

Damned if you do, damned if you don't: Recruitment and Retention of English Children and Family Social Workers

Simon Cauvain

University of York

It is well established that the UK social work profession endures historical problems in recruiting and retaining staff, especially within children and family teams, but reasons for these problems are not fully understood. The inner-workings of social work are little known outside the profession, contributing to a climate of political misunderstanding and public vilification. The purpose of this study was to open a small window on the world of social work practice, and give fresh insight into why recruitment and retention problems exist, and how they might be resolved. Using a case study of an English Local Authority this research explored factors contributing to recruitment and retention problems by examining employee experiences. Analysis of local data, an ethnographic study of the daily lives of social workers, interviews with 18 social workers, and a nominal group interview technique with 28 senior managers combine to illuminate the issues. Local vacancy and turnover rates above national levels helped identify a need for a new 'real-time' vacancy rate that more closely reflected front-line experiences, when compared to the rate calculated using traditional formulae. The data reveals challenges and rewards being a social worker, high levels of resilience, emotive nature of practice, and wide-ranging complexities associated with recruitment and retention. Disparity in senior management and social worker relationships contributed to front-line workers feeling undervalued, despite sharing the aim of protecting and improving child welfare. The study indicates the need for careful consideration of how political pressures influence poor communication between senior managers and social workers. A lack of acknowledgement of the emotive nature of practice feeds negative perceptions. The findings suggest that improvements in mutual understanding between politicians, senior managers and front-line workers will help create an environment where problems associated with recruitment and retention can be addressed more constructively.

Key words: Recruitment, retention, social work.