

#thebiglisten

Valuing Children's Social Workers

Report on The Big Listen Survey 2022-23: A Survey of Social Workers across London and the South East



SESLIP
South East Sector Led
Improvement Programme

Liia Together for
London's Children
LONDON INNOVATION AND IMPROVEMENT ALLIANCE



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Executive Summary

The Big Listen is a research project conducted to develop a better understanding of the Children's Social Care Workforce in London and the South East through the voice of child and family social workers. The analysis of the research was conducted in Spring 2023 and the final report produced in June 2023. It focuses specifically on the challenges local authorities experience in retaining and recruiting qualified social workers and managers.

The purpose of the Big Listen is to develop a high-quality evidence base to inform strategies at both regional and local authority level to help find new and innovative ways of addressing the difficulties faced by the sector.

The research sought to listen directly to frontline social workers and managers working in both regions through a combination of focus groups attended by over 150 people and a survey completed by over a 1000 (more than 8% of all social workers/managers in both regions).

Our approach has been inclusive to capture views from the whole workforce (including local authority employed staff and managers, agency workers, Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs), students and apprentices). This report gives voice to social workers working in local authorities across both regions. Where possible it uses direct quotes and views clearly expressed in our survey.

In addition to the primary research undertaken, the Big Listen also included a desk top review of other data sources. These are used to provide contextual information and insights into how the workforce is likely to change. This information has been gathered from a range of sources including the Department for Education (DfE) annual workforce census, Social Work England's State of the Nation Report, and

the Local Government Association (LGA) National summary report of the Employer Standards Survey for registered Social Workers. We have also consulted with other key stakeholders including practice leaders, social work agencies, managed service providers and Social Work Teaching Partnerships.

Differential Experience of Black and Global Majority Staff

One key finding of the report is that Black and Global Majority (BGM) social workers have a differential experience to their white counterparts. Throughout focus groups and the survey we heard examples of the impact of racism and discrimination and how it often makes the difficulties and challenges they face worse. **The research suggests this is a very significant factor and influences BGM workers moving into agency social work, how they feel about progression opportunities and how they are affected by the cost of living crisis.** The BGM workers we spoke to expressed feelings of being "forced" to leave their local authority positions due to poor experiences, lack of support and economic necessity. Local authorities are fundamentally at higher risk of losing BGM social workers to the agency market. The report highlights key areas where the research has provided evidence of this differential experience and offers questions that system leaders can ask to understand their workforce better.

Making a Difference

Most social workers are motivated to make a difference for the communities they serve regardless of their employment status (i.e. local authority employed or agency staff). The majority feel valued by their employers, but there is a significant minority who do not.

Factors like pay and resources influence this alongside the support that staff experience.

“ I wanted to give back to the community I grew up in. (LA employed Social Worker) ”

In our research many workers cited the importance of managers and leaders listening, caring and helping staff to feel safe in their roles.

The group of staff who do not experience their employer as supportive or caring are probably those at highest risk of moving, joining an agency or leaving the profession.

Agency Staffing

Both regions are heavily dependent upon agency staff, with just under a quarter of London and approximately a fifth of the South East (SE) workforce made up of agency workers. Black and Global Majority (BGM) social workers make up a disproportionately high percentage of the agency workforce in both regions.

Our research heard from multiple sources that racism in the workplace was a factor for some people in choosing the agency route. Better remuneration and frequency of pay was a key factor in motivating workers to seek agency employment. The flexibility of agency working was also identified as a key benefit. The research highlighted that there is significantly more movement between local authority employment and agency working than is often recognised.

“ Leaders must be intentional about addressing racism. Agencies pound the table for global majority staff when authorities don't. (LA employed Social Work Manager) ”

Worryingly 25% of local authority child and family social workers in London plan to work for an agency at some point in the future and a further 13% are considering it as option. In the South East 13% are planning to work for an agency and a further 18% view it as a possibility.

This research suggest that authorities need to develop a more sensitive and in-depth understanding of why some staff see their future working for an agency. The factors driving this choice are different, whilst money is important it is not the only issue.

Workload and Working Conditions

Almost 40% of the children's social care workforce find their workload unmanageable and 35% think their role does not support a good work life balance. There appears to be a perception that this is worsening against a background where DfE statistics do not seem to support the assertion that overall workloads are increasing.

In our research many staff make a connection between the number of hours they have to work and the view that they are not properly remunerated for their role along the lines of “I would just like to be paid for the hours I work”.

“ It's an overloaded system. Caseloads need to be low enough to do meaningful work with families. (LA employed Social Work Team Manager) ”

Data also suggests that there has been an increase in sickness levels in both regions over the last five years.

The most concerning trend identified is the increasing turnover of social workers over recent years. 2022 is the first year in which both regions experienced a net loss of social workers

from the children's workforce (this has also happened at a national level). If it continues it would represent a year on year reduction of available workforce.

The research also explored how often workers are now working from home. Most of the workforce are based from home 2-3 days per week. Interestingly agency workers are likely to work from home more often than directly employed local authority staff.

Pay, Progression and the Cost of Living

The research identified the cost of living crisis as a major issue for many in the Children's Social Care Workforce, some identified this as significant factor in staff opting for agency work, whilst others thought local authorities should be doing more to support social workers with the inflationary pressures faced.

“Permanent social workers should be developed and coached and mentored for career development, rather than the LA overlooking their existing staff/workforce to employ new staff and agency workers.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

BGM staff were most concerned about the rising cost of living. BGM staff also identified career progression as a slightly higher priority, as did more newly qualified staff.

Supervision and Continuous Professional Development (CPD)

Supervision was seen as critical by 95% of people taking part in our survey, but a third of staff felt they did not get good quality supervision. Male staff were most likely to be happy with the standard of supervision received and BGM staff least satisfied.

“The idea of having a buddy is great and having someone to go to is really helpful in the absence of management.
(LA employed Newly Qualified Social Worker)”

Career Decisions and Influencing Factors

Many of the social workers we spoke to during the research were very concerned about the portrayal and perception of the profession, for some this extended to their family and loved ones being concerned about their choice of career. They viewed the impact of this issue as double edged. Firstly, it makes it hard to recruit and retain good quality staff as people are reluctant to work in such a negative and critical environment (and those who do so often move on to less frontline roles when opportunities become available). Secondly it contributes to creating a situation where the children and families they work with are fearful and distrusting of them, making a difficult job even harder.

Social workers and managers are also conscious and concerned about the vicious cycle many authorities find themselves in where they are unable to recruit/retain the staff needed, in turn placing a tremendous pressure on the workers that they do have. For some local authority staff this can be the final straw that leads to them moving to agency roles in an effort to be paid in a way that they feel better reflects the demands placed upon them. Social work is a profession where the relationship between the gravity and responsibility of the tasks is not directly linked to the workers seniority.

The research also highlighted the age profile of the workforce across both regions. When looking at London or the South East as a whole, the statistics mask the huge variation between authorities, with some having young workforces and others that are significantly older. London needs to recruit around 120 social workers each year to simply replace those that are likely to retire and the South East needs to employ approximately 86 social workers for the same reason. This is in addition to the new staff required to replace people who leave for other reasons (moving away, becoming an agency worker, not returning following maternity/paternity, burn out etc).

Throughout this research children’s social workers have told us that they are “proud to be children’s social workers”; they are extremely passionate about their career choice, their role in the community and are motivated to make a difference for children and families. However, there are many complex contributing factors at local, regional and national levels that interfere with their ability to do their jobs effectively which impacts on their enjoyment of the role and the capacity to maintain a healthy work-life balance. Children’s social workers we have spoken to are not generally questioning their career choice, but the system they work in.

“The view of the public is that social workers are incompetent ... we need to highlight good stories.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

Introduction

The Big Listen is an ambitious research project undertaken collaboratively with the 52 local authorities in London and the South East (SE). As of September 2022, the two regions employ 12,694 social workers and managers (London 7093 and SE 5601), representing over one third of the 31,600 social workers employed in the children's local authority workforce in England.

Of the 12,694 children's social workers employed, over 8% (1035) took part in this research through participation in the Big Listen survey and/or taking part in focus groups.

The recruitment and retention of children's social workers has been a challenge for more than two decades. Recent data suggests these difficulties have escalated into a crisis. In 2022¹ the number of children's social workers directly employed by local authorities nationally decreased for the first time in 5 years by 2.7% (or 900 social workers), vacancies increased by 21% (to 7,900) and the use of agency staff increased by 13% (or 6,800). This is against a backdrop where the number of registered social workers with Social Work England (SWE) has increased over each of the last 3 years. Their most recent report identifies 100,654 registered Social Workers in England, of these 52.1% are registered to work with children and families (though not all are in local authority employment, as it includes charity and private sector workers).

The aim of the Big Listen is to develop an evidence base exploring the extent of the problem directly through the voice of the workforce; to examine what is driving persistent challenges and most importantly to explore what can be done to address them.

Workforce issues can often be seen as an existential and irresolvable problem. It is clear that there are no easy solutions or panacea to address the challenge, but there are things local authorities and the regions can do to improve the situation.

The purpose of this research is to provide a practical and pragmatic approach that gives local authorities an evidence base to support the development of effective strategies, both locally, regionally and perhaps more widely.

The research draws on evidence from a range of sources including the Department for England (DfE) Children's Workforce Census², The Local Government Association (LGA) Social Work Health Check³ and SWE's 2022 State of the Nation Report⁴. We have also spoken to social work leaders and other key stakeholders (e.g. DfE, SWE, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), Universities and Teaching Partnerships).

The centrepiece of the study is qualitative research undertaken in London and the South East with over a thousand social workers (including social work managers, students and agency workers) that was completed in late 2022 and early 2023.

¹ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce/2022>

² <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce/2022>

³ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-summary-report-employer-standards-survey-registered-social-workers-202223>

⁴ <https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/about/publications/social-work-in-england-state-of-the-nation/>

Who took part in the Big Listen?

	London (DfE Census 2022)	London Big Listen response	SE (DfE Census 2022)	SE Big Listen response
Number of SWs in workforce	7093	589 (8.3%)	5601	446 (8%)
Agency Staff	24%	7%	17.9%	6.0%
Gender (Female)	83.1%	79.0%	88.0%	86.0%
Gender (Male)	17%	19%	12.0%	13.0%
Ethnicity (BGM)	53.4% (<i>gen pop 39.9%</i>)	43.0%	18.6% (<i>gen pop 12.2%</i>)	11.0%
Ethnicity (White)	44.7% (<i>gen pop 53.8%</i>)	57.0%	80.9% (<i>gen pop 86.3%</i>)	89.0%
Managers	23.7%	32.8%	24.4%	28.7%
Social Workers	76.2%	68.0%	75.6%	71.0%

Figure 1: Response to the Big Listen Survey compared with data from the September 2022 DfE Children's Workforce Census.

In total 1035 social workers and managers completed the survey and approximately 150 people participated in the range of focus groups/events.

At least one social worker from all 19 of SE's local authorities completed the survey and 80% (27) of London's 33 authorities.

This represents a significant sample of the workforce with 8.3% of the London Children's workforce taking part and 8% of the SE. The response received was broadly representative in both areas with some exceptions.

The most notable differences between the people who completed the survey and the characteristics of the workforce are:

- Agency staff are significantly under-represented in both regions (17% less than the proportion of the workforce they make up in London and 11.9% less than expected in the SE)

- Black and Global Majority (BGM) workers are underrepresented in London (9.6% less than expected)

We are unsure why proportionally less agency social workers took part in the survey than we would expect. We ensured agency workers' views are reflected in this report by incorporating findings from the focus group discussions where agency workers were well represented. Additionally we have made reference to earlier research conducted collaboratively by London and SE regions in March 2022 that focused solely on agency workers, exploring the push and pull factors of working in the agency social work market. Similarly, this research involved participation in a survey (approx. 75 agency worker responses) and a focus group (attended by 34 agency workers).

There are also other small differences in response rates which are not viewed as significant.

Findings

Making a Difference

In the survey we asked if people thought they could make a difference to the children and families they work with:

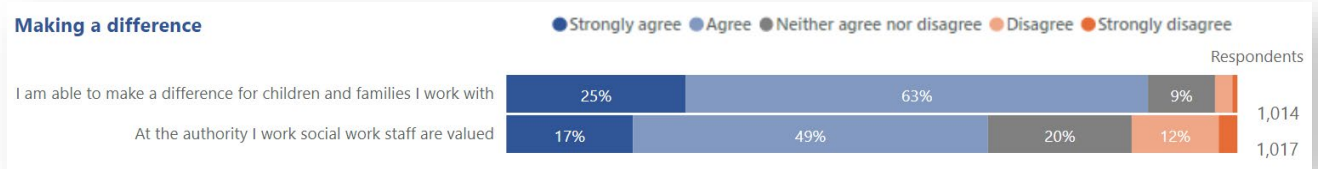


Figure 2: Response to the Big Listen survey on making a difference to children and families.

Encouragingly most respondents thought they could, with 88% agreeing or strongly agreeing with this statement.

There was little variation between the regions (89% in London and 87% in the South East).

These numbers were also quite consistent when we looked at different segments of the workforce (including gender, ethnicity, role and LA employed/agency, years qualified etc). Less positively it is concerning that 12% either chose not to express a view or said they were unable to make a difference. If this is representative it equates to approximately 1500 social workers across the two regions.

We also asked if staff felt valued, again the response was broadly positive with 66% either agreeing or strongly agreeing, more worrying is that 20% did not express a view and a further 16% disagreed or strongly disagreed. If representative this would be the view of over 5,500 of the 12,694 workers across the two regions. We also analysed this information by region, gender, ethnicity, role and LA-

employed/agency employment, years qualified etc. There were not any significant differences that impacted on how people answered this question.

The LGA National summary report of the Employer Standards Survey for registered Social Workers 2022/23⁵ does not ask directly comparable questions in their survey. The closest match is: *My employer understands the barriers and challenges that are getting in the way of doing my best work.*

Nationally this scores 74% for children’s social workers, this is higher than the number agreeing and strongly agreeing they are valued in the Big Listen question.

The drivers for workers feeling valued and being able to make a difference (e.g. supervision, leadership, workload, pay, ICT etc) are fully explored later in the report.

⁵ <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/national-summary-report-employer-standards-survey-registered-social-workers-202223#key-drivers>

Social Workers say...

“ I wanted to give back to the community I grew up in.
(LA employed Social Worker) ”

“ My manager is brilliant. I feel really safe in my role. If I don't get it right, then I can admit to making a mistake – there is not a punitive culture in the LA.
(LA employed Social Work Team Manager) ”

“ My Service Manager makes it a point to know everyone by name, sits with everyone and sends email to congratulate the teams good work. That visibility and presence has made a huge difference to morale.
(LA employed Newly Qualified Social Worker) ”

“ I am really proud to be a social worker.
(LA employed Social Worker) ”

Questions for leaders...



What more can you do to celebrate and build on the positivity of the children's social care workforce and the impact they are having?

Do you know how many of your children's social care workforce feel undervalued and why?

Agency Staffing

We have included a section specifically on agency staffing as it has developed into an integral and critical element of the children's social care workforce. In London, agency workers have consistently represented around a quarter of the children social care workforce over the last five years, numbering around 1,700 of the 7,100 social worker workforce. Levels of agency staffing vary significantly, in 2022 the highest usage of agency staff by a London authority was 46.7% whilst 2 authorities reported no use of agency staff (see Figure 3).

Numbers in the South East have been more variable with rates varying from around 15% to 18% (700-1,000 of the 5,600 social workers). Like London, use across the region varied significantly from 38.5% to no agency staff (see Figure 4).

The sector has a paradoxical relationship with the agency market. Many system leaders view it as a significant contributor to many of the challenges experienced in the children's social care workforce, but the sector remains heavily reliant upon agency resource. This situation has worsened over the last two to three years with the increasing use of project teams (teams entirely composed of agency workers and managers) and a serious shortage of supply of individual agency workers available to complete specific single role assignments. In addition to this agency workers are significantly more expensive than direct local authority employed staff (even when their on-costs are included). We also know that many local authority employed staff find it demoralising working alongside agency colleagues being paid more to do the same job.

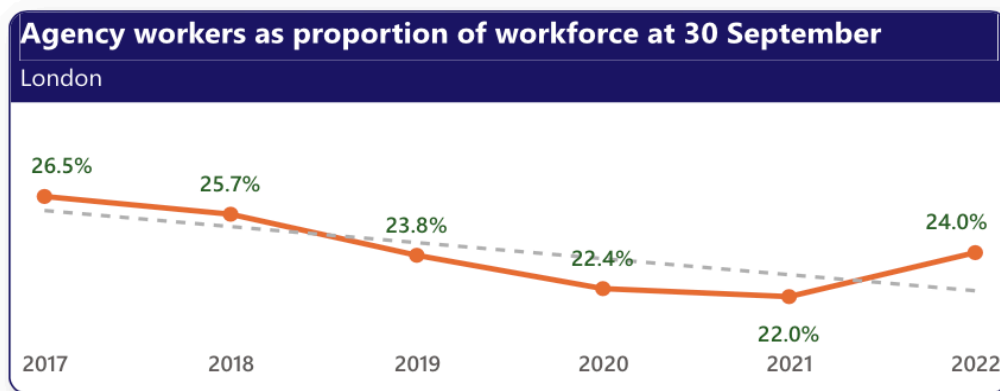


Figure 3: DfE Children's Workforce Census Data 2022

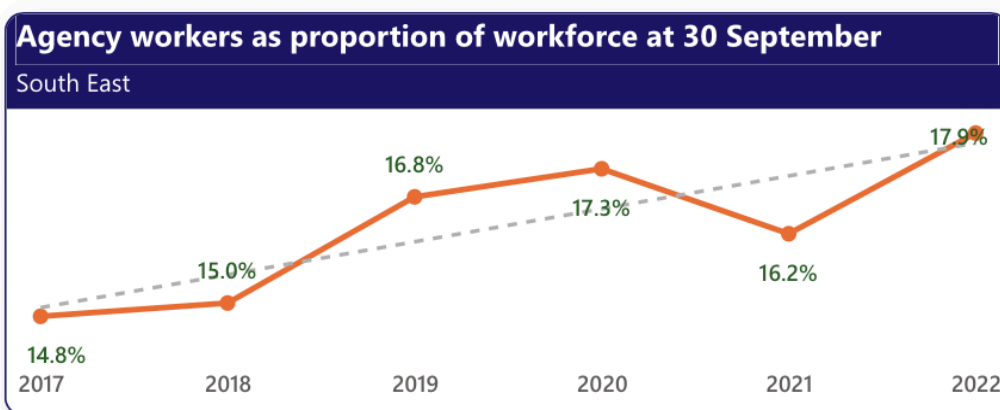


Figure 4: DfE Children's Workforce Census Data 2022

It is easy to view the rise in agency staffing as the root cause of many of the recruitment and retention challenges faced by the sector. This research suggests that the relationship is more complicated and that the choice of working for agencies may be more of a symptom of the difficulties rather than the cause.

At the time of writing, we are awaiting the publication of the DfE response to the Care Review which is likely to make some significant changes, and bring consistency to the way the agency market operates (possible pay caps, memorandums of understanding supported by data, guidance and other measures). In this context the Big Listen sought to understand who agency workers are, what motivates them and how to develop a better understanding of the issues driving the market. This builds on earlier research undertaken collaboratively between London and the South East in March 2022, which sought to understand the push and pull factors of agency work.

Of the agency workers who responded to the survey there were higher numbers of workers from the BGM community than the general workforce.

	London	SE
All responses to the survey from BGM Social Workers	53.5% (250 of 589)	11% (50 of 446)
Agency workers responses to the survey who identified as BGM	63.5% (26 of 41)	32% (8 of 25)

This was also the case in agency focus groups that we spoke to, where the majority of attendees were from BGM groups. At the groups they spoke about their experience of racism and discrimination in the children’s social care workforce.

Some participants described becoming an agency worker as a way of empowering themselves and taking control of their careers. They described practical factors including using the additional income from agency working to pay for their own training and development and the extra flexibility (short term contracts and shorter notice periods) to help choose assignments where they felt comfortable and supported.

Social Workers say...

“ I felt every approach to prevent my upward progression was taken. I left my permanent role due to racism and feeling pushed out.
(Agency employed SW) ”

“ Leaders must be intentional about addressing racism. Agencies pound the table for global majority staff when authorities don’t.
(LA employed Social Work Manager) ”

From the response received it is clear the financial benefits of agency work are the most significant drivers for workers joining the agency workforce (see Figure 5); in contrast only 17% local authority employed social workers cited pay as a driver in their choice of employer. It is also clear that agency workers value the flexibility agency work offers, including the short notice periods that are offered and higher frequency of pay (i.e. weekly).

The survey suggests that once people join the agency workforce they see it as preferable to being employed directly by a local authority (52% said they would rather work for an agency if the pay was the same as in a local authority). This included reference to agencies actively promoting and negotiating on behalf of social workers, resulting in often more lucrative and beneficial working arrangements being agreed. When we asked what they would do if social work agencies were prohibited, only 16% of agency social workers said they would seek local authority jobs (49% said they would look for non-local authority social work jobs and 35% said they would leave the profession).

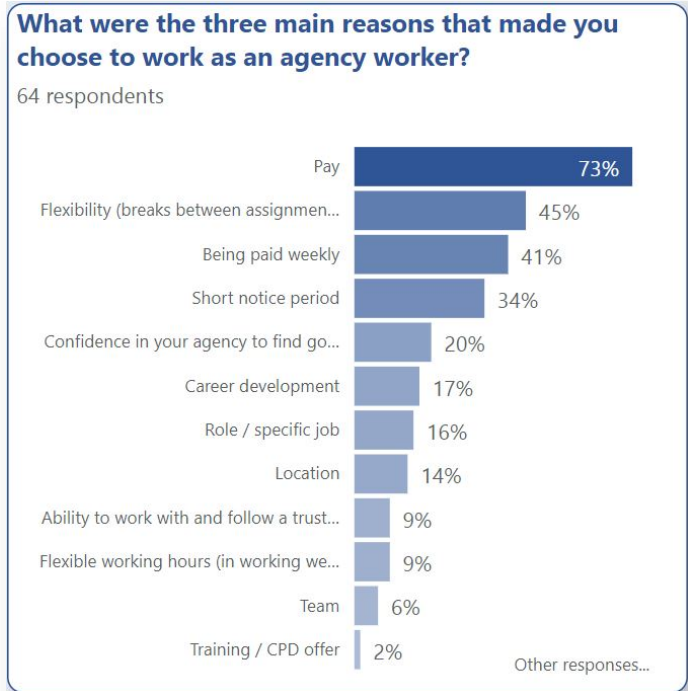


Figure 5: Response to the Big Listen survey on the three main reasons for choosing agency work

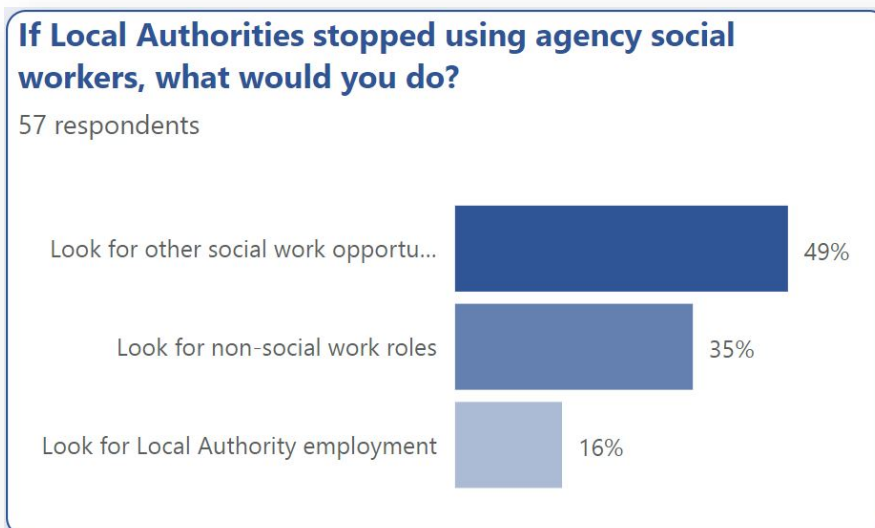


Figure 6: Response to the Big Listen survey question to agency social workers

We also asked local authority employed social workers their views about agency work; this presents a concerning picture where 20% (25% in London and 18% in the SE) state that they intend to work for an agency in the future and a further 21% are considering the possibility of doing so.

There is also significant movement between local authority and agency employment, which is not always recognised. Our research found that 29% of the local authority social workers responding to the survey had worked for an agency at some point in their career (37% in London and 17% in SE).

The data gathered in this research suggests the relationship between the sector and agency workers is complex and poorly understood. Children’s social care services are both heavily dependent upon the contribution of agency workers and sector leaders are rightly concerned about the cost/value of the staff employed through this route and the threat to sustainability for the workforce and stability of services for children. Children social work agencies can often be described as exploitative and seen as driving many of the workforce challenges faced in this area. This research recognises this as part of the problem but concludes the issue as more nuanced and complex.

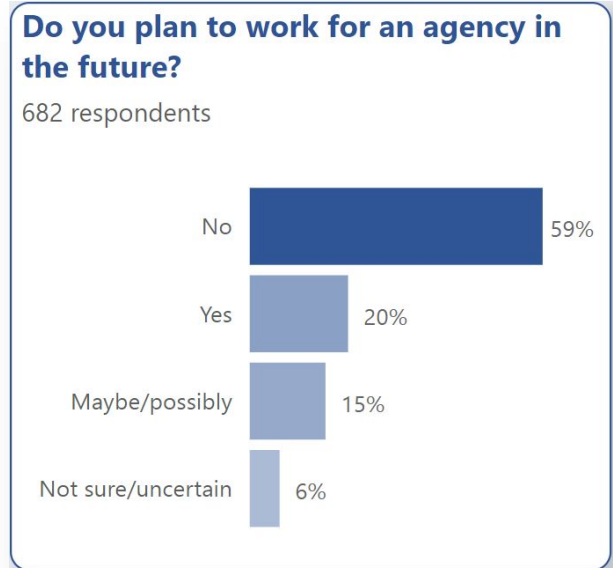


Figure 7: Response to the Big Listen survey on future agency work

Social Workers say...

“When you compare permanent worker salaries to agency salaries, agency workers are paid twice as much for less experience.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

“We need to do better and invest in retaining staff.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

Questions for leaders...

What role do we want agency social workers to play in the workforce (and what would represent appropriate % of FTEs)?

What can we do to build trust and confidence to make local authority employment more appealing and attractive to BGM social workers?

? How could we re-direct some of the money spent on agency staffing to make local authority employment more attractive for social workers?

Are there opportunities to offer greater flexibility in contracts for social workers and managers to compete more effectively with social work agencies?

What can we do to re-engage and re-energise local authority social workers who are feeling undervalued by their authorities?

Workload & Working Conditions

The research identified a significant number of workers who are concerned about their workload, with 36% describing it as “unmanageable”. This is reasonably consistent across both regions (36% in London and 38% in the SE). There was little variation across the other ways the data can be segmented (ethnicity, gender, years qualified etc). The one cohort that reported less concerns about workload were agency workers (33%) as opposed to local authority employed staff (39%). It is also notable that 35% of people responding to the survey do not feel their role supports a good work-life balance.

The DfE also collects information about worker caseloads and staff sickness. Many in the sector are sceptical about the usefulness of this information as data definitions and collection methods are viewed as inconsistent. Despite this the information is worthy of inclusion as it has been collected for over 5 years (so presumably has a level of internal consistency). It shows case numbers per worker have reduced in both regions since 2017. In London this has been consistent year on year (plateauing in 2020) and reducing in the SE between 2017-2020, before increasing in 2021 and 2022. Both regions have also experienced rising levels of sickness in their social work staff groups.

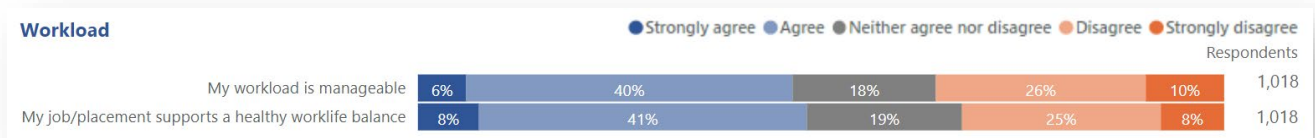
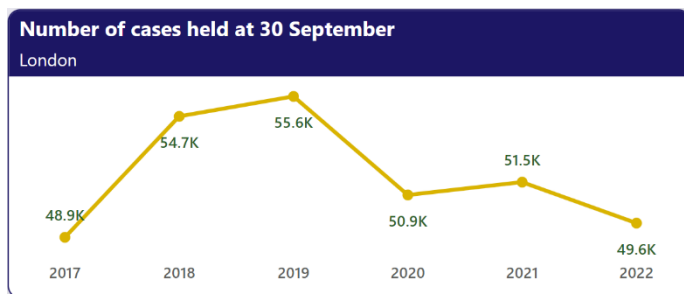
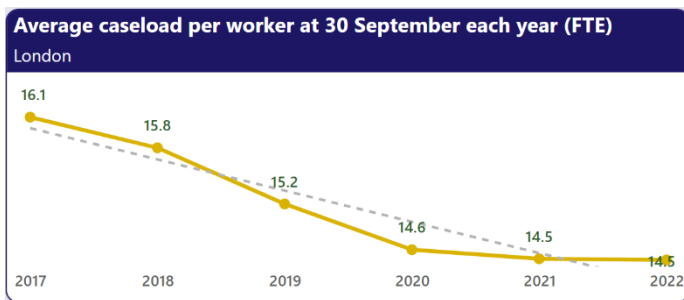
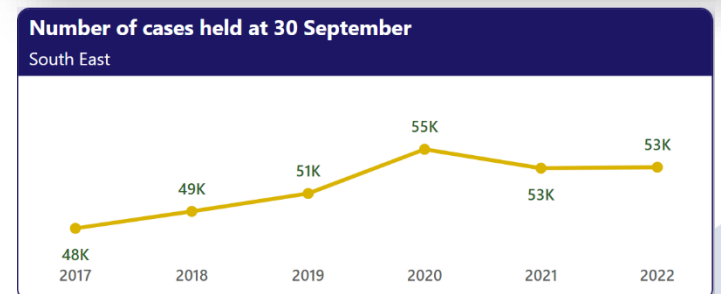
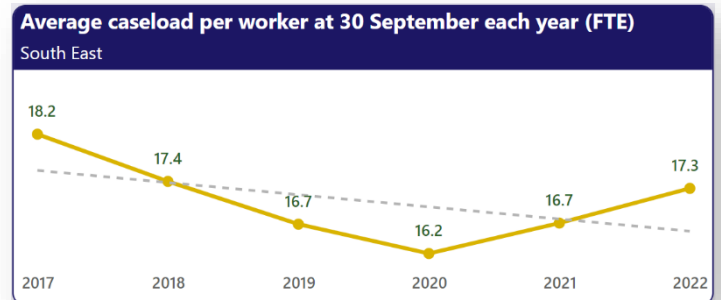


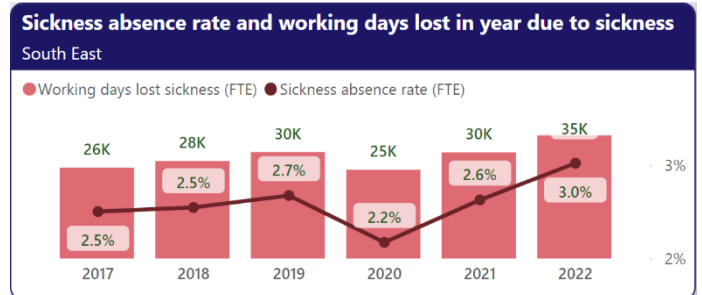
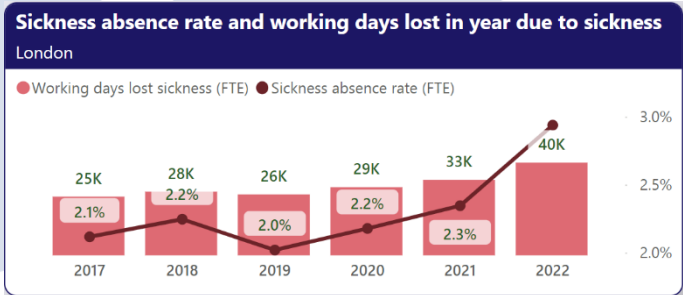
Figure 8: Response to the Big Listen survey on workload

Caseloads and sickness absence data - London



Caseloads and sickness absence data – South East





It is difficult to reconcile the perceptions reported in our survey and focus groups with the data from the national census. Through the narrative questions in the survey and our focus groups, social workers repeatedly stated their workload was not manageable within their contracted hours. Many also referenced feeling that they had to compromise the quality of their work due to the limited time available for their cases. Sector leaders have suggested that complexity of case work has increased significantly since the pandemic. They have also advised that the placement crisis for looked after children impacts significantly on the amount of time it takes staff to complete some tasks.

Sickness levels equate to an average of 7.5 days per year for each local authority worker. In both regions there has been an upward trajectory since 2017. In London 15,000 more days were lost to sickness in 2022 when compared with 2017, in the South East the increase was 9,000 days over the same period. This loss of capacity will also contribute to workloads (as sickness is not factored into the caseload data).

Information from the 2022 DfE Census also presents a concerning picture for both regions about staff turnover. Over the previous 4 years both regions had more starters than leavers. In 2022 this reversed in both regions as well as nationally.

There has been a downward trend in both regions, in 2017 London had 280 more starters than leavers, and the SE had 311 more. By 2022 London had 112 fewer starters than leavers and the SE had 97 less (see Figure 8). Average turnover rates in London are 19.5% and 18.6% in the SE, there is significant variation between authorities with the highest at 41% and the lowest at 7% turnover rates in both regions.

Region	London	South East
2017 Turnover (FTE)	17.8	12.5
2022 (FTE)	19.5	18.6

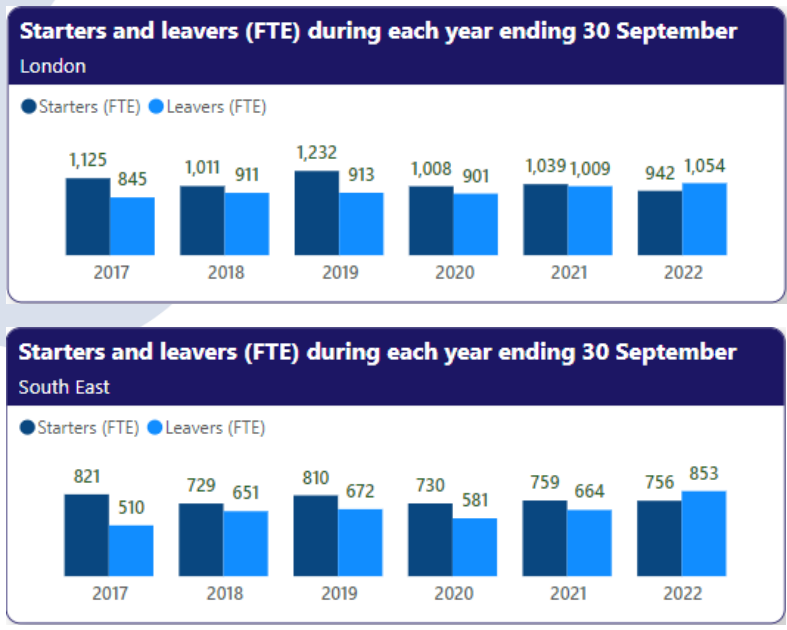


Figure 8: DfE Children’s Workforce Data 2022 – Starters and Leavers London and South

Since the pandemic, working from home for part of the week has become normal for most workers across both regions (see figures 9-11). Typically, people work from home 2-3 days per

week. There are few differences in the patterns between the regions or other segments (role, ethnicity, gender etc.). The one significant difference is that agency staff report working at home more than the local authority employed staff.

Working arrangements – all responses

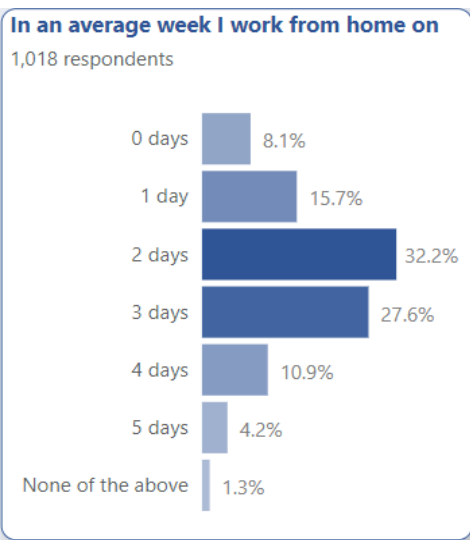


Figure 9: Big Listen Survey response on remote working arrangements – all responses

Working arrangements – Agency

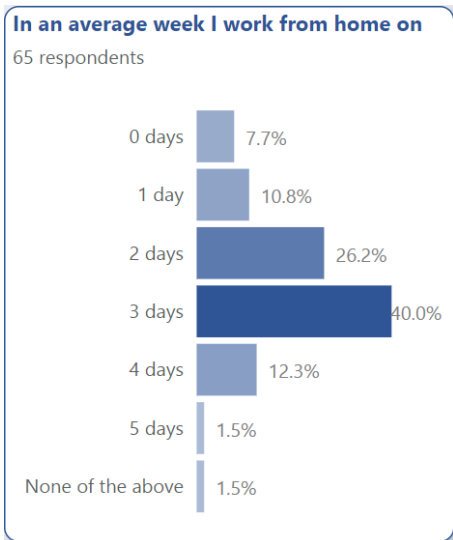


Figure 10: Big Listen Survey response on remote working arrangements – Agency Workers

Working arrangements – LA staff

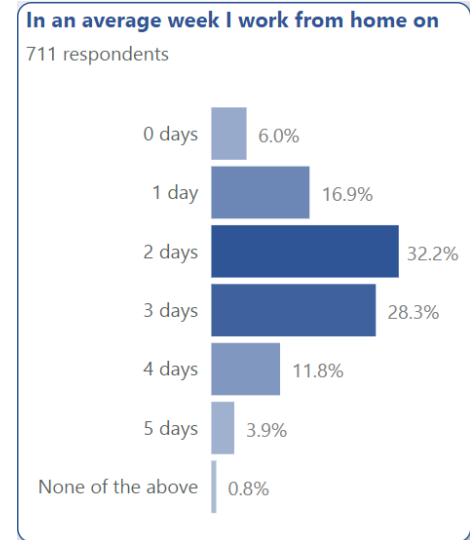


Figure 11: Big Listen Survey response on remote working arrangements – LA Staff

Workers in the survey were broadly positive about their ICT systems and how they support their work. 78% of participants in the survey found their authorities' ICT systems at least somewhat helpful (82% in London and 76% in the SE). Workers from the BGM majority were more positive with 87% of this view.

From the survey responses and focus groups we held, whilst many responses reflected a need for flexibility around working patterns and leave, workers also expressed the importance of local authorities maintaining a creative approach to flexibility to prevent and address burnout. For example, social workers holding particularly challenging or difficult cases can benefit from moving around services periodically offering a form of "working sabbatical" that allows staff to maintain their energy and wellbeing, whilst continuing to contribute to services. Local authorities should therefore remain flexible and open-minded in addressing burnout as there is an appetite amongst workers to adapt.

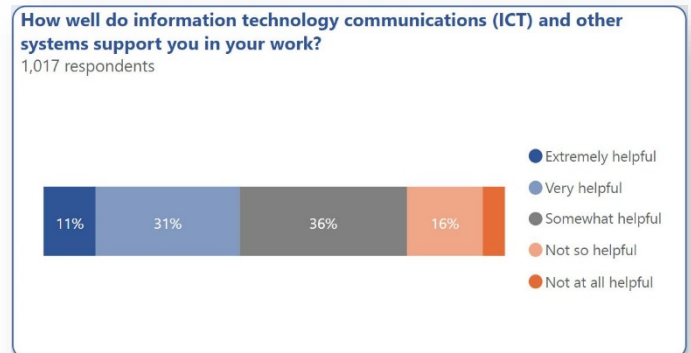


Figure 12: Big Listen Survey response on ICT systems

Questions for leaders...

Do you know how your staff feel about their workload?

Do you know which staff are least happy and why?

Do you know the ethnic make-up of each tier of your children's workforce?



Do you understand what drives staff turnover in your authority?

Do you know which groups of staff work from home, how this meets the business need and their work life balance?

Do you have policies in place to ensure AYSE and NQSWs are able to spend enough time in your offices to get the help and support they need to develop their skills and knowledge?

Could you do more to support staff who are at risk of burn out (e.g. working sabbaticals)?

Social Workers say...

“ It’s an overloaded system. Caseloads need to be low enough to do meaningful work with families. (LA employed Social Work Team Manager) ”

“ The lack of placements, foster, children’s homes, broken court system, then delays, having children time out for permanence. Unless these systemic things are fixed, can’t offer better delivery. (LA employed Social Work Manager) ”

“ Extended leave should be allowed, without longer processes needing to be agreed. I’m an Aussie and it is difficult to take longer periods of leave. Our council are also recruiting social workers from India; but then don’t seem that happy about people taking longer times off to visit family back home. (LA employed Social Worker) ”

“ You can only have low caseloads if you have enough staff to share the cases. The amount of work you do as a frontline social worker is relentless and I wished that was more shared out with the professional network. (LA employed Social Worker) ”

“ It’s difficult working in a context of families being really disadvantaged when you have very little resources. (LA employed Social Worker) ”

“ These days I am still working until 9pm or 10pm to manage the amount of work and admin I need to do. (Agency employed Social Worker) ”

“ Caseloads are a significant factor for social workers and prevents a good work-life balance. I had a bad experience in permanent LA employment. Moving to agency I found that there was a bias for controlling caseloads. (Agency employed Social Worker) ”

“ I think sabbaticals are really helpful and should be employed. This could be another way to build skills, for example to go into a different service area to build skills and reinvigorate. This could prevent people leaving the profession. (LA employed Social Worker) ”

“ Managing work with children is really challenging and it’s a juggling game, which it is for so many people. I have 3 children and am studying, so is my partner and we both work. Financially we can’t afford to change that or hire help. Would be really nice to have employers ask what we can do for you. (LA employed Newly Qualified Social Worker) ”

Pay, Progression and the Cost of Living

The cost of living crisis is a challenge for the children’s social care workforce. This was raised repeatedly in focus groups; staff were unhappy that pay has not kept up with inflation. Many felt this was made worse by expenses not reflecting the true cost to staff (e.g. petrol) and the additional costs incurred through working from home for part of the week (heating etc).

69% of staff are very concerned about the cost of living crisis (see Figure 13). More London staff were very concerned (London 74% and SE 64%). BGM staff were considerably more concerned than their white colleagues (BGM 83% and White 64%).

More newly qualified staff also expressed greater concern (0-5 years qualified 76%, 6yrs plus 67%). Interestingly agency staff expressed more anxiety about this issue than their local authority colleagues (agency 74%, LA employed 68%).

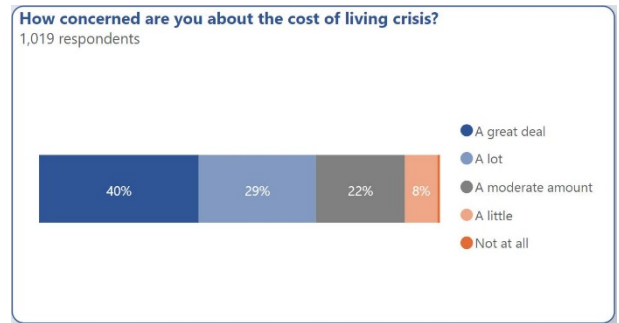


Figure 13: Big Listen Survey response on the cost of living crisis

Less surprisingly managers were less worried than social workers (managers 61%, SWs 74%)

Combined with fears about the cost of living crisis, most of the workforce think their pay does not fairly reflect the job they do. Only 34% think their pay is fair (see Figure 14).

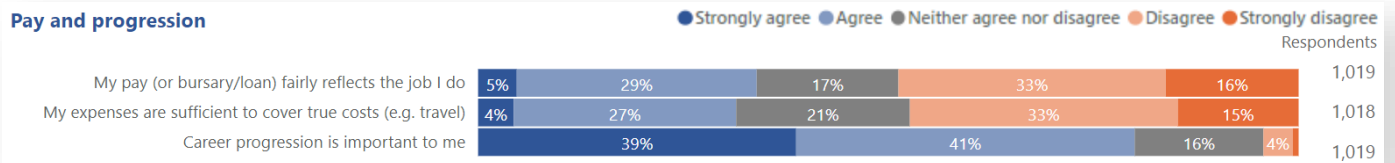


Figure 14: Big Listen Survey response on Pay and progression

Strength of opinion on this issue is similar to those expressed by the various segments about the cost of living.

Group	% Agreed or Strongly agreed pay fairly reflects the job
All respondents	34%
London (all groups)	34%
South East (all groups)	35%
Black and Global Majority (BGM)	23%
White	38%
Qualified for less than 5 years	27%
Qualified for 6 years plus	37%
Agency	46%
Local Authority	33%
Managers	40%
Social Workers	30%

We also asked people about their career aspirations. Unsurprisingly the vast majority identified this as being important. Some groups rated this significantly higher than others. These included London based workers, BGM staff and those who were relatively newly qualified (less than 6 years).

Group	% Agreed or strongly agreed career progression is important
All respondents	80%
London (all groups)	82%
South East (all groups)	75%
Black and Global Majority (BGM)	88%
White	77%
Qualified for less than 5 years	90%
Qualified for 6 years plus	78%
Agency	73%
Local Authority	82%
Managers	82%
Social Workers	80%

Social Workers say...

“Permanent social workers should be developed and coached and mentored for career development, rather than the LA overlooking their existing staff/workforce to employ new staff and agency workers.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

“I used to be permanent and realised some time ago that it looked as if new workers who just came in were being promoted. I overheard someone discussing pay and felt that my position as a black man was disadvantaging me so decided it was better to go agency.
(Agency employed social worker)”

“A number of SW's are leaving to be agency as the pay is higher; this is the issue from my perspective and then they are re-joining after 6 months with a hefty pay rise as agency.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

“We need a retention package for all committed social workers or improve pay to reflect the cost of living.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

“I've actually handed in my notice recently and am considering agency social work now due to the financial discrepancies.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

Questions for leaders...

Is your authority addressing the cost of living crisis with the workforce?

Does your authority have mechanisms in place to identify workers who are dissatisfied with the remuneration package?

Does your authority have a strategy and practical measures in place to help prevent staff seeking better pay through agency work?



What are you doing to encourage progression of your BGM social workers (and other children's workforce)?

Does your authority have a career structure in place that provides a clear pathway for staff who want to develop their career without moving to a different organisation?

Does your authority have a career path that provides a progression that allows for specialist development, for those not interested in management and leadership routes?

Supervision and Continuing Professional Development

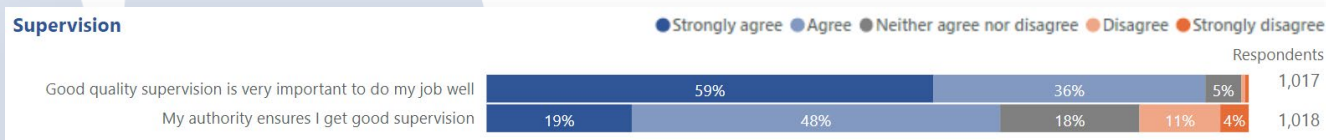


Figure 15: Big Listen Survey response on the Supervision and CPD

The people we spoke to valued supervision as critical to doing their job well. Across all of those participating 95% were of this view. We also explored how satisfied staff are with their supervision and a third (33%) said they did not get good supervision (see Figure 15). Our focus groups sessions specified the lack of reflective space, where supervision was often more task focused and directive. In the table below we

have shown both the importance placed upon supervision and the percentage of staff who told us they are getting good supervision. BGM staff were most unhappy with the quality of their supervision, with only 62% reporting they get good supervision. Male staff participating in the survey were most positive about the quality of supervision received with 70% rating it as good.

	Good quality supervision is important to help me do my job well	My authority ensures I get good supervision
All	95%	67%
London	95%	66%
South East	97%	70%
BGM	95%	62%
White	94%	69%
Under 6 yrs qual	98%	70%
Over 6 yrs qual	94%	68%
Agency	92%	68%
Local authority employed	96%	68%
Female	95%	67%
Male	93%	76%

Social Workers say...

“Money is more important than ever, but team morale and support is paramount to this. Feeling that your team is your backbone is critical.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

“Supervision is so important. I’m lacking this in my perm role, so I pay for external supervision (self-funded) that isn’t case direction but reflective space. We are all under a lot of pressure and there isn’t a lot of space for bread and butter support for social workers.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

“Some of the challenges that I worry about are that I can’t do some things on my own. Navigating my caseload where I’m at the mercy of other people’s diaries, puts a lot of pressure on the social workers allocated this work and it’s too much for them to manage
(LA employed Newly Qualified Social Worker)”

“It’s really important to me that wherever I end up there is plenty of support.
(LA employed Newly Qualified Social Worker)”

“The idea of having a buddy is great and having someone to go to is really helpful in the absence of management.
(LA employed Newly Qualified Social Worker)”

Questions for leaders...



Do you know how satisfied your staff are with their supervision?

How do you know that your managers are equipped to provide good quality supervision?

Career Decisions and Influencing Factors

Social Workers say...

“The view of the public is that social workers are incompetent. The media’s negative coverage of the job does not help. We need to highlight good stories.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

“I struggle with the public perception of social work. The fear from communities and parents is that we are just going to take children away.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

Many of the people who took part in our research voiced concerns about perceptions of the social work profession. The quotes above are typical of the two main issues raised, many were very unhappy with the media portrayal of social work with children and families. They cited examples of headlines and media coverage following high profile tragedies. There was also extensive frustration that the profession is poorly understood, which in turn affects recruitment and retention. Some newly qualified social workers also told us in focus groups that their families had expressed concerns about the career choice. Some family members were aware of the public perception of the profession and worried about the impact on their loved ones. **It was reflected through responses in the survey that few people that sit outside the direct workforce understand the support and prevention elements of work with families. This contributes to a climate of fear in which social workers’ tasks are made more difficult as parents and**

carers are reluctant to accept offers of help, or trust social workers assigned to work with them.

These combined with concerns explored in the earlier sections of the report about the challenges of excessive workloads and under-resourcing contribute to a sense of crisis. This was the view of many of the people we spoke to, but it was not universal. Some social workers were positive and felt their employers gave them the supportive leadership and tools needed to do a good job.

“We need increased recognition of the contribution permanent staff make and support their retention over employing agency staff (who are also valuable members, but in a different way).
(LA employed Social Worker)”

“This is a national crisis in terms of the retention of social workers in the profession IT systems are not fit for purpose given the level of bureaucracy that is expected and the children and families are facing too many challenges through cost of living, poverty and austerity that has stripped away support. National government need to invest properly in local government to address these issues and also the impact of too many children having to be in care in a system without the capacity to care for them all.
(LA employed Social Worker)”

Many of the people we talked to thought that there needs to be a much stronger focus on the retention of staff. Some recognised that in order to be successful in addressing these issues, local authorities need the support of

central government (and others) to address the retention challenges faced.

Others recognised that recruiting enough good quality staff is also important to improving the situation and helping to create conditions where social workers want to stay.

“You can only improve retention by improving recruitment. None of the additional things you add in to help retention - e.g. better training, better supervision etc will help if you are short staffed and over worked. I'd like to see Senior Management speaking out strongly to government re: pay and conditions and I'd like to see our professional bodies doing the same.”
(LA employed Social Worker)

In addition to fair pay and conditions many of the social workers we spoke to also identified good quality leadership as critical to the retention of staff. Some identified specific leaders in their organisations who inspired them and contributed to their commitment to their employer. There were some more critical observations too (examples below).

One agency social worker said their decision to join a local authority would:

“Very much depend on the leadership and practice model.”
(Agency employed Social Worker)

The quotes below are examples of what some people said would improve retention in their workplace:

“Provide continuity of leadership, consistency - and listen to us”
(LA employed Social Worker)

“Ensure the right people receive senior roles - people who can lead”
(LA employed Social Worker)

“They need to respect and trust social workers and their views. Some managers need to stop micromanaging”
(LA employed Social Worker)

In the survey we asked staff what motivated them to join their current employer. The location and particular role were the most common reasons cited (see Figure 16). Surprisingly pay, flexible working arrangements and caseload guarantees were much less important to the people completing the survey. We also asked what would be most likely to make them decide to leave their current local authority, to which responses included; high caseloads, excessive hours, poor supervision and management and an offer of better pay as the most common reasons. These factors were consistent when we analysed responses by the various data segments (ethnicity, gender, years qualified etc.) (see Figure 17).

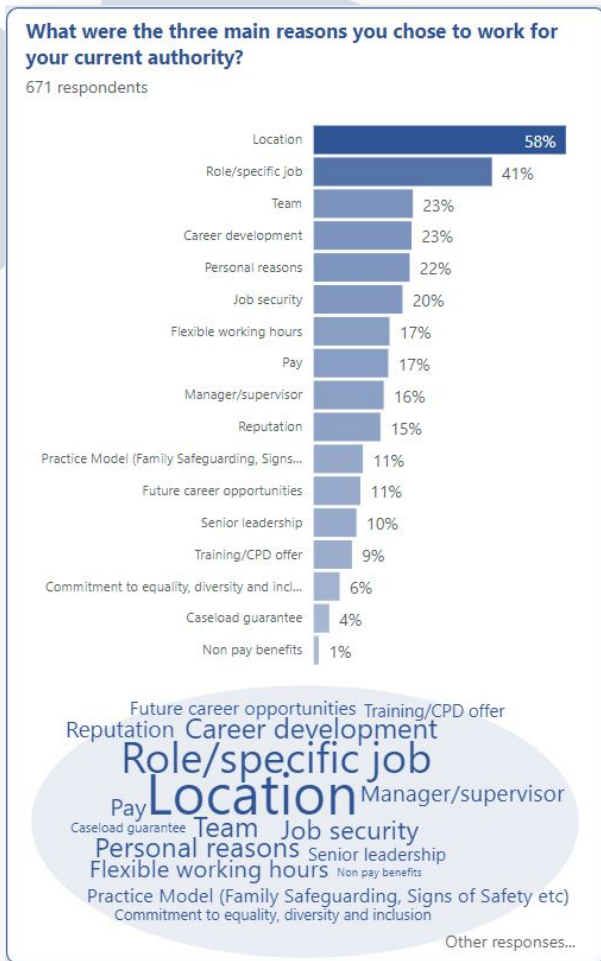


Figure 16: Big Listen Survey response on reasons for working for current LA

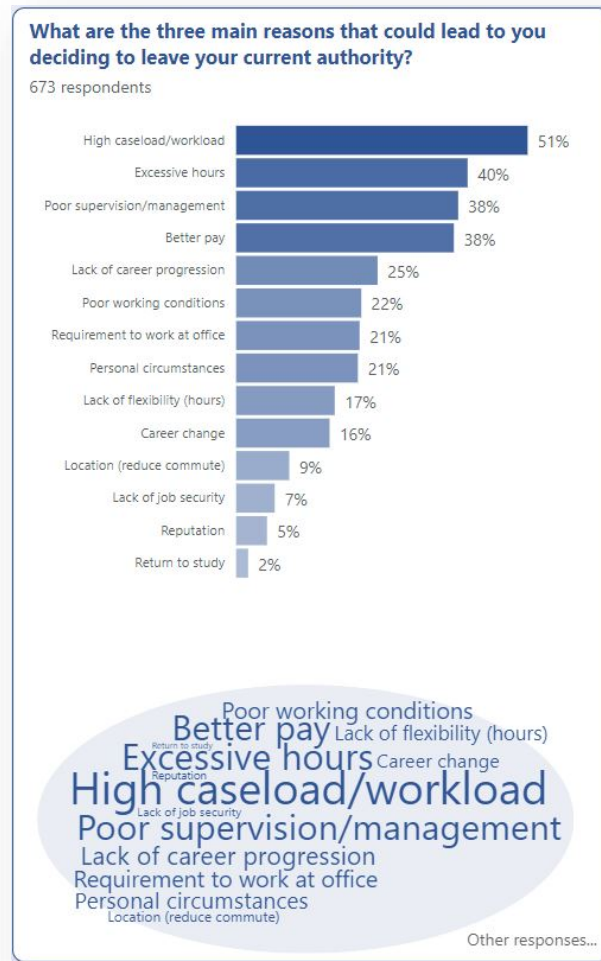


Figure 17: Big Listen Survey response on potential reasons to leave current LA

Similar patterns can be seen in other data collected. For example, students, apprentices and NQSWs cite location and Assessed and supported year in employment (AYSE) support as their key reasons for choosing a particular authority. Most join with the intention of staying at the same authority for at least two years (89%). Agency workers identify location as the most important reason for choosing a particular assignment (closely followed by pay).

The Big Listen suggests that the factors that drive people to join a specific authority are more personal and individual than the reasons that can lead to them leaving. The majority of staff are motivated to a join an

authority that is near where they live and offers a role that they find attractive whereas excessive workload, poor supervision and uncompetitive pay rates are likely to motivate people to leave a particular authority.

Social Work leaders also need to understand the age profile of their workforce. Whilst there is no statutory retirement age, experimental DfE research⁶ suggest that 22.4% of children's social workers aged over 60 leave the workforce each year (as opposed to 9.3% of the other age bands). If correct this would account for 120 social workers leaving London each year to retirement and 86 in the South East.

⁶ <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-s-social-work-workforce-attrition-caseload-and-agency-workforce>

	Age of workforce (years)				
	20-29	30-39	40-49	50-59	60+
London	12.1	29.9	25.8	22.7	9.7
South East	13.8	32	25.6	20.9	7.8

The age profiles of individual authorities vary significantly, in the South East the authority with the highest percentage of workers aged 60 + was 15.4% (in London this is 16.9%), the SE authority with the lowest number of staff aged over 60 was 3.3% (in London 4.1%). Similarly

there are large variations when looking at the younger cohorts of workers. The South East authority with most workers aged 20-29 has 20.6% of staff in this range (17.1% in London), the South East authority with least 20-29 year olds has 8.3% (London 4.1%).

Questions for leaders...

Does your authority promote positive messages about the work children's social workers do in your area?

Does your recruitment strategy focus on your local community and offer a good range of roles to attract social workers and managers?

Is your supply of Students, Apprentices and Newly Qualified Social Workers strong enough to maintain the workforce you need?

Do you understand the age profile of your authorities children's social care workforce as part of your workforce planning?

Conclusion

Many of the workers we spoke to as part of the Big Listen were positive about their role and felt that they were able to make real improvements for the children, families, and communities they work with. They were also positive about their employers and the support provided.

However, there are key messages from the Big Listen which paint a concerning picture of the children's social care workforce, suggesting the situation is deteriorating. We have heard a significant proportion of children's social workers are unhappy and dissatisfied with their role. The reasons for this dissatisfaction are complex and multifaceted. Many of them relate to factors outside of the control of individual local authorities or even regions, such as perception of the profession and the media portrayal of social workers. Others are nominally in the control of local authorities, such as pay and caseloads, but local authorities find it very difficult to make the changes that are required to have an impact.

While the report sets out a concerning situation, it also shows that it is not hopeless. It also offers insights into what can be done at a local authority, regional and national level to address the challenges.

One key finding of the report is that the BGM social workers are impacted differently to their white colleagues by the challenges faced by the workforce as a whole (as a result of the racism and discrimination they experience). In focus groups and throughout our research they told us the impact of racism and discrimination often made the difficulties and challenges they faced worse. The research suggests this is a very significant factor for many BGM workers who decide to choose agency social work over local authority employment. The BGM workers

we spoke to do not describe making this decision by choice, but rather expressing a feeling of being forced to do so due to poor experiences, lack of support and economic necessity. Local authorities are fundamentally at higher risk of losing BGM social workers to the agency market.

Another important finding from the research is that even though most local authorities now face serious challenges in recruiting and retaining the children's social workers needed, the reasons for this differ between employers. For some it is driven by too many staff leaving, whilst for others it is the result of too few new starters. Some areas have experienced dramatic escalation of workforce difficulties, whilst others have faced a gradually worsening situation.

Carrying out the research across two regions had multiple benefits. Firstly, it has provided a useful comparator and helpful benchmarking opportunity for the work. It has also helped to illustrate that there are many significant similarities between the regions and the participating authorities, and that there are also some major differences.

Employing the resources of both regions also enabled economies of scale and significantly expanded the skills and knowledge available to the project. It presents a good model for future cooperation where some of the recommended regional activity can be conducted at a lower cost and to a higher standard by sharing the workload. It also offers the potential to start to build trust beyond our regional footprints with a view to greater inter-regional cooperation in future.

National

At the time of writing, we are awaiting the next steps in the interpretation of the Care Review and specifically the potential changes in the way social work agencies are permitted to operate. This should be helpful but will not be a panacea.

Our research suggests that a national workforce strategy with a clear plan for a sustainable pipeline of children social workers is urgently needed. Alongside this we need a national response to address the negative perception of what children's social workers do to improve public understanding of their work and so support recruitment and retention efforts.

Regional

Regional cooperation can be difficult as authorities are acutely aware of the competition to recruit and retain good staff within a context of limited and reducing supply. Most authorities and their leaders want to act collaboratively, but this can appear counter-intuitive in such a competitive market and is severely tested by the intense external pressure and scrutiny from local and national politicians and media as well as bodies such as Ofsted. However, these findings demonstrate that it is imperative authorities within regions find ways to work together to address the workforce crisis, as no individual authority can solve it and whilst national developments may help, they are unlikely resolve all of the issues faced. This report suggests that authorities within regions develop clear guidelines about what they will (and will not) work together on. The research highlights areas where a regional focus is more likely to be successful than an individual authority, these include:

1. **Disproportionality:** work to address concerns of BGM staff about the

professional and personal impact of racism and discrimination

2. **Data:** Ensuring good quality regional data
3. **Supply:** Developing strong regional (or sub-regional) cooperation with universities and other training providers to ensure sufficient numbers of people are qualifying as social workers
4. **Engagement:** Promoting children's social work as a career at a regional level (e.g. regional websites, recruitment portals)
5. **Progression:** Developing shared career pathways (including progression without becoming a manager). It would also be helpful if this was viewed as a national priority.
6. **Efficiency:** Working together on innovations to improve social workers day to day experience (e.g. role of unqualified and alternatively qualified staff in the children's social care workforce)

Local Authority

In writing this report we are conscious most authorities have deliberated long and hard to develop their own responses to the recruitment and retention crisis. Many have high quality strategies and plans which seek to address the problems faced.

Our key insight is that strategies need to be tailored to individual circumstances, but link into a wider strategy at both regional and national levels to truly be effective and sustainable.

Throughout this report we have included questions to act as prompts to assist authorities to reflect, review and update their strategies in light of the findings of our research. For ease of access this have been collated these questions into a table in the Appendix.

Appendix: Questions for leaders:

Making a difference



What more can you do to celebrate and build on the positivity of the children's social care workforce and the impact they are having?

Do you know how many of your children's social care workforce feel undervalued and why?

Agency Staffing



What role do we want agency social workers to play in the workforce (and what would represent appropriate % of FTEs)?

What can we do to build trust and confidence to make local authority employment more appealing and attractive to BGM social workers?

How could we re-direct some of the money spent on agency staffing to make local authority employment more attractive for social workers?

Are there opportunities to offer greater flexibility in contracts for social workers and managers to compete more effectively with social work agencies?

What can we do to re-engage and re-energise local authority social workers who are feeling undervalued by their authorities?

Workload and Working Conditions



Do you know how your staff feel about their workload?

Do you know which staff are least happy and why?

Do you know the ethnic make-up of each tier of your children's workforce?

Do you understand what drives staff turnover in your authority?

Do you know which groups of staff work from home, how this meets the business need and their work life balance?

Do you have policies in place to ensure AYSE and NQSWs are able to spend enough time in your offices to get the help and support they need to develop their skills and knowledge?

Could you do more to support staff who are at risk of burn out (e.g. working sabbaticals)?

Appendix: Questions for leaders:

Pay, Progression and the Cost of Living

Is your authority addressing the cost of living crisis with the workforce?

Does your authority have mechanisms in place to identify workers who are dissatisfied with the remuneration package?

Does your authority have a strategy and practical measures in place to help prevent staff seeking better pay through agency work?

What are you doing to encourage progression of your BGM social workers (and other children's workforce)?

Does your authority have a career structure in place that provides a clear pathway for staff who want to develop their career without moving to a different organisation?

Does your authority have a career path that provides a progression that allows for specialist development, for those not interested in management and leadership routes?

Supervision and CPD

Do you know how satisfied your staff are with their supervision?

How do you know that your managers are equipped to provide good quality supervision?

Career Decisions and Influencing Factors

Does your authority promote positive messages about the work children's social workers do in your area?

Does your recruitment strategy focus on your local community and offer a good range of roles to attract social workers and managers?

Is your supply of Students, Apprentices and Newly Qualified Social Workers strong enough to maintain the workforce you need?

Do you understand the age profile of your authority's children's social care workforce as part of your workforce planning?

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