

Call for evidence: Migration Advisory Committee (MAC) review of social workers

Response by the Association of Directors of Children's Services and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives

ADCS (Association of Directors of Children's Services) is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services appointed under the provisions of the *Children Act 2004* and for other children's services professionals in leadership roles. The Association provides a national voice as a champion for children, with local and central government, and with the public.

SOLACE (Society of Local Authority Chief Executives and Senior Managers) is the representative body for senior strategic managers working in the public sector. Through its policy and professional development activities, the Society promotes excellence in public service.

ADCS and SOLACE welcome the opportunity to provide evidence to support the retention of social work on the MAC shortage list.

The recruitment and retention of good quality social workers is a key priority for Government and Local Authority Children's Services departments, and this has been re-affirmed in the light of recent safeguarding events in a number of areas around the country. ADCS and SOLACE believe, therefore, that it is essential that children's social workers remain on the shortage occupation list.

The Impact of High Vacancy Rates

According to the Local Government Workforce Survey 2008 England, 64% of Local Authorities reported difficulties in recruiting children's social workers. The December 2008 Unison survey of its members across the UK working in children's social work, indicated that nearly 60% of respondents work in teams where over 20% of posts are vacant. Furthermore, over a fifth of all respondents to the Unison survey work with a vacancy rate of over 30%. This recent survey information correlates strongly with historic data, underpinning the view that recruitment and retention are endemic issues in the social work workforce nationally, and require a sustained and systemic approach.

The recent coverage of children's social workers in the press has also contributed to difficulties recruiting good quality practitioners to work in this field. If Local Authorities were unable to recruit migrant social workers the difficulties filling key posts would be further exacerbated. Low levels of staffing can affect the ability of Local Authorities to safeguard children and young people. High numbers of social worker vacancies mean that caseloads and supervision become too stretched to support good practice and that thresholds of need become very high limiting social worker involvement in early intervention and prevention.

Furthermore, high vacancy levels (and the resulting lack of capacity) can also affect working relationships with other services for children and young people, such as education and health. This can lead to unproductive or difficult working relationships and have a braking effect on the integration of services at the frontline.

Many Local Authorities have found it necessary to use expensive agency workers to fill critical vacancies. This represents a significant financial strain on Local Authority resources. Moreover agency rates are rising at the moment as councils search talent in this diminishing pool of experts too. The high, but necessary, use of agency workers in Local Authorities also makes it difficult to provide the continuity and consistency of care and intervention that our most vulnerable children need. In some parts of the country, it is impossible to fill vacancies with even agency workers – such is the current demand.

Staff Turnover

In many Local Authorities the Social Worker staff turnover rate is high. High staff turnover can lead placement instability for looked after children (decision making can be affected and placements are more likely to be hurried and result in breakdown)¹, which in turn has been linked with poorer outcomes for children and young people. Service users can find frequent changes in their social worker difficult and may struggle to form trusting and open relationships with them.

In order to keep vacancy rates as low as possible out of necessity many Local Authorities utilise agency staff (in 2006 90% of surveyed Local Authorities reported using agency staff²) as well as recruiting migrant workers. Without the capacity to consider applications from migrant workers recruitment to key posts would be considerably more difficult than it is now and dependency on

¹ Placement stability- A review of literature, Munro & Hardy (DfES, 2006)

² Children's, Young People's and Families' Social Care Workforce Survey 2006 (LGAR 2007)

agency staff would increase. This would result in even higher staff turnover rates.

Recruitment Costs

Recruitment is expensive – the average Local Authority expenditure on recruitment of social care staff came to around £35,000 in 2006³. To ensure recruitment success (and also minimise reliance on expensive agency staff) it is essential that Local Authorities are able to consider applications from as many different groups of candidates as possible, including migrant workers.

Experience of Staff

Many migrant social workers have several years of post qualifying experience⁴. Recruiting experienced practitioners is a real challenge in the current workforce climate. The social work teams that are most difficult for Local Authorities to recruit to are: contact/referral and assessment and family support & child protection. Often migrant social workers make a significant contribution to these teams.

Summary

Many Local Authorities have a diverse community and strive to have a workforce that reflects the profile of residents. Migrant social workers are employed from all over the world as long as they meet Local Authorities' specific selection requirements and are registered with the GSCC. Given the experience that they bring and the vacancies that they fill the service would be considerably compromised if we were unable to recruit them. Changes to the shortage occupation list are, therefore, of great concern to ADCS and SOLACE.

This response has been prepared by Robert Belli, Administrative Officer, ADCS on behalf of ADCS and SOLACE. Any queries regarding this response should be addressed in the first instance to Robert Belli (e) robert.belli@adcs.org.uk .

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³ Children's Young People's and Families' Social Care Workforce Survey 2006 (LGAR,2007)

⁴ In the London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham the majority of migrant social workers have over 6 years of post qualifying experience (81%) and several other West London boroughs have confirmed they hold similar statistics.