

Voices from the front line

Supporting our social workers in the
delivery of quality services to children

"...There is a lot of paperwork, unmanageable case loads, you will get paid for 37 hours per week and do a minimum of 50. You will not get rich, be liked and there is very little time for your own family."

A research paper



Voices from the front line – a research paper

The Victoria Climbié Foundation and HCL Social Care explore the current social work system and its ability to achieve the expectations of the Children and Families Act 2014.

“Together, we can work to raise the profile of good social care practice through proper selection and training of staff at all levels, to achieve more positive outcomes for children and families.”

The Victoria Climbié Foundation and HCL Social Care

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Abstract

The children and families social care system in the United Kingdom is widely regarded as one of the best child protection systems in the world, applauded for its accountability, stability, continuity, local partnership working across agencies and experienced and committed leadership. As new legislation is implemented across the country, with the passing of the Children and Families Act in April 2014, the Victoria Climbié Foundation (VCF) and HCL Social Care collaborated to examine the reality of this statement by engaging the workforce which underpins this critical service. In 'Voices from the front line: Supporting our social workers to deliver quality services to children,' the two organisations explore key elements which will significantly impact on the implementation of the Act.

Experts in their respective fields, the eminent VCF aims (among others) to develop methods to influence improvement in child protection policies and practices, while HCL Social Care is committed to driving excellence in social worker recruitment practice and candidate compliance and quality.

The methodology for engagement was by on-line questionnaire which was distributed by HCL to all social worker candidates on its internal database and by VCF to its own contacts, as well as to external databases of social workers.

Respondent contributions were broadly organised into four key pillars for action: Management support, Listening to the front line, Training and development and Recruitment and retention. The overall findings reflected on the current system's and infrastructures' ability to support and implement any new legislation, with high levels of frustration evident and less than a quarter of the respondents feeling optimistic about their future as a social worker.

This paper makes key recommendations which are specifically intended to support change in the current social work system to ensure that this vital workforce is enabled and supported to carry out that critical role: protecting and supporting the most vulnerable in our society.

The six recommendations link directly to respondent contributions and call for: mandated standards for the employers of social workers, the clarification and standardisation of the role of the Team Manager, that the College of Social Work be supported to develop and deliver a sustained social work reputation enhancement programme, that social workers on the front line be actively engaged and consulted on transformational system change, that social work training include placement in a statutory children and families team and finally that the recruitment of locum social workers be standardised to promote consistency and best practice.

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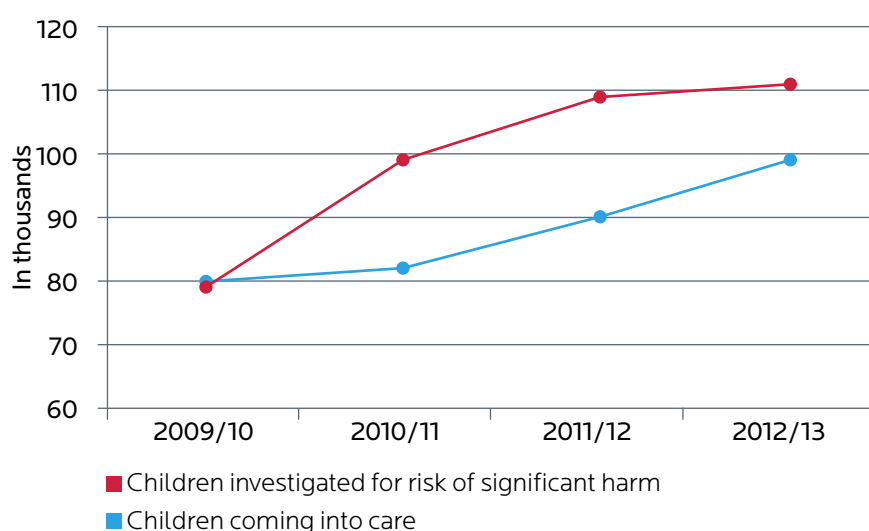
Introduction

There has been a raft of review, recommendation and reform in children and families social care. The aligning and enabling of multiple agencies (education, police, health and social care) was a major step forward in preventing children and families being failed by the system following the tragic death of Victoria Climbié in February 2000. The most recent of these was the introduction of the Children and Families Act 2014¹ which gained royal assent on the 13th March 2014, taking forward the coalition government's commitment to improve services for vulnerable children and strengthen families. The Act reforms the systems for adoption, looked-after children, family justice and special educational needs.

Among these reforms, the Children and Families Act 2014 encourages the development of the childcare sector, introduces a new system of shared parental leave and aims to ensure children in England have a strong advocate for their rights. The Act brings changes to the law to give greater protection to vulnerable children, better support for children whose parents are separating, a new system to help children with special educational needs and disabilities, and help for parents to balance work and family life. It also underpins wider reforms to ensure that all children and young people can succeed, no matter what their background.

However, VCF and HCL Social Care remain unconvinced that the social workforce infrastructure in its current form is sufficiently robust to support and enable the best practice required to implement the various recommendations of Laming, Munro, SOLACE, College of Social Work, Skills for Care et al. With the introduction of the Act, HCL Social Care and VCF elected to canvass the social workforce across experienced, less experienced and newly qualified social workers in both substantive and locum roles to gain a current, snapshot of opinion in relation to their ability to perform to the highest level in the present system. This is even more relevant against a backdrop of significant budget cuts levied on local authorities, which has in some cases led to the scaling back of services to help balance the books.

Implementation of the Act will generate significant challenges for local authorities and those who work with them, but the greatest burden will fall on the social workers responsible for delivering the required outcomes to the required timelines. This research paper reveals that the workforce and supporting infrastructure in its current form is insufficiently robust to meet these new challenges, particularly when weighted against increasing demand and the significant cost pressures being experienced in local government, which has seen, among many cuts, a considerable reduction in investment in social work services.



Latest figures² show a dramatic increase in the numbers of children coming into care following the death of Peter Connelly (Baby P) and the number of children in England with child protection plans.³

1. Children and Families Act 2014 http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/pdfs/ukpga_20140006_en.pdf

2. CAFCASS Nation Picture of Care Applications in England for 2013/14 <http://www.cafcass.gov.uk/news/2014/may/national-picture-of-care-applications-in-england-for-2013-14.aspx>

3. NSPCC Inform child protection statistics http://www.nspcc.org.uk/Inform/research/statistics/england_wdf49858.pdf

Reform, recommendations and reality

At this point, we turn to the social care workforce to examine where they feel they stand in the system against the emerging legislation, reforms and recommendations. Although social worker surveys have been undertaken before, this is the first occasion where we have been able to capture the views of purely children and families' social workers in both substantive and locum posts at a time of new legislation. This grants us a unique view into the variance in responses from the two groups and allows us to assess the impact of their responses on sector ability, infrastructure and development.

Methodology

To ensure a representative voice of the national children and families social worker workforce, VCF and HCL Social Care collaborated to devise a questionnaire based on major recurring themes. Distribution of an invitation to participate was sent by email to an extensive database of each organisation's contacts, including HCL's own candidates, and an external social worker database.

Surveys were available on-line, accessible through both the VCF and HCL websites, and promoted using social media. The survey was conducted between 14 April and 19 May 2014. As well as responding to specific questions, respondents were encouraged to provide their comments as free text.

A total of 487 individuals completed the survey.

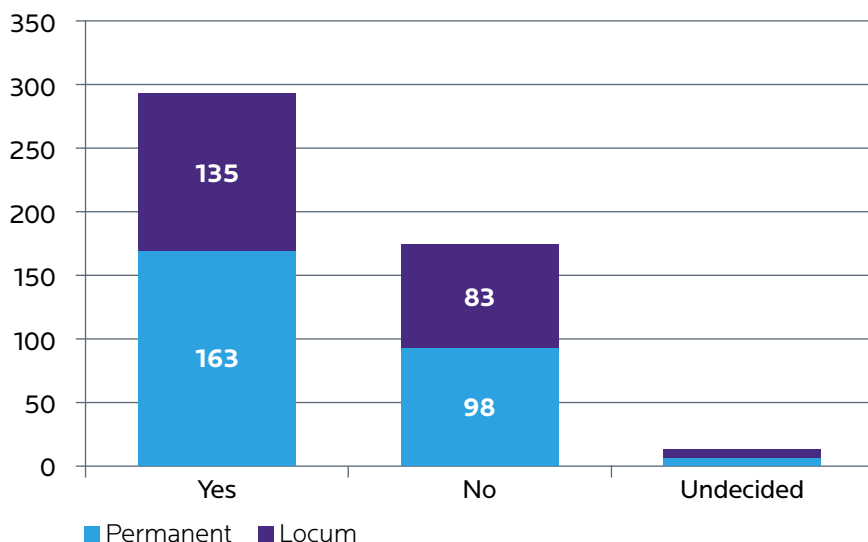
Respondent profile

We are satisfied that, of the 487 respondents, the sample pool is a good representative mix of very experienced, less experienced and newly qualified substantive staff and locums:

- Social workers with 10 or more years' experience: 244
- Social workers with between 5–10 years' experience: 132
- Social workers with 1–5 years' experience: 77
- Social workers with <1 year experience: 34
- Substantive social workers: 264
- Locum social workers: 223

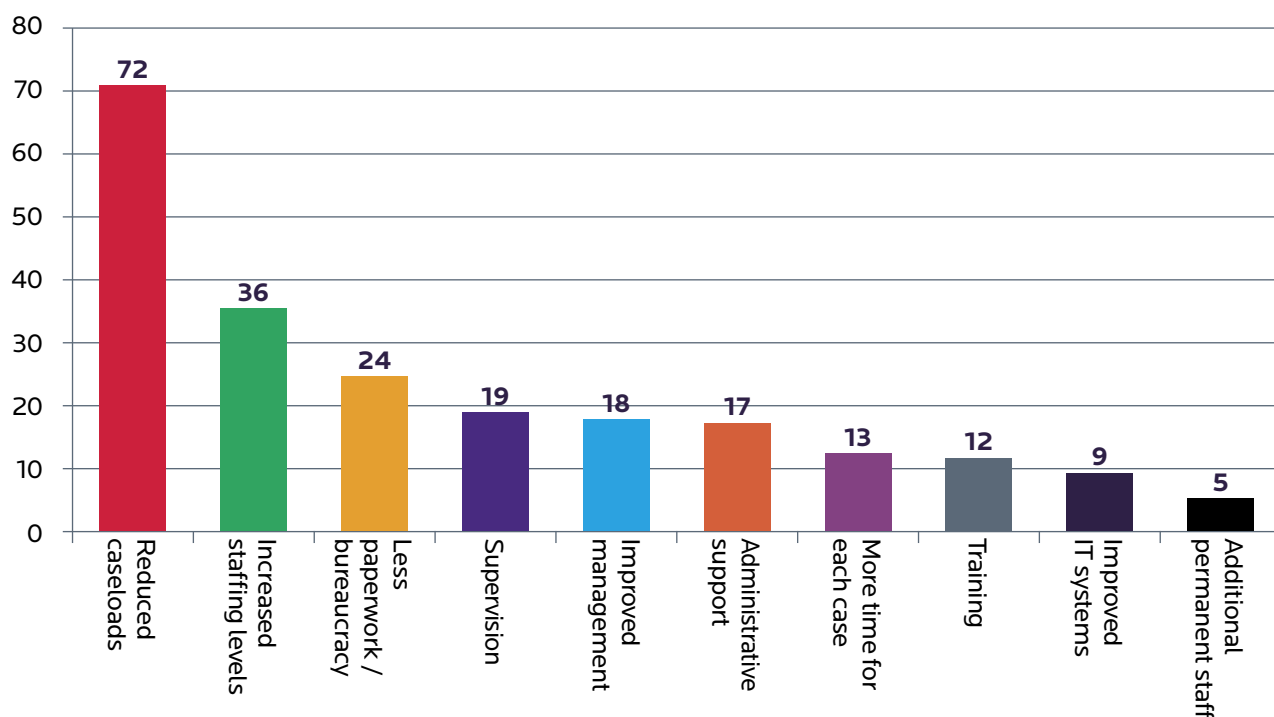
Survey results

1. Do you believe you are enabled by your current employer to adequately protect children on your caseload?



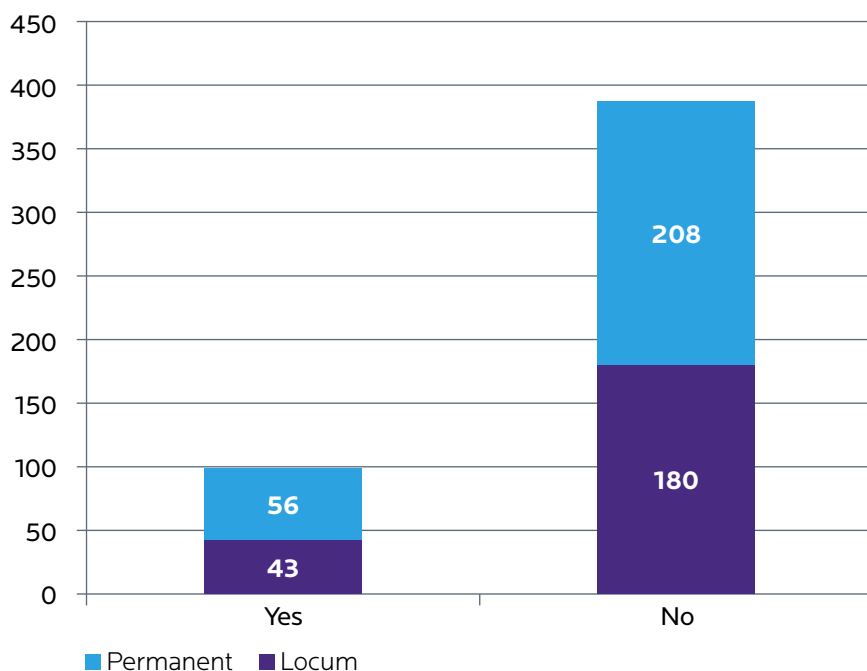
Key theme: Almost two thirds of both substantive and locum staff felt that they were enabled by their current employer to protect children on their case load.

2. If you answered NO, what additional resources or support do you require? (Although not compulsory, all of the respondents who answered no elected to answer this question and most requested more than one resource)



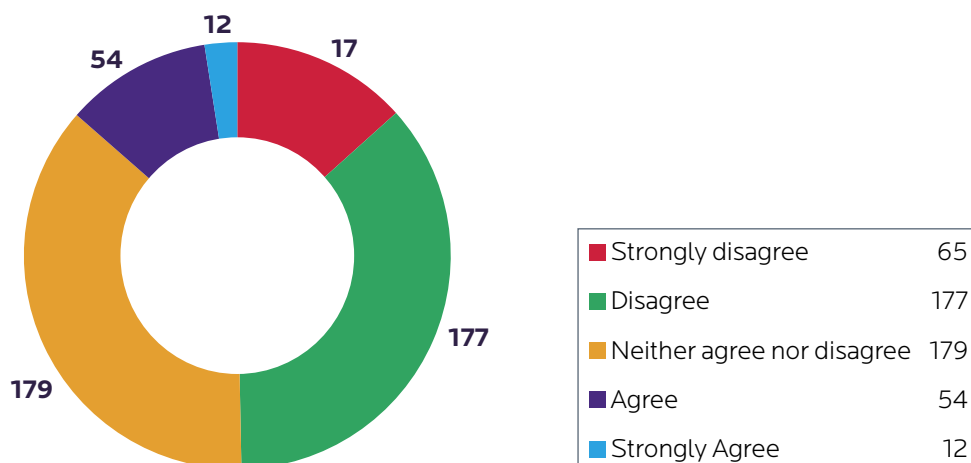
Key theme: The strongest request for additional resources was reduced caseload, followed by more staff, reduction in paperwork/bureaucracy, more supervision and improved management.

3. Do you believe that recent child protection reforms (from Laming to Munro) have effectively addressed the level of bureaucracy within social care practice? For example, has it contributed to allowing social workers more time to engage with children and families?



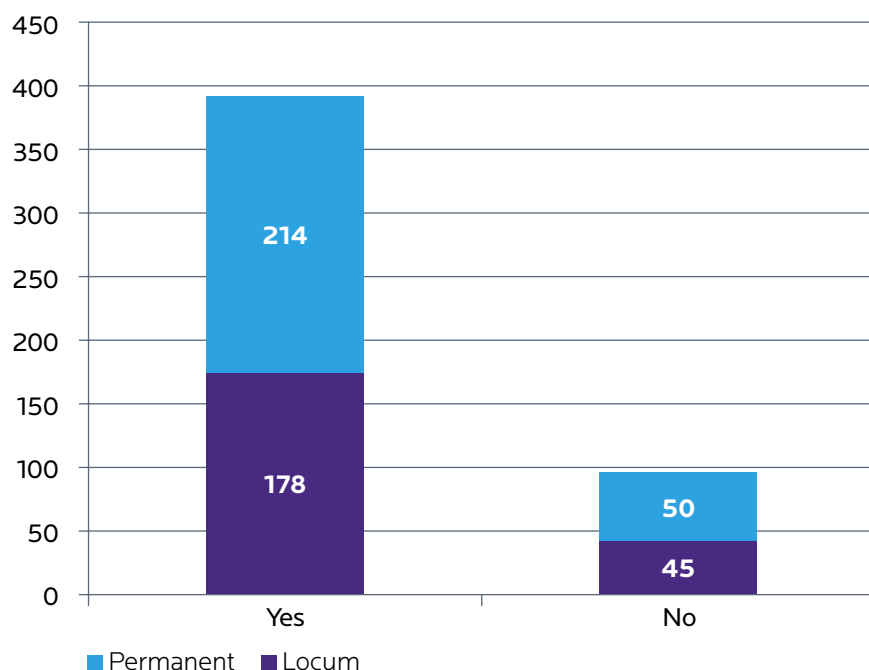
Key theme: Respondents overwhelmingly felt that reforms have not positively impacted on the time social workers have to engage with children and families.

4. Level of agreement with the statement: 'Government initiatives (e.g. ASYE and Step Up to Social Work) are robust enough to enhance the reputation of social workers with the wider public.'



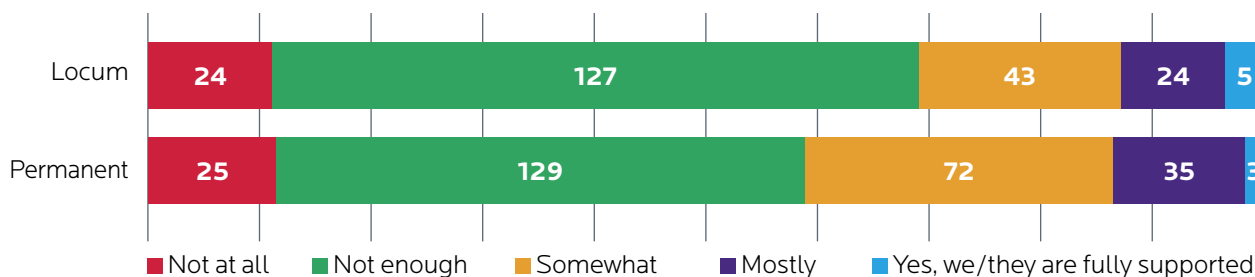
Key theme: Less than one in five social workers feel that Government initiatives are robust enough to enhance the reputation of social workers with the wider public.

5. Are you aware of recent legal reforms and the changes to the public law outline (PLO) which become effective on 22nd April in the new Children and Families Act 2014, e.g. the 26-week timeline for child protection care proceedings?



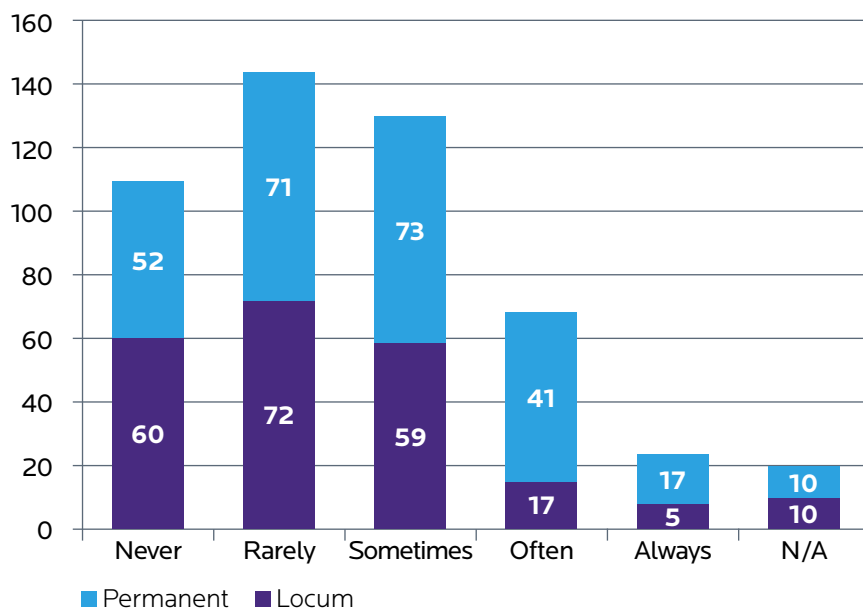
Key theme: Almost one in five substantive and locum social workers are not aware of major legislative changes to the public law outline.

6. Do you feel that front line social workers are receiving management support, at all levels?



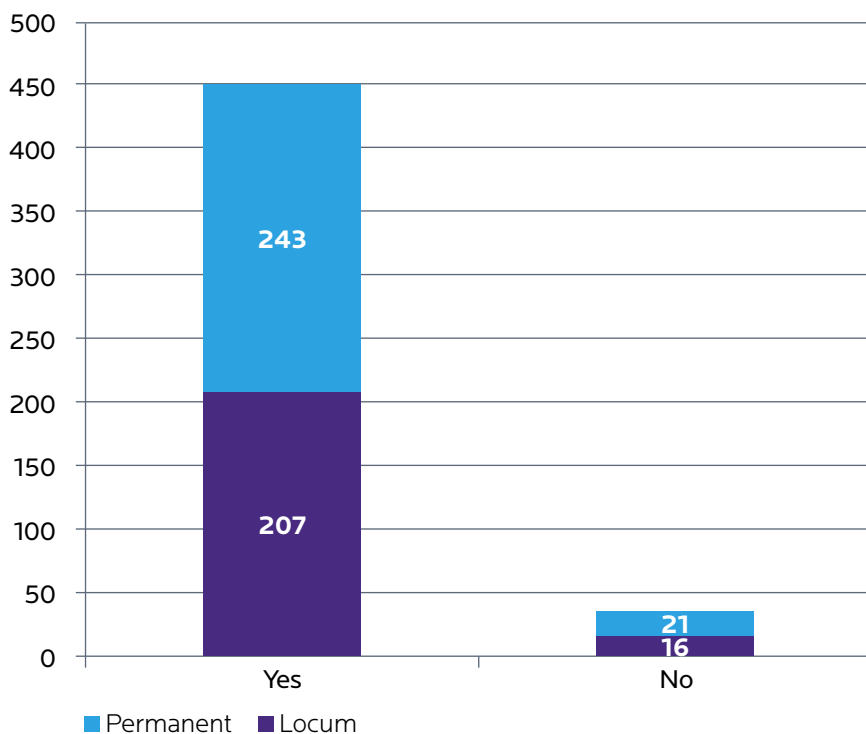
Key theme: Over half of substantive staff thought that front line social workers were not receiving sufficient management support whereas nearly two thirds of locums felt front line staff needed more support. Only eight individuals in the 487 sample felt fully supported.

7. Are you usually consulted by management when they are making policy or practice decisions locally?



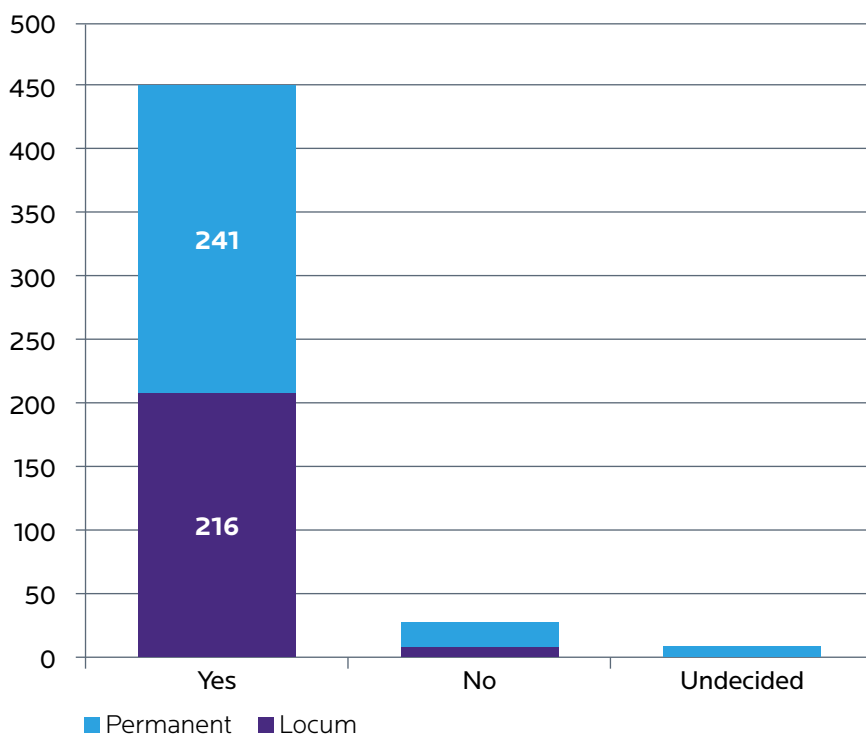
Key theme: Less than a fifth of substantive and less than a tenth of locum social workers are often or always consulted by management when making policy or practice decisions locally.

8. Do you think that front line social workers should be prominently involved in serious case reviews?



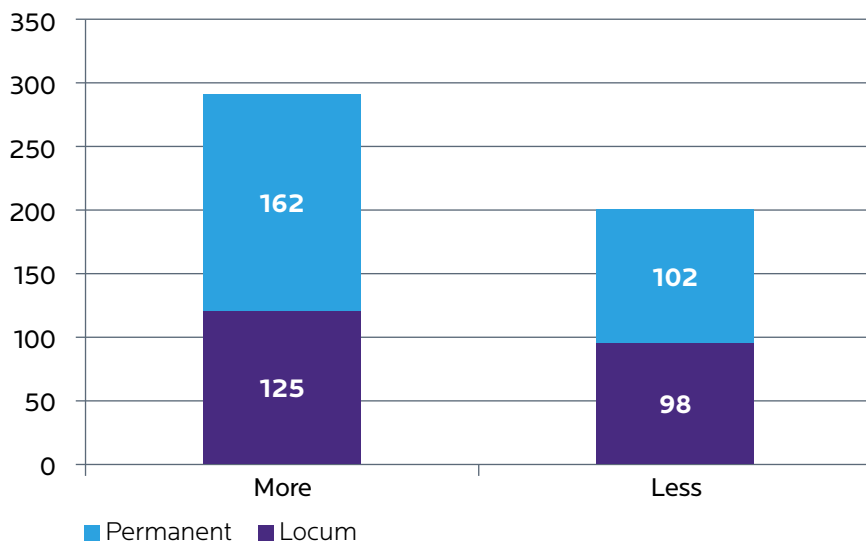
Key theme: More than 90% of both substantive and locum social workers felt that they should be prominently involved in serious case reviews.

9. Do you think locum social workers should be empowered to make informed decisions whilst in post?



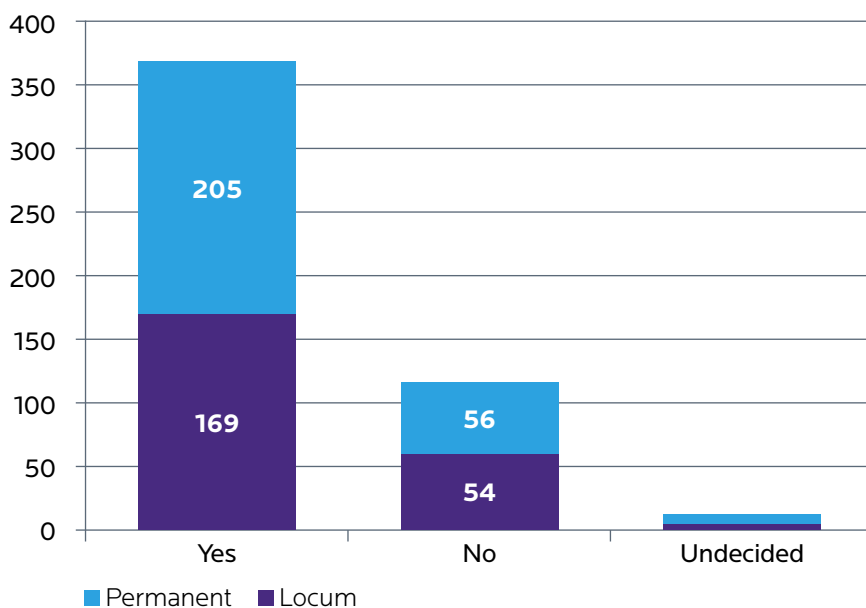
Key theme: The support among substantive staff for their locum colleagues to be empowered to make informed decisions was very high at 91.3%. Locum social workers also agreed with 96.9%.

10. Do you think locum social workers should undertake more or less CPD than their permanent counterparts?



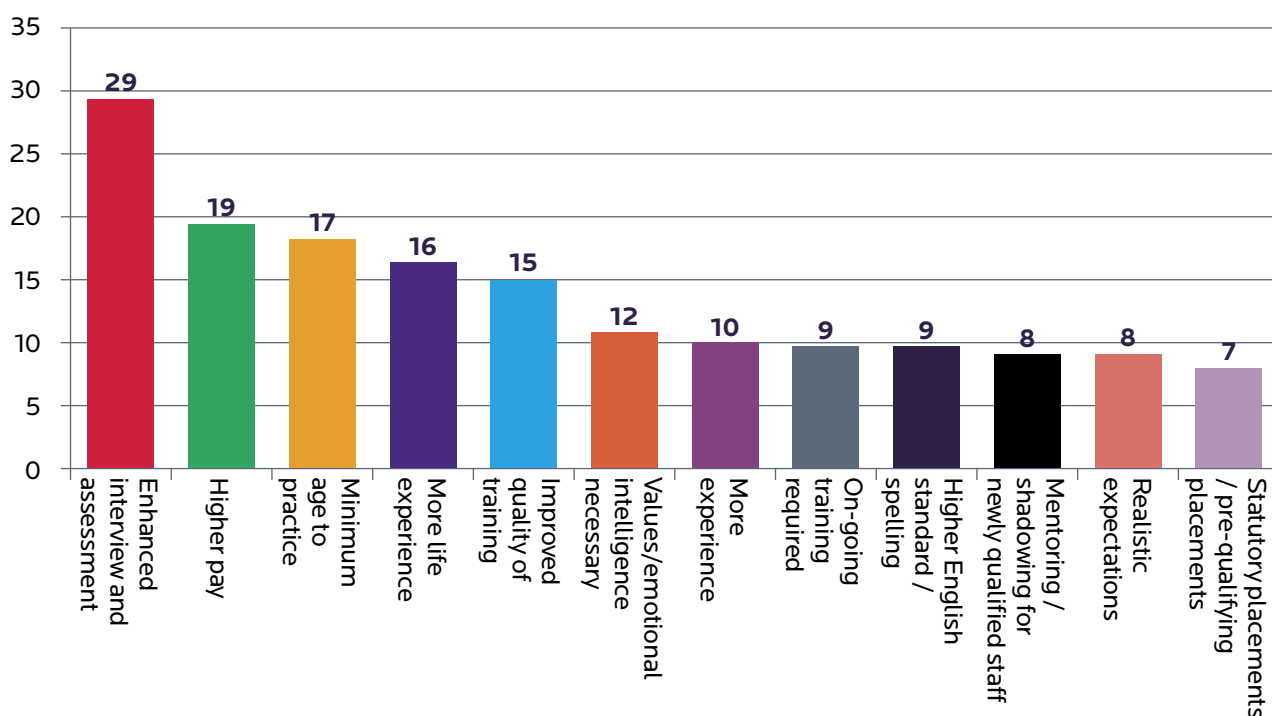
Key theme: This question divided opinion among both substantive and locum staff.

11. Do you think there is a need for higher standards in the recruitment of children's social workers?



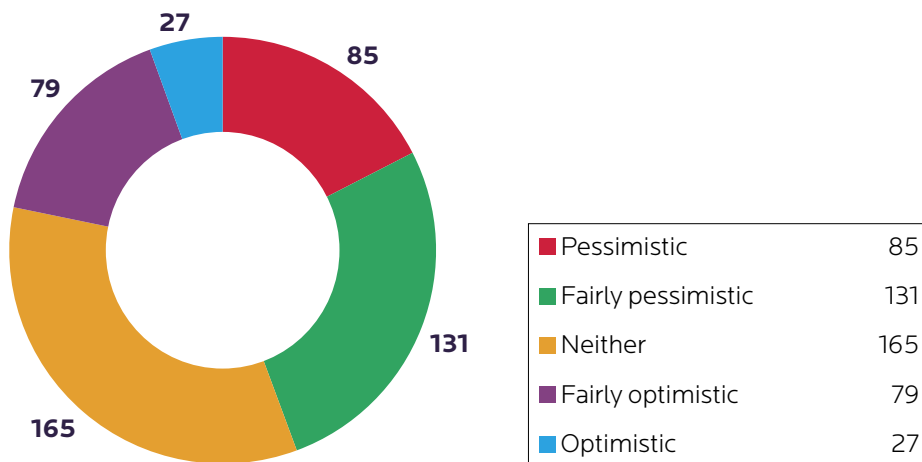
Key theme: Both substantive and locum staff felt strongly that higher standards were required in the recruitment of children's social workers

12. What changes, if any, do you think need to be made in the recruitment process to lift the calibre of social workers?



Key themes: The key changes that respondents felt should be made to the recruitment process were: enhanced interview and assessment, higher pay, the introduction of a minimum age to practice, more life experience and improved quality of training.

13. How do you feel about your future as a social worker in the current system?



Key themes: Less than a quarter of substantive staff (23%) felt fairly optimistic or optimistic while fewer than one in five locums felt fairly optimistic or optimistic about their future as a social worker in the current system.

Summary findings:

Strong themes emerged from this research which support VCF's principles for improvement:

- Almost two thirds of both substantive and locum staff felt that they were enabled by their current employer to protect children on their case load.
- The strongest request for additional resources was reduced caseload, followed by more staff, reduction in paperwork/bureaucracy, more supervision and improved management
- Reforms have not yet positively impacted on the time social workers have to engage with children and families.
- Almost one in five substantive and locum social workers are not aware of major legislative changes to the public law outline.
- Over half of substantive respondents thought that front line social workers were not receiving sufficient management support, whereas nearly two thirds of locums felt front line staff needed more support. Only eight individuals in the 487 sample felt fully supported.
- Less than a fifth of substantive and less than a tenth of locum social workers are often or always consulted by management when making policy or practice decisions locally. This is a particularly surprising outcome given that half of our respondents were highly experienced social workers with more than 10 years' experience.
- More than 90% of both substantive and locum social workers felt that they should be prominently involved in serious case reviews.
- The support among substantive staff for their locum colleagues in them being empowered to make informed decisions was very high at 91.3 %. Locum social workers also agreed with 96.9%.
- When asked if locum social workers should undertake more or less CPD than their permanent counterparts opinion was equally divided by both substantive and locum staff.
- Both substantive and locum staff felt strongly that higher standards were required in recruitment of children's social workers.
- The key changes that respondents felt should be made to the recruitment process were: enhanced interview and assessment, higher pay, the introduction of a minimum age to practice, more life experience and improved quality of training.
- Less than a quarter of substantive staff (23%) felt fairly optimistic or optimistic, while fewer than one in five locums felt fairly optimistic or optimistic about their future as a social worker in the current system.

While in an ideal world social workers would make choices about the best employers based on their track record in providing the organisational context within which best practice is promoted and delivered, the reality is somewhat different. Location, pay, and the challenge of the role are key factors – particularly in the locum cohort.

Pillars for progress

From the survey results and extensive commentary, the responses formed four clear themes from which we are able to explore potential solutions for the future. While reforms and restructuring have been put in place to protect and support children and families, it is evident that the social care workforce in this sensitive field remains concerned about their ability to consistently deliver good outcomes for children.

The high levels of frustration are evident and, worryingly, less than a quarter of the respondents feel optimistic about their future as a social worker in the current system. Despite there being two significant surveys undertaken in the past eight months (Community Care⁴, CAFCASS/The Guardian Social Lives Survey⁵) our respondents made time to participate on this occasion in the hope that their voices might be heard.

Key outcome themes

Management support	Listening to the front line
Caseload	Reform
Bureaucracy	Restructuring
Manager support	Time with children
Supervision	Awareness
Staffing	Familiarisation
Resource management	Consultation
Morale	Involvement
Time	
Training and development	Recruitment and retention
Courtroom skills	Morale
Consultation	Interview assessment
Continuous professional development	Pay
Empowerment	Work/life balance
Decision making	Minimum practice age
	Quality of training
	Worker health and wellbeing

“Lack of resources, retention issues, complexity of cases, stress on staff, paperwork, prescriptive managers and constant statistical gathering, evidencing nothing! Problems have been[the] same [for the] last 20 years, so why keep asking?”

4. Community Care <http://www.communitycare.co.uk/2013/11/19/community-care-survey-exposes-rising-thresholds-leaving-children-danger/#.U38QgvdWH4>

5. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/may/06/pay-rises-dont-top-social-workers-wish-list>

Management support

Strong feelings emerged on a number of issues which relate directly to the management of the system, chiefly: feeling supported, being given adequate supervision, having manageable caseloads, having sufficient time for children, excessive paperwork, and high levels of bureaucracy and not being listened to or consulted with. In addition, morale appears to be very low among most of the respondents, with many saying their managers are focussed more on Ofsted inspections than on the needs of their team.

This raises a fundamental question – should managers be focussed on the child or on the system, or can they do both? Are they driven by fear of blame should something go wrong or of a poor outcome from an Ofsted inspection? Or both?

In her review, Professor Eileen Munro considered whether the two roles of managerial oversight and professional supervision needed to be separated “so that both are done properly”. She stated “A division of career pathways at this point would also contribute to the establishment of a professional career pathway, as recommended by the Social Work Reform Board.” Following this suggestion, there is now the role of Principal Social Worker in every local authority, to ensure that a lead professional is directly involved in front line services and to ensure clear communication between public-facing front line staff and senior management. In addition, many local authorities now have team managers and senior social workers, the latter of whom focus on promoting the quality of practice, while team managers focus on the workload issues, skill mix of team members, budget etc.

Looking beyond the profession, it is well established that the most successful managers are responsible and accountable for results, and are driven to build and support strong teams, enabling and providing the resources for the individuals within the team to do their jobs to the best of their ability. As the British Olympic Swimming Coach famously said “The team manager is responsible for everything around the field of play – not on it!”

Where then has the management role in social work come adrift? From our respondents, it seems likely that budget cuts have forced managers to consolidate resources to a point where all hands are to the pump, trying to do what needs to be done to protect a child, while at the same time everything that needs to be done to meet Ofsted standards. Has regulation of the profession become more important than doing the job?

The profession has been under significant pressure due to budget cuts in local government and Ofsted, as the regulator of children’s services, has not necessarily accepted that this impacts on the quality of services provided for children. Ironically, local authorities invest heavily in children’s services if they get an inadequate judgement in an Ofsted inspection, when in fact they should have resourced the service properly at the outset to avoid a failed inspection. With a poor inspection, the director of children’s services usually loses their job and a new management team is often drafted in, so the service goes through a period of instability and change which can take some time to recover from. Therefore, while regulation is not more important than doing the job, it does have a huge impact on how the job gets done.

"Our management team is very supportive, but the local authority's financial cuts has led to reduction in staffing. This has resulted in caseloads being too high [with] pressure to keep allocating cases or clarify cases too. Too many cases and not enough staff."

"I am lucky that I am working for an independent fostering agency who [put] children at the centre of their practice. It has been refreshing and my new post has given me hope for social work. My previous job in the LA was the opposite of this. I was unsupported and driven by ticking boxes."

"Change the 'blame down, praise up' culture."

"Irrespective of bureaucracy, responses to child protection measure are essentially knee-jerk reactions to appease public hysteria. Before and after Climbié, child abuse still persists. Rather than client protection, professionals are now performing within the confines of avoiding liabilities.... social workers always seem to be the best choice for scape-goating."

Of the respondents who did not feel adequately enabled by their employers to protect children, the following resources were deemed necessary to enable them to perform their roles better:

1. Funding to bring in more professional staff to enable safer case load management.
2. Streamlining or restructuring of processes to reduce bureaucracy, administration and free up front line time.
3. Focussed and supportive managers for supervision, reflection and professional development.

This is a big ask for struggling local authorities who are, according to the Local Government Association 'reaching financial tipping point'⁶, noting that three in five will have exhausted all other ways of making savings by 2015.

Reforms and restructuring

The reforms, legislation, initiatives and recommendations referred to in this paper are: Laming⁷, Munro⁸, ASYE⁹, Step Up to Social Work¹⁰, the Public Law Outline¹¹ and the Children and Families Act¹² 2014.

Overwhelmingly, the respondents felt that reforms have not positively impacted on the time social workers have to engage with children and families, therefore undermining the impact of and investment made in bringing the reforms into play. The large negative response reflects that the respondents understand that those particular initiatives, ASYE and Step Up to Social Work, can address the quality of social workers coming into the profession, but what about the social workers already in the profession?

Critically, the reputation of social workers with the wider public needs to be addressed on a number of levels, including at a local level where social workers provide high quality services to children and families. As a profession, we need to be much better at celebrating the excellent practice that never makes the tabloids, where children are protected from harm through skilled judgements and decision-making by social workers day in, day out.

It is of genuine concern that a fifth of the social workers surveyed were not aware of the major legislative changes to the public law outline of April 2014 which is specific about timings for care proceedings. Briefing on major changes such as this should be a core part of the line manager's remit to ensure their front line teams are well informed about changes to legislation and regulations. There needs to be specific time set aside for this type of briefing to be undertaken possibly in regular team meetings which are usually every fortnight or at least monthly.

It is evident that, where changes are made within departments as a result of legislation or recommendations, social workers are not involved in the process.

6. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/may/11/public-service-cuts-deepen-councils-savings>

7. The Protection of Children in England: A Progress Report March 2009,

8. The Munro Review of Child Protection May 2011

9. The Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)

10. Step Up to Social Work June 2014

11. The Public Law Outline April 2014 <http://www.justice.gov.uk/protecting-the-vulnerable/care-proceedings-reform>

12. Children and Families Act http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2014/6/pdfs/ukpga_20140006_en.pdf

They therefore, despite their wealth of local and front line knowledge, have little influence on devising ways for better or different working practices. Less than a fifth of substantive and less than a tenth of locum social workers felt often or always consulted by management when making policy or practice decisions locally – again extremely surprising given half of respondents had ten or more years' experience.

Training and development

While academic training for social work qualification is well established, the survey revealed concern about whether it adequately addresses the areas required for the profession and most respondents expressed concern about the supervision and experience of new graduates coming into the profession. Many were concerned that graduates had little life experience and yet were thrust into demanding and emotionally challenging situations beyond their ability, leading some to call for the age limit to practice to be raised.

Supervision, for both graduates and experienced social workers, was another area for concern, particularly given the excessive workload already being managed by more experienced colleagues and managers. With most managers fire-fighting on a day to day basis, supervision is often pushed down the priority list, restricting growth and development for all groups.

A government initiative, the Assisted and Supported Year in Employment scheme, was introduced in 2012 in an attempt to bring more graduate social workers to practice more quickly, with employers able to claim £2,000 per participant. Allowing graduates to develop their skills, knowledge and professional confidence, it is intended to provide them with access to regular support during their first year of employment. Those that have undergone ASYE reported good experiences, as did their managers; however, not all newly qualified social workers have access to the scheme, creating further inconsistency in practice.

Training, both on-the-job and in the classroom, was a further area of concern. While maintaining CPD falls to the individual, there is little slack in the system to cover for absences caused by courses and workshops. Of significant concern is the exclusion of locum social workers from formal training by their current employer, with a general attitude that locums are paid to work not sit in classrooms. This leaves a gulf between substantive and locum worker's professional development, where locums are forced to seek training in their own time. The reality is that the locum social worker is the representative of the local authority to the child and family, therefore it is in the local authority's interest to ensure that they have the knowledge and skills to deliver a high quality service. If locum social workers are denied training opportunities, the quality of the service they provide will be undermined and this impacts on the child.

The involvement of social workers in serious case reviews, and the skills and abilities to participate robustly in case reviews and in court proceedings, is another major cause for concern. Over 90% of respondents believed they should be involved in serious case reviews but were often ill prepared due to lack of time or short notification. The same is true for court proceedings, where many are handed files at the last minute and find themselves out of their depth in the formality and aggressive atmosphere of the courts.

"The vision is there and it's quite a vision, reducing a case load, increasing one to one time, answering to all agencies queries, responding in a timely fashion. The reality is that the budget cuts have a massive part to play in not allowing this vision to become a reality."

"Less government interference, more policies that are grounded, made by people who are actually doing the job."

"There are many suggestions and comments that I could make and my colleagues have made but unfortunately no one cares about what we think, as is evident in the current Agile Working Policy currently being promoted in the local authorities... Most social workers do not feel that things will change so are reluctant to say anything."

"I feel most newly qualified social workers are woefully unable to face social work on the front line. I have many frightening examples as a team manager. In regards to ASYE, team managers have nowhere near enough time to supervise them, especially as often you have more than one in a team at a time. They are consequently being passed through by necessity rather than having achieved the appropriate standard."

"The ASYE is brilliant and provides a good framework for new staff. The problem is we don't have enough experienced staff on the front line."

"All degree programmes address the basic requirements and I believe cover all that is needed to prepare social workers. It's the support after qualifying; the massive caseloads that need tackling."

"Stop relying on solely social work qualifications. There are numerous practitioners from early years, youth work, community work and criminal justice backgrounds who can be more capable of completing work than those with SW qualifications. Experience can be worth its weight in gold."

"I won't work in children's services anymore, it's far too dangerous."

"I do not think the future for the service is at all bright and intend to get out altogether as soon as practical."

Recruitment and retention

Perhaps the most sobering outcome from the survey was the low morale among the respondent cohort. Less than a quarter felt fairly optimistic or optimistic about their futures as a social worker in the current system. This compares with the survey undertaken by The Guardian and CAFCASS¹³ (survey of all social work staff, of whom around half were qualified) earlier in the year, where just 63% said they were happy in terms of job satisfaction, a significant decrease on the same survey undertaken in 2008, where, at that time, 82% were happy. In this same survey, more than half (52%) said they would definitely or possibly consider quitting the sector altogether.

This poses more problems in terms of being able to bring suitable trainees into the profession, recruit the experienced social workers required from a flagging and dwindling talent pool, and retain the staff already employed in the system. The profession does not present an attractive career choice, with social workers perpetually castigated by the media and public. It therefore falls to local authorities and specialist recruiters to identify strong potential candidates and bring them in to the system quickly and effectively, while continuing to maintain a strong locum bank to fill short, medium and long term vacancies until permanent solutions can be found.

Unlike health, where the Government has established Health Education England, there is no government led body tasked to bring social workers into the system. Tackling the current national nursing shortage, HEE has published the country's first national healthcare workforce plan¹⁴, commissioning training and education places and identifying significant gaps through liaison with providers and commissioners.

There have been two reports this year making recommendations about social work training, the first where Sir Martin Narey¹⁵ makes 18 recommendations including that the College of Social Work should have a regulatory role for social work training courses. In the second, David Croisdale-Appleby¹⁶ makes 22 recommendations including the need to devise a new strategic workforce planning system.

13. <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2014/may/06/pay-rises-dont-top-social-workers-wish-list>

14. <http://hee.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/sites/321/2013/12/Workforce-plan-interactive1.pdf>

15. Sir Martin Narey 'Making the Education of Social Workers consistently effective' February 2014

16. David Croisdale-Appleby 'Re-visioning social work education an independent review' February 2014

The recruitment process was similarly called into question by both substantive and locum respondents who felt that the process should be more rigorous, as well as being standardised. Of note is the discrepancy in recruitment practice, both between substantive and locum workers, and more widely within locum recruitment, which often takes the form of a half hour informal interview with a manager. The dependency on the supplying agency to conduct screening, interviews and compliance is immense, yet excessively bureaucratic procurement and cost conscious processes, mean to the detriment of quality, few local authorities either choose or are able to take the opportunity to actively engage and work in partnership with experienced and credible suppliers to explore creative and innovative solutions to long term staffing pressures.

Once actually through the door, a fulfilling role, organisation culture, personal development and career progression should combine to provide strong reasons to stay for both new recruits and experienced social workers alike. Our respondents painted a bleak picture of lack of training and development, not being involved or consulted on system changes or innovations, and impossible workloads, riddled with bureaucracy and paperwork.

For a sector in which we place the biggest of responsibilities, the protection of our children, organisational performance and productivity are critical for the system to be effective. Our questions probed organisational culture on a number of levels, exploring how social workers felt they were treated, how the organisation was operated, and the extent to which freedom was allowed in decision making and personal expression, information flows and the commitment towards collective objectives.

"I feel (as do many others) very responsible for my young people although I have little control over the decisions I would like to happen as LA's are a collective and decisions are a jointly made outcome. I am just the bottom rung of the ladder and do as I am asked to, as do the rest of us. It is time we were given a bit of power and trust. The voice of the child needs to be heard."

While our respondents were wholly committed to protecting children and supporting families in their care, the overall conclusion is that they are badly let down by the system.

"Recruitment needs to be more rigorous, language skills should be to a higher standard, interviews should consist of written assessment, [a] panel interview with someone independent of Local Authority sitting on the panel, a presentation of 15 minutes on a key social work issue."

"Despite my comments I remain committed to the profession I chose. I take students and encourage my team to do the same, we need to keep encouraging people to come into the profession and giving them the best possible experience so that we can continue to feel proud of what we do. We all know the pitfalls but do the job we love and hope to pass the positives on and not focus on the negatives."

"I feel optimistic because my local authority has invested in the strengths based Signs of Safety (and well-being) approach to social work practice. This is a highly innovative and inclusive approach to working WITH children and families. All local authorities should be adopting this methodology across all their services."

"Current system needs a complete overhaul/reorganising as it's not working and experienced/good social workers are leaving/going on long term sick [leave] as they are not appreciated/valued and given too many cases and not enough support!"

A last word

“Child protection professionals and those representing them in the media must develop better ways of joining in with public debates about their role and responsibility. The review will work with the College of Social Work to consider how child protection professionals can join this debate to make the biggest impact.” Professor Eileen Munro.

“The majority of the social workers I have worked with are wonderful passionate, empathic people who [do] this job because they care about people and the world and want to make a change but they are so busy that they do not have time to raise their voices in unison to be heard.”

“[The social care system requires] the ability for managers to see [the] perspective of child not their scarce resources or ideology that always [assumes it is] best [for the] child [to] remain with family, whatever. Not misusing the new six month timescale to prevent taking action to keep children safe, until they are sure they can meet timescales. There is going to be another baby P, a child who they always knew they were going to remove but were waiting to ensure they were in court timescales.”

“High case loads, low staff numbers, too much to do for too few workers. It is worse in the LAC Teams, where sickness and people leaving causes delay and poor care planning. High expectations from the government in speeding up the process for assessment of prospective adopters is overwhelming teams where there is little gate keeping and workers are struggling to manage competing demands.”

“In six months I have had three different managers and they leave because they cannot cope with the pressures of their job. They are so overwhelmed they do not have time to give proper guidance to the social workers. Social workers leave on a regular basis and the turnover is unbelievable. We need more social workers and managers to provide a service. The cuts that are being made mean that we are unable to do our job in the way that we should be able to.”

“Management consistently fail to recognise that lower case loads would improve the quality of the service provided. Instead management continue to reorganise systems in hope that changing teams and organisational systems will magically improve quality of service. Management also fail to recognise that increased referral rates requires greater resources meaning that more social workers /social work assistants are needed to meet the ever increasing demand.”

Conclusion

The reforms in the Children and Families Act are being implemented at a time of significant challenge and opportunity for local authorities' children's services and their partners, creating great potential to significantly improve sustainable outcomes for vulnerable children and their families.

For social workers in children's services this should be a time of great hope, as the focus has shifted from a defensive culture focussed on compliance with targets and performance indicators which undermined the professional skills of social work practitioners, to one focussed on achieving the best outcomes for children. This is what attracts people into a career in social work and is what keeps those already in the profession doing the job despite the highly stressful nature of the work.

The challenge is to ensure that social workers are enabled to do what they are trained and skilled at doing, which is, providing the best protection for our most vulnerable children in the community. To do this, social workers need to be well trained by our academic institutions so that, by the time they achieve the social work qualification, they have had the opportunity to experience what it is like working at the front line in children's services. Newly qualified social workers need to be given the right support, training and development, which the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment¹⁷ facilitates. Experienced social workers need to be given opportunities to develop their practice on an on-going basis and at more senior levels, so that the best practitioners are retained in the profession and provide skilled leadership for others.

Employers of social workers are responsible for ensuring that they provide the organisational context within which best practice is delivered. To do this they need to ensure there are sufficient numbers of social workers employed to manage the workload, that caseloads are maintained at a manageable level, social workers are trained and developed to deal with the complexities of the decision-making required of them and are supported by skilled, experienced and competent managers.

Social workers require a level playing field: to be able to make choices about the best employers based on their track record in providing the organisational context within which best practice is promoted and delivered.

Drawing on the extensive feedback provided by the representative cohort of social workers contributing to this research paper, a number of key recommendations are being proposed linking directly to the four key pillars for action identified in the survey.

17. The Assessed and Support Year in Employment www.skillsforcare.org.uk

Recommendations: Listening to the front line

It has been heartening to read the many positive comments made by social workers who are committed to doing the best possible job for children and families. It was however extremely disheartening to read the 500+ comments made by these committed professionals who felt hampered and frustrated by the very system set up to protect the most vulnerable children in our society.

The Victoria Climbié Foundation in partnership with HCL Social Care therefore makes the following recommendations for change:

1. That local authorities be mandated to implement in full the standards for employers in social work including planned, sustained consistent workforce development and the need to establish safe caseloads such as those established by NICE for the nursing sector.¹⁸
2. That the role and expectations of the Team Manager be clarified (in a similar way to the defining of the Principal Social Worker role as recommended in the Munro Review) particularly in terms of leadership, staff management and continuing practice.
3. That the College of Social Work be supported to develop and deliver a sustained and impactful reputation enhancement initiative, led by the College of Social Work and Isabelle Trowler, the Chief Social Worker for Children and Families, to promote the excellent work being done by these dedicated professionals and to speak out on behalf of the profession during difficult times.
4. That social workers are supported and enabled to contribute to and participate in transformational changes required to streamline bureaucratic systems and embed innovative practice at a local level.
5. That all social work training for children and families social workers includes the requirement to undertake a placement in a statutory children and families social work team (though a placement is currently required it is not team specific) to ensure that on qualification they are equipped with the knowledge, skills and experience to work in that setting.
6. That the recruitment process for locum social workers be standardised nationally to promote best practice and consistency.

18. <http://www.nice.org.uk/guidance/safestaffing/SafeStaffingGuidelines.jsp>

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

The Victoria Climbié Foundation and HCL Social Care partnership is based on a shared commitment to promoting best practice in children's social care.

The Victoria Climbié Foundation was established by Mr and Mrs Climbié (Victoria's parents) and campaigns for improvements in child protection policies and practices and to ensure effective links and coordination between statutory agencies, care services and communities. HCL Social Care, is a division of HCL Workforce Solutions, and has been a leading supplier of qualified social workers and social care professionals for over 10 years.

Together, HCL and the VCF want to ensure the voice of social workers is heard, supporting their delivery of quality services to children. Our partnership aims to raise the profile of good social care practice and encourage proper selection and training of staff at all levels, to achieve more positive outcomes for children and families.



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