Retaining Social Workers – Messages from Research

In order for high quality services to be provided to children and their families, there is a need for a workforce that is well-trained, motivated and supported. However, there is evidence in the UK of a shortage of experienced child and family social workers (Research in Practice, 2015). Social workers on average remain in the profession for less than eight years (Curtis, et al. 2010).

When experienced social workers leave, there is an impact on the quality of the service that can be provided. Baginsky (2013) explored what is meant by the term 'experienced' social worker. 'Experienced' does not just refer to the number of years that a social worker has spent in practice, but also the depth and breadth of their experience. Experienced social workers should have an excellent understanding of social work theory and its application, and a knowledge of social work research.

Newly qualified social workers learn through peer support and interaction with more experienced workers, and a shortage of experienced social workers reduces the 'community of practice' for those beginning their careers. When there is a lack of skilled workers, confidence in the profession is reduced from both service users and other agencies (Buckley, 2008).

High staff turn-over leads to added pressure on those who remain, and a lack of continuity for children and families. Social work by its very nature relies upon relationships between the social worker and the children and families that they work with (Research in Practice, 2015).

Why do Social Workers Leave?

There are several reasons identified in research for social workers leaving their current role, Local Authority, or indeed the profession as a whole. These are known as 'push factors' (Research in Practice, 2015).

Culture of Blame

Children and families social work continues to receive negative media representation which increases anxiety among social workers who are dealing with complexity and risk. If social workers fear being blamed within their Local Authorities then they feel vulnerable and will lack trust in their managers (Healy et al, 2009; Baginsky, 2013).

In order to counteract this, organisation need to support 'collective accountability', with a shared commitment to supervision and continued learning and development (Research in Practice, 2015).

Lack of clarity about roles

Risk-adverse culture within social care often results in decision making being done by management, rather than the social worker. This can lead to social workers feeling disempowered and unable to use their own professional judgement. When social workers are micro-managed in this way it can lead to low job satisfaction (Searle and Patent, 2013), which then can increase the likelihood of social workers leaving.

In order for social workers to make decisions, and for managers to have the confidence that they can do this, they need to be provided with continued professional development in order to improve their knowledge, confidence and skills (Ward, 2014).

High levels of stress and burnout

Higher levels of stress tend to be reported within social work than in other professions (Collins, 2008). When there is high staff turnover and vacancies within a team or organisation, the remaining social workers caseloads increase, and newly qualified social workers can be expected to take on too much responsibility from an early stage in their career. If this continues, over time the risk of emotional burnout increases (Gibbs, 2009). Stress can impact on social workers judgements and their ability to perform tasks (Baginsky, 2013).

Organisations need to be proactive and not reactive in promoting the well-being of their social workers (Research in Practice, 2015).

Overly bureaucratic systems

Research suggests that the core reason that social workers enter the profession is to complete direct work with children and families, and when social workers are able to do this their job satisfaction increases (Stalker et al., 2007). Overly bureaucratic systems (such as awkward electronic recording systems), reduce the amount of time that social workers can spend with children and their families. There is also a lack of administrative support across social care, and this leads to social workers having to do more administration tasks. Gibson (2016) found that when social work focusses on administrative tasks, the social workers 'capacity for empathy for the parents' is reduced.

Organisations need to simplify and integrate their procedures where this is possible, or provide administrative support in order to give social workers more time to use their expertise with children and their families (Research in Practice, 2015).

Negative Ofsted judgement

Staff turnover can increase following a negative Ofsted judgement, as well as interim appointments in management and leadership roles, increasing the instability within an

organisation (Research in Practice, 2015). A poor Ofsted judgement creates anxiety staff, and can also lead to an increase in their workload, due to staff turnover and attempts to improve services (Kelly, 2005).

Organisations need to acknowledge and challenge where practice has not been adequate, but also need to recognise that staff may feel 'over-criticised' and want to leave, at the time when the organisation needs them most (Research in Practice, 2015).

Why do Social Workers Stay?

There are numerous reasons identified in research as to why social workers stay in their current team, organisation or the profession as a whole. These are known as 'pull factors' (Research in Practice, 2015).

Making a difference

The majority of social workers are very committed to the work that they do. A motivation for social workers is making a difference in the lives of the children and their families with whom they work (Stalker et al., 2007).

Organisations which allow a maximum time to be spent with children and their families, have higher levels of job satisfaction, are more desirable places for social workers to work (Research in Practice, 2015).

Good quality supervision, support and the opportunity for development

If social workers feel supported by their supervisor, and their peers, social workers are more likely to want to remain in this organisation. Where there is good quality supervision and continued professional development is valued, this helps reduce the stress and pressure of social work. The sense of belonging to a team and having support from colleagues increases the well-being of social workers (Research in Practice, 2015).

Opportunities for career progression

Recognising experienced social workers and having pathways for career progression are effective ways of retaining experienced social workers (Burns, 2010). Progression pathways should include, but not be exclusively management positions, with case-holding senior and advanced practitioner roles, and practice educator posts also being recognised (Research in Practice, 2015).

Organisational support for emotional well-being

There are numerous methods for social workers to develop a greater resilience and manage the emotional stresses of their work (i.e. Mindfulness). Organisations as a whole should commit to supporting practitioners well-being, rather than placing the responsibility on the individual (Russ et al, 2009).

Feeling valued

Feeling valued is regularly cited as a reason why social workers stay. Pay is one aspect of valuing staff, but more often referenced is the way that social workers are treated and spoken to by management and the organisation (Research in Practice, 2015).

Good quality management

Social workers are more likely to stay within their team or organisation if they have a good quality manager. A confident team manager is able to protect their team, even within the context of a highly stressed Local Authority, whereas an inexperienced manager can contribute to the stress that the social workers are experiencing (Baginsky, 2013).

What works in Social Work Retention?

Retaining experienced social workers is a challenge across children and families social work, and particularly in child protection teams. In order to retain experienced social workers there needs to be greater stability in organisations and higher levels of job satisfaction. This in turn will lead to more positive outcomes for children and families. Baginsky (2013) found that the factors that are most closely associated with retaining experienced social workers are:

- Workloads, remuneration and working conditions
- Positive workplace cultures
- Supervision that addresses both organisational and professional requirements
- Opportunities for professional and career development

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