'Should I stay or should I go? The experiences of 40 social workers in England who had previously indicated they would stay or leave children and families social work.

ABSTRACT

This article is focussed on the concern about the retention of child and family social workers in England. Retention of workers is seen as a major issue for the delivery of quality services for service users, stability of workforces and development of social work. The article reviews international studies in relation to retention identifying a gap in relation to studies that have followed up those who indicated they were going to leave child and family social work but were unable to say whether they acted on this intention or not. This sudy focuses on 40 semi-structured interviews with child and family social workers in year two of a five year longitudinal study half of whom had indicated they would remain or leave social work practive and followed them up to as whether they did so or not. The findings indicated that there were major similarities between those who left and those who stayed. However, the importance of the interaction of organisational, job role and individual factors provide organisations with opportunities to mitigate such challenging aspects of children and families social work so that their workers feel supported, and able to respond to these challenges positively.

Key words: social work job retention, social work job satisfaction, social work leavers, social work turnover

Teaser Text

This article focuses on the retention of child and family social workers. Such retention is important as it can impact upon service user experience, potentially result in an inexperienced workforce and.in the local authority. This is not only an issue in the England , but also internationally. The article identifies the key issues from these international studies but notes that the intention to 'stay' or 'leave' has not been followed up to find out whether these intentions were carried out. This study follows up 40 social workers who said the would leave or stay one year after this decision those identifying who actually left or stayed and why. In so doing it provides an insight in key issues for social workers in relation to the culture of their organisation, managers support, supervision, the stress involved in the job, and personal issues like; caring responsibilities, health issues, reaching the age of retirement and most importantly the impact of the role on their families which can lead to 'lightbulb moments'. Whilst local authorities cannot manage all these issues the paper argues that there are opportunities for local employers to make it more likely that their workers will remain with them.

INTRODUCTION

There are considerable implications of high turnover and poor retention for the delivery of high-quality social work services to children and families.   Baginsky (2013) states that poor retention in social work results in a workforce with insufficient numbers of experienced staff capable of dealing with the complexity of the work, of providing appropriate leadership and support to less experienced colleagues.

High turnover impacts upon the quality of service user experience, affects public confidence; limits opportunities for individual and organisational learning; and offers a low return on investment in social work education (Research in Practice, 2015).

In 2018 the Department for Education (DfE) in England commissioned a five year longitudinal study to collect evidence about child and family social work recruitment, retention, and progression in England (Johnson et al. 2019, 2020). This is a mixed methods explanatory study (Cresswell and Creswell, 2017) consisting of an annual quantitative survey and 40 follow-up qualitative semi-structured interviews.

In this paper, we focus on findings from the qualitative element of Wave 2 of the study, drawing on interviews with social workers invited to participate based on their intention to leave or stay at Wave 1, compared to how they had acted on that intention by Wave 2.

CONTEXT

The DfE annual census of the child and family social work workforce defines child and family social workers as registered social workers "…working in a local authority children's services department, or, if working in an authority where the services are joined up, working exclusively with children and families" (DfE, 2020, p.3). Tables 1 and 2 summarise the key workforce statistics for the years ending 30 September 2017 - 2019 based on local authority (LA) returns at individual social worker level (DfE, 2018,2019,2020). In September 2019, 32,900 child and family social workers were directly employed by English local authorities.

Table 1 about here

Table 2 about here

This data shows that over these three years, staff aged 50 years or more made up between 29-30% of the workforce, suggesting high levels of upcoming replacement demand.   While there were 5,900 starters in the year ending September 2019, 68% of the 5300 people who left during the same period did so within five years of taking up post, and 35% within two years. Leavers are defined as those who have left a child and family LA post, including those who remain in LA employment but moved to a non-child and family role, those who have begun a career break, were seconded or who have left the profession altogether (DfE 2020). Social workers moving between different child and family posts within the same authority are not counted as starters or leavers.

The DfE census does not capture the reasons why social workers leave their jobs, nor does it provide information about their destinations. This information is important to understand whether social workers are turning their backs on the profession or are seeking opportunities to practise differently outside the LA sector.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Concern about retention of children and family social workers, particularly in child protection, is not confined to the UK. Over the past fifteen years or so, there has been considerable international research interest in the factors affecting turnover in studies from the USA (DePanfilis and Zlotnik, 2008; Madden et al., 2014), Australia (Chiller and Crisp, 2012), Canada (Mandell et al., 2013) and Ireland (McFadden et al. 2014; McFadden, 2018; Burns et al 2020).

This body of research varies considerably in terms of scale, scope and methodological approaches, but the studies and the literature they draw upon identify some commonly occurring factors thought to influence job satisfaction. These factors are also found across a range of occupations, not only in children's and family social work. Herzberg (1959) has previously categorised these into two groups – maintenance or hygiene factors, which included characteristics of the job external to the worker, such as salary, conditions and organisational culture; and motivation factors, such as opportunities for personal growth and development, challenge and sense of purpose. Job satisfaction appears to influence, but is not causally linked, to intention to stay or leave a particular job (Hellman, 1997; Huseein et al, 2014). The relationship between job satisfaction, intention to leave and acting on that intention is not well understood at the individual or organisational level. A study of turnover in US federal agencies (Cohen et al, 2016) suggests that the link between intention to leave and turnover at organisational level is a tenuous one.

Larger scale quantitative and mixed methods studies of job retention and turnover are more common in the USA, where it should be remembered that in many state jurisdictions, frontline child welfare workers do not require a social work qualification to undertake child protection work. DePanfilis and Zlotnik (2008) carried out a systematic review of studies published between 1974 and 2004 looking at the retention of frontline staff in child welfare in the USA. From 154 papers, they identified nine, dating between 1986 and 2004, that met their criteria of studies using multivariate analyses to explore the relationships between organizational and/or personal factors as independent variables and retention or turnover as dependent variables. The authors encountered significant challenges in comparing results

of the studies given the wide range of definitions, samples and variables involved. However, they concluded that the research reinforced the importance of commitment to child welfare, self-efficacy and low levels of emotional exhaustion as significant personal factors for staying in the role, and at the organisational level, supervisory support, co-worker support, salary and benefits.

A longitudinal qualitative study by Burns et al. (2020) in Ireland involved interviews with 19 child and family social workers, carried out ten years after their involvement in an earlier study (Burns, 2011). The earlier study interviewed 35 social workers practising in child protection and welfare social work, and ten who had left similar roles. The findings suggested that those social workers who were following a career preference, with child and family social work as a first choice, were more likely to remain than 'transients', who accepted child protection work as a route into another role. A third category, 'converts', who began as 'transients', changed their preferences based on experiences in the job. In the follow-up study, the researchers re-contacted original participants who had remained in this area of practice, seeking to understand the experiences of 'stayers', something they say was not well covered in existing literature on the social work workforce. The authors used job embeddedness theory (Zhang et al 2012; Lee et al, 2014) to analyse the interviews. Job embeddeness has been described as an employee's "stuckness" within a larger social system (Lee et al 2014. P.201) resulting from external forces conceptualised under the dimensions of Fit (compatibility with the employing organisation and surrounding community), Sacrifice (the perceived costs of leaving) and Links (formal or informal connections between the individual and the organisation and community).

McFadden et al (2015), reviewed 65 papers looking at resilience and burnout in child protection/child welfare work. Papers included were published between 2000 and 2009, in English, and the key search terms were, resilience or burnout in combination with retention and turnover. Thematic analysis identified nine themes influencing resilience and burnout – four individual (personal history of maltreatment; training and preparation for the role; coping with job demands; job satisfaction) and five at an organisational level (organisational commitment; culture and climate; workload; peer and management support; compassion fatigue).

In contrast there appears to be little research that interrogates the experiences of social workers who have actually left their children and families social work posts.   Consequently, we perhaps know more about dissatisfied remainers than we do about actual leavers.

An exception to this is McFadden (2018) who interviewed 15 social workers who were continuing to work in child protection posts, and 15 who had left. However, most of the leavers in this study had left child protection roles and moved into other areas of children and family social work, two thirds citing the stress of the child protection role as a reason for their move. McFadden (2018) found that manager and peer support, positive supervision and supportive relationships were of critical importance in this difficult work.

THE STUDY

The DfE commissioned a landmark study in 2018 tracking children and family social workers over a five-year period, to collect robust evidence on recruitment, retention, and progression (Johnson et al, 2019). The length and scale of the study reflects the acknowledged challenges of turnover research, summarised by Lee et al(2014) as requiring longitudinal work, large sample sizes given the relatively small proportions of leavers and the difficulties of accessing workers who have left their employment.

For this study a child and family social worker was defined as a qualified social worker registered with the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC) or later, the new regulator, Social Work England (SWE). The study included all children and family social workers working for a local authority or for one of the nine Children's Trusts in England, irrespective of seniority. Children's Trusts were introduced in 2016 by the UK government (DfE 2016) to remove local authority control of delivery of children's services usually in a 'failing' local authority (Jones, 2019). Throughout this article we refer to social workers in both settings as local authority children's social workers.

In Wave 1 95 of the 152 Local Authorities/Children's Trusts in England agreed to particiate, with survey responses received from 5,621 social workers; a response rate of 27%, and representing 1:6 of all child and family social workers in England (Johnson et al., 2019, p.11). Of this group 4,597 (82%) agreed to be recontacted in the following year and provided email addresses for this. In Wave 2 (Johnson et al.,

2020) prior to the impact of COVID-19, 3,302 (72%) of contacted children and family social workers completed the second survey (see table 3). Alongside the survey there were 40 interviews with children and family social workers in both years.

Table 3 about here

In Wave 2 (Johnson et al., 2020) most survey respondents (94%) were still employed in local authority child and family social work posts. Of these nearly nine in ten (89%) were working in the same local authority. One in ten (10%) had moved to another local authority, although most of these were employed by recruitment agencies, and were more likely to be on fixed term or casual contracts. Only a small minority (5%) of the respondents had left local authority child and family work between the two Waves. This did not mean that they had turned their back on social work as half of these were still employed as social workers either as a child and family social worker in the independent sector, or in a different area of social work e.g. adult services. The numbers of leavers are also likely to be under-estimated as some of the leavers may not have responded to the Wave 2 survey.

Methodology

The research covers five consecutive years using an explanatory mixed methods design (Cresswell and Creswell, 2017), consisting of a quantitative survey and qualitative semi-structured interviews to explore key issues from the surveys. The qualitative research reported here received ethical approval from XXX University and informed consent was provided by interviewees prior to interview and at the start of each interview.

In 2019-20 we carried out 40 qualitative interviews. Interviewees were divided into four categories based on the 2018 -19 children and family social workers survey intentions, ten of each who had said they were either going to:

- stay and stayed (SS)
- stay but left (SL).
- leave and left (LL).

- leave but stayed (LS).

This article focuses on these qualitative interviews in trying to understand the factors influencing participants' decisions. The sampling for the interviewees was purposive in that they were selected to represent similar demographic factors across the four groupings. As far as possible, they were matched in terms of role, length of time in post, gender, ethnicity, and qualification route. It was not always possible to match these exactly due to the smaller numbers in the categories of child and family workers who said they would stay but left and for those who said they would leave but stayed. Some of the matched participants failed to respond to invitations to participate in the qualitative interviews; and given the smaller numbers in the stay but left and leave but stayed groups, demographic matching across categories was not fully achieved.

The interviews followed a semi-structured themed format and all interviews were digitally recorded and then transcribed. The team then split the four groups of respondents between them and read all the transcripts from one group before meeting for a day to review the data and compare it across the four groupings in relation to the themed sections of the interview schedules. The findings from each group were then coded, reviewed with a re-reading of the original data, and the main and subsidiary themes identified. Themes were then discussed and elaborated and a detailed framework for analysis developed. This framework was later transferred to an interactive Excel spreadsheet into which the authors were able to independently add quotations, discussion points and observations based on their own review of the data which they had collected, and to identify new cells for any questions or outliers they wished to discuss with the other team members. One member of the team then read all those who had indicated they would stay and another member all those who said they would leave. The team then met together again to further refine the analysis using the constant comparative method (Boeije, 2002) focussing on similarities and differences between the data sets and how these could be understood in relation to the key dimensions of the study. By doing this it was possible to examine patterns of responses to the same questions from each of the four groupings identifying where there were these acting as an enabler or barrier to someone staying as a child and family social work.

Results

In reporting the results, we have split the responses into three major categories, the first two of which correspond broadly to the external and motivation factors influencing job satisfaction, described by Herzberg et al (1959) above. These relate firstly to external, organisation-level factors, such as

resources, organisational culture and managers; secondly to factors that are intrinsic to the job itself, such as stress, caseload and supervision. The third category concerns individual factors and personal circumstances that influenced the decisions that participants made about specific jobs, or their broader career plans.

Organisational Factors

In this section we look at resources, organisational culture, managers, Whilst these issues are identified individually it is clear they impact and interact with each other. A lack of resources or poor administrative support will impact upon an organisational culture and how workers and managers will be able to do their job.

Resources

Both those who intended to stay and those who had left noted that government austerity measures (Jones, 2019) had negatively impacted on job satisfaction. Local Authority Children's services in England saw a reduction in their funding of 23% between 2010/11 and 2018/19 resulting in a 46% decrease in early intervention services and a 29% increase in later intervention (Action for Children, National Children's Bureau, NSPCC, The Children's Society and Barnardos 2020). This has placed children's services under severe pressure (Marsh, 2020). Around half of the survey respondents indicated that they had insufficient resources to do their job (47% in Wave 1; 45% in Wave 2 (Johnson et al., 2020, p.68); and while this did not feature as one of the main reasons for considering leaving in the survey (see Table 5 below) it was a significant theme in the qualitative interviews, often mentioned in response to a question asking participants what three changes they would like to see in child and family social work, and contributing to the challenges of the job.

As one stayer noted:

> It's about taking into account the fact that we've been in a country now where we've had ten years of cuts to services, where we're surprised when care proceedings have increased, where we're surprised when early health and all the preventative services have generally been cut… our job has become less about support and preventative work, and more response to crisis and it shouldn't have ever been like that. (SS2)

Similarly, a worker who had previously stated they were going to stay but had left identified a lack of resources being one of the three main reasons why she had gone:

> I used to find it frustrating where I used to go and complete assessments for families, and identify their needs and their issues, but there would be a lack of resources available to implement them... So it just felt like an impossible task, I felt like I was a one-man band. (SL13)

Organisational Culture

Several workers talked about characteristics of their employing organisation, referring to factors such as the atmosphere within the workplace, management expectations of staff, and how they were treated, for example in terms of support when things went wrong. These factors contributed to the 'culture' of the setting. Where organisations have produced written mission or values statements, some participants identified a disjuncture between the espoused values of such statements and values in action. There was a similarity of experiences between those who had stayed and those who had left. Perceptions about the organisation's culture seemed to affect satisfaction and was one of the most common reasons for considering leaving (see Table 5).

An example was captured in a LA where the espoused values endorsed taking time off in lieu (TOIL), but staff did not feel supported to do so,

> I have 37 hours of TOIL accrued, when am I going to take it?' (SL7)

Another worker who had stayed also felt unable to use their TOIL as time off, but:

> I've used TOIL and flexitime, but that is normally taken up by doing something that I need to focus on, because I can't get at it in the office (LS11).

More positively one worker who stayed felt able to say:

> I'm having TOIL when I need it, just all the things that it says in the handbook that you're supposed to have (SS3)

Similarly, employers' approaches to staff wellbeing varied and were not always viewed as supportive. A social worker noted that the response by management to concerns about 'coping' expressed by two new workers undertaking their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) was:

> The next week they put up a wellbeing board, - with posters - go for a walk at lunchtime. If you are feeling bad, try eating your five fruit and veg. ... it was ridiculous.... that was the response we got, not the offer of external supervision or counselling' (LL8)

Managers

A good relationship with a supportive line manager was highly valued and could make a significant difference to a social worker's experience, although having that support was not always enough to prevent staff deciding to leave.

Some of those who had previously said they were leaving but had in fact stayed were influenced by a change of manager. One frontline worker social worker who was intending to leave but was now pleased to be staying said: 'I cannot stress how massive that change is, (a new manager) in terms of my personal health and my personal well-being' (LS9).

Most stayers spoke positively of their relationship with their manager, and one identified this as crucial:

> …if you don't have your manager's support, then you're on your own, and I think if they don't understand what it's like to be front-line, and dealing with families, and getting abuse and struggling with deadlines etcetera, if they don't know that then it's just really difficult to communicate or be honest in supervision. If you can't be honest … then it's a very slippery slope, you know, mental health-wise, and I think that's so important, that we need to be as safe as our families. (SS3).

It was noticeable that most of the respondents felt that their primary loyalty and commitment was to their teams: 'It's a lot more to do with the people in your team and the people managing you than anything else. I think this has been what makes it hard work, or what makes it easier' (SL17). This was reflected by participants who said they felt were letting their team down by leaving, rather than their employer.

Factors Intrinsic to being a social worker

There are several factors which participants accepted as intrinsic to the role; including stress and workload pressures, although these could be ameliorated by positive experiences of supervision.

Stress

Most interviewees expected child and family social work to be stressful. Overall, 56% of child and family social workers reported being stressed in Wave 2 up from 51% in Wave 1 (see table 4). In both Waves, workload and the amount of paperwork were reported as the two main sources of stress.

Table 4 about here

Workload stress was a common feature in the lives of both leavers and stayers. It was also acknowledged that stress would have peaks and troughs, which meant that intention to stay or leave could change according to levels of stress being experienced at a particular point in time:

> I would say that it oscillates between sometimes I really love my work and I'm feeling confident in it and I would put myself between an eight and a ten, and other days it is extremely difficult to do my job and I'd put myself on a two or something. (LS15)

One intending leaver who went on to leave their job stated they were 'working from home every night and over weekends as well, that was seen as the norm, as part of the culture' (LL8), whilst another said,

> It was obviously extremely stressful, and I was burning out ...it just led to that burnt out feeling of never being on top of anything …So I decided that I just needed to leave for my own mental health' (LL 6).

A worker who had initially indicated they were going to leave but got another post within the same authority away from frontline social work said,

> I'm sleeping better now, I've got a better life-work balance and can spend more time with my family the time pressures are predictable, so I know when the busy times are …I can plan for it. (LS 13).

An intended stayer who had actually left had moved onto a career in accountancy and noted that now at the end of the day she no longer took her work home with her, 'My brain never switched off before …. Now everything can wait until tomorrow' (SL15).

Caseload/Workload

Between Wave 2 and Wave 1 the major source of stress had changed from being the completion of the paperwork to caseload in Wave 2 (21% in Wave 1 and 24% in Wave 2 -see table 4). In Wave 2 the mean number of cases per worker was 18.8 cases, down from 19.2 in Wave 1, with 14% holding more that 26+ cases and 24% 21-25 cases. Cases were defined as "an individual allocated to a social worker (for example a family of three siblings would be three individual cases) and/or a carer or carers allocated to a social worker for the purposes of fostering or adoption."(Johnson et al, 2020, p.48). However, we should not necessarily assume that a higher number of cases inevitably meant a more stressful workload;

> When I started, I was really anxious about caseloads and the number of cases that I would have and what I've come to realise is that I could have 25 children on child in need and child protection plans and probably just keep my head above water, but if I had three families in care proceedings and no other work I would still be constantly drowning. (LS15)

They went on to explain that court work could require up to eight sessions with parents, sixteen if parents had separated and formed new relationships, which would then need three or four days to write up. Whilst we have traditionally taken the number of cases as a proxy for the volume of worker activity it is clearly inaccurate and further research is required to develop a more nuanced model to measure social worker workloads.

Supervision

Kettle (2015) claims that supervision is an essential component of social work and that it is essential for all organisational levels within social work. Whilst the evidence on the impact of supervision on service delivery (Carpenter, et al. 2012) is poor, good supervision is often associated with job satisfaction and the retention of staff (Lambley & Marrable, 2013).

Generally, supervision was welcomed by workers, but it tended to be workload driven, as illustrated by these comments by a leaver:

> My supervision was great. It was more case supervision; it wasn't about me...but I found that very helpful because it was my time to sit down and talk to my manager about where I was thinking things were going. (LL11)

Just as in the example above, a positive experience of supervision was not necessarily enough to persuade people to stay nor did a negative experience of supervision necessarily mean a worker would leave:

> Well, I had a long period of time where I felt not safe with my manager. I didn't feel valued, I didn't get supervision, my opinion didn't matter. All those, like, really horrible things that are really crucial when you're working front-line…(SS3)

However, it was clear that for most respondents, inconsistent or inadequate case supervision was a stressor:

> …as I was leaving, I was due to have my fifth manager and that affected my decision making because I didn't have that one person to go to talk to about my caseload…another manager would come and I'd go to speak to them about the case but they wouldn't have a clue (SL13)

Individual Factors

Ultimately, the decision to leave or remain is an individual one, based upon several interacting factors including those outside the workplace. These factors sometimes triggered decisions to leave even amongst people who had indicated an intention to remain at Wave 1 including changes to personal and family circumstances, health including mental health and emotional well-being. The survey questionnaire asked respondents who were considering leaving child and family social work to indicate all reasons, and their main reason for this (see Table 5); in both Waves 1 and 2 retirement was most commonly chosen as the main reason, and increased as a percentage of responses from 15% to 20% between the two waves (Johnson et al., 2020). Incompatibility with family relationships and long working hours, along with dislike of the culture, paperwork, and high caseloads all featured significantly amongst the reasons cited.

Personal Circumstances

For some social workers, personal issues, and life course events, such as having a first child, bringing up a young family, or caring for adult relatives played a significant part in decisions about staying or leaving.

Such factors sometimes led to clear 'tipping points' which resulted in a decision to leave, even where this was not something that the individual was actively considering. Other examples included sudden and unexpected life changes, such as workers' own health issues, bereavement, or serious family illness, or increased caring demands incompatible with continuing in paid employment.

Put Table 5 here

Several social workers suggested that the impact of their work on family members, particularly on their own children, crept up on them, and described this as 'lightbulb moments'. As one of the leavers recounted:

> … there was the time at home, when he had to look in my diary just to see if he could put some time in to have a conversation with me…. this is not only impacting on me, its impacting on my family (LL10)

Another reported a similar experience:

> My seven-year-old daughter said, because I said to her, "Oh, you know, I'm looking for a new job", and she said, "That's really good Daddy, because you're really sad at work." If she's picking that up at seven, it is having an impact more than I think. (LL8)

A social worker who initially indicated they were going to stay but had now left reflected on the implications of a similar realisation:

> 'I didn't want to end up being a person that needed children's services because of my job'(SL3)

However, not everyone who experienced conflicting demands of work and family left their jobs. Some of those who had stayed described similar issues, but had been able to find a way to accommodate these pressures, where their employers were willing and able to be flexible. One social worker with significant family commitments said: 'Working for this LA has allowed me to be flexible with my caring responsibilities, and my work commitments (SS8).'

Another who left because of the impact upon her family subsequently returned to the same organisation on a part-time contract basis. This she suggested allowed her more control over her work-life balance.

The challenge appears to be how to manage the worlds of work and home. The interviews suggested that some people can achieve this, whereas for others the tensions between the two become so unbalanced that they feel no option but to leave. It is not easy to determine the relative importance of individual factors, but it is likely that it is an amalgam of the severity of any single factor and the accumulation of several factors, both personally and organisationally.

It is important to note that while family commitments can contribute to decisions to leave, having the support of, but also responsibilities towards, a family can sometimes help workers to find a better work life balance. As one team manager observed:

> I have a lot going on outside of work as well, so I've got two kids, I'm a single mum, I've got a dog that's only eighteen months old, so I've got lots to do when I get home. So, I, kind of, have to leave, I have to get home, I have to pick the kids up, so that stuff, I don't have the choice of, kind of, sitting down until eight, nine o'clock in the office or whatever, I have to get on and do other things, so that's helpful (SS1).

Emotional impact of distress, anxiety and fear

The qualitative interviews suggest that social work is not only stressful, but involves a significant emotional component. This may be due to the ongoing 'emotional labour' (Hochschild, 1983) involved in being exposed to distressing events, or trying to support people in continuing challenging circumstances. The inability to support children and families as they would wish, due to lack of resources, was a source of concern for some respondants, and resonates with the notion of 'moral distress' which 'arises if one action is preferred and seen as morally superior, but the person feels blocked from pursuing it by factors outside the self' (Featherstone and Gupta., 2020 p.837).

Other participants talked about anxiety generated by a general sense of responsibility, personal risk and vulnerability, and in some cases, the experience of actual harm.

For some leavers, organisational expectations about how staff coped with the emotional demands of the job seemed to contribute to their dissatisfaction. This included perceptions of employer attitudes towards staff struggling with high workloads, but perhaps more significantly, organisational responses when social workers encountered difficult, frightening or even violent situations.

One intended stayer had twice been threatened by service users during the year and felt this was not taken seriously by management leading to her leaving. Another had felt extremely vulnerable while working alone in a large rural LA, often visiting potentially hostile families some distance from her office base:

> Some of the houses I've been to where the police won't go in, unless they've got the big boys outside. And we're expected to go in, with our charm, wit, and sparkling personalities as a way of getting in and getting back out of there safely. (SL19)

This worker had experienced mental health difficulties and moved to a more supportive authority, but subsequently had left social work for another local authority role.

A female social worker recounted a frightening situation where:

> I had a really frightening experience of a young man who tried to attack me in a meeting, …. So, it was, like, that, sort of, fight or flight thing, and I just literally froze. It was a case where this young man had stabbed his girlfriend to death, had a preoccupation with knives, and an affinity in violence towards women. (LS11)

The worker goes on to say that she went to her manager to say she could no longer work this case but reported that there was no follow-up and no safety plan put in place for her. This worker was later invited to make a formal complaint against her manager and states if it was not for the support of her team she would have left.

Discussion

The findings from the qualitative interviews indicate that children and families social workers in England are sensitive to many of the well-established factors affecting job satisfaction identified in other studies (DePanfilis, and Zlotnik, (2008) Madden et al. (2014) and McFadden (2018) . However, this study suggests that there may be a particular combination of specific, though not individually unique, characteristics of children and families social work interacting with individual circumstances that influence intentions to stay or leave. These characteristics are particularly relevant to statutory child protection work. Social workers in these roles are often newly or recently qualified, and generally younger in comparison with the rest of the workforce. There is a general tendency for social workers to move out of, rather than into, these roles

The characteristics of this work as experienced by respondents included high degrees of responsibility, legal and regulatory accountability, management of uncertainty and complexity in the context of risk,

and emotional intensity. These are not necessarily experienced negatively – on the contrary, many social workers enjoy the challenges they bring - but they do have implications for organisations and individuals. Social workers may be regarded by the public as powerful (and of course in terms of their collective powers to intervene in families' lives this is true), but as individual workers entering potentially volatile situations, they can feel vulnerable and unsupported. Statutory powers and duties should support social workers to promote the welfare of children, but demonstrating compliance with legal obligations can lead to significant administrative and recording burdens, which some social workers experienced as limiting meaningful engagement with families. These factors can mean that maintaining clear boundaries between work and home is challenging. Many workers felt that they are expected to take work home, whether literally in that they are completing work tasks at home, or figuratively, in finding themselves unable to leave work behind emotionally at the end of the day.

Such characteristics of children and families social work, particularly investigative child protection roles, interact with individual factors and circumstances which influence decision making about staying, moving on within children's social work (to another role or Local Authority), moving out of children's social work to another area of practice, or leaving the profession altogether. These factors include key 'life events' that can affect all of us, such as approaching retirement, health concerns, relationships, becoming (grand)parents, childcare and caring responsibilities for ageing relatives. These responsibilities were sometimes perceived by respondents as incompatible with the demands of particular children and family social work roles and tasks. The relationship between life inside and outside work is complex, and tensions between the two may be connected to specific times in workers' lives, as well as to perceived or actual organisational cultures and expectations. Changes in either or both areas can make a difference to social workers' intentions and decisions about staying or leaving. They can destabilise the fit between a social worker and their employer, reducing the sacrifice needed to leave the organisation and resetting the links between the worker and the organisation and/or their community (Zhang et al. 2012; Lee et al. (2014) and Burns et. al 2019). It is not unreasonable to consider whether different posts in children and families work suit different workers at different life stages.

A key challenge for social work organisations is to mitigate such challenging aspects of children and families social work so that their workers feel supported, and able to respond to these challenges positively as opposed to experiencing them as sources of debilitating stress and unmanageable difficulty.   Stalker et al (2007) for example, discuss examples of workers being satisfied with jobs

despite high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion. Participants in the qualitative interviews talked about practical matters that made a difference to their working lives, but which were linked to less tangible aspects of their experiences – what might be regarded as the culture of the organisations in which they worked. The ways in which organisations respond to external demands, such as accountability, complying with legislation, inspection regimes, and resourcing challenges are shaped by and shape their culture, and impact upon their workforce. How is responsibility distributed, and importantly how is this demonstrated and communicated to staff through the way they are treated? How are social workers supported by managers and co-workers; what are the characteristics of positive supervision and supportive relationships (McFadden, 2018), and how is this demonstrated when things go wrong?   How do administrative and IT systems support staff to manage their work within the working week? Culture as 'how we do things around here' rather than 'how we say we do things' gives workers messages about whether they are valued, or not.

Finally, while high staff turnover can be problematic for children and families social work (Baginsky 2013) some movement of staff is inevitable, and may be beneficial for the profession, if not for individual employing organisations. While some people may appropriately leave, realising that the profession is not, after all, for them, others may be enabled to remain and flourish with the right support. Organisations with high turnover rates need to consider what they might be doing that is influencing staff decision making. On the other hand, though, moving on can be the right decision for individuals, with benefits not only for themselves. Staff may move to other organisations where they find they have a better fit; or for career development, such as promotion; or to make best use of or further develop specialist skills; or to change direction within the profession, into policy, management, social work education or research. This exchange between practice, research and education can lead to developments in practice benefitting users of services.

CONCLUSION

The research was exploratory and limited in that we are only reporting on one year's qualitative interviews of a five year mixed methods study which in time will provide more detailed and in-depth iformation on the issues identified. There is also a potential bias whereby those who left and did not provide details to be followed up may have had different experiences from those who werte interviewed.

The message from this research suggests that what is needed is more research involving people who leave children and families social work, with a greater focus on how wider networks and external factors identified in job embeddedness theory play out in the child and family social work workforce.. A more nuanced understanding of what these are, and why, when and where child and family social workers leave child and family local authority social work might help identify strategies to support staff to stay. Also, and importantly it would be valuable to consider what level of 'churn' is positive and healthy and what is destabilising. It is clear from the interviews that there is no magic bullet. There are personal issues for workers which go beyond the employer's ability to influence, both personally and structurally. However, this does not mean that employers and senior managers should not engage with the life work balance of their workers to provide flexibility, support and clear boundaries. There are issues that employers can take greater control over, including workload, supervision, the culture of the organisation and managerial leadership. However, there are also structural factors such as government responses to social, economic and political issues; for example, funding for children's services and the consequent loss of preventative services and potential for moral distress.

It is worth remembering why so many social workers join the profession and remain in practice:

> Just to make a difference to peoples' lives. That's the bottom line and the other is obviously a job, it pays the bills but that's a bonus to me. The difference that I make to peoples' lives, that's the main motivation (SS10).

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TABLES

Table 1: Children and Family Social Workers – Workforce*

	30.9.2019	30.9.2018	30.9.2017
Children & Family Social Workers FTE	30,700	29,470	28,500
Children & Family Social Workers Headcount	32,900	31,720	30,670
% Children & Family Social Workers with less than 5 years in service	61%	59%	68%
% Children & Family Social Workers aged 50 and over	29%	29%	30%

Agency Workers FTE	5,800	5360	5340

Table 2: Children and Family Social Workers – Vacancies and Turnover*

	30.9.2019	**30.9.2018**	**30.9.2017**
Vacancies	6,000	5,810	5,280
Vacancy Rate	16.4%	16%	15%
Turnover (headcount)	16%	16%	15%
Leavers FTE	4700	4500	3900
Leavers Headcount	5300	5150	4500
% Leavers with less than 5 years' service	68%	68%	63%
% Leavers with less than 2 years' service	35%	35%	33%

- **Source:** DfE 2018; DfE 2019; DfE 2020.

Table 3

Research survey respondents in Wave 1 and Wave 2

	Wave 1	Wave 2
Starting sample	21,000	4,597
Total response	5,588	3,302
% completing	27%	72%
% agreeing to being recontacted	82%	95%

Table 4
Main reported reason for feeling stressed

Main Reason for feeling stressed	**Wave 1**	**Wave 2**
I have too many cases	21%	24%
I have too much paperwork	30%	22%
Working culture/practices	13%	9%

Insufficient quality of management/support	6%	8%
Lack of resources to support families	4%	7%
Having to make emotional or difficult decisions	6%	5%
Lack of administrative support	2%	4%
High staff turnover in my team/area of work	4%	5%
Insufficient time for direct work with children	4%	2%
Other	2%	6%
Simply a stressful job	3%	4%
Don't know/ prefer not to say	2%	3%

Table 5
Main reasons for considering leaving child and family social work, Wave 1 and Wave 2

Main reason for considering leaving	Wave 1	Wave 2
I will be retiring/retired	15%	20%
I don't like the culture of LA social work	13%	14%
Personal reasons (e.g. health)	7%	13%
I'm not making the best use of my skills	11%	9%
Not compatible with family or relationships	9%	8%
The high caseload	12%	5%
It is not the right job for me	5%	5%
The working hours in general	5%	4%
More suitable opportunities for promotion	2%	3%
The pay/benefits package	4%	2%
Other	5%	4%
Don't know/prefer not to say	7%	3%