



putting **people first**

respect and protect

respect, recruitment and retention
in children's social work



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foreword

If child protection was like football, then teachers, the police, health visitors and GPs would all be on the team, but there's no doubt at all that a children's social worker would be the goalkeeper.

That's because with football, if a goalkeeper makes a mistake then the buck always stops with them, regardless of how well or badly the rest of the team helped to protect the goal. The more often they are forced to make saves, the more chance there is for an error.

In just the same way, if a social worker makes a mistake, it seems that the finger gets pointed at them regardless of how well or badly the rest of the team performed.

When things go wrong with child protection the headlines are damning. Just as with goalkeepers we lament the difficulty of recruiting and retaining the best into child social work. And just as with goalkeepers, the role of a social worker is never glamorous but is absolutely vital to the success of the team as a whole.

The jobs are different, the issues are the same. But, of course, the death of a child is far worse and the demands and pressures on social workers are far greater. Day-in, day-out, children's social workers make thousands of vital 'saves' that prevent children from abuse or worse. Day-in, day-out, they help ensure that parents are supported in bringing their children up in the best possible way.

The fallout from the devastating case of Baby P is still being felt. Historical evidence shows that as respect for child social workers declines, people who were looking at child protection as their chosen career think again. Many long-standing experienced professionals may also decide enough is enough and leave. Just when we need to be tightening the safety net to do our best never to repeat the mistakes that contributed to the death of Baby P there becomes an increased danger that the gaps widen as people decide it's time to get out.

This is why we at the Local Government Association (LGA) are launching the first ever national Respect, Recruit, Retain campaign to help stop this familiar pattern from happening again. Across the country one in ten social worker posts are unfilled and this figure urgently needs to be reduced so we can protect children effectively.

Being a children's social worker is one of the toughest jobs in Britain. Encouraging back those who have been on the frontline, working relentlessly to save the lives of vulnerable children is key to helping plug the gaps and ensuring that we, as a nation, can do everything possible to keep children safe.

The recent sad events shine a light on the onerous responsibility councils bear in working with the most vulnerable children and families, and the equally onerous responsibility we ask individual members of staff, children's social workers especially, to carry on our behalf. It is a tough job to do and for councils it is the toughest job to fill.

The first part of our campaign is to help attract 5,000 recently retired child social workers back into the profession. Their experience is vital to ensuring that we, as a nation, do everything we can to raise our game in successfully protecting the tens of thousands of children who every week are at risk from abuse and neglect.

There is no quick fix single solution, but this is, we think, a very necessary start. Over the coming months the LGA will be taking this campaign directly to Government and opposition parties so that we can build a cross-party consensus to ensure that children are better protected, lives are not lost when this could have been prevented, and children's social workers are given what they need to get the job done.

Councillor Margaret Eaton OBE
Chairman
Local Government Association

Mayor Sir Steve Bullock
Chair
Local Government Employers

3. introduction

Many different professionals have a role to play in helping to keep children safe, among them health visitors, police officers and teachers, but there is no doubt that children's social workers bear uniquely important responsibilities.

This is why it is widely agreed that having sufficient numbers of children's social workers with the right skills and experience, doing the right things at the right times, is *essential* for a high quality child protection system.

However, there are some doubts as to whether children's social work is currently as strong or as well supported a profession as vulnerable children need it to be. Politicians in all the major parties have expressed concerns¹ and in December the Government commissioned Moira Gibb, chief executive of Camden council, to lead a Social Work Taskforce. The taskforce will look at the state of both children's and adult social work and will report by summer 2009.

Lord Laming is due to submit his report on progress in child protection to the Government in March, having been asked to conduct a review shortly after the conclusion of the trial relating to the tragic death of 'Baby P'. He too is expected to consider the workforce issues.

The outcomes of these two important reviews are awaited with huge interest by everyone in children's services; at the LGA we hope they will help to improve child protection and we are committed to working with our member councils to support them in applying the lessons in their areas.

We hope these reviews will also stimulate a constructive public debate about what needs to happen to strengthen children's social work, because the LGA believes this is the right discussion for us to have now in this country, as a central element of our efforts to improve child protection.

We also think it is crucial that this debate is based on an informed understanding of where the children's social work profession is at present - especially as regards recruitment and retention, how these people feel about their jobs and how they think they can be helped to do them as well as they possibly can.

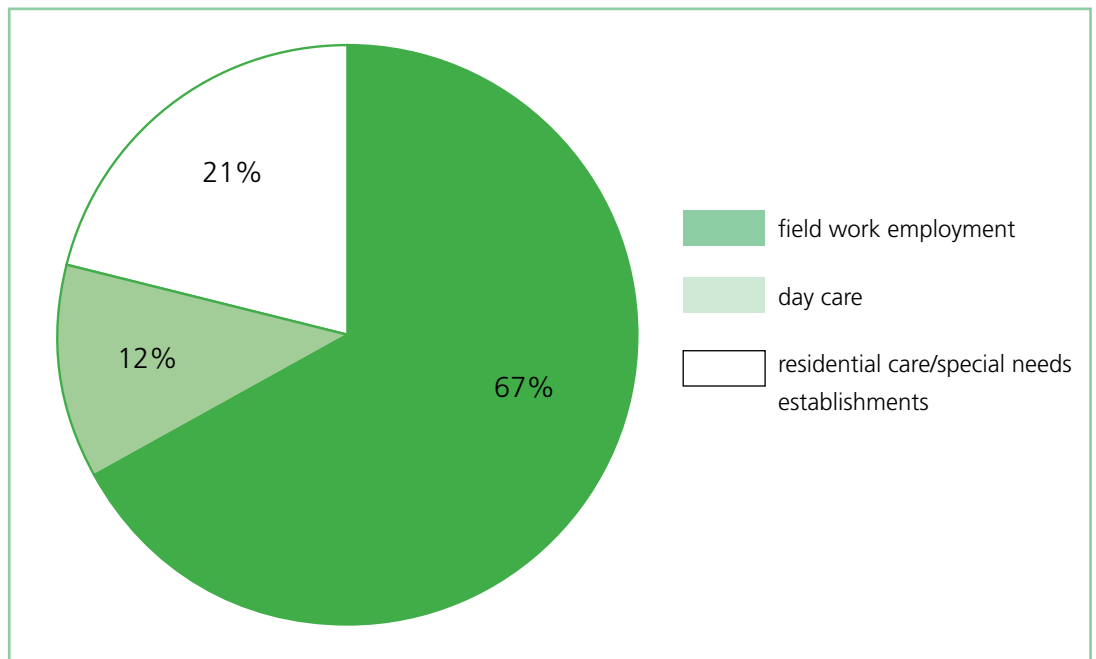
A great deal has been said and written in recent months about children's social work, by no means all of it supported by evidence. This short report, which focuses on children's social workers employed by local authorities, draws together the key facts and so aims to create a simple and straightforward evidence base for the discussions to come, following first the publication of Lord Laming's review and, later on, the outcomes of the Social Work Taskforce.

1. profile of children's social workers in local authorities²

55,000 individuals are directly employed in children's social care

In 2006 the local authority social care workforce specifically working with children totaled 55,000 headcount and 46,700 FTE staff, of whom 67% were in fieldwork employment, 12% were in day care and 21% in residential care/special needs establishments.

figure 1 - direct employment in children's social care



Plus a further 5,500 FTE agency staff (for more information see section 2)

In 2006 FTE 5,500 agency staff were engaged in the children's social care workforce

With further contributions from managers and others too

There were a further 96,400 staff working in social care who may be involved in working with children, including home care workers (48,000), strategic and central staff (23,000), social workers in generic, health and specialist settings (23,000) and senior managers in operational divisions (2,800).

Over 5,000 education welfare officers were also employed by local authorities.

This is a predominantly female work force, working mostly full-time, with a significant proportion from minority ethnic backgrounds

Over two thirds (68%) of the children's social care workforce in local authorities worked full time and 32% worked part time, with the highest full time proportion being employed in social work (79%).

A fifth (20%) were male and four fifths (80%) were female; 84% were white, 11% minority ethnic and 5% no ethnicity recorded; with the highest minority ethnic proportion being in social work (18%).

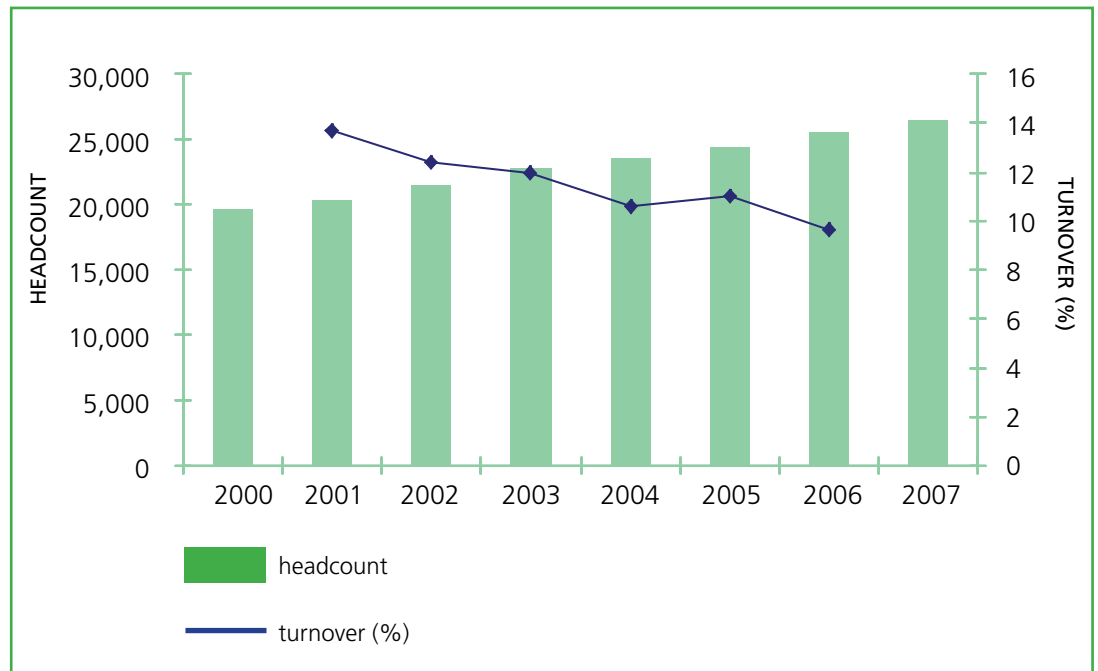
Most children's social workers in local authorities are aged between thirty and their fifties with very few aged under 25

More than a quarter of children's social workers (27%) are in their fifties; a quarter are in their thirties (25%) and fewer than 5% each are under 25 or over 60.

The numbers of people employed as children's social workers have risen significantly in recent years

Data from the Department of Health staffing return SSDS001 shows that between 2000 and 2007 there has been an increase in the recruitment of children's social workers by just over a third (33.8%). Headcount figures for children's social workers should be available from the Information Centre for Health and Social Care in April 2009. Over a similar timescale, staff turnover for the children's social workers has reduced from 13.7% per cent in 2001 to 9.6% per cent in 2006.

figure 2 - childrens' social workers - headcount and turnover, 2001-2007



Sources: Department of Health staffing return SSDS001 (employment); Social Services Workforce Analysis (vacancies and leavers).

Notes:

1. Children's social workers collected as separate job categories which have been combined above (field social workers, care managers, senior social workers and team leaders). These relate to the following lines in the DH's SSDS001: 2.30-2.33, 2.35.
2. Vacancy and leaver rates are on headcount (number) terms. Vacancy rates and Turnover not available for 2000 or 2007.
3. 2008 figures will be available from the IC for Health and Social Care by April 2009.

2. spotlight on children’s social workers operating as agency staff³

Agency staff comprise a significant proportion of the children’s social work workforce, especially in London where they account for 1 in 5

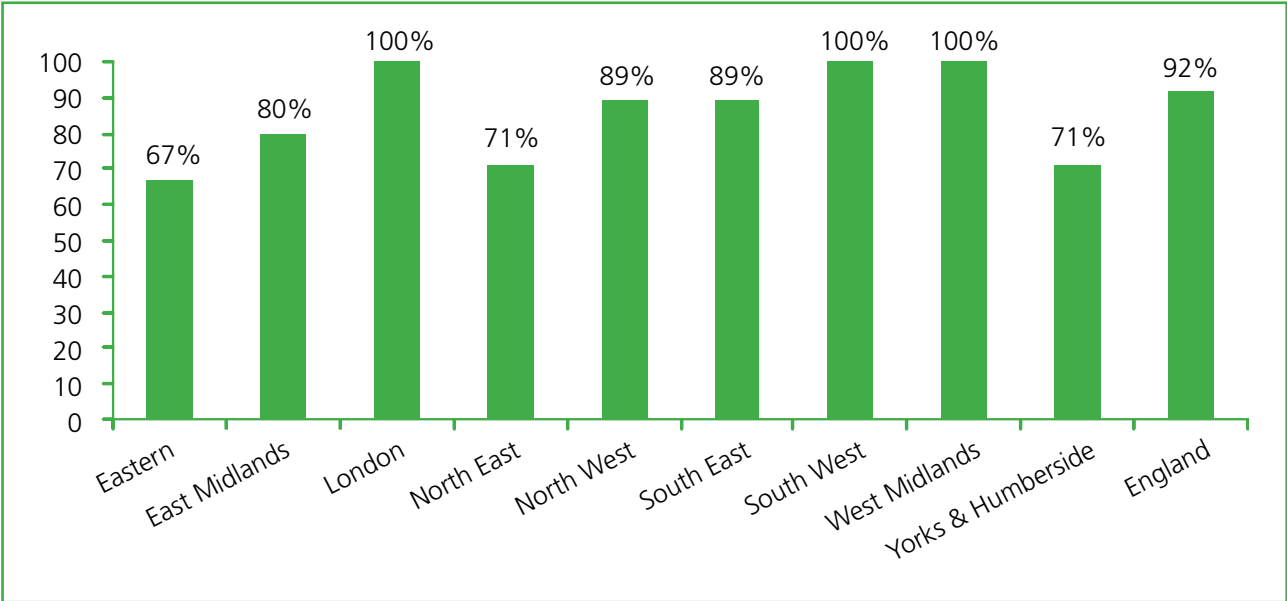
The gross total number of agency staff for England at September 2006 was 5,500 FTE, equating to around 13% of the total local authority children’s social care workforce. This proportion was markedly higher in London, at 21%.

The main jobs for which agency staff were used were residential managers/supervisors (36% of all agency staff), field social workers (34%), residential care staff (9%) and administrative staff (10%).

92% of local authorities use agency staff (either long-term or short-term), most commonly to cover absence (89%), cover vacancies (79%) or for short-term assignments (55%)

Figure 3 shows the percentage of authorities that use agency staff on a regional basis.

figure 3 - percentage of authorities using agency staff in 2006



Source: Children’s, Young people’s and families’ Social Care workforce survey 2006, pg. 25, Local Government Association, base: 73 responses

3. vacancies, turnover and retirement in children's social work⁴

It is more difficult to recruit and retain children's social workers than any other occupational group in local government, but the position slightly improved between 2005 and 2006

The most serious recruitment difficulties across the whole local government workforce concerned social workers working with children and families (78% of employing authorities), followed by social workers working in community care (61%), approved social workers (50%), residential social workers (50%) and occupational therapists (42%).

Most local authorities report difficulties in recruiting children's social workers and despite improvement compared to the year before, the position is significantly worse than five years ago

For field social workers, in 2006 two thirds of local authorities reported recruitment difficulties (66%), slightly down from the previous year but a significant increase from just under half of local authorities in 2001 (48%).

Retention seems less problematic than recruitment, but again still more difficult compared to five years ago

Almost half of local authorities reported retention difficulties in 2006 (47%), slightly down from 49% in 2005 but higher than the 30% reported in 2001.

Vacancies for children's social workers have been going down over the last four years

For field social workers, the vacancy rate fell from 11.8% to 9.5% between 2005 and 2006, compared with 12.6% in 2002.

However, this compares badly with the vacancy rate for teachers which currently is only 0.6%⁵.

The turnover rate for children's field social workers has also been going down over the last four years

Annual turnover fell from 11.0% in 2005 to 9.6% in 2006; this compares with a rate of 12.4% in 2002. Figure 2 illustrates the falling trend between the years 2001 to 2006.

But the retirement rate for children's social workers has gone up over the same period

The retirement rate for children's field social workers employed in local authorities increased from 0.9% on 2003 to 1.2% in 2006.

There are clear regional patterns to these trends, with the South East and London facing the greatest challenges

Vacancies were highest in Eastern, West Midlands, London and the South East regions, with turnover highest in the latter two of these regions.

Retirement rates were highest in the South East, followed by the South West, the East Midlands and Yorkshire and Humberside.

The great majority of local authorities are adopting a range of creative approaches to improve recruitment and retention

Local authorities were engaged in a wide variety of activities to tackle recruitment and retention difficulties in children's social work, including internet recruitment (78% of authorities); use of the local press (62%); exit interviews (62%); job fairs (61%); workforce planning (61%); and flexible working (56%).

There are proven strategies for improving recruitment and retention and many local authorities are using them

The most commonly adopted measures specifically to tackle shortages of field social workers were training-up social work assistants to become qualified social workers (78%), improved IT to aid efficiency (70%), introducing policies to manage workloads (55%) and providing more training for support staff (54%).

It is *experienced* children's social workers who are most difficult of all for councils to recruit

Of the 78% of authorities reporting recruitment difficulties for children and families' social workers, 67% reported that the difficulty related to basic professionals, 81% to *experienced professionals*, 55% to principal professionals, and 38% at division head level.

Retention is also most acute with *experienced* social workers

Generally retention difficulties were at a lower level than recruitment difficulties. But of all authorities with a retention difficulty, difficulties concerned 72% of those authorities at the basic professional level, 89% at experienced level, 65% at principal level and 48% at division head level.

The most recent data shows that the problem isn't going away

There was still a very definite recruitment and retention problem associated with children's social workers as of 2008. The Local Government Workforce survey 2008 (pg. 26, Local Government Association) identified that 64% of authorities surveyed reported recruitment difficulties amongst their children's social workers, higher than any other occupation whilst 39% reported retention difficulties.

figure 4 - ten occupations most frequently reported with recruitment difficulties in 2008

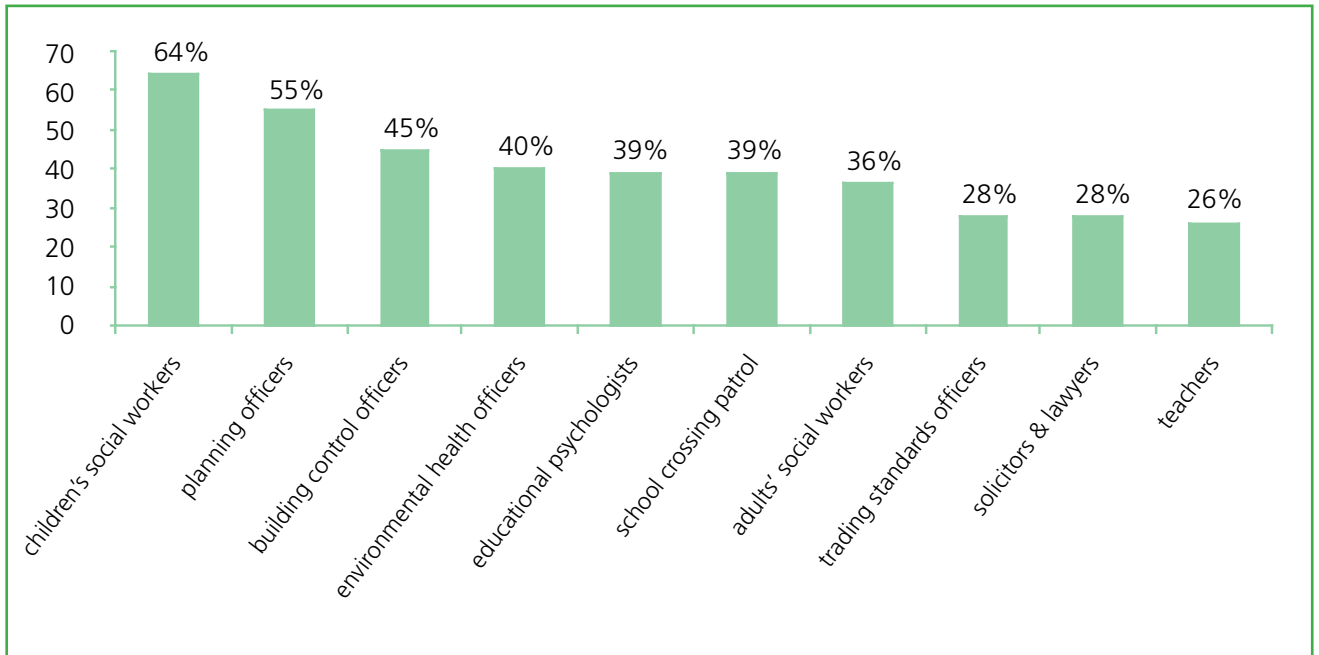
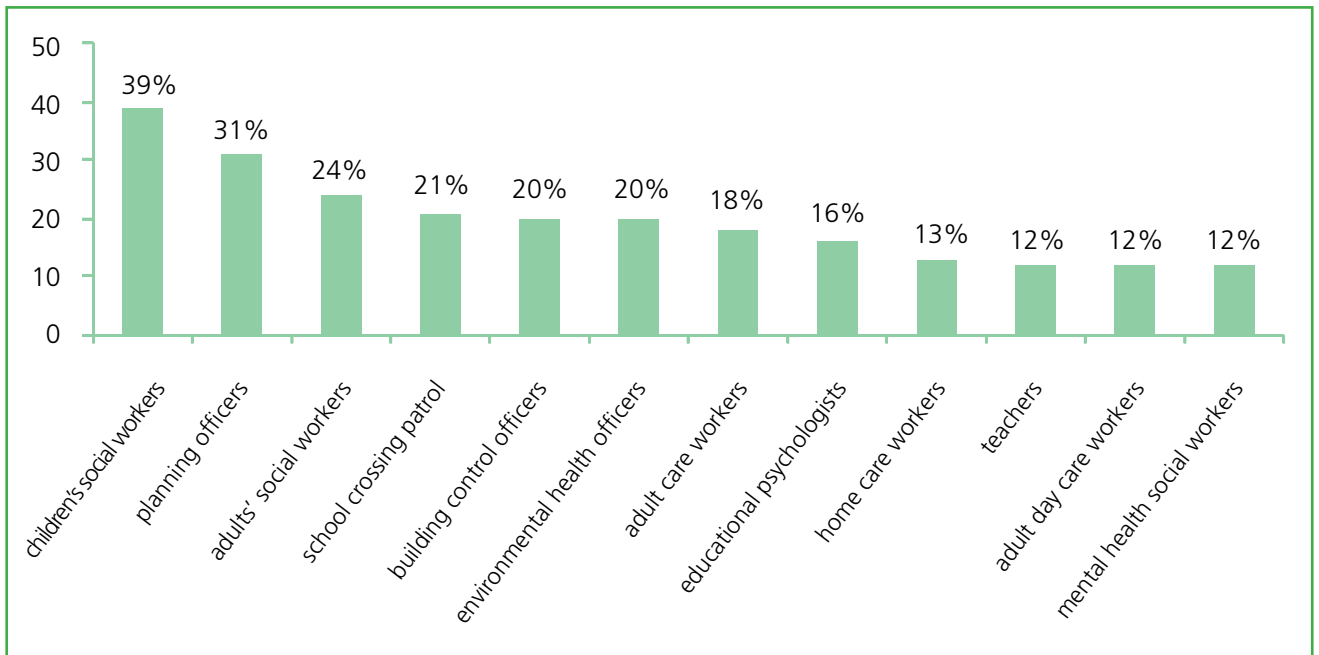


figure 5 - twelve occupations most frequently reported with retention difficulties in 2008



Source: pgs 25/26, Local Government Workforce survey 2008 - England, Local Government Association

4. training and skills⁶

Children's social work managers are better qualified than before

The proportion of local authority registered managers holding qualifications rose from 90% to 98% between 2001 and 2006.

Training activity in children's social services has been increasing

A range of data demonstrate this upward trend in training activity, including increases in assessed social work practice learning days (up from an average of 9.6 days to 14.4 days pa from 2003/4 to 2006/7); and increases in the percentage of social workers and residential managers achieving the child care post qualification (up from 20% to 41% between 2001/2 – 2006/7).

Local authority children's services were supporting 2,986 people through professional social work training in 2006, of whom 80% were secondments and 20% were receiving bursaries or sponsorships, equivalent to almost 7% of the social work workforce.

A total of 1,000 people qualified in 2005/6, of whom 70% were on secondments and 30% were receiving bursaries or sponsorships, equivalent to almost 5% of the workforce.

Between 2000/1 and 2006/7, there were 3,301 post qualifying awards in child care and there were 3,301 new registrations; the number of awards achieved each year rose from 49 in 2000/1 to 691 in 2006/7 (note: these are not exclusively local authority sponsored).

A brief explanation of the changes in social work training

In September 2003, universities began to offer a new Social Work degree to replace the previous professional training course, the Diploma in Social Work

(DipSW) for all those seeking to qualify as social workers in England. The DipSW had its last intake in 2004/05 but continues to be recognised as a qualification leading to registration as a social worker.

The introduction of the new social work degree is leading to higher numbers of people entering training in their early twenties, compared to before, as had been intended

Between 2003/4 and 2006/7 the proportion of those entering training aged 24 or under rose from 20% to 32%, whilst those aged over 35 fell from 47% to 34%.

This is a trend initially linked to the removal of the lower age limit to qualify as a social worker, (previously 22 years of age) and reinforced by changes to the balance of routes into social work, promotional publicity and the growth of a younger university student intake.

However, there is evidence that the new social work degree is struggling to attract the best qualified students

Almost half of students entering social work⁷ degree programmes with A levels in 2006/7 had fewer than 240 UCAS points (3 grade Cs or equivalent).

In comparison, more than three quarters of entrants to teaching and nursing degree had more than 240 points.

Fewer than 2 in 3 students passed the social work degree first time⁸

Almost 2,700 social work students graduated in 2007; the pass rate was only 62%. Of the remaining 38% of students, some had to re-submit work or had deferred a year, while 11% had left the course. Less than 2% failed.

The General Social Care Council states that this pass rate was similar to that of comparable degrees.

Yet students are raising serious doubts about whether the new social work degree is equipping them for the challenges of practice⁹

Only one-third of newly qualified children's social workers believe their degree courses prepared them fully or largely for their job.

Only half of newly-qualified practitioners said their training "completely or mostly" covered child protection and only one-third said it completely or mostly covered child development.

Just over half of social workers said their course prepared them "just enough" for their role, with the rest saying it had not prepared them at all to practice.

The finding, from a survey of 500 newly-qualified practitioners, compares poorly with a 2005 survey of more than 2,000 newly-qualified teachers, in which 85% agreed that their

training course had prepared them to be an effective teacher.¹⁰

Social workers already in post are also sceptical about how well the social work degree prepares students for doing the job¹¹

Nearly 60% of respondents to a survey of their members carried out by the trade union UNISON say that staff who are newly qualified are now more likely, compared with 2003, to be doing child protection work for which they are insufficiently trained or experienced. Just under a third believe this is now just as likely to happen as it was in 2003, while only 13% believe this is now less likely.

One in five new social work graduates is currently unemployed¹²

Despite reports of recruitment problems in local authorities across England, the unemployment rate for graduates was nearly a fifth. Of the 6,000 newly-qualified social workers who registered in 2007, 23% were described as unemployed. There may be a number of reasons for this, such as students taking a break before searching for a job, but the General Social Care Council also refers to some anecdotal evidence that some new graduates were having difficulty in obtaining work.

5. rewards¹³

In terms of quantum

In local authorities, within the social care workforce, average maximum national salaries were highest for social work team leaders and registered managers (£37,300 and £35,200 respectively), followed by social workers (£31,000).

Salaries have gone up

Between 2001 and 2006 the average maximum (top of scale) salary rose by 26.1% for social workers and 26.6% for registered managers, with a lower increase recorded for deputy registered managers.

Just over a fifth of social work posts had been re-graded in the previous year.

Salaries are higher in London

Salaries were around 13–14 % higher than the national average in London.

Additional financial benefits for children's social workers

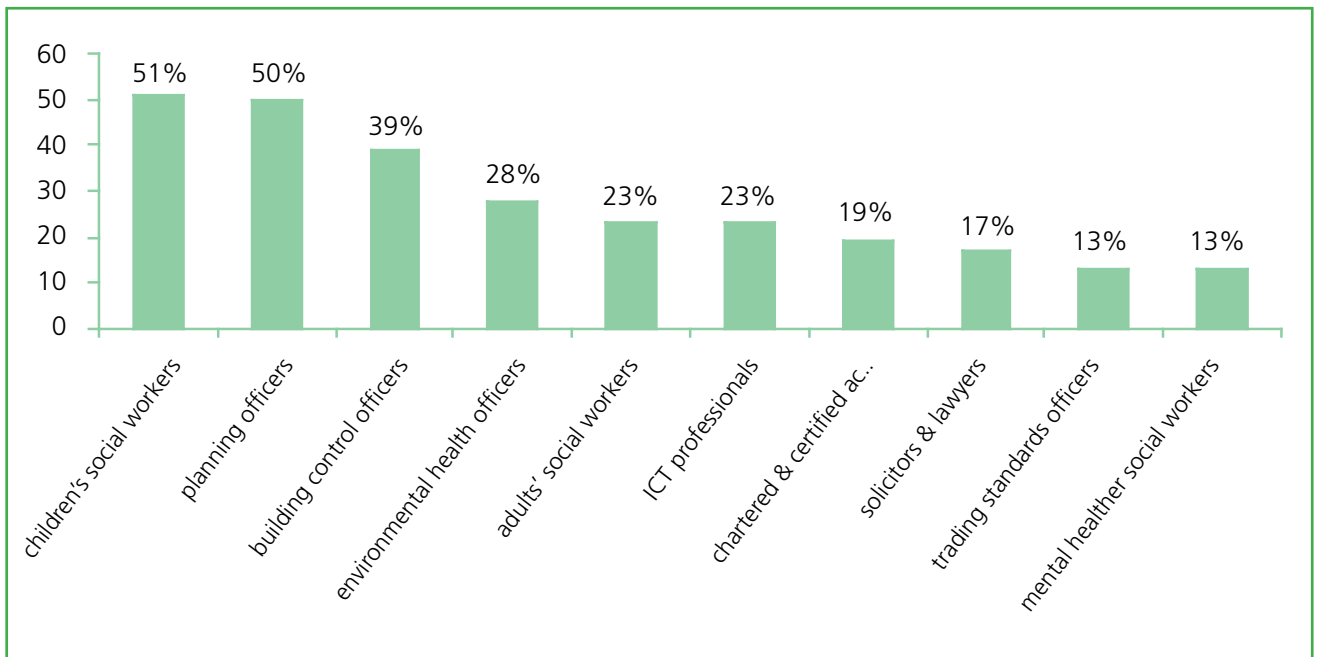
Local authorities report giving social care staff additional benefits, and the most common were:

- payment of higher rates for shift/night/weekend work, available to 38% of care staff;
- use of career grade progression schemes, highest for social workers (34% of authorities), and social work assistants (16%);
- lump sum retention payments, highest for social workers (22% for each group) and 'golden hellos' (18% for social workers).

Market supplements are made very frequently to children's social workers

Figure 6 shows that children's social workers are more likely to receive market supplements than any other occupation in local government.

figure 6 - ten occupations most frequently offered market supplements



Source: pg 26, Local Government Workforce survey 2008 - England, Local Government Association

Non-pay additional benefits are available frequently too but are by no means universal

A wider range of non-pay benefits are available to local authority social care staff, of which the main ones were:

- car benefits, particularly essential car user allowance (63% for social workers and 57% for social work team leaders) and casual car user allowance (highest availability for registered managers and deputy registered managers – 38% and 47% respectively);
- career break opportunities, generally available in around two fifths of local authorities;
- flexi-time, available to social workers in around two fifths of local authorities;
- payment of professional fees to qualified post holders – highest for social workers (a third of local authorities);
- mobile phone provision in around a quarter of local authorities for social workers.

6. social workers' views and experiences¹⁴

Most children's social workers are happy in their jobs and they would choose the same career again

84% of children's social workers said they were happy and more than two in three of children and adult social workers in the same survey said they would choose social work again.

Asked what words they would use to describe the job, the most popular choice was "rewarding", while the most-cited qualities social workers felt were necessary to the job were "integrity", "honesty", "commitment", "empathy" and "patience".

Most social workers currently in post believe they have the training and development they need to do the job

88% of children and adult social workers expressed this view.

But most also say the job is becoming less attractive

61% feel that social work is increasingly a less attractive sector to work in.

87% feel that the demands they face are greater than ever.

Two-thirds said they did not have the time to give full attention to their cases and only 39% of children's social workers (as opposed to 46% of those working on the adult side) felt they received appropriate levels of pay and benefits.

Red tape and heavy workloads are the things most social workers like least about their jobs

46% of social workers cited bureaucracy as what they liked least about their jobs, followed by pressure/heavy workloads (18%).

Only 7% picked 'the amount of computer work' as a factor.

Children's social workers are conscious of negative media coverage and say it makes their jobs harder

Almost 9 in 10 (87%) children's social workers agreed that "negative media stories about social work in the media make my job harder to do".

Only 11% think that social work has a positive public image.

92% feel the public undervalues the work they do.

2 in 5 social workers say they would consider leaving social work altogether

41% of social workers expressed this view in the survey, with those working with adults more likely to have said it than those working with children.

They were more likely to have said they wanted to leave if they were had been in the profession for between 5 and 10 years.

And if they lived in London and the South East (49%).

One thing that differentiates those who said they wanted to leave the sector altogether is that they are significantly more likely to feel that bureaucracy is making their jobs harder to perform.

This group is also slightly more likely to feel that they do not have access to the training and development necessary for their role.

3 in 5 were planning to change jobs at some point and 1 in 3 expected to do so within the next 12 months

60% were planning to move to another employer and a third expected to move jobs within a year.

Of all those who said they might work for a social care provider outside local government, 67% said they would consider a charity and 62% the NHS, but only 29% would look to the private sector and 25% a housing association.

56% said they would consider becoming an independent practitioner.

Location is the dominant factor in choosing another social work job but career development is important too

For those intending to move jobs but stay within the profession, location came out as the most important factor in choosing a new employer (47%) followed by the opportunities for career progression (23%) and the image of the employer (16%).

1 in 3 of those intending to leave would reconsider if offered more money but only 1 in 6 said they wanted to leave in order to earn more

While only 15% of social workers said they wanted to leave their job because of their salary, 37% of those looking to change jobs said they would stay if they were offered more money.

7. discussion and conclusions

To a great extent these research findings and statistics speak for themselves, but it is perhaps helpful to pick out some key points.

The findings demonstrate that the position as regards recruitment and retention is by no means uniform across the country, with the South East and London in particular being areas in which there is significantly higher turnover and more shortages of permanent staff, leading to greater reliance on agency workers and the risk of considerable staffing instability.

The LGA Group stands ready to work with councils and others in these regions, in order to support them in creating a more consistent approach, and to mitigate the risks of employers feeling forced to compete against each other for scarce skills.

When taken as a whole, in some ways the picture painted by these findings is more optimistic than many might expect. Admittedly, recruitment and retention of children's social workers are shown to be more challenging than for any other job within the local authority workforce, bar none, but overall the statistics show some encouraging progress being made. Turnover and vacancies are both seen to be coming down, and most local authorities have developed strategies to attract new workers and keep them. These appear to be yielding some real success.

However, these figures all relate to the period *before* the criminal trial concerning the death of 'Baby P' and the events that followed.

It is reasonable to suppose that recruitment and retention in children's social work will have become more challenging since then – threatening to undo the progress made by councils and others in the previous four years.

These findings also appear significantly more worrying when read alongside those from *The Guardian's* survey of social workers; again the latter reflect views gathered before the conclusion of the trial relating to the tragic death of 'Baby P'. Even then, a significant proportion of social workers appear to have been considering quitting the profession. How many more are doing so now?

The Guardian survey provides some useful insights into what matters most to social workers. What some call 'the public service ethos' is alive and well it seems in social work; these professionals place high value on the opportunity to make a difference to vulnerable children and families and as a society we should be profoundly grateful to them.

However, given the stark facts about the numbers of children's social workers who are apparently considering leaving the profession we would be unwise to take their goodwill for granted; as in any walk of life this is likely to have its limits.

In this regard it is important to note that the findings suggest it is not only 'the social work profession' that is hurt by negative media portrayals of social work, but also the morale of individual members of staff.

It is of course crucial to take a clear, calm look at the issues of pay and rewards for child social workers. It is fairly routine when there are acute recruitment problems for a key profession to say that the problem lies in unattractive rewards and in an ideal world people will always want to see pay rising faster. But we're not in an ideal world at the moment and, in any case, behind the figures there is a story that suggests that in many local authorities there has never been a better time to be a social worker.

All councils have been going through a long, complicated and expensive period of local pay reviews costing upwards of £3bn across England and Wales. These reviews involve developing new grading systems based on evaluating the relative size and weight of thousands of jobs. Wherever these reviews have been completed, social workers have done well because of the bigger weighting given to caring jobs. Councils have reported that social workers have received immediate pay increases of up to £2,000 on average, with scope to earn up to £2,000 more in their new grades. More and more councils will complete pay reviews over the next year or two and prospective social workers can therefore look forward to a much higher status.

What is needed though is to ensure that there are proper career progression paths so that the experienced staff we need do not find themselves trapped in particular grades after a few years but can then move to higher roles and achieve the rewards that they deserve.

In fact, the aspects of their jobs social workers appear to dislike the most are 'red tape' and heavy workloads. The good news is it should be possible to take action to alleviate these concerns, even within tight existing resources; indeed some areas have already done so, as this report show. For example, some are improving recruitment and retention by enhancing the administrative support on offer to children's social workers – hoping to free staff up to focus more of their time on practice.

Others are going further and remodelling the whole way in which the social work task is organised in their areas. The London Borough of Hackney is attracting a lot of interest at present for its work of this kind. The council is moving to an approach based on small 'units' or groups of social workers, led by a consultant social worker responsible for decision-making as well as controlling a small budget and maintaining a case-load. In late January 26 new-style units were in place, with the intention being to move towards 48 units and a slimmed down management structure.

It is reported that children's social care in Hackney had 340 applications for its first 26 consultant posts and an unprecedented 1,200 applications for the other unit posts. Use of temporary agency staff is said to have gone down, from 40% a year ago to 25% in late January, with most new units experiencing very low rates of turnover.¹⁵

Although it is early days with this new approach it is one that potentially offers some important lessons for other areas.

Last summer the Government announced an additional £73 million to tackle recruitment and retention problems and improve support to social workers. Since September 2008 the Government has also been piloting a newly qualified social work status for 3,000 new social workers. In addition, 6 Social Work Practice pilots, backed by £6.12 million, are experimenting with ways of organising social work, some of which are based on approaches that have some similarities with the model being developed in Hackney. All these initiatives offer some hope for the future, though none of them will deliver quickly across the board.

It is significant that many of the successful applicants for the new, exciting 'consultant social worker' posts in Hackney come from abroad. Despite hundreds of applications from social workers already living and working in London, the experience of those leading this initiative in Hackney is reported to be that most of these applicants are not sufficiently well trained to be able to do the job to the standards they require.

This brings us to one of the most worrying sets of findings set out in this report; the scepticism being expressed by some, including it appears students themselves, about whether the new social work degree is fit for purpose. Of course, this qualification is still very new and some initial difficulties were to be expected, but the doubts seem both considerable and widely shared. No doubt the regulatory body for social work, the General Social Care Council, among others, will be continuing to scrutinise the new degree closely and will work with those higher education institutions offering it to ensure standards are acceptable. Last year the council reports that one in ten courses failed to meet at least one of its requirements.¹⁶

It is good news that the council has just announced a performance-related funding model for the 71 universities and nine higher education institutions that provide the degree. This will, it appears, take the quality of teaching into account for the first time.

In commenting on the concerns being expressed by some about the new degree the council also quite fairly makes the point that by the end of their initial training newly qualified staff should be competent to practice, but that it is unrealistic to expect them to be able to handle the most complex cases straight away. The quality of the support and professional supervision offered to newly qualified staff in their first year and their opportunities for further professional development are undoubtedly crucial in enabling these staff to survive and thrive in the cut and thrust of frontline social work.

In this respect it is welcome that the General Social Care Council has suggested that in future, all newly-qualified social workers could be expected to achieve a specialist-level post-qualifying award in their first two years of practice, bringing social work into line with professions such as medicine. The syllabus may also be strengthened to include two new awards: on safeguarding either children or both children and vulnerable adults, and on forensic social work.

In any profession on-the-job training is important, not only for the newly qualified but for those who have been practicing for some time too, so staff have the chance to refresh their skills and catch up with new ideas about good practice.

The new social work degree is bringing higher numbers of younger people into training than before; this is essential in order to replace those who are of an age to retire and was one of the reasons for introducing the new social work degree in the first place. However, there is a balance to be struck here, and it would perhaps be unfortunate if, over time, children's social work overall became significantly 'younger' as a profession than it is now.

Social work takes a high degree of intelligence, empathy, resilience and insight, and this particular combination is more likely to be found in those who have accumulated considerable life experience before entering the profession. Yet it is notable that even before the events of last autumn the retirement rate among children's social workers was rising.

So it is not surprising that the findings reported here show it is *experienced* social workers who are the most sought after and the hardest to recruit and retain; this also perhaps helps explain why even with the current recruitment difficulties, one in five newly qualified social workers are unemployed.

Training developments and remodelling strategies such as those described above no doubt offer the promise of improving the quality of social work practice in future and, in turn, of strengthening child protection. But they will inevitably take time to take root and generate real gains on the frontline.

LGA believes vulnerable children cannot afford to wait.

Taken as a whole, these findings suggest that the single greatest source of concern with respect to the children's social work workforce at present is its lack of sufficient numbers of highly skilled and experienced practitioners, able to operate as expert social workers and first line managers. In any profession it is people like these who provide stability and leadership, and who act as the crucial mentors and role models to those who are new to the job. In a profession in which people are routinely under stress to as great an extent as social workers often are, having such people within staff teams is all the more important.

That's why LGA is now calling for a campaign directed at experienced social workers who have left the profession over the last five to ten years, encouraging them to return to social work management and practice. Some of them have

drifted away into allied jobs; some left practice temporarily to have families; others will have recently retired. But all of them have precious skills and experience which vulnerable children need: we must act now to draw them back into the fold.

LGA wants to work with national government and with councils on a programme that encourages and supports these experienced practitioners to return to children's social work, to plug the gaps that the figures presented in this report show currently exist.

In the end, gaps in the children's social work workforce threaten to produce gaps in the child protection safety net; that's why it is so important that we take action to fill them.



footnotes

1. See House of Commons Opposition debate on child protection, Hansard 3 Feb 2009, column 764ff
2. All the figures in this section are from chapter 4, pages 29-36 of the *State of the Children's Social Care Workforce: a statistical overview of the workforce providing children and families care in England*; Children's Workforce Development Council, (CWDC), May 2008
3. 4.1.14, page 35 the *State of the Children's Social Care Workforce: a statistical overview of the workforce providing children and families care in England*; Children's Workforce Development Council, (CWDC), May 2008
4. All the figures in this section are drawn from chapter 7, pages 51-65 of the *State of the Children's Social Care Workforce: a statistical overview of the workforce providing children and families care in England*; Children's Workforce Development Council, (CWDC), May 2008
5. *School Workforce in England*, DfES, 2007
6. All the figures in this section are drawn from chapter 8, pages 71-85 of the *State of the Children's Social Care Workforce: a statistical overview of the workforce providing children and families care in England*; Children's Workforce Development Council, (CWDC), May 2008, except for those with specific references beside them, as below
7. Figure 4.5, page 32, *2020 Children's Workforce Strategy: the evidence base*, DCSF, December 2008
8. *Raising Standards: Social Work Education in England 2007-2008*, General Social Care Council, February 2009
9. Page 30, *2020 Children's Workforce Strategy: the evidence base*, DCSF, December 20

10. Page 30, *2020 Children's Workforce Strategy: the evidence base*, DCSF, December 2008
11. Page 4 *Still slipping through the Net? Front line staff assess children's safeguarding progress*, UNISON, January 2009
12. *Raising Standards: Social Work Education in England 2007-2008*, General Social Care Council, February 2009
13. All the figures in this section are drawn from chapter 9, pages 93-102 of the '*State of the Children's Social Care Workforce: a statistical overview of the workforce providing children and families care in England*'; Children's Workforce Development Council, (CWDC), May 2008 except for the figures on market supplements which are from the Local Government Workforce survey 2008 – England, Local Government Association (pg.26)
14. All the figures in this section are drawn from *Social Lives*, a survey of 500 social workers carried out for *The Guardian* newspaper by GfK NOP Social in September 2008 and published in a supplement to *Guardian Society* on 28 January 2009. The survey findings can be accessed at <http://adinfo-guardian.co.uk/recruitment/research/social-lives/index.shtml>
15. Reported in an article entitled *In search of the very best* by Andrew Cole in the supplement to the *Guardian*, 28 January 2009, referred to above
16. *Raising Standards: Social Work Education in England 2007-2008*, General Social Care Council, February 2009



Local Government Association

The Local Government Association is the national voice for more than 450 local authorities in England and Wales. The LGA group comprises the LGA and five partner organisations which work together to support, promote and improve local government.



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