

Strengthening the workforce: Retention in social work

Introduction

Social workers play a key role in the support and protection of vulnerable adults, children and families and the provision of effective, relationship-based social work relies on a workforce of skilled, confident, and committed professionals. However, the retention of social workers in England is a long-standing issue and low retention rates have been reported across all social care sectors for many years.

High turnover has serious implications for the delivery of social work services and can lead to a lack of consistency for individuals and families who often experience a revolving door of professionals (Baginsky, 2022). Additionally, an overreliance on agency social workers to fill gaps left by leavers can be counterproductive, resulting in 'workforce instability, churn, and high costs' (Department for Education, 2023, p. 4).

High staff turnover also leads to the loss of experienced practitioners from the workforce. In 2023, the recruitment and retention crisis in children's social work made national headlines when social workers leaving the profession outnumbered joiners for the first time in six years (Department for Education, 2023b). Furthermore, the Review of Children's Social Care in England identified significant concerns about inexperienced practitioners holding complex and high-risk safeguarding caseloads (MacAlister, 2022).

Even though retention of social workers is a challenge for many employers, organisations can increase retention by maximising 'pull factors' – those which incentivise social workers to stay. Many of these can be achieved through addressing organisational culture, strengthening peer and team support, and providing CPD opportunities tailored to the specific career stages of social workers (Cook et al., 2022; Biggart et al., 2017). This briefing has been developed for practice leaders and workforce development leads in organisations that employ social workers working with adults or children and families. It provides practical information and ideas about how organisations can retain social workers. Practice examples, challenge questions and links to useful resources are provided throughout.

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Distinguishing between turnover and mobility

- > The turnover rate for adult social workers in England increased from 15% to 17.1% between 2021 and 2022, (Skills for Care, 2023).
- > Turnover among children's social workers peaked at 17% in 2022, up from 15% a year earlier (Department for Education, 2023b).

Types of turnover:

- > Voluntary or desirable: when workers who are not suited to the role (or organisation) leave.
- > Unpreventable: due to retirement, change in life circumstances or death.
- > Undesirable: when capable employees leave despite the wish of their organisation to retain them (Turley et al., 2020).

When considering the issue of high turnover (the rate at which social workers leave their post), it is important to distinguish between employee turnover and mobility (Burns and Christie, 2013). Even though turnover within the profession is high, the number of registered social workers has increased over a three-year period (Social Work England, 2023). This data may indicate that social workers are taking up other roles within the profession (mobility) rather than leaving social work entirely.

Little is known about the rates at which social workers move between roles within and outside of their organisation or between adults' and children's services. There is some evidence that practitioners may sidestep from frontline practice (such as duty, crisis and assessment teams) to other roles after a couple of years to sustain themselves in the profession, to continue their development or to find a role more compatible with caring responsibilities (Cook, Carder and Zschomler, 2022). Social workers may also move teams or services within their organisation as an opportunity for continued professional development (Cook et al., 2022).

Findings from a survey of 3,421 adult, mental health, and children's social workers in 2021 suggested 50% of respondents were unhappy in their role (Ravalier et al., 2021b). Over 60% of respondents were also planning to leave their current post (but stay within social work) within the next 20 months (Ravalier et al., 2021b).

Points to consider:

- > Employers need to understand the reasons why social workers are leaving their current roles and distinguish between different types of turnover and mobility (Turley et al., 2020).
- > As part of a workforce planning strategy, it is important to distinguish between the three types of turnover since the most useful measure (undesirable) is not usually disaggregated within current workforce returns data.
- > Turnover figures may not capture intra-agency moves. Mapping patterns within intra-organisational moves help identify new opportunities for secondments and career pathways which build in mobility.
- > Robust exit-interview procedures can identify the root causes of undesirable turnover.

Testing out new ways of working to support recruitment and retention in children and families social work.

The Department of Education is funding a [National Workforce Action Group \(NWAG\)](#) to develop, test and produce tools and resources that support recruitment and retention in children and families' social work. Research in Practice is leading the partnership.

There are two core strands to the work:

- > **Retention** - Supporting local authorities to develop effective workforce strategies that enable positive working conditions and organisational culture.
- > **Agency social workers** - Supporting local authorities to engage agency social workers effectively, collaboratively and in line with proposed national rules on the use of agency social workers.

Agency social work

- > Approximately 1,400 (8%) of social workers in adult social care are agency workers: a high proportion of the workforce (Skills for Care, 2023).
- > In children and family services the use of agency workers has risen from 16% in 2021 to 18% (6,800) in 2022, the highest number recorded (Department for Education, 2023).

As a result of the high costs and associated challenges surrounding increased reliance on agency staff, the Department for Education are considering a national cap on the rates paid by local authorities to agencies, a bar on agency work among early-career social workers and a halt to the use of project teams to deliver core statutory services (Department for Education, 2023b). There are many reasons why social workers may choose to 'go agency;' these include perceived flexibility, the promise of healthier work-life balance, preferential rates of pay and the opportunity to move between teams/roles as a means of ongoing professional development.

The Local Government Association's most recent employer standards survey consisted of responses from 7,843 adult, children's, and mental health social workers (Local Government Association, 2023). It found that there were significant differences between the experiences of permanently employed and agency social workers. Permanent social workers perceived their workplace in a more negative light and felt under greater pressure to do more with fewer resources. Overall, permanently employed social workers were less satisfied with their employment package and responded less positively across every work experience question.

It is also important to highlight the [Big Listen](#) (2023) survey of more than 1,000 social workers across London and the South-East. This provided repeated examples of the impact of racism and discrimination on Black and Global Majority social workers. This is a significant contributory factor in the higher rates of Black and Global Majority social workers moving into agency work (Spillet, 2024).

Poor wellbeing and burnout

While social work can be a richly rewarding profession, it is also particularly emotionally demanding. Supporting individuals in crisis, at the end of life or who have experienced abuse and neglect involves intense emotional labour (Winter et al., 2019). Social work, therefore, has elevated levels of burnout compared with other professions (Hussein 2018; McFadden et al., 2015, Health and Safety Executive, 2023).

Burnout refers to the emotional exhaustion, depersonalisation, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who do 'people work of some kind' (Maslach and Jackson, 1986 p.11).

Symptoms of burnout

- 1. Emotional exhaustion** – feeling emotionally drained and over-extended by work.
- 2. Depersonalisation** – an uncharacteristic lack of feeling or an uncaring response towards people who use services. For example: compassion fatigue, reduced empathy, becoming cynical or disengagement. Depersonalisation arises from emotional exhaustion.
- 3. Reduced sense of personal accomplishment** – feeling less effective as a social worker or experiencing a crisis of confidence in one's work.

(Adapted from Maslach and Jackson, 1986)

Social workers in all settings must often 'do more with less.' These pressures can make it difficult for practitioners to achieve a work/life balance (Kinman, 2021). Additional stressors, such as high caseloads, increased bureaucracy, and poor supervision (Ravalier et al., 2021; Welander et al., 2019) can also cause social workers to experience burnout (McFadden et al., 2015).

Consequently, social care professionals are at greater risk of work-related ill-health including stress, anxiety, and depression than many other occupational groups (Health and Safety Executive, 2023). Chronic stress and exhaustion can also impact on practitioners' overall health and their practice (Maslach and Jackson, 1986). If practitioners are not supported this 'can lead to deterioration in the quality of care or service provided' (Maslach and Jackson, 1986. p.11).

Experiencing burnout is associated with forming an intention to leave (McFadden, 2015b; Zychlinski et al., 2021). Research also suggests that social workers can experience high levels of job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion simultaneously (McFadden, 2015b).

Points to consider:

- > Practice supervisors can play a key role in being alert to the symptoms of emotional exhaustion and burnout, not only among social workers who are struggling, but also in those who are currently performing well and are passionate about their work.
- > When it comes to burnout, prevention is better than cure. It is important to ensure social workers can access regular, supportive discussions around wellbeing.

Resource: The Professional Wellbeing Self-Assessment Tool

The [Professional Wellbeing Self-Assessment Tool](#) provides an opportunity for social workers to reflect on their professional wellbeing across seven dimensions (perspective, self-management, supports, meaningfulness, self-care, practice competency and professional development) through a range of questions that cover key aspects of professional life. It can be used by practitioners to assess their own wellbeing, to recognise and remedy challenges before they experience ill health.

Misalignment between practice and professional values

Most social workers are highly committed to their work, finding meaning and great value in work with individuals and families. Four-fifths of social workers (81%) report that wanting a career that makes a difference to people's lives was their key motivation for becoming a social worker (YouGov, 2020). For many social workers, the ability to make a difference is tied up with a strong sense of professional identity, mission, and purpose (Thoburn et al., 2021). Where social workers are unable to make a difference (e.g. due to lack of resources, or high caseloads) they may feel disinclined to stay in the profession (Cook et al., 2022).

Social workers in Cook et al.'s study (2022) reported experiences where they felt unable to provide high quality support to the people they work with due to financial and organisational constraints. Feeling unable to practice in line with their own ethical values led some to consider leaving the profession.

Where organisational factors prevent professionals from delivering appropriate support to the people they work with, in addition to the increased risk of burnout (Acker, 2010), they may also experience moral distress (Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2020; Grootegoed and Smith, 2018).

'The concept of moral distress is useful in describing the experiences of social workers when they are unable to practise their profession according to their moral code and the emotional burden related to this inability.'

(Mänttari-van der Kuip, 2020, p.86)

Enabling social workers to practise in a way that is congruent with their values is likely to support retention. Ensuring they can connect with the aspects of the work most meaningful to them (usually direct work with people with lived experience) is important to sustain them in the profession over the long-term (Cook et al., 2022).

Research by Cook (2022) found that social workers were more motivated to remain in their role when they felt their manager advocated for their service in the wider organisation, where their concerns were acknowledged, and they had a voice in shaping resource-allocation or service delivery.

Building a positive organisational culture

Organisational culture and support have an important impact on retention within social work. A good relationship with line managers, effective supervision and team support are associated with retention (Kyonne, 2009; Tham, 2022; McFadden, 2020) while the reverse, coupled with a culture of blame, can act as a disincentive for social workers to remain. Interventions which focus on improving organisational support and resilience alongside strengthening peer relationships are, therefore, likely to improve wellbeing and retention.

Taking an organisational approach to resilience

Resilience is a multi-faceted and complex concept which describes our ability to bounce back, adapt and recover following an adverse event (Kinman and Grant, 2014). Practitioners who are more able to tolerate setbacks are thought to be less likely to leave the profession. Several interventions have been piloted to improve social worker resilience including mindfulness, emotion journalling and emotional intelligence training. However, these individual-level interventions have proved to have limited or inconclusive impact (Turley et al., 2020). Instead, resilience is now increasingly recognised as a psychosocial construct where a worker's ability to bounce back is shaped not only by individual factors but crucially by social relationships with one's team, manager, and wider organisation.

Resource: The Social Work Organisational Resilience Diagnostic (SWORD)

SWORD helps to improve organisational resilience among child and family social workers and adult social workers (including those who work as part of a community multidisciplinary team in an NHS trust or inpatient mental health services). It equips senior leaders with a research-informed diagnostic tool and associated workbook to understand, build and sustain resilience in their organisations at individual, team, and organisational levels. The diagnostic tool takes the form of a workforce survey which will provide feedback on organisational strengths and weaknesses.

SWORD has five key foundational principles (KFPs):

1. Secure base
2. Sense of appreciation
3. Learning organisation
4. Mission and vision
5. Wellbeing

SWORD now includes features which support remote working based on learning from the COVID-19 pandemic. Information about SWORD, the research on which it is based and how organisations can access it is available here: <https://sword.researchinpractice.org.uk>

Resource: Helping practitioners reconnect with what they value about social work using ikigai.

This [open access tool](#) supports social workers to reconnect with what they value about social work. Ikigai (pronounced ick-ee-guy) is a Japanese concept that explores what we value in life, and why. Practice leaders, supervisors and teams can use it to identify key motivators for individuals and teams.

When used in a work context, it can help practice leaders, supervisors, and teams to identify what helps social workers to stay in their jobs and what they value about their work and understand what supports them to remain in their role, despite the challenges.

Talking about ikigai can help managers gain appreciation for what drives each staff member in their team and what they are proud of, celebrate successes and reconnect with their sense of mission and vocation.

Nurturing supportive and connected teams

Support from managers, colleagues, and team colleagues are important for employee resilience, wellbeing and in supporting social worker retention (Biggart et al., 2017; Ravalier, 2021). A good team can make the difference between a social worker choosing to stay or leave and support from team colleagues has been highlighted as particularly important for bolstering workers' resilience (Biggart et al., 2017). The provision of frequent, high-quality supervision has also been linked to greater professional confidence and job-engagement (Manthorpe et al., 2015; London Innovation and Improvement Alliance, 2022) which may reduce social workers' intention to leave.

Teams which provide non-blaming, 'backstage' spaces for workers to discuss the demands of their practice can help practitioners to feel supported, valued and emotionally contained (Ruch, 2007, Carder, 2022). Supportive relationships with colleagues help social workers to manage the emotional challenges of practice and informal conversations in the office act as a source of knowledge, supporting decision-making and information sharing (Helm, 2016). Interventions which strengthen relationships at work may, therefore, support retention.

The increase of agile working practices post-pandemic has presented challenges for social workers' connection with colleagues (Cook et al., 2020). A survey of local authority children's social workers found that the majority (59%) felt that relationships with colleagues had worsened because of COVID-19, particularly among frontline practitioners (Johnson et al., 2021). Increased remote working can lead to a sense of isolation for some workers, especially for newly qualified practitioners who may need additional support and learning opportunities provided by their team (Cook and Carder, 2023).

The team as secure base model

One model which can be helpful in facilitating the development of supportive teams is the team as secure base model. The concept of secure base comes from attachment theory (Bowlby, 1969) in which the characteristics of our relationships with significant others affect the development of trust and our ability to regulate our emotions.

In the context of emotionally demanding occupations, practice supervisors and their teams often provide a work-related secure base. Research conducted by Biggart et al., (2017) suggests that teams which embody the following five key dimensions provide a work-related secure base:

Availability - physically or emotionally, in real time or virtually, and relying on each other to be available.

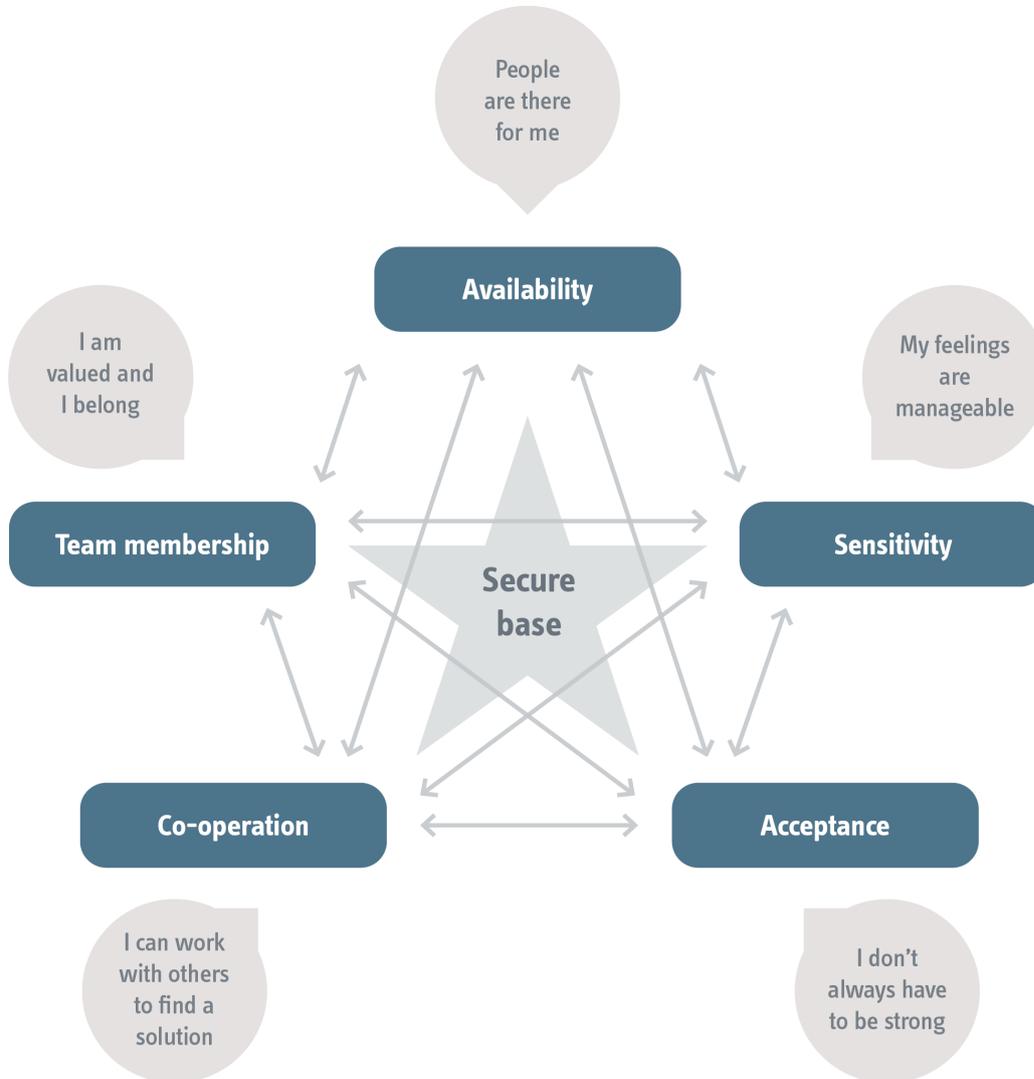
Sensitivity - sensitivity to each other's needs instils a sense of confidence that the emotional demands of the work can be processed and managed.

Acceptance - providing constructive help and advice when things go wrong and showing an understanding that it is unrealistic to expect to be perfect all the time.

Cooperation - direction and advice which promotes confidence that solutions to problems will be found.

Team belonging - shared ownership of work, and recognition of each other as both colleagues and human beings, helps social workers to believe they are valued and belong.

Figure 1 *The team as secure base model (Biggart et al., 2017)*



Resource: The team as secure base model

This [open access tool](#) for practice supervisors provides more information about the Team as a Secure Base model and how to use this to build supportive and connected teams.

The model has also been updated to support practice supervisors in considering how teams can provide a secure base when members are working remotely in online and hybrid settings. More information is available in this [open access tool](#).

Supporting early-career social workers

Social workers are particularly vulnerable to workforce exit during their first five years in practice and many employers have focused on developing coordinated support for early-career social workers. Recent workforce data indicates that most leavers from children's social work have been in their local authority for less than five years (Department for Education, 2023d).

During the early months and years of their career, social workers are developing their professional identity. They are therefore vulnerable to imposter syndrome and a loss of confidence during this period (Hochman et al., 2022). Newly qualified social workers often report feeling inadequately prepared for practice and experiencing a lack of support around the transition from student to social worker (Scourfield et al., 2021).

A recent five-year longitudinal study exploring the experiences of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in Scotland highlighted the value of informal peer support and the provision of guidance, advice, learning and emotional space for NQSWs (Grant et al., 2022). Newly qualified social workers also require opportunities to observe experienced colleagues, listen to conversations in the office and shadow them on home visits and meetings.

'For younger social workers... it only takes two or three cases to go over a cliff ... without the right support people just become isolated... it's only by observing people in an office situation that you realise that they're getting into difficulties'

Social Worker in Cook and Carder (2023)

For early-career practitioners, agile working arrangements may limit the availability of ad hoc support and reduce vicarious learning opportunities. When supporting newly qualified (NQSW) workers, supervisors should consider how to build in informal opportunities for vicarious learning (Cook and Carder, 2023). This may involve careful consideration of how to balance at-home and in-office working arrangements for both the NQSW and their team.

Practice example: A warm welcome in Warrington – enhanced induction and support for ASYEs.

Between 2022 and 2023 Warrington achieved a 51.1% decrease in staff turnover through the introduction of enhanced induction and bespoke support for social workers in their Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE). Feedback about this approach to supporting ASYE's has been positive.

A new induction process provides consistency for all new starters.

- > One day every fortnight is set aside by the Quality Assurance (QA) team for inductions of all new starters, whether permanent or agency, and those returning from sick leave or maternity leave. This provides an opportunity for everyone to network and obtain key information.
- > The induction day includes information about:
 - structure of teams and the organisation and key IT systems
 - local agencies and resources
 - emotional wellbeing and support
 - CPD opportunities and resources to support learning.

Welcoming people to the authority: a warm welcome helps staff to feel valued.

- > The QA team sends an email to key people within the organisation with names of new starters. This triggers a welcome email from senior staff, including the director.
- > Members of the senior leadership team set aside an hour a month to meet with new members of staff.

Developing a new ASYE Practice Development Worker (PDW) role

- > A PDW role has a specific remit to improve retention of ASYEs. The PDW shadows and observes practice, models good practice, and provides tailored support to ASYEs.
- > A 12-month evaluation provided evidence of the impact of the PDW in supporting long-term retention.

Managing 'stay or go' moments

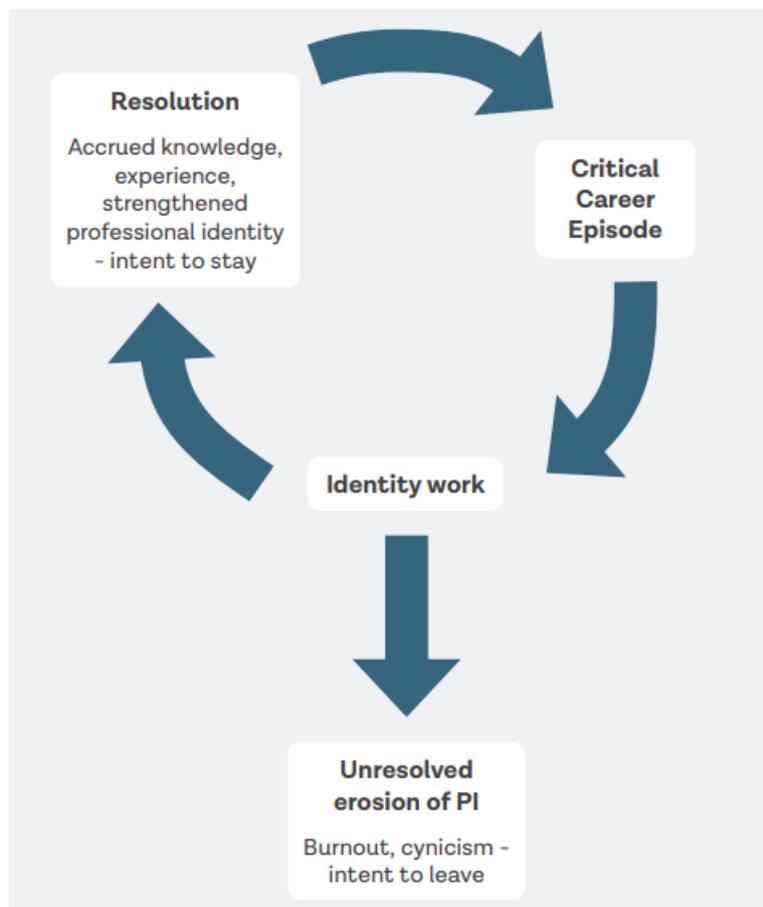
Cook et al. (2022) undertook research to learn more about what sustains experienced child and family social workers to remain in the profession. Social workers in the research study identified that they periodically encountered defining moments in their careers which they wrestled with. Working through these dilemmas required them to re-examine what it means, personally and professionally, to be a social worker.

They coined the term 'Critical Career Episodes' (CCEs) to describe these experiences and highlighted that staying in the profession over the long term entails successfully navigating a series of CCEs. Subsequent consultations indicate the relevance of these findings in adult contexts.

Cook et al. (2022) concluded that CCEs arise from a sense of misalignment between the demands of practice and the social worker's strongly held sense of identity (e.g. feeling a strong moral imperative to help but not having the resources or organisational support to do so). CCEs, therefore, prompt identity work where social workers attempt to bring their sense of identity and practice back into alignment.

The relationship between CCEs and retention is represented in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2 *The relationship between professional identity, CCEs and retention (Cook et al., 2022)*



Cook et al. (2022) argue that CCEs are often ‘stay or go?’ moments for social workers. Where social workers are unable to resolve a CCE they may think seriously about leaving. However, where they find a way through, the CCE can act as a powerful and transformative learning experience which informs their future practice. In turn, this strengthens social workers’ professional identity, desire to stay in the profession and acts as an important buffer when the role becomes stressful.

Effective, sensitive support from colleagues and managers can make the difference between a social worker remaining or leaving following a CCE.

Points to consider:

- > It is important for organisations to consider how social workers manage these ‘stay or go?’ moments. This includes identifying CCEs as they occur, providing space to reflect and work through the episode and offering opportunities to use the knowledge gained from CCEs to support the learning of others.

Resources: Critical Career Episodes

Dr Laura Cook talks about the research study and highlights key learning about retaining experienced social workers in these two short films:

- > [Professional identity development in experienced social workers](#)
- > [Critical Career Episodes: Stay or Go Moments](#)

The first part of the tool ‘[Reflecting on your journey as an experienced social worker. Using your learning to support others](#)’ provides a structured way for experienced social workers and practice supervisors to talk about the impact of CCEs.

CPD opportunities tailored to the needs of experienced social workers.

‘Your only way to progress is to go into a management role... I know people that have left the profession saying, “I’m tired of frontline practice, but I don’t want to be a manager and there’s nothing else I can do”.. what’s made me different is working in an organisation where they have offered other forms of progression.’

Social Worker with nine years’ post qualifying experience (Cook et al., 2022)

Opportunities for career progression and ongoing professional development are key to long-term retention in social work (Healy et al., 2009). High-quality CPD opportunities, including the opportunity to develop a practice specialism, motivate experienced workers to stay in their organisation. However, many training and development opportunities are targeted at early-career practitioners and a lack of established career pathways has been identified as a barrier to retention in social work (Healy et al., 2009; MacAlister, 2022).

The 2023 annual employer survey (Local Government Association, 2023) captured the views of 7,843 social workers (56% children’s social workers, 35% adult social workers and 9% mental health workers) across England. Respondents were asked their views on each of the eight employer standards. In a pattern continued from the previous year, social workers expressed greatest dissatisfaction with standard six – the provision of CPD opportunities.

Specialism, generativity, and mobility

Research by Cook et al. (2022) highlights a specific gap in provision for experienced social workers, whose ongoing development needs can be overlooked. They caution that CPD provision may not suit the needs of experienced social workers who do not want to become managers.

Experienced social workers in the study emphasised the importance of continuing to develop as a social worker throughout the mid and later stages of their career. Three factors were important in this process:

Specialism: Social workers' intentions to stay are strengthened by opportunities to develop a meaningful practice specialism. For example: developing specialist career pathways for experienced social workers, particularly for those who find themselves 'stuck' when they do not wish progress via a management route.

Generativity: Supporting other practitioners is a powerful motivator for experienced workers, who find ongoing meaning in sharing their learning and supporting the next generation of social workers. For example: supervision, mentoring colleagues, supporting ASYEs, practice education or taking on a workforce development role.

Mobility: Social workers value opportunities to try different roles and continue to develop new skills. Opportunities for mobility, such as secondments and rotations, can provide motivation for mid to late-career social workers to remain in the profession.

Resource: Reflecting on your journey as an experienced social worker

The second part of the tool '[Reflecting on your journey as an experienced social worker. Using your learning to support others](#)' provides a structured way for experienced social workers and practice supervisors to talk about specialism, generativity and mobility and consider how to make the best possible use of an experienced social worker's accumulated skills and knowledge.

Innovative progression pathways in Knowsley

Knowsley Council is piloting an innovative approach to progression which recognises the link between development opportunities and retention.

- > In 2022, Knowsley reviewed their Adults and Children's Joint Social Worker Progression Policy to ensure that this meets the needs of social workers over the course of their careers by providing CPD opportunities for early career (ASYE), experienced and advanced/senior practitioners in adults and children's social care.
- > Previous progression pathways required social workers to have one or more of the following qualifications: Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP), Practice educator (Stage 1 and 2) or a Level 3 apprenticeship in Leadership in Management. Knowsley concluded that this was potentially limiting for social workers who were not ready to complete formal qualifications or did not want to progress into management roles.
- > They decided to develop a more flexible annual credit-based CPD system as an alternative to this in which a CPD credit is earned when one hour of CPD is completed. The focus is on helping social workers to quantify and use the informal learning they complete throughout the year. For example: delivering CPD sessions to NQSWs, attending Higher Education Institutions to support students, supporting service projects, or using research. Informal learning is evidenced within an application and endorsed by their manager at the application stage.
- > Once practitioners have built up 300 credits (the same number of credits as the average of formal qualifications), they can apply for progression into new roles at an advanced level.

Barriers to progression for Black and Global Majority social workers

For experienced workers, lack of opportunities for development can act as a disincentive to stay in the profession (Cook et al., 2022). These issues are magnified for social workers from minoritised groups, who face additional barriers in progressing to leadership and supervisory roles (Gurau and Bacchoo, 2022). In a 2021 survey of social workers, 8% were considering leaving the profession because of experiences of racism, while 10% had considered leaving their organisation (Gurau and Bacchoo, 2022).

Black and Global Majority social workers are overrepresented (relative to the population) in the workforce for both children and adults social work yet underrepresented in leadership roles and overrepresented among agency workers (Fitzhenry et al., 2022). They report experiences of discrimination, racism, microaggressions and unconscious bias in the workplace, impacting their wellbeing and opportunities for progression.

Addressing these issues requires organisations to have:

- > continuing professional development opportunities available and accessible to all
- > transparency around the criteria for progression and promotion
- > a proactive strategy for championing the progression of Black and Global Majority social workers.

Points to consider:

Bernard (2021) challenges organisations to consider:

- > How Black and Global Majority social workers progress and develop into leadership roles.
- > Whether advice and guidance around criteria for recruitment, appraisal, and promotion are clear and accessible to all staff.
- > How data about recruitment and progression in relation to race is gathered and monitored.
- > How they can develop greater confidence in facilitating difficult conversations about race and experiences of discrimination.

Resources: Promoting anti-racism

More detailed analysis of barriers to progression for Black and Global Majority practitioners into senior leadership roles can be found [here](#).

You can hear Black and Global Majority practice leaders discuss barriers to progression in this short open access [film](#).

In this series of [resources](#) on promoting anti-racism you can hear directly from professionals engaged in anti-racist work. The resources have been developed to support organisations to talk about anti-racism.

Recruiting and retaining Black and Global Majority staff: best practice in Brighton and Hove

Brighton and Hove focuses on the empowerment of Black and Global Majority staff. Their initiatives help staff members to speak up and not feel silenced as well as create working environments that support staff to thrive, not just survive, in the face of injustice. These changes have been 'born out of the inequity experienced by our Black and Global Majority staff members and a desire to want to do better for them and the communities we serve' (Millie Kerr, Strategic Anti-Racist Lead, Brighton and Hove).

Their approach has led to an increase in Black and Global Majority and international social workers joining the council, as well as the increased progression of Black and Global Majority staff members into managerial and senior leadership positions. This includes:

- > Blind interviewing (where no identifying information is revealed prior to interview) and Black and Global Majority staff on interview panels.
- > Monthly Black and Global Majority staff groups as well as emotional support for staff with lived experience of racism/racial trauma.
- > Comprehensive support for international social workers (including support around relocation, accommodation, and additional time to accommodate learning, particularly where there are cultural and/or language differences).
- > Comprehensive mentoring/buddying and induction for all staff, which includes introduction to the anti-racist leads.
- > Personal development plans (PDPs) that encompass anti-racist practice and professional development goals.
- > Diverse talent and future leaders' programmes – these include opportunities for Black and Global Majority workers to shadow senior leaders.
- > Participation in the Black, Asian Leadership Initiative (BALI).
- > An ongoing commitment to listening to the workforce via staff engagement events and surveys, particularly regarding the anti-racist strategy and action plan, as well as the Workforce Race Equality Standards (WRES).

Key messages

Social workers leave the profession for a range of reasons. Key push factors include organisational culture, poor wellbeing and burnout, inadequate support for early-career social workers, and lack of opportunities for progression and development for experienced social workers.

Organisations can increase retention by maximising ‘pull factors’ – those which incentivise social workers to stay. Many of these can be achieved through addressing organisational culture, peer and team support and do not incur a financial cost.

‘It’s part of my identity. It’s part of who I am... It’s very important and it’s probably got more important as time has gone on. The longer I’ve been in social work... I’ve felt more inspired, rather than less.’

Experienced social worker (Cook et al., 2022)

This is important to consider because after the five-year mark, social workers are less likely to leave (Department for Education, 2023). Burns et al., 2020 (p.1363) argue that: ‘if you can retain social workers beyond the five-year point, their retention narrative intensifies, their embeddedness in the organisation and community strengthens and they have a stronger sense of professional confidence.’

Summary of points to consider:

- > Employers need to understand the reasons why social workers are leaving their current roles and distinguish between different types of turnover and mobility.
- > When it comes to burnout, prevention is better than cure. It is important to ensure social workers can access regular, supportive discussions around wellbeing.
- > Support from managers, colleagues, and team colleagues are important for employee resilience, wellbeing and in supporting social worker retention.
- > In an increasingly hybrid working climate, it is helpful for organisations to explore how opportunities for support and connection are made available to social workers, particularly for newly qualified workers who are more vulnerable to leaving the profession.
- > Providing opportunities for experienced social workers to review and reflect on their experiences of navigating CCEs and subsequent learning are important.
- > CPD opportunities need to be relevant to the specific career stages of social workers.
- > Career pathways which offer opportunities for specialism, generativity and mobility are important for ongoing professional development and retention.
- > It is important to champion and support the progression of Black and Global Majority social workers.

Retention: barriers and solutions

Barriers	Solution
Organisational culture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Conduct regular ‘temperature checks’ with employees to identify areas for improvement within the organisation. > Invest in strengthening teams - using interventions which support peer-relationships and teams as a secure base.
Poor wellbeing and burnout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Early intervention – provide ongoing support to promote wellbeing and prevent burnout among social workers. > Reduce barriers that prevent social workers from connecting with the meaningful aspects of their work and making a difference. Where this is difficult (due to lack of resources), consult workers in generating potential solutions.
Lack of progression and development opportunities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> > Develop clear progression criteria and a proactive approach to the promotion of Black and Global Majority social workers. > To retain experienced workers, offer career pathways with opportunities for specialism, generativity, and mobility. > Provide high-quality CPD tailored to different career-stages.

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