

CYP Now investigation shows 10-fold rise in agency social work teams being used by local authorities in

Recruitment agency practices

SOCIAL CARE

By Fiona Simpson

The recruitment and retention of “quality” social workers is described as “the biggest worry” facing directors of children’s services (DCSs). With record numbers of social workers leaving the profession, local authority leaders are being forced to turn to social work agencies, many of which now offer entire social work teams for “double the price” of staff employed by councils.

Department for Education figures, published in February, show the number of children and family social workers who left their posts in 2021 was up by 16 per cent compared with 2020 – the highest level in five years.

Vacancies on 30 September last year also hit the highest level in five years.

A Freedom of Information (FOI) request sent to all 151 local authorities by CYP Now finds increasing numbers of councils commissioning managed teams of social workers and social work managers over the last five years.

Of 100 councils which responded to the request, 25 say they have used a managed team in 2021/22 compared with just two in 2017/18.

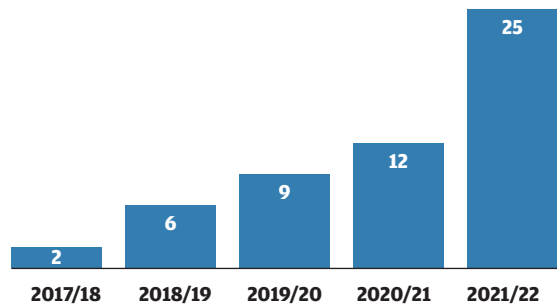
Overall, 43 per cent of local authorities say they have commissioned a managed team

“I could not find one single agency worker, but I could find eight – they are only being offered as a team”

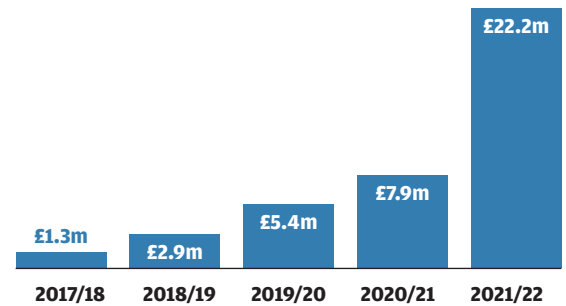
Steve Crocker, president, Association of Directors of Children’s Services

RISE IN COUNCIL USE OF SOCIAL WORK AGENCY MANAGED TEAMS

Annual number of councils using managed teams



Annual council spend on managed teams



Source: CYP Now FOI request, June 2022; responses from 100 councils

between 2017 and 2022, amounting to a total cost of £41.1m across all councils.

Meanwhile, the number of individual agency social workers hit a five-year peak in 2020/21 when 5,977 were employed by agencies, 4,558 of whom were actively covering vacancies at local authorities, according to latest DfE statistics.

Ban needed

Steve Crocker, president of the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS), and DCS for Hampshire and Isle of Wight Councils, is calling for a ban on the use of social work agencies or “at the very least” for Social Work England to be handed greater powers to regulate profiteering by organisations (see page 10) which he claims are “contacting our social workers, hoovering them up and then selling them back to us at twice the cost”.

He has particular concerns over the “increasing” practice of agencies only supplying social workers to local authorities as part of a team. To illustrate the point, he cites a social worker on maternity leave as an example of where he’d use an agency worker to cover the role.

“At the moment, I could

guarantee you that I could not find one single agency worker,” Crocker explains. “But I could find eight – they are only being offered to us as a team. I have to wait until I have eight vacancies then buy a team but that doesn’t seem very sensible.”

According to its FOI response, Hampshire reveals it has employed four managed teams this year – the first time the local authority has ever done so – through agency Innovate.

The four teams were initially commissioned for six months to cover children’s assessments and safeguarding work. The contract has subsequently been extended to 12 months, at a total cost of £482,599 to the council.

The four teams, based in the New Forest, East Hampshire, Basingstoke, Hart and Rushmore, each consist of one team manager, one assistant manager and six or seven social workers.

Crocker’s experience is mirrored by director of children’s services in Liverpool, Steve Reddy, who says that despite work in his local authority to increase pay rates and benefits to attract permanent staff, the council is “struggling with a social worker shortage so we’re using the agency teams”.

“Because of the level of demand, we need a workforce,”

Reddy says, noting that increasing numbers of children are entering care following two years of school closures and Covid-19 restrictions.

Like Hampshire, Liverpool has been forced to employ teams of agency workers for the first time over the past year.

The council has commissioned two teams to cover a children-in-need project and discharge of cases for a current period of six months at a total cost of £695,045.

Not just money

Reddy argues that while there is a cohort of social workers who are driven to join agencies for a higher hourly wage, he says that for others it’s about a range of issues including work/life balance, management, caseloads, health and wellbeing and professional development.

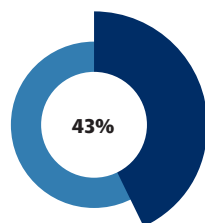
Agencies which offer managed teams can have “a very strict criteria about how they will work, what their caseloads will be, what type of work there is going to be”, Reddy adds, noting that “that’s how they’re completely in control of the market”.

A third of all agency teams mentioned in the FOI responses were employed to cover child assessments while gaps in areas

last five years, with children's services leaders saying staff shortages are placing huge pressure on budgets

compound workforce pressures

Use of managed teams since 2017



of councils have used managed teams

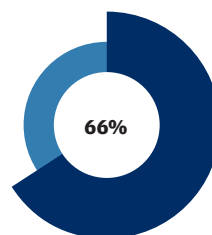
Cost of managed teams



£41m

total cost spent on managed teams since 2017

Response rate



of local authorities (100 out of 151) responded to the FOI request

like safeguarding and child protection are also more likely to be plugged by agency staff than vacancies in permanence and leaving care teams.

Reddy suggests it is because work pressures in these areas are more likely to leave staff feeling “burned out”.

Targeting NQSWs

Crocker is concerned that the cost of living crisis will push even more social workers to join agencies, at an earlier stage in their career.

“Social workers are finding they need more money to make ends meet,” he says.

Sheffield City Council employed two teams of six social workers at a cost of £350 per worker per day between July 2021 and March 2022, its FOI response shows.

The teams, which worked in children in need and child protection services across the South Yorkshire city, also included two managers at a cost of £400 per day each, around £50 an hour.

While it remains unclear how much of a cut agencies are taking from high daily rates, the total cost for both teams of six social workers including managers amounts to £925,000 for just 37 weeks compared with a total of £15.2m spent on Sheffield's entire

children's social work staff budget in 2021/22.

“We know the hourly rate for agency teams – say a manager and six staff – is more than if we were employing agency social workers at an individual level,” says Reddy.

Despite the lure of attractive pay packets, stricter oversight of caseloads and more flexible working, Crocker questions the impact of a “relatively new” practice of agencies “targeting” graduates.

“The worry is that this could compromise on quality as access to support, supervision and reflection are critical to excellent practice,” he says.

“If you're a newly qualified social worker (NQSW), you need a team manager who is going to support you and nurture you, you need training and you need permission to make mistakes with supportive people around you who can pick you up and help you put it right.

“If you're on your own as an agency worker or in a team that is not part of a broader set of services, you don't get that. I really worry that that is going to end up with those people burning out, that they're not going to get the right support and they won't actually develop into the great

social workers that we want them to be and that they're undoubtedly capable.

“I'm invariably impressed with NQSWs in Hampshire and the quality they bring but they do need that nurturing environment, they do need to have a team around them that is permanent and not flit from job to job because that won't stand them in good stead for later in their career.”

Impact on families

Both Reddy and Crocker also highlight the detrimental impact on vulnerable children and families of frequently changing agency social workers, who are often able to leave with one week's notice.

“I've seen a complaint recently where somebody, on behalf of a parent, was challenging us and saying this parent has had to deal with 13 different social workers. That's far from ideal, both for the parents and the children.

“If you're trying to do relationship-based social work and work with a family to keep them together, it's hard if you're having a rapid change of social worker,” Reddy explains.

This is noted in Josh MacAlister's Independent Review of Children's Social Care which sets out recommendations (see

page 10) to reduce the use of agency social workers, describing it as “costly and working against providing stable professional relationships for children and families”.

Cost to councils

The impact of the rising use of agency social workers in terms of both budgets and work to improve Ofsted ratings is another key concern raised by sector leaders.

“Of all the things that keep you awake at night as a director, the one thing I'm most worried about is recruitment and retention of social work staff because all the things around improvement, managing demand and balancing the books, are dependent on us having a decent, stable workforce with reasonable caseloads,” Reddy says.

“You need a stable workforce, particularly with a workforce that's on an improvement journey.”

In his government-commissioned report into failures at Bradford Council following the death of toddler Star Hobson in 2020, Steve Walker notes that slow progress to recruit more than 100 social workers at Bradford City Council was a “key” factor in the local authority's failure to improve its children's services after it was rated “inadequate” by the inspectorate in 2018 (see page 11).

“Imagine what we could do if we put that money spent on agency social workers back into frontline services and preventative services for children,” Crocker says.

Whether through an outright ban or measures to regulate the operation of agencies – or more competitive terms and conditions for children's social workers offered by councils – Crocker is adamant something needs to be done to prevent money going to social work agencies that could be better spent on supporting vulnerable children and families.

Children’s services leaders say only regulation of the agency sector or an outright ban can stop rising workforce

Ban or regulation: steps to tackle

SOCIAL CARE

By Fiona Simpson

The practice of agencies selling teams of social workers to local authorities for potentially hundreds of thousands of pounds for contracts lasting less than a year “could be stopped overnight with just a few tweaks to the law”, directors of children’s services say.

Responses to a Freedom of Information (FOI) request to all local authorities in England about the use of so-called “managed teams” to plug workforce gaps reveals that collectively 43 councils have been billed £41.1m over the last five years by agencies.

Bradford City Council has been using six managed teams since November 2020 which were due to stay in place until June 2022. In 2019/20 this cost Bradford £1.7m, increasing to £1.8m in 2020/21 and £5.5m in 2021/22 with the addition of “a small managed service team to support work in the leaving care team” which was set up in September last year.

Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole Council has so-far spent £1.3m on four teams covering children and family support and assessment in 2021/22.

Croydon Council paid £1.6m on three teams for an average of 36

weeks covering children’s social work services, referral and assessment, and care planning, between 2017/18 and 2019/20 before issuing a Section 114 notice – declaring de facto bankruptcy and banning spending outside of essential services in January 2021 amid a potential budget shortfall of £66m over the last financial year.

Children’s services leaders say the cost to “cash-strapped” local authorities is just one of several concerns they have with the practice, including its impact on the career development of newly qualified social workers and relationships with vulnerable children and families (see page 8).

In his final recommendations to the government, Care Review chair Josh MacAlister, calls for the development of new rules and regional staff banks “to reduce the use of agency social work, which is costly and works against providing stable professional relationships for children and families” (see box).

Steve Crocker, president of the Association of Directors of Children’s Services (ADCS), says social work agencies, who offer both individual social workers and managed teams to local authorities at high costs should be banned “ideally”.

“It’s a practice by the agencies

BONGKARN/A DOBE STOCK



Care Review chair Josh MacAlister has called for new rules and regional staff banks to

that I don’t think should be allowed – it effectively restricts access to the [recruitment] market,” he explains.

Steve Reddy, director of children’s services at Liverpool City Council, backs calls for a ban, saying it could be enforced “overnight” using emergency legislation.

Reddy dismisses the idea that agency workers would change profession, exacerbating the workforce shortage, saying: “If government stopped agencies operating the way they do and paying people the way they do, those staff would just come and work for us – they’re not going to get a job in a bank or supermarket.”

WHAT THE INDEPENDENT REVIEW OF CHILDREN’S SOCIAL CARE SAYS ABOUT USE OF AGENCY STAFF

The Care Review says that levels of agency social work use is “inexcusably high” in children’s services.

Of the 3,630 social workers who left permanent local authority social work roles in 2020/21, 23 per cent moved to agency roles.

It recommends that “working with local authorities, government should develop rules to tackle the overuse of agency social workers”.

These rules could include expectations that all local authorities:

1. Require a high-quality reference that relates to the standard of practice of any agency worker
2. Do not hire social workers that have not completed their first two years of the Early Career Framework
3. Use approved commercial frameworks to recruit any agency social workers
4. Work across their regions to establish and adhere to Memoranda of Understanding on agency social worker recruitment and pay.

Review chair Josh MacAlister also says that when his recommendations around national pay scales for social workers are introduced the rules imposed on councils by the government should be updated to integrate rates of pay for agency social workers.

However, MacAlister notes that the sector must recognise “that some temporary social worker staffing will be required in children’s social care”.

Instead of an outright ban, “we should seek to reduce the excess cost

and profiteering of agency staff so that it can be reinvested in supporting children and families”, he says.

The review highlights a number of “staff banks” within individual local authorities, such as Connect2Kent, Connect2Hampshire and a Social Care Casual Bank in West Sussex as good practice examples.

Banks should “in time become the main source of agency staffing”, provided by funding handed to local authorities by the government.

costs, but recruitment boss derides such ideas as ‘absurd’ and calls for sector to ‘work with us not against us’

agency dominance of workforce



reduce councils' use of agency social workers

OVERUSE OF AGENCY STAFF A FACTOR IN TODDLER'S DEATH

The problems of over-reliance on agency social workers in some local authorities is highlighted in the national safeguarding review into toddler Star Hobson's murder in Bradford in 2020, according chair of the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel Annie Hudson.

Hudson told the Commons' education select committee in June that at the time of Star's death at the hands of her mother's partner, Savannah Brockhill, agency staff made up around 35 per cent of Bradford's children's social workers compared with an average of 15 per cent in England.

The case was closed without any further visits by social workers, despite concerns raised by the toddler's grandparents, due to



Star Hobson died in 2020

pressure on managers to reallocate the agency worker's caseload, a review into the toddler's death found.

A report into the council's failures by government-appointed commissioner Steve Walker published after

Star's murder found that in September 2020 there were 124 social worker vacancies filled by 173 agency staff.

As well as being a factor in Star's death, high numbers of agency staff also contributed to increased spending in children's services that was "clearly unsustainable", Walker states.

The council has estimated that recruiting a "full establishment" of in-house social workers would save at least £5m each year in lower agency costs, according to his report.

Instead, he urges the ADCS and local authorities to "work with us not against us" to create a framework for agency social work that benefits both local authorities and workers.

He says that agencies are "not out to make profits from public services" but adds that "better planning by local authorities

“The real issue is not agency practice but underfunding of local authority children's services by the government”

Neil Carberry, chief executive, Recruitment and Employment Confederation

needs to be put in place to ensure proper use of agency staff”.

“Like in the NHS, filling emergency cover with very little notice is going to be a lot more expensive than something that has been planned in advance,” he says. “The real issue is not agency practice but underfunding of local authority children's services by the government.”

Carberry echoes Reddy's view that for agency social workers, the main drivers are both higher wages and flexibility.

“What we've found across the public sector is that it is not keeping up with new ways of working and offering greater flexibility than the private sector,” he adds, urging councils to improve benefits for salaried staff.

Crocker concedes that, if an outright ban is not possible, agencies should be regulated by Social Work England to reduce “profiteering”.

This could be based on models

seen in other professions like teaching, he says, adding: “One way would be through linking social workers' registration to an employer rather than the regulator.”

Regulation of social workers

Social Work England says it is “aware of the issue” around social work agencies and “continues to work with our partners, including ADCS and others, on recruitment and retention issues in the sector”.

It states: “We would like to remind people that we regulate all social workers in England, regardless of who they are employed by. All social workers must meet the professional standards and maintain their registration in order to practise, whether they are agency or not.”

Crocker also suggests that MacAlister's proposals (see box) for a five-year early career framework for social workers should “go further” and ban newly qualified social workers from joining agencies during this period.

“Graduates being drawn to agency work almost straight out of university is a relatively new phenomenon. The worry is that this could compromise on quality as access to support, supervision and reflection are critical to excellent practice,” he says.

A ban on agencies recruiting graduates was also among proposals made to former Education Secretary Nadhim Zahawi in a letter from North West local authorities around improving recruitment and retention in children's social work.

Whether ministers heed calls to be “brave” enough to ban or regulate the use of social work agencies remains to be seen but both sides of the argument appear to agree that without funding and support from central government, there will be no solution to the children's services workforce crisis.

Flexible working practices can reduce pull of agencies

Derren Hayes editor, *Children & Young People Now* derren.hayes@markallengroup.com



CYP Now's investigation into the use of managed teams of agency social workers highlights how fragile the children's services workforce situation is in many areas (Analysis p8-11). A national shortage of social workers has been apparent for some time, with a 16 per cent rise in the number who left their post last year and vacancies reaching a five-year high.

Against this backdrop, the balance of power is in favour of the recruitment agencies, so it is unsurprising they often dictate to authorities the employment terms of their social workers including whether to supply a team of staff rather than individual practitioners to fill gaps.

With the cost of living crisis set to increase referrals to children's services, demand for staff will only rise, resulting in councils having to spend even more on expensive agency teams. Such a scenario is unsustainable. Children's services leaders are calling for an outright ban on social work agencies or regulation to limit their profits. Neither seems likely as both candidates to be the next Prime Minister appear keen to show off their free-market credentials.

Most who end up working for an agency are experienced practitioners who have the skills and confidence to work in different settings and at pace – around a quarter of social workers who left councils last year joined an agency. Local government and children's services leaders need to look at the motivations behind these moves if they are to attract and retain them. Money is a factor for some, and councils will need to consider pay deals that keep up with rising inflation or risk losing more staff.

That aside, the pandemic has changed working practices. People expect jobs to flex with other life pressures. Is it right for staff to regularly work unpaid into the evenings to "catch up"? Will that attract and retain social workers? More flexible shift patterns that better reflect how people live today – instead of standard office hours – are needed. The type of work people do also needs to be more varied so that practitioners do not spend too long in highly stressful safeguarding and assessment teams – it is no coincidence that these are the roles most filled by agency workers.

Trying to compete with agencies for talent is difficult, but offering a flexible, competitive employment package that invests in children's social workers' development is a must for every local authority.

“Offering a flexible, competitive employment package that invests in children's social workers' development is a must for every local authority”

BLOGS

“I can't remember it ever feeling this difficult to attract permanent, experienced, qualified staff. A growing proportion of staff now choose to work as agency instead of working permanently for local government. And to compound the situation, the growth of 'managed' agency teams has seen the individual agency market dry up as agency workers opt to work for these teams instead, which often come at much higher costs and variable quality.”

Lucy Butler, executive director of children, young people and learning at West Sussex County Council

“In the eight years since the 2014 Children and Families Act reforms were introduced, we've been listening to autistic children, young people, parents, teachers, further education staff, health colleagues, social workers, and local authority managers – all working hard to deliver what they can and tearing their hair out at the bits that don't work. So – what are the answers? Do we need a shiny new system with new laws and new structures? Probably not. We need a system that values the achievements of all children, not just those who hit age-related targets. We need to stop excluding, rejecting, and belittling children whose achievements are not textbook. Until we do that, the system is always geared against autistic young people.”

Jolanta Lasota, chief executive, Ambitious about Autism

“There are currently more than 80,000 children in care in England and every year more than 10,000 of them leave the system – and are expected to live more or less independently. For these young people access to transport is often unaffordable. Single young people under 25 years old are only eligible for the Under 25 universal credit rates and, with the average cost of a weekly bus ticket over £18, this uses up a third of their weekly benefit payment. That's why Barnardo's is calling on the government to support and fund free bus travel for care-experienced young people up to the age of 25 in England.”

Lynn Parry, chief executive, Barnardo's

“For most people, the observation that life is unpredictable is one to be filed away under Basil Fawlty's category of 'The Bleeding Obvious'. But for me, it's a reminder I can't get often enough. Why? Because the promise that both the UK and Jersey have made when they signed up to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) is a living, breathing thing. It is a recognition that we will use the articles of the UNCRC to continually respond to whatever the world throws at our children and young people.”

Deborah McMillan, children's commissioner, Jersey

SOCIAL WORKERS ON THE SMALL SCREEN

Children’s social workers are often portrayed in a negative light when they feature in TV dramas. *Charlotte Goddard* investigates how the profession is trying to change how it appears on screen

A mum rushes home to find two social workers in her living room, who ask her to explain a small bruise on her baby’s arm. After finding empty alcohol bottles in the house, they physically restrain the mother so they can take the child to hospital. The distressed mum runs alongside the car as her child is driven away.

As any children’s social worker will have guessed, this is not a real-life scenario. It’s a scene from an episode of *EastEnders* aired earlier this year. The BBC received 193 complaints, the majority focusing on the inaccurate portrayal of social work procedures.

One social worker – who asked not to be named – told *CYP Now* why she was driven to contact the BBC. “I highlighted that what they portrayed in their storyline was illegal practice and educated them on the fact social workers do not have power to remove children without a court order,” she says. “I said it negatively portrayed social workers and provided the public with a factually incorrect narrative of the interventions we provide. This storyline instils fear and makes our job as frontline workers difficult.”

A spokesperson for *EastEnders* defends the plotline by saying the audience knows the difference between soap storylines and real life. “*EastEnders* takes great care when portraying issues such as these,” she says. “At no point was it the intention to portray social workers in a bad light and during the course of this storyline it was clear the social worker always wanted what was best for the child. Audiences are aware that dramas often portray situations that may not be the same as real life and we believe *EastEnders* viewers know to expect big dramatic stories such as these.”

However, scenes like this can have a hugely negative impact on social workers’ relationships with the families they work with, says Professor Joanne Westwood, head of the School of Social Work, Care and Community at the University of Lancaster. “Social workers say they find it really difficult to engage people and get them to ask for help, when the public’s understanding is ‘social workers are child snatchers,’” she explains. “Broadcast media often depicts social workers as child snatchers, as inept and bungling, or conversely completely invisible. A social worker is often represented in isolation, as a do-gooder or an interfering busybody.”

Negative coverage also impacts on recruitment and retention. “We’ve got massive retention problems, and these poor portrayals do more harm than good,” says Professor Westwood. Social work students often arrive with a skewed view of what the role involves, because of what they have picked up from television, she maintains.

There are a number of reasons why screen portrayal of social workers is often negative. “It doesn’t make good telly if you get somebody doing their job properly, does it?” suggests Professor Westwood. Dramatists, like the general public, also draw their perception of social workers from the news media, which often focuses on the negative. “Social workers are vilified by the media, and that kind of narrative sticks in people’s minds,” she says.

Media engagement

Local authorities often shy away from engaging with the media. However, social work leaders have a key role to play in improving perceptions, says Julia Ross, chair of the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). “When I was a director of social work I took a proactive approach with the press,” she says. “When things are going well, we should take that to the media – they may not pick it up but they might be having a slow day and take it on.” Leaders should never back away from difficult issues such as the death of a child with a “no comment”, she says. “It’s not fair on social workers to carry the can.”

BASW aims to speak up for social workers when poor practice is shown on screen. It has contacted the BBC regarding *EastEnders* three times – in 2012, 2017 and most recently this year. However, the organisation is also keen to get involved in productions featuring social workers before they reach the screen, sharing experience and advice to help media organisations get it right.

BASW regularly approaches producers of shows which sometimes feature social workers, such as *EastEnders*, *Coronation Street*, »

NICK WALL/CHANNEL 4



BBC/LITTLE DOOR PRODUCTIONS

Recent television portrayals of social workers include Sarah Lancashire in *Kiri* and Rakie Ayola in *The Pact*



The British Association of Social Workers works with TV dramas such as *Holby City* in an attempt to improve the accuracy and balance of scenes featuring social work

NEGATIVE STEREOTYPING OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKERS MAKES MY JOB HARDER

By **Patriche Bentick**, senior practitioner

I have worked with children and families for the past 16 years or so, qualifying as a social worker in 2013.

Working in child protection and with looked-after children is a difficult balance between working with families to make positive change versus keeping children safe. As a black woman, I understand the damage caused by stigma and negative stereotyping – something also experienced by many of the families I work with, affecting how they are valued and treated by others.

A common stereotype is the idea “all social workers do is take babies away”. In fact social workers have difficult conversations about factors that can harm babies to help parents keep their children safe. The positive work social workers do is often not spoken about so there is a lack of awareness.

I have not seen social work portrayed accurately on television. Soaps such as *EastEnders* show families being fearful while practitioners are presented as cold and unempathetic with a “popping in and out” attitude to their work.

I have watched documentaries that do not show the complexity of social work or the efforts made by social workers to keep families together. Radio discussions sometimes give people the chance to talk openly about the challenges surrounding social work but these have limited reach.

The negative stereotyping of social work on TV and in the media creates tension and demotivates future generations of social workers. People who want a career supporting people may feel reluctant to consider social work because of the stigma and associated risks.

The way social work is portrayed also creates fear among children and parents which can prevent them approaching professionals – including teachers, doctors, health visitors, GPs – for support. I routinely experience hostility from parents when doing home visits. This is often due to fear and a misunderstanding of the social work role, which results in reluctance to engage and dishonesty from children and family members.

It makes the process of building trust and positive relationships longer and more



stressful, affecting my ability to support families in creating positive change.

I am often told “you do such a meaningful job” or “your job must be so hard” but at the same time I am wary about telling people what I do for a living. I have received verbal abuse and mistreatment when I have disclosed my role as a social worker in the past.

I would like to see more honest and realistic examples of social work on TV and in the media, specifically around families’ and practitioners’ experiences of safeguarding. As in all walks of life, there are positives and negatives but there is a huge imbalance in the way social work is showcased with a focus on the negative. I hope to see this balance shift with more emphasis on promoting positive social work practice.



Children's BBC drama *Joe All Alone* features a challenging storyline in which social workers decide a boy should return to live with the mother who had abandoned him

Emmerdale, *Doctors*, *Casualty* and *Holby City*, to offer its expertise. “We offer our time to look over scripts because social work is complicated,” explains Anthony Dhadwal, BASW senior press and communication officer (see comment). “We know writers need creative licence to make the plot engaging but some stuff is just not correct – social workers can’t come into a house, grab a kid by the hand and take them out.”

Engagement with producers has been a slow process, but BASW has gained some traction on an ad-hoc basis with shows including *Doctors*, *Holby City* and *Casualty*. “If they have a social worker in the script and are not sure about legal issues, they come to us and our professional experts give them advice,” says Dhadwal. “For example, a script was changed so a social worker didn’t just rock up to the hospital and take a child away, they had to have a court order.”

Social worker Gavin Moorghen was involved with a number of shows when working for BASW as professional officer. “I have worked with people in the media, I don’t think they are lazy,” he says. “However, there is a need to produce material rapidly, especially on a soap opera, leaving little time for research.” In some cases Moorghen was asked specific questions, in others he was sent the whole script.

He enjoys being part of the process and seeing his impact on the final production. “Researchers on *Doctors* wanted to know about the process a social worker would go through to remove a baby at birth,” he says. “You saw a good depiction of a social worker weighing up the arguments for and against, professionally, and

when in private breaking down in tears. They got the drama in while still getting an accurate portrayal and were able to point to the strengths of social work and the humans behind it.”

Professional realism

BASW is clear its involvement is limited to advising on what is or is not realistic practice, and not on how social workers are portrayed in terms of their characters or home life. Moorghen says he does not have to agree with the decisions made by fictional social workers as long as they are within the realms of possibility. Children’s drama *Joe All Alone*, for example, has social workers plan for a boy to return to live with the mother who abandoned him. “I struggled with that outcome as I thought there has been harm to the child,” he says. “However, it is not impossible in those circumstances that the plan would be [for him] to return home. You may not be sure that was the right outcome but you can watch it and understand why the social worker is making that decision.”

Those seeking to improve dramatic portrayals of social workers should pick their battles, agrees Ross. “Some portrayals are appallingly bad but we can be oversensitive,” she says.

“We hoped to give social workers a human face, warts and all”

Jo Brand, actor and co-writer, *Damned*

“*Casualty* has a lovely example of a social worker who is a fully developed character with feelings as well as intervening in people’s lives. It doesn’t always get it right but it is not a documentary. We’d do better to encourage good portrayals rather than solely focus on bad ones.”

There have been a handful of shows featuring social workers as main characters. Channel 4 drama *Kiri* focused on a social worker played by Sarah Lancashire, at the centre of a plot involving trans-racial adoption. Comedy series *Damned* – also Channel 4 – centred on the day-to-day life of a fictional local authority children’s services department.

More recently, BBC thriller *The Pact* centres on Christine, played by actor Rakie Ayola who says her character comes across as “a really good, competent social worker”. But – spoiler alert – all is not as it seems as Christine’s four children turn out to be babies she has “rescued”, or rather stolen, during her career and she will do anything, including murder, to avoid exposure. Ayola says she started to ask social worker friends about their experiences in social services to inform the character. “Then I thought I didn’t want any of them to think I based Christine on them,” she says.

Damned co-writers Jo Brand, Morwenna Banks and Will Smith consulted with current and former social workers, including Brand’s mum, when developing the show. “We had a particular social worker with whom we worked very closely, and they gave us a huge amount of advice on procedure as well as information about specific cases,” says Brand. “My mum worked as a social worker in child protection for many years and what I gleaned

WHY WE NEED TO TELL THE TRUE STORY OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORK

By Anthony Dhadwal, senior press and communications officer, British Association of Social Workers (BASW)

Storytelling is an art form. Done right it has the power to alter minds and change opinions like nothing else. But telling the story of social work is inherently and historically difficult. The people who use and need services understandably don't want to be involved. Data and identity protection is a barrier, and rightly so.

Employers are notoriously scared of media and discourage, or even order, employees not to engage – although braver local authorities have reaped the benefits from working with the media and BASW. Most importantly, social workers are neck-deep in rising and ever more complex caseloads – so who has the time for it?

However, it is precisely because there are so many challenges in social work currently that is it so important we tell our stories – good and bad.

I was reminded of the power of frontline storytellers when I organised for one of our members to speak candidly on Steph McGovern's *Packed Lunch* show on Channel 4 about the mental health impact on social workers from increased referrals during a cost-of-living crisis. He received a round of applause for him "and all social workers" from McGovern and the audience. The producers told me their social media feeds lit up with acknowledgement and respect for social workers.

It is these kinds of pay-offs that make it

worth working through the challenges of getting social workers on the telly, on the radio and in newspapers. We need more social workers willing to talk openly in that way. The identity of that social worker was protected throughout the show, something I can offer to any social worker interested in sharing their experiences.

The need to share is clear in my mind and should be to everyone else in the sector considering the year we've had. Two tragic child murders will dominate my memory of 2022. The media engagement following the deaths of Arthur Labinjo-Hughes and Star Hobson showed me two things: we have moved on from the naked vitriol that engulfed the profession after Peter Connelly, but we also have a way to go regarding the public's understanding of how social work actually works.

BASW appeared on the BBC, Sky News, ITV and plenty more to be scrutinised on social worker involvement in the deaths, but also to share the challenges, stresses and deteriorating conditions social workers are working with – the second part didn't happen in the aftermath of Baby P's death, it was just the blame game, so there is evidence some journalists are being fairer and reporting better.

The public is a different kettle of fish. While these news reports will have given them a better understanding of social work, popular TV programmes have a bigger impact. So it was very disheartening this summer to see *EastEnders* once again bring a social worker



into a scene simply to take a child away. In this, and numerous other depictions on soaps, the social worker has no real lines or context, they are just wheeled out to increase the tension.

It is frustrating because it reinforces old stereotypes of social workers as homewreckers and a profession to be feared – when the truth is the complete opposite. When I joined BASW in 2017 I relaunched BASW's offer to volunteer our time to work with scriptwriters and producers, as we used to many years ago. We have since worked with *Holby City*, *Doctors* and *Casualty* to make any scenes involving social work accurate and balanced. Sadly, bigger soaps have yet to take up our offer but I'll keep knocking on the door.

With this, and TV/radio news reporting, we need real social workers to tell their stories, to show what they do, why they do it and how they work. I can line up opportunities, sell social work to producers, gather data, generate new research, but it's the stories of social work that makes the biggest impact, so please do get in touch if you are interested in working with BASW to improve the image of social workers.

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from her was that most social workers are just doing their best and struggling against the public perception of hessian bag wielding, vegetarian, hippy types who were ineffectual, or school-marmish lady almoners who were patronising and equally misguided. We hoped to give them a human face, warts and all."

The writers tried to combine drama with the mundane. "We felt very strongly we wanted to represent the mundane office work, the bureaucracy, the hierarchies as well as the dramatic and impossible situations social workers often find themselves in," says Banks.

The show had a mixed response from social workers. "We were very pleased when the social workers who responded to the show and contacted us liked it, and I had messages from a few people who felt that it was among the more accurate representations of a very complicated job," says Banks. Brand saw a few

"dissatisfied letters and articles in social work publications" which she says is "fair enough". "But there were also some very positive and warm appraisals of the series too."

Kiri also received a mixed reception from social workers, who complained about the main character bringing her dog to work and her high alcohol consumption. Professor Anna Gupta, senior lecturer in social work and head of department at Royal Holloway, University of London, consulted on the script with writer Jack Thorne. Her focus was on correct procedure and terminology but she thinks the social worker character was positive. "I was happy with the final result," she says. "Some people found it a difficult, uncomfortable portrayal of a social worker but actually she was very thoughtful and really committed."

Some social workers actively avoid watching dramas centred on their profession but others

say they would like to see a social work-based drama along the lines of *Casualty* or *The Bill*.

"I would love somebody to write that, I think it would be an eye opener," says Professor Westwood. "I would definitely champion that," adds Dhadwal. It would offer opportunities to explore a full range of social workers' characters and decisions, balancing positive and negative, he says. "There's a smorgasbord of potential for drama in the issues we deal with."

It might seem social workers are fighting a losing battle when challenging their on-screen portrayal but it is definitely worth getting involved, says Ross. "Social workers need to be shown in the context of other professions," she says. "People need to see us as part of the whole system, working with children and families alongside doctors, teachers and courts to provide a safety net for the vulnerable in society." ■