Social workers received a personal letter from Ed Balls, secretary of state for children, schools and families and Alan John-
son, secretary of state for health, after Lord Laming published his report into the tragedy of Baby P in March. The letter told them that their role, whether looking after vulnerable children or adults was “critical” to the nation and it pledged the government was committed to boosting the status of social work in both the short and longer term.

This must have seemed like unlikely praise to a profession whose achievements are rarely publicly acknowledged. As Mike Warde, chief executive of the profession’s regulator, the General Social Care Council in England, puts it: “When a handmade sends a child the story is on the front pages; when a social worker does the same there is no news of it.”

But this time, the government has been quick to follow up its words with actions, and money. Every newly qualified adult services social worker is to receive £1,000 and money. Every newly qualified adult social worker is to receive £1,000 and money. Every newly qualified adult social worker is to receive £1,000 and money.

From next year, as part of a £58m govern-
ment package, an advanced profes-
sional status for social workers in children’s services is being created. The practice-
based initiative is an attempt to offer a senior career opportunity to keep-experienced professionals on the frontline. And from 2011, social workers will have the option to complete a new, practice-based masters qualification. Allan Bowman, a qualified social worker and chairman of the Social Care Institute for Excellence (Scrie), the organisation set up to help to spread good practice in social work, says: “While there is a lot of focus on what goes wrong in social work, there is a lot of good practice all over the country, and we are here to give people the tools to do the job.”

Other recommendations which will address the skills needed to be a 21st-cen-
tury social worker are expected later this year from Moira Gibb – the chief execu-
tive of the London borough of Camden and chair of the taskforce set up by the government to conduct a root and branch review of the profession – who declared this month: “It is time to move social work tea new footing.”

New skills

According to Wardle, changes in social care policy, with the focus on person-
alisation, is giving social workers the chance to return to the core principles behind their training. But leaders of the profession say that to be a competent social worker, it is also important to develop additional strengths, including organisational and analyti-
cal skills. It is equally crucial that people working in children’s services have a good understanding of adult care. Boosting the status of social workers, and developing policy that allows them to practice what they have been taught, would help resolve the current recruit-
ment and retention crisis.

The government’s new drive to attract ex-social workers back into practice follows the recruitment and retention campaign launched, in March, by the Local Govern-
ment Association (LGA), the organisation which represents local councils. LGA chair-
man Margaret Eaton says that improving the status of the profession is paramount: “Our leaders have nothing but high regard for the terrible difficult task that we are asking social workers to do.”

The LGA has developed a list of online indica-
tors for members to help them under-
stand social services issues and their own roles and responsibilities. Andrew Cozens, a strategic advisor at the Improvement and Development Agency for Local Gov-
ernment for children, adults and health services, who helped develop the initia-
tive, says: “This should help create more support for social workers and a greater understanding of issues and improve qual-
ity and development.”

The government has so far been unable to apply how much of the cost of these social worker reforms will fall on local councils and whether money for child protection services will be ring-fenced. But what is clear is that the political and professional will exists to help give social workers the same professional status and respect that others who work with vulnerable adults and children, such as teachers and doctors, already enjoy. And perhaps despite, or even because of, that ministry of Baby P, there could not be a better time to become a social worker. As Hilary Johnson, the new chief executive of the British Association of Social Workers, says: “At last the government is realising that it doesn’t need to invent a new profession but just invest in the profession of social work. There is a huge amount of energy and enthusiasm for change - doors are beginning to open.”

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How the professional social worker qualification can open doors to different career options across the public, voluntary and private sectors. And perhaps, or even because of, the ministry of Baby P, there could not be a better time to become a social worker. As Hilary Johnson, the new chief executive of the British Association of Social Workers, says: “At last the government is realising that it doesn’t need to invent a new profession but just invest in the profession of social work. There is a huge amount of energy and enthusiasm for change - doors are beginning to open.”

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Social workers are rarely given the recognition they deserve for helping turn around distressing family lives, saving vulnerable children from abuse or for putting plans into action to support disabled adults to live independently. But this could all be about to change.

This month, together with employers and organisations devoted to developing the skills and status of the profession, is putting in place the infrastructure needed to support social workers from their first days in the frontline to those who have ambition to become social workers.

As the wealth of initiatives unveiled in recent weeks start to take root, this supplement looks at what help is available for social workers who have left the profession and want to return to practice. Find out what it is like to come back to it after a 24-year career-break working for John Lewis.

Social work is one of the top-20 degree courses chosen by older people. We speak to undergraduates on the cusp of their career about how prepared they feel for the job and find out what funds are available towards the cost of studying for the social work degree, whether you are an 18-year-old undergraduate or a career-changer.

We also reveal how the professional social work qualification can open doors to different career options across the public, voluntary and private sectors. And perhaps, or even because of, the ministry of Baby P, there could not be a better time to become a social worker. As Hilary Johnson, the new chief executive of the British Association of Social Workers, says: “At last the government is realising that it doesn’t need to invent a new profession but just invest in the profession of social work. There is a huge amount of energy and enthusiasm for change - doors are beginning to open.”

The way ahead

New reforms offer more support and career development for the profession, allowing social workers to develop additional skills and return to core values, says Debbie Andalo

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When Sheila Taylor made enquiries about returning to a career in social work after 24 years out of the profession, local government and social agencies competing for her services. "There wasn't a single social worker at the Barnsley council I dis-covered I was like gold dust," she says.

Three years ago, Duncalf sought access to children's services at the Barnsley council. She found about 30 social workers were in temporary work, with about 12 in the process of being made redundant. She initially found work through the social work agency Extend A Life, who helped social workers make the transition back into practice.

"Social workers are particularly helpful at this time, because they see the person in context – in their work, both their personal and professional experiences, who are stimulated by the opportunity to return to practice," says Cranie. "This is the role that they have to offer, and are not afraid to get stuck in until they achieve success," she says.

According to the General Social Care Council, 4,779 of the 17,500 social work-ers over the age of 55 are not in practice. But the regulator knows little about what most of them are doing instead.

Untapped talent

In a bid to tap into this pool of talent, the Local Government and Social Care Organisation (LGCO) in March launched its first campaign to lure 5,000 retired social workers back to children's services. The Guardian's latest Social Lives survey, which questioned 501 former local authority social workers in September, revealed that 82% of council employ-ers currently face difficulties recruiting. Older staff's views of social workers are ‘hopeful’, who are stimulated by the opportu-nity to return to practice. This is the role that they have to offer, and are not afraid to get stuck in until they achieve success," she says.

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Social workers of the future

As more young people are looking for careers that will help them make a difference to people’s lives, what are the study paths they can take?

Gaye Timmerman

It is only six years since social work became a degree-entry profession but it’s popularly enjoyed by students for the right reasons: most social work ‘top 20’ university subject choices and they are in every street to brighten the future.

Natalie Francis, 20, abandoned a career as a hairdresser to join the University of Hertfordshire’s social work degree course, after gaining experience in voluntary work helping homeless people.

You need a caring person, with an interest in people, as you can connect with them. It’s about respecting individuality and promoting choice for people - working with them. You can’t be judgemental and you must take a holistic approach - looking not only at the social care needed but also at the person as a whole, with all their other needs. You have to have a variety of skills and patience. As you are working with people with different needs, you have to be able to adapt, as the communication skills are vital. You must be articulate and confident because you are dealing with sensitive issues and are part of a multi-professional team. Working in an acute hospital, there are pressures like reimbursement and discharge delays and the need to get people out of hospital, but safely. You must be able to deal with pressure and you need very keen assessment skills. You have to be able to deal with challenging issues from a professional level, without criticism – it’s about understanding each other's roles. The job is very rewarding but it can be tiring. You endeavour to get people home and it’s satisfying when you can see that they are doing well.
COUNCILS CAMPAIGN FOR CARE

The government is backing its promises to improve support for the social work profession with funding, better training and help for newcomers.

Anna Bawden

Sam Evans did not know she wanted to be a social worker until she was 20. The 26-year-old left school with six GCSEs and, after an NVQ in travel and tourism, worked in a recruitment consultancy, her mother’s office and a pension firm. “They were just too stressful,” she says. “But what really wanted to do was help people.”

In four years, when she saw an advert for an apprenticeship in youth offending work, she jumped at the chance. This led to a position as a social work assistant with Hampshire county council, who are now sponsoring her to become a qualified social worker. Evans is on placement with a hospital in Bordon helping vulnerable adolescents. “I love it,” she says.

Evans is just one example of a massive recruitment drive by the council, which is aiming to plug gaps in its social work force and make social work more an attractive profession.

Hampshire is just one of a number of local authorities looking at how best to fill vacancies in children’s services, with 57% finding it harder to recruit child social workers over the past six months and 38% saying it has become more difficult to keep them.

The council has also appointed 28 additional support workers.

Hampshire is not alone. According to a survey by the Local Government Association, this month, councils are struggling to fill vacancies in children’s services, with 57% finding it harder to recruit child social workers over the past six months and 38% saying it has become more difficult to keep them. (39% of councils report difficulties in retaining frontline workers.

The government has recognised the scale of the problem. Earlier this month, the children’s secretary, Ed Balls, pledged £58m to tackle the shortfall of social work jobs in his department after the ‘Baby P’ case in Haringey.

Earlier this year, the council is also developing 13 bursaries to trainee social workers and 20 apprenticeships and a new management trainee scheme.

In previous jobs Infanti-Milne, 32, says she felt isolated, now she heads a multi-disciplinary team of five including a family therapist, a qualified social worker, a child’s practitioner - who may be a qualified social worker - and an administrator who works together to look after vulnerable children in the east London borough. The team’s progress is checked by senior managers and staff are offered high-level training in skills such as family therapy.

If Infanti-Milne had left social work, she says, she probably would have found it hard to make it in community services for West Sussex council. “I challenge people more confidently. I am much more confident now.”

The council is also developing a return-to-practice course and an on-the-job traineeship. In all, the council is investing more than £150,000 a year to keep a child in care; the model, but Goodman argues that it saves enough to make them some of the highest paid social workers in the country.

The high cost might deter some local authorities from adopting the Hackney model, but Goodman says that it saves money in the long term by reducing the number of children in residential care. These years ago Hackney had 47 children in care, now there are 30. It costs more than £250,000 a year to keep a child in care, while a consistent social worker team costs around £200,000 a year.

An interim evaluation of the project’s success by the London School of Economists is broadly supportive, according to Goodman. “The social work model works elsewhere too,” says Hebden. “we need to look at the way children and families work is done, there is a clear rationale for changing the way children and families work is done,” he says. "It’s particularly encouraging to see this sort of innovation."
Expert care: New career paths

Variety performance

A career in social work can now be more varied than ever. What changes are being made to create new opportunities for staff?

Louise Hunt

Annie Stevenson had little idea where a career in social work would take her when she took her first steps on the professional ladder as a house parent in a children’s home in Hackney, east London, 30 years ago. Today, Stevenson is head of older people’s services at the Social Care Institute for Excellence (Scie), the organisation which helps promote best practice across the profession, after a number of different posts across the statutory and voluntary sectors. Looking back on her first days as a social worker she admits: “When I started, it was very much in at the deep-end and learn through experience.”

Stevenson started out with social work grounding in hospital and community teams, before becoming a contract manager for learning disabilities services. A move to the charity sector followed, which led to the post of senior policy adviser for Help the Aged. Her work in developing practice education roles.”

All qualified social workers registered with the General Social Care Council can move across the four UK countries because registration is transferable. And the range of career options has expanded in recent years “as people have recognised social work skills are useful in a lot of different settings,” says Joan Munro, who leads a workforce development programme at the Improvement and Development Agency, which is part of the Local Government Association (LGA).

The development of children’s trusts, which offer integrated services for this client group across the public and voluntary sectors, are providing those specialising in adults and children’s services or work in settings,” says Joan Munro, who leads a workforce development programme at the Improvement and Development Agency, which is part of the Local Government Association (LGA).

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An arm to lean on: personalisation is changing the way people think about social work: "’Personalisation is very much where we are as a profession, after holding a number of different posts across the statutory and voluntary sectors.”

Louise Hunt

The Guardian | Wednesday 27 May 2009

Thinking of returning to social work?

There is now a programme of support to help you by providing advice and practical support on how to update your skills and find a position within a children and families setting.

Re-registration

If your registration with the General Social Care Council has lapsed, you will need to re-register in order to practice.

Skills and knowledge

Publications available to give you an idea of what skills and knowledge needed to practice social work in a children and families’ setting.

CWDC newly qualified social worker documents

These set out what newly qualified social workers are expected to know, understand and be able to do by the end of their first year as a social worker in children’s services

General Social Care Council codes of practice

These UK-wide codes of practice provide a clear guide for all those who work in social care, setting out the standards of practice and conduct workers and their employers should meet.

www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/social-work/return
Expert care | All change

Many choose social work as a second, or even third, career. Which routes and support new workers are available to those eager to retrain?

Linda Jackson

Many career changers who have a degree in social work, may have considerable experience of working with children. Now a new training scheme is being developed, opening up the prospect of a fast-track route for graduates from other disciplines.

The man behind the scheme is Keith Brumfitt, director of strategy for the Children’s Workforce and Development Council. Details are being finalised, and an announcement is due in the summer.

Brumfitt says one idea the council is interested in is geared towards people who already work with children and young people. “These could be teachers, youth workers, early years’ staff, or people working with young offenders or in residential care. There are many people with extensive experience. We want to recognise that and see if we could offer a fast-track course.”

At first glance, people like Lisa Wager, a former teacher and learning mentor from Hartlepool, would be prime candidates for such a course. The 25-year-old psychology graduate, who is also a qualified sign language communicator, has just completed the first year of a part-time social work degree, sponsored by Hartlepool borough council. She says she looked around for support. “I was earning £21,500 as a lecturer, and then saw my salary go down to £10,200 due to a funding cut. It was a huge cut, but the local authority is paying for my tuition fees, books and subsistence allowance, which means a lot. I have also had a wage rise.”

Other graduates may think twice about switching careers. However, financial support is available. There are social work bursaries for eligible students on approved college-based courses who are not supported by employers. These are worth up to £3,300 a year for full-time students in London and £3,500 a year for full-time students studying outside London. On top of this there is support towards tuition fees worth up to £3,390. Grants are also available to part-time students and people may receive help with child care costs.

Recruiters admit that career changers may feel a loss of status as they give up positions of responsibility to become a student again, but this is often offset by “incredible placement opportunities,” according to Helen Johnston, Local Government Association director for children and young people. Throughout, there is constant support. Newly qualified social workers have guaranteed supervision in their first year, and are given a 10% reduced workload. According to Brumfitt, this support is due to be extended by pilot programmes offering extra support to social workers in the second and third year of practice from this September. Peer support is also available via online forums called community of practice, which allow people to share information across the UK.

For many career changers, social work turns out to be their true vocation, says Jane Held, a social work consultant. She points to the example of Michael Leadbetter, former president of the Association of Directors of Social Services, and chairman of the Children’s Workforce Development Council, who died of cancer last month.

“Leadbetter was a rugby international who became one of the most respected directors of social services in a complete career change. What is important is that we have people who have lived a bit and have experience of bringing up families.”

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