

Social Worker Recruitment and Retention

Purpose

For information and discussion.

Summary

This report updates members on the work of the task-and-finish group looking at improving the recruitment and retention of social workers.

Recommendations

That the Board notes the content of the report and offers comments as necessary.

Action

Officers to continue with the work programme and report as necessary.

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Background

1. The sustainability and quality of the social work workforce has been an issue for many years and is regularly brought into sharp focus by tragic events such as the death of Baby Peter and most recently the Rotherham child sexual exploitation enquiry. A skilled and confident profession is vital in improving care and reducing risks. This long-term problem requires sustained action.
2. Following a roundtable discussion in March of this year, the Workforce Board agreed to set up a joint task-and-finish group with the Children and Young People's (CYP) Board to oversee a project on social work careers. The roundtable took the view that it is especially important to focus on the retention of skilled social workers. This is because research suggests that a major issue is that experienced social workers who are needed to deal with the most demanding cases tend to get jaded after a few years and either leave the profession or shift to agency based employment to avoid pressures. This leads to the twin problems of employers becoming dependent on agencies to fill many vacancies and continuous recruitment to make up the numbers. The Government has focused a number of initiatives such as "Frontline" on accelerated recruitment but the group took the view that if retention of experienced staff could be improved, teams would be better balanced and indiscriminate recruitment and agency-dependency could be avoided.

Developments

3. The task-and-finish group developed a series of key objectives for the project as follows:
 - 3.1. *Ensuring that the sector has more and better skilled social workers:* It was noted that quite a number of councils have initiatives in place to develop and maximise skills working with higher education institutions etc. Some of these initiatives involve small groups of councils working together and one key responsibility for the LGA is to encourage this joint working.
 - 3.2. *Ensuring that the skilled people we have brought in and retained can work at their best:* The issue is about using a scarce resource in the most effective way whilst making jobs interesting and rewarding. The level of ambition for remodelling teams needs to be high with an emphasis on giving highly skilled and experienced core social workers some really top quality support through assistants who are similar to class room teaching assistants.
 - 3.3. *Linking reward structures to the objective of developing a cadre of highly-skilled core professionals:* A lot of work has been done on this already by the LGA but there is a challenge in that the system for career growth in local government is linked very much to promotion into roles which have higher job evaluation scores - traditionally involving moving into management. For the social work profession, the traditional sense of career growth has been about acquiring skills and qualifications

4. When the group met in the early summer it took the view that although there is a campaigning element to the work, the main focus should be on working with councils as employers rather than a major media campaign aimed at social workers. Events in Rotherham have changed this emphasis a little and the aim now is to make some highly visible announcements at the National Children's and Adults Services (NCAS) conference at the end of October.
5. In taking the project forward, the Workforce and CYP teams have agreed and made progress on a number of deliverables with the aim of supporting employers and demonstrating that the LGA is working with the profession to improve the outlook:
 - 5.1. A series of detailed case studies of employer practice has begun with interviews in a range of councils with the first batch to be published at NCAS.
 - 5.2. The national Employer Standards for Social Workers which cover good practice on issues like caseloads and supervision have been refreshed and re-launched with a new emphasis on accessibility for staff. The standards are hosted by LGA and strong emphasis is being put on ensuring that OFSTED take account of the standards in inspections.
 - 5.3. Building on the standards, a joint bid has been prepared with The College of Social Work for innovation fund monies to run a new project. The proposal is to develop an assessment and "award" system that would demonstrate that an employer is committed to improving the development and career prospects of social workers. The bid was endorsed by the former Workforce Board and the CYP Board.
 - 5.4. A video podcast has been commissioned for launch at NCAS. The podcast will include senior national figures talking about efforts to improve social work careers and frontline social workers talking about their experiences.
 - 5.5. Again at NCAS, there will be an announcement of a bid to Government for special funding to improve career and professional development through, for example, enhanced opportunities for personal development and a cementing of the role of principal social workers as professional leaders in every council.

Next steps

6. Members are invited to note the report and offer comments. Officers will continue with the project work and report back to this Board and the CYP Board.