

STRENGTHENING FAMILIES, PROTECTING CHILDREN PROGRAMME

Workforce Learning Report





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Top Tips for robust staff training and development

Strong workforce development needs to be based on a carefully crafted learning and training offer

This includes ensuring that training content is based on relevant, current issues with a place-based focus and fit to meet the changing needs of children and families. Reaching out to partners, local communities as well as staff helps to build a coherent picture of local needs and relevant topics, and is central to the development of learning content. Effective workforce development also involves a considered, and engaging approach to training delivery. Training needs to be accessible to staff at different levels and with clear processes in place that ensures each staff member is able to attend the course that matches their needs and stage of professional development. Applying innovative delivery methods (e.g. action learning sets, forums, peer support groups) and involving a diversity of trainers (including external experts, experienced and trained staff themselves, and multi-stakeholder partners) contribute to the overall learning experience and ensure an offer can fit a diversity of workforce needs.

An active learning culture enables staff to harness every opportunity for knowledge sharing and skill development

Creating environments for children's social care work and other practitioners to flourish goes beyond the requirement for a robust and engaging training offer. Learning cultures are based on constant, reflective practice, curiosity and openness. Embedding these values enables staff to consider their learning and development as part of an overarching goal of thriving communities, children and families. Building a learning environment can take different forms, but might include small steps such as organising a reading club, offering shadowing opportunities across different services and departments and sharing relevant articles between teams.

Training and development need to be focused on people's aspirations, their career goals and progression

Investing in staff's career journeys from the point of entering into contract and adopting a 'grow your own' mindset has proven successful in attracting, building and retaining a skilled and motivated workforce. This involves a strong development offer for newly-qualified staff and robust progression pathways that enable people to set and work towards career goals with how these can be met with clear guidance on standards.

Click here to read more about robust staff training and development

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Introduction

A skilled, motivated workforce is at the heart of effective children's social care. Paying attention to and investing in workforce stability is therefore vital to achieving the outcomes set for local communities and enabling children and families to thrive.

This report shares valuable insights and learnings from SFPC local authorities' approaches to workforce recruitment, development and retention.

The significance of strong practitioner relationships with the people they are working to support is highlighted across the Independent Review of Social Care and the government's response to it, and forms a cornerstone of the three innovations at the centre of the Strengthening Families Protecting Children (SFPC) programme.

In the light of recruitment pressures and rising vacancy rates, this report seeks to highlight innovative practice from across local authorities forming part of the SFPC programme. The report is based on in-depth conversations and interviews with staff from eleven SFPC local authorities who are applying a range of strategies to address workforce-related challenges, attract values-driven and motivated people and create a supportive culture for staff to practise safely, develop and thrive.



The report begins by surfacing a collation of Top Tips from our interviews.

It then goes on to deep dive into learning shared on:

Values based leadership

Recruiting talented and values driven people

Learning and development for children's social care work to flourish

Retaining skilled and dedicated staff

The approaches and values underpinning these are grounded in three innovations at the centre of the SFPC programme:

Hertfordshire's Family Safeguarding:

A whole family, strengths-based approach to child protection with a focus on multi-disciplinary safeguarding work undertaken by children's social workers, adult mental health practitioners, substance misuse and probation officers, working together as one team. Multi-disciplinary teams combine knowledge and expertise to assess the needs of the whole family and support parents to achieve sustained change for themselves and their children.

Leeds Family Valued:

An approach that seeks to promote relational (restorative) practice, underpinned by fostering a clear set of shared values and practice principles that emphasise the strengths and importance of family. Family Valued is focused on whole system change across children's services, including practitioners, teams and wider local partnerships and their practice, language, culture, behaviours and ways of working.

North Yorkshire's No Wrong Door:

An integrated service and approach to supporting adolescents in or on the edge of care. At the heart of the model is a residential Hub, which provides short-term placements and outreach support. The goal is to reduce the number of young people coming into care, and to support those in care to find permanence in a family setting through long-term foster care, reunification with their families or independence.





Input for this report was shared by staff at different organisational levels, including frontline practitioners and Practice Leads, Service Managers and senior leaders. Specifically, staff were asked to reflect on organisational strategies to foster workforce stability, including on the role of leadership, recruitment practice, learning and development and continuous staff engagement in achieving this.

It features practice and approaches from:

- Hertfordshire, Lancashire, Wandsworth and Walsall and their Family Safeguarding approach
- Leeds, Darlington, Coventry and Sefton who are embedding the Family Valued Model
- North Yorkshire Council, Norfolk and Redcar and Cleveland and their practice in line with No Wrong Door



This report highlights their responses and examples of good practice across the themes of:

Values-led leadership and decision-making on workforce

Recruiting talented and **values driven people**

Learning and development for children's social care work to flourish

Retaining skilled and dedicated staff



'Top Tips for Workforce Recruitment, Development and Retention' provides a practical, high-level summary of local authorities' insights and approaches, shared in this report, with the aim to strengthen workforce related decision making.

Placing values at the centre of workforce related decision making



Values can provide a consistent thread for thinking about workforce strategies

This includes the recruitment, development and retention of staff. Understanding workforce strategies as a part of a wider vision for change in children's and families' lives opens up new opportunities to address workforce-related challenges. Values-driven, whole system ways of working facilitate a renewed perspective on the development of recruitment processes, the crafting of an engaging learning offer and the retention of dedicated staff with the potential to produce successful results.

Top Tips for recruiting talented and values driven people



Word of mouth and a strong, organisational reputation can go a long way

When recruiting for values-driven staff, evidence suggests that a significant number of local authority applicants hear about vacancies through their personal and professional networks. There is a clear argument to tie recruitment practice into wider organisational and workforce strategies, investing in staff development and wellbeing throughout people's career journeys. A good reputation, combined with a diversity of innovative recruitment approaches that taps into a variety of communication channels, can broaden a local authority's reach and help attract like-minded, values-driven candidates.



A focus on equality, diversity and inclusion in hiring processes and workforce strategies is important for effective children's social care work

It can be an important pull in attracting and retaining values-driven staff. Targeted recruitment efforts that focus on particular geographical or demographic areas and working closely with trained Equality and Inclusion Consultants, can remove barriers for people and support the aim of communities seeing themselves reflected in the make-up of a children's social care workforce. For EDI strategies to be effective, there needs to be a genuine and demonstrable commitment to its values, focusing on authentic engagement and moving away from tokenistic practice at all costs.



Values-led recruitment processes can support better decision-making

This includes developing an understanding of someone's authentic commitment to hearing the voice of children and families. Applying methods such as scenario-based questions and assessment centres, can offer insights into people's motivational drivers to support robust decision-making. Further to this, taking a whole-system approach and ensuring meaningful participation from multi-stakeholder partners and people with lived experience in an interview process, ensures important decisions are not taken in isolation and can strengthen recruitment outcomes.

[Click here to read more about recruiting talented and values driven people](#)

Top Tips for robust staff training and development



Strong workforce development needs to be based on a carefully crafted learning and training offer

This includes ensuring that training content is based on relevant, current issues with a place-based focus and fit to meet the changing needs of children and families. Reaching out to partners, local communities as well as staff helps to build a coherent picture of local needs and relevant topics, and is central to the development of learning content. Effective workforce development also involves a considered, and engaging approach to training delivery. Training needs to be accessible to staff at different levels and with clear processes in place that ensures each staff member is able to attend the course that matches their needs and stage of professional development. Applying innovative delivery methods (e.g. action learning sets, forums, peer support groups) and involving a diversity of trainers (including external experts, experienced and trained staff themselves, and multi-stakeholder partners) contribute to the overall learning experience and ensure an offer can fit a diversity of workforce needs.



An active learning culture enables staff to harness every opportunity for knowledge sharing and skill development

Creating environments for children's social care work and other practitioners to flourish goes beyond the requirement for a robust and engaging training offer. Learning cultures are based on constant reflective practice, curiosity and openness. Embedding these values enables staff to consider their learning and development as part of an overarching goal of thriving communities, children and families. Building a learning environment can take different forms, but might include small steps such as organising a reading club, offering shadowing opportunities across different services and departments and sharing relevant articles between teams.



Training and development need to be focused on people's aspirations, their career goals and progression

Investing in staff's career journeys from the point of entering into contract and adopting a 'grow your own' mindset has proven successful in attracting, building and retaining a skilled and motivated workforce. This involves a strong development offer for newly-qualified staff and robust progression pathways that enable people to set and work towards career goals with how these can be met with clear guidance on standards.

[Click here](#) to read more about robust staff training and development

Top Tips for robust staff retention



Good management practice was named the most important factor for keeping people in their jobs

Building structures and environments for management to flourish is therefore vital and supervision practice is a key part of that. Working with children and families can be challenging and for their practice to be effective, staff need to feel heard, supported and held in their work. This involves close relationships with management, openness for questions and concerns, and investment in strong team connections and peer to peer support. Effective supervision practice needs to build on the same values and provide a reflective space to raise issues with a manager and a source for assistance if needed.

This needs to be coupled with a strong focus on practitioners' practice and skill development, including the collective goal to move a family to progress through ones' interventions and support. Management and supervision need to strike the right balance between offering safe spaces for reflection and motivating and challenging staff to deliver excellent family work.



Offering flexible, agile working conditions that suit both practitioners and the families they are supporting is important

A post-pandemic context that has altered the nature of work. This includes being responsive to staff' needs, enabling work-from-home arrangement where possible, whilst providing space and opportunities for teams to meet, connect and collaborate where possible. Trust, mutual agreements and a collective commitment of families as the number one priority are central for making sure that agile working conditions are effective in practice.



Removing bureaucratic barriers and enabling staff to prioritise direct family work can improve staff wellbeing and job satisfaction

Practitioners need to get alongside a family to build meaningful relationships and support them in thinking about the changes they need to make, requiring both time and head space. Identifying effective ways to lift reporting burdens and maximise staff time spent in communities is an important feature of workforce strategies with the potential to improve both the impact on families' lives as well as retention rates. This might include the use of technology, enabling people to verbally record reports whilst on-the-go, as well as learning from innovative practice such as the Family Safeguarding Workbook, centring holistic reporting and combined family records to minimise time spent on administrative tasks.

Top Tips for robust staff retention



Developing a workforce culture that focuses on active staff engagement can make a difference to people's experience at work


This can include celebrating staff achievements and best practice at team meetings or in newsletters, ensuring people are acknowledged for their work. It can involve innovative ways to provide additional support and learning, fostering peer support within teams and building greater connections across practitioners and departments. Active staff engagement is built on the idea that teams should have a voice in the decision-making that affects their work. This includes listening very carefully to feedback and making strategic use of surveys and staff forums to build future plans of action.



Offering competitive pay grades was mentioned as a vital ingredient supporting retention rates

However, it is widely agreed upon that a focus on values, connection, and support outweigh the importance of salary rates with the potential to be an even greater pull, keeping people in their jobs. Considering workforce strategies' impact on budgets is vital, and plays a particularly significant role in decision-making related to working with agency staff. In the light of children's social care practitioners increasingly opting for highly paid agency contracts, a renewed focus on workforce culture, development and collaborative practice can set an organisation apart and might support the retention of values-driven staff despite ongoing competitive pressures.

[Click here](#) to read more about robust staff retention

A woman with short grey hair and glasses, wearing an orange shirt, is gesturing with her hands while speaking. A man with dark hair and glasses, wearing a blue denim jacket over a white shirt, is looking at her and holding a pen over a notebook. They are sitting at a dark wooden table with a laptop, a black mug, and a glass pitcher of water. The background is a light-colored wall with some papers pinned to it.

Values-led leadership and decision-making

Values-driven children's social care work is based on strong relationships and a fundamental belief in people's capacity to enact change. This includes all stakeholders involved, communities, families and equally, the practitioners at the heart of children's and family work.

This chapter highlights the fundamental role of values in workforce related decision-making. It points to the importance of strong relationships and leadership, and the impact of centring workforce culture as an integral part of a local authorities' wider vision for change.

Values-led leadership and decision-making

The importance of values in workforce recruitment and development has been consistently highlighted by local authorities forming part of the Strengthening Families Protecting Children (SFPC) Programme.

[Previous research](#) on the role of leadership in driving innovations in children's social care points to similar findings with a clear focus on the central role of value-based decision-making in affecting innovative, organisational change.

'Social work is a values-led profession. And so the first thing I would say is that everything needs to be about values. The importance of knowledge and skills is known, but we underplay values at our peril. I think that a local authority with a clear and explicit value base for the work that they do, will find recruiting people less difficult.'

For the three SFPC innovations: No Wrong Door, Family Safeguarding and Family Valued, this involves **hearing the voice of the child and family** and recognising that families are the experts on their own lives and their children's needs. It recognises that the vast majority of the work that comes into a local authority is about families who want the best for their children, that are not deliberately hurting and neglecting them, but who are struggling under conditions of adversity. It also includes an emphasis on the support and development of the people at the frontline of this work, upholding these values through their practice.

Values-driven children's social care work is based on **strong relationships and a fundamental belief in people's capacity** to enact change. This includes all stakeholders involved, communities, families and equally, the practitioners at the heart of children's and family work.

In the example of Sefton, a local vision for children and young people is based on them being happy, heard, healthy and achieving. The Children's Services People strategy is grounded in the same principles, extending this vision to include all practitioners and their right to feeling heard and safe and to achieving their goals - a 'doing with, not to' approach. In Darlington, workforce decision-making is

based on a strength-based framework similar to the relational practice framework applied in children's services. There is a whole-family approach to recruitment and retention, based on relationships and partnerships which encompasses everyone involved in children's and family work, including multi-agency partners.

Fundamental to this way of working is senior leaders' commitment to upholding and modelling these values and **a demonstration of values-led leadership**. This involves presence, integrity and deep connection with staff and partners at all levels. In Leeds, senior leaders find ways to regularly address the workforce, whether this is in restorative circles, one to one meetings or during staff meetings, and actively make known that they can count on their support in challenging situations. In Hertfordshire, leaders put a strong emphasis on multi-stakeholder relationships, working collectively and empathetically to uphold the goal of keeping children safe. Senior managers in North Yorkshire ensure they find the time to visit residential care homes, getting to know the young people on site as well as the professionals supporting them and learning each and everyone's name, fostering connection.

Decisions on **team structures** need to reflect organisational values and work for families as well as practitioners. This involves a shift from mechanistic set-ups and towards long-term relationships between families, children's social care practitioners and colleagues in partner agencies, allowing both to develop an effective partnership, and enabling professionals to accompany and progress a family's journey towards change. The Leeds' Front Door service provides an example of this way of working through the 'conversations' model – ensuring people calling can talk directly to a social worker rather than filling in forms, and an opportunity to develop a purposeful connection early on instead of being quickly passed on and referred to a different part of the system. Shifting organisational structures away from short-term support provision and towards meaningful relationships not only improves outcomes but enriches the experience of delivering children's social care work itself.

The fundamental role of values provides a consistent thread for thinking about wider strategies in relation to the recruitment, development and retention of staff.

Understanding **workforce culture as an integral part of a wider vision for change** in children's and families' lives enables SFPC local authorities to adopt more holistic approaches to addressing workforce-related challenges. Values-driven, whole system ways of working facilitate a renewed perspective on the development of recruitment processes, the crafting of an engaging learning offer and the retention of dedicated staff with the potential to produce successful results.





Recruiting talented and values driven people

Click to explore

Innovative approaches to recruitment

Testing values in a recruitment process

Equality, diversity and inclusion

Recruiting talented and values driven people

Identifying the type of staff that share an organisation's commitment, that can uphold it, demonstrate it through their work with children, families and colleagues, and that have the skill set to make a difference in communities' lives is an essential part of any workforce strategy.

An effective recruitment process relies on diverse and innovative methods. This includes tapping into opportunities to make an organisational offer known, highlighting one's principles and values as well as applying robust ways to test candidates' dedication and skills.

SFPC local authorities are demonstrating a range of approaches to recruiting talented and values-driven people.



This chapter highlights innovative ways to promote open vacancies, to meaningfully engage with candidates during interviews and to embed equality, diversity and inclusion principles in a recruitment process.



A strong reputation

The power of word of mouth

A majority of SFPC local authorities who contributed to this report pointed to the power of word of mouth. Investing in and building a strong local reputation for strong values, support and innovation and has been central in attracting skilled people to services across Leeds, Redcar and Cleveland and Coventry. Similarly in North Yorkshire Council, some of the strongest, most like-minded applicants hear about adverts through their existing social and professional networks. Local hiring teams are building on this and recruit from across their multi-disciplinary partnerships, for example former police officers who have left the force and are already familiar with the service.



Beyond the obvious

Creative ways to get the word out

Local papers and social media are important channels to spread the news about vacancies. In North Yorkshire, recruiting teams have gone a step further in thinking about creative campaigns to raise awareness. Hearing about the closure of a local factory and related redundancies, North Yorkshire shared information with the factory's HR department to see whether there might be people with transferable skills who are open for a potential career change. In Norfolk, teams advertised jobs with armed forces, connecting with those at the end of an army career and in search of a potential, new challenge in their lives.



Promoting an enticing offer in a variety of ways

Given the competitive landscape of local authorities regarding pay scales, creating an attractive proposition that stands out can make a significant impact. Lancashire is promoting itself as an employer of choice and a desirable place to live and work by implementing various well-being initiatives for all employees. They effectively share job vacancies through an engaging Team Lancashire web page and on social media platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn. Moreover, they actively participate in university-based job fairs, where current practitioners provide first hand accounts of their fulfilling work life within the local authority. The team is working on a refer-a-friend programme and exploring diverse recruitment channels to generate interest and attract applications.





Collective efforts and regional collaboration

Some SFPC local authorities are collaborating across their regions to advertise and promote vacant roles. Wandsworth together with London-based local authorities are channelling resources via the new platform London Social Work for Children. Each of the 32 London boroughs has its own page, promoting and showcasing their work, including current vacancies. The intention is for this to be a one stop shop for people who want to do children's social work in London to find all the information in one place with an opportunity to register interest.



Tapping into a local partnership network

Partnerships can play a major role in supporting recruitment. Local authorities leading on and implementing the Family Safeguarding model, based on multi-disciplinary teams, speak of recruitment as a clear partnership endeavour. The model requires a range of specialist roles, including substance misuse and domestic abuse practitioners, who are often seconded into children's services from partner organisations.

Developing strong relationships and a coherent, system-wide approach to children and family support is essential for this way of working to be successful. In Lancashire, teams took a considerate approach to the recruitment of specialist roles, taking into account recruitment challenges shared by a variety of partners.



Testing values and skills in a recruitment process

Testing values and skills can be challenging, particularly as individual commitment often becomes most visible after several months in post. Nonetheless, there are some effective methods to understand candidates' motivational drivers and how they might act in a given situation.

Many SFPC local authorities lead values-driven recruitment processes, built on the idea of children's social care work as a values-driven profession. This includes developing an understanding of someone's authentic commitment to hearing the voice of children and families and to giving that voice genuine influence through their work.

1

Lived-experience panels

Involving the voice of lived experience in the recruitment process can provide powerful insights and a strong basis for values-led recruitment. This includes teams working closely with young people and families and inviting them to be part of interview decision-making panels, taking the lead on asking questions to the applicants. In order for this to be effective, a decision-making team needs to be purposeful in their involvement of people with lived experience, ensuring genuine leadership that is not tokenistic.

2

Scenario-based questions

Scenario-based questions are a helpful tool in testing an applicant's relationship and problem solving skills. Their response can give a first indication whether their approach is centred on tick boxing a list of risk factors or whether they have the skills to genuinely engage with people in a challenging context. In Leeds, such questions are an integral part of any recruitment process. For Heads of Service and Team Manager posts, Leeds' recruiting teams set up assessment centres, offering an in-depth opportunity to learn about applicants' values-led decision-making.

3

Local partnership panels

Involving local partners in the recruitment process can also support decision-making and build important relationships early on. As well as engaging with children and families in a confident, authentic way, social work staff in particular might be required to work closely with health care professionals, head teachers or local religious leaders when addressing the needs of individual children and families. In Leeds, local partnership panels offer important perspectives during staff interviews. It demonstrates to applicants the place-based, whole-system approach that the profession relies on and the importance of effective relationships and partnerships with a range of people and organisations.

Case study

In Wandsworth, lived experience panels are a key component of any recruitment process, and teams listen carefully to feedback and base their decision making on what is being said.

To ensure that contributing to interview decision-making becomes a meaningful and enriching opportunity, Wandsworth-based teams work closely with the local Children Living in Care Council to identify and recruit young people to take part. Before joining a panel, young people receive extensive training and support, and they are paid for their time and contribution.

In addition to this, Wandsworth has established a strong group work programme for women with experience of domestic abuse and mothers whose children have been taken into care.

When recruiting for domestic abuse practitioners, mothers affected by domestic abuse sit on interview panels and were shared decision makers in hiring decisions.

This form of participation not only strengthens the recruitment process itself but gives people agency in affecting change within the services they have been using. Wandsworth recruitment panellists fed back that they felt they actually had a chance to influence the children's social care work of tomorrow.



Centring equality, diversity and inclusion in recruitment and workforce development practice

Diversity and representation in children's social care work matters and local authorities have highlighted the importance of communities seeing themselves reflected in the make-up of a children's social care workforce. Focusing on equality, diversity and inclusion in hiring processes and workforce strategies and a demonstrable commitment to these values, can make a difference to staff and be an important pull in attracting and retaining those whose values are aligned.

'This is about raising communities' aspirations. Young people often don't know that they might like to be or could be a social worker unless they are from a middle class background.'

In Lancashire, hiring teams deliver targeted recruitment and promote open vacancies in specific area districts with a high number of minority ethnic communities to increase participation.

In Walsall, leaders worked with an Anti-Racism Consultant to establish and test workforce strategies. This input allowed workforce managers to develop clear avenues of support for their staff, particularly in the instance of minority ethnic social workers being exposed to racist attitudes and behaviours displayed by families they are working with. Embedding anti-racist strategies allows teams to prioritise staff safety, to raise challenging issues and identify effective ways to address these.

Wandsworth, one of the pilot local authorities on the Workforce Race Equality Standard, offers in-house coaching and mentoring to social workers and managers from minority ethnic backgrounds. Staff receive training in anti-racist practice, and there is an established Equality Diversity and Inclusion Forum providing a space to talk about anti-racism in a social work context.



[Click here](#) to read top tips for recruiting talented and values driven people

A close-up photograph of a man with a beard and long hair, smiling warmly at a baby. The baby is laughing joyfully, showing its teeth. The man is wearing a yellow shirt. The background is softly blurred.

Learning and development for children's social care work to flourish

Click to explore

A carefully crafted learning offer

Embedding a learning culture

A focus on progression

Learning and development for children's social care work to flourish

'We need to create the right conditions for social work to flourish. And social work cannot flourish without a comprehensive career and workforce development plan.'

Learning and development are central to staff motivation and wellbeing and have been noted as key ingredients for staff retention by a majority of SFPC local authorities who have contributed to this report.

Effective learning strategies allow practitioners to grow and develop as professionals, progressing in their career and providing them with the skills and opportunities to achieve set goals. Simultaneously, for staff practice to be effective, workforce development programmes need to form part of a wider vision for children and families and be grounded in their experience and local authorities' knowledge of their changing needs.



This chapter offers insights on SFPC local authorities' approaches to develop a robust learning offer and enticing training programmes, to establish a continuous culture of learning, as well as to support staff progression and professional development.

A carefully crafted learning and training offer

Children's social care work is a comparatively young profession.

Practice, language and social work terminology are evolving and practitioners are required to adapt to changing contexts and develop their skills accordingly. Providing a consistent learning offer, based on local communities' needs and the challenges faced by children and families is vital.



In Leeds, designing a workforce development and learning programme involves close collaboration with local partners. This might take the shape of workforce leads speaking to headteachers about the challenges faced by young people in schools or engaging with social workers supporting children and families, to gather evidence of current issues and place-based needs. Learning programmes are therefore built on local data, allowing practitioners to adapt to what is required and then develop skills across different areas from youth violence to substance misuse.

An effective training programme needs to deliver relevant place-based learning in an accessible manner. Local authorities need to adopt a considered approach that enables staff at different levels to access key information and that ensures courses are delivered in engaging ways.

In Lancashire, workforce development teams are taking a combined approach to training with courses being externally commissioned as well as delivered in-house by practice development staff. In doing so, the latter applies a range of innovative methods, including action learning sets, forums and peer support groups.

Ensuring that training offers are up to date, robust and meet current needs, the role of practice development staff requires them to keep one foot in social work practice and one foot in supporting development routes, enabling consistent information flows between both areas.

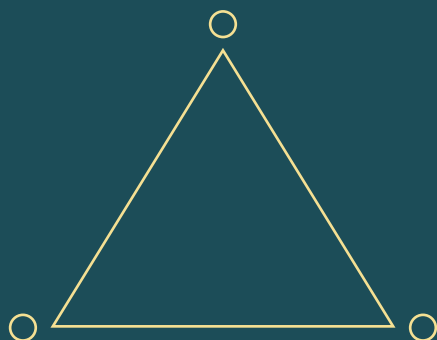
Ensuring information reaches the right teams and people, practice development teams are supported by training champions who are based across different departments. They are the first to be informed about upcoming opportunities and support with promotion and distribution.

Case study

Darlington applies a triangulated approach **to crafting a local learning offer:**

- Workforce development staff listen to the voice of the workforce through forums, surveys and conferences. This involves directly asking people what a learning offer should look like and what they might need to effectively do their jobs well
- They listen to the voice of children, young people, families, adults, communities and multi-agency partners, to understand specific pressures, needs and concerns
- They listen to recent theory, evidence and the government's advice

Darlington's workforce development and training needs analysis as well as their strategic planning is based on data from across these three avenues.



Darlington also takes a triangulated approach **to training delivery:**

1. Firstly, the local authority commissions sector led training, identified through their training needs analysis.
2. Secondly, teams embrace successful multi-agency partnership approaches to training. This collaborative effort involves various organisations, teams, and sectors working together to address and bridge learning and professional development gaps. Whenever training gets delivered, spaces are opened up to multi-agency partners based on the understanding that the same organisation will open up training spots for social work staff in return. The approach is working well and Darlington regularly sees training courses being delivered by health colleagues, and practitioners from across prisons or the education sector. Training programmes are of high quality and are being offered at reduced rates or are free to attend. The approach is open and if there are organisations that do not deliver training themselves, they might offer their facilities as a training venue or identify other ways to contribute to the collaborative process.
3. Thirdly, Darlington's experts in practice project enables staff to become researchers. Currently, there are three children's services practitioners working in partnership with Newcastle University to research particular areas of interest as identified by the local authority. Their evidence and information then informs local training plans, training introductions through innovative methods such as podcasts and training delivery, led by the experts in practice themselves.

Darlington's development of learning and training programmes is based on services' own knowledge, experience and expertise, a direct result of the journey the local authority has been through and established trust in a high quality workforce. A focus is set on embedding a culture of using the existing strengths from within, to support improvement, innovation and creation across the service.

An impactful and powerful learning provision extends beyond a comprehensive training programme, encompassing a multitude of ways to facilitate knowledge exchange within and between teams. Cultivating a learning culture involves taking small yet significant steps to encourage curiosity, reflection, and connection.

In Leeds, this entails sharing inspiring articles among colleagues and making them accessible on the Intranet for wider reach. Going beyond that, they proactively reached out to an academic author of one of the articles, expressing their interest in having them deliver a lecture for locally-based teams. This effort led to a session attended by over a hundred social workers, enabling them to engage with cutting-edge research and establish connections between evidence and practice.

During Coventry's Practice Week 2023, teams opened up the opportunity for drop-in sessions across different service delivery teams to enable cross service learning. This allows practitioners wanting to better understand the work and interface of, for example the fostering service, to meet and speak to colleagues. There is an open-door policy allowing staff to explore and learn across the organisation.

Monthly practice development forums create space to discuss current challenges, issues or take a deep dive into specific practice-related topics. Coventry set a particular focus on celebrating success, appreciative enquiry to inspire, and develop good practice. This is an intentional shift away from a "blame culture", which often surrounds the social work profession. Celebrating success takes the shape of highlighting practitioners' stories of good practice, sharing their ways of working and exploring how they overcome barriers. It enables colleagues to draw inspiration and fosters a culture of positivity and openness.

Learning cultures should also be cultivated across regional boundaries, as demonstrated by the Aspiring Leadership and Management training programme for the North East region, including Darlington. Similarly, teaching partnerships, such as West Midlands and London's South West Teaching partnerships, enable local authorities to draw on resources and collaborate in building practitioners' skill sets.

Case study

In Redcar and Cleveland, residential care home teams practise a similar approach to openness and transparency.

Staff support each other through strengths-based skill-matching and mentoring. Rather than taking a formal approach to the latter, portfolio leads with a specific relationship-based skill - for example setting boundaries with young people in a kind and clear manner - are being matched with practitioners who might want to develop this aspect of their practice.

A focus on progression and ‘growing your own’

“If you want to attract skilled people into the organisation you will have to do more than pay them and give them manageable caseload. You’re going to actually have to support them around their learnings and goals. And that might be the tipping factor that makes them choose you over a different organisation.”

There is a shared understanding that training and development need to be focused on people’s aspirations, their career goals and progression. It is this type of investment that keeps people motivated and makes a significant contribution to retention rates. Supporting people’s professional journey’s early on and adopting a ‘grow your own’ mindset and approach has led to transformational outcomes across a range of local authorities, including Darlington, Coventry, Leeds and Lancashire.

In Lancashire, Newly Qualified Social Workers are automatically enrolled in the local Social Work Academy, a year long in-depth induction and support programme for staff completing their ASYE (Assessed and Supported Year of Employment). Whilst completing their portfolio, the academy provides ongoing support. For the first two weeks, staff are placed in-house in the main County Hall building, working with the practice development team to be inducted into the organisation. After that period, newly qualified staff start working with their teams in the community. Every second month, staff are invited back for recall days, which involve additional support and CPD training as well as peer support groups. Practice development staff provide assistance on a regular basis, including conversations with supervisors about potential support needs, wellbeing initiatives, and ensuring the protection of a reduced caseload.

Coventry launched its Social Work Academy in 2018 and is currently seeing a 75% retention rate over three years of those newly qualified social workers who started in the social work academy. Their approach involves Newly Qualified Social Workers starting together as a cohort, whilst based within an operational team within the Academy. Newly Qualified Social Workers start with a small caseload incrementally increasing up to 10 children over the initial six months of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment. This is supplemented by a team offering high support and high challenge around the work to develop a baseline of best practice to move forward in their career journey; alongside a planned trajectory or learning and development which supports Newly Qualified Social Workers to consider the journey of the child in children’s services, alongside high levels of reflective supervision.

By the six month stage, there has been an incremental transition to substantive social work roles across children's services. Joint work and collaboration are central themes in Coventry's academy and workforce strategy. Newly qualified social workers meet their teams early on in the process, and a focus is set on relationship building with future colleagues.

Similarly, in Darlington there is a strong emphasis on 'growing their own' and progressing staff within the workforce. The academy approach allows people to see potential career pathways and destinations early on, and a competency in progression framework provides an understanding of how staff might move from role to role. Approximately, over 45% of the local workforce was developed or 'grown' in Darlington, whether through the ASYE programme, Step up to Social Work programme or apprenticeships. Being able to share this message has been central to strengthen retention rates and was appreciated during Darlington's last Ofsted inspection.

In Leeds, aspiring managers sign up to a six to eight week leadership programme, based on reading and learning labs. Following the course workforce development managers will lead some initial conversations with course graduates.

These are set up to allow staff to reflect on their career goals, and test whether they feel equipped and ready to step into a leadership position or whether the course has given them insights into different opportunities or specialisms. When a new manager role becomes available, there is a pool of internal candidates ready to step up, and the workforce development teams will work to match staff to specific positions.

Wandsworth uses a values-led questions approach as part of their career progression panel:

1. What are you most proud of in the last six months?
2. How do you support families to achieve change?
3. What's your reflection on your biggest areas of development?

Their story needs to reflect their values and beliefs about how to work with families, their theory of change in families' lives and their self-reflective capacity around their own strengths and areas for development.



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A woman with short brown hair and glasses, wearing a white long-sleeved shirt, is sitting in a wheelchair. She is holding a black tablet. A man with dreadlocks and glasses, wearing a light purple shirt, is sitting next to her, looking at the tablet. He is holding a blue pen. They are in a room with large windows in the background.

Retaining skilled and dedicated staff

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Effective management and supervision

A changing work culture

Prioritising direct work with families

Meaningful and active staff engagement

A healthy balance of agency staff

Retaining skilled and dedicated staff

SFPC local authorities shared what mattered the most for retaining employees, responses included:



Feeling valued, listened to, supported and upskilled to do their job

This includes a strong connection with management and strong peer support within the team.



Feeling inspired and empowered to learn and develop

Provide a supportive work environment to inspire the best from people giving them the tools, networks, and the support they need.



Competitive pay

However, it is widely agreed that individuals are willing to remain in their jobs even with lower pay if they experience a sense of value, connection, and support.



The motivation to try and change children's and families' lives

Having the freedom and capacity to deliver meaningful family work.

"People come into social work, because they believe in it. But it's hard. And it's scary, as well as wonderful and delightful, and you see lots of change."

"So what we need to do is create environments where an individual feels safe, and feels that their practice is being supervised, that they're not isolated in dealing with very complex situations. And that means, a really good structure of supervision, permission to ask questions, and a good, supportive team who they physically meet."

There is a strong link between values-based workforce cultures and retention, and SFPC local authorities are demonstrating a variety of ways to create supportive environments for practitioners to feel held, appreciated and able to thrive.

This chapter explores their approaches to keeping people in their roles, including effective management and supervision, the need for flexibility and enabling staff to deliver direct family work by decreasing bureaucratic burdens. It also highlights local authorities' innovative ways to consistently engage their staff, fostering connection and participation, and shines a light on strategies in relation to agency staff.

Effective management and supervision

Effective management, relationships with senior staff and good supervision practice have been mentioned as some of the most central ingredients to staff wellbeing.

Supervision in particular provides a space for staff to reflect and open up. If harnessed well, this becomes a vital ground for development for children's social care practitioners.

In Leeds, this involves offering an effective structure to the conversation and an opportunity to ask questions. Supervision is the opposite of a tick box exercise, purely focusing on caseload reporting and timescales, but a reflective, learning space. At its centre lies the understanding that the concept of 'high support - high challenge' (i.e. providing help and assistance as well as motivational challenge in equal measure), bears effective results in both direct work with families but equally in relationships with children's social care work staff.

In North Yorkshire, there is a strong focus on structured work. Particularly in a residential home context, where priorities can shift in a short period of time, carving out space for regular supervision meetings is vital and demonstrates connection and support. Meetings take place on a monthly and six-weekly basis and are held separately to more ad-hoc debriefs following an incident.

Supervision is set out as a two-way conversation, a reflective space to raise issues with a manager and a source for assistance if needed.





Coventry's supervision practice is aligned with their purpose, based on the question of what it is that practitioners are truly aiming to achieve through their work. The value base of Coventry Family Valued and The Coventry Way of practice has been important in this, and these align well with the One Coventry values of Coventry City Council also. This provides an opportunity to hone in on specific aspects of people's practice and to celebrate achievements. Asking the question of what has changed for families and why something might have changed, can reveal how a staff member worked in a particularly person-centred way and child focused way, demonstrating support and leadership that are unique and deserve to be highlighted.

Equally important is the goal to move a family to progress, and to use a supervision space to reflect on that. In Coventry, managers keep on asking: why this Plan/assessment for this child? Where is it we want to get to? And How? Revisiting this question helps practitioners to think through the aim and direction of their work with the family, in a relational and restorative way. Ultimately, the goal is for families to be supported to succeed and for statutory children's social care work intervention not to remain in their lives for longer than needed.

Supervision drives the value base for the Family Valued model, adopted by Coventry. It is set up as a contained and safe space for practitioners to think about families and relational practice with the aim to make a difference in children's lives by keeping them within their families and their communities' wherever safe to do so.

In Hertfordshire, supervision takes the shape of a facilitated team discussion - group supervision - a key element of the Family Safeguarding model. As part of this, team managers lead conversations with multi-disciplinary teams about each of the supported family cases. Strong administrative skills are vital to ensure each family gets the reflection space needed to progress the team's work. Working with a team of specialist practitioners from a range of disciplines, including domestic abuse and substance misuse, group supervision leaders are asked to put their own discipline aside and to listen very carefully to each and everyone's opinion. It requires a particular skill set, diplomacy, and facilitation to bring the group to agreed next steps. If done well, this can lead to transformational impacts on family work as well as an enriching development and learning experience for multi-disciplinary team staff.

'Asking the question of what has changed for families and why something might have changed, can reveal how a staff member worked in a particularly person-centred way and child focused way, demonstrating support and leadership that are unique and deserve to be highlighted.'

Flexibility and responding to a changing work culture

The pandemic and lockdown restrictions have altered the nature of work across every sector, including children's social care. Flexible working patterns and work from home arrangements have become the norm and local authorities are adapting their policies to meet the needs of an agile workforce.

Darlington

Darlington's agile working policy enables staff to come to the office whenever needed, but equally enables them to work from home where this is possible and if this is the preferred option for staff. Practitioners who are delivering direct work with families will need to be physically present more often than others, but there is a strong culture of acceptance based on the values of collaboration and trust and staff agency to make decisions for the benefit of children and families.

Lancashire

Lancashire also offers an effective hybrid approach to working patterns. There are opportunities to access different office spaces, including collaborative workspaces that people can book, for group supervisions, joint projects or initiatives.

Trust and mutual agreements are central for making flexible working arrangements work in practice, as is a collective commitment to the service and the support to children and families. Particularly, in the case of residential care home staff, working together closely and collaboratively is important for the arrangement of shift work during holiday periods.

Redcar and Cleveland

In Redcar and Cleveland's No Wrong Door Hub, working out a rota requires supportive and honest conversations. It can take time for staff to understand that it might not be possible to book annual leave at the same time, leaving shifts without sufficient cover. Managers are required to listen to staff concerns, make them feel heard, but equally explain the reasons for decision-making. The No Wrong Door provocations are crucial in these conversations, in particular the values-led question: Would this be good enough for my child?



Enabling staff to work in a relational, person-centred way with children and families requires carefully crafted processes and structures. Manageable caseloads, that allow people to do direct, meaningful work in communities, are a key starting point.

In Hertfordshire, this involves social work staff aiming to work with a maximum of 17 children at any one time. Staff need to be able to do more than a 'monitoring visit' to comment on the child's appearance, the state of the house, and whether there is food in the kitchen cupboards. They need to have the time and head space to form a relationship with people, to understand why they are here. They need to get alongside a family to support them in thinking about the changes they want to make, and then provide the help they need for their family's problems. Working in such a way requires time for thinking and preparation and using skills in motivational practice. This has the potential for impact in the lives of families and children as well as job satisfaction for staff.

Case study

The Family Safeguarding Workbook, applied by Hertfordshire and local authorities who have adopted the model, provides an effective way to decrease the burden of bureaucracy, enabling staff to spend more direct time with families and children.

The workbook takes all members of a family into a combined record, instead of keeping individual records for each child, and it facilitates adult specialists to contribute directly into the book, ensuring connected entries are all kept in one place. It represents a cultural shift away from descriptive and granular details about the visit, including details about a family's bedroom and food in the fridge, towards a holistic picture of the visit and analytical reflections. It includes a summary about strengths and concerns, whether the family shares the concerns, the tools that have been used in the conversations, and whether things are improving for the family as a result of the work undertaken.

For Family Safeguarding Adopter, Lancashire, the workbook has been a helpful tool. In addition to this, technology is playing a significant role in minimising reporting pressures. Teams in Lancashire use Liquid Logic for case management recordings, enabling teams to record details whilst on-the-go with observations fresh on their mind and without the need to come back to the office and type up notes in front of a computer.

Meaningful and active staff engagement

Staff engagement can take a variety of forms ranging from team away days, surveys to newsletters and forums.

Identifying meaningful and regular opportunities for staff to input into decision making, to socialise and be celebrated for their work is an essential part of job satisfaction and wellbeing at work.



Shining a light on good practice

The Sefton Scoop is a monthly piece of communication, a space where teams are able to share practice standards, updates, reminders and new policies. In each edition Sefton Stars are featured which encourages people to give and receive 360 degree feedback. It might be details about the support received from another, good partnership working or a great outcome for a young person they have witnessed. Being featured in the Sefton Scoop provides vital recognition and fosters connection across teams and departments in a simple but impactful way.

Celebrating staff commitment

North Yorkshire Council delivers quarterly service days, a Heads of Service road show twice a year and an annual 'Celebrating You' conference. This space recognises the work of teams and individuals, including long service certificates shared with staff who have been in service for five to fifteen years and beyond.

Basing decision making on staff input

Staff surveys played a vital role in shaping the strategic direction of Redcar and Cleveland's No Wrong Door Hub. The survey included a range of genuine questions about people's views, but the leadership team specifically focused on staff comments around what they would like to see more of in the future and what would make working at the Hub a better experience. Data on these questions formed the basis of the team's strategic plan which was vital for staff members to see their concerns being taken on board and turned into actions.

Small incentives can make a difference

Small incentives are easy to implement and do not rely on complex processes of approval. In North Yorkshire Council, teams ensure that they provide high-quality food for their staff during training and development. In Wandsworth, the kitchen is always stocked with tea, coffee, milk and oat milk as well as a fruit basket. Feeling nurtured makes a difference to people, it demonstrates genuine care and recognition of their hard work.



Creative ways to provide additional support

Darlington's concept of the Xtra Space sets a focus on providing staff with additional support. Xtra Space creates a space in the town hall's civic building and enables staff to seek out support if they are struggling with a particular issue. They can offload with an experienced worker, allowing them to talk about issues bothering them or where they need help to unblock something and work towards solutions.

Fostering connection, belonging and learning

To enable greater staff connection and foster joint learning, Sefton organises a staff engagement session every second week of the month. Staff meet face to face with biscuits and tea and with an open agenda. There is an opportunity to bring any particular item to the discussion table as well as to structure meetings and include external stakeholder input. Past sessions have included conversations about the equality, diversity and inclusion strategy, the apprenticeship offer, planning for Social Work Week etc. Darlington's bi-annual staff conferences can include about 150 people at a time. To foster connection, organising teams introduced the idea of a staff carousel. Based on the concept of speed dating, teams sit at tables spread across the room, introducing their work, what they have done throughout their year and their plans for the future. Once the whistle is blown, people move from table to table as the process repeats itself, creating an engaging, fun and energising environment.

Investing in good endings

In Sefton, investing in staff is key throughout their employment. Endings are as important as are beginnings; reputation is shared locally and this can support recruitment. Supporting professional development involves an effective induction, learning and development along the way and a space to reflect before leaving their contract, whether this is due to maternity, retirement or a new opportunity. Managing these transitions ensures staff feel valued and can bring about effective results.

A recently hired employee used to work for the local authority for many years before departing three years ago. They came back, highlighting their memory of Sefton's supportive culture.

Maintaining a healthy balance of agency staff

Agencies play a significant role in the children's social care job market. In the light of a cost of living crisis and the changing nature of work post-COVID-19, an increasing number of social work graduates opt for flexible, often higher paid agency roles rather than permanent staff contracts. We must therefore find effective ways of working with agencies to avoid drains on budgets. This is a careful balancing act.

'There are some very significant advantages to working for a local authority, but at the moment, the market is so skewed in favour of people being able to choose to work in that more flexible way and get paid a lot more money. Of course, you're going to try and get a job that pays you 50 pounds an hour, work hard and get your student debts down. Then, after that, you might think, what I want is somewhere that I can really get my teeth stuck in and get my feet under the table and work for an organisation that develops me and my learning needs. But, the way things are at the moment, it is really hard.'

North Yorkshire Council and Norfolk

North Yorkshire Council and Norfolk, both, managed to reduce their agency staff in residential care homes. In Norfolk, in the case of uncovered shifts and staff shortages, teams recruit people from within other teams who are interested in doing short-term weekend work or looking for a potential career change. North Yorkshire takes a similar approach and pulls staff from across different services. This included working with practitioners from Early Help and Youth Justice Services to support covering shifts at the No Wrong Door Hubs. There is an advantage to being able to rely on trained staff, already known to the service. Particularly, in the case of residential care home staff continuity and trust are vital for building strong relationships with young people. Working closely across different services and collaboration between team managers is important to make this system work in practice. North Yorkshire Council is taking a flexible approach to shift work, enabling staff to choose between taking time off in lieu or receiving additional payments.

Lancashire

Lancashire set out a focus on balancing the number of newly qualified social workers and experienced agency staff. The latter can often bring a range of diverse and needed skill sets and are adding significant value to locally based teams. The local authority employs a number of agency workers who have delivered family work in Lancashire for more than two years and have become an integral part of the workforce. To avoid over reliance, hiring teams adopted an international recruitment strategy, attracting experienced social workers from South Africa who will be starting work in Lancashire in 2023.

Sefton

Sefton has been successful in converting at least eight agency staff into permanent staff through a focus on values-driven, supportive work cultures. Two of their recently recruited Service Managers had moved from an agency contract. Both of them are locally based and felt ready to focus on their local area instead of moving between different local authorities. There was also a strong sense of connectedness with Sefton's values and both praised the open, trusted culture within teams. One of the most recent members of staff who had opted for a permanent position was featured in Sefton's newsletter, the Sefton Scoop. Answering the question of why they chose to give up on the agency career in favour of their new permanent role, they said that Sefton was on an improvement trajectory and that they wanted to be a part in shaping that.

Coventry

Coventry's academy model is based on a workforce strategy which highlights the number of newly qualified staff across each team, the number of vacancies and turnover rates, projections for the number of agency staff required as well as clear exit strategies to reduce dependency on agency staff. The aim is to develop a permanent, stable workforce based on the knowledge that this is what makes a difference to children and families. Coventry is taking a collaborative approach, working closely with agency providers as well as Senior Heads of Service and addressing this challenge as a wider corporate issue encompassing service delivery across different sectors. This includes specific recruitment summits, bringing together senior leaders with HR colleagues, finance staff and recruitment partners to jointly think about effective solutions to reduce dependency on agency staff.

Regional collaboration has also been central in supporting local aims. Coventry plays an important role in upholding a Memorandum of Understanding across the West Midlands, ensuring standards with agency staff are being retained across a range of local authorities to avoid competition and spiralling rates. This includes for example a regional agreement not to employ any newly qualified social workers as agency staff, driving the importance of permanency within a local authority.

Wandsworth

Equally in London, the role of regional agreements and support has been central in regulating the movement of agency staff. Wandsworth, together with the other 31 London authorities are part of a pan London workforce group, and have collaborated to develop the London Pledge. Commitments included in the London Pledge, include a six month cool off period for any staff member who leaves permanent employment in London for agency work, meaning social workers cannot skip from permanent posts into agency roles straight away. Other commitments include capped rates of agency pay as well as a pledge that local authorities will not offer any agency roles to practitioners who qualified within the last three years.

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Key learnings and reflections

In the light of recruitment challenges, competitive market pressures and rising vacancies, building a robust workforce strategy is vital. For a majority of SFPC local authorities, a focus on whole system approaches to the recruitment, development and retention of staff has been central in addressing or at times even overcoming workforce-related pressures.

Tying strategies to a wider, local vision for children, young people and families and connecting decision-making to the same principles that guide local authorities work in communities is bearing highly effective results.

This report highlights strategic learning points:

1 Centring values-led decision making

A strong value base, linked to an overarching aim for children, young people and families, facilitates decisions on recruitment, development and retention of staff. This might include the ability to tap into trusted, well-established local partnership networks for recruitment support, a focus on developing skills locally and 'grow your own' mindsets as well as a driver to decrease bureaucratic burdens and prioritise practitioners' direct relationships with the people they are meant to serve. Central to this way of working is senior leaders' demonstration of values-driven leadership and a commitment to practice presence, integrity and deep connection with staff and partners at all levels.

2 Building the learning conditions for children's social care work to flourish

Effective learning strategies allow practitioners to grow and develop as professionals, progressing in their career and providing them with the skills and opportunities to affect vital change in families' lives. Robust learning and development plans need to be based on insights from staff, partners and families and adapt to evolving local needs and national evidence. A thriving learning culture provides staff with a range of training and development opportunities, centred on their professional and personal goals. However, there is a need to go beyond a traditional training approach, which includes tapping into an organisation's wider potential to develop curiosity and learning and to facilitate knowledge exchange between and across departments and teams.

3 Taking a whole-system approach to recruitment

Recruitment processes rely on strong local networks, facilitating the promotion of vacancies and sharing of key information through a variety of communication channels. A whole-system, values-led approach allows local authorities to build on their existing relationships, reputation and word of mouth to spread key messages and attract like-minded candidates. Involving multi-stakeholder partners and people with lived experience into recruitment-related decision-making manifests the idea of family work as a whole-system, place-based responsibility and increases the likelihood of identifying the right person for the right job.

4 Retaining staff by prioritising direct work with children and families

An understanding of children's social care work as a values-led profession builds on practitioners' intrinsic motivation for entering into their jobs: this is to effect lasting change in families' lives. Retention efforts need to centre on this understanding and provide staff with the systems, processes and structures for them to fulfil their aims and responsibilities to the best of their abilities. This includes supportive and effective management and supervision and providing safe and open spaces for reflection that are equally built to consistently improve practitioners skills.

It involves flexible, responsive approaches to working conditions, active staff engagement, and efforts to decrease bureaucratic workloads, allowing practitioners to have the time to build the trusted and sustained relationships that make their work effective. A supportive work environment will inspire the best from people whilst providing them with the tools, networks, and support they need. Working in this way can ensure staff are able to learn, grow, and feel valued, which is central to keeping them in their roles.

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