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Tackling the recruitment crisis in the social care sector 21/06/2010

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The media has not been kind to the social care sector. Despite the long hours and emotionally challenging days, social workers and those in social care have become scapegoats for virtually any case of childhood neglect and abuse. Serious errors of judgements have been made but the fault doesn't necessarily lie entirely with those who have to juggle rising workloads and priorities. It's of little wonder why many people are now reluctant to enter a profession steeped in infamy and a culture of blame. Little wonder as to why Britain is now experiencing a social care crisis.



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Major problems in the social care sector

Leading care charity, CarersUK are calling on the coalition government to tackle the crisis by reforming the sector and treating it as a top priority. But even though the Liberal Democrats had pledged to give more support to carers in their pre-election promises, it's unlikely that the sector will receive much attention at all.

There are fears that councils having to make big cuts will reduce pastoral support to vulnerable families. The elderly and disabled - indeed anyone dependant on social care - will be the worst affected. Indeed, the quality of care a person receives depends entirely on where they live - it's very much a postcode lottery. A child and/or vulnerable person who is lucky enough to live in an area with a good social care team will have a better outlook than a child or vulnerable person in either Haringey or Doncaster.

What does this mean for recruitment?

David Marshall, co-founder, Jobsgopublic:

"Local authorities have to work harder to attract and retain suitable candidates into the sector. They need to start developing and implementing clear and workable recruitment strategies if this social care crisis is to be overcome."

Recruiting the Foster Care Workforce of the Future: A Guide for Fostering Services written by The Fostering Network sets out recommendations and guidelines for foster family recruitment. The briefing, written specifically about foster care recruitment, can be applied to any social care role within the sector. Specifically, it recommends:

- Decide on a recruitment strategy
- Set recruitment objectives
- Portray a realistic (but not off-putting) view of the sector
- Create staff profiles of good, experienced staff
- Create a dedicated team solely for recruitment
- Conduct exit interviews and staff attitude surveys and learn from them
- Share good practice with other local authorities
- Engage the media.

How can you retain experienced staff?

One local authority experienced particular difficulties in the recruitment and retention of experienced social workers. Battling against the 'London factor' where many candidates set their sights on working in the capital, Gloucestershire County Council realised they had their work cut out for them if they were to recruit experienced

staff.

Linda Hopkins, workforce planning and resources manager, Gloucestershire County Council:

"We had very high vacancy rates as early as October/November 2008. We realised we needed to focus and target our resources into making sure we were monitoring the right areas."

Staff at Gloucestershire County Council developed a recruitment retention strategy specifically for social workers, which included payment incentives and career advancement plans. They also set up a talent pool. Gloucestershire was lucky in recruiting newly-qualified social workers due to their links with local universities, but identified an issue with successfully recruiting (and retaining) experienced staff.


Hopkins explains:

"It's about retaining good, experienced social workers who have got a solid background and strong experience of working on the frontline. We've just introduced a career progression scheme which allows our social workers to progress to senior practitioner level. I think that's where the key is: in terms of incentives, it's about retaining this experience."

A nationwide problem

Gloucestershire isn't the only local authority experiencing difficulties. Linda Hopkins believes other authorities are trying to address retention issues and *Recruiting the Foster Care Workforce of the Future: A Guide for Fostering Services* warns that it's a nationwide issue. Surrey County Council, for instance, are currently offering additional cash incentives for new recruits to the sector.


There's no doubt that strategies such as those employed by Gloucestershire and Surrey County Council do make a difference in attracting and retaining staff in the sector. It's essential for more local authorities to follow suit if the crisis is to be overcome. The next few years are certainly going to be a testing time for all involved.



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