

April 2026

THE BIG CONVERSATION

The voice of child & family social workers

London Innovation & Improvement Alliance (LIIA)
South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP)

WORKFORCE RESEARCH

The Big Conversation (2025) is social worker workforce research led collaboratively by London Innovation & Improvement Alliance (LIIA) and the South East Sector Led Improvement Programme (SESLIP) on behalf of 52 participating Local Authorities and Trusts. This second edition builds on the Big Listen research conducted and published in 2023.



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Executive Summary

Updating the picture

The Big Conversation 2025 revisits the themes first explored in the Big Listen 2023, providing an updated picture of the experiences, pressures and priorities of child and family social workers and managers working across London and the South East. Against a backdrop of significant social care reforms and wider economic uncertainty, the latest findings point to modest but meaningful improvement.

Slow and steady recovery

Overall, practitioners describe a system that is showing early signs of rehabilitation; permanent staffing is increasing, vacancies and agency reliance are decreasing, and turnover has fallen across both regions.

Survey responses and focus group insights consistently highlighted incremental progress across all core areas of assessment and comparison. Importantly, these improvements are visible across roles, experience levels, gender and ethnicity, indicating more evenly distributed gains across the workforce.

Fragility persists

Despite these positive shifts, the findings underline that these 'green shoots' remain fragile. Psychological safety has dipped slightly in both regions, and pay fairness and financial security continue to fall below neutral for many.

Black and Global Majority staff still report experiences of structural barriers, including discrimination and inconsistent access to progression. The disproportionately female workforce speak to the more likely need for flexibility and part-time working arrangements, but highlight the subsequent impact on career trajectories. Managers, though generally positive about induction, supervision and development initiatives, describe increasing role complexity and pressures that do not always come with the comparative protections afforded to other practitioners.

Practice and technology

Hybrid working patterns remain broadly stable, with most staff working 2–3 days from home and reporting improved ICT helpfulness. AI tools are now being piloted or deployed across most authorities, with practitioners recognising their potential to reduce administrative burden when used carefully and ethically. However, there is a clear call for AI to augment, not replace, professional judgement, and for any roll-out to be opt-in, well-evaluated, and not used to justify reductions in administrative capacity.

Reflections on social care reforms

Views on the social care reforms are cautiously optimistic. Practitioners generally believe local changes - particularly towards early help - are enabling children and families to receive support sooner.

However, there are mixed views about whether lived experience is being adequately centred in redesigned services. The success of reforms, respondents emphasise, will depend far more on implementation quality and resourcing than policy intent.

Career progress and investment

Finally, while career development remains a strong motivator, significant proportions across all levels identify lack of progression opportunities as a key risk factor for leaving. Although fewer social workers now express an intention to move into agency work than in 2023, perceptions of flexibility, pay and levels of investment in the permanent workforce, continue to shape local authority attractiveness.

Sustaining and protecting visible progress

Taken together, the Big Conversation 2025 presents a workforce that is beginning to feel the benefits of sustained organisational effort, but remains acutely aware of the uncertainties ahead. Progress is visible, real and valued - but it must be continually nurtured, especially as the sector prepares for significant structural changes and as a sizeable proportion of experienced workers approach the later stages of their careers. Ensuring that improvements to culture, workload management, inclusion, and professional development are deepened and protected will be essential to building a resilient and sustainable workforce capable of meeting the needs of children and families in the years to come.

Introduction

Background to research

The purpose of the Big Conversation has been to revisit the findings of London Innovation & Improvement Alliance's (LiiA) and South East Sector Led Improvement Partnership's (SESLIP) groundbreaking Big Listen research that was completed and published in 2023. The earlier research was undertaken in the shadow of the pandemic and explored the experience of social workers, students and managers regardless of their employment status (i.e. local authority and agency workers). The research included a survey and focus groups. The [Big Listen 2023 report can be found here](#).

The Big Conversation was started in summer 2025 with analysis taking place over an elongated period to include both survey and focus group responses and capture the latest [DFE Children Social Work Workforce Census \(2025\)](#) (published in March 2026) as a central benchmark of progress.

Purpose

The purpose of the Big Conversation was to revisit some of the themes of the original research and see if progress had been made. In addition to this the sector is undergoing a period of turbulence with the implementation of the social care reforms, the technological changes of remote working alongside the increasing use of artificial intelligence. The Big Conversation sought to explore social workers' and their managers' views on these issues.

Response rates

The Big Conversation covers many of the same themes as the Big Listen, repeating the survey and focus group research model to enable fair comparison. The original survey elicited 1035 responses (589 from London and 446 from the South East) and the 2025 release got an even stronger response with 1220 replies (880 London and 340 from the South East). Every Local Authority and Trust in London and the South East had a least one social worker who responded to the 2025 survey, with many having tens of staff respond.

Workforce context and trends

The Big Conversation Survey took place against an improving picture in both the London and the South East. The most recent [DFE Children Social Work Workforce Census \(2025\)](#) reinforces these improvements including:

- **There are growing numbers of permanent social workers** in post with 283 (+4.8%) more in London and 245 (+5.0%) more in the South East
- **Social work vacancies are decreasing** with 246 (-14.3%) fewer in London and 17 (-1.8%) fewer in the South East
- **Agency reliance is reducing** with 310 fewer (-14.3%) fewer in London and 78 less (-8.9%) in the South East
- **Fewer social workers are leaving local authority roles** 45 fewer (-5.0%) leaving in London and 72 fewer (-10.2%) leaving in the South East.

Who took part

Representation

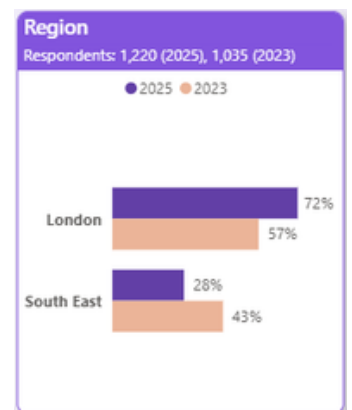
The table below shows who took part in the Big Listen 2023 and the Big Conversation 2025 in the wider workforce context. The DfE census information is based on returns made by local authorities in the region so provides the most complete picture of the workforce in both regions in the years of the Big Listen and the Big Conversation.

The background information on ethnicity is based on the [2021 Office for National Statistics census](#), the most up-to-date available, so provides the best context for both pieces of research.

	London (DfE Census 2022)	London Big Listen Response 2023	London Census (DfE 2025)	London Big Conversation Response 2025	SE (DfE Census 2022)	SE Big Listen Response 2023	SE Census (DfE 2025)	SE Big Conversation Response 2025
Number of SWs in workforce	7,093	589 (8.3%)	7,488	880 (11.7%)	5,601	446 (8%)	5,940	340 (5.7%)
Agency Staff	24.0%	7.0%	17.8%	5.0%	17.9%	6.0%	13.4%	1.8%
Gender (Female)	83.1%	79.0%	84.3%	74.7%	88.0%	86.0%	88.0%	82.4%
Gender (Male)	17.0%	19.0%	15.7%	17.2%	12.0%	13.0%	12.0%	8.5%
Ethnicity (BGM)	53.4% (<i>gen pop 39.9%</i>)	43.0%	58.0%	49.5%	18.6% (<i>gen pop 12.2%</i>)	11.0%	23.1%	12.6%
Ethnicity (White)	44.7% (<i>gen pop 53.8%</i>)	57.0%	39.8%	43.3%	80.9% (<i>gen pop 86.3%</i>)	89.0%	76.2%	80.3%
Managers	23.7%	32.8%	25.4%	33.8%	24.4%	28.7%	22.7%	36.2%
Social Workers	76.2%	68.0%	74.8%	48.5%	75.6%	71.0%	77.4%	39.4%

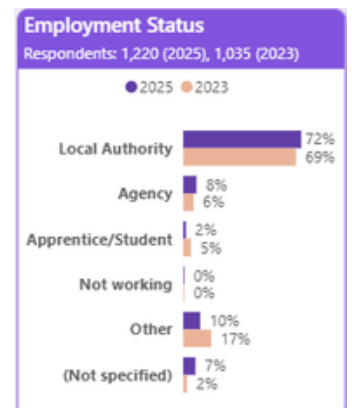
Overall responses

The overall London response to the survey was stronger with almost 12% of all child and family social workers employed in the capital taking part. The South East response was down slightly, but still included contributions from almost 6% of all child and family social workers employed in the region.



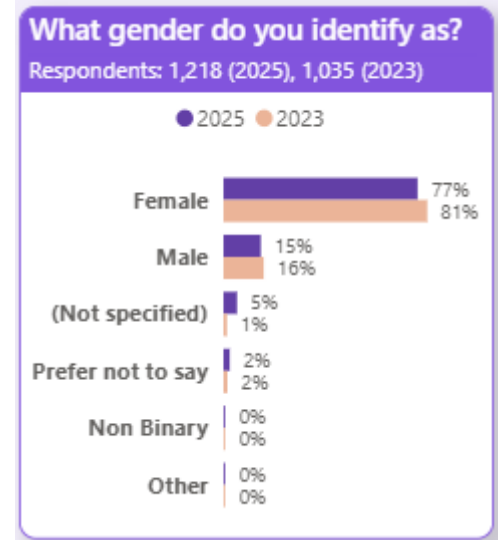
Agency social workers

The group who were least likely to take part in both regions were agency social workers. In London only 5% of responses came from agency staff, when they make up almost 18% of the workforce. In the South East only 1.8% came from agency workers when they make up just over 13% of the workforce.



Gender

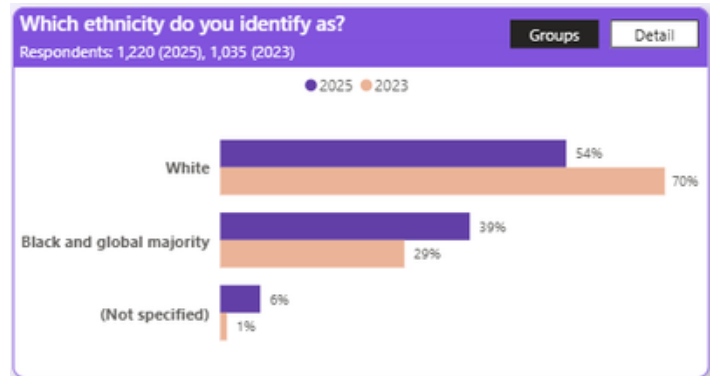
The workforce in both regions is mostly female (84.3% in London and 88% in South East) and responses to the survey from both regions were broadly in line with the make up of the workforce with 75% of London responses and 83% of South East responses being from those who identify as female.



Ethnicity

In both regions Black and Global Majority (BGM) staff make up more of the workforce than the general population (60.2% in London and 23.8% in the South East) and responses to the Big Conversation were well represented in both regions (57% of responses in London and 13% of responses in the South East).

Notably, BGM representation increased in the 2025 response overall (particularly in London), which is important given the differential experience of BGM staff highlighted in the Big Listen 2023.



Length of time in service

The Big Conversation shows a stronger presence of more experienced workers with a rise from 509 to 657 of those qualified more than 11 years and a rise from 136 to 175 of those qualified between 1 to 5 years.

In both regions managers were over-represented. In London 34% of responses came from managers (when they make up 26% of the workforce) and in the South East 36% came from managers (when they represent 23% of the overall workforce).



What's changed

Overall sentiments

In 2025 there is an overall sentiment of improvement. Whilst incremental, this can be seen across the majority of key statements. This incremental improvement also applies to the large majority when cross-referenced by role type/level, gender and ethnicity.

Both regions report small but broad improvements in comparison to the 2023 research, which focus groups corroborate. The SE gains are notable for work-life balance and workload, while London shows stronger gains in ICT and expenses perceptions. However, psychological safety has edged down in both regions.

Responses include;

- **London only:** improvements are strongest in ICT (+0.13), workload (+0.10), expenses (+0.21), making a difference (+0.08), supervision (+0.06). Psychological safety dipped slightly (-0.03).
- **South East only:** improvements in work-life balance (+0.16), workload (+0.16), ICT (+0.08), expenses (+0.24). Psychological safety declined a bit more (-0.10).

"A lot of work has taken place here and we have great social worker retention. Continue with the same initiatives."

"Workplace culture also matters. Promoting a positive, team-oriented environment where staff well-being is genuinely prioritised can reduce turnover."

It is important to acknowledge that shifts in psychological safety also sit against a backdrop of heightened political, social and economic unrest nationally, compounded by the uncertainty of significant reforms across the sector.

Average scores by questions requiring sentiment response				
Larger scores indicate more positive responses (score of 3 = neutral)				
Respondents were asked to rank how much they agreed with each statement from a choice of five options, which we have scored from 1 (strong disagreement) to 5 (strong agreement)	Average score in 2025	Average score in 2023	Change	
Good quality supervision is very important to do my job well	4.54	4.51	0.02	↑
Career progression is important to me	4.22	4.14	0.09	↑
I am able to make a difference for children and families I work with	4.16	4.09	0.08	↑
My authority ensures I get good supervision	3.72	3.68	0.04	↑
At the authority I work social work staff are valued	3.71	3.66	0.05	↑
How well do information technology communications (ICT) and other systems support you in your work?	3.41	3.28	0.13	↑
My job/placement supports a healthy worklife balance	3.24	3.15	0.09	↑
My workload is manageable	3.20	3.07	0.13	↑
Do you feel safe in your job? (Clarified as 'psychological safety' in 2025 survey)	3.04	3.10	-0.06	↓
My expenses are sufficient to cover true costs (e.g. travel)	2.98	2.74	0.24	↑
My pay (or bursary/loan) fairly reflects the job I do	2.78	2.74	0.05	↑
All sentiment questions	3.55	3.47	0.08	

Average scores by ethnicity				
Larger scores indicate more positive responses (score 3 = neutral)				
Ethnicity Grouping	Average score in 2025	Average score in 2023	Change	
White	3.56	3.47	0.09	↑
Black and global majority	3.54	3.48	0.06	↑
(Not specified)	3.50	3.59	-0.08	↓

Average scores by gender				
Larger scores indicate more positive responses (score 3 = neutral)				
Gender	Average score in 2025	Average score in 2023	Change	
Male	3.70	3.50	0.19	↑
Female	3.53	3.48	0.06	↑

Making a difference

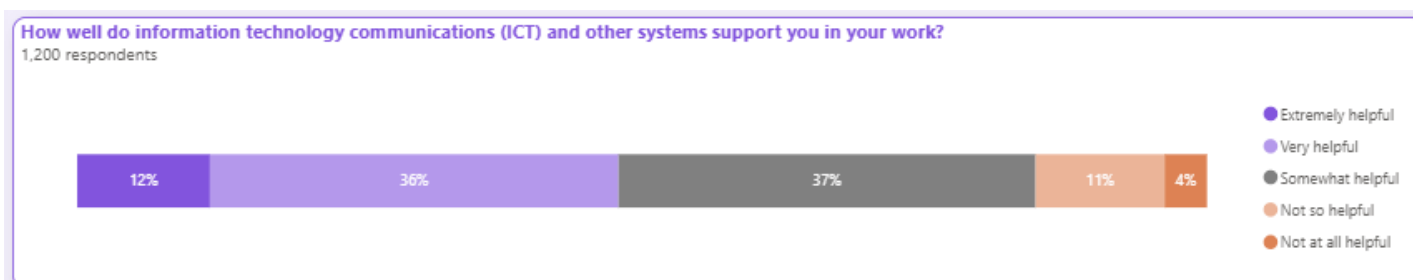
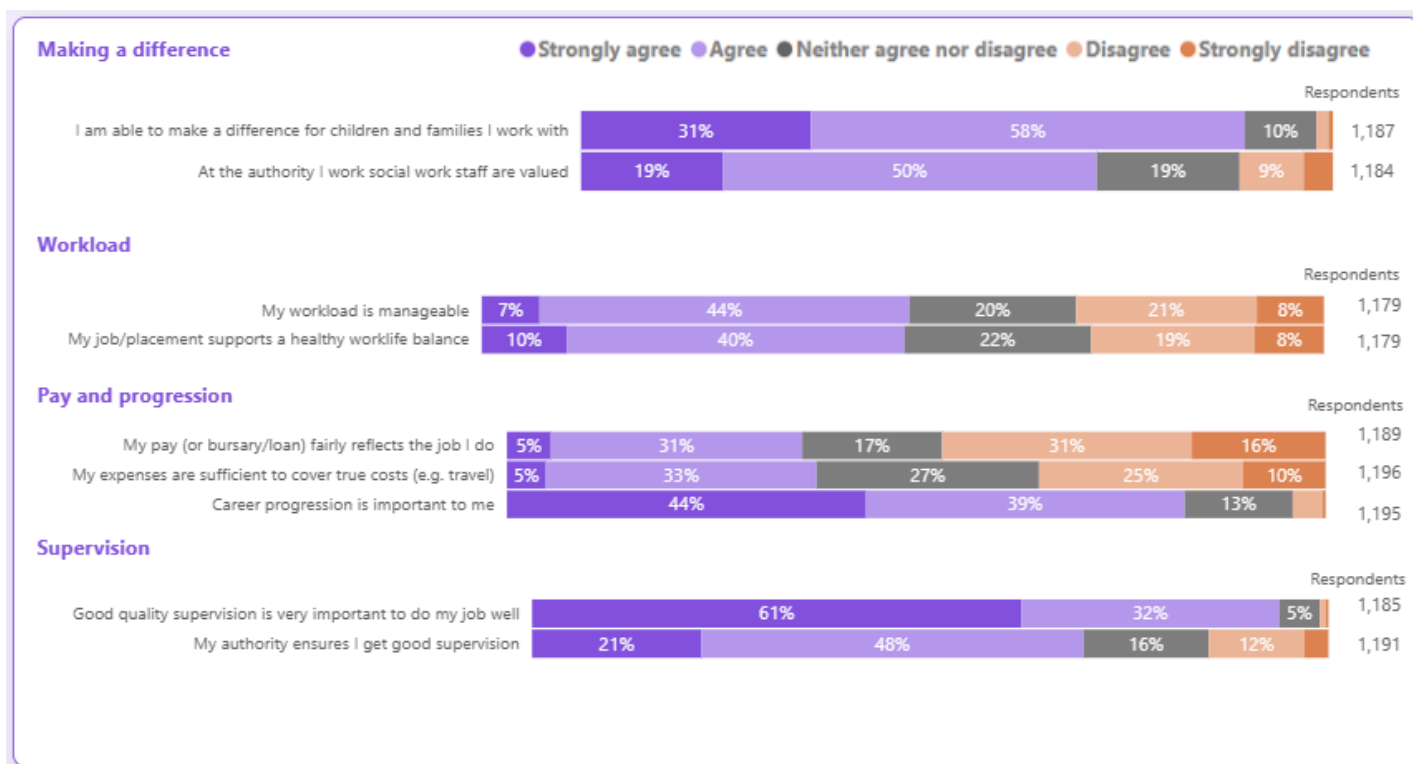
The 2023 Big Listen research highlighted strong pride in career choices and a sense of making a difference but high workloads, cost-of-living pressures, and BGM inequities contributed to agency-drift catalysed by experiences of racial discrimination and financial necessity.

The 2025 data shows incremental improvements in workload, work-life balance, ICT, and expenses perceptions. Pay fairness remains below neutral and feelings of psychological safety have reduced slightly.

Equity gaps have narrowed a little but persist.

“My LA is an innovative, responsive and caring. I have developed important relationships with like-minded colleagues and managers that has influenced me to stay here. I feel proud of the Council's achievements and to be one of its employees.”

- **London:** “workload manageable” and “work-life balance” show modest improvements vs 2023; hybrid working is the norm (40% work two days at home, 24% three days).
- **South East:** similar hybrid pattern (34% two days, 27% three days). Gains in workload/work-life balance are slightly larger than London, yet psychological safety declines more.



Focus groups corroborate these gains but stress their fragility during peak periods and the need for protected learning time for newly qualified social workers. Managers note growing complexity and, at times, uneven caseload governance for senior roles. Some Local Authorities referenced building structured inductions, reflective practice, and ensuring clear progression pathways which was contributing to improved confidence among NQs

Supervision and feeling valued

Supervision quality and feeling valued were referenced repeatedly in all focus groups, with reports of peer-recognition practices such as affirmation weeks, peer-to-peer praise encouraged as a 'norm' supporting increased levels of morale. Groups also cited the impact of high expectations of leadership on newly qualified social workers and facing external professional challenge.

Inclusive practice

Workforce diversity was highlighted by focus groups as not always translating into inclusive practice. Examples of discriminatory encounters and differences in how people from various cultural backgrounds interpret and assess risk can add stress and contribute to retention implications.

Focus groups highlighted that risk assessment isn't culturally neutral, which needs careful management through training, supervision and inclusive practice.

Caseloads

Caseloads were referenced as the critical retention driver protected with examples of protected caseloads and escalation routes being positively received for newly qualified social workers, but managers referenced that equivalent protections do not always exist for managers who carry supervisory responsibilities alongside operational burdens.

Working arrangements

Hybrid working patterns are broadly stable comparative to 2023, with the majority of respondents working 2 - 3 days from home. ICT helpfulness is increasingly reported as "very" or "extremely helpful" (48%).

"There is constant stress at the moment about budgets due to lack of resources. This doesn't help with retention of good staff as they are not sure of their positions in the future."

"Retention is good here. Keep case work manageable and pay competitive."

"Create an environment where social workers feel safe to be reflective and talk about issues. Have a culture of support and growth."

"My LA has many longstanding social workers, it is a tough job and perhaps better support for younger social workers will help."

"LA's should continue and commit more to hybrid, flexible and part-time working arrangements in frontline roles so staff can have better work life balance."

Pay and remuneration

More respondents said remuneration leaves them “just about” comfortable (38%) or “not really” (27%). Those reporting meeting “very comfortable” remains very low (2%). Desired salary bands cluster around £50–69k for many roles with agency workers who would consider switching LA employment more often citing £60–79k as acceptable. The need for improved maternity leave pay was also repeatedly referenced.

- **London respondents’ desired salaries** gather around £50–69k (with more choosing £70–79k than in the SE), and a higher share report longer travel times (22% more than an hour one-way). Overall remuneration comfort levels highlight 36% saying “just about”, 28% “not really” and 11% “not at all.”
- **South East respondents’ desired bands** are similar but lean more to £50–59k and £60–69k, with shorter commutes (38% less than 30 minutes; 44% between 30 - 60 minutes) and remuneration comfort levels highlight 43% saying “just about” and 25% “not really”. Perception that expenses have improved is present in both regions.

Proximity to work

The Big Conversation highlights most social workers are employed relatively close to where they live (68% within an hour commute, 63% in London and 82% in the South East). When asked hypothetically how far they would be prepared to travel for a new job 76% identified an hour as the maximum time for a commute (71% in London and 86% in the South East).

- **In London the top assignment factors** remain location, role, career development and the team.
- **In the South East the main drivers** mirror London but with slightly more emphasis on the team and flexibility.

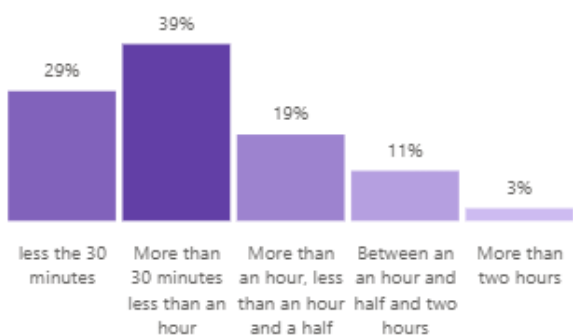
“Keyworker housing was available when I joined but not for new staff anymore unfortunately. Support on affordable housing for staff would help with recruitment.”

“Pay is an ongoing issue, we live in London; one of the most expensive cities in the world and pay should reflect that reality.”

“Improved maternity leave pay. Many LAs offer significantly better maternity pay than my current employer. If they don’t increase the maternity pay, I will leave to move to one of the LAs that offer better maternity pay.”

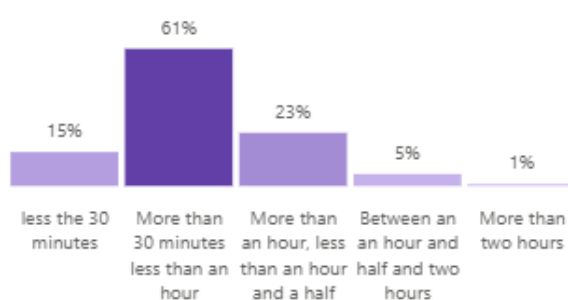
How long does it take you to travel to work on a typical day? (one way home to your office base)?

1,177 respondents 1,193 responses



When looking for a new job how much time are you prepared to travel on a typical day (one way home to your office base)?

1,176 respondents 1,236 responses

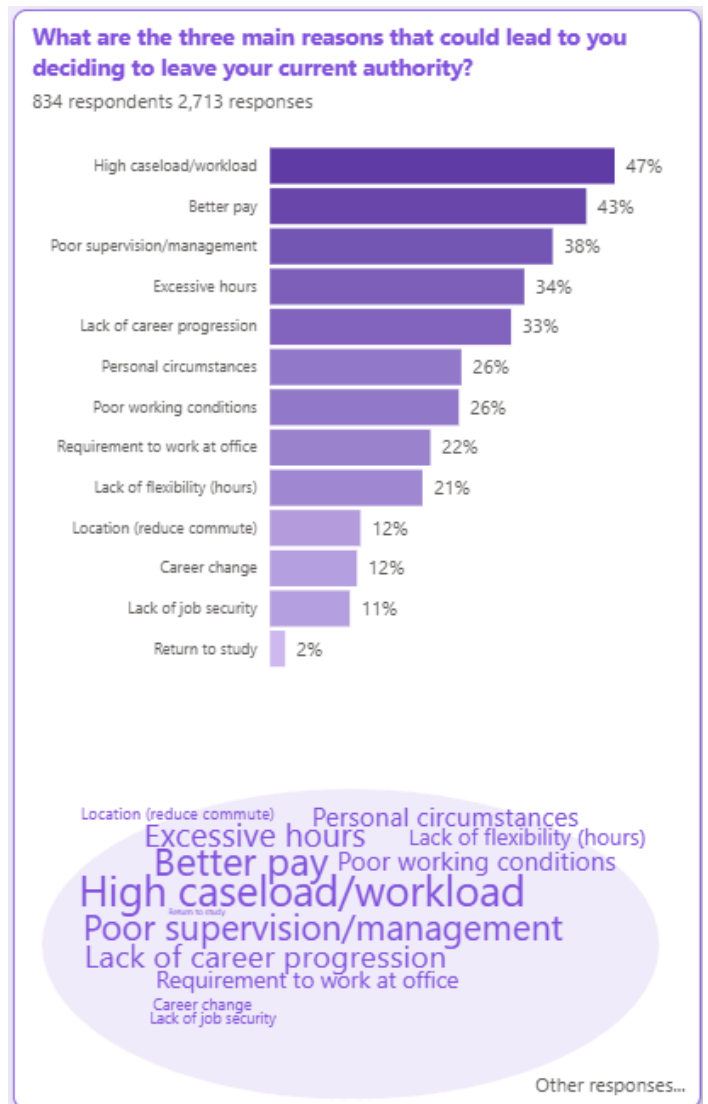
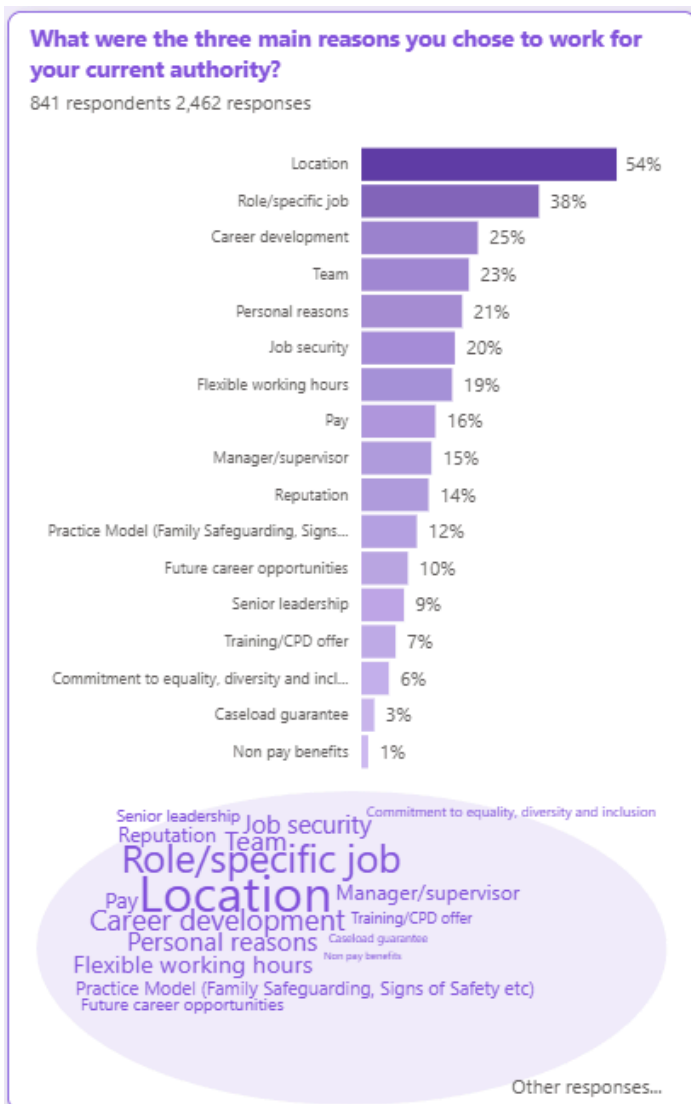


Career development

More respondents said that career development remains important to them with 25% placing this as one of the top three reasons they chose to work with their current authority, and 33% citing lack of career progression as one of the top five reasons that could lead to them leaving. Career development overall was less important to agency social workers and managers comparatively with 16% highlighting it as a main reason for moving into agency work.

"Listen to staff and understand why they are unhappy/leaving. I have voiced issues and am now leaving. No one has asked why I want to leave or support me to staying. I feel undervalued."

- **In London career development was slightly more important** to respondents with 28% placing this in the top three reasons.
- **In the South East the importance of career development was lower** down the list of reasons respondents chose to work with their current authority, but a larger proportion (37%) highlighted lack of opportunity to progress as one of the top five reasons that would leave to them leaving.



Whilst we heard many positive examples of innovation, support and development that are positively impacting progression, opportunities and retention, we also heard of discrimination where Black and Global Majority colleagues feel overlooked and permanent staff experienced long-term agency workers being promoted to management roles.

We also heard feedback that part-time working may create a barrier to progress and promotions which was noted as being particularly discriminatory towards women who more commonly require flexible working arrangements for caring responsibilities.

Opportunities for sabbaticals and secondments were referenced as tools for retention, but were often not always encouraged.

Agency working

One quite significant difference from our 2023 survey 2025 was local authority social workers interest in agency work. In 2023 20% were planning to work for an agency and a further 21% were open to the possibility (rates were similar across both regions). In the 2025 survey this had reduced to 15% planning to work for an agency and a further drop to 13% open to the possibility of working for an agency.

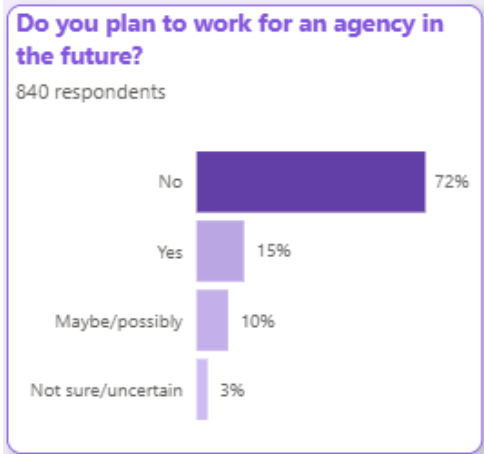
In 2023 the Big Listen highlighted that BGM staff are disproportionately in agency cohorts due to experiences of racial discrimination and financial pressures. In 2025, agency preferences persist, particularly in London, but at a lower rate than previously identified.

"In my country of origin you can retain your contract and go and work somewhere else for a year, in areas like nursing professions. My LA treats wanting a break as disloyalty and seems to prefer we would leave when agency workers come and go. It creates resentment."

"Internal secondments can provide stepping stones, skills and tasters for promotion."

"Women are more likely to work part-time. The LAs I have worked for have not been flexible with this for manager positions which limits my opportunities."

- **The London agency cohort** in the 2025 research is larger and highlights that if pay caps were introduced, 41% would prefer to work agency even if pay were the same; 35% would move at a 30% premium cap.
- **The South East agency cohort** is a smaller response in 2025; 45% say a 30% premium limit could encourage LA moves.



Supervision and psychological safety

London shows upticks in the sentiment that “authorities ensure good supervision” and “staff are valued” though psychological safety is down slightly.

South East shows similar upticks but a larger drop in psychological safety.

Ensure that social workers can have open conversations with someone other than managers to express their views and potentially reduce the possibility of leaving

Artificial intelligence in practice

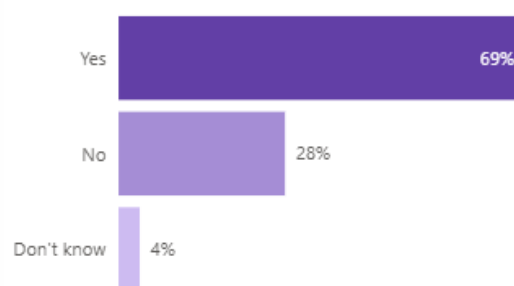
There were multiple reports of AI pilots and/or adoption of AI tools locally with examples primarily referencing use of Magic Notes and Microsoft CoPilot. In 2025, 69% overall report that their employer has deployed or piloted AI tools; more LAs mention active trials in London than in the South East.

- **London:** higher reporting of AI pilots/use (69% “Yes”) and more LAs mentioning CoPilot/Magic Notes (MS CoPilot in 18 LAs; Magic Notes in 10).
- **South East:** AI adoption is lower but present (Magic Notes and CoPilot are mentioned in a smaller set of LAs).

Focus groups highlighted that AI tools are perceived to save time on note-taking and drafting when used responsibly but cautioned that increased use of AI should augment not substitute and called for opt-in pilots with clear metrics that do not reduce administrative capacity until benefits are evidenced long-term.

Has your employer deployed (including pilots) the use of artificial intelligence in any aspects of your work with children and their families?

1,038 respondents



Social care reforms

Views on Multi-Agency Child Protection Teams from focus group discussions were mixed with a small split between “very beneficial” and “neutral”. The takeaway message was that the success of the reforms will depend more on implementation fidelity and resourcing than policy headlines.

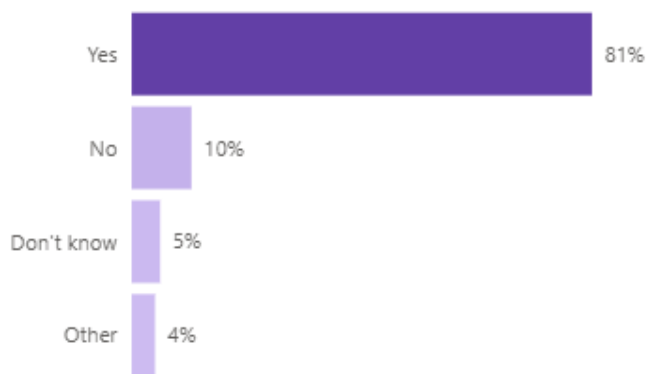
There was also acknowledgement from some attendees that whilst Family Support Worker roles are highly valued and skilled, some LAs carry a perception that affects recruitment and retention. ‘Rebranding’ and explicit pathways were referenced as key factors in success and candidate attraction.

Overall there is strong confidence that the changes LAs are making will ensure children and families get help sooner (81%), but there is a more mixed view about whether users’ lived experience is central.

- **In London** there is stronger confidence that early help changes are being implemented (83% “Yes”).
- **In the South East** 76% report employers making changes for early help. Perceptions about lived experience being central are similar (mostly “moderate” or “a lot”).

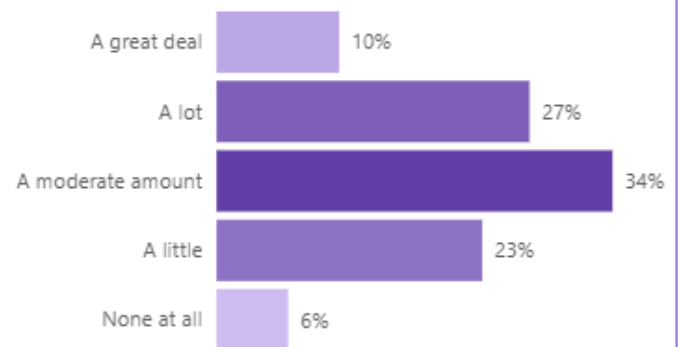
Is your employer making changes that will ensure children and families get help sooner?

1,002 respondents



My employers progress making users' lived experience central to design, delivery and evaluation of children's services

915 respondents



Conclusion

Incremental sustainable progress

The Big Conversation presents a motivating picture where some progress has been made on the key issues identified in our earlier research. The incremental progress evident from both our quantitative and qualitative data and research highlights that the continuous efforts made by employers has led to overall improvement that is sustainable.

It suggests local authorities and their leaders have made changes that the children's social care workforce are benefiting from. This aligns with other changes, such as the implementation of the social care reforms, and changes to the CSC SW Agency Worker Rules, are starting to have an impact with modest changes to local authorities' ability to recruit and retain the children's social care staff they need.

Continue to nurture

Whilst encouraging against a backdrop of rising permanent social workers, reduced agency reliance and lower turnover rates highlighted in the 2025 social worker workforce census, this new research also acknowledges that these 'green shoots' are fragile and need to continue to be nurtured, particularly during this time of significant change across the sector. This includes consideration the Early Career Framework changes and possible dilution of the role of Social Workers in some areas of practice.

Change with care

The research also suggests that the workforce in both regions is positively disposed to the potential benefits of change as a result of the social care reforms and technological developments, but realistic that they will only have the impact needed if they are developed and implemented in ways that support practice.

This suggests local authorities and leaders need to take great care when making these changes to ensure the progress continues to support a strong and stable workforce.

Retaining and replenishing experience

There are also some risk attached to this, in both regions almost a third of the workforce being over 50 (32.3% in London with highest individual authority peaks at 45.4% and in the South East with the highest individual authority peaks at 38.2%). There is some precedent for older workers considering leaving the children's social care workforce rather than working through a time of challenging and unabridged system reforms.

Takeaways to support locally

In the Big Listen we suggested a set of questions that local authority children's social care leaders should ask to help understand their workforce. Several years on we think these are still the right themes to focus on.

Each authority needs to tailor this to the needs of their workforce by reviewing your staff's response to the Big Conversation (or other local data) alongside a deep dive into the Children's Social Workforce Workforce Census.

Thank you to the many colleagues who participated in this research, both through the survey and focus groups. The wealth and richness of contributions has sought to reinforce the workforce as our greatest asset and enabler.

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