Dear readers,

Over the past couple of years, social work employers have been faced with the challenge of implementing reform after reform, while managing increasingly tight budgets. The best intentions to protect frontline jobs haven’t always been possible. One council recently admitted that, while it had tried to avoid opening up its voluntary redundancy scheme to frontline staff including social workers, it had been forced to change its position because it had run out of ways to save money.

Vacancy rates are falling across the UK and the government has agreed to invest in the assessed year in England, showing efforts to improve recruitment and retention are having a positive impact. But there is still a long way to go, so Community Care has produced this guide to some of the issues likely to affect your decision making over the next year.

Best wishes

Kirsty McGregor

Workforce Editor of Community Care
The big issues to be aware of in 2013

Vacancies and a shrinking workforce

Results from Community Care’s latest investigation, which took a snapshot of social worker vacancy rates in local authorities across the UK in August 2012, show the average rates in England, Scotland and Wales have fallen for the third year in a row. However, the average number of posts per council fell from 226 in 2010 and 2011 to 214 in 2012, with the sharpest drop seen in adult services.

There has been a 9% fall in the number of adult social worker posts and a 4% fall in the number of children’s posts in councils. Earlier this year, the Centre for Workforce Intelligence (CfWI) found demand for adult social workers was falling, while there had been a marked increase in demand for non-professionally qualified staff, such as personal assistants.

When we looked in more detail at how Yorkshire and Humber had brought its regional vacancy rate down from 7.4% in 2011 to 5.3% in 2012, it emerged that the 15 councils in the area believed it was due in part to joint working arrangements between the directors of children’s services, which included a regional recruitment campaign and retention strategy.

“Because we’ve been working together, we’ve been able to monitor where the greatest need is,” said Alison O’Sullivan, director for children and young people at Kirklees Council, who leads the regional Children’s Social Work Matters campaign. “One authority with a 30% vacancy rate last year is now fully staffed.”

Social worker vacancy rates 2012

% Overall vacancies
- 32% - 20%
- 19% - 16%
- 15% - 12%
- 11% - 8%
- 7% - 4%
- 3% - 0%
- 0
When carrying out its risk assessment of the future supply and demand of social workers, the CfWI identified a potential oversupply of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs), due to a preference among local authority recruiters to employ more experienced staff wherever possible. This problem has escalated over the past few years, leading to a great deal of anxiety among social work students and recent graduates.

Earlier this year, concerns were raised after Suffolk Council revealed that seven out of 10 social workers it employed at the time had less than two years’ experience.

Graham Newman, the council’s cabinet member for young people’s services, explained that, in 2009, the council decided to recruit more social workers in a bid to ease pressure on existing members of staff. “But recruiting lots of new people means you do reduce the number of older, more experienced people in proportion to the rest,” he admitted.

Government-backed attempts to tackle this discrepancy – high vacancy rates in some social work teams, while many NQSWs struggle to find work out of university – are ongoing. The support schemes for NQSWs in England were replaced this year with the assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), on the recommendation of the Social Work Task Force. Local authorities providing the ASYE can access £2,000 in government funding to invest in the learning and development of each NQSW taking part. A Freedom of Information request sent by Community Care to 142 local authorities in England showed three quarters (74%) were planning to implement the scheme across children’s and adult services from September. Most of the rest planned to offer the ASYE in either children’s or adult services.

There has been a lot of anxiety among social workers about meeting the Health and Care Professions Council’s (HCPC) requirements for continuous professional development (CPD), which they must meet in order to re-register every two years. The HCPC took over the regulation of social workers in England in August 2012 and the old system of post-registration training and learning (PRTL) was replaced by CPD.

Social workers are now expected to keep a continuous record of what they have learned, how it has improved their practice and how that in turn has improved outcomes for service users. Social workers had to begin recording their CPD in the new way from 1 December 2012. Employers should consider how best to support the workforce to meet the new requirements, particularly if they wish to attract the best candidates – i.e. those interested in developing their skills and experience.

Community Care can help social workers keep on top of their CPD in a number of ways, from reading the latest news on communitycare.co.uk, to taking part in one of our good practice online debates or sharing advice with their peers on our forum, CareSpace.

We also send out daily, weekly and monthly emails to keep social workers up-to-date with what is happening in the sector and organise opportunities for face-to-face learning, including Community Care Live. Community Care Inform subscribers can log their CPD activities with the click of a button.
Pay

When heavy pay cuts were imposed on social workers and other staff at Southampton Council, those who were members of a union went on strike. Months of protest followed and, eventually, a new Labour leadership was elected to the council based partly on its pledge to restore the original pay levels.

*While pay has never been the main reason cited by social workers for doing the job, staff are feeling the pinch of increasing household bills. Pay is becoming a key retention issue.*

When discussing Suffolk Council’s reliance on relatively inexperienced social workers (see above), Graham Newman admitted: “Social workers in some adjacent counties are being paid better than ours. People get experience in Suffolk, then start looking around.” This reflected what Birmingham Council’s strategic director of children, young people and families said last year about the department’s high use of agency social workers; explaining that some agency staff refused to go permanent because they would have to take a pay cut. As Ruth Cartwright, manager for the British Association of Social Workers, put it: “You have to try and stay competitive if you want to recruit experienced social workers, because that experience is hard won.”

Use of agency staff

Our latest research shows local authorities are becoming more reliant on agency social workers this year, after an apparent dip in the use of non-permanent staff in 2011. Jonathon Coxon, managing director of Liquid Personnel, said the use of agency staff was simply returning to a normal level for the sector: “In 2011, public sector cuts had a big impact, with councils reacting by cutting their agency posts – however, councils have quickly realised this was unsustainable and experienced agency practitioners were needed to help deal with caseloads.”

*In previous years, Community Care has found agency social workers could be costing councils at least £70m a year more than if permanent staff were employed to perform the same roles.*

Over the next few weeks and months, we will be looking further into the current costs and benefits of employing agency staff.
Caseloads

Social work caseloads are increasing in number and complexity and many practitioners are on the verge of buckling under the strain, according to research carried out by Community Care last year. Half of all social workers said at least one of their colleagues had quit the team over the past year because they couldn’t cope. In addition, around a third of social workers (35%) told us their caseload had increased in complexity over the past year. When asked for the reasons behind the increasing caseloads and complexity, many social workers reported shrinking teams, high sickness absence rates and rising referral rates. Others said paperwork and IT systems were still taking up too much of their time.

Violence levels

Another Community Care survey revealed shocking accounts of the abuse and violence many social workers have been subjected to in their work.

More than 94% of the social workers reported having been abused in some way, including 22% who were victims of physical violence and 92% who had been verbally abused.

And in a separate study, data gathered from 117 councils showed the average number of recorded incidents of abuse, harassment and violence against social workers was on the rise.

The Local Government Association (LGA) rejected Unison’s calls for national monitoring of violence levels across the country, stating it is up to individual local authorities and line managers to address the problem. To aid this process, Community Care has brought together a range of resources designed to help social workers and other social care professionals defuse dangerous situations and better manage risk.
What the workforce is saying

Often the things that seem relatively insignificant make the most difference to social workers’ working lives, such as hotdesking and remote working, mileage allowances and whether or not they have to pay for parking. Our recent hotdesking survey highlighted the extreme impact these working arrangements can have on some people’s practice, with nine out of 10 social workers saying hotdesking saps morale. Some social workers told us they had left a previous post or were considering leaving their current one, because they could not find space to work comfortably and felt they no longer had access to proper peer and management support. “Employees feel devalued when their employer won’t even provide them with a desk and the space to put one,” said one social worker responding to our survey. “I don’t think it’s much to ask in the larger scheme of things.”

This sense of feeling undervalued goes deeper than the working conditions in certain authorities. Thousands of social workers have joined in with the national protests against austerity measures. During the most recent march in October, some told Community Care that cuts to services in their local communities were making their jobs all but impossible.

While local authorities are under pressure to cut more and more, taking even the smallest steps to make social workers feel valued is an essential part of retention.

Reforms to the sector are slowly coming into effect, with NQSWs feeling better supported and staff looking towards the new requirements for CPD. The positive changes will be gradual, but should assist councils with recruitment and retention. Over the next few months, Community Care will further investigate ways in which to improve workforce planning.

In the meantime, every month, communitycare.co.uk/jobs welcomes 125,000* social care professionals from all UK regions looking for their next career opportunity. Since our revamped website launched at the start of 2012, application rates have increased by 136%**!

We have a portfolio of online advertising opportunities to suit any recruitment budget. To find out how Community Care Jobs could help you recruit the employees you are looking for, please contact us on 0208 652 8870 or email recruitment.services@rbi.co.uk.

*(Average monthly unique users Jan- May 2013) **(Jan-June 2012 average growth in applications)