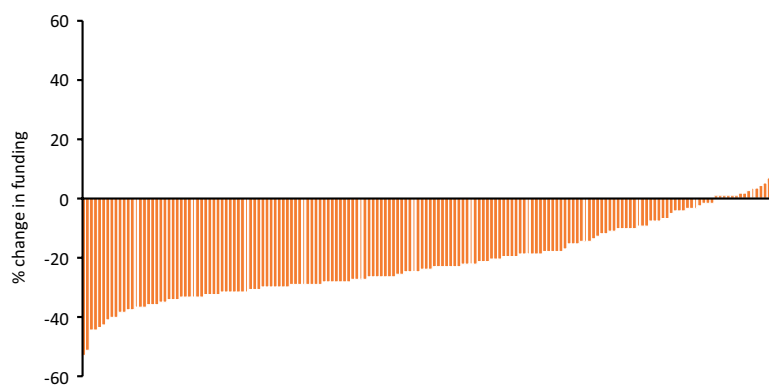
84 Munro, E., "Progress Report: Moving towards a child-centred system," Department for Education, 2012.

5.2 per cent in real terms each year between 2001/2 to 2009/10, without making a significant impact on any of these issues.<sup>85</sup> With LAs now facing the pressure of significant reductions of central government resources as part of the wider fiscal consolidation, it is likely that social services will face the need to reduce spending at a time of increased demand.

In fact, these pressures were already evident prior to the fiscal consolidation through looming demographic changes. By 2015 18 per cent of the population will be aged 65 or over. People with learning difficulties are also living longer; with spending on their needs projected to increase up to 7.9 per cent a year by 2026.<sup>86</sup> It is also worth noting that the reduction in central government funding through Formula Grant does not impact all councils equally. Councils in the North, and particularly the North West and London will see particular reductions in their spending power.<sup>87</sup>

A recent report from the LSE predicts that budget cuts of up to 25 per cent will result in significant financial pressure as LAs struggle to maintain service standards while making necessary reductions in expenditure.<sup>88</sup> Whilst many frontline social services have been sheltered from the direct impacts of these changes, overall the amount spent on social care has decreased markedly since 2010. Demonstrating this, NSPCC data on LA spend on Children's social care per 0–19 year-old in 2011–2012, compared to 2010–2011 is shown in Figure 2.6.

**Figure 2.6: Percentage change in children's social services spend by council in 2011–2012 compared to 2010–2011**



Source: National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, Smart Cuts, 2011.

As can be seen, whilst there are a few exceptions, the amount spent on Children's social care has decreased substantially in 154 of 171 LAs. A similar pattern exists in Adult social services. A survey by the Association of Directors of Adult social services (ADASS) found that in the past two years social care budgets have lost £1.89 billion in funding, while demographic pressures from adult social care continue to grow at 3 per cent per year.<sup>89</sup> An LA breakdown of NHS data on spending in Adults social services can be seen in Figure 2.7.

85 IFS Green Budget February 2012, Table 6.2, p. 140, <http://www.ifs.org.uk/budgets/gb2012/12chap6.pdf>.

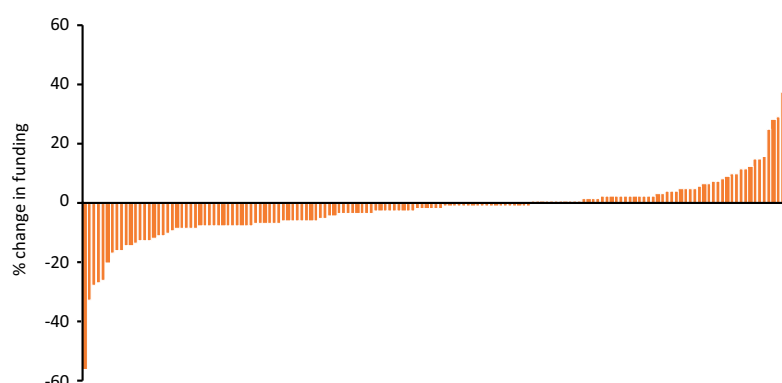
86 Audit Commission, "Improving value for money in adult social care," 2011.

87 Audit Commission, "Improving value for money in adult social care," 2011.

88 Dunleavy, P., Rainford, P. and Tinkler, J., "Innovating out of Austerity in Local Government: A SWOT analysis," 2011.

89 *The Guardian*, "Social care funding cut by £900m last year," 2012, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2012/jun/14/social-care-funding-cuts>.

**Figure 2.7: Percentage change in adults social services spend by council in 2011–2012 compared to 2010–2011**



Source: NHS Information Centre, Personal Social Services: Expenditure and Unit Costs 2010–2011 Final Costs and England 2011–2012 Provisional Release.

Overall 96 of the LAs included in the data provided by the NHS will have faced some real term decrease in their budgets, whilst 55 will see an increase. Social services expenditure for adult social services suggest that, in real terms, spend on social care in 2011–2012 decreased by 1 per cent when compared to 2010–2011. However, other estimates put this fall to be between 2 and 7 per cent.<sup>90</sup>

The challenge these changes pose to future provision of adult and children's social services is clear. Whilst this may have measurable impacts, the much more significant effect is the limit it imposes: LAs, employers, and social workers in general will have to find ways to innovate and renew their profession to cope with flat (or more likely falling) budgets.

This has unfortunately not been the path followed by most LAs so far. An effect of budgetary constraints has frequently been that savings have been made 'salami slicing' preventative services which may prove counterproductive in the longer term. Other reductions – such as in administrative support staff – have provided an efficiency saving in the short-term, but at the expense of increased workloads for the frontline.

LAs also have great incentives to be risk averse and will often prioritise fulfilling their statutory obligations which primarily focus on acute cases. The result is that there is a distinct possibility that the casualties of cutbacks will be early intervention programs with the potential to reduce the demand for social services in the long-term.<sup>91</sup>

These issues are symptomatic of much wider organisational issues in many LAs. This is largely due to managerial structures which are largely concerned with fulfilling procedure and statutory duties rather than engaging in effective interventions. These are often side-lined as a result of what former Children's Minister Tim Loughton described as "a culture ... built up on risk aversion and box ticking."<sup>92</sup> This has the potential to reduce provision of preventative services which may prevent some clients' problems becoming more serious and expensive over time.

90 National Health Service, "Personal Social Services: Expenditure and Unit Costs – England 2011–12 – Provisional Release," 2012.

91 Family and Parenting Institute, "Families on the Front Line? Local Spending on children's services in austerity," 2012.

92 Department for Education, "Tim Loughton to Community Care Live," 2011.

For policy to have a hope of changing this dynamic, social workers will need new structures, methods of working and management. Potential structures of social work departments and international evidence for their effectiveness will be discussed in Chapters 5 and 6.

#### Doing more with less

This chapter has outlined some of the key issues facing social work and social workers. This situation poses serious challenges to the profession of social work and offers an opportunity to undertake lasting reforms which will improve practice, morale, and service provision in the long-term. These policies must:

- Tackle issues with the recruitment and training of social workers, guaranteeing the long-term viability of the workforce;
- Take comprehensive steps to encourage the retention of staff and create a more diverse social work career structure; and
- Take steps to ensure that social work budgets are deployed in the most effective way, including taking steps to facilitate professional discretion and greater use of early intervention techniques.

We will now turn to an examination of policies which might achieve these goals.

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# 3

## Recruiting Tomorrow's Social Workers

Chapter 2 outlined the numerous challenges facing the social work profession, including recruitment, training, retention, progression and managerial structures. This chapter will outline a series of policy recommendations to overcome these issues.

### Context and constraints

As previously outlined, the challenge that social work faces is not necessarily a lack of potential social workers.<sup>93</sup> Moreover, low vacancy rates do not necessarily exist across the board. Certain units suffer from much higher shortages than others, primarily due to the stress associated with the positions and the high level of experience required to join such units.

There are, however, several opportunities to rectify this situation; the high number of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) who cannot find jobs in social work demonstrates a significant problem in social work education, but also a potential solution. As our modelling showed, increasing the numbers of students who transfer their training to practice would be a positive step. However, it is unlikely to be effective in isolation, so other ways of encouraging entrants to the profession must be considered.

### Gaining practical experience

The main reason that NQSWs have trouble finding employment is that their education does not give them sufficient practical experience for them to be desirable candidates from an employers' point of view. As highlighted in Chapter 2, many of the social workers we interviewed emphasised that one of the decisive factors affecting the employability of NQSWs was the nature of the placements the student had undertaken as part of the qualifying social work course. Most social workers we interviewed highlighted a statutory placement as indispensable, especially for those students seeking more challenging posts such as child protection.

This dilemma for NQSWs is mirrored in research by Community Care which found that in a survey of 77 institutions offering a qualifying social work course, 22 had not provided statutory placements for their students and a further 17 refused to provide any information. Many of the social work students interviewed expressed their frustration that their placements had not adequately prepared them for entry into the social work profession.<sup>94</sup>

93 General Social Care Council, "A Report on Social Work Education in England: Data Pack," 2011.

94 CommunityCare, "Lack of statutory practice placements for students leaves newly qualified social workers struggling for jobs, 2009," See: <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/articles/13/07/2009/112090/lack-of-statutory-practice-placements-for-students-leaves-newly-qualified-social-workers-struggling-for-jobs.htm>.

This is not a new criticism. The need for high quality placements is reflected in both the Munro Review and the Social Work Task Force, where the need to guarantee placement quality and to undertake reforms to this effect was emphasised. Whilst the Munro Review focuses on child protection, a wider rolling out of opportunities for statutory placements would be desirable to give social work students who train on a ‘generic’ degree more experience. Box 3.1 below lists the recommendations from the Munro Review and the Social Work Task Force about practice placements, as well as wider reform of social work education.

### Box 3.1: Placement-related recommendations in the social work task force and the Munro Review

#### The Social Work Task Force (SWTF) – Recommendations for a ‘Reformed System of Initial Education and Training’

The SWTF made a series of recommendations regarding social work training and education including that it should:

- Create clear and consistent criteria for entry to social work courses;
- Balance academic and personal skills when making admissions decisions;
- Provide a consistently high level of teaching, placement opportunities and assessment across all providers;
- Creating an advanced teaching organisation status for agencies providing high quality practice placements;
- Creating a supported and assessed first year in employment.<sup>95</sup>

#### The Munro Review – Recommendation 12

The Munro Review’s recommended that Higher education institutions and employers should work together to ensure that:

- Practice placements were of a high quality, and eventually only took place as designated approved practice settings;
- Employers were able to apply for a ‘teaching organisation’ status awarded by The College of Social Work;
- The merits of ‘student units’ headed by a senior social worker were considered.<sup>96</sup>

95 Social Work Task Force, “Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force,” 2009.

96 Munro, E., “The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system,” Department for Education, 2011.

97 HM Government, “Building a Safe and Confident Future: Implementing the recommendations of the Social Work Task Force,” 2010.

98 Department for Education, “Full Response to Named Day Question – Tim Loughton,” 2011.

99 Social Work Reform Board, “Building a safe and confident future: Maintaining Momentum. Progress report from the Social Work Reform Board,” 2012.

100 The College of Social Work, “Recommendations for the selection of students into social work degree courses in England,” 2011.

101 Department for Education, “Funding to support new social workers,” 2012.

102 Department for Education, “Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE),” 2012. See: <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/social/developing/b00211051/asye>.

103 General Social Care Council, “The supply of social work practice placements: employer’s views,” 2012.

Many of the recommendations on education have become government policy.<sup>97, 98, 99</sup> Several regarding the standards for entering social work courses have been codified,<sup>100</sup> and the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) has been implemented.<sup>101, 102, 103</sup> However, little significant action has occurred on the quality of placements, or the introduction of teaching organisations or student units.

### Places of Learning?

The concept of a teaching organisation was raised in the Munro Review, and has parallels in the medical profession, where ‘teaching status’ exists for hospitals and other medical organisations. The government response to the concept of teaching organisations was generally positive, stating that:

*“Employers also have a major role to play and the Government wants to seek assurance that this will be taken seriously. It is likely that some of this can only realistically be done in the medium – to longer-term and some authorities will face more challenges in delivering this than others.”<sup>104</sup>*

Despite approval, the response contained no particular impetus for action, essentially passing on the task of accrediting teaching organisations to The College of Social Work and focusing more on the concept of constructing partnerships between Higher Education Institutions (HEI) and employers. This is clearly a desirable goal. Given that increased partnerships offer a step towards the establishment of teaching organisation status, it is our view that these reforms are vital for further advancing the profession.

Creating teaching organisations would mean that employers could gain and retain the status by conforming to a series of regulations set out by The College of Social Work. In order to qualify they would have to take a certain amount of students on statutory placements each year, providing them a high quality educative experience. This could either be done as part of a wider relationship with a University, in the same way that University teaching hospitals are organised, or merely as a status which an employer could hold independently. Incentives for employers to gain and retain teaching status could include increased resources and support for practice education staff, as well as general prestige. How a similar model is used in medicine is outlined in Box 3.2.

### Box 3.2: Teaching hospitals and the NHS

There are 44 members of the Association of UK University hospitals.<sup>105</sup> Through partnership with universities, the focus of the hospitals is changed to what the association describes as a “unique tripartite; serving, teaching and research.”<sup>106</sup> The combination allows research into improving cases of best practice alongside providing treatment, and educating medical students.

Interaction with medical students depends upon the structure of the course which the partner university pursues. Generally in later years of education students will complete attachments in the hospital and with wider medical organisations affiliated with the university. The quality and duration of these placements will again vary, indicating the level of flexibility which HEIs and university hospitals have. For example, in Edinburgh students will undertake community and hospital attachments in their third and fourth years, with a view to developing a full range of experience by the end of their fifth year.<sup>107</sup> Similarly, practical experience when studying at Imperial College London starts in second year with small amounts of group work with GPs or hospital consultants, before progressing to three 10-week clinical attachments in third year. The fourth and fifth years are then generally focused on more academic learning methods, followed by an extensive practical emphasis in the sixth year.<sup>108</sup>

A strong and durable partnership has been built between the organisations where practice placements are undertaken, and the HEIs providing medical education. This bond allows extensive practical experience to be gained by medicine students, meaning that they are equipped for further practice and learning upon graduation. Crucially, whilst further training in the form of the Foundation Programme is compulsory,<sup>109</sup> a base standard of quality means that there is not the same reluctance to take on newly trained staff that there is in social work.

104 Department for Education, “A child-centred system – The Government’s response to the Munro review of child protection,” 2011.

105 The Association of UK University Hospitals, List of AUKUH Members, 2012, See: <http://www.aukuh.org.uk/index.php/members/aukuh-members>.

106 The Association of UK University Hospitals, *About Us*, 2012, <http://www.aukuh.org.uk/index.php/about-us>.

107 University of Edinburgh Website, See: <http://www.ed.ac.uk/studying/undergraduate>.

108 Imperial College London, <http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/ugprospectus/facultiesanddepartments/medicine/mbbsmedicine>.

109 Department of Health, “Modernising Medical Careers: The next steps – The future shape of Foundation, Specialist and General Practice Training Programmes,” 2004.

Combined with increased partnerships and other reforms, such a model should incentivise the provision of more social work placements. However, it is entirely possible that many LAs would not make the moves towards gaining teaching organisation status at the present time. Given this fact, and that nearly all LAs have at least some training capacity already, there is a case for rolling out a requirement for LAs to report on their performance in delivering high quality placements for social work students. The status of ‘teaching organisation’ should be available to those LAs judged to be performing exceptionally and those LAs performing badly should be required to work with partner LAs with this status in order to improve their performance.

**Recommendation 1: LAs should be expected to provide a set number of high quality placements for social work students, proportional to the size of their social work teams.** LAs should report their performance against this measure and poor performing LAs held to account.

**Recommendation 2: Government and The College of Social Work should establish ‘teaching organisation’ status and guidelines to award and regulate it.** This should be awarded to LAs delivering a large number of high quality placements. Achieving this status should be reflected in assessments undertaken by Ofsted and the Care Quality commission.

**Recommendation 3: LAs judged to be performing poorly in providing high quality placements should be required to work with a partner LA who has been awarded ‘teaching organisation’ status in order to improve their performance.**

This would increase the amount of statutory places on offer. To enable Local Authorities to embrace this transition, support and advice should be provided and other education-based reforms discussed below should be adopted.

### Looking elsewhere

We should also recognise that LAs may be unable or unwilling to fulfil the demand for high quality statutory work placements. It is thus inevitable that many placements will happen in the third sector, or wider elements of social care. Finding such placements is not the problem *per se*, but the quality of these placements in preparing students for frontline practice.

Students must be given sufficient experience and practice on advanced statutory tasks without compromising the quality of the services provided. Simultaneously they must be supported so that the experience can be a positive learning one, but must also be given independence such that they develop professional discretion. These inherent tensions combined with the fact that placement supervision occurs whilst staff are trying to deliver social work services mean that placements will not always guarantee this level of quality. How to improve the provision and quality of placements in the third sector is critical if we are to tackle the issues with student placements which currently exist. Box 3.3 gives an example of an approach to this problem.

### Box 3.3: The Sweet (Social Work Education, Experience and Training) Project<sup>110</sup>

Located in the 'three estates' area of King's Norton, Birmingham, the Sweet Project is an organisation which seeks to combine providing student placements with the role of providing support services to children, families, and adults.

It is self-sufficient, funded through student placement fees paid by universities. Through this mechanism and start-up funding from several sponsors it manages to cover all associated costs without any LA funding. Payments are made by universities for each student taken on placement and are generally paid at the end of the placement period. It currently hosts 58 students, supported by several senior social workers as well as two family support workers. Students take on duties around statutory cases including gaining experience with assessment, support work and handling referrals.

The Sweet project is unique in that the focus of the organisation on specifically providing quality placements allows a much greater focus on developing skills and confidence amongst students. This constructive environment is popular with the students on placement there, and receives favourable comments when compared to alternative placements they have experienced. Students are able to shadow LA workers and take responsibility for liaising with other service providers. Fully 95 per cent of final placement students gaining employment since 2011 including 70 per cent in statutory care, 20 per cent in voluntary agencies and 5 per cent in agency or private settings.<sup>111</sup> This result compares well to the more general experience, where in 2011 only 64 per cent of graduates were employed in social care or social work.<sup>112</sup> The opportunity for LA cooperation stems from the fact that students on their second placement are allowed to handle statutory work, with 47 per cent of the organisations work coming directly from LAs.

Several important lessons can be taken from the Sweet project. Chief amongst them is that the ability of students on their second placement to carry out statutory tasks opens up an avenue whereby third sector organisations can effectively take on tasks for LAs whilst providing effective and high quality placements. However, this is only likely to be effective if students are supported effectively whilst carrying out statutory duties and LAs are cooperative in the process of carrying out assessments and referrals.

A significant barrier to universities embracing such a model has been concern about the quality of placements. As we have seen this is well founded, with placements being key to the employability of the students in question. However, it does mean that when establishing such groundbreaking schemes there is likely to be a problem with attracting demand from universities. The introduction of a measure to guarantee placement quality would help allay some of these concerns.

**Recommendation 4: The College of Social Work should enable external organisations to gain 'teaching organisation' status if they can demonstrate that they are providers of quality student placements equivalent to those provided by LAs.** This status should have the same content and supervision requirements as LAs.

110 The Social Work Education, Experience and Training Project Website, <http://www.sweetproject.co.uk/>.

111 SWEET Project, Promotional Brochure, 2012.

112 CommunityCare, 'Quarter of new social workers in England remain jobless after a year,' 2011.

**Recommendation 5: LAs should cooperate with third sector organisations to provide statutory tasks which can be carried out by supervised students on placement.** This cooperation could be based on the model the Sweet project operates on. For instance, some LAs granted ‘teaching organisation’ status may want to create a formal partnership with such an organisation and, potentially, a supporting University.

Evidently one of the main barriers to increasing the numbers of such organisations is cost. For example, whilst the Sweet project is self-sufficient on the income from student placement fees paid by the University, the fact that Universities tend to pay at the end of a placement in a lump-sum can mean serious cash flow issues, especially during set-up. Illustrating this point, Sweet have considered franchising but estimated that the cost of setting up a new branch equates to around £200,000; a large sunk cost which cannot be offset until students have completed their placements. Overcoming the barriers to this business model would help make establishing such education-based organisations much more feasible.

**Recommendation 6: Such organisations should seek to be self-sufficient on the basis of the funding which can be provided by student placement fees.** This will enable their primary purpose to be solely providing quality placements.

**Recommendation 7: Universities and government should be more flexible with the financing of student placement fees, including paying a significant sum up-front rather than at the end of the placement, with potential for claw-back.** This should allow such business models to become more feasible by reducing cash-flow problems and increasing the ability to take on more students.

### Learning by units

Increasing the number of students on placements will undoubtedly place strain on already limited LA resources. Many social workers we interviewed identified that the key constraint preventing them from taking on students was a lack of time and insufficient financial incentive. With an emphasis on creating more statutory placements within LAs comes the need to embrace learning techniques which will not impose additional pressures.

One option is to embrace group-based learning in so-called ‘student units.’ A form of group learning would allow more students to be monitored by fewer social workers, as well as offering a better forum for the discussion of issues and practice.

Clearly the introduction of student units is not a catch-all solution to the challenges of giving students sufficient experience on placement. However, moving towards a group-based approach could mean that more students can be accommodated in a more productive learning environment.

This change could, in turn, be facilitated by social workers specialising as practice educators; something which would diversify the career progression routes social workers could take. This potential is one reason that they are cited in the Munro Review.<sup>113</sup>

Questions to consider will include the optimum number of students; how they interact with statutory cases; and the job specification of the student unit leaders. This will likely be different for each LA, depending on how it structures its social work departments.

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<sup>113</sup> Munro, E., “The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system,” Department for Education, 2011.

**Box 3.4: Student units – a brief summary**

The term 'student units' is something of a catch-all phrase for group teaching of social work students whilst they are on placements. Established in the early 1970s in response to the demand for qualified social workers, they have gradually disappeared over time with changing education methods. Whilst multiple patterns and variations can be identified, they generally included a student unit supervisor acting as a co-ordinator who either directly oversaw the work of a group of students, or who worked in conjunction with a wider team.<sup>114</sup>

The key differences from the current organisation of student placements generally related to two key characteristics: the existence of a dedicated or specialist practice educator who would co-ordinate placements and their duty to oversee multiple students at once. This approach also offered the opportunity for group learning, as well as wider support for practice educators.<sup>115</sup>

There is thus precedent to reorganise the provision of social work placements in a way which both permits a wider variation in the development of social worker career paths, and increase the capacity of social work placement provision.

**Recommendation 8: In order to increase their capacity for placement provision, LAs should be encouraged to set up 'student units' for students to undertake their practice placements with.** Implementing this approach should be supported by the Department for Education to evaluate the success of this method.

**Recommendation 9: Setting up 'student units' should be seen as an opportunity to implement more diverse career structures for social workers, with a specific focus on the creation of a 'practice-educator' route.** This role would allow more senior social workers to see career progression while still remaining on the frontline. Practice educators should have a lower caseload but supervise ASYE and placement students.

**Recommendation 10:** If LAs do not take up such arrangements, those LAs failing to deliver sufficient quality placements should be required to reorganise along these lines on a pilot basis.

**Making the best of the bursary**

The social work bursary was introduced with the goal of increasing the flow of students studying social work, and as a result, the amount of social workers in the long-term. In some respects it has been successful, with the amount of applicants increasing from 4,765 in 2004–2005 to 6,113 in 2010.<sup>116</sup> Despite this, reform of the social work bursary was recently undertaken, with consultation ending in July 2012,<sup>117</sup> and a series of recommendations and decisions made.<sup>118</sup> These reforms demonstrate the increased need and willingness to make the most out of the social work bursary budget, and are outlined in Box 3.5.

114 Ainsworth, F., & Fulcher, L., "Student units for practice teaching in group care," *Social Work Education: The International Journal*, Volume 3 (2), 1984.

115 CommunityCare, 'How past social work practices could benefit us today,' 2009.

116 General Social Care Council, "A Report on Social Work Education in England: Data Pack," 2011.

117 "Consultation launched on social work bursary," Department of Health 2012, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.dh.gov.uk/health/2012/05/consultation-launched-on-social-work-bursary/>.

118 "New social work bursary details set out," Department of Health 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-social-work-bursary-details-set-out>.

### Box 3.5: Ongoing reforms to the social work bursary

In May 2012, the Department of Health launched a consultation into the social work bursary scheme, with the goal of ensuring that it continued to “attract sufficiently high quality candidates to come forward to study and work as social workers.”<sup>119</sup> This followed recommendations of the Social Work Taskforce.<sup>120</sup>

The consultation itself highlighted five options with various costs and impacts. They were:

- Means-testing the undergraduate and postgraduate bursary with a cap on the number of students who receive a bursary;
- Retaining the postgraduate bursary with a cap on the number of students who receive a bursary;
- Retaining the undergraduate bursary from the second year and the current postgraduate scheme with a cap on the number of students who receive a bursary;
- Ending the bursary completely to redeploy resources into social work training;
- Creating a new scheme based on successful completion of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment.

After the receipt of a number of responses, including from The College of Social Work<sup>121</sup> and the British Association of Social Workers,<sup>122</sup> the government released its response on 26th October. It was decided that the new arrangements taking effect in 2013 would be:

- Keeping an undergraduate bursary for years 2 and 3 to support those unable to work part-time due to course commitments;
- Maintaining the postgraduate bursary as it is to ensure a continuation of highly qualified graduates;
- Capping the number of undergraduate and post-graduate bursary service users to ensure a sufficient supply of high quality students is maintained.<sup>123</sup>

These reforms will take place for those entering university in the 2013/2014 academic year. The impact assessment for the reforms estimated that this approach would save £221m over 10 years, whilst retaining the current level of bursary for all of those apart from undergraduates in their first year.<sup>124</sup>

119 “Consultation launched on social work bursary,” Department of Health 2012, <http://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/+/www.dh.gov.uk/health/2012/05/consultation-launched-on-social-work-bursary/>.

120 Social Work Task Force, “Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force,” 2009.

121 The College of Social Work, “Reforming the Social Work Bursary – Response to Consultation Paper from The College of Social Work,” 2012.

122 British Association of Social Workers, “Social Work Bursary consultation form,” 2012.

123 “New social work bursary details set out,” Department of Health 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-social-work-bursary-details-set-out>.

124 Department of Health, “Social Work Bursary Consultation Impact Assessment, 2012,” See: <http://www.dh.gov.uk/health/files/2012/05/Social-Work-Bursary-Consultation-Impact-Assessment.pdf>.

As discussed previously – large numbers of social work students do not go on to practice social work, either because they cannot find employment, or because they choose employment in positions which do not require a social work qualification. Many of these will be joining related fields within social care, but some will not, representing an effective loss to the taxpayer. Insofar as the primary and overriding goal of the social work bursary is to produce more social workers in the long-run, one way to make a better use of resources and encourage those individuals to enter social work would be to introduce a form of conditionality on the bursary by making those who do not go on to work in social work or related professions repay the bursary over a manageable period of time.

Similar schemes exist in multiple services where the government would like to incentivise recruitment. For example, officer training for the army is encouraged through their Undergraduate Bursary scheme, which totals £6,000, with the student receiving £1,000 per year and £3,000 upon completion of training at the Royal

Military Academy Sandhurst.<sup>125</sup> The bursary applies to those taking a three year contract, but breaking this condition means that the bursary has to be repaid. Similar conditions exist with the Army's Sixth Form scholarship program, which requires the repayment of the bursary to the Ministry of Defence if the student wants to be released from the commitment.<sup>126</sup> Such bursary conditionality is commonplace in the private sector, with professional qualifications such as the Legal Practice Course often being funded by the employer in return for a guaranteed commitment.

Given the purpose of the social work bursary and the limited resources to provide it, it seems reasonable that those who are subsidised to become social workers and then do not should have to repay that sum. Through the bursary the government is making an investment, and it seems both inefficient and unfair to allow those who will not contribute to the social work profession to free-ride on that subsidy. This approach is especially relevant due to the underlying theme of the recent reforms; namely making better use of budgetary resources. Additionally, the fact that the bursary will now have a maximum amount of recipients makes it all the more important to ensure that wasted resources are recouped and redeployed in the long-term.

Of course, imposing conditions on the subsidy is only fair if those individuals have made a choice to actively pursue another profession, rather than simply being unable to find employment in social work. As a result, it is necessary to ensure that there are sufficient employment opportunities for NQSWs. However, as we have seen, the key issue has not been one of lack of vacancies, but lack of appropriately experienced candidates – something which should be rectified by wider changes to social work training. Repayment should also be structured in a manner which is bearable for the service user. We believe that a model based upon tuition fee repayment where individuals would only have to repay the sum at a reasonable rate after they were earning above a certain threshold would be the most appropriate form for this to take, especially as the receipt of the social work bursary would reduce a student's reliance on similar loans which are repaid in the same manner.

**Recommendation 11: The Department for Education should make the receipt of the social work bursary conditional on taking up a position as a social worker or in a related profession such as social care for a given period (for instance 3 years). The bursary should be repaid if this condition is not met.**

Government should consult as to how best to implement this approach.

This consultation should include: consideration of the professions which should be considered to be related; the exact length of commitment; and how the employment of social workers can be tracked.

### Fast-tracking social workers

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, the Centre for Workforce Intelligence Supply and Demand model suggests that, even assuming that every social work student were recruited, the supply of social workers would only reach demand for their services at some point around 2022. This assumption is clearly unrealistic; even if they could all find employment, at least some would be likely to decide not to enter the profession. As a result, there is certainly potential for adopting different schemes to recruit social workers. A recurring theme has been the potential for fast-tracking suitable candidates through what is otherwise a protracted training period. A history of these proposals is displayed in Box 3.6.

125 Army/Ministry of Defence, "Undergraduate Bursary," 2013, See: <http://www.army.mod.uk/armyineducation/bursary/undergraduate-bursary.aspx>.

126 Army/Ministry of Defence, "6th Form Scholarship, 2013," See: <http://www.army.mod.uk/armyineducation/bursary/6th-form-scholarship.aspx>.

### Box 3.6: Fast-track schemes, proposals, and suggestions; past and present

#### The Social Work Graduate Fast Track Scheme in Scotland, 2003–7

This scheme was introduced by the Scottish Executive in 2003, in cooperation with other relevant bodies such as the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities. It was intended to deal with issues of recruitment and retention within Scottish social work, dealing particularly with challenges relating to a shortage of qualified social workers and a reduction in the number of trainees qualifying through standard routes.<sup>127</sup>

The remit of the scheme was to recruit 50 graduates to trainee posts within children's care, eventually expanded to 150 a year. Trainee selection criteria required previous relevant experience, with backgrounds including nursing, teaching, the police force, the civil service and youth. They received a limited salary during training, followed by employment as a social worker upon completion. The scheme was broadly successful, though ended when the final cohort of trainees entered in 2006/2007.<sup>128</sup>

#### No More Blame Game – The Future for Children's Social Workers, 2007–

The Conservative Party's Commission on Social Workers reported in 2007. In their publication 'No More Blame Game' responses to their consultation included the suggestion of fast-tracked training for suitably experienced individuals who wanted to take up a career in social work.<sup>129</sup>

#### Step Up to Social Work, 2010–

Conceived by the government in 2009 and implemented from 2010 onwards, Step Up to Social Work was established with the goal of allowing students to work towards a Masters degree in social work whilst gaining practical experience. Coursework and practical work are pursued simultaneously, with qualification taking between 18 and 24 months. Students receive financial support of £15,000 or more annually throughout their training, and the scheme is organised with a strong regional element; partnering LAs with Universities to provide training and placements.<sup>130</sup>

The second annual cohort had 240 students as of February 2012 and a third cohort was announced in March 2013.<sup>131</sup> Total funding for the program so far is £11.7m.<sup>132</sup> A key entrance requirement is a large amount of prior experience working with children, young people, and families,<sup>133</sup> making the program particularly suitable for career switchers.

#### Frontline proposal, 2012/2013

Proposed in October 2012, Frontline seeks to transfer the 'Teach First' model of teacher training to children's social work. This would entail the recruitment of high-quality graduates who would then take part in an intensive training course before undertaking intensive work experience. The proposed structure of the model is that of a social enterprise; an entity focused on social returns to the community rather than purely financial goals.

Financing for training in the first year would be provided by the social enterprise Frontline and by the LA in their second year. By the end of the first year they would be certified to practice as a social worker, and their second year would be their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment.<sup>134</sup>

These policies received support from the Department for Education in May 2013 and pilots for 100 recruits will begin in September 2013.<sup>135</sup>

127 Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, "Social Work Graduate Fast Track Scheme: Evaluation Report 2006 – Hooks and Anchors: Recruitment and Retention for the Scottish Social Services," 2006.

128 Scottish Institute for Excellence in Social Work Education, "Social Work Graduate Fast Track Scheme: Evaluation Report 2006 – Hooks and Anchors: Recruitment and Retention for the Scottish Social Services," 2006.

129 Conservative Party Commission on Social Workers, "No More Blame Game – The Future for Children's Social Workers," 2007.

130 Department for Education, "Frequently asked questions about the Step Up Programme," 2013, See: <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/social/becomingasocialworker/a00201143/faqs-about-step-up>

131 Department for Education, "Step Up to Social Work – new cohort announced," 2013, See: <http://www.education.gov.uk/childrenandyoungpeople/social/becomingasocialworker/b00200996/step-up>

132 Results from Freedom of Information Requests. For further information contact the author.

133 Op.cot. Department for Education, "Step Up to Social Work – new cohort announced," 2013.

134 MacAllister, J. et al., "Frontline: Improving the children's social work profession," Institute for Public Policy Research, 2012.

135 Department for Education, "First ever chief social workers for children and fast-track training to lead social work reform," 2013.

A unifying theme of these models is the desire to move suitable candidates through to front line practice at a quicker pace than the conventional route would allow. If this could be done successfully without compromising the quality of experience and training, this is a clearly desirable goal.

This issue has been highlighted by the largely negative or ambivalent response that Frontline has received from social workers. Many have complained about the lack of life experience of the recruits making them unsuitable and have warned that a combination of in-work training and a Russell-group or better degree are unlikely to prepare recruits for the rigours and stress of frontline practice.<sup>136</sup> It has been argued that many of the necessary skills to practice social work, such as good interpersonal skills,<sup>137</sup> are not guaranteed by having a high-quality academic degree, and may develop over years of conventional social work training.

It is possible that such issues could be rectified through an appropriate selection process, such as Step Up to Social Work's, which only recruited those with experience or qualities which suggested that they would be able to effectively adapt to social work within the training period. Selection under the Frontline model will be done on the basis of academic performance. However, as the report outlining the Frontline concept noted:

*"Academic achievement on its own is not sufficient to screen participants for a fast-track programme. Many lecturers and employers stressed this point in interviews and focus groups. The selection process will therefore need to assess applicants against these broader criteria."*<sup>138</sup>

This seems a reasonable position. However, given that practical experience in related fields is likely to make applicants more likely to hold the relevant skills, and given that the goal of the Frontline model is to target top graduates and career switchers, it seems that by applying this criteria, the pool of candidates is extremely likely to overlap with that of the existing Step Up to Social Work scheme. This is unlikely to be a significant issue in the short-term as a relatively small proportion of social work students will be participating in fast-tracked schemes. However, the longer-term interaction between the different fast-tracked schemes and conventional social work education should be considered.

Given this overlap, we believe that an amalgamation of the two programs would be a desirable long-term goal. Having separate bodies which ostensibly focus on students and career-switchers, but in reality overlap seems unnecessary. Having a more streamlined system with access to a wider pool of recruits would allow greater competition for places and, as a result, the recruitment of the most suitable candidates. This seems especially true given the level of oversubscription that Step Up to Social Work has received in its two cohorts – in London, reaching around 20 applications per place.<sup>139</sup>

The effect in the long-term may mean that the typical fast-track intake is weighted towards career-switchers or those with ambitions to work in social work but a desire to go through a more fast-tracked system, rather than high-

**“Having a more streamlined system with access to a wider pool of recruits would allow greater competition for places and, as a result, the recruitment of the most suitable candidates”**

136 A summary of several objections and links to further comments on the frontline scheme can be found here: <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/blogs/social-work-blog/2012/10/teachers-telling-social-worker.html>.

137 Trevithick, P., et al., "Social Care Institute for Excellence, Knowledge Review: Teaching and learning communication skills in social work education," 2004.

138 MacAllister, J. et al., "Frontline: Improving the children's social work profession," Institute for Public Policy Research, 2012.

139 CommunityCare, "Step Up to Social Work graduates discuss their course," 2010, See: <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/articles/16/09/2010/115303/step-up-to-social-work-graduates-discuss-their-course.htm>.

calibre graduates. This would not be undesirable insofar as it selected those who were most likely to be effective social workers. In short, a program which seeks the highest quantity of quality social workers is clearly more desirable than one which focuses on where those recruits are initially coming from. This model would allow outstanding graduates to contribute and be recruited, but mean that overall resources are deployed towards those who will be the most effective social workers. What should matter is how effective those social workers will be, not where they came from.

An amalgamated approach seems especially appropriate given that financial constraints may mean that the expansion of one scheme may be at the expense of another. Total funding for the two cohorts of Step Up to Social Work students has totalled £11.7m. Whilst it is unclear what size the fully developed Frontline scheme would be, Teach First, the model which Frontline is based on, will receive £32.4m of funding in 2012 and trained 1,250 graduates.<sup>140</sup> Even allowing for a significantly smaller program, it would seem that a substantial amount of government resources would be necessary, which in the context of constrained public finances may mean the longer-term coexistence of both programs is endangered. It seems that a wider consideration of both programs is necessary in order to make the best use of scarce resources and to cherry-pick the more desirable aspects of both.

**Recommendation 12: The Department for Education should support the establishment of a fast-track social work training scheme which amalgamates the best features of both the Step Up to Social Work and the Frontline models.** This scheme should:

- Base its recruitment criteria on finding the most effective social workers rather than targeting a specific group such as graduates and;
- Combine the budgets of both schemes to ensure that there is clarity about their future and that recruitment into fast-track schemes continues.

### Learning lessons

The impact of a fast-tracked education system which is employer-facing and focused on quickly and effectively training social workers will clearly not be confined to that scheme. The development of new methods for training social workers such as effective in-work training or altered training schedules could contain important lessons which could be applied to conventional routes of social work training. If a certain element of the fast-tracked system such as on-the-job education rather than discrete placements is successful, it is important that this knowledge informs attempts to improve wider social work education.

To achieve this goal, information on the effectiveness of recruitment and retention should be collected and used to refine the system. The Health and Care Professions Council already has responsibility for tracking social work registration and other activity on a national level, but monitoring the effectiveness and ability of LAs to adapt would provide useful information.

**Recommendation 13: The Department for Education should carry out an evaluation of the fast-track scheme, and seek to apply relevant lessons to**

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<sup>140</sup> Department for Education, "Tripling number of top graduates recruited through Teach First," 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/tripling-number-of-top-graduates-recruited-through-teach-first>.

**conventional social work education.** This would help spread best practice within social work education, as well as helping calibrate social work education courses to the needs of employers.

### Overcoming recruitment challenges

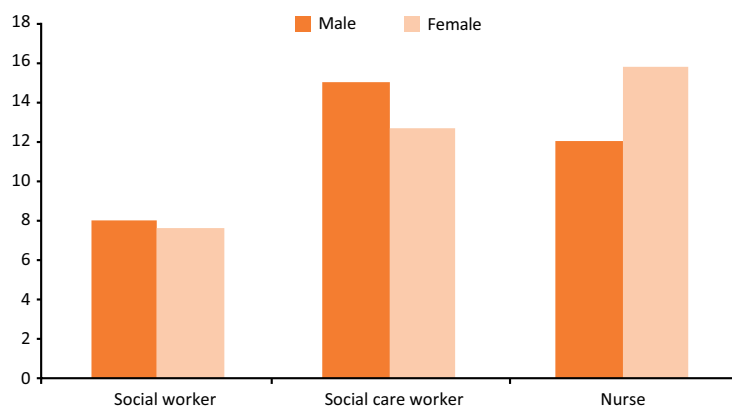
Providing effective social work services requires a workforce which can effectively communicate with its clients, identify their needs and respond effectively. Currently vacancy rates in certain frontline units mean that staff shortages persist, caseloads are high, and service provision faces long-term challenges. This partially reflects social work education which does not fulfil the needs of employers, with many NQSWs having difficulties finding employment. To resolve this conundrum, this chapter has made a number of recommendations, including policies to increase the availability of statutory placements, and to explore new and innovative ways of delivering social work education. This is, however, only part of the challenge – not only must more social workers be recruited, they must also be retained in the long-term.

# 4

## Retaining Social Workers

Recruiting and training social workers is only a part of a wider problem. Too often, skilled and effective social workers decide to leave the profession, with high rates of burnout meaning that the average social worker's working life is only eight years. As demonstrated in Figure 4.1 this is significantly lower than other equivalent professions.<sup>141</sup> This can at least in part be attributed to the wider structural issues within social work departments we outlined earlier, where a lack of career progression or support mechanisms discourage staff from staying.<sup>142</sup>

**Figure 4.1: Estimates of the expected working life of a member of a profession (years)**



Source: Curtis, L, Moriarty, J, and Netten, A, "The Expected Working Life of a Social Worker", *British Journal of Social Work* (2010).

Two things mark out retention as a particular cause for concern. First, social work is a profession where the accumulation of experience to instruct future social workers and guide best practice is highly valued. This process is evidently harmed by social work units losing more experienced members of staff as they build up experience. The second problem is that, given government spending in the training of social workers, low retention indicates a loss of the resources invested in the individual who leaves.

This means that simply increasing the number of workers recruited will be insufficient to solve workforce problems if not combined with significant moves to retain those workers as they build up more experience.

141 Curtis, L, Moriarty, J, and Netten, A, "The Expected Working Life of a Social Worker", *British Journal of Social Work*, 2010.

142 Social Work Task Force, "Building a safe, confident future: The final report of the Social Work Task Force," 2009.

Information on where social workers go after leaving LA employment is scarce, but continued registration and anecdotal evidence suggest that many continue to practice, but as agency workers. Agency work is not itself a bad thing; a flexible workforce is needed in many cases and agencies can be effective at ensuring temporary provision. However, an increasing LA dependence on agencies to fulfil core functions suggests that at least a significant minority of those who leave LA social work do so because of issues, structural or otherwise, in LA employment, rather than a desire to quit social work itself.

These structural issues are well documented, and were highlighted in Chapter 2. High caseloads and stress are combined with low levels of support and little potential for career development. A key part of solving this issue will be increasing retention through offering further opportunities for support, development, and progression, as well as reducing the burdens placed on social workers where possible.

### Progression through education

The career structure a social worker faces may well be one of the strongest barriers preventing their retention, both in a general sense, and specifically on the frontline where their expertise would be most useful. Whilst attempts to diversify the career path have been pursued previously, in the majority of cases they have merely led to an additional stage of progression rather than a fundamental rethinking of career progression routes. This means that for the majority of social workers, career advancement is still only really possible through advancing into management. The effect is that those who are passionate and effective social workers are either eventually moved away from frontline practice and into management, or, if they wish to remain on the front line, are faced with few opportunities for genuine career development. This is made all the more problematic due to the fact that agency employment will often be more lucrative, offering social workers a route towards more flexible employment which is also better remunerated.

One solution is to exploit the move towards educational supervision and provision that is needed within social work. Providing a career pathway for the most experienced social workers to be retained in frontline practice, to progress in their careers and help resolve the issues in social work training would clearly be desirable and could be an effective tool to boost retention for the most experienced and valuable staff.

As outlined in Chapter 3, a move towards the establishment of ‘teaching organisation’ status and an increased need to supervise students offers an opportunity to diversify the options open to social workers. The increased number of students being supervised will necessitate more staff with the necessary skills to support them. In the longer-term, development of specific positions within social work departments which allow a social worker to continue frontline practice whilst supervising students would allow the development of an alternative *practice educator* career path for those who wish to progress without moving into management. Whilst by no means a solution to all of the problems with retention and career progression, an additional level of diversity is likely to encourage more individuals to stay in the profession. Furthermore, through an educative post, those individuals are likely to contribute significantly to resolving the long-term challenges facing the social work profession, through helping to

provide and supervise more placements as well as the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (AYSE).

Given the constraints on taking on students, the new practice educator positions would require a level of caseload relief. In the short-term this may appear a counter-intuitive solution, but through effective use of placement students, and the increased ability to take on and monitor NQSWs, the medium and long-term case holding capacity of the ASYE is likely to increase. Given that training and a level of development will likely be necessary for those undergoing this career pathway, it would be an ideal way of both transmitting lessons about how to provide the best quality of placements, and in turn, how ASYE and placement students can be effectively used to contribute to and support teams without compromising the quality of provision.

**Recommendation 14: The move towards more diverse career structures and, in particular, the creation of a “practice educator” route, should not be confined to LAs who introduce student units.** All LAs should be encouraged to introduce these part frontline, part educator/management roles as a way to develop expertise for a teaching organisation status and away to allow social workers to progress while retaining contact with the front line.

### Support and development

A common complaint from social workers is that high caseload levels prevent there being sufficient time for professional development. This is something we have seen reflected in our interviews with social workers, as well as in the British Association of Social Workers’ State of Social Work survey.<sup>143</sup> The cause can be discerned from the CfWI Supply and Demand model, which suggests that the total demand for social work services outweighs available supply.<sup>144</sup>

A clear and easy solution would be a reduction in caseloads. Whilst initially attractive, beyond recruiting more social workers to existing vacant positions, existing budgetary constraints make this unfeasible. Even were budget increases possible, they would likely be ineffective without the substantial changes to staff training and recruitment described in Chapter 2. However, what can be done is easing specific burdens social workers face in order to make caseloads and working conditions more bearable in the long-run.

One such issue is a lack of opportunities for professional development within social work. For example, despite standards set for employers which mandate regular supervision, time for reflective practice, and continuing professional development,<sup>145</sup> the majority of social workers we interviewed commented that this is sporadic and unorganised at best. This sentiment is reflected in comments to BASW.<sup>146</sup>

The perception that supervision and continuing professional development is often undirected, lacking structure or a sense of progression is obviously a cause for concern. The introduction of career positions with a focus on practice-based education offers a potential remedy to this situation. Whilst supervising ASYE students and placements will be time-consuming, responsibility for developing and implementing coherent Continuing Professional Development (CPD) plans and non-caseload related supervision could fall either to the same practice educator, or a specific practice educator with CPD responsibilities. The crucial

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143 British Association of Social Work, “The State of Social Work,” 2012.

144 Centre for Workforce Intelligence, Supply and Demand Model, 2012.

145 Social Work Reform Board, ‘Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England and Supervision Framework.’

146 British Association of Social Workers, “Voices from the Frontline: Real comments from social workers who responded to BASW’s survey, the state of social work 2012,” 2012.

difference from supervision by management would be the explicit focus on CPD and progression-related supervision.

The advantages would be twofold; first, a more diverse career progression route would be facilitated by individuals effectively having time and space to develop their practice. Second, simply being able to engage in a process which encourages career progression and development is more likely to increase the job satisfaction of those who wish to progress in their careers, with the likelihood this will have a positive effect on retention. Moreover, a channel divorced from management for social workers to engage with is likely to offer a channel of support which may help them cope with caseload issues.

**Recommendation 15: Practice Educators should also have responsibility for overseeing plans for Continuous Professional Development and Supervision.**

This should allow professional development to become more consistent, structured, and useful, thereby improving the quality of service offered. Combined with an emphasis on career progression, this should have a positive effect on the retention of social workers.

## Returning to the fold

As we have highlighted, the primary reason such reforms have not been undertaken has been due to the pressure of the moment – in particular, high caseloads, which make taking time out for development or training problematic. The process of introducing a more diverse career structure will require extensive planning and implementation. This means that any reform will take time, with few easy gains in the short term. However, more immediate routes to reform could compliment and precede the reforms above.

Many social work departments have an increasing reliance on temporary agency workers to fulfil duties within the LA, whilst simultaneously being unable to fill longer-term positions with experienced social workers. Whilst this is a source of the problem, it also offers a level of flexibility which should help the system adjust in the longer-term. This can occur through two mechanisms; first, having a flexible workforce should allow LAs to hold caseloads roughly constant whilst they undergo adjustments whilst retaining the ability to effectively shed agency workers as new qualified recruits become available for full-time work at a cost which is likely to be cheaper than agency workers.

Second, practice-educator positions for experienced workers may allow progression which is more in line with what agency work offers, presenting a unique opportunity to recapture an experienced segment of the workforce. Suitable individuals carrying out agency work may be tempted to rejoin direct LA employment in new specialised roles as practice educators. This, in turn, could mirror a wider scheme to encourage agency workers to return to LA employment, something which would become more appealing as the need for agency workers decreases.

**Recommendation 16: LAs should consider how to encourage agency social workers to re-enter Local Authority employment.** This would be desirable due to the skills that some of the more experienced social workers could bring to their positions and especially to the practice educator role. It would also exploit what

should be a diminishing role for agency work as longer-term workforce stability is achieved, and be cost-neutral as the cost of the agency social worker is simply paid in a direct wage rather than a fee to the agency.

### Retaining social workers

Retention of social workers is perhaps the most complex problem that the profession faces; a combination of long-term workforce problems have affected morale and reduced incentives to stay in the profession. In this chapter we have outlined some solutions to this: providing greater support and development opportunities, make caseloads more manageable in the long-term and finding ways to retain the most experienced and best social workers. Taking these steps will not be easy, but will be necessary if we are going to continue to provide the social services service users need.

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# 5

## Reclaiming the Profession

As well as problems with recruitment and retention, financial constraints and greater demand for services mean social workers will have to begin to deliver the same services with less money. This chapter outlines evidence from some encouraging innovations which may help achieve this.

### The need for innovation

One way of achieving a more effective social work profession with fewer resources is through adopting innovative models of organisational structure and practice. These models have the potential to: allocate resources more efficiently, reduce costs, create better decision making processes, reduce caseloads and free up social workers from administrative burdens to spend more time working directly with children and families.

As the Reclaiming Social Work model – a sector led innovation in Hackney – has demonstrated, effective reforms can deliver better outcomes for service users while cutting costs over the medium to long-term through better allocation of resources towards early intervention and preventative services. As we have noted, this does not necessarily require additional spending. For example, Morning Lane Associates, a social enterprise committed to driving innovation in social work, commented that:<sup>147</sup>

*“Providing additional resources will not fix the problem. In our experience, the necessary resources are often already there within the system, but they need to be used in a much more effective way. If practitioners were not spending in many instances over 80% of their time immersed in administration, but were instead undertaking effective, evidence based and preventative direct work with families, this has the potential to release huge savings which can then be reinvested in further prevention work. Most understand the strategic sense of this, but many do not yet operationalise this into effective frontline services.”*

### Innovation and risk

One of the main obstacles to this type of innovation is not the lack of resources but a system of incentives which encourage risk aversion. This culture runs throughout the profession and is heavily influenced by both government and the media. A commonly cited example is the aftermath of the death of Peter Connolly in 2007. Analysis by the Child and Family Court Advisory and Support Service (Cafcass) showed that from 11th November (when the Peter Connolly serious case review was made public) to 30th November 2008, a total of 449 care order

147 During interviews with Policy Exchange conducted as part of this report.

applications were filed, an increase of 37% over the previous twenty day period. Throughout 2009 Cafcass received its highest ever level of demand for work relating to section 31 applications (for care and supervision orders), peaking at 784 requests in June 2009, an increase of 113% compared to the June 2008.<sup>148</sup>

Several experts have referred to a systemic structure of risk aversion, with one academic arguing that these figures show child protection is a “fragile system that is influenced by politics and fear, not solid assessment.”<sup>149</sup> Similar concerns about financial reputational risks have also led the Social Care Institute for Excellence

to warn about the prevalence of risk-aversion in adult social care.<sup>150</sup>

At the management level, this risk aversion has the potential to prevent adoption of new structures which would give social workers more autonomy and prevents effective allocation of resources. For individual

social workers, it can be mean they are reduced to mere assessors who are not empowered to use their own judgement or to actively engage beyond narrowly defined parameters.<sup>151</sup>

It has been argued that this approach has reduced the quality of social workers’ practice making them less effective at safeguarding the vulnerable.<sup>152</sup> In particular, inquiries and subsequent policy changes responding to major scandals risk overriding genuinely needed changes. ‘Knee jerk’ legislation which over-regulates and constrains the ability of social workers and local authorities to operate flexibly and adjust their resource allocation is a frequently cited issue.<sup>153</sup>

To improve this situation, a culture which allows for mistakes and facilitates sharing and learning from experiences needs to be fostered. Crucially, social workers with sufficient skills and knowledge should be supported by their employers in flexible decision making, enabling them to effect real change on the lives of service users. Sequencing here is key; more autonomy for social workers who lack necessary skills and experience and are not supported by collaborative working practice and management, would not be desirable. In this respect, reforming training skills and practice is a necessary precondition of changes in the organisational structure.

## The Hackney Model: Reclaiming Social Work

An instructive example of this whole system approach to reform has been the Reclaiming Social Work model (RSW) in Hackney. Similar to the concerns raised elsewhere, the root of this reform lay in serious concerns about the quality of practice. In particular, by 2006 around 480 children were in care and the department was spending high sums on agency staff to cover an average 50 per cent vacancy rate that soared to 80 per cent in certain specific posts.<sup>154</sup>

To rectify this, the RSW envisaged a wholesale rethinking of the Children and Families social services department and prescribing new designs for organisational structure and practice, including its social work units and workforce. All staff were made to reapply for their positions with around 150 found to lack the requisite skills and not retained. RSW utilises a more stringent recruitment process and requires all social work staff be trained in a specific intervention methodology.

“Crucially, social workers with sufficient skills and knowledge should be supported by their employers in flexible decision making, enabling them to effect real change on the lives of service users”

148 Cafcass, “The Baby Peter effect and the increase in s31 care order applications,” 2010.

149 Alexander Katherine report, Churchill Fellowship Report “To look at child protection systems in England, Norway and the USA,” 2010.

150 Social Care Institute for Excellence, “Enabling risk, ensuring safety: Self-directed support and personal budgets,” 2010.

151 Munro, E., “The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system,” Department for Education, 2011.

152 Kenneth McLaughlin, “Regulation and Risk in Social Work,” *British Journal of Social Work* (2007), pp. 1263–1277.

153 For example, see Lord Laming, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/society/2003/mar/27/childprotection.politics>.

154 Guardian Local Government Network, “With Reclaim Social Work, Hackney Council could find itself leading a revolution,” 2010.

The model itself is highly prescriptive, setting out a clearly defined approach to organisational structure and practice methodology, with the two being viewed as highly interdependent.<sup>155</sup> Moreover, the model emphasises that increased structural autonomy cannot be implemented before improved levels of practice, since getting this sequencing back to front would increase the risk to children.

The model also places great emphasis on the shared values of the system. Its designers state that:

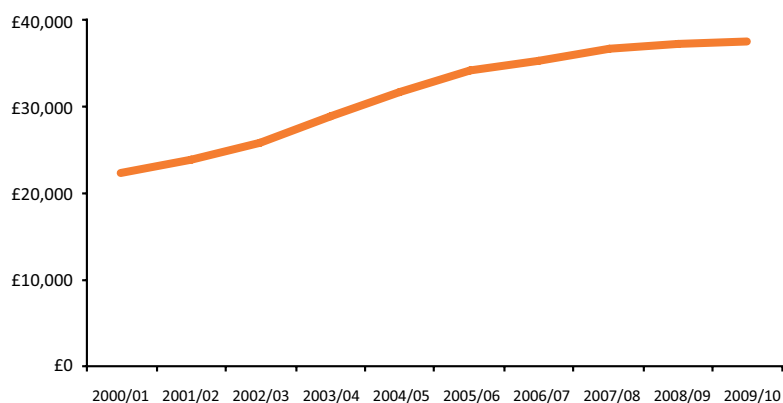
*“Fundamentally, Reclaiming Social Work is primarily interested in keeping children safely together with their families wherever possible, limiting the role of the state in families’ lives and, when that role needs to be executed, that it is done speedily, with depth and decisiveness.”<sup>156</sup>*

The purpose of this chapter is not to evaluate or describe the RSW model (this has been done comprehensively elsewhere.<sup>157</sup>) Rather, our intention here is to highlight aspects of the model which we believe ought to inform the thinking of LAs when considering their social work departments, not only for children’s services, but for wider social work reform.

### Deploying budgets effectively

A core principle of RSW is that resources should be frontloaded towards providing family based interventions and services that will reduce the number of children in care and keep families together wherever possible. This involves increasing spending on staff and early intervention services for children and families, offset by decreased costs at a later point through lower demand for expensive services for children in care. For comparison, it is worth reflecting on just how expensive these costs can be and how far they have risen in recent years.

**Figure 5.1: Cost per looked after child**



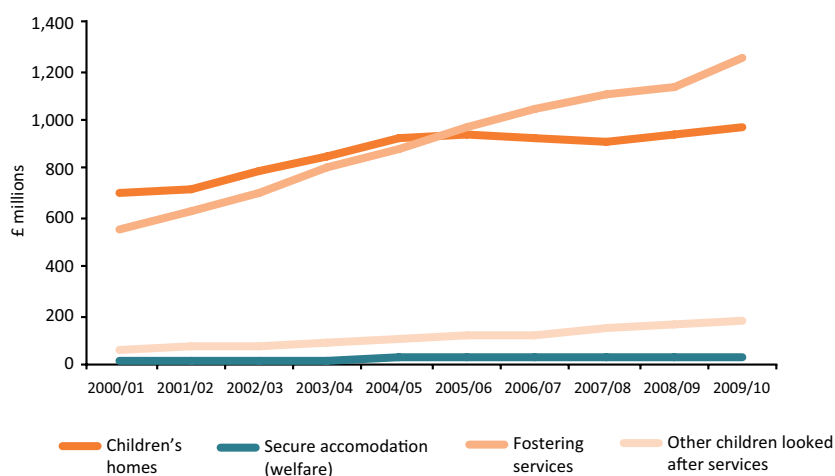
Source: 2000/00 to 2007/08: Personal Social Services Expenditure and Unit Costs NHS Information Centre. 2008/09 onwards: Children’s Services Actuals England (various years) Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting.

155 Goodman, S. and Trowler, I. “Social Work Reclaimed: Innovative Frameworks for Child and Family Social Work Practice,” 2012.

156 Goodman, S. and Trowler, I. “Social Work Reclaimed: Innovative Frameworks for Child and Family Social Work Practice,” 2012.

157 Munro, E., “The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system,” Department for Education, 2011.

**Figure 5.2: Gross expenditure on looked after children, England, 2000/1–2009/10**



Source: 2000/00 to 2007/08: Personal Social Services Expenditure and Unit Costs NHS Information Centre. 2008/09 onwards: Children's Services Actuals England (various years) Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accounting.

Aside from the direct problem of dealing with such high and escalating spending in an environment of constrained budgets, there are also serious concerns about a correlating warping of resource allocation. For example, in Hammersmith and Fulham, where the number of children in care is double the national average, over 30 per cent of the total budget of the council's children's services budget is spent on just 0.6 per cent of children living in the borough. The council spends, on average, around £1,000 per week to care for a looked-after child.<sup>158</sup>

Perhaps most importantly, the outcomes for the children themselves are very poor. We explored the evidence around outcomes for children in care in our report *Fostering Aspirations*, which found that:

- Around half of children in care have been diagnosed with a mental disorder.
- Educational outcomes are very poor, with only around a third of children in care achieving the expected Key Stage 2 level in English and Maths (compared to 74% in the general population of children).
- Twice as many 19 year olds who were previously in the care system are now not in education, employment or training (33%) than for the general 19 year old population (16%).
- Over the longer-term, over a quarter of all adults serving custodial sentences previously spent time in care and almost half of all under 21 year olds in contact with the criminal justice system have spent time in care.<sup>159</sup>

The government has indicated that it believes not enough children are being taken into the care system.<sup>160</sup> The recent Select Committee report on the child protection system also raised concerns that thresholds for Section 17 and Section 47 may be too high and rising in certain areas.<sup>161</sup> These announcements rightly reflect genuine concerns over the safeguarding of children by social services.

<sup>158</sup> <http://www.lbhffiles.co.uk/?tag=looked-after-children>.

<sup>159</sup> Harber A, Oakley M, 'Fostering Aspirations: Reforming the foster care system in England and Wales', Policy Exchange 2012, <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/fostering%20ambitions%20-%20jan%2012.pdf>.

<sup>160</sup> Michael Gove speech on child protection to IPPR, 2012, <https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/the-failure-of-child-protection-and-the-need-for-a-fresh-start>.

<sup>161</sup> House of Commons Select Committee on Education, "Children first: the child protection system in England," 2012.

However, as our recent report, *A better start in life*, outlined, in the longer-term we need to develop strategies to reduce social and personal problems so that fewer children grow up in abusive or dysfunctional families, thus reducing the need for the care system and the pressure on social work budgets.

Seen in this light, the approach of RSW and the government are completely compatible. The contentions of the RSW model are twofold:

- Often the decision to take a child into care is not the correct decision for the child or the family, driven by a culture of risk aversion and adherence to procedural guidelines rather than sound evidence based judgement, and;
- Social workers should primarily be regarded as agents of change who can deploy evidence based interventions to improve the capacities and relationships within families, resulting in more families staying together and fewer children in care. By giving greater budgetary priority to family intervention services, it is believed, will reduce the number of children arriving at the point where statutory child removal powers have to be engaged.<sup>162</sup>

Such an approach is designed to ensure that early intervention within families significantly reduces the number of children on the edge who will ultimately need to be brought into the care system. By doing so, those children in real need of care can be accommodated and provided with quality and tailored placements. Our report *A Better Start in Life* argued that a key component of the overall strategy for reducing pressure on the care system must focus on preventative interventions. We argued that reducing the numbers of children in care is:

*“Not about simply raising care thresholds and only providing for the most serious cases. Rather it is about developing short, medium and long-term strategies to reduce social and personal problems so that fewer children grow up in abusive or dysfunctional families, and that fewer families reach crisis point.”<sup>163</sup>*

The approach to resource allocation represented by the RSW model could thus improve safeguarding in line with these objectives and fit with the government’s overall approach by freeing up capacity in the care system for children at severe risk, making sure that decisions taken around child protection are based on sound evidenced based judgement, and not influenced by a lack of resources and capacity in the care system.

There is significant evidence that this strategy is effective. In conjunction with the changes in organisational structure and practice described above, there was a 30% reduction in the number of children taken into care in the period 2005/2006 to 2008/2009, alongside a 5 per cent fall into the total cost of children’s services. The introduction of RSW also coincided with a 55 per cent fall in days lost through sickness.<sup>164</sup>

Whilst placing a heavy emphasis on preventative measures, RSW has also worked to improve its preparation for care proceedings. A review of this process by the Ministry of Justice described how Hackney provides family network meetings long before proceedings to give the family an opportunity to address the issues and to identify potential kinship carers at an early stage, rather than during the court process. By improving its preparation for proceedings and quality assurance, Hackney is better able to articulate care plans when going to court.<sup>165</sup>

162 Goodman, S. and Trowler, I. “Social Work Reclaimed: Innovative Frameworks for Child and Family Social Work Practice,” 2012.

163 Burghart A, ‘A Better Start in Life: Long-term approaches for the most vulnerable children’, Policy Exchange, 2012, <http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/a%20better%20start%20in%20life.pdf>

164 Cross, S. Hubbard, A. and Munro, E., “Reclaiming Social Work: London Borough of Hackney Children and Young People’s Services – Independent Evaluation,” London School of Economics & Human Reliability, 2010.

165 Ibid.

## Rethinking responsibility and risk

As outlined, the RSW model is underpinned by a strategic aim to keep children out of care and with their families wherever possible. This has been combined with organisational changes designed to free social workers from administration and enable a new approach to risk management. The traditional social work structure generally consists of large teams of individual case holders with each social worker responsible to the team manager in a linear hierarchy.

Many social workers we interviewed who operate under this structure were critical of this approach. They described how cases are often allocated to social workers without regard to their existing caseload, specific skill set, or experience. Moreover, there is often no formal mechanism for sharing caseloads or collaborative input between social workers and we frequently heard that managers lacked sufficient frontline experience to offer appropriate support. Where management support is weak, social workers are scared to admit mistakes but struggle to obtain the support which would help them to avoid making serious errors, with the effect being that they feel pressured to avoid any risk which might occur.

Furthermore, where responsibility for the case lies with the individual social worker there is intense pressure to avoid risk. For example, one social worker with 12 years experience in child protection commented that:

*“The issue of managing risk is all encompassing for social workers. It is by sharing risk that a social worker gains the knowledge, insight and understanding needed to keep children safe. The bridge between senior management and front line workers appears to be widening leading to social workers ‘feeling’ like they manage risk in isolation.”<sup>166</sup>*

One of the key structural innovations of the RSW model is what is termed the “social work unit”. The unit is headed by a consultant social worker (CSW) who has some managerial responsibilities and overall responsibility for cases. These units also include a qualified social worker, a child practitioner, a clinician (one per two units) and created a new administrative role known as a unit co-ordinator. Although the CSW has full responsibility for all cases, the social worker or child practitioner can take the lead on cases where appropriate. However, it is integral to this model that each family, child and young person is known to each member of the unit and direct work is undertaken by everyone.<sup>167</sup>

The RSW model thus shares the assessment of risk between members of the unit. This structure facilitates multiple inputs, critical reflection and a learning approach to risk management. Moreover, it is believed that since all cases are known to each member of the unit the chance that a case can slip through the net is greatly reduced.

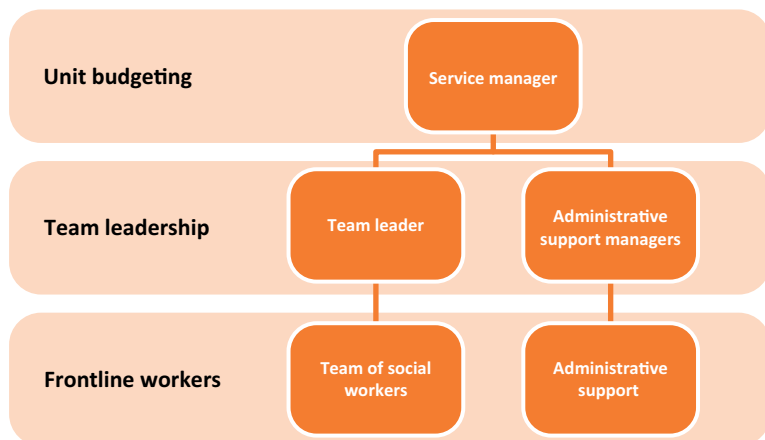
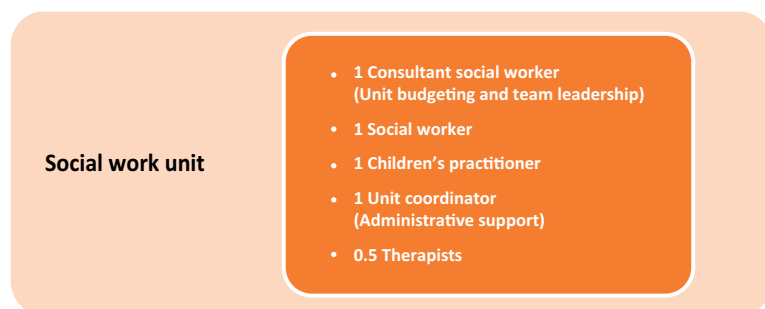
This more joined-up approach is also reflected in other elements of administration. Each CSW controls the Unit’s budgets, removing the need to constantly refer spending decisions up the hierarchy. The evaluation carried out by Eileen Munro demonstrated that when compared to ‘old-style teams’ social workers under the RSW model were much more likely to agree that they had enough autonomy to carry out their job.<sup>168</sup> A comparison of this model with a ‘standard’ arrangement is depicted below in Figures 5.3 and 5.4. As can be seen, under the RSW model, budgeting, administrative support, and frontline workers are much more integrated than under the conventional model.

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166 During interviews with Policy Exchange conducted as part of this report.

167 Cross, S. Hubbard, A. and Munro, E., “Reclaiming Social Work: London Borough of Hackney Children and Young People’s Services – Independent Evaluation,” London School of Economics & Human Reliability, 2010.

168 Munro, E., “The Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report, A child-centred system,” Department for Education, 2011.

**Figure 5.3: 'Old' generic unit organisation****Figure 5.4: RSW social work unit organisation**

A further innovation of the RSW model is the Resource Panel which makes all final decisions on starting care proceedings with the Court. The Resource Panel is chaired by the Assistant Director, and is attended by other managers and the principal legal officer. The benefit of this approach is that it “means that senior staff of the agency are aware of all serious cases and that the responsibility for bringing children into care, or not, is shared across the management team.”<sup>169</sup>

These changes have had a dramatic impact on how social workers in Hackney spend their time, reducing the administrative burden and enabling them to focus on early intervention. One consultant social worker estimates that in the past he used to spend 70–80% of his time at his computer, but since moving to a social work unit he now spends only 25–30% of his time there.<sup>170</sup> Reflecting these outcomes, the Munro evaluation of RSW found that significantly more social workers in RSW Units felt their Unit was organised in a way to allow broad assessment and early intervention. They also felt it was much more responsive to families’ needs.<sup>171</sup>

169 Alexander, K., “Report to look at child protection systems in England, Norway and the USA with a focus on supporting and inspiring frontline practice,” The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia, 2010.

170 Ministry of Justice, “Improving performance case study: London Borough of Hackney Children’s Services.”

171 Cross, S. Hubbard, A. & Munro, E., “Reclaiming Social Work: London Borough of Hackney Children and Young People’s Services – Independent Evaluation,” London School of Economics & Human Reliability, 2010.

It is also worth noting that internationally the implementation of similar models achieved significant results. A key example, Minnesota's Differential Response Model, is outlined in Box 5.1.

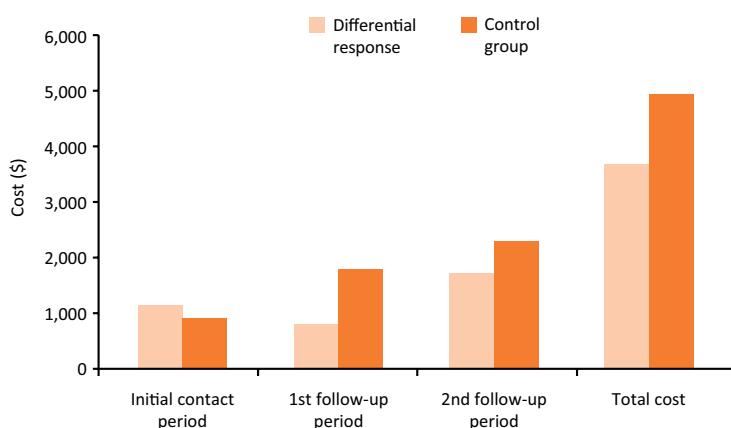
### Box 5.1: Minnesota – The Differential Response Model

In 2000, Minnesota implemented a new social work model, designed to give staff more flexibility when making assessments of children at risk. This distinguished between cases of acute risk which require a forensic investigation, and cases of less severe risk which can be more appropriately dealt with through an alternative path involving constructive engagement with families. Additional tracks may include a resource referral or prevention track for reports that do not meet the screening criteria for child protection services but suggest a need for community services. Additionally, a law enforcement unit monitors cases that may require criminal charges.<sup>172</sup>

As with the RSW model, the introduction of the differential response model coincided with significant positive changes. In one county, the number of care proceedings brought before the Children's Courts reduced significantly, alongside a fall in the number of children in out of home care from 284 in 1996 to 112 in 2006. There were also significant declines in instances where a further substantial report was required after an initial case work response, falling from 14.3 per cent in 2001 to just 2.1 per cent in 2006.<sup>173</sup>

Resources were front-loaded towards initial intervention, with higher costs on initial services and casework. However, these initial costs were offset with comparative costs reducing incrementally throughout the entire period of the care journey as demonstrated in Figure 5.5.

**Figure 5.5: Mean costs associated with sample families in 13 impact study counties**



Source: Institute of Applied Research St. Louis, Missouri, Extended Follow-up Study of Minnesota's Family Assessment Response – Final Report.

172 Child Welfare Information Gateway, "Differential Response to Reports of Child Abuse and Neglect: Issue Brief," 2008.

173 Alexander, K., "Report to look at child protection systems in England, Norway and the USA with a focus on supporting and inspiring frontline practice," The Winston Churchill Memorial Trust of Australia, 2010.

### A wider lesson?

Clearly an innovative approach to organisation such the RSW model should be considered by LAs looking to deliver efficiency savings and improve the services they provide. As we have seen, the steps taken by the RSW model seem to have

had a significant impact in Hackney, taking steps towards rectifying many of the challenges social workers have indicated to us as problems. However, applying this model is not necessarily appropriate for all LAs. In particular, the transition to such a system may not be feasible within existing structures, be prohibitively expensive or be applicable to the specific circumstances and challenges an LA faces.

Nevertheless, the fact that similar successful approaches are being taken internationally with some measure of success suggests that the RSW model is not merely one which suits specific circumstances, but rather is a set of broad principles and approaches which can lead to better outcomes and lower costs. It is our view that this is a policy path which should be followed where possible, subject to LAs maintaining their flexibility to respond to unique circumstances.

**Recommendation 17: LAs should consider the role of multidisciplinary units and shared risk in any future reorganisation of their Children's social work departments.** This would help facilitate greater support for a rebalancing of the risk calculus, and a focus on early intervention. To facilitate this change government should consult on and disseminate best practice on this topic, drawing on the RSW model.

Given that RSW and equivalent models have been primarily focused on Children's and Families social care, it is legitimate to question whether any of the lessons from them are relevant to Adult's social services. Steps such as freeing social workers to use their professional discretion, or working in multidisciplinary teams are likely to be effective in both circumstances due to the fact they target problems associated with both Adults and Children's social work. In this sense, many of the provisions in RSW would be welcome in either case. Despite this it is clear that the evidence-base needs to be expanded in order to determine how the lessons from the RSW model can best be applied to Adults' social services.

**Recommendation 18: The Department of Health should seek to expand the evidence-base regarding whether and how the lessons of RSW could be applied to Adults' social services.** This would require a comprehensive evaluation of the lessons which can be learnt from the implementation of the RSW model, as well as coordination between the various bodies which provide Adult's social services. This analysis should include a focus on structures to support preventative care, as well as a focus on the structure of social work units.

These reforms would aim to achieve the same purpose as those of the RSW model; namely supporting staff to be more proactive and work in better supported units, with a focus on long-term policies to address issues before they become acute.

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# 6

## Coordinating and Providing Services

The previous chapter discussed the RSW model, focusing on how social workers involved with front-end issues such as assessment can be effectively supported and organised. However, this is only one of the current changes being undergone in social work. This chapter will discuss the government pilots of 'Social Work Practices,' and will discuss what impact their introduction or expansion could have on the social work profession.

### Social Work Practices

Social Work Practices (SWPs) were originally intended to provide services to looked after children to address a lack of incentives for efficiency and innovation in the LA social services structure. Specifically, it was hoped SWPs would be able to offer improved quality and continuity of care. The report which first outlined the SWP model – *Care Matters* (2006) – highlighted one message consistently at the top of children's priorities: that they want social workers who are accessible and known to them.<sup>174</sup> A follow up report – *Consistent Care Matters* (2007) – highlighted three structural problems with how social work currently operates in LAs:

- The lack of incentives for efficiency and innovation;
- Rapid turnover of social work staff; and
- The decision making hierarchy.<sup>175</sup>

SWPs were designed to tackle all three problems. First, social workers would be encouraged to experiment with different organisational models and be given the flexibility to encourage innovation and imitation of good practice. To achieve this, they would be supported to set up their own independent practice, or join an existing independent or private sector organisation providing services to looked after children. Second, it was argued that giving social workers more autonomy and freeing them from bureaucracy and heavy caseloads would improve job satisfaction and reduce staff turnover. Finally, by devolving the decision making process to the social worker dealing directly with clients, SWPs would ensure that decisions were made by the person with the best knowledge of, and strongest relationship with the service user.

In reality the SWP pilots took a variety of forms. This lack of prescription is at the heart of the model, freeing up social workers to experiment and innovate

<sup>174</sup> Department for Education, "Care Matters: Transforming the Lives of Children and Young People in Care," 2006.

<sup>175</sup> Le Grand, J., "Consistent Care Matters: Exploring the Potential of Social Work Practices," 2007.

with both structure and practice. In order to help illustrate how a SWP can operate in practice Box 6.1 describes the SWP that operated in Kent as part of the independent sector organisation called Catch22.

### Box 6.1: Catch22

Catch-22, a voluntary sector provider, was commissioned by Kent Council to run its Social Work Practice, which in 2010 was tasked with dealing with 580 young people aged 16–24. It is split into four geographically-based teams each supporting around 140 looked after children and care leavers.<sup>176</sup>

Teams which coordinate the services for these individuals are multidisciplinary and consist of a Team Leader, an Assistant Team Leader or Practice Supervisor, social workers with responsibility for Young People, as well as Case Workers. These teams were joined by a number of further members of staff including an Accommodation Officer, a Countywide Mental Health Worker, a Connexions PA, and a Participation worker. These positions are supported by Administrative staff,<sup>177</sup> meaning that the teams can effectively monitor and respond to a large variation of issues within their area of jurisdiction.

As of 2012, the Social Work Practice supported 476 care leavers; approximately 43 per cent of Kent's population of looked after children and young people. These individuals can be cared for up until the age of 21, or 25 if they are in higher education or another agreed training program. The aim is to create placement stability with the goal of maximising social and educational outcomes.<sup>178</sup>

We also recognise the pressing need to increase capacity and control costs within social care and believe that the government's Social Work Practice pilot scheme has demonstrated potential to achieve this goal as well as the delivery of higher standards.

## Social Work Practices – what works?

Despite significant variation between the structural organisation and practice of each SWP, some positive outcome measures can be attributed to the model. There is evidence that smaller organisations focused on providing services for looked after children were able to provide a more tailored service and that social workers felt liberated from administration and bureaucracy and able to spend more time in direct work with children and families. Among the key positive outcomes attributed to the model were:

- The reduction of caseloads and administrative burdens;
- The small-size of the SWP pilots allowed team members to acquire familiarity with one another's cases, assisting in decision-making;
- SWP staff considered that shared responsibility for decision making made for speedier decisions;
- Carers looking after SWP children were more likely than others to consider that the social worker had often been able to take key decisions in the previous six months;

176 CommunityCare, 'Social workers in charge: how are the social work practice pilots getting on?,' 2010, <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/articles/17/02/2010/113829/progress-at-evolve-yp-and-catch22-social-work-practices-for-children-in-care.htm>.

177 Clifton, S. & Putnam, J., 'Catch22 16 Plus Presentation,' See: <http://www.kfca.org.uk/Catch22%20Presentation.pdf>.

178 Kent County Council, 'Kent's Looked-after Children Strategy 2011–2014: Improving services and outcomes for looked after children and care leavers through good and effective corporate parenting,' 2011.

- Staff turnover rates were lower for the majority of the pilots;
- Interviews with children and young people suggested that pilot children were more likely to have had the same social worker in the last year; and
- Most of the SWPs were successful in reducing placement change rates for children and young people in their first year of operation.

These outcomes indicate the potential of the Social Work Practice model to deliver services for looked after children. Determining which factors made social work practices effective is key to determining if and how they should be used by Local Authorities.

### A model of success?

Successful policies similar to SWPs can be seen in Kansas's provision of services for looked after children. US child welfare provision has faced both high caseloads and a culture of risk aversion, such that many family interventions appear to have occurred unnecessarily, resulting in excessive numbers of children in care and strained capacity overall. During the 1990s Kansas' children and families' services buckled under the pressure of a 20% increase in the number of children in care over the preceding decade. Social workers found themselves unable to cope with caseloads sometimes as high as 60–80 children.<sup>179</sup>

In the US outsourcing of services for looked after children on a large scale to the private and independent sector has been seen as a potential way out of these difficulties since the late 1990s. In 1997 the Federal Adoption and Safe Families Act was passed, designed to give states incentives to expedite adoptions and bring more flexibility into the provision of services for looked after children. As a result Kansas pioneered the privatisation of their entire foster-care service.

This involved restructuring services for children and families at risk by implementing a privatised form of managed care in family preservation, foster care, and adoption. No other state had attempted a change of this magnitude.<sup>180</sup> The initial transition took only 18 months during which time the state awarded contracts totalling \$68 million and serving more than 6,600 children and their families. Private, non-profit agencies assumed control of family preservation, adoption and foster care in February 1997.<sup>181</sup>

Under the previous fee-for-service system, agencies gained more from keeping beds filled. This system was replaced by payment of a one-time “capitated” rate of about \$13,000 for each child or family served. The state contracts linked per-child payments to high standards of care and accountability, with the children and families department retaining responsibility for monitoring the contracts and investigating abuse or neglect.<sup>182</sup>

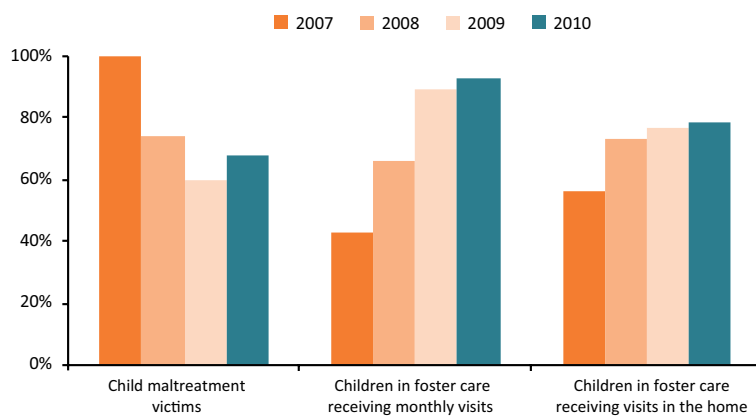
The evidence suggests this has significantly rehabilitated children's services in Kansas. The state's most recent Child and Family Services Review earned a “strength” rating for 9 of 16 safety and permanency measures, with several other measures near the 90% threshold that earns that rating. The number of adoptions has increased and the length of stay in out-of-home care fallen, alongside improvements on a whole range of indicators as demonstrated in Figures 6.1 and 6.2.

179 The Christian Science Monitor, 'Kansas Pioneers a Solution to Child-Welfare Woes,' 1997.

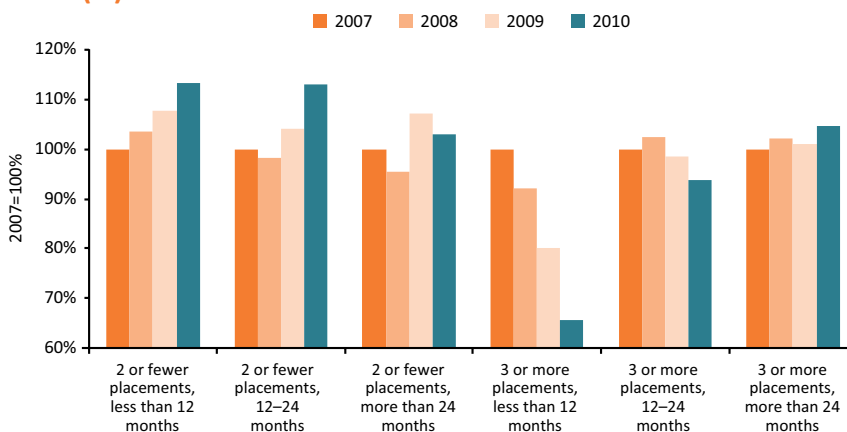
180 Child Welfare Information Gateway, 'Privatized Child Welfare Managed Care: The Kansas Experience,' <https://www.childwelfare.gov/calendar/cbconference/resourcebook/110.cfm>

181 The Christian Science Monitor, 'Kansas Pioneers a Solution to Child-Welfare Woes,' 1997.

182 The Christian Science Monitor, 'Kansas Pioneers a Solution to Child-Welfare Woes,' 1997.

**Figure 6.1: Indicators for the performance of Kansas's children and family services (2007–2010)**

Source: Children's Bureau, "Child Welfare Outcomes 2007–2010, Report to Congress: Safety, Permanency, Well-Being, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services," 2011.

**Figure 6.2: Number of placements for children in care, by time in care (%)**

Source: Children's Bureau, "Child Welfare Outcomes 2007–2010, Report to Congress: Safety, Permanency, Well-Being, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services," 2011.

In particular, the number of child maltreatment victims has fallen rapidly, alongside rising numbers of fostered children receiving monthly visits and visits at home, while the number of children in care put on three or more placements of less than twelve months has fallen significantly.

Along with Kansas, Florida also opted to privatise most of its child welfare provision. Other states chose to outsource the case management function and introduce financial incentives by using contracts that linked payment to performance. This created an opportunity to stimulate innovation and improve results by sharing potential risks and rewards with contract providers.<sup>183</sup> By 2000 one study found that 59 per cent of states had one or more privatisation initiatives underway.<sup>184</sup>

183 Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation – U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, "Evolving Roles of Public and Private Agencies in Privatized Child Welfare Systems," 2008.

184 Collins-Camargo, C., Ensign, K., and Flaherty, C. "The National Quality Improvement Center on the Privatization of Child Welfare Services: A Program Description." *Research on Social Work Practice*, 18(1): 72–81, 2008.

The emergence of independent organisations dedicated to providing services to looked after children has proved largely successful. These programs demonstrated private contractors could move children through the foster-care system more quickly, ensure their safety, reduce the number of foster-care placements and reduce the caseload for social workers.<sup>185</sup> Moreover, this process seemed to have positive outcomes for the system as a whole, freeing up child welfare services to focus on child safeguarding and intervention work. As one policy review explained, “Child-welfare agencies are often so busy investigating child-abuse, placing children in foster care and providing services to families that there are not many resources left to announce the availability of children to prospective parents once they are freed for adoption.”<sup>186</sup>

Demonstrating this phenomenon, in Kansas where services for looked after children are entirely in the independent sector, the children’s services department has started to engage more vigorously in long-term strategic thinking. Michelle Ponce, director of communications for the Kansas Department of Social and Rehabilitation Services explained the current trajectory of reforms was focused on a renewed effort in Kansas to reduce the number of children coming into care through the provision of front-end services and preventative interventions.<sup>187</sup>

### Social Work Practices: the problems

Success in Kansas clearly demonstrates that there is at least some potential from this sort of approach. However, experience from government pilots indicates that outcomes were variable and that more needs to be done to make the model effective in the longer-run.

An initial problem with the SWP model was the lack of enthusiasm from the profession to get involved with the scheme. There was scepticism that the pilot programme was the ‘thin end of the privatisation wedge,’ and concerns that statutory powers might be transferred into the private sector. Specific elements, such as payment by results mechanisms were particularly controversial.

It is clear from the evaluation of the SWP pilots that many of these fears were unfounded and that SWPs are best understood as part of the solution rather than a panacea for reform of the social work profession. Indeed, as outlined in our report, *Fostering Aspirations*, those SWP pilots which had a closer relationship with the LA functioned most effectively as the pilots relied heavily on LA departments for many services including IT, legal services and out-of-hours cover.

There were also concerns about the financial viability of the model. Probably the most worrying finding of the Department for Education evaluation was that the SWP pilots were not able to demonstrate savings and efficiencies. In fact in some of the pilots costs were found to be higher than the control group. There was also a feeling that too much was being expected of the providers considering the financial constraints of budgets. For instance, the provision of an out-of-hours service was considered too costly for most of the SWPs to deliver. The lack of competition in the tendering process should also be a concern since this removes one of the principal mechanisms through which it was hoped the SWP model could drive greater efficiency. On occasion there were no applications in the tendering process at all and an SWP was established through the expansion of an existing contract between the LA and an independent sector organisation. Making the SWP model financially viable will be essential if competitive mechanisms are going to drive efficiency and innovation.

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185 Snell, L., “Child-welfare Reform and the Role of Privatization, 2000 Child-Welfare Reform and the Role of Privatisation, Policy Study No. 271,” 2000.

186 Ibid.

187 “Examining Private Foster Care in Kansas”, Children’s Voice 2010, <http://www.cwla.org/voice/MJ10newswire.html>.

Another aspect of the SWP model which has proven difficult for social workers is the complexity and risk involved in running a small enterprise of this nature. Tendering and procurement processes were found to be difficult and the provision of outside consultants by the sponsoring governmental department was seen as an indispensable form of support. Nevertheless, doubts emerged that social workers are equipped with the necessary skills and expertise to make the enterprise model a success. While some social workers may relish the challenge of taking on a business management role, many will see this as a distraction from ‘social work proper’, as one told the evaluators, “I’m a social worker, I don’t write tenders.”<sup>188</sup> Similarly, the small size of some of the SWP pilots contributed to a sense of precariousness and instability. Being a small venture meant that reliance on a single contract created perceptions of job insecurity.

Government support, in the form of grants and providing consultants, would certainly go some way to alleviating these problems. However, levels of support have dropped off in the most recent wave of SWPs commissioned by the Department of Health. Moreover, spending on consultancy support has also declined. Tables 6.1–6.3 show the spending in grants for each pilot and consultancy fees. This shows how the first two waves of pilots under the Department for Education received considerably more (albeit limited) support, both in terms of grants and consultancy fees, than the most recent wave of pilots directed by the Department of Health.

**Table 6.1: Department for Education Social Work Practice pilot costs**

Department for Education (1st and 2nd Wave)	Cost (£)
Kent	517,635
Liverpool	610,750
Hillingdon	760,000
Blackburn with Darwen	330,000
Staffordshire	660,000
North Tyneside Council	100,000
Peterborough City Council (two SWPs)	10,854
London Borough of Barnet	80,000
Wakefield	100,000
Richmond upon Thames Borough Council	17,068
Redbridge Borough Council	120,000
Sunderland City Council	50,000
Norfolk County Council	120,000
Bristol	150,000
<b>Total grant funding (DfE)</b>	<b>3,626,307</b>
<b>Total consultancy costs (DfE) (2008–12)</b>	<b>2,740,215</b>

Source: Department for Education and Department of Health Freedom of Information Responses.

188 Stanley, N. et al., “Department for Education, Social Work Practices: Report of the National Evaluation,” University of Central Lancashire Institute of Education and King’s College London, 2012.

**Table 6.2: Department of Health Social Work Practice pilot costs**

Department for Health (3rd Wave)	Cost (£)
Birmingham	46,750
Lambeth	77,605
North East Lincolnshire	42,500
Shropshire	82,500
Suffolk	88,000
Stoke-on-Trent	19,250
Surrey	93,500
Grant funding awaiting allocation	96,895
<b>Total grant funding (DoH)</b>	<b>547,000</b>
<b>Total consultancy costs (DoH)</b>	<b>134,057</b>

Source: Department for Education and Department of Health Freedom of Information Responses.

**Table 6.3: Total Social Work Practice pilot costs**

Category	Cost (£)
Department for Education grant funding	3,626,307
Department for Education consultancy costs	2,740,215
Department of Health grant funding	547,000
Department of Health consultancy costs	134,057
<b>Total Social Work Practices pilot costs</b>	<b>7,047,579</b>

Source: Department for Education and Department of Health Freedom of Information Responses.

## Improving Social Work Practices

The SWP model will never obviate the need for systemic reform in LA social services departments, but does offer an opportunity as part of a wider solution. SWPs are an approach designed to improve service delivery at the backend of the system when children are already in care. In this sense, allowing the independent sector to take on responsibilities for looked after children's services could free-up children and families social services departments to focus on the frontend intervention work which addresses the root causes of some of our most persistent social problems in a systematic way.

This perspective on the two models recognises that an increased role for independent and private sector organisations in delivering social care services is no panacea for reform of the social work profession. However, government can take steps to increase the ability of providers to contribute to the sector and LA services, as well as to expand understanding of SWPs more broadly.

**Recommendation 19: Government should further investigate Social Work Practices, specifically seeking to analyse which factors make them more effective. Particular attention should be paid to how stronger working relationships could be built between the SWP and the relevant LA.** This could include a further wave of pilot schemes as well as further evaluation of which social work tasks can be effectively undertaken by Social Work Practices.

**Recommendation 20: Government and LAs should take action on the barriers preventing third-sector providers and other groups from taking part in the tendering process for the establishment of Social Work Practices.** This is an important step both to improving the quality of service provided in the long-run as well as increasing the amount of providers who can be part of service provision through Social Work Practices. Specific steps could include examining the financial barriers preventing their establishment, or providing expert advice during the tendering and setup phases.

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# 7

## Moving Forward

Social work is in need of reform to tackle the long-standing issues which hamper effective recruitment and retention of social workers, as well as effective delivery of services. This report has set out a number of recommendations which would help fix these issues. Achieving these reforms will require partnership between numerous parties, including the civil service, LAs and other bodies such as universities and charities. Specifically, implementation will require:

- A commitment to reform from all bodies to ensure that policies are carried forward from conception to implementation.
- Strong leadership at the LA level and a willingness to engage in comprehensive reform of the current structure of social services.
- Consultation with social workers who will be affected by reforms, in order to seek their input and use it to inform the steps taken.
- Cooperation with other bodies such as universities and third sector providers to ensure that services are joined up as effectively as possible, and that reform causes as little disruption as possible.

While, these reforms present challenges, the potential advantages are significant. The reforms we have put forward would tackle issues of recruitment and retention as well as improve the way the LAs are structured. Doing so would improve the ability of social workers to undertake their vital role in improving the lives of individuals and families across society who are in great need of support.

Social workers play an essential and often unrecognised role in the lives of some of the most vulnerable people in our society. This report highlights ways in which the social work profession can be reformed in the face of significant challenges to effect improvement in the lives of the most vulnerable, focusing on how recruitment, training and retention can be improved within social work.

As part of this process we make recommendations which include diversifying career routes for social workers by creating or expanding 'practice educator' positions within social work departments. We also suggest ways to increase the access students have to high quality practice placements, including the introduction of a 'teaching organisation' status for social work departments which provide a sufficient quantity. Alongside these suggestions, we also make recommendations to claw back the Social Work Bursary if students do not go on to practice social work, and suggest that in the longer-term Social Work Practices should be further trialled and departments should focus on restructuring their teams to be more multidisciplinary.

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