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Practitioner Perspectives on Agency Social Work in Children and Families Social Work in England

Hugh McLaughlin [1,*], Helen Scholar[2], Su McCaughan[3] and Sarah Pollock [1]

[1]*Department of Social Care and Social Work, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester, M15 5GX, UK*
[2]*Social Work, Greater Manchester, UK*
[3]*Social Work, University of Salford, Salford, M6 6PU, UK*

*Correspondence to Professor Hugh McLaughlin, Department of Social Care and Social Work, Manchester Metropolitan University, Manchester M15 6GX, UK. E-mail: h.mclaughlin@mmu.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines practitioner perspectives on agency social work in Local Authority Children's Services Departments in England. There have been ongoing concerns about the use of agency workers, relating to cost, quality and impact on services, despite a recognition that temporary staff may be needed for a range of reasons. However, recent labour shortages and the escalating costs of agency staffing are fuelling calls for some form of regulation of agency workers. The article reviews literature on agency workers from the UK and elsewhere. It presents demographic survey data about agency workers drawn from a five-year longitudinal study on the recruitment and retention of child and family social workers and reports qualitative data from forty semi-structured interviews with social workers in Year 4 (Johnson *et al.*, 2022) of the project about their experience of agency social work and agency social workers. The findings indicate several reasons for choosing agency work, pay being the most significant but by no means the only one. The advantages and disadvantages of agency work for workers, employers and service users are considered, and suggestions are offered about further research to assist in understanding how employers can identify and address recruitment and retention factors to reduce dependence on agency staff.

Keywords: agency social workers, childcare workforce, children and families social work, recruitment and retention of social workers

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Introduction

In recent years, there has been a constant concern about the recruitment and retention of social workers in England (Baginsky, 2013; Research in Practice, 2015). This is a feature of social work not only in England but also in Sweden (Shanks, 2022), the United States (Hyde, 2020), Ireland (Burns *et al.*, 2020) and Northern Ireland (McFadden, 2018). Agency work has also been identified as problematic for other public sector services including teachers, allied health personnel and nurses (Hudson-Sharp *et al.*, 2017 and de Ruyter *et al.*, 2008).

In this article, agency workers are defined as employees supplied by a recruitment agency to an employer for a time-limited period (Cornes *et al.*, 2013), as opposed to candidates supplied for permanent roles. Recruitment of permanent and temporary staff may be carried out by the same recruitment agency. Agency workers in England are subject to the Agency Working Regulation (HM Government, 2010) designed to tackle discrimination against them in the workplace.

The article begins with background information on the recent use of agency workers; provides a review of relevant literature; explains the purpose and methodology of the five-year study on which this article is based; and presents and discusses findings relating to agency work particularly from Wave 4 of the project. The article raises questions about why child and family social workers choose to work for agencies rather than for local authorities (LAs), the benefits and costs to LAs of using agency workers, and what they might do to attract more social workers as permanent employees.

Background: Agency social workers in child and family social work in England

The data in this article are drawn from a Department for Education (DfE) five-year longitudinal study into the recruitment and retention of child and family social workers (Johnson *et al.*, 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023). The study '… aimed to collect robust evidence on recruitment, retention and progression in child and family social work (CFSW) by tracking individuals over a five-year period (Johnson *et al.*, 2023, p. 10)' and included a survey and forty qualitative follow-up interviews in each

year. The qualitative questions were reviewed each year to explore key issues identified by the DfE based on the survey findings and on topics of current policy interest to the sector. The qualitative data collected in Wave 4—carried out during a year in which agency numbers were rising significantly following a period of relative stability—included a focus on agency social work, seeking to explore the factors influencing decisions to move in or out of agency work, and participants' experiences of agency work. Survey data from the study captures information about the recent composition of the agency workforce in Children's Services, and the qualitative interviews provide insights into the factors influencing this.

In 2013, the DfE imposed a statutory duty on English LAs to report annual data on the social workers employed in their Children's Services Departments (DfE n.d.). The annual census includes details of the directly employed workforce, and of agency social workers. Their definition of agency social workers is '… children and family social workers not directly paid by the LA. These may be social workers who are paid by an agency rather than the LA or who are self-employed' (DfE, 2023). This definition differs from that used in this article, which only includes those recruited and paid by agencies, and not those working on an independent/self-employed basis. This distinction was agreed with the DfE in the development of the study methodology and assisted in establishing a clearer purposive sample excluding self-employed workers as participants for the qualitative interviews. Self-employed workers would be worthy of research in their own right.

Table 1 extracts census data concerning agency social workers for the years between 2013 and September 2023. The data indicate that whilst absolute numbers of FTE agency staff have increased throughout the period, the rate of agency workers in LAs did not increase significantly until 2022, remaining at a steady rate of between 15 per cent and 16 per cent for most of the period until jumping significantly to 18 per cent in 2022, before falling slightly in 2023. This increase is reflected in the heightened concerns that have been expressed about the impact and costs of agency staff (Jones, 2019b and Crocker, 2022).

It should be noted that the DfE statistics do not capture differences between individual LAs in their employment of agency staff and that the returns do not disaggregate information about the characteristics of agency staff and directly employed staff. Figures from a survey by The Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) highlighted that although on 30 June 2022, 16.7 per cent of the social work workforce were agency workers, the average masked significant variations. Ten LA respondents to the ADCS survey indicated that over a third of workforce was made up of agency workers—in one case almost two thirds (63 per cent)—whilst other LAs employed very few agency staff. Across the 108 LA respondents, there were sixty-eight agency project teams (530

Table 1. Number of FTE agency workers working as children and family social workers in English Local Authorities on 30 September in each of the years 2013–2023.

	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
No. of agency workers FTE	3250	4310	4860	5330	5343	5356	5754	5806	5977	6760	7200
Rate of agency workers FTE	12%	15%	16%	16.1%	16%	15%	16%	15.4%	15.5%	18%	17.8%
Vacancies FTE	3850	4320	5470[a]	5440	5823	5812	6037	6113	6522	7913	7700
Vacancy rate FTE	14%	15%	17%	16.7%	17%	16.5%	16.4%	16.%	16.7%	20%	18.9%
Percentage of agency workers covering vacancies	Not reported	New voluntary variable so data not complete	79.2%	72.6%	75%	72%	73%	75%	76.3%	80.5%	80.1%
No. of FTE agency workers covering vacancies	Not reported	New voluntary variable so data not complete	3850	3870	3865	4166	4414	4532	4558	5441	5744
No. of agency workers not covering vacancies	Not reported	New voluntary variable so data not complete	1010	1460	1340	1190	1340	1274	1421	2472	1427

Source: Department for Education (2024).

[a]This is noted as an unexpected increase and possibly a data error. See p. 6 of https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/503071/SFR07_2016_Main_Text.pdf.

workers), a rise from sixteen teams in the previous year. The ADCS (2022) report also noted an increasing percentage of agency workers who were newly qualified.

Literature review

In a recent article, Shanks (2022) claimed that literature on the use of agency workers is sparse. However, she identified a small number of key studies, mainly from the UK about a decade ago (Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2008 and Kirkpatrick and Hoque, 2006; Carey, 2011; Cornes *et al.*, 2013, 2012).

Hoque and Kirkpatrick (2008) commented that hiring agency social workers had the benefit of allowing social work organisations to maintain services during periods of staff shortage or high demand and, in these circumstances, could help to reduce workloads and thus improve morale. They also suggested that employers were potentially provided with greater flexibility and could reduce the costs of recruitment and training (Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2008). Cornes *et al.* (2013, p. 241) found that good agency workers could manage many cases 'and refresh teams with new skills and insights'.

There were, however, some negatives for the agency workers including 'unpredictable hours, unreliable pay, no benefits, lack of supervision, and weak agency attachment' (Hyde, 2020, p. 43). Hyde (2020) argued that the precarious nature of the employment and its incumbent financial insecurity and lack of stability made such work less desirable. Shanks's study found that permanent staff perceived agency workers as a necessary evil who were used 'reactively and unwillingly to counteract staffing difficulties' (2022, p10).

The literature also highlights the negative consequences of agency work for permanent social workers, employers, and service users. Cornes *et al.* (2012) noted that agency workers needed induction into the employing organisation and their lack of organisational specific knowledge could result in them being less efficient, requiring permanently employed staff having to take on the more difficult and complex tasks. In some authorities the opposite was also noticed, i.e. that agency workers were expected to take on cases that permanent workers did not want (Cornes *et al.*, 2012, 2013). This can lead 'to an unequal distribution of tasks' (Shanks, 2022, p. 3). Carey (2011) also identified that the employment of agency workers may result in a built-in lack of continuity for service users, compounded by agency workers being able to leave at short notice.

Jones (2019a) has raised issues about the growth of private agencies leading not only to an overspend on children's services budgets but also, in the case of Northamptonshire County Council in 2018, destabilising

the council's overall finances. Steve Crocker (2022) former President of the ADCS called on the government to regulate or ban social care recruitment agencies.

> Profiteering is again raising its head and I can't see that this is in the public interest, it's certainly not in the taxpayer's interest. It can't be right that private social work agencies are contacting our social workers, hoovering them up and then selling them back to us at twice the cost. (Crocker, 2022, p. 6)

The literature identifies positives and negatives for the agency worker, the employing organisation and the service user in relation to the employment of agency workers.

The study

This article draws upon data from a DfE-commissioned study carried out over five consecutive years (2018–2022) using an explanatory mixed methods design (Creswell and Creswell, 2017). Each year of the study includes an online quantitative survey, and forty qualitative semi-structured interviews.

The research was carried out jointly between IFF Research, an independent research organisation, and an academic team, in accordance with internationally accepted ethical guidelines, abiding by the Code of Conduct of the Market Research Society (Market Research Society, 2023) and with ethical approval from Manchester Metropolitan University.

Participants in the online surveys were asked to indicate if they would be willing to take part in follow-up interviews. If agreed, invitations to follow-up interviews, with information about consent and confidentiality, were sent to purposively selected social workers who were then contacted for interview. Consent was confirmed verbally at the start of the interviews.

The article is based on demographic data drawn from the surveys for the five years of the study (2018–2022), and on findings from the qualitative interviews carried out during late 2021/early 2022 for Wave 4 of the project (Johnson *et al.*, 2022).

Methods

In all waves of the study, forty follow-up qualitative interviews were carried out with survey respondents. In all five waves, the qualitative sample included some agency workers, but in Wave 4 the DfE requested that the sample should include ten social workers who had identified as agency workers at the time of the survey and that the interviews should address the issue of agency social work directly. They were also

interested in the experiences of social workers from different ethnicities (see Pollock *et al.*, 2024) and the qualitative sample included participants who had identified across the broad ethnic categories as used in the UK census, as well as a spread of other characteristics, such as job role, gender, age band, and geographical region (Johnson *et al.*, 2022, p. 176). Quotations in this article are attributed to participants as presented in the published report (Johnson *et al.*, 2022).

Of the forty interviewees, ten had been employed as agency workers at the time of survey completion, and five of the permanent/directly employed social workers had done some agency working in the past, so the sample included fifteen people with experience of working as agency staff. Nine of these fifteen identified as being from non-White backgrounds. Participants were invited to talk about their experiences of agency employment where relevant, and all were asked about their attitudes towards agency social work and agency social workers.

Interviews were semi-structured, following a themed schedule, and were recorded and professionally transcribed. Transcriptions were divided amongst members of the academic team and the data from each transcription was entered into an interactive Excel spreadsheet under each of the themed areas of the schedule. Each team member read the completed spreadsheet and met to review the material and to agree themes across the data, identifying similarities and differences (Boeije, 2002). Following initial discussions, the team revisited the transcriptions to check for further confirmation of themes, and for any outliers, and to identify relevant examples and quotations. At a final meeting, the team reviewed the data and refined the analysis.

Results

Demographic characteristics of agency social workers

At Wave 1 (Johnson *et al.*, 2019), survey data compared the percentage of agency workers to that of directly employed workers for a range of characteristics. Table 2 shows that agency staff were more likely to be male, to be older, to identify with a black or minority ethnic group and to be more experienced than their directly employed counterparts. They were also more likely to be working in 'frontline' child protection or child in need roles, in London or South-West England, and in authorities with an Ofsted rating of 'inadequate'. Ofsted is the non-ministerial department of government responsible for inspecting children's social care services. Agency workers were least likely to be employed in LAs rated outstanding.

In subsequent waves (Johnson *et al.*, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023), although the results were not presented in the same way, the surveys found that

Table 2. Percentage of agency workers/directly employed workers for specific characteristics at Waves 1 and 5 of the DfE retention study (Johnson *et al.*, 2019, 2023).

Characteristic	Wave 1		Wave 5*	
	Agency (%)	Directly employed (%)	Agency (%)	Directly employed (%)
Male	25	15	24	12
Black/Black British	33	7	+	
White/White British	+		65	74
Aged 55+	26	18		
6–10 years' experience	28	19		
Working in Greater London	32	13		
Working in SW England	18	7	#	
Working at 'inadequate' LA	21	8	18	10
Working at 'outstanding' LA	3	10	1	16

*Where percentages are not reported, this is because at Wave 5 there were no statistically significant differences between the profiles of those employed directly by a LA and those employed by an agency, Wave 5 report, p. 34, footnote 8.
+Directly comparable data not available.
#At Wave 5, agency staff were more likely to work in South West England than elsewhere in the country.

agency workers continued to be more likely to have the characteristics identified at Wave 1 in relation to age, gender, ethnic background, and length of experience compared to directly employed social workers. In all five waves, the short-term career plans of agency workers varied more than those of direct employees, and agency workers were more likely to say that they intended to leave LA child and family social work than were directly employed social workers.

Findings from the qualitative interviews

Findings are reported using three major categories: first, the reasons why individual social workers had worked or might work as agency social workers, including the perceived advantages and disadvantages of working in this way; secondly, the reasons why employers use agency social workers, and thirdly, participants' perspectives on the impact of agency social work on practice.

Reasons for working as an agency social worker

Participants were asked about the benefits or disadvantages of agency work and the factors that might influence them to choose agency work above permanent employment, or vice versa. Pay (eight responses) and flexibility (seven responses) were the most frequently mentioned benefits by the fifteen respondents who had personal experience of agency

working. Sometimes these characteristics of agency working—extra money, or the flexibility to leave a post at short notice—allowed people a means of responding to personal or career challenges or ambitions but were not the primary motivating factor for moving in or out of agency work.

Amongst those who were no longer in agency work, or who had never experienced it (30 respondents), thirteen saw lack of security as the main disadvantage. Four were explicit in stating that they had ethical objections to agency work, although one of these was nevertheless actively considering it for a short period due to their personal circumstances.

Advantages

Pay For some people, the opportunity to increase their earning power was the overriding reason for moving into or remaining in agency work, even when they were uncomfortable about doing so:

> If I was going to leave, I'd be looking potentially to go agency if I'm brutally honest. That's purely because of my financial constraints… on moral grounds I think agencies shouldn't exist, but in a—I describe myself as a realist, and in the real world the money just isn't enough. (Frontline Practitioner, Black)

One Head of Service commented on the attractions of agency pay rates for certain workers,

> I think there are real issues around mainstream social work salaries being such that single or sole breadwinners who are—particularly women and black minority women—forced into agency work because that's the only way that they can pay the bills. (Head of Service, Mixed ethnicity)

One participant explained that they had worked for ten years, reaching the top of pay scale but had been unsuccessful in achieving promotion and needed some other way of earning more money. Another said that agency work offered the opportunity to work in a less senior, and probably less stressful, role for a similar level of income, given the higher rate of hourly pay.

Flexibility Agency work gave participants 'flexibility' to move in and out of work as they wished, without having to give lengthy periods of notice. It was important to some people that they could leave a role if it was unsuitable for them, or they were experiencing unhealthy levels of stress:

> The reason why there's agency workers is because people like to have the option to get up and leave when they need to…. working two months' notice is not healthy for anyone that is feeling at rock bottom at that moment. (Agency frontline practitioner; Asian)

Another saw this as a potential way forward should they ever get to the point of considering leaving social work:

> I think if I'm really stuck and before I decide to leave the profession entirely, I might do that, just because that gives you the opportunity to go to different teams, and maybe, if you don't like it, you hand in your notice and you leave. (Frontline worker, Other)

For some, flexibility also meant the opportunity to take extended periods away from work, for example, for holidays or to spend time with family.

Agency work as a 'means to an end' Amongst those respondents who were or had been agency workers, a number had done so as a temporary measure to help achieve specific personal or career goals. Examples included relocating to another part of the country; developing their skills, knowledge and experience; frustration about lack of career progression; uncertainty about their next career steps or unhappiness in a previous post.

One respondent had spent ten months as an agency worker, seeking different experiences and the opportunity to make an informed choice about which LA they would like to work for. Another had worked for five years as an agency Team Manager to gain experience to apply for a permanent Service Manager role and was currently waiting for the right opportunity to arise.

> I'm basically doing an agency post now because it pays my bills while I look for the right post. I now know where I want to live and I'm waiting for the right post in those areas. (Agency Team Manager, White British)

Three minority ethnic social workers suggested that for them there was a link between lack of career progression and their decision to work for an agency. They felt they had encountered barriers to progression and that agency work was the only, or at least the quickest, way of earning more money:

> … Some social workers of ethnic backgrounds often tend not to progress into management because sometimes they feel that they are at a bit of a disadvantage, or not supported in the same way as their counterparts. So they will sometimes become agency workers because … you're more or less earning the same as what a manager would earn but without the extra responsibility. (Agency frontline practitioner, Black)

Someone else 'could not wait' to leave their LA following a change of management and followed other colleagues to a different employer, taking an agency post as that was the only immediate option. Although they had intended this as a temporary arrangement, they were finding the financial advantages made agency work more appealing:

> It wasn't about the money, but it is actually quite nice to feel like you're being financially valued for what I think is a very tough and demanding job … (Agency Frontline Practitioner, Mixed ethnicity)

Disadvantages

Concerns about job security Almost half the people interviewed said that they would be reluctant to work for an agency because of the lack of job security. This is the other side of the coin to the flexibility that agency workers often see as a benefit:

> … as a Dad I want a level of certainty. I've seen them just fire all of the agency staff in February to save money for six or eight weeks you know, and they can't do that to me because I'm a permanent member of staff. (Senior Practitioner, Other)

Respondents unlikely to consider agency work also valued the safety net of other benefits offered by permanent employment, such as sick pay, maternity leave and employer pension contributions.

Financial disadvantages Whilst advertised hourly rates of pay were much higher for agency staff than for equivalent employees, there were other financial implications associated with agency work, for example, responsibility for tax affairs. More than one person said that the high hourly rates seemed attractive but suggested that often workers were not much better off.

Agency workers also face some uncertainty about level and flow of income across the year, and the consequences of being in temporary, potentially precarious employment for personal financial planning.

> … it's a lot more pay absolutely [but] … you have to sort out your own sick pay, holiday pay, all of that stuff, and you've got to have a really good accountant, or you've got to be really good at it yourself … You can't get a mortgage as an agency worker. ('Other' work role, Asian)

Lack of support from the Local Authority employer A third disadvantage for some was the feeling that they were not fully integrated into a LA, with implications such as lack of access to learning and development opportunities and to other support systems. Whilst this might be expected, it was something to be considered when thinking about agency working.

> [as a permanent worker] you've got a lot more support in terms of management, and it's more of a community … they were more protective of their permanent workers than their agency workers. (Agency CP social worker, Asian)

One frontline practitioner said that as an agency worker they had been unable to train to become a Practice Educator (i.e. supporting and assessing students on placement) and another said that a benefit of moving to a permanent post would be better access to training. Funding training and development was another cost for some agency staff to consider.

What would make agency workers return to local authority employment? In the final report (Johnson *et al.*, 2023), the survey asked agency workers what would encourage them to return to LA employment. The three main drivers to do so were more pay (64 per cent), better life–work balance (29 per cent) and better opportunities to progress (28 per cent)., Further research about the effect of agency experience on progression for those who return to LA posts would be of interest.

When asked which was most important 54 per cent said more pay, and at Wave 5, there was an increased proportion of social workers considering a move to agency, perhaps because recent cost of living pressures.

> I think the reason a lot of people are jumping ship to agency is because you do get a little bit more money … it's about making ends meet and not struggling, not worrying … -. I've got to go out and visit. I don't have diesel in the car. I don't have money in the bank but don't get paid for another week and. How am I supposed to go and do my job? (Agency social worker, CP, Wave 5)

Why use agency social workers?

LAs and other employers of children and family social workers typically use agency staff to fill gaps caused by recruitment and retention problems, although in some circumstances agency workers may be engaged to deal with peaks in demand, or to carry out specific pieces of work.

Ongoing recruitment and retention challenges Some participants talked about long-standing, entrenched difficulties with recruitment, related to reputational issues including poor Ofsted ratings, or geographical location, in terms of the attractiveness of the location to potential staff, and/or proximity to Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) with social work programmes providing a supply of Newly Qualified Social Workers. Others, at the level of team manager and above, said they preferred not to use agency staff, but acknowledged that there was little option available given ongoing recruitment and retention problems, and rising, increasingly complex, caseloads.

> It's always been difficult to recruit and retain social workers in XX, but more recently there's been more reliance on agency workers and more experienced agency staff because of the predominance of ASYEs in the team. (Team Leader, Asian)

Another said that their organisations made relatively little use of agency workers, and talked about ways to improve retention such as providing a positive and supportive working environment, with competitive packages of pay and conditions:

> What you have to do is make it an organisation that is really attractive to people to work in so that you don't need to fill in gaps with agency

> staff. And we're lucky that a lot of attention was put into making it a good place to work, where you're going to get really good support, and really good management, and really good training so that people want to work here. (Service Manager, Other)

Temporary workload relief Participants recognised that there might be circumstances when organisations required support from temporary agency workers to meet a particular need. Suggestions for other ways of responding to temporary pressures included an example of a LA who encouraged recently retired workers to return to cover gaps or complete specific pieces of work, and the creation of LA peripatetic teams, the members of which could be moved around to areas where help was most needed. It is interesting to consider whether such peripatetic teams might also create issues of disrupted support for service users similar to that reportedly caused by individual agency workers.

Impact of the pandemic The Covid-19 pandemic resulted in extraordinary pressures on LAs and unusual patterns of staff movement which had led to an increase in the use of agency social workers. An early consequence of the pandemic was the absence of staff due to illness, isolation and shielding. LAs urgently needed to staff their services, and employing agency workers was one way of doing this.

One participant who said their LA had been trying to reduce agency workers prior to the pandemic, found that they were needed again:

> There's a lot of change at the moment and a lot of unsteadiness and a lot of movement, I think, towards agency work. And I think it is because of, you know, the various experiences within local authorities, the response to the pandemic, the workload … all of those things and more really. (Agency front line practitioner, Black)

As the pandemic continued, more flexible home working arrangements offered opportunities for staff to take posts in geographical areas that would have been impractical for them before the pandemic. Flexible work arrangements and the ability to work from home were being highlighted as advantages in advertisements on agency recruitment sites.

This, alongside what one respondent described as a *mass exodus* of staff (e.g. through early retirement), brought about staff shortages and in some LAs, a struggle to recruit anyone, including agency workers:

> … we've found quite a lot of staff have gone. Because we're offering flexibility now, people can go to agencies and get paid more, and work from home. We're losing those staff and we're not able to recruit, because a lot of places are working from home and a lot of people are [now] much happier where they are. (Practice Supervisor, Mixed ethnicity)

Perspectives on the contribution of agency staff

A common theme throughout the interviews was that whilst agency workers were sometimes needed, colleagues and managers often perceived the impact on work with children and families as negative. The two main reasons given were the rapid turnover of agency staff, and the variable quality of their work.

Turnover Managing turnover of agency staff was challenging, given that they can move on with only a week's notice. Nine respondents mentioned experiences of agency staff leaving suddenly, with work not completed and little in the way of handover. One Team Manager said that most of the agency staff in their team appeared to have 'their own agenda' and left at short notice, sometimes leaving complex work for permanent colleagues to pick up.

The overwhelming view of participants was that short-term agency staffing was not good for work with children and families, particularly in some areas of practice; and that staff moving on at key points in children's 'journeys' was problematic. Agency workers leaving during preparation for court proceedings was a particular concern.

> It's one of the biggest factors in causing delays for children in care proceedings…. every time there is a new social worker, the decision making almost starts again. (Practice Leader, White British)

This impacted on relationships with children, and their families. Several social workers reported a perception that agency workers were seen as less invested in the work by family members and quoted comments that they interpreted as suggesting this. They noted that parents sometimes had negative views about agency staff, and suggested that they understood why:

> I don't think it's the right way of working with children, especially like in this team, where it's very long-term work and children need consistency and stability. I don't think agency work lends itself to that at all. (Team manager, Mixed ethnicity)

> I think it probably adds to a stronger sense of instability for the families, you know, you've just got agency staff coming and going all the time (Agency front line practitioner, mixed ethnicity)

Despite these concerns, another respondent who said that half their current team was agency staff, and turnover was high, suggested this was probably the lesser of two evils.

An Assistant Team manager pointed out that the temporary nature of the contracts works both ways and that agency staff can be given a week's notice if there is concern about standards or if service acquires sufficient permanent staff.

Quality The quality and experience of agency workers were issues for some respondents, although most acknowledged that this was variable and that some, more experienced and established agency staff made valuable contributions.

> In our team for a long time, we were literally on our knees and begging … and we ended up having two agency workers … and they've fitted in really well in the team, and it's just been really lovely actually. (Adoption social worker, Black)

However, there was frustration with less effective agency workers, both because people felt that money could be better spent in supporting families, and because of some resentment that these workers were earning more than permanent colleagues left with more work when they moved on:

> … I've worked with some cracking agency workers who are really good, go above and beyond, and then I've also worked with some who leave their cases in a mess … hand their notice in or get pushed out and then the cases are just in a mess, so it's like, what was the point in even having them in the first place? (Fostering social worker, Black)

Two people suggested that there were aspects of agency social work that might be improved by some form of regulation. On quality, one practice supervisor said that agency work should not be available to NQSWs.

> … agency workers need to come with more experience. And I don't love that you can do your ASYE [Assessed and Supported Year in Employment] as an agency; but also, we're desperate for social workers, so I don't know whether that's ever going to change. (Practice Supervisor, Other)

Discussion

These findings suggest that social workers and employers recognise that there is a legitimate place for agency—or at least, temporary—social workers in the sector. The steady rate of agency workers as a proportion of permanent staff over the past ten years indicates that this is a long-standing requirement, although of course some employers make more use of agency staff than others. This is reflected in the variation in perceptions between respondents about the extent of agency working.

However, respondents reported dissatisfaction with the levels of experience and quality of some agency staff, and concern about the impact on children and families of their typically short-term involvement. Most would prefer employers to do more to retain permanent staff by providing attractive pay, working conditions, support and development opportunities. Some employers were seen to do this better than others

Respondents who had worked as agency staff had done so for a variety of reasons, and amongst those interviewed, most saw this as a temporary arrangement, often for personal/career reasons. Only a small number reported having worked in agency roles for several years. Agency work was seen as a positive option for some workers, in particular sets of personal circumstances or at pivotal points in their careers. Whilst pay was significant, it is by no means the only reason that social workers choose agency roles, and some found the financial benefits less favourable than they had anticipated. The positive and negative aspects of agency working noted by participants echo those found in earlier studies and include greater flexibility and autonomy, opportunities to gain broader experience, the chance to 'try out' different employers, or to escape from unsatisfactory or unhappy employment situations (Hoque and Kirkpatrick, 2008; Carey, 2011, Cornes *et al.*, 2012, Hyde, 2020 and Shanks, 2022).

The survey findings throughout the five years of the study indicated that agency workers are more likely to identify as Black or from another minority ethnic group. The difference between the percentage of Black/British workers in the agency workforce compared to the directly employed workforce at Wave 1 (33 per cent compared to just 7 per cent) is striking (see Table 2). At Wave 5, White British staff represented 65 per cent of the agency workforce as opposed to 74 per cent of those directly employed by a LA (Johnson *et al.*, 2023, p. 34). Perhaps surprisingly then, ethnicity was not identified as particularly significant by most of this group of respondents. However, a small number suggested that perceived barriers to career progression influenced the decision of some ethnic minority workers to move to agencies as a way of increasing their earning power when promotion appeared unlikely. Males were also overrepresented in the agency workforce (24 per cent), whilst constituting only 12 per cent of the LA workforce (Johnson *et al.*, 2023, p. 34).

Whilst the south-west region employed the most agency workers over the research period, there were significant variations between different areas of the country, and in some cases, different LAs in the same region. This may be a consequence of local economic and social factors, but there is also evidence to suggest that Ofsted rating is a factor. Eighteen per cent of agency workers worked in LAs rated 'inadequate', compared to 10 per cent of those who were employed directly. Conversely, agency workers were underrepresented in 'outstanding' rated' LAs; 1 per cent as opposed to 16 per cent (Johnson *et al.*, 2023, p. 34). It should not be assumed that having a high proportion of agency workers implies an 'inadequate' LA; but it may be that after being designated 'inadequate', employers find social workers move on and it becomes more difficult to recruit staff. Wave 5 survey responses tend to support this—social workers in inadequate authorities were more likely

to expect to be working in an agency in 12 months' time; 29 per cent compared with 17 per cent overall. Further research designed to understand the impact of these factors, and how far numbers and rates of agency workers correlate with specific characteristics of individual LAs might throw more light on the issue.

Use of agency staff has been relatively stable until the recent increase during 2022, potentially related to the cost of living (see Table 1). It is not yet known if this represents a persistent and permanent change if nothing is done to address issues such as pay, remuneration packages and support for staff. Of course, since the interviews reported here were carried out, there have been new pressures related to the war in Ukraine and the widespread recruitment crisis in the UK. Concern about agency workers has been further exacerbated by the recent growth in agency teams and the unwillingness of recruitment agencies to provide individual workers, but instead only whole teams of staff, with increasing costs and disruption to services (Crocker, 2022). Jones (2019a and b) and Crocker, (2022) have raised concerns about the profiteering of private agencies and the impact on children's services. The commissioned independent government report *The Independent Review of Children's Social Care* recommended that English local authorities needed to reduce the use of agency social work, by developing new rules and regional staff banks (MacAlister, 2022).

Strengths and limitations

A limitation of this article is that the issue of agency working was only one element of a more wide-ranging recruitment and retention longitudinal research project. It does, however, resonate with previous research and provides an updated snapshot of the experiences of agency workers, how they are viewed by other social workers and the benefits and costs to the employing local authority and agency worker. The findings suggest areas for further research, including how far the use and characteristics of agency staff in LAs might act as a 'barometer' for the pressures an organisation is under.

The respondents to the survey were self-selecting, as were those participants who agreed to provide more information in the follow-up interviews. This suggests the need for a more focussed study with a larger sample of agency workers and LA employed social workers to tease out the complexities and nuances of the issues. Why do some employers have much less need for agency personnel? What is it that they are doing differently? Why is there an over-representation of Black/Black British workers in the agency workforce? Is the number of agency workers a contributor towards an inadequate inspection outcome or a

consequence of the outcome? Would increasing pay reduce the number of agency workers in child and family work?

Conclusions

In 2012, Cornes *et al.* (2013) suggested we had seen the zenith of agency working and that it would become an historical artefact. This has clearly not been the case. LAs need to be able to supplement their workforce from time-to-time to meet their statutory responsibilities. However, this should not come at a cost that threatens to destabilise budgets. If it is accepted that agency staff will remain a part of the social care landscape, more needs to be done to ensure that service users do not suffer and that agency workers can thrive in an environment in which they would want to work on a permanent basis and where they can contribute to better service delivery.

Those who choose to become agency staff are not only in it for the money, although current economic circumstances appear to be making better paid agency work more attractive. However, participants in the interviews who talked about decisions made in more stable economic circumstances cited a range of reasons for moving into agency roles, some of which perhaps could be addressed in other ways. Given the continuing issues with recruitment and retention of children's social workers, and the current more acute context, it seems likely that the need for temporary staff will remain at a significant level unless permanent employment conditions become as or more attractive than agency working. This is something that LAs can have some control over by implementing measures likely to encourage the recruitment and retention of permanent social workers.

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