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## A Workforce Development Team's Reflections on Social Work Retention and Turnover in South-East London, UK

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### Cover Page Footnote

We wish to acknowledge the support of the Department for Education and the South-East London (Social Work) Teaching Partnership in funding the original study, which has helped us to produce this paper. We also wish to thank Dan Timariu, Goldsmiths, University of London, for his support in co-facilitating the discussion with the workforce development team members.

## Introduction

A significant social work policy problem persists in England. The State, via local councils, employs social workers to address social issues (e.g. child abuse, domestic violence, children with additional needs) experienced by children and families (O'Connor & Netting, 2011), yet the average working life of a social worker in England is less than eight years (Curtis et al., 2010). More than eight in ten English councils in 2022 experienced challenges recruiting children's social workers, and almost three-quarters (72 per cent) had problems retaining social workers (Local Government Association, 2022). Moreover, 71% of councils experienced difficulties recruiting adult social workers, and over 57% had difficulties retaining adult social workers (Local Government Association, 2022). High turnover of early career social workers appears to be a national and local problem within the children's social work workforce. The children's social care workforce increased by 3.7% by the end of 30 September 2020; however, over 60% of all FTE children and family social workers have less than five years of working experience with the same local authority (Department for Education, 2021).

The Department for Education (England) funded the South-East London (Social Work) Teaching Partnership (SELTP) to interview social workers to examine why children and families' social workers stay or leave statutory social work employment. This paper aims to share perspectives from three members of a children's social work workforce development team from the Royal Borough of Greenwich (i.e. a SELTP local authority partner) with a SELTP agency on the reflections of two social workers interviewed for this project about their working lives.

The findings from this study will be published elsewhere. Our focus in that publication will be to offer a positive story of how some social work teams develop a team resilience and cohesiveness. We will examine these strengths which aid staff retention through a systemic lens. However, the research team felt that it was important to illuminate how experienced members from a workforce development team responded to respondents' reflections. Workforce development teams play a crucial role in recruiting and retaining social workers (Local Government Association, 2014). Located in a children's social work workforce development team, Sharon, Shalini and Corlea are three social work practitioners with over 100 years of collective social work experience. Their remit is to support social workers to enhance their practice, aid their career development, and stabilise and improve social work team culture within their organisation. They also hold a birds-eye view of children's social workers staying or leaving employment in their Council. The value of presenting Sharon, Shalini and Corlea's collective wisdom is that they are better situated than academics or researchers to reflect on the experiences of why social workers stay or leave employment, as there is still a need to develop a systematic understanding of how workforce development

teams fasten together social workers and organisations (Turley et al., 2022; Webb & Carpenter, 2012). Therefore, Sharon, Shalini and Corlea's perspectives may be of interest to readers; they illuminate how a workforce development team interprets the complexities of staff turnover and its role in supporting unhappy social workers and encouraging social work team stability.

## **Methods**

To generate reflection and discussion among the three members of the workforce development team on staff retention and turnover, the following process was followed. Following university ethical approval, Shalini, Sharon and Corlea met Goldsmiths' academics over several meetings to review interview transcripts with research respondents. This led to a focus group discussion in which the three practitioners were presented with quotations from several research respondents about their work experiences.

Reflexively, the academic co-writer of this paper chose to 'entextualise' quotations (Bauman & Briggs, 1990) by extricating text units from transcripts with research respondents to facilitate discussion and reflection from workforce development team members. Specifically, following this process of extracting and decontextualising quotations from their original interview context, Shalini, Corlea and Sharon were invited to recontextualise the quotations by drawing on their own professional discourses and social location (Talmy, 2010) to imagine the lives of the two respondents. Consequently, the focus of this paper is less on the respondents' quotations and more on the reactions and interpretations of workforce team members to these quotations.

## **Findings**

The findings are structured as follows. First, a quotation from an anonymised research participant is presented. Different members of the workforce development team then reflect on the quotation. There are two quotations: the first is from a social worker who is happy with her work experience. The second quotation comes from a social worker who is far from happy with their day-to-day work experience. Shalini, Sharon and Corlea reviewed and edited their reflections for this paper.

### **Quotation One:**

The first quotation is from a female senior social work practitioner in a local authority's children's safeguarding team.

*I'm only still here because of my team. It's a very tough job safeguarding; if it wasn't for my team, I don't know if I'd been able to have continued this far. I'm still enjoying the vast majority of it. But yeah, as I get more senior, it gets tougher, I'd need at least 10 grand pay rise to leave. Everybody, everybody that's come into my team has just said that this is the best team ever.*

Source: Alice, Senior Social Work Practitioner

The three practitioners were asked two questions regarding this quotation. First, what was their perspective on the social worker's reflection.

Sharon: I am hearing a sense of belonging, acceptance, and being listened to, part of a group of people who think the way I do and feel the way I feel. There is a sense of knowing each other. This is special to certain teams in which that exists. That sense of belonging, family, camaraderie, acceptance, knowing, and just caring about one another and your well-being. So, if that does not happen in a team, I do not want to be there. I'm going to move.

Shalini: It is the team that keeps you going really. When I was frontline and doing safeguarding work, it was key for me. It is the huge amount of support you have; it is like covering for each other, shadowing, to go together on a visit. From our vantage point of workforce development, we see many different teams. And you can tell where there is a better team spirit, people are kind of happier and will stay longer and be able to survive the hard work. Because no matter where you go, there's going to be similar pressures anyway, it's about having the right kind of leadership, but more importantly, it is about the team that you are working with. And if you get along well with people, that's like a huge part of your waking day you are spending somewhere. So, you have got to have people around you who you can feel supported by and who you can support.

Corlea: I think equating it in terms of money value, given that social work is not a very well-paid profession, speaks volumes. Just how much weight do they place on that relationship? I think that is similar to what Shalini was saying, yes, it is about leadership, but also about sharing and recognising the community within that. No, I do not think it is common. We see that many workers move around because they do not have a sense of community.

Shalini, Corlea and Sharon were then invited to reflect on how their workforce development team could contribute to creating a team spirit with a sense of community.

Corlea: I think it is one of the challenges for workforce development and the Principal Social Worker (PSW). While we have seen the benefits of that kind of culture within a team, it is a challenge to replicate it so that others have that sense of safety and belonging, as it aids staff wellbeing and retention. We are trying to identify the strategies that facilitate this. However, this is also related to the personalities and commitment of different team members.

Shalini: You need to invest in building relationships. When people have not stayed long enough, it is difficult to build relationships in a constantly shifting team if the dynamics continue to change. If a manager is so busy recruiting and interviewing, they have less time and energy to invest in building their team. This is a kind of catch-22. It is definitely something that one can try to influence and replicate. We also think about middle-tier leadership and first-line managers, how we can support them to recognise the value of kindness in team relationships, and how this can impact on retaining people and feeling supported.

Sharon: I have a view that it is linked to a social worker's personality, a character or style of interaction. As a workforce development team member, we are on the outside, observing that a particular style or personality can impact the team and families. Working on this with some social workers is interesting. However, it's helping them to get past their way of doing things. This is about helping them to adopt a mindset change. What we do is work with their approach and get them to sit back and reflect on the impact. We examine different strategies to address this and consider how we can do things differently. This is one element of our work. We do this in reflection. Is it how I practised, how I spoke with the family or the young person? What did I do? I think because some managers are so busy that they do not have the time to reflect in this way.

### **Quotation Two:**

*I just genuinely feel the system feels like a factory, it's a machine, and you've just come...pumping out what's needed. And it's not really looking at the individuals within that machine. Because it's like, well, you know, if you can't do it, then, you know, just stop, or we just step over you and get somebody else to do it... We just essentially need a name on that case. So, a person feels like they're a number on a factory floor.*

Chi, social worker, child safeguarding team

Workforce development team members were asked to reflect on what was happening in Chi's situation.

Corlea: I think that it is also down to management style, what they prioritise. Some managers prioritise case management, which is what it sounds like here, rather than understanding the pressures of staff. If managers acknowledge the pressures, social workers feel more valued. Some managers are not open to having that kind of reflective conversation or being compassionate, due to their own pressures. Strategically, they have performance boxes which require ticking. However, some managers will push back and say that it is not a priority for me. For me, based on my experience, it is the staff of these managers who feel valued more.

Shalini: It is about why do we tick these performance boxes. I'd much rather do one visit, which provides more quality than having visited every 10 working days, where we really are not doing much, not building a relationship, and not understanding why you are going to see a family. But again, if I am feeling like Chi, either I will become part of that system, and I will start going in ticking boxes and closing off cases or doing whatever it is that the leadership is expecting of me. Or I will be really resentful and eventually leave, as this is not for me.

Sharon: As a workforce development team member, I would have a difficult conversation with the team leader. Are you aware that this person feels this way? What can we do? How can I support you in changing what this person feels? Or your entire team? Let us work together to see how we can change it. I would do a reflective piece of work around people's feelings where they are at, how they perceive support from the top, and then work with that to get the team leader to reflect on their management style. What is impacting and making this person feel this way? It is layered. So, you have to address it at every layer, really, and see how, as individuals and as a team, and then as a service, this could be changed. It is a big piece of work to change a mindset, and a way to do things. It is a combination of training and the supervisory relationship between the team leader and the senior leader. What is happening in supervision and in that relationship for the newly appointed team leader to learn from their senior leader? Thus, it is a combination of both training and supervision, just as it is for social workers.

Shalini: And we have to remember that most of the people who move into management are not necessarily trained to be managers; they are trained to be social workers. As we enter leadership, you need a different kind of skill set. For example, I was thinking of a manager about two years ago who had many challenges in terms of how he managed relationships in his team. We supported him in reflecting on his own experiences, and I am not saying that we are there yet. However, I think that as a workforce development team, we have the advantage of being able to see things from outside. There is likely to be a gradual shift. The first bit is really to help people to step outside of themselves and to reflect on how people experience them and their way of

working. This is not necessarily a criticism because we are our own experiences and bring our own values.

## Discussion

High social work staff turnover is problematic for several reasons. First, the recruitment and retention of children and family social workers presents a Sisyphean problem for councils. High turnover reduces the cohesion and stability of social work services (Mor Barak et al., 2001), undermines institutional memory and increases the risk of poorer outcomes for service users. Second, scarce public resources are inefficiently allocated (Le Grand et al., 2008) if social workers leave the permanent workforce after a relatively short time. High social worker attrition rates generate a febrile labour market, as councils compete for staff and turn to expensive recruitment agencies to fill labour shortages. This creates a short-term, expensive workforce policy fix, leaving fewer resources for families, as greater demand is placed on staffing budgets (Local Government Association, 2022). Third, high staff turnover does not help the professional status of social work, as people will not be attracted to train for a profession where the average working life of a social worker in the UK is less than a decade (Curtis et al., 2010). Arguably, the presentation of social work as a competent and rewarding profession becomes febrile if employers are constantly firefighting to fill staffing vacancies.

This paper utilises respondents' reflections from a wider study in which we examined the reasons for why social workers leave or stay in the profession. In the paper presented here we invited three very experienced practitioners to consider some of these reflections to understand how a workforce development team approaches the challenges of addressing staff turnover challenges in social work.

Corlea, Shalini and Sharon demonstrate the importance of social work organisations developing a "relational ethical" (Noddings, 2013) approach to their workforce to aid social work satisfaction and reduce staff turnover. Their reflections suggest that this approach, which encourages compassion, understanding and empathy for individual social workers, can occur at organisational and individual levels (Turley et al., 2022). In some ways, as a workforce development team, they have more power to influence what happens at an individual or meso level, whether by offering a safe container (Ruch, 2007) for staff to vent, mentoring (Brook et al., 2019) to examine, for example, practice patterns (Hayes & Spratt, 2009), or by creating a sustained, purposeful one-to-one or group reflective space for managers to discuss, examine, and identify alternative communicative patterns (Spath et al., 2013). By applying these strategies, Sharon, Corlea and Shalini are focused on serving the emotional well-being of their workforce. By doing so, they are sensitively inviting others to question a social work culture which might



be straying too much towards a “servicing” model (Waddell, 1989). In such a world, social workers feel more emphasis is placed on measuring the quantitative elements of social work performance. Performance statistics are vital to capture. However, workforce development teams play an equally vital role in offering insight and tools to help social workers and managers in organisations address experiences such as Chi's, where workers spiral towards burnout, a significant factor leading to staff turnover (Orsi-Hunt et al., 2023).

However, while workforce development teams can directly or subtly influence social work working practices, Sharon, Corlea and Shalini also recognise that they have limited capacity or power to introduce more structural changes to an organisation's culture. Wider systemic change is difficult as any system is complex, with patterns of organisation and communication deeply entrenched (Bateson, 1972), not least when economic resources are limited. For such a change to occur within an organisation, it requires a multi-layered focus, resilience, openness, a willingness to learn, mutuality, compassion, good humour, time and a buy-in to always remember the fragility of ourselves and others.

### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

None

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