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**RETAINING AND SUPPORTING
EXPERIENCED CHILD AND
FAMILY SOCIAL WORKERS IN
CHILD PROTECTION**

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RETAINING AND SUPPORTING EXPERIENCED CHILD AND FAMILY

SOCIAL WORKERS IN CHILD PROTECTION

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WHY IS THIS STUDY IMPORTANT?

The retention of experienced child protection social workers is a significant issue across child welfare systems in the UK, the USA and Europe. Failure to retain experienced practitioners has serious implications for the protection and support of vulnerable children. In the UK, the average working life of a social worker is around eight years, and this figure is thought to be significantly lower for child protection workers (DfE 2022). The recent Review of Children's Social Care in England (MacAlister, 2022) identified high turnover and the retention of experienced workers as urgent and endemic issues in child protection. There is some evidence to suggest that a strong sense of professional identity (PI) can sustain social workers in the profession. However, existing research and workforce interventions have tended to focus on the experience and support of early-career social workers to prevent exit. Few studies have examined what can be learned from experienced social workers who have remained in the profession long-term.

AIMS OF THE RESEARCH

This research sought to understand how Local Authorities (LAs) can support and retain experienced child protection social workers by capturing the voices of experienced stayers. The study had two interlinked aims – to understand the phenomena of long-term retention and to explore the concept of Professional Identity (PI) among experienced

social workers. The research was guided by the following questions:

- What sustains experienced social workers, helping them to stay in the profession? (especially front-line child protection teams)
- What is the relationship between professional identity (PI) and retention in child welfare social work?
- How do social workers develop and sustain a sense of PI over time?

METHODS

- Participants (n=58) were all practising, qualified social workers with ≥8 years post-qualifying experience drawn from 11 LAs in England
- Years in practice ranged from 8-40 years with an average (mean) of 14 years.
- All participants were either a) working in frontline services or b) had worked in a frontline services post-qualification.
- At the time of interviewing, 20 out of 58 participants (34.5%) considered themselves to have remained in frontline practice, although there was considerable debate about the definition of both 'frontline' and 'child protection' practice.
- Social workers were telephone interviewed using a novel interviewing technique to capture how their professional identity had changed over time, and what had sustained

them in the profession. Interview data was analysed thematically.

KEY FINDINGS

The findings were grouped into three areas, described below:

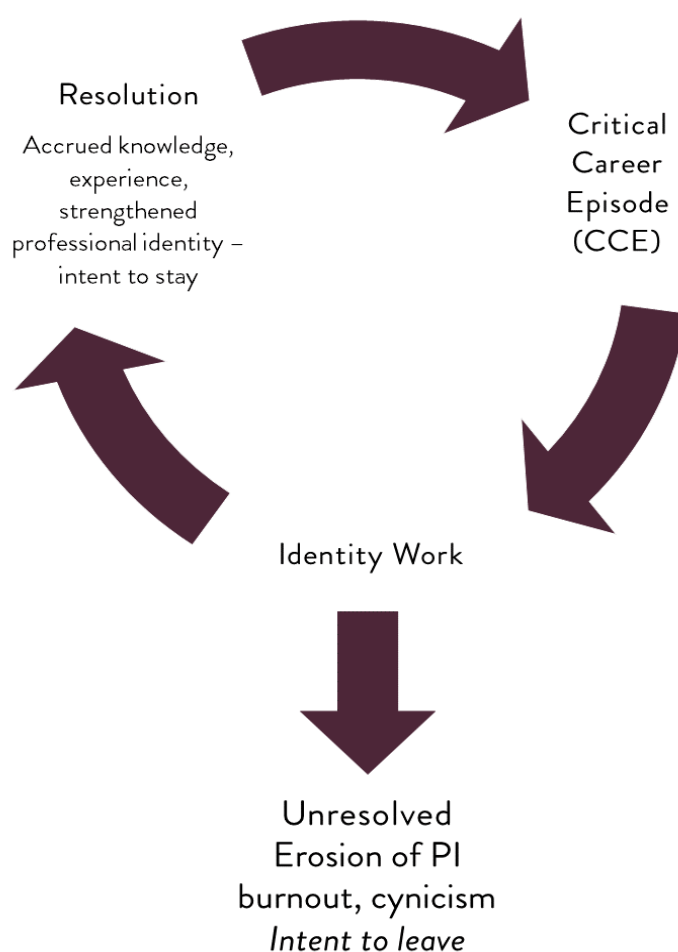
1. Professional identity (PI) among experienced stayers

For this group of experienced practitioners, social work was an intrinsic and important part of their identity. Almost all participants said being a social worker was a defining feature of who they were, emphasising the integration of their personal and professional identities. Social workers' representations of being a social worker (PI) encompassed their core values, beliefs, personality, skills and sense of purpose. The findings suggest that a strong sense of professional identity (PI) sustained experienced social workers in practice, contributed to their sense of purpose and meaning and acted as a buffer to the stressors of the role.

2. The role of Critical Career Episodes (CCEs) in PI development and retention

Staying in the profession over the long-term entailed successfully navigating a series of 'Critical Career Episodes' (CCEs). CCEs were defining moments in social workers' careers which were emotive, often challenging and forced them to confront the meaning of being a social worker. CCEs arose from a sense of misalignment between the demands of practice and the social worker's strongly held sense of PI (e.g. feeling a strong moral imperative to help a family but not having the resources or organisational support to do so). CCEs prompted 'identity work' where social workers sought to bring their sense of PI and practice back into alignment. Social workers who were unable to resolve these CCEs thought seriously about leaving the

profession. As such CCEs were often 'stay or go' moments. However, where social workers found resolution, the CCE could act as a powerful and transformative learning experience which could ultimately strengthen social workers' PI and intention to stay in the profession. Social workers frequently drew on their prior CCEs to make sense of new situations and to share these experiences with others.



The relationship between Professional Identity, CCEs and retention

3. Career pathways that support PI development and increase retention

Participants emphasised the importance of continuing to develop as a social worker throughout the mid and later stages of their career. However, they highlighted their ongoing development needs were often

unrecognised due to their ‘experienced’ status. Career pathways which offered opportunities for specialism, generativity and mobility were identified as important for ongoing PI development and retention.

Specialism: Social workers’ sense of PI and intention to stay was strengthened by opportunities to develop a meaningful practice specialism.

Generativity: Supporting other workers and contributing to workforce development was a powerful motivator for experienced workers, who found ongoing meaning in sharing their learning and practice wisdom with others.

Mobility: Social workers valued opportunities to try different areas of practice in which roles and continue to develop new skills. Opportunities for mobility could provide motivation for mid to late career social workers to remain in the profession.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- This research suggests that PI development continues across the career span, and therefore attention needs to be paid to the identity needs of mid to late career social workers. Experienced social workers are often overlooked, yet they require ongoing opportunities for professional development.
- It is important for employers to recognise the impact of Critical Career Episodes on social workers and anticipate their vulnerability to exit during these times. Social workers need coordinated support from their colleagues, teams, managers and organisation to manage Critical Career Episodes. This can include debriefings, regular peer support and short periods of managed leave following CCEs.
- The opportunity to develop a specialism was identified as a potential solution to high turnover and consequent loss of experience in frontline teams. Specialisms created a sustainable way for workers to use their experience to support frontline services while not carrying the full ‘burden’ of a child protection caseload. A specialism in Court skills, Child Sexual Exploitation (CSE), domestic abuse or other issues relevant to child protection could allow experienced workers to retain an advisory role. However, participants identified that such opportunities were rare.
- Local authorities need to consider the development of specialist career pathways for experienced social workers, particularly for those who find themselves ‘stuck’ when they do not wish to progress via a management route.
- Local authorities should consider a bottom-up, rather than top-down, approach to developing specialist roles – many highly experienced social workers had in-depth knowledge of their communities and were able to readily identify gaps in knowledge and service provision. Active consultation with experienced workers is therefore key.
- Opportunities for generativity (e.g. to support NQSWs, mentoring colleagues and contributions to service and workforce development) help experienced social workers to feel valued, motivated to stay and allows the organisation to benefit from their accumulated knowledge and expertise.
- Local authorities should consider how opportunities for mobility can be built into the career and personal development plans of experienced workers. While rewarding, child protection social work is emotive, challenging and difficult to sustain across the careerspan. Many social workers who had permanently side-stepped from frontline child protection into other areas of child and family social work said that opportunities for ‘rotation’ – such as

secondments in other teams – would have enabled them to stay in frontline services over the longer-term. Local authorities might wish to consider rotation as a long-term strategy for increasing retention in frontline teams.

- More broadly, the development of career pathways which support specialism, mobility and generativity will enable local authorities to support and retain experienced social workers.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

This research is the first UK-based study to capture the voices of highly-experienced stayers in child protection social work. It is also the first research to provide an exploration of professional identity (PI) among experienced stayers in social work. While these qualitative findings suggest a link between PI and retention, further quantitative research is needed to examine the association between PI, intention to leave/stay and actual turnover.

IMPACT

The findings from this study were launched at the annual CRCF conference in 2021 and the European Conference of Social Work Research (ECSWR) in 2022. The research team are currently delivering workshops to local authorities to support workforce development and planning. Academic articles from the project are currently in press.

FIND OUT MORE

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HOW TO CITE THIS RESEARCH BRIEFING

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