

NIHR ARC Wessex



Recruitment and retention in adult social care in 2024

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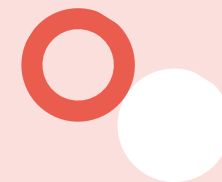


Aims of the project

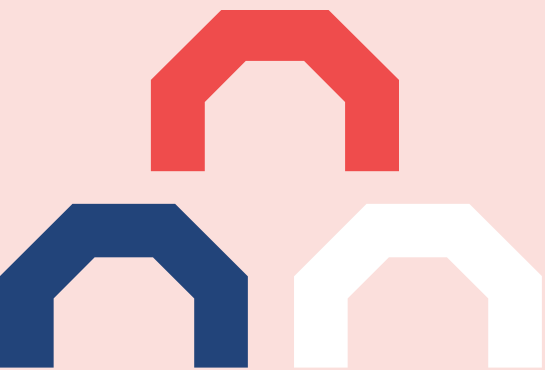
- Explore local recruitment and retention issues in adult social care and adult social work
- Helping to inform future workforce development activities undertaken by two local authorities (LAs)
- Contributing research data to both the regional and national picture of adult social care recruitment and retention issues

Methodology - mixed methods

- Four different populations of interest (POIs):
- Social care practitioners - social workers, allied health professionals, unregistered social care practitioners - working in adult social care at two local authorities (LAs)
- Social care staff performing exit interviews with staff working in the two local LAs
- Social work students (undergraduate and postgraduate programmes) in Wessex
- Service users receiving services in either LA and advocates drawn from Wessex LA contracted services



Achieved aims of the BU project

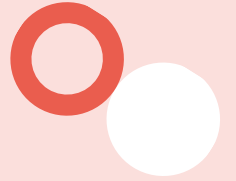


All aims of the project were achieved

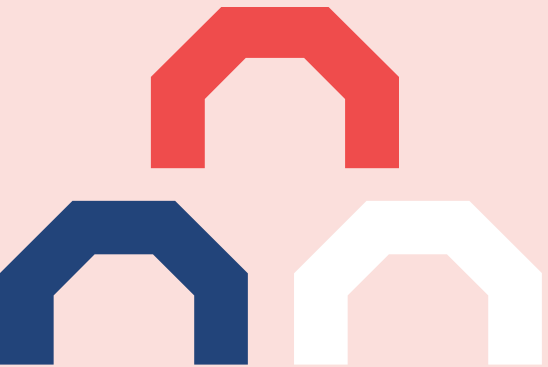
- We were able to explore local recruitment and retention issues in adult social care and adult social work
- We have helped to inform future workforce development activities undertaken by two local authorities (LAs)
 - - producing individual reports for them
- We have contributed research data to both the regional and national picture of adult social care recruitment and retention issues
 - – producing a number of outputs from the project

Methodology - mixed methods

- Total of $n=131$ participants from four POIs participated:
- $n=97$ practitioner survey responses ($n=25$ qualitative interviews)
- $n=2$ exit interviewer survey responses ($n=1$ qualitative interviews)
- $n=20$ student survey responses ($n=11$ qualitative interviews)
- $n=12$ survey responses ($n=1$ service user qualitative interviews and $n=2$ focus groups ($n=4$ service users and $n=7$ advocates))

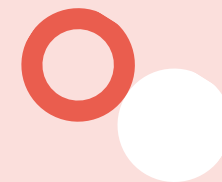


What went to plan and went well

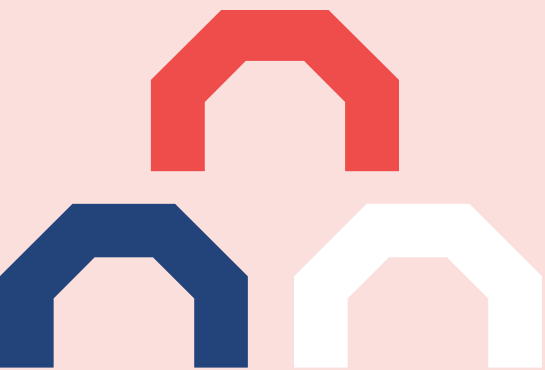


Positives

- Practitioner demand to participate in this study was very high and we exceeded our initial recruitment targets.
- Being able to shine a light on some of the current issues facing advocacy – a currently under-reported research area – as a part of our qualitative data collected from POI 4 was an enlightening and beneficial bonus.
- Being able to involve and co-write with both the PPI collaborator and the two research champions from a local authority to produce two separate academic articles from the project was another highlight.
- Reaching a national newspaper (both print and online in the Telegraph) with research findings from practitioners regarding hybridization and hotdesking was a very positive development in reaching an external audience.

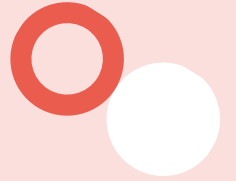


What was not achieved/had to be adapted and why

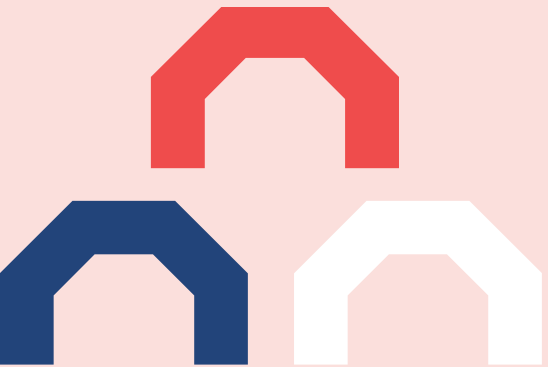


Negatives

- Even though we were able to recruit $n=97$ participants from the two LAs, obtaining a balanced number of gender and ethnicity responses within POI 1 (social care practitioners) was not possible during data collection, so the study might not reflect all possible views within these areas.
- We were only able to recruit ($n=2$) social care staff from 1 LA within POI 2 (social care staff performing exit interviews with staff working in the two local LAs), so the data collected for this group was not as rich or detailed as that obtained from the other three POIs.
- There was much more demand to participate in interviews than we anticipated (or could process) within the project timelines. We therefore had to decline requests for $n=19$ practitioner interviews which left valuable local research data uncollected.
- University budget precluding our articles from being made available on an open access licence (as universities are required to pay VAT for articles published on an open access agreement).



Results (Practitioners)



Practitioner findings – overview

- $n=75$ (77.3%) participants either agreed or strongly agreed that they were happy working in social care
- $n=73$ (75.3%) participants either agreeing or strongly agreeing that they were happy in their current role
- $n=60$ (61.9%) felt they were able to manage their current workload
- $n=73$ (75.3%) felt they had received adequate training to carry out their role
- $n=68$ (70.1%) felt they had enough support for their role
- $n=34$ (35.1%) participants felt that their pay adequately reflected the demands of the job
- Within next three years, $n=17$ (17.5%) of participants were planning on leaving social care
- Career change including changing area of practice, independent working, moving to NHS/Third Sector and leaving the profession to go to other employment – ($n=7$ - 41.2%)

Practitioner findings – data on staying

Reasons for staying with LAs included:

- Flexible working – place of work and hours worked
- Love of the job and engaging with the service users supported
- Supportive management
- Supportive team
- Training and CPD - via continuing professional development or an apprenticeship.



Hybridisation and hotdesking

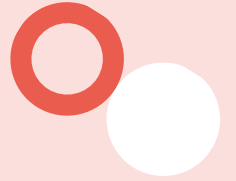
- The pandemic enforced greater changes in office space - some satellite offices closed and hot-desking/shared spaces introduced
- Maintaining team structure either virtually or in person in a larger hotdesking more difficult
- Open plan offices can cause issues with noise, lack of quiet spaces, privacy issues, storage space
- Hybrid working enables flexible working, where working time is split between the home and the office.
- Negative effects of hybrid working patterns included difficulties of maintaining a virtual team, with some feeling isolated and lacking support.
- Particularly challenging for new entrants who need team around them to build up their skills and confidence.

Stress and burnout

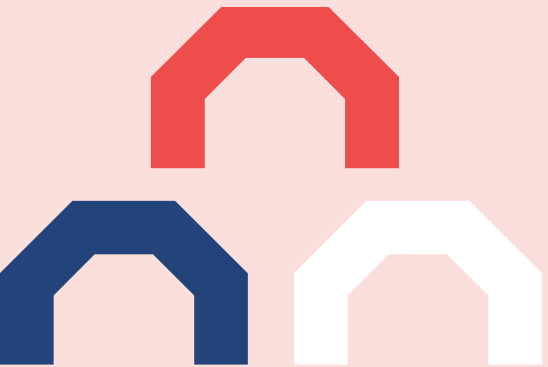
- Stress caused by the nature of the job was mentioned by a number of participants
- The increasing demands on roles - in terms of a rising number of cases, the increased complexity of each case caused immense pressure on being able to process work in a timely manner
- COVID-19 and post pandemic effects contributed to stress and impacted on staff working from home during and after this period
- Stress caused by ethical challenges of the social care system – challenging professional values of social care and ability to meet SU needs
- Coping and resilience linked to reducing hours of work or moving to another post, or out of the sector completely

Negative perceptions of social work

- Many participants reflected on the negative views of ASC from service users and their families- often considered as being a 'normal' aspect of the job
- Negative media coverage influenced views and perceptions of the public and affects practitioner self-worth which undermines commitment to remain in the sector
- Suggestions for improving this situation include improving organisational awareness and public understanding to help manage expectations



Results (Students)

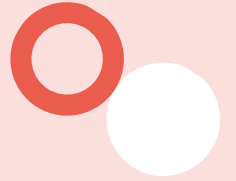


Student reflections on social care

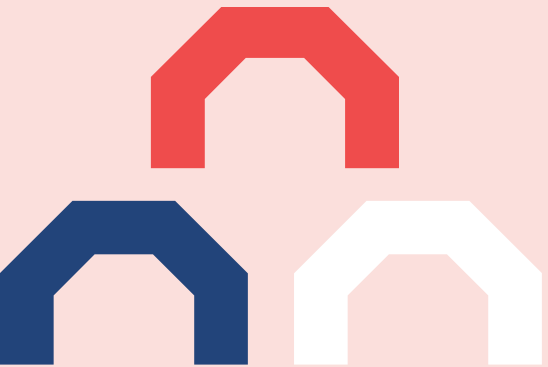
- There is always focus on recruitment, but not on retention.
- Social care is hugely under-funded but money is not the only answer –a place where people want to be.
- Awareness that SW not seen as a fully sustainable career. Some already planning exit strategies before they started work - a perceived shelf life for a social work career.
- Worries about excessive caseloads/increased admin burdens and bureaucracy.
- Pay level was deemed inadequate for the demands of the job.
- On placement students noticed issues with team churn, attrition and a lack of stability – one had 8 different managers over a 12 months.
- Staff shortages – some vacancies can't even be filled by locums.
- COVID-19 had been the prompt for a lot of staff to move on.
- Agency usage is an issue (for example, out of county managers). This is helping to create a 'perfect storm'.
- Risk of stress and burnout inherent in profession was noted: Ethical Dilemmas / Job related / Questioning of their decision making / Resilience / Coping strategies / Travel issues

Student reflections on cost of living impacts

- Increased numbers seeking hardship support / more working alongside study
- Social work bursaries frozen since 2014 – more earning whilst learning
- Some HEI staff do not appreciate hardships experienced or demands faced
- Burnout - feeling stressed/lacking in energy after working full-time alongside course.
- Longer term, reductions in students entering the profession have major implications for meeting rising level of vacancies in social work.
- Cost of living issues an increasingly influential factor for prospective students when choosing route/retraining as mature student.



Results (Service users)

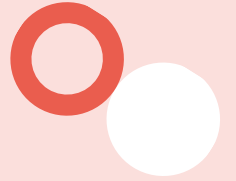


Service user reflections on social work relationships

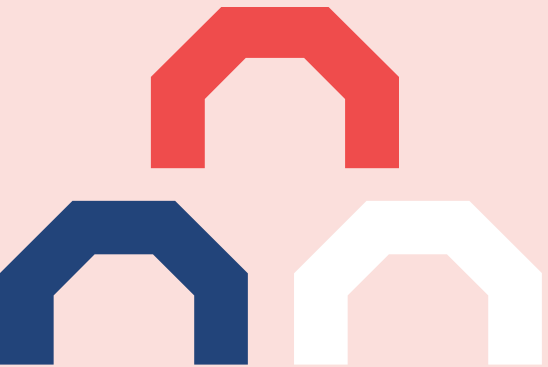
- Changing role - onus now on the carer more to be the lead professional though not through choice.
- Biggest issue is lack of money in the system.
- Money over empathy – it often feels like carers and SUs cost money.
- Inertia - one participant described this feeling as : “It doesn't matter how I am, you're not going to do anything about it”.
- Whole structure needs an overhaul. Social work/social care is a societal issue and priority

Service user reflections on staff turnover

- Previous continuity of same worker no longer exists. Rapid changeover / staffing issues causing upset for carers and SUs.
- Churn obliterates previous working relationships
- Depersonalisation – team rather than individual; now you don't usually have a designated social worker. It's a group.
- Less frequent contact.
- Out-of-hours - service is overstretched and doesn't cover the whole area effectively for time precious situations.



Results (Advocates)



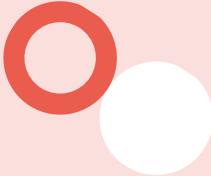
Advocacy – Impacts on advocates

- Safeguarding caseloads for advocates have increased. Crisis situations due to lack of early intervention. After discharge there is no pick-up or continuity from the community – loss of advocate, a new LA social worker or unqualified social care practitioner assigned, or the case is closed as it is classified as ‘not in crisis’.
- Increased caseloads now have greater complexity. There are more Section 21A challenges – a review under a Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards (DoLS) as SUs unable to care package in the community.
- Community advocacy - which prevents crisis in a lot of cases - has been reduced as statutory work always comes first. SUs need be in receipt of an LA commissioned service or NHS secondary care before they can get issues-based advocacy.
- Increased complexity causes settled cases to be visited less regularly as advocates now deal with more complex court proceedings and safeguarding issues.

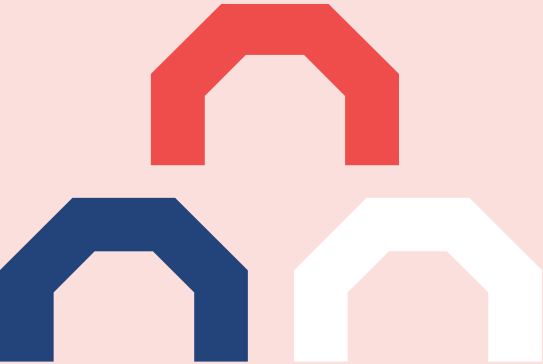
Advocacy - Impacts on advocates

Increased caseloads - Social work / NHS overflow

- Social work seems to be moving away from relationship-based practice to procedurally driven form-filling with advocates picking up some of this work instead.
- “*Hold on, this is not actually my role*” - Advocates are doing part of the social worker’s job because, for whatever reason, they are not able to.
- There is a greater expectation of monitoring conditions done by the supervising body, when actually it’s not their role as an advocate, but it has become their role.
- Less time for IMHA within hospitals as advocates now have little or no time to do it.



Outputs



Reports

- Recruitment and retention in adult social care Exec Summary (LA1 Practitioner Responses). 07-Mar-24 / Internal Only - for LA1
- Recruitment and retention in adult social care Report (LA1 Practitioner Responses). 07-Mar-24 / Internal Only - for LA1
- Recruitment and retention in adult social care Exec Summary (LA2 Practitioner Responses). 16-Apr-24 / Internal Only - for LA2
- Recruitment and retention in adult social care Report (LA2 Practitioner Responses). 16-Apr-24 / Internal Only - for LA2
- Recruitment and retention in adult social care Exec Summary. 29-Apr-24 / Available from BU BURO when approved by NIHR - a copy has also been sent to NIHR
- Recruitment and retention in adult social care Report. 29-Apr-24 / Available from BU BURO when approved by NIHR - a copy has also been sent to NIHR

Publications (3,290 views as of 19/12/25)

- Pulman, A. and Fenge, L.A. 2024. The Evolving Workplace: The Possible Impacts of Hybrid Working and Hotdesking on Retention of Social Workers. *The British Journal of Social Work*. Volume 54, Issue 8. <https://doi.org/10.1093/bjsw/bcae120> (872 views)
- Pulman, A., Fenge, L.A., Mazarura, P. and Sanis, N. 2024. Struggling with studying and earning – realities of the UK's cost-of-living crisis on students on social work programmes. *Research in Post-Compulsory Education*. Volume 29, Issue 4. (co-writing with research champions Patricia Mazarura and Neil Sanis) <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2024.2403825> (1,325 views)
- Pulman, A., Sloan, H. and Fenge, L.A. 2025. Advocacy in Practice: Who Advocates for the Advocates? *Practice - Social Work in Action*. Volume 37, Issue 1. (co-writing with PPIE strategy group representative Helen Sloan) <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2024.2410851> (471 views)
- Pulman, A. and Fenge, L.A., 2025. Impacts of Workplace Stress on the Retention of Social Workers: A Qualitative Study. *Practice - Social Work in Action*. Volume 37, Issue 3. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09503153.2024.2429085> (622 views)

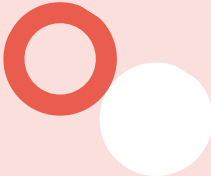
Presentations

- Presenting at with supra regional social care meeting 6 March 24 and working with national social care leads to share and disseminate good practice
- Seminar Series (virtual)
Seminar 7 (18 January 24) - Realities of adult social care recruitment and retention in 2023 (Practitioner Views)
- Multiple presentations on project at Collaborating for Impact: How ARC Wessex research is improving our communities' health and care (5 June 24)
- Seminar Series (virtual)
This seminar (16 January 25) - Recruitment and retention in adult social care in 2024

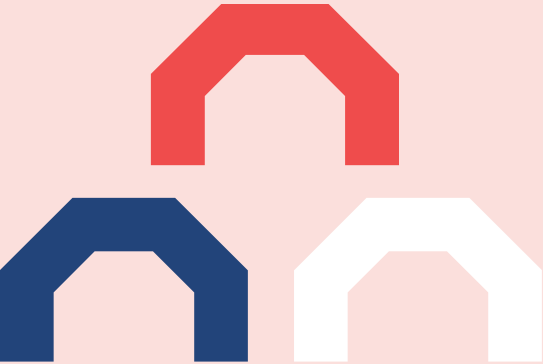
Significant Press and PR

UK National Newspapers

- Print and online in the Telegraph -
<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2024/08/01/working-from-home-is-forcing-social-workers-out-of-job-stud/>



Contacts



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The NCCDSW website contains details on all of our NIHR research work including this project:

<https://nccdsw.co.uk/clusters/research/building-research-capacity-in-social-care>