RETAINING EXPERIENCED SOCIAL WORKERS IN CHILDREN’S SERVICES: THE CHALLENGE FACING LOCAL AUTHORITIES IN ENGLAND

MARY BAGINSKY
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Although some of this work was undertaken while the author was employed at the Department for Education the interpretation of the data and conclusions drawn are those of the author and do not represent the Department's views.
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Section 1: Background

The well-being of children served by the child welfare system are put at risk by the difficulties child welfare agencies experience in recruiting and retaining competent staff as turnover results in staff shortages and high caseloads that impair workers’ abilities to perform critical case management functions. (General Accounting Office, 2003, quoted in Zlotnik et al., 2005, p11)

1.1 Context

Despite the effort and resources that have been focused on recruiting and educating social workers, there are still systemic problems that need to be addressed if these are to bear fruit. In this report the emphasis is on those working with children, young people and families – and specifically on those social workers working in the area of child protection.¹ However, there are messages that will have a wider application for the social work workforce in general.

There is as yet no systematic way of recruiting the number of social workers required to deal with the challenges and increasing complexity of issues that face society. The Social Work Task Force (SWTF) and the Social Work Reform Board (SWRB) attempted to correct this. The Centre for Workforce Intelligence (CfWI) worked with the SWRB to develop a supply and demand model for social workers, which is now being used by local authorities and higher education institutions. While it is useful for those that work closely with the CfWI it is not being used widely enough to fulfil the purpose for which the model was designed, namely to support long-term strategic workforce planning. As a result the information that is available is too often compiled on the basis of open surveys and freedom of information requests, and as explored in Section 2 further weakened by a lack of clarity over definitions.

The national shortage of experienced social workers in children’s services has been widely reported. It is a recurring theme in discussions across England

¹ In an attempt to move away from the term frontline services, which is increasingly criticized for conjuring up a vision of a battlefield and does not seem helpful, the term ‘protective services’ is used. But the author is aware that in some authorities service configurations may mean that the term does not cover all those social workers included in this study and therefore asks readers to understand this problem and, in time, suggest an appropriate alternative term. Where the term has been used in quotes from contributors these have been left.
and it is a concern at both policy and practitioner levels. But it is not just a feature of social work in this country but is evident across the USA, Canada and Australia. Heavy caseloads, burnout, poor pay and conditions, dysfunctional organisations, and low levels of training and support have all been found to explain this exodus (see, for example, Lawson et al., 2005; Lonne et al., 2012). While each is significant, Strolin et al. (2006) found that it is how these combine and interact to create ‘push-out factors’ (Lawson et al., 2005) that result not only in the departure of weaker workers but also committed and excellent practitioners.

The quality of social work practice in any setting depends on the quality of the workforce. The shortage of experienced social workers reflects the high turnover in the workforce that many authorities continue to experience. As a consequence, the knowledge and skills available when dealing with the most vulnerable children and families will not always be as great as they need to be, and this will lead to poor outcomes for service users (see Laming, 2009). There is, for example, a strong correlation between children achieving permanency and turnover rates amongst their caseworkers (Flower et al., 2005 and McDonald and Sumski, 2005); and a study conducted in Illinois found that investing in low caseloads led to a reduction in residential placements and shorter stays in foster care (McDonald, 2003). By contrast a shortage of skilled workers induces a lack of confidence in social workers by service users and other agencies (Buckley, 2008) and adds to the workload of those who remain.

Expert knowledge draws on many experiences, is domain specific and requires extensive participation in practice (Ericsson et al., 1993). Novice practitioners gain their expertise through engagement with peers and mentors in a community of practice (Fenton-O’Creery et al., 2005). So without this level of expertise practice is the poorer as is the experience of those entering the profession. When there are too few members of staff dealing with high caseloads and high levels of stress mistakes are more likely to happen (Gibbs, 2009; Martin and Healy, 2010). Schon (1983, 1987) argued that as professionals become more expert in their practice, they are able to adapt
their practice, by reflecting on their experience, as well as using their expertise and intuition. In contrast, what he terms novice practitioners start by following the rule book, and need coaching and encouragement to reflect on practice. Yet it is this reflective practice that we are expecting from even newly qualified social workers, some of whom are in teams with those who have little more experience than they do.

Many social workers are not in post in child protection long enough to develop the deep-seated knowledge and practice wisdom. Fook et al. (2000) comment on there is an absence of what transferable and contextualised knowledge that expert professionals grounded in specific contexts can bring to the whole context. They explain what expert professionals can contribute in this way:

They interact, reflexively and responsively in these contexts, recognising multiple viewpoints, conflicts and complexities. As flexible practitioners...they engage in a process...using a range of skills... They use this knowledge creatively, from diverse sources, and are able to relate and create this knowledge in the specific context, and thus transfer it relevantly to other contexts. Although grounded in specific contexts, they are able to transcend the constraints of these because...their broader vision gives them meaning and a sense of continuity...they are therefore able to deal with uncertainty by maintaining a higher order of meaning which is flexible enough to adapt and respond to continual change. (Fook et al., 2000, p.97)

These skills are likely to contribute to the resilience of all social workers and increase the capacity to function well despite dealing with traumatic and disturbing events.

Retention is not a problem confined to child protection. According to Curtis et al. (2010) the expected working life of a social worker is just over seven and a half years compared with 25 years for a doctor and 16 years for nurses. However, the situation has been far worse in child protection, although robust data is not available to evidence how bad. While not directly comparable, there are data from other countries that show the average length of employment for child welfare workers is in the range of one to three years (See Ellett et al., 2007; Faller et al., 2010; Gomez et al., 2010).

When experienced social workers leave child protection practice, key skills that would benefit children and families are lost, as are the relationships they
have built up with service users, colleagues and other agencies. The fact that too many leave the profession after a short period and that shortages persist raises questions about the wisdom of training social workers at the current rate and in the way we train them.

1.2 Recent evidence
Webb and Carpenter (2012) recently conducted a systematic review of research into the effectiveness of interventions that had been used to reduce staff turnover and increase retention in children’s services. Although the work was conducted in this country, most of the studies that met the criteria for inclusion came from the USA. They found that interventions designed to impact on ‘organisational variables’ (supervision, autonomy and career progression) and ‘administrative variables’ (salary, workloads and role conflict) were most successful, as were those targeted on specific populations such as newly qualified social workers. The work reported in this paper was not of the type conducted by Webb and Carpenter. However, in the final section of this report their findings will be considered alongside the emerging, softer evidence from employers and managers of social workers in England.

1.3 Capturing the voice of employers
In order to understand more about these and other challenges facing social work, a series of group discussions with representatives of children’s services in local authorities took place across England between December 2012 and March 2013. Invitations to take part went out to local authorities through various networks and resulted in four group discussions involving 34 local authorities. The groups were supplemented by a series of interviews with senior managers with responsibility for workforce issues in 18 local authorities. Sixteen of these interviews were conducted face to face and two were conducted over the telephone. In most cases those who agreed to be interviewed had been in touch with the author to discuss attendance at the groups or another workforce issue. In three instances an authority was

2 Another interview was conducted over the telephone to collect specific information from a manager about an initiative in one of the authorities.
involved in both a group and the interviews. Four of the interviews involved more than one person. So while participants were not randomly selected, the exercise involved 49 local authorities, which represents nearly a third of local authorities in England. At a later stage Assistant Directors and Heads of Service were involved in commenting on the outputs from the groups. Twenty-five individuals – ten from authorities that had taken part in the exercise and 15 from others working with the author on other projects – were approached to complete a brief template and 20 agreed to do it. At all stages participants were assured that their responses would be treated in confidence and no individual or authority would be identified. It would have been difficult, if not impossible, to have achieved the level of openness if participants had not felt secure in knowing that their identities and those of their employers were protected. In addition an authority that had not taken part in other parts of this work contributed an example of how it was beginning to provide opportunities for social workers to spend time in other teams as part of its retention strategy.

In preparation for the fieldwork a set of questions was sent to six individuals with an expertise and interest in the subject, who worked outside local authorities but had a professional and/or academic interest in the subject. Given the need to develop questions that could be used in both group and one-to-one interviews, a general interview guide approach was adopted. This ensured that the same general areas of information were covered but allowed the researcher some flexibility, which was important given the group and interview contexts. The areas covered in the interviews and groups are contained in Annex 1. This report extracts the information directly relating to the recruitment and retention of experienced social workers. Data collected on other areas will be reported elsewhere.

The groups and interviews were recorded with the agreement of participants and the recordings were transcribed verbatim. An analysis of the transcripts was conducted under the headings used in the instrument, which is an acceptable method to adopt when the research does not involve an unknown or under-researched area. The analysis was set within a thematic framework.
(see Ritchie et al., 2003) where the main themes are subdivided into related sub-themes or topics. The process of collection and analysis then becomes iterative, meaning that some emerging themes could be tested in the later interviews and groups while taking care to avoid assuming their existence (see Merriam, 1998).

At all times the researcher was conscious of the reason for collecting the data. The intention was for their analysis to be useful to those in local authorities grappling with the issues as well as to those informing and making policy. While the methods deployed allowed ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions to be explored, an obvious challenge in conducting an exercise such as this is to be able to draw reliable conclusions. In an attempt to address this the research design included three different data collection techniques. While the terms ‘reliability’ and ‘validity’ sit more easily with studies that use quantitative techniques, qualitative studies are left to apply other measures of what Guba and Lincoln (1981) term ‘trustworthiness’. In the end it will be for the reader to decide if a measure they use – whether or not the inquiry’s findings are “worth paying attention to” (p.290) – has been met.
Section 2: Recruitment and retention issues

Given the demanding work conditions, public criticism and organisational climate, a crisis of retention in the child protection services is to be expected. (Lonne et al., 2012 p.9)

2.1 Turnover, vacancies and retention

Section 1 highlighted one of the challenges facing all those who are interested in this area, that is the absence of reliable national data on retention and turnover of social workers. Turnover and vacancies are also frequently confused. Turnover measures the frequency with which workers are leaving their jobs while vacancies measure how many full-time equivalent (FTE) positions are unfilled. Although they are associated, these are very different concepts. Turnover is linked to the stability of the workforce while vacancies are linked to an organisation’s recruitment processes. Turnover is the more accurate indicator of the stability of a workforce and hence of retention, identified by Lawson et al. (2005) as ‘the key component in overall organizational plans for optimizing and stabilizing the workforce’ (p.15). The strongest single predictor of actual turnover is intention to leave.

On the basis of what was said in group discussions and interviews, the high turnover rates currently being experienced in many child protection services mean there are many staff in post with limited experience. This results in a lower level of competence and confidence across teams and in the probability that individuals are given too much responsibility at too early a stage in their careers. This contributes to stressed workers and high workloads, both of which have been associated with past failures to protect children and support families. An additional challenge comes with the increasing complexity of cases, identified by all participants as a reality of current practice, requiring even higher levels of skill:

Pressures on frontline staff have increased. Referrals continue to rise but it is also the complexity – more than numbers. With our threshold we don’t take anything if it is not child protection and heading for care. There are no opportunities to cut your teeth on easier stuff – that is not getting through – and that is a problem for newly qualifieds and students. You cannot send them out on many of the referrals and that adds to the burden on colleagues. There we need to allocate cases jointly. We have sometimes found ourselves in situations where newly qualifieds have had caseloads
and types of cases they should not have had. They may have taken them as child in
need cases. Then they escalate and you are stuck. We have very good supervision
and very accessible managers but the system is still wrong.

2.2. Recruitment and retention in general
In 2009, following the Peter Connolly case, the Local Government Association
found six out of ten authorities in England reported problems retaining staff –
a 50 per cent rise on the year before.\textsuperscript{3} Four years later, while recruitment of
social workers in general was said to be less difficult, the recruitment of
experienced social workers into protective services continued to be a
problem, and may well have become more acute. Concerns remained in
many areas of the country about the pressures on social workers as a result
of the continuing high referral levels, unsustainable caseloads and
demoralised staff.

For most of the authorities contributing to this study the recruitment of
experienced social workers – senior social workers and managers – was a
significant problem:

Previously recruitment all round was the area that we struggled with. This was up
until about six months ago. That was when we saw things turn around and vacancy
levels came down. Now the focus is very much on retention – although we still have a
number of areas where we have recruitment difficulties. So we have ten vacancies for
managers at the moment and we have problems getting the quality and quantity of
applications for those roles.

About a third of authorities involved in this study had recruited from overseas,
some more successfully than others. It had worked well for some but it was
regarded as expensive and had often proved not to be a long-term investment
if those recruited had returned home within a few years.

So it was not surprising that most authorities said the majority of those whom
they had appointed recently were newly qualified social workers (NQSWs).
This had happened at a time when there were more social workers leaving
university than there were jobs available. Employers admitted that they could
now be more discriminating over whom they appointed than had previously

\textsuperscript{3} www.communitycare.co.uk/articles/12/11/2009/113121/lga-baby-peter-case-hits-social-worker-
retention-rates.htm
been the case when there had been a shortage of social workers in general. Admittedly, in many places there were fewer jobs. What is perhaps surprising is that in some instances newly and recently qualified workers were appointed over those with more experience because they were assessed as being more competent workers (see Example 1).

**Example 1: Finding the right social worker**

A Child in Need service in a London borough ran a rolling recruitment process for qualified and experienced social workers mid-2012. Candidates were short-listed on the basis of their application followed by an assessment day. This included candidates reading a core assessment based on an emergency referral from a duty team of a young child left unsupervised at home. Applicants were asked to analyse the implications for the child’s future, and identify the next professional steps to address the concerns and issues raised, and who they would need to work in partnership with to achieve the best outcomes for the child.

If applicants were short-listed from the assessment stage then they moved on to the interview stage where they were asked to prepare a five-minute presentation on the topic ‘Good assessment is critical to safeguarding and a prerequisite to achieving positive outcomes for children and families’.

The process concluded with an interview with a panel that included a young person. From the most recent round of applicants 86 people applied, 39 of whom were short-listed for the assessment stage. These were predominately newly qualified social workers (62 per cent). Twenty per cent had one to two years’ experience, eight per cent had three to five years’ experience and 10 per cent five or more years’ experience. Only six applicants progressed to interview stage. Half of them were newly qualified and the other half had one to two years’ experience. Two were offered posts with Child in Need teams. Both were newly qualified social workers.

This introduced another confounding factor: employers chose to appoint someone with minimal experience over someone who had practised for longer but failed to impress at interview. Most respondents thought that the quality of NQSWs had risen in recent years, although they continued to question why they were not more prepared for the actual tasks they were required to do. The availability of more NQSWs meant employers believed they could be more choosy about whom they appointed than previously, so the emphasis had definitely shifted to the recruitment of those most suited to the role and the development of supportive mechanisms to oversee and protect them. It

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4 This criticism runs through many studies, conducted here and abroad (see, as examples, Baginsky et al., 2009; Vardon, 2004). Interestingly, although most child protection workers surveyed in one study (Martin and Healy, 2010) considered they had the skills needed to do the job, their managers did not agree.
was interesting that there were comments that indicated that authorities also thought the quality of NQSWs had improved. Sometimes they attributed this to the support that was provided through the Newly Qualified Social Work (NQSW) Programme\textsuperscript{5} and now through the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment Programme\textsuperscript{6}; at other times there was the suggestion that initial training had improved. In some instances, phrases such as ‘the reforms are now beginning to pay off’ and ‘we could hope that we may be turning the corner’ were used, particularly as they pointed to better retention rates amongst people recruited a few years ago who had, in fact, been through the NQSW and the Early Professional Development Programmes.\textsuperscript{7}

But while employers were reasonably positive about the recruitment and retention of those at the start of their careers there was less optimism in relation to those with more experience. There were too few who responded to advertised vacancies and some who did were not considered appointable:

> When I got here I saw managers rewriting court statements – that is nonsense. We are too polite – we don’t want to offend people but we have to get better at providing feedback. We have stopped the culture that any body is worth having – it is not… They need the right skills to come and work here. I don’t lie on a surgical table and hope that someone has been trained in what they are going to do to me. We have to have confidence in our profession. We have been our own worst enemy.

Employers were keen to weed out those they thought incapable of developing their practice but to provide extensive opportunities for others to do so. Unless they did this they thought that their attempts to reshape practice in line with Professor Munro’s recommendations to increase the opportunities for more direct work with clients would fail because of the shortage of the skills that would be required. So it was not a surprise that far more attention was also being paid to recruitment processes. For example, one authority involved in the Step Up to Social Work initiative\textsuperscript{8} had adapted the assessment centre

\textsuperscript{5} A 12-month support programme centrally funded designed to ensure that NQSWs had access to high quality development opportunities so that they could broaden the skills and knowledge obtained through their initial training and gain a firm foundation for future career development.
\textsuperscript{6} Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) scheme succeeded the Newly Qualified Social Worker Programme in 2012-13.
\textsuperscript{7} The programme was designed to enable employers to offer a high quality support package to social workers entering years two and three of employment of working with children and families. The programme ran from 2009-13.
\textsuperscript{8} Step Up to Social Work is a training programme designed to enable high-achieving graduates or career changers who have experience of working with children and young people to train to become qualified social workers. Selection is via national assessment centres – see Baginsky and Teague (2013) and Smith et al., (2013)
approach used to recruit trainees for that programme to use when recruiting all social workers. Others had developed their own exercises, focusing particularly on the ability to write coherently and show skills of critical reasoning and empathy:

We developed them because a lot of what is off the shelf is about other businesses. We used social work scenarios, etc. but we wanted people who had good critical reasoning and emotional attunement.

The cost of recruiting staff who either did not stay for long or who stayed but could not work effectively was very high. By paying more attention to recruitment and using more rigorous processes they hoped to employ staff they would want to retain.

Some participants also pointed to another factor that was indirectly impacting on authorities’ ability to retain skilled social workers. At the time of writing a quarter of authorities that have been inspected under Ofsted’s new framework have received the rating ‘inadequate’ for their ability to protect children. There were authorities that took part in this study that had been deemed to be inadequate; some had now improved but others were still in intervention. In some cases they had resorted to interim appointments, bringing people in to rescue services but who had not provided much needed stability (see 4.4.2 Agency workers).

2.3 Overview
It was heartening to hear the enthusiasm that so many respondents expressed about the quality of some of the newly qualified social workers they had employed. While they recognised that because there was usually a larger number applying for fewer vacancies they could be more discriminating than previously, it was definitely seen as a significant improvement. For the majority the real problem lay with finding enough skilled and experienced practitioners. This sometimes opened up the debate about what was good professional practice in social work and how it could be developed within contexts that sometimes still continued to de-professionalise practice. In the post-Munro world employers were now looking for reflective practitioners able
to work effectively with and on behalf of clients. But these skills had been eroded over time as a result of the pressures of workloads, reorganisations and case management approaches, as well as by past failures on the part of field and academic staff to develop and value them during training. Without a commitment to retain and develop the skills of those already in post the solution may be a long way off.
Section 3: The organisational context

3.1
The report has already drawn attention to the importance of the structural and organisational context within which social work operates in promoting a style of management that develops stable and supportive teams. Only a few authorities were not experiencing any difficulty in recruiting experienced social workers. One was a London borough that had faced recruitment problems earlier in the century. In 2013 it has a very different reputation to the one it had in 2006. Like many other authorities it had put plans in place to address the difficulties it then faced, though some aspects were similar to strategies reported in authorities that continued to struggle. There were, however, distinguishing elements. The authority had major problems with its electronic integrated children’s system, as had many other authorities, but had put time and resources into resolving them at a very early stage. It engaged enthusiastically with the Newly Qualified Social Worker programme\(^9\) from the early days and over 30 newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) went through the programme. Most have stayed and, in the opinion of the informants, the authority only needed to recruit two NQSWs in 2012. The authority had also worked hard to improve the organisational culture and stability (see Example 2).

Example 2: Managers

| We have a high ratio of managers to staff – our frontline teams have eight to ten social workers plus two deputy managers (some authorities would call them practice managers) who supervise a maximum of five social workers. That is a low ratio. We usually only have one NQSW in a supervision group. Then there is a team manager who manages the whole team. Then we have operational managers who manage three or four of those teams and then we have Heads of Service in each of the main areas. The added layer of deputy managers is very important. Lots of authorities have senior pracs and we don’t. Our deputy managers co-work cases and work with families – so they are not entirely managerial posts. Team managers will also meet families if necessary. One of the issues is that we are not stressed because we have tried to manage this well. The senior management team has been very stable. |

\(^9\) The Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) programme was established in 2008 as a three-year project working with employers to deliver a comprehensive programme of support to NQSWs. It was extended for a further two years and ended in 2012–2013.
Research has shown the linkages between the positive culture in an agency and lower staff turnover, improved quality of service and outcomes for service users (Hemmelgarn et al., 2006), as well as with increased job satisfaction (Ellet et al., 2007; Johnson and McIntye, 1998). Glisson and Hemmelgarn (1998) found that offices with healthier cultures had half the average level of staff turnover. While the authority in Example 2 was not alone in taking these steps, its efforts seem to have paid off while other areas had been less successful. The senior managers there were only too aware of the volatility of factors that impact on local authorities but were convinced that greater staff stability at all levels meant that social workers were able to work more effectively with clients. This makes sense on so many levels and ties in with what Faulkner and Borah (2008) concluded after studying a number of previous studies on job satisfaction, which was that it may be strongly associated with employees feeling they are making a difference in families’ lives by providing high quality services. Of more concern, therefore, was the minority who reported the emergence of a very negative culture and one that had usually emerged with a change of Director or other senior manager and / or following a poor outcome of an Ofsted inspection. It was defined as one dominated by a command and control ethos, where fear and blame ran through the organisation and where social workers felt disempowered and did not trust management. An immediate consequence of demoralisation was the movement out of the agency or at least out of teams regarded as high risk.

### 3.2 Quality of managers
Participants made a connection between turnover and the quality of the manager leading a team; in their experience social workers are far more likely to move on if they are not getting good quality management. The more experienced social workers an authority has the greater the likelihood that social workers will have manageable caseloads, as they are able to provide support for informed decision making and planning. A confident team manager may protect their team even within a highly stressed local authority context, while an inexperienced manager may contribute to the stress.
A manager has to be able, and have the time, to distinguish between caseload size and case complexity. Recognising the importance of effective, capable and committed frontline managers is imperative in ensuring the delivery of effective social care services, especially for those services which are specifically aimed at children, young people and vulnerable adults.

3.3 Reshaping service delivery

Social work is determined by the legislative and organisational context in which it is practised (see Baginsky, forthcoming). Changes intended to achieve greater consistency in practice and information exchange have led to a labyrinth of rules and procedures in an attempt to standardise decisions around intervention. As a consequence there was an erosion of professionalism as social workers had little time to reflect, plan and arrive at a judgement. The move towards encouraging more reflective practice and increased levels of direct work with clients had already started but Professor Munro’s report (2011) and her support for the Reclaiming Social Work model developed in Hackney gave it added impetus. About a quarter of authorities contributing to this work were replacing or planning to replace the traditional model of specialist teams with a system of social work ‘pods’. These usually contained a mix of social workers from newly qualified to experienced seniors. The approach is similar to that used in Hackney, although there the ‘pods’, known as Social Work Units, also contain a systemic therapist, a children’s practitioner and an administrator.  

Although one authority was training all its social workers in systemic therapy and others were supporting a proportion of the workforce to undertake the training, most were adopting a variation of the model deployed some years previously in Somerset as part of the Remodelling Social Work initiative (See Baginsky et al., 2011). There the ‘pods’ included a team leader, social workers, family support workers and an administrator who shared caseloads and tasks, and provided greater continuity for children and their families. Whatever the model, the intention was to arrive at a situation where there was a stable workforce that contained more experienced workers with a shared understanding of thresholds and

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10 For a description of the Reclaiming Social Work model, see Goodman and Trowler (2012).
appropriate and effective interventions, as well as increasing the level of peer support, oversight and sharing of skills. Many authorities had established or were in the process of establishing multi-agency assessment teams at the ‘front door’ of children’s services. Amongst other things their success depended on a shared understanding of thresholds and good professional judgement on the appropriate response to a referral or request for help. Professional judgement comes with experience, which is all the more important given the high level of requests for services.

There were those who took part in the study who thought all their existing structures needed careful examination and reorganisation before attempting to move to a pod structure or any other model. In these authorities, in particular, the increasing levels of referral following high-profile failures to protect children were said to be producing more defensive practice, higher thresholds and soaring caseloads; this in turn resulted in reluctance to move away from a monitoring and compliance culture.

One informant had left her previous post because staff had been overwhelmed by the pressures that resulted when a pod structure had been adopted too rapidly without due attention to the high volume of referrals they were receiving. In her opinion the transition process had not been thought through thoroughly, caseloads ‘went through the roof’ and the old structures had to be partly reassembled. She felt that social workers had been misled into thinking things could improve by distortion of facts and exaggerated promises which she described as ‘smoke and mirror tactics’.

Despite some participants’ caution, there was a noticeable commitment to organisational and practice reform as a way of shifting the culture of social work practice from one dominated by compliance to one where the professional judgement of experienced managers and social workers underpinned practice. Shifting to a form of practice which valued shared responsibility for cases, administrative support and high quality training was rated highly and an approach that would pay dividends.
There is, in fact, evidence from at least one research study to support this. When individuals are overwhelmed by high caseloads and the associated administration they are more likely to leave their posts; they are more likely to stay where they are able to spend more time on direct services (Lawson et al., 2005). A common theme throughout discussions was that collaborative and co-working approaches would help to address the challenges social workers faced in dealing with complex cases. This is very significant given the body of research that has shown how collaborative and supportive relationships with colleagues also have a positive impact on retention (see Dickinson and Perry, 2002; Ellett, 2000; Ellett, et al., 2003; and Nissly et al., 2005).

But it was only thought to have any chance of real success if the challenges facing children and families social work were also addressed. And the biggest challenge of all was the increasing economic constraints that faced local authorities operating with significantly smaller budgets. A culture shift of this magnitude requires substantial investment in the training and professional development of all social workers. Across most professions, training is viewed as a retention tool and a way to reduce recruitment costs and sickness absence it is also likely to have an impact on decisions to stay. Furthermore without it the attempts to shift to reflective and relational practice are unlikely to succeed.

3.3 Overview
It is recognised that organisational factors contribute significantly to burnout in child protection (Dollard et al., 2001; Schaufeli et al., 1993). There is also a growing body of literature that explores how stress impacts on both judgement and an ability to perform tasks in general (see, for example, Hammond, 1995; Blaug et al., 2007). In the course of this work there was a steady stream of reports of sickness levels rising, sometimes disguising the real level of under-capacity, which should be calculated by combining vacancies, sickness and other planned absences. When these were happening alongside increasing rates of referral, caseloads in a few authorities were said to be reaching ‘unsafe levels’.
Dee Wilson, Director of Child Welfare Services in the Knowledge Management section of Casey Family Programs, has recently written about the fact that policymakers and managers have an ethical obligation to organise the work and support staff in a way that prevents or reduces the physical, psychological and moral injury of employees (see Wilson, 2012). Although Wilson is writing about his experience in the USA, the messages cross the Atlantic all too easily. Wilson draws on Jonathan Shay’s (2003) analysis of what prevents psychological and moral injury in combat to extract lessons for those working in child protection. Wilson writes:

According to Shay, the main factors that prevent psychological and moral injury of soldiers in combat are the social cohesion of units, tough and realistic training and leadership that engenders trust. Shay refers to these factors as ‘strength multipliers’, that is, small numbers of cohesive well trained military units led by trusted leaders are far more effective than 2-3 times as many units weakened by practices such as individual deployments (and replacement) and inadequate training and leadership. (Wilson, 2012, p.2)

He points out the obvious parallels. Teams vary considerably in terms of turnover, internal cohesion and experience. As in army units, where there is little stability in social work teams it is difficult to train and support new members or develop expertise. But it is impossible to address the problem with just one strategy. It is a combination of factors that will challenge or support retention; some are personal, some are interwoven with commitment and experience, but all need to be combined with a working environment where staff feel valued and supported.

Section 2 reported Mor Barak and colleagues’ (2001) finding that the strongest single predictor of actual turnover is intention to leave. Their meta-analysis also uncovered that the best predictors of intention to leave were organisational commitment, professional commitment, burnout and job satisfaction. The obvious conclusion was that these were areas where senior managers could respond and intervene to make improvements. It was evident that most authorities have tried various strategies to retain experience, with various levels of success and it was proving harder for some. The only way to achieve higher standards in the long term is to start to impose minimum standards. The Social Work Reform Board published the ‘Standards for Employers’ in England, which define what employers should do to enable their social workers to work safely. The Standards are now hosted by the Local
Government Association, and Ofsted has incorporated them into its inspection framework. While this is not the whole solution they strengthen the argument for maintaining investment in these key areas at a time of stringent financial constraint.
Section 4: Retaining experience and addressing the shortfall

4.1 What are ‘experienced social workers’ in protective services – and where have they gone?

So while the increase in the number of social workers who have been trained has gone some way to address the shortages that were identified in the early part of the century, there is still a shortage of social workers with experience of working in child protection and looked after children. Many of the social workers who stayed in local authority children’s services retreated to specialist services such as fostering and adoption when they had had enough of working ‘on the frontline’. The social workers taking part in these discussions were all very experienced; a few had come back into child protection work after working in voluntary or preventative services. Many spoke of how much they loved their jobs and looked forward to each day, reflecting what Gibbs (2001) found amongst some social workers who stayed in social work because they enjoyed facing new challenges on a daily basis. But they also spoke of the ‘lost generation of social workers’, referring to those who had left social work completely or at least protective services. The age profile of social workers produced by the Centre for Workforce Intelligence (2012) does not show a dip in the 35–45 age group\(^{11}\) but those working in protective services say it exists in their agencies. And it is from this age group they would be expecting to recruit most of their leaders and managers.\(^{12}\)

Initially, when asked to define an ‘experienced social worker’, respondents suggested that it referred to those with at least two to three years’ experience. But further discussion – more so in the groups than in the interviews – usually led to the conclusion that this was a misleading categorisation. It was suggested that while it should not exclude those with this length of post-qualification experience, it should be a determinant. There were examples of

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\(^{11}\) On the basis of numbers registered with General Social Care Council in 2011.
\(^{12}\) A similar ‘lost generation’ reference was also used in relation to the large number of social workers who left statutory children’s services during and after the Cleveland Child Abuse Inquiry in 1987 (see Butler-Sloss (1988)).
early career social workers considered to be 'on their way to becoming experienced social workers' and of those with many more years’ service who were not considered to have the required attributes. There were also references to a shift that had taken place over the years, which was regarded as undermining the profession as well as practice:

I have been qualified for 25 years and when I started you were not considered to be experienced unless you had been doing it for five or six years. It seems now you are experienced when you have done your first year. I don’t think this is helpful. What happens is that people finish their first year and we say, ‘So now we can throw even more complex stuff at you.’ We have unrealistic expectations. A lot more thought has to be given to how you support people for the job they are doing and prepare them for the next level of practice. It has been possible to be a social worker on the Friday and a manager on the Monday without much happening in between.

The nature of the work undertaken by social workers was explored in discussions and interviews. So what then would experienced social workers look like? The discussions implied that they were recognisable when seen – and would exclude those of any age who find it hard to use their professional judgement – but they were difficult to describe. In general, the qualities that marked an experienced social worker were said to be a depth and breadth of experience, based on an excellent understanding of social work theory and messages from research, personal and interpersonal skills, and professional humility based on deeper feelings of competence and confidence. These individuals were also said to be recognisable for their enthusiasm and breadth of experience:

So you would not want someone who has only done adoption to be termed an experienced social worker. You would want them to have worked across different services.

For me it is not just about length of time served it is also about learning and development during the time served. Sometimes you can do the same role for three years and that does not make you an experienced worker.

However, there was universal agreement that in the world of child protection they are key to safe practice. But after two to three years in practice too many were said to be ready to move. This exposed a weak thread running through the profession caused by a tendency for too many social workers to view their
first two years in the profession ‘as serving their time on the frontline’ before they then moved on to other services/agencies – or out of social work:

I think we need to unpack why people who have worked on the frontline for a few years start looking for jobs. I have two students at the moment who are very experienced social work assistants – one on placement in adoption and one on placement in fostering. They have been in the duty team before starting their training. They are looking for jobs in adoption and fostering – and I asked them why do you want to start your social work career there? They say they have done the long hours, the grind, the high caseload, the commitment to meet court dates and now they are qualified they don’t want to go back to that. We get a lot of this with people who have served two or three years on the frontline – and it has something to do with the way we manage them. They start to burn out.

4.3 Attempts to stem the ‘two to three year exit’

So why is it that at the point when they could be developing specialist skills much needed in child protection many social workers are moving away from that work? One answer may lie in the limited access to experienced colleagues’ support and wisdom. Given the challenges faced in recruiting experienced social workers, local authorities were faced with employing those with little or no experience. Research has highlighted the fact that psychological strain and a lower perception of accomplishment are significantly higher with these social workers (Davis-Sacks et al., 1985). The reality is that those with least experience are often being expected both to assess and deal with complex need and effect changes in families’ behaviours. While research suggests that social workers who remain in the profession for longer report more positive experiences (Dickinson and Perry, 2002), Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick (2007) found that workers were far more likely to leave at an early point where employers had failed to engage them at the outset (see Example 3).

**Example 3: Supporting NQSWs into child protection**

We dealt with shortage of social workers via the [mentions scheme for newly qualified social workers entering child protection work] but we still have two to three years before they are ready for those management posts. We were used to getting people from local area now that we have a national reputation people apply from all over the country. So about 200 apply for 15 places. It also means that we get people who have covered different things on the courses and that can be a bit of a nightmare.

We bring in two cohorts a year of newly qualified and give them a supportive environment with slightly reduced caseloads. But it is quite intensive – they are given a lot of training and support so by the end of that six months they are able to go into
a team. It is a student unit type model. Originally we had four teams across a large authority but now we have three teams and a September and April intake. They go onto frontline assessment and locality teams – as one lot go out the other follows two weeks later. They go to teams that have vacancies. The advantage is that we have a whole support service for them. Each one (15 x 2) has a manager and a senior worker plus a coordinator and admin support; and learning and development support. Every other week they have a ‘learning’ input based on taking a child’s journey from need through to adoption and exit. So they have a range of tasks and learn those on an incremental basis. If they get a case that looks as if it is going to court the experienced social worker will support them through that process (‘sitting next to Nellie’) and then they update themselves about the theory later.

We know that appropriate support can reduce stress levels, contribute to job satisfaction and influence the choice of team or service where a social worker will choose to work (see, for example Balloch et al., 1998; Coyle et al., 2005). Practising social work in a child protection setting is a high-risk activity and brings with it the additional risk of burn out. The quality and regularity with which supervision is provided reduces both types of risk. Serious case reviews have identified the need for staff working in challenging and complex situations to receive leadership and support through supervision. Supervision has been shown to be effective in increasing staff job satisfaction, reducing stress and burnout, and improving quality of service provision (see, for example, Wallbank et al., 2010). The importance of supervision for all social workers at any stage in their careers was taken for granted by participants and most, but not all, were reasonably certain that supervision was being provided at appropriate intervals. But they were far less confident that it was used as a tool to encourage development and reflection.

There were many examples of initiatives designed to provide additional support that usually went alongside the introduction of career progression schemes designed to allow social workers to progress their careers while staying in practice rather than move into a managerial position. Although the methods and intensity varied, the response was to provide some combination of coaching, mentoring and support. Specific posts at the level of Advanced Practitioner and Senior Social Worker had been developed in order to assist with the day-to-day supervision and support of newly qualified social workers, as well as to provide additional support across teams. Various models had
emerged, sometimes tied to a more fundamental reorganisation of social work delivery (see Example 4).

Example 4: Professional Educators

Professional Educators: We called them Professional Educators as one thing we learned was that if you are not absolutely clear about what you want you get role confusion. So we wanted to distinguish them from social workers’ managers and practice educators. We wanted to say this is about preparing people as professionals. So ‘Professional Educator’ is our term for people who work alongside those who are newly qualified and work with managers. They are not supervising. They are there to provide coaching and support. We broadened it out from newly qualified and they work alongside newly qualified and those who may need additional support because not experienced in this work. In terms of management we located it outside the operational service group but we wanted to make it distinct and not let it seem like a parallel management structure. They do not carry cases. They were nearly all external appointments at manager level. We were clear what we wanted – people immersed in social work and the management of social work. People who saw improvement in terms of encouraging and supporting better practice. And we wanted people who could negotiate potential role clashes and were tough enough not to be put off and would be dogged. I thought the opposition would be more significant than it was. I thought it would be more when we offered it to people who had been qualified for years – and we said you may have 12 years’ experience but we all learn all the time and realise that you have not had enough reflective space to think about pathways.

In some authorities it was said that increasing workloads had compromised what had been intended to be supernumerary or discrete roles. So, for example, post holders sometimes had to take responsibility for cases when the intention had been to leave them free to co-work or support a group of NQSWs or other colleagues and in other areas they had ended up doing all the court work so were rarely available to mentor or support. There were also authorities where it was proving difficult to recruit to the posts:

We had a similar role and could not recruit to it... My view is that this role should be linked to that of a practice manager if you are going to recruit them. We did not and we could not recruit. Managers say they want the extra money because of their management responsibilities. I think leadership of practice is as demanding as management. It will never come through a job evaluation process because the management aspect is missing.

4.4 Addressing the shortage of experienced social workers
4.4.1 Incentives to stay

Most authorities continued to offer combinations of lease cars, market forces and other enhancements, but a few were withdrawing these ‘benefits’ and
even reducing leave entitlement as their budgets were cut even further. There were real concerns about the impact these steps would have on retention. While pay differential has not emerged as one of the most significant factors in social workers’ decisions to stay with an employer (see Scannapieco and Connell-Carrick, 2007) in time it may impact on loyalty to an organisation and lower morale if it is interpreted as a lack of commitment on the part of an employer.

Across all authorities there was a high level of shared experiences but it was also clear that each authority has distinct features, making over-generalisations and assumptions of transferability inappropriate. As an example, one authority thought its problems arose because it was too small and another because it was too large. Both had invested heavily in training their workforces. The small authority was able to offer very limited opportunities to progress and on average social workers only stayed for two years. The large authority, like many others, was struggling to improve pay and conditions for social workers to offset the attractive packages offered by neighbouring authorities, in an environment where market supplements were once again becoming popular. Traditionally this authority was said to have offered excellent training only to see neighbours reap the benefits, so that was no longer seen as a sound retention strategy on its own:

People can very easily live in one place and work in another authority. That is partly why we need to address the pay differential and play catch-up. Our starting grade for basic grade social workers was very low but we then allowed people to get double increments. But it did mean that some other authorities were well ahead even if you could catch up in five years. So we needed to restructure alongside training, career development, a good environment in which to practise. We have been redesigning job descriptions and framework for career progression from The College. We are trying to devise a system whereby you get academic credit for in-house courses – they will count towards a post-grad diploma which will not cost the social workers anything; if they wish to extend this and work for a Master’s degree we shall not provide financial support but we shall give some time. We know that by investing in the workforce we are supporting retention, but sustaining that funding is the challenge.

One London authority had looked into its retention record in some depth and surveyed its staff. Pay did not emerge as an issue but social workers would

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be attracted to an authority that provided good leadership, regular supervision and equipment that worked. While managers were trying to make sure these were in place, its position in the ‘wrong’ part of London was something about which they could do very little:

We are trying to look at rebranding. We are not in a sexy part of London. This is a poor part of London – we attract local people but not people who would go to some of the high-profile London boroughs.

4.4.2 Agency workers
In recent years there has been an effort across authorities to reduce their dependency on agency workers. Here as elsewhere they have often been described as too inexperienced and too expensive, and the nature of their contract means they are not a stable part of the workforce. However, the highest proportion of agency workers are still found in protective services. While there were a few authorities that reported that they had not been able to move away from long-term use of agency workers, the majority of authorities did not use agency staff to fill long-term vacancies. They did engage them to cover absence and other short-term vacancies, as well as for specific projects. It did, however, become apparent that the use of agency staff is once again increasing and is connected with the difficulties in recruiting experienced staff. A link with Ofsted inspections also emerged. There were examples of agency workers being employed prior to expected inspections to get things straight, as well as after an inadequate rating, or even an adequate one, in an attempt to improve. A judgement of an authority as inadequate was often reported to lead to an exodus of senior managers; it also tended to generate a loss of confidence and introduce ‘a permission to leave’ environment that led to the demand for agency workers and other consultants.

Participants speculated about why social workers worked for agencies. The level of remuneration was considered to be a major attraction. Even though agency workers did not enjoy the benefits that went with employment it was thought to become an even more popular option when conditions deteriorate for those employed by local authorities. The freedom to work when they wanted without being burdened by local authority bureaucracy was also
known to attract people to work for agencies. Participants provided examples of where experienced staff had left local authorities to move to agencies because they said they had become social workers to do a good job but they needed to feel supported. In the absence of what they considered to be adequate support they had moved to agency work. This fits with what Cornes et al. (2013) recently found. They examined the reasons why social workers ‘go agency’. Even though their work was conducted in adult services their finding that the motivation often came from the experience of having worked in local authorities is likely to be similar for those in children’s services:

It (agency work) has value therefore in pointing to a possible lack of flexibility in current social work employment, to the debilitating effect of office politics and the influence and perceptions of inadequate managers and to restricted opportunities for frontline social workers in adult services to remain working with users and carers. (p. 80)

4.4.3 Rotations
In an attempt to approach the problem of the shortage of experienced social workers in key services several authorities were thinking about introducing a system of compulsory or voluntary rotations. Every authority had many of its more experienced social workers outside the teams where they were most needed, which led a few to consider insisting that staff change teams after a period of time. Other studies have concluded that a rotation policy would benefit those working in high-stress teams such as child protection by giving them time away from crisis work (see, as an example, Westbrook et al., 2006). But the current suggestion was the reverse of that – the idea was to inject experience into child protection teams where there were too many novice workers. It was not clear how this suggestion would be received where it was being developed. During the consultations with practitioners that took place to inform the work of the Social Work Task Force¹⁴ there were a number of experienced social workers in fostering and adoption teams who felt they had the expertise that they could contribute to child protection teams but they would have been reluctant to make that transition permanently. Some would have been willing to consider returning for a fixed term period – to carry a caseload and/or to mentor less experienced staff in these services.

¹⁴ Taken from unpublished proceedings of the SWTF
The following example was provided by an authority that was not involved in other aspects of this research but had mentioned the initiative in the course of another study and it seemed appropriate to include a brief description here.

**Example 5: Beginning to think flexibly**

| One authority had been very concerned about the rate at which experienced social workers were leaving the authority. The workforce development manager had interviewed all staff with over three years experience to find out why they might consider leaving. While an increase in salary was a consideration the fact that many did not think their skills and experience were being valued was considered to be far more significant. Partly as a result of this the authority has started to develop a strategy that will involve greater flexibility and specialisation. There had been interest in establishing a ‘rotation’ scheme in some form and the logistics of this are still under discussion. It will be informed by the lessons learnt from the merger of the adult and children’s learning disability teams as part of the ‘cradle to grave’ plan. The merger meant that many social workers needed to be trained and / or brought up to date with child protection. Social workers who had worked in adult services, as well as in other teams in children’s services spent time with the child protection teams. Initially they shadowed child protection colleagues but gradually they assumed more responsibilities including for assessments. So far the initiative is judged to have been a success. As part of the strategy the authority is planning to identify workers in every team who will have or be encouraged to develop specialist knowledge on specific topics. This would provide a resource for colleague as well as professional development for staff. |

However, in the discussions and interviews that took place during this work, the suggestion attracted few supporters, for one of two reasons. In the first place it was thought that after years of working in adoption or fostering many social workers would be unlikely to be able to cope with the pace and intensity of child protection, and second it could introduce even more instability and lack of continuity for children and families.

**4.5 Overview**

Failing to retain staff is expensive, not least because of the skills that are lost. A robust retention strategy is key. There are strategies that are being attempted to retain, and draw in, more experienced workers in protective services, but they clearly need to go hand in hand with the organisational issues discussed in Section 3. The risks that are associated with any strategy clearly have to be managed and responses based on feedback from social workers.
As Lawson et al. (2005) also found, it was often difficult for participants to explain what they would define as ‘competent’ or ‘good enough’ practice and what would be defined as ‘excellent’ or ‘expert’ practice. The problem appeared to be that there was usually no clear measure other than the on-time delivery of well-written reports and assessments. Neither were there examples of how practice and improved outcomes for children and families were aligned. While there were references to how this would be explored in supervision and in performance appraisals, the linkages were far from clear. This reflected what Professor Munro described as:

a curious absence from a great deal of social work and child protection literature, policy and discussions about practice of any considered attention to the core dynamics, experience and methods of doing the work. (Munro, 2011, p.86)

The absence of agreement or clarity over the skills or expertise of social workers contributes to the problem. The Professional Capabilities Framework may go some of the way to address this but will not be the whole solution. Professor Munro found that workers were not doing the work they both wanted to do and believed they had come into the profession to do because of the pressure to meet bureaucratic requirements. The issue attracted a great deal of attention when the problems surrounding the Integrated Children’s System were at their height, although even then the notion that most social workers spend up to the much-quoted 80 per cent of their time on computers was not supported by evidence from a large scale survey of social workers (see Baginsky et al., 2010) or the experience of those contributing to this work. The discussions, however, did often cover the differences in workers’ capacity, and the challenges some would face, to move to the type of practice requiring greater use of professional judgement as envisaged by Professor Munro. While contributors recognised that the technology and software put in to support social workers had not always been up to the job they were sceptical about social workers who continued to report that it was getting in the way of their working with clients. The scepticism was also linked to concern that some social workers did not have the necessary skills to engage with clients so it was safer to keep it to a minimum and retreat to an office. In this respect it is important to distinguish between indirect work
(which is part of improving outcomes for service users) and unnecessary bureaucracy.
Section 5: Suggestions for a retention strategy

After the more general discussions were concluded, in each group a summary of the approaches being taken to recruit and retain experienced social workers and any additional suggestions was compiled. The results were:

- Work with social workers to map their careers within the authority using PCF and career structure – including establishing strengths, motivations and interests.
- Reduce caseloads.
- Create a learning culture that actually means something, and provide relevant learning and development opportunities to maintain both registration and professional progress.
- Use the role of the Principal Child and Family Social Worker (PCFSW) to respond to concerns and work on solutions.
- Introduce a ‘peripatetic social worker’ post based in a flexible pool able to be deployed to meet variations in demand.
- Provide opportunities to spend time in other agencies with other professionals working in child protection, such as the police and schools.
- Hold good exit interviews and pay attention to the messages received.
- Ensure better support and more opportunities for reflective practice by providing consistent, high-quality supervision that is supportive and challenging, focusing on the needs of the worker, not on performance indicators, and building in time for reflection and mentoring.
- Improve the levels of administrative support.
- Consider ways in which those reaching retirement could continue to be employed in some way by introducing flexible retirement packages (to provide mentoring, supervision, etc.).
• At a local and national level take measures to improve morale, confidence and the status of social workers; possibly conduct a sustained campaign to promote positive public awareness about what social work achieves.

This list was circulated to a panel of 20 senior managers – assistant directors and heads of service in local authorities – who agreed to rate them on two scales: one recorded how significant each was thought to be and another recorded how difficult it would be to implement each one. Each scale had a minimum value of 1 and a maximum value of 5. So for significance the higher the rating the more significant it was seen to be; for ease of implementation the higher the rating the easier it was seen to be to implement. Figure 4.1 records the average of the ratings that resulted.

**Figure 5.1: Significance and ease of implementation of factors linked with improving retention**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Significance</th>
<th>Ease of implementation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Work with social workers to map their careers within the authority using PCF and career structure – including establishing strengths, motivations and interests</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This was usually happening in authorities, although a variety of different methodologies was being adopted.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced and managed caseloads</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Various workload and caseload management systems were in place or had been tried. It was seen as an important step but one that required more systematic development.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create a learning culture that actually means something and provide relevant learning and development opportunities to maintain both registration and professional progress</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the current economic climate, local authorities are finding it difficult to fund training and dedicated training sections are disappearing from local authorities.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use the role of the Principal Child and Family Social Worker (PCFSW) to respond to concerns and work on solutions</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most authorities have accepted the recommendation of the Munro Review that there should be a Principal Child and Family Social Worker (PCFSW), set at senior manager level, in every local authority. However a range of models are emerging with a preference for a model that aligns the post with a quality assurance role.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Introduce a ‘peripatetic social worker’ post based in a flexible pool able to be deployed to meet variations in demand</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Most respondents thought this was a very good idea in theory but given the difficulty in recruiting experienced social workers they thought it would be extremely difficult to establish and sustain.</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities to spend time in other agencies with other professionals working in child protection, such as the police and schools</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This was seen as the ‘icing on the cake’ – nice to be able to do but not necessarily a key part of a retention strategy, but it was considered relatively easy to implement with other agencies but difficult in that it might deplete expertise where it was most needed.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hold good exit interviews and pay attention to the messages received</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>These were rated as being very important yet most respondents said that despite the ease with which they could be introduced/improved they were significantly under-used.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensure better support and more opportunities for reflective practice by providing consistent, high-quality supervision that is supportive and challenging, focusing on the needs of the worker, not on performance indicators, and building in time for reflection and mentoring</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This was regarded as the most important tool in retaining social workers in child protection services, but its potential was reduced by the quality of supervisory skills of a proportion of managers and by the pressures under which many operated.</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Improve the levels of administrative support</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The responses indicated that while it was desirable it was not a priority and that it would be very difficult to introduce when faced with reduced budgets.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consider ways in which those reaching retirement could continue to be employed in some way by introducing flexible retirement packages (to provide mentoring, supervision, etc.)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>This idea was widely welcomed although the respondents thought that there would be some, but not great, interest from those who were about to retire and it would create organisational and administrative difficulties, making implementation quite difficult.</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>At a local and national level take measures to improve morale, confidence and status of social workers: possibly conduct a sustained campaign to promote positive public awareness about what social work achieves</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>As important as this was clearly seen to be there were many doubts about the capacity or ability of any organisation to do this. While it was seen as something The College of Social Work should lead there was not much confidence that this would happen.</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>
The results show that these senior managers saw that establishing a career structure tied to the PCF and acting on the results of exit interviews were the two steps that were both significant and able to be acted upon without too much difficulty. The provision of high-quality support and supervision was seen to be of even more importance but harder to implement because of the available skills and resources. Improving the morale of, and regard for, the profession was seen as equally significant but even more difficult to achieve.

There was considerable interest in finding an effective way to manage social workers’ caseloads, which was seen to be a very significant step to take but one that was hindered by a reliable tool. Most of these senior managers rated the creation of learning cultures, where learning and development opportunities relevant to registration and professional progress, as almost as important. They usually gave examples of how they were attempting to develop this within their agencies but severe cuts in training budgets were now making this very difficult. Perhaps surprisingly, the suggestions for establishing a peripatetic role that would help to meet fluctuating needs across teams and for introducing some form of flexible retirement package were both rated as very significant but neither were rated as being easy to implement. Similarly, the benefit of providing additional administrative support to social workers was seen as reasonably significant but not feasible in the light of stringent reductions in their budgets.

Opinion was clearly divided over the significance of the part the Principal Child and Family Social Worker (PCFSW) would play. At one end were those who saw the role of the PCFSW as key to addressing the complex web of retention issues and at the other were those who did not think the post holder (where one existed) was significant in this respect and nor was the contribution s/he would/could make. And finally, there was limited interest in providing opportunities for social workers to spend time in other agencies as

\[15\] Kishiyama (2001) has argued that child protection agencies would benefit from interviewing staff to find out why they stay and what supports resilience.
part of a strategy to retain them, although this was not regarded as very
difficult to implement.
Section 6: Conclusion

A great deal was already known about the reasons why social workers stay or leave protective services. This work was designed to provide evidence beyond anecdote on the situation facing English local authorities on developing and retaining expertise within the statutory child protection workforce. Data sets on vacancy and turnover rates are of limited use because they do not contain enough reliable and recent data. At a local level there are examples of workforce data being collected, analysed and used to inform staff deployment. But the absence of reliable workforce data on which to base a full understanding and planning base for the statutory child protection workforce impedes the development of recruitment and retention strategies.

Discussions across the country have shown that local authorities are facing similar challenges over recruitment and retention of experience in protective services. In most areas there was not a shortage of social workers but there was a shortage of experienced social workers able to deal with the complexity of much of the work, and provide excellent leadership, management and support. Unless ways are found to slow down and reverse the flow it will be very difficult to raise the quality of practice across child protection services and provide high-quality response to those with the most complex needs who require the highest level of professional expertise. Yet it is an area where too many newly qualified social workers start their careers. Workflow issues add to the strain, with continuing high referral rates and rising caseloads placing managers under extreme pressure. This, in turn, leads to less interest in following that career route and as a consequence the span of control increases and contributes to the pressures. In nearly every group and interview there were accounts of experienced social workers who had left the protective services because of high levels of stress and moved to areas which were better resourced and less intense. But participants also suggested part of the solution lies in building capacity in authorities to nurture people through their careers, to develop their professional skills and build their resilience in an attempt to stop them leaving a few years later. The increasing levels of stress
as a result of high caseloads and the serious and complex nature of referrals continue to lead to a drift out of protective work. Structures designed to develop organisational and personal capacity would help to stem this flow.

There is clearly no one solution to these challenges but there are steps that can be taken to attempt to achieve greater stability and satisfaction and, in turn, achieve more positive outcomes for children and families. The literature on this subject identifies the factors most closely associated with retaining experienced social workers.\textsuperscript{16} These are:

- workloads, remuneration and working conditions
- positive workplace cultures
- supervision that addresses both organisational and professional requirements
- opportunities for professional and career development.

There is also a very clear overlap with the areas that emerged from Webb and Carpenter’s (2013) review. Perhaps not surprisingly these were amongst the areas seen to be most significant by senior managers in local authorities, although as they indicated they are not always easy to address. There is, for example, considerable variation between and even within authorities in the caseloads of staff working with children and families and, as a consequence, variation in the quality of services provided and the pressures on staff. However, there was universal agreement that in the world of child protection experienced social workers are key to safe practice.

In the short term local authorities will find it difficult to maintain, and certainly difficult to expand, current service levels even though it will be counter-productive to do otherwise. It will take time for the impact of reshaped referral and early help services to show measurable impact, but if they work effectively they should reduce the pressures on child protection services. In the short term, however, they may, in fact, create additional pressures. Professor Munro’s report shone a light on the importance of reflective practice.

\textsuperscript{16} See, for example, Healy et al. (2009); Lonne et al. (2012); and Zlonik et al. (2005).
and supervision. While they have both been fundamental to social work practice they have not always been supported to the extent required. Experienced and expert practitioners are needed to develop the art of reflective practice in their less experienced colleagues, as well as provide the supervision that sits alongside where capability will also be explored. But experienced social workers also need skilled and supportive supervision, alongside opportunities for career and professional development. While rotations were not generally thought to be useful, some system by which social workers could move into another part of the agency for a limited time – in the way described by Westbrooke et al., 2006¹⁷ – may be useful.

There may be one further issue that is linked to retention and yet, because the two are separated in time, it has not been easy to make a direct connection. It is the experience and understanding of social work of those entering social work courses. Local authorities are clearly investing time and effort in recruitment and attempting to attract the best candidates, and there was a great deal of interest in finding an appropriate screening tool to identify resiliency in prospective employees. Webb and Carpenter (2013) found that the use of a Realistic Job Preview where a film is used during recruitment to give candidates an idea of the challenges and expectations that lay ahead of them was positively associated with retention in at least one study.¹⁸ If they understand the challenges and make a more informed decision about their career are they more likely to stay and gain the skills, maturity and empathy to address the complex needs of children and families?

One area that did not emerge in this work but is closely tied to recruitment and future commitment is the importance of induction (see Baginsky, 2009). It was evident from recent work on the establishment of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment that employers’ practices in this area varied considerably (Baginsky and Teague, 2013). The importance of induction has been well documented and is seen as an essential way of integrating staff into

¹⁷ Quoted in McFadden et al., 2011
¹⁸ Faller et al., 2009
any organisation. It is also the first example of in-house training an employee will experience, and as such it should contain an element devoted to the development of the relevant skills, knowledge and behaviours required.

Research is needed to confirm or deny some of the speculative suggestions made about this. There are other areas where research would be helpful. One would be to add to our understanding of the influences on retention, including the factors that enable some social workers to remain working in highly stressful situations for many years yet retain an enthusiasm and commitment for their work and the strategies they deploy to help them cope. Another would be to examine the impact of attempts to match the capabilities and career aspirations of social workers to posts.

But an immediate step that could be taken is for agencies to conduct a thorough assessment of the factors that contribute to excessive turnover within their organisation, by seeking staff feedback on a range of issues including their intention to stay or leave, and using this to inform their future retention policies as well as providing further insight into this complex area.
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