*‘Being a social worker... it’s in my DNA’*

**Retaining experienced child and family social workers: the role of professional identity**

**Abstract**

The retention of experienced child and family social workers is a significant issue in the UK, the US and Europe. Failure to retain experienced practitioners has serious implications for the protection and support of vulnerable children. Existing research and workforce interventions have focused on the support of early-career social workers to prevent exit. Relatively few studies have examined what can be learned from experienced social workers who have remained in the profession long-term. This study captures the voices of experienced stayers. Data consist of interviews with social workers (n=58) across 11 local authorities in England who have remained in practice for ≥ 8 years. Findings suggest that a strong sense of professional identity (PI) sustains social workers and promotes retention. For experienced social workers, staying in the profession long-term involves navigating a series of identity challenges over the course of their career, conceptualised here as Critical Career Episodes (CCEs). Based on these findings, we suggest that retaining experienced social workers involves support to navigate CCEs alongside meaningful opportunities for learning and development. We identify three key factors which support and sustain ongoing PI development and support retention: generativity, specialism and mobility. The article concludes with recommendations to support workforce retention.

Keywords: retention, experienced social workers, professional identity, stayers, workforce exit, Critical Career Episodes

**1. Introduction**

The retention of experienced social workers is a long-standing issue in child and family social work, both in the UK and internationally. In the US, typical tenure for child welfare workers is less than two years, with an annual turnover rate of 20–40% (Guzman et al 2020). Similar retention rates have been reported in Europe (Astvik et al, 2020; Frost et al 2018). In England, the turnover rate of child and family social workers peaked at 17.1% in 2022, currently standing at 15.9% (DfE, 2024). Despite this slight decrease, high turnover and the retention of experienced workers is recognised as an urgent and endemic issue in child and family social work.

Failure to retain experienced social workers has significant implications. Firstly, novice practitioners may lack the skills to manage high-risk cases and are typically less able to identify gaps and patterns in case information (Whittaker 2018). An overreliance on inexperienced workers has been implicated in several high-profile reviews of child death (e.g. Hudson, 2022). Second, since experienced workers play a key role in supporting the learning of early career social workers (Johnson et al 2023) their loss impacts workforce development. Third, the economic costs of training rather than retaining social workers is high (Bowyer and Roe, 2015). A high turnover of staff also impacts service quality, creating a lack of consistency for families (Baginsky 2023) which may impact on outcomes for children (Turley and Morgan 2020). As Thoburn *et al* (2021) observe, most research to date has focused on early leavers, rather than experienced workers who have stayed in the profession long-term. The present research addresses this gap, seeking to learn from experienced stayers about what sustains long-term retention. At a national level, the findings from this research address the key issue of retention in child and family social work. We advance specific recommendations for the retention of expertise among local authority social workers. The findings are also of international relevance for child welfare systems in the U.S and Europe where there are similar issues around retention.

1.2 Retention in child and family social work

Child and family social work is recognised as an emotionally demanding profession with high levels of burnout compared to other types of social work (Hussein 2018; McFadden, 2015). Working in the emotive context of child abuse and neglect involves intense emotional labour (Winter et al 2018). Stressors such as reduced resources (Grootegoed and Smith 2018), high caseloads, increased bureaucracy (Ravalier, 2021), poor supervision and work-conflict (Welander et al 2019) can shape social workers’ intention to leave and place them at increased risk of burnout (McFadden, 2015), secondary traumatic stress (Weiss-Dagan et al 2022) and moral distress (Manttari-van der Kuip, 2020). In England, the latest wave of the five-year longitudinal study of local authority child and family social workers echoed these themes; the most commonly cited reasons given by those who were considering leaving in the next year were: high caseload (49%), working hours in general (45%), the amount of paperwork (37%) and dislike of the working culture (32%) (Johnson et al 2023). For experienced workers, a lack of established career pathways has been identified as an additional barrier to retention (MacAlister, 2022; Healey et al 2009).

Despite these push factors, there are powerful motivations for social workers to stay in the profession. These include: job satisfaction and engagement (Hussein, 2018), organisational embeddedness (Burns et al 2020) and a strong commitment to the profession of child and family social work (McFadden et al 2015). Several studies indicate that social workers can experience high levels of job satisfaction and emotional exhaustion simultaneously, suggesting that the ability to find ongoing meaning and rewards in their work may allow them to manage the intense emotional demands of practice (McFadden 2015; Stalker et al, 2007). Peer and collegial support help sustain social workers (Ravalier, 2021; Sedivy et al 2020; Guzman et al, 2020; Biggart et al 2017). In particular, support from team colleagues, a good relationship with line managers and effective supervision are associated with retention (McLaughlin et al, 2023; Tham, 2022; Mcfadden, 2020; Russ et al 2020; Ferguson et al, 2020). Experience itself is an important predictor of retention. In the US, Guzman et al (2020) found that the odds of staying increased by 14% for each additional year in the job. Burns et al’s (2020) study of child protection in Ireland found that ‘if you can retain social workers after the 5-year point’ their ‘retention narratives intensify, organisational embeddedness and confidence increases’ (Burns et al, 2020: 1363). Similarly, Griffiths and Royse’s (2017) US study of child welfare workers found that those in practice for ≥8 years expressed greater levels of job satisfaction. This suggests that capturing the perspectives of long-serving social workers may enable us to identify factors that support long-term retention.

1.3. Professional identity and retention

Existing research, which focuses on early-career leavers, does not provide a complete picture of how and why some experienced workers stay. The small number of studies which include the voices of experienced social workers suggest that what sustains them is more complex, and may relate to a sense of identity, mission and purpose (Thoburn et al, 2021; Burns et al, 2020; McFadden, 2020; Frost et al 2018). Burns et al’s (2020: 1376) longitudinal study followed a cohort of experienced social workers over a decade. It identified a sense of long-term commitment among stayers, linked to professional identity:

These experienced child protection and welfare social workers had constructed staying narratives that helped them explain their long-standing commitment to working in child protection... These narratives did not change much over the decade between interviews...

Professional Identity (PI) is defined as ‘how social workers think of themselves as social workers and their self-concept based on attributes, beliefs and experiences’ (Webb, 2017: 2017). PI is a multifaceted concept which includes personality traits (Wiles, 2013) competencies (Wiles, 2017) and strongly held personal values (Levy et al 2014), particularly in relation to social justice (Mackay and Zufferey, 2015). PI in social work characterised by a sense of belonging, identification and commitment to the profession and includes the personal and professional aspects of identity (Hochman et al, 2023; Webb, 2017). It is formed through the process of professional socialisation (Leigh, 2014) during which social workers adopt the norms and standards of the profession (Wiles, 2017; Levy et al, 2014) and ‘internalise the ‘moral core’ of social work’ (Butler Warke and Bolger, 2021: 1032). It has been suggested that PI may act as a source of intrinsic motivation and its absence may be an antecedent to turnover intention among social workers (Wang et al, 2020). While a direct link between PI and retention in social work has not been established, it has been tentatively suggested that a strong, positive sense of PI may bolster social workers’ resilience (Wiles 2017b; Kearns and McCardle, 2012). In other professions, PI has been shown to mitigate burnout (e.g. Chen et al 2020; Lu et al, 2019). There has been a renewed international interest in PI development among social workers, particularly in the early stages of their career (Hochman et al, 2023; Moorhead, 2021; Smith, Harms and Brophy, 2022). However, no studies have explored PI among experienced workers or those who have stayed beyond the average tenure. The present study therefore aimed to answer two interlinked questions: what sustains experienced social workers helping them to stay in the profession and what is the relationship between PI and retention?

**2. Methodology**

2.1. Ethical approval and recruitment

Ethical approval was obtained via the University of East Anglia Ethics Committee and from the Association of Directors of Children’s Services in England. Where required, additional ethical permissions were obtained from the Research Governance panels of participating local authorities (LAs). An invitation to participate was sent to Directors of Children’s Services in England and 11 agreed to participate. LAs subsequently identified participants who were qualified and registered social workers, currently working with children and families, with ≥ 8 years post-qualifying experience. Social workers were invited to participate via email. Those who responded were contacted by the research team, their eligibility confirmed and informed consent obtained.

2.3 Sample: description of the ‘stayers’

Participants (n=58) were all practicing, qualified social workers with ≥8 years’ post-qualifying experience drawn from 11 local authorities in England (fig. 1). Length of experience ranged from 8-40 years with an average (mean) of 14 years. Participant age ranged from 31 to 70 (mean: 46 years). 48 were female (83%) and 10 male (17%). The sample reflected a range of seniority levels (fig. 1). At the time of interviewing, 20 of the 58 participants (34.5%) considered themselves to have remained in ‘frontline’ practice - used to describe statutory child protection social work which typically combines high levels of assessment and intensive intervention, including duty or ‘triage’ type services (Healy et al 2009). The remainder worked in other areas of child and families social work including fostering, adoption, children with disabilities and workforce development teams. Typically, participants had started their career in frontline services and moved to other areas of CFSW after 2-3 years.

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Social SW | Senior SW | First-line manager | Middle-manager or Head of Service | Other |
| 17 (29.3%) | 17 (29.3%) | 16 (27.5%) | 4 (6.8%) | 4 (6.8%) |

(Fig 1: participants by role type)

2.4 Data collection

Social workers were interviewed via telephone using semi-structured interviews which aimed to capture the reasons why social workers had stayed, what had sustained them and how this related to their professional identity. Questions included: tell me about a time when being a social worker was important to you? Tell me about an experience that shaped you as a social worker? Tell me about a time when being a social worker was difficult for you/ you thought about leaving? What has enabled you to stay? What does being a social worker mean to you and how has this changed over time? Interviews lasted for approximately one hour and were recorded and transcribed.

2.5 Data analysis

An inductive approach to thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2021) was used to generate a theoretical understanding of professional identity (PI) and retention among experienced stayers. Interview transcripts were read through several times to ensure familiarity. In this first stage of analysis, each researcher separately open-coded a subset of interviews, meeting to discuss instances of difference and commonality and to develop a coding framework. The coding framework included: representations of being a social worker (PI), key practice moments/episodes, and career-sustaining factors. The second stage of analysis involved coding the full dataset in NVIVO12 using this coding framework. The research team met bi-weekly to discuss patterns in the codes from each interview, which were distilled into a series of overarching themes. To ensure rigour, the research team met for a final process of review, checking fit between themes and the dataset as a whole.

**3. Findings**

3.1 Professional identity among experienced stayers

For this group of experienced practitioners, social work was an intrinsic and important part of their identity. Excepting one participant (who described social work as ‘just a job’) all participants described social work as a defining feature of who they were, solidified through their years in practice. Social workers’ representations of being a social worker (PI) encompassed their core values, beliefs, personality, skills and sense of purpose. For this group of experienced stayers, the personal and professional were inextricably linked:

It’s part of my identity. It's part of *who I am*... I think 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. (SW26)

There is not a separate me who is a social worker... all of my values and belief systems and personality are absolutely entwined with me being a social worker. (SW28)

While a degree of separation between work and home life was acknowledged to be important, experienced stayers described social work as ‘24/7 state of being’ (SW33). They approached their personal relationships in a way that was congruent with their work identity and vice versa. They described themselves as avid observers of human behaviour, people watchers and good listeners who found themselves ‘social working’ friends, family and even strangers. Over the years, social work had become a ‘way of life’ (SW40) for these experienced stayers, strengthening their resolve to stay in the profession:

Being a social worker... it feels like it’s in my DNA now... being a social worker is like

breathing... I don’t think I’ll ever not think and feel like one. It’s difficult to imagine a life

without social work in it – it’s that ingrained... it feels like it’s in your bones after ten

years... (SW37)

This strong sense of professional identity (PI) could act as a buffer to the stresses of the role. For instance, social workers described drawing on their sense of vocation, their desire to ‘make a difference’ and their core values to cope with the manifold demands of child and family social work. Several social workers described having to ‘hold on’ to their sense of purpose and what had brought them into the profession during difficult times. For some social workers, the strong sense of PI that sustained them also held them captive; many social workers found it hard to conceive of who they were without social work. Being a social worker could therefore create ambivalent feelings. Some social workers felt that the job changed their personality and outlook in negative ways. For instance, as a result of working in child protection some described becoming more cynical and suspicious of people. As one practitioner stated ‘social work saved my life, and it’s totally ruined it at the same time... (SW37). Despite this ambivalence, practicing in a way that was congruent with their deeply-held values and beliefs provided meaning and purpose that sustained them over the long-term. As one social worker summarised it ‘this is what I feel like I was born to do’ (SW55).

3.2. Critical Career Episodes

While this sense of professional identity (PI) was important, sustaining it was not a static achievement. Instead, it was an ongoing process across the career span which involved navigating a series of what we conceptualise as ‘Critical Career Episodes’ (CCEs). CCEs were defining moments in social workers’ careers which were emotive, challenging and typically represented ‘stay or go’ moments. CCEs arose from a sense of misalignment between the demands of practice and the social worker’s sense of PI, which encompassed their personal values, beliefs and sense of purpose. For instance, one practitioner provided an example of a CCE which arose due to misalignment between her vocation to help families and the limitations of her role:

… austerity was kicking in and everything was being cut left, right and centre. Our caseloads were massive, we had 35, 40 kids. There were cases you were really, really worried about but just didn’t have the time to deal with them... I spent a couple of years where I felt backed into a corner and there was no way out. I spent a long time just feeling like I was just putting kids into this processing machine and hoping for the best. (SW37)

This became a CCE – a stay or go moment - where she felt she could not reconcile her values and purpose (aspects of her PI) with the demands of her work. Other practitioners described similar instances. Examples included: situations where they had fundamentally disagreed with their organisation about a decision made about a child, the first time they removed a child from their family and transitioning to the role of manager and needing to make decisions that conflicted with their practice values.

CCEs often involved ‘moral distress’ (Manttari-van der Kuip, 2020) where workers felt they were prevented from working in a way that was congruent, meaningful and compatible with their identity. Crucially, CCEs provoked ‘identity work’ (Winker, 2018) where workers needed to find a way to move their role back into alignment with their PI. For instance, one participant recalled a particularly formative CCE where she worked with parents who were threatening and hostile towards her. The social worked described this as an extremely anxiety-provoking and upsetting case for both her and the family. She experienced a sense of painful dissonance; she had a commitment to improve the lives of children and families yet found herself causing profound distress. She described needing to tolerate being hated and, despite her intentions, causing distress to the family each time she visited. This CCE led her to ask herself fundamental questions about herself and whether what she was doing was compatible with her sense of who she was. Ultimately, through a process of identity work, she was able to reframe the situation, distilling a ‘moral’ from the experience:

I do think that [case] has cemented my own resilience... you have to learn that *it's not*

*personal.* (SW40)

Reframing her identity as someone who would not always ‘be liked’ and that this was part of the work was a hard-won resolution, yet it enabled her to maintain a positive view of herself – what Winkler (2018) would describe as ‘successful’ identity work. CCEs involved a process of (often painful) self-examination where workers sought to bring their PI and the role back into alignment. This often-entailed rationalisations such as ‘you can’t help everyone’. In other cases, it meant finding the courage to ‘challenge’ and ‘disagree’ with other professionals in order to remain congruent with their values.

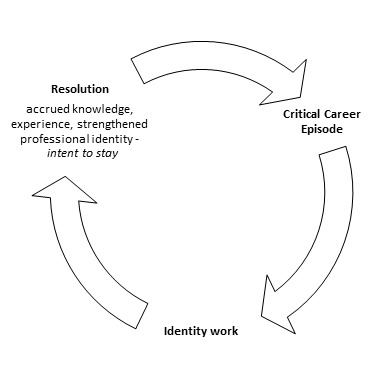
For some social workers CCEs were a single event or case, such as a Court appearance, a visit to a family, a key meeting or work with a particular child. Other CCEs, such the example above, consisted of a cluster of events which spanned several months where workers entertained questions such as: am I making a difference? Is my work helping or harming children, should I leave? In some cases, social workers were simply unable to reconcile these demands with a positive sense of identity, what Winkler (2018) describes as ‘unsuccessful identity work’. In these cases, participants experienced burnout, became cynical, disengaged and crucially, formed an intention to leave the profession.

For instance, one social worker described a CCE which involved being a ‘hostile witness’ to her local authority. She judged that the children were at imminent risk of harm, yet this ran counter to the views of other professionals. Being congruent with her own values and identity as someone who ‘safeguards children’ placed her in an untenable position:

I was in a position where there was pressure put on me... I had no support from managers, no legal representation. It was a very lonely place, and it almost made me ill... in my heart of hearts I knew the risk... I was going to stand by my assessment... I left social work because I had no faith in the system … I don't want to be part of an organisation that ignores risks to children because then my job is futile... Then I came back to social work because ultimately, I think I do have faith in the system... I realised that whilst that was a very difficult time...ultimately that reiterated my identity as a social worker... What I absolutely will not ever, ever, ever, ever, ever do is change my assessment because somebody has put pressure on me. (SW17)

As this example shows, where social workers couldn’t reconcile their values with the demands of their work CCEs became ‘stay or go?’ moments. In this case, the social worker temporarily left the profession following this episode. CCEs prompted difficult and often painful identity work, but where social workers were able to achieve a resolution, this could result in deep learning. In this case, working through this problem allowed her to return to social work – she did this by ultimately drawing a moral from her experience - the resolve to adhere to her professional judgement (i.e., to ‘never, ever, ever change judgement under coercion’). This identity work ‘ultimately reiterated’ her identity as a social worker and she returned to the profession.

For experienced stayers, remaining in the profession meant encountering and navigating several CCEs over the course of their career. These CCEs, while involving difficult identity work, could ultimately strengthen social workers’ professional identity further reinforcing their intention to stay in the profession. Developing and sustaining a strong sense of PI over time was a cyclical and iterative process (conceptualised in fig. 2). Experienced social workers had typically moved round the circle several times accruing experience, practice wisdom through encountering CCEs and consolidating their sense of PI over time. CCEs acted as points of reference throughout social workers’ careers, from which they continued to derive meaning. They drew on these experiences to navigate subsequent challenges over the course of their careers.



Shape

**Unresolved**

Erosion of PI

Burnout, cynicism

**Intent to leave**

Fig. 2. The relationship between CCEs, Professional identity and retention

3.3. Organisational and social support during CCEs

While navigating a CCE involved a great deal of self-reflection, social support played a fundamental role in their resolution. Most participants identified that conversations with team colleagues during CCEs could help them to reframe and process the experience. Having a supportive manager, team and colleagues could enable social workers to think differently and retain a positive sense of PI in the face of conflict. Many CCEs prompted questions that had no easy answer; long-standing issues around caseloads, lack of resources and ethical issues in social work are not easily resolved. Despite this, social workers reported finding great solace in having a manager who understood, listened and allowed them to have a ‘voice’ in decision-making, even when they could not obtain the desired outcome. Where social workers lost faith in their identity as a social worker, having a manager ‘who believed in me, who I could trust had faith in my practice (SW26)’ was vital in sustaining them through a CCE. Similarly, the response of their local authority (organisation) to the CCE was important. For many social workers, the most challenging times of their career – and where they had most seriously considered leaving - were occasions where they experienced a CCE and had an unsupportive manager, team or organisation.

3.4 Sustaining PI development and retention

In answer to the question of what sustained them during their career, experienced social workers identified a need to continue to develop as people and professionals. Part of this involved support to manage (and grow from) CCEs. It also involved ongoing opportunities for generativity, specialism and mobility which promoted ongoing PI development and motivation.

*Generativity*

To stay in the profession, social workers needed to continue to find purpose and meaning in the work, rather than ‘more of the same’ (SW18). Participants identified a risk of stagnation as they entered the middle and later stages of their career. In terms of PI, social workers’ identity needs at this point in their career paralleled the seventh stage of Erikson’s (1959) theory of psychosocial development - generativity vs stagnation, which takes place in middle-age. The guiding concern for the individual during this period is making a mark on the world through the nurture of things that will outlast them.

Opportunities for generativity (e.g. mentoring) provides a wider social context for individual endeavours, leading to a sense of meaning, personal accomplishment and, according to Erikson, the virtue of care. Similarly, supporting the development of ‘the next generation’ (SW31) enabled experienced social workers to find continued meaning in their work and motivated them to remain in the profession. While their early career was focused on the development of their own skills, social workers described a shift of emphasis in later years:

… when I first started my practice [was] about being the best that I can be... now I look at every opportunity to support others to be the best that they can be, and that’s a real

change... (SW28)

The need for generativity could be fulfilled by mentoring new team members, becoming a supervisor, a manager, a practice educator, adopting a workforce development role or simply by sharing one’s learning with others. For many social workers, generativity involved supporting early career social workers to manage CCEs similar to those they had encountered earlier in their career. This consisted of both sharing knowledge and providing emotional support for junior colleagues. Opportunities for generativity helped experienced social workers to regain motivation and, in some cases, directly prevented them from leaving:

I think the light bulb moment was if I carry on, I can have these students and I can help train other students... that was a key moment. So, they give me lots of students and they give me lots of staff that are underperforming. (SW1)

However, experienced social workers capacity for and need for generativity was not always recognised within their organisations. Instead, as teams were under pressure, they tended to be allocated increasingly large caseloads.

*Specialism*

Opportunities for progression other than through management were often limited, particularly in child protection social work. However, where these opportunities were available this could promote retention:

If you’re a frontline social worker 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 front-line practice, but I don’t want to be a manager and there’s nothing else I can do’... what’s made me different is I’ve worked in an organisation where they have offered other forms of progression. (SW14)

Experienced social workers were often motivated to stay in the profession where they could develop a specialism i.e. becoming an expert in a particular area. Progression through specialism could offer a viable alternative for continued development among social workers who did not wish to enter management. Most participants echoed the need to develop specialist career pathways. Social workers described interests in several specific areas, including court work, child sexual exploitation (CSE), domestic abuse, working with adolescents, autism etc. These interests were typically developed through their practice where they had encountered a challenging case, or a CCE which had provoked new learning. For instance, one participant was given the opportunity to use her experience, developed across several challenging cases, to develop a Child Sexual Exploitation response team. Matching specialisms with workers’ interests was a mutually beneficial investment for the individual and the organisation, sustaining motivation and improving retention.

Specialism was also identified as a potential solution to high turnover and consequent loss of experience in frontline teams. While a small number of social workers had worked in frontline child protection teams for their entire career, most had moved into other areas of children’s social work. Some questioned whether child protection case work was sustainable beyond 2-3 years. Despite this, many were reluctant leavers who missed frontline work but did not see a sustainable way to remain. Several participants expressed a desire, as one social worker described, ‘to keep a foot in practice but not be immersed (SW47)’. The opportunity to develop a specialism was identified as a sustainable way to use experience to support frontline services while not carrying the full burden of a child protection caseload. A specialism in court skills, CSE, domestic abuse or other issues relevant to child protection could allow experienced workers to retain an advisory role to ‘help the frontline somehow, without being right in the middle of it’ (SW34). However, participants identified that these opportunities were rare.

*Mobility*

Mobility was important for sustaining experienced workers in the profession and was sometimes (but not always) linked to moving into a specialism. Participants typically described moving teams, local authority and/or role several times during their career. This helped them to stay motivated and reconnect with their passion for the job:

I change job every two to three years, I love learning new things. (SW49)

Social workers also identified mobility as a key reason why they had been able to remain in practice:

…one of the things that helped me to stay was doing different roles... to move around a little bit and try different things and go to different teams. (SW19)

Opportunities for mobility allowed workers to develop their skills and try out other areas of social work. While formal secondment opportunities were mentioned by some participants, generally they identified a lack of structured opportunities for mobility. In response to this, many social workers described creating their own informal secondments via a short-term role change to ‘try out’ (SW31) a new aspect of social work. Almost two-thirds of social workers had moved from frontline child protection services to other areas of children’s social work. For some of these participants, this sidestep allowed them to escape excessive demands of child protection social work while remaining in the profession. In some cases, this sidestep was permanent, in others it was a temporary move to provide a period of respite. Opportunities for short-term moves and secondments were identified by social workers as an underexplored option to retain expertise in frontline teams. Social workers described how developing a specialism could provide opportunities for mobility, while also allowing workers to provide support to workers across frontline teams. Several participants suggested that having a specialism, such as court work, might enable them to rotate through different services, including child protection teams, to co-work cases as needed. This in turn could provide respite from the continued and unsustainable demands of sole responsibility for a full child protection caseload. As one social worker summarised:

It’s like being a battery hen, you churn it, you just churn it because you are on

this... production line... I think the practice system tends to get siloed... I suppose, it’s like being a kidney specialist or a heart specialist - can you rotate, can you have a specialism and then go on a rotation somewhere? I don’t think you can keep people for longer.  I think, actually, everyone should move team or service area every two or three years (SW48).

Social workers recognised that mobility could lead to gaps in service provision with implications for families. However, they highlighted that having a full child protection caseload was, for many workers, not sustainable beyond 2-3 years and that some workforce movement was inevitable. Instead, they suggested that experienced workers could adopt an advisory role and co-work cases with caseholding social workers. This was viewed as a more sustainable way to retain expertise in frontline teams.

**4. Discussion**

Retaining experienced social workers is a long-standing problem in child and family social work. This research aimed to identify what sustains long-term retention among social workers by capturing the voices of experienced stayers. The findings suggest that, for experienced workers, a strong sense of professional identity (PI) may act as a buffer to the stresses of the work and support retention. Existing research has identified personal and professional integration, values, ethics and mission as key aspects of PI among social workers (Hochman et al, 2023; Butler-Warke and Bolger, 2021; Frost et al, 2018; Levy et al, 2014). Similarly, for this cohort, PI included an integration of personal values and beliefs, a sense of purpose, meaning which was consolidated over years in practice. Existing literature has focused on PI development among newly-qualified and early-career social workers (Hochman et al, 2023; Moorhead, 2021). The present study builds on this, suggesting that PI development continues across the career span, so attention must be paid to the identity needs of mid to late career social workers. This can be achieved through a) support to manage CCEs and b) opportunities to facilitate ongoing PI development through generativity, specialism and mobility.

Existing research has drawn a tentative link between PI and retention (Moorhead, 2021; Wiles 2017b; Kearns and McCardle, 2012). The findings from the present research support and extend this hypothesis by advancing a conceptualisation of PI development and its relationship to retention (fig.2). Previous research has emphasised the role of collegial and peer support in the retention of social workers (McLaughlin et al, 20123; Tham, 2021; Ravalier, 2021; McFadden 2020; Russ et al, 2021). For social workers in this study, peer and management support often made the difference between leaving or staying after a CCE. Existing research identifies experience as an important predictor of retention (DfE, 2022; Burns et al 2020; Guzman et al, 2020). The present research may help to explain why social workers with ≥8 years in practice may be more likely to stay. For these experienced stayers, being in practice over a number of years typically entailed navigating a series of CCEs. This prompted identity work and deep experiential learning, ultimately strengthening their professional identity over time (fig. 2) and capacity to support others. Experienced social workers had travelled around the circle several times (fig. 2). When encountering new situations and stressors (or supporting colleagues to do so) experienced social workers drew on this wealth of accrued experience and learning which helped them to manage new stressors from a position of experience – perhaps explaining why experienced workers are more likely to stay.

This research has strengths and limitations. In terms of strengths, this is the first research to provide an exploration of PI among experienced stayers in social work. However, while these qualitative findings suggest a link between PI and retention, further quantitative research is needed to examine the association between PI, intention to leave/stay and actual turnover.

**5. Implications: retaining expertise in child and family social work**

The findings from this research have several implications for supporting retention in child and family social work. Firstly, social workers are particularly vulnerable to workforce exit during CCEs. Support to manage CCEs is therefore vital. To process CCEs, social workers require social support, time to take stock, opportunities to reflect and some respite from the demands of the work. Protocols for debrief and reflective support around CCEs are important for retaining and supporting experienced workers. In subsequent follow-up research (to be reported elsewhere) we have found that the concept of the CCE provides useful language for social workers to reflect on their experiences, ask for help and identify support needs. The research team is currently developing reflective tools for use around CCEs – both to manage challenges and harness learning from CCEs as a developmental tool for social workers. We are also exploring the applicability of these findings for adult social care workers.

Social work teams played a key role in helping practitioners to work through CCEs. Interventions which strengthen teams and support them to function as a secure base are therefore likely to be useful (Biggart et al, 2017). However, in practice many social workers are placed in teams with high turnover or a lack of supervision which can make accessing ongoing support challenging. Organisations should therefore consider spaces outside teams (such as reflective groups, peer support, mentoring, Schwartz Rounds) which social workers can access for support to manage CCEs. Several social workers described how, following a CCE, their team manager had pieced together informal arrangements for a short period of leave using accrued annual leave, time off in lieu and negotiated cover arrangements within the team. In these cases, social workers could gain respite without needing to ‘go off sick’ which could feel like a defeat or failure, pushing them to leave. However, these arrangements were dependent on the goodwill of managers. Organisations could therefore consider short periods of respite for workers following a CCE.

Secondly, experienced social workers are sustained by opportunities to grow and develop. Existing interventions tend to focus on PI development needs and learning among newly qualified or early-career social workers. Experienced social workers in this study emphasised the need for opportunities for development across the careerspan, including for mid-later career social workers. Organisations could consider using the concepts of generativity, specialism and mobility as a framework for considering career pathways for social workers, especially for those who may not wish to pursue a traditional career progression route (i.e. into management).

Maximising opportunities for generativity is key to sustaining and retaining experienced social workers as well as supporting the workforce more generally. Many highly-experienced workers were motivated to stay in the profession through opportunities to share their learning with others – whether this be through mentoring, training or having input into service development. Many possessed substantial institutional memory which could assist in the development of practice as well as service delivery strategy. However, many felt their expertise was unrecognised and thus underutilised by their employers. Undertaking an ‘expertise audit’ may assist organisations to map and make use of the specific skills of their workforce to the mutual benefit of both. In addition to mentoring, practice education and workforce development roles, schemes such as legacy mentoring – which have proved useful in health services (see Hardy, 2022) - may prove useful.

Mobility and specialism may also support retention of expertise within child protection social work – an area of child and family social work where retention is a particular challenge (DfE, 2024). While all social workers in this study (n=58) had practiced in child protection social work, at the time of interview only 20 (34.5%) considered themselves to have remained in this area. The remaining 38 (65.5%) had ‘side stepped’ into other areas of child and family social work. This supports Burns and Christie’s (2013) hypothesis that high turnover figures may obscure the fact that many experienced social workers change role, rather than leaving the profession. However, it was significant to note that many of those who had ‘sidestepped’ away from child protection had done so reluctantly. Child protection social work typically offered few opportunities for professional development and progression beyond line management. This was exacerbated by high caseloads and limited time for reflection. Participants emphasised that they would welcome opportunities to support frontline services in a more sustainable way. The creation of specialist roles, opportunities for generativity (such as mentoring and supporting new child protection workers) and mobility (having opportunities to rotate across teams) were suggested as ways to retain the expertise of social workers in frontline teams.

A co-working model, where experienced workers share cases with less experienced workers, could be beneficial, allowing experienced workers to use their experience, promote and support the learning of other staff and ensure effective services for children and families. The Children’s Social Care Review in England (MacAlister, 2022) recommended the creation of expert child protection practitioners which could allow some of the opportunities for specialism and generativity identified here. However, it is important that such roles allow time for meaningful development. Social workers in this study were critical of opportunities for specialist roles which consisted of ‘one off trainings’ rather than sustained opportunities for learning. They also observed that such opportunities tended to become quickly subsumed by a high caseload. To sustain and retain experienced workers, it is therefore important to ring-fence development time and cap caseload. Rotation and time to reflect were identified as important for sustaining social workers in child protection, yet in practice this can lead to a lack of continuity for families. A co-working model could support service continuity while allowing a degree of mobility. Opportunities for experienced social workers to mentor, coach or co-work with less experienced workers who carry out the direct work with service users can be both satisfying, promote retention and ensure that expertise is retained within organisations.

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