North London
SOCIAL WORK
TEACHING PARTNERSHIP

Regional Labour Market Plan

Executive summary report

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Introduction

The North London Social Work Teaching Partnership is a joint project between four local authorities, a charity and a university, which aims to improve the training, recruitment, progression and retention of social workers across the region. Workforce planning is a key component of the process of assessing the capacity to deliver service outcomes now and into the future. The Government has therefore asked Teaching Partnerships to have a credible plan for increasing employment rates of social work students after graduation and maintaining a supply of high calibre qualified professionals.

Since the supply of, and demand for, social workers is constantly changing, the NLSWTP plans to keep abreast of the labour market changes by monitoring workforce trends across its partners organisations and then implement 'evidence informed' activities that address local labour market challenges. The development of a labour market plan consequently involved a series of steps, including:

— Assessment of the current workforce profile
— Analyses of historical data to identify trends
— Forecast of future labour force requirements

This plan focussed on two key components of labour market planning, namely the supply and demand of social workers. Demand forecasting asks how many workers are going to be needed and workforce supply is a measure of the number of workers going to be available within the organisation and for hire in the labour market. Any gaps between supply and demand will predict whether there is likely to be a workforce shortage or surplus in the future.
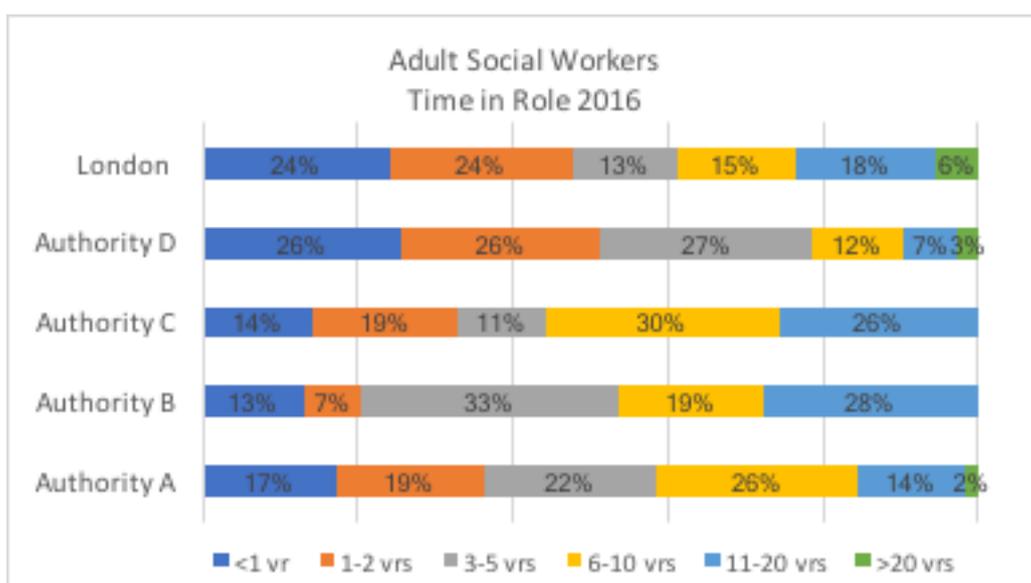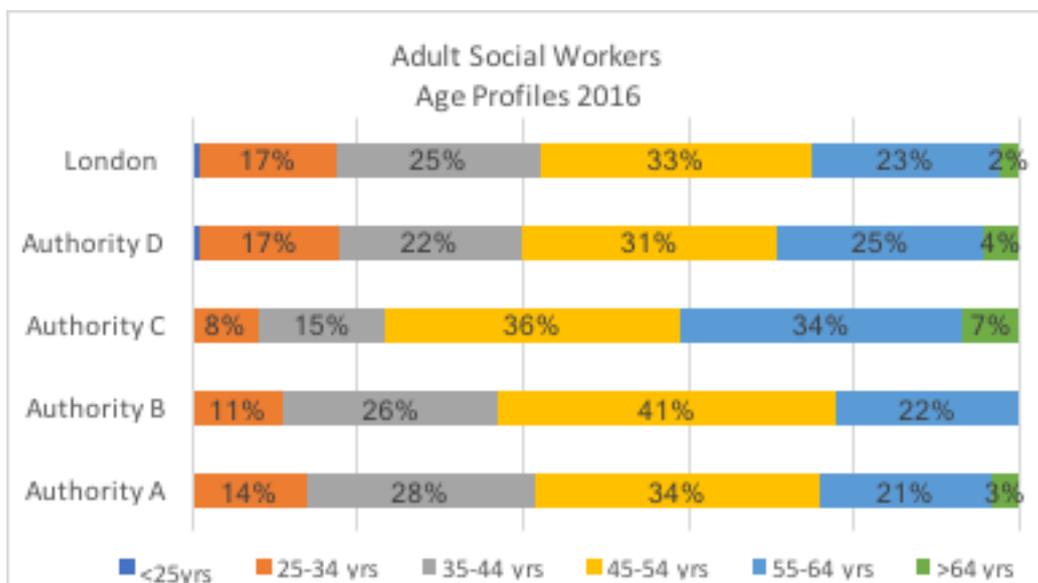
The expected outcomes of the labour market plan were to:

— Improve effective collection, sharing and utilisation of high quality data.
— Provide an indication of the number of social workers required across the NLSWTP over the next five years
— Identify specific concerns to aid authorities in the recruitment and retention of social workers.
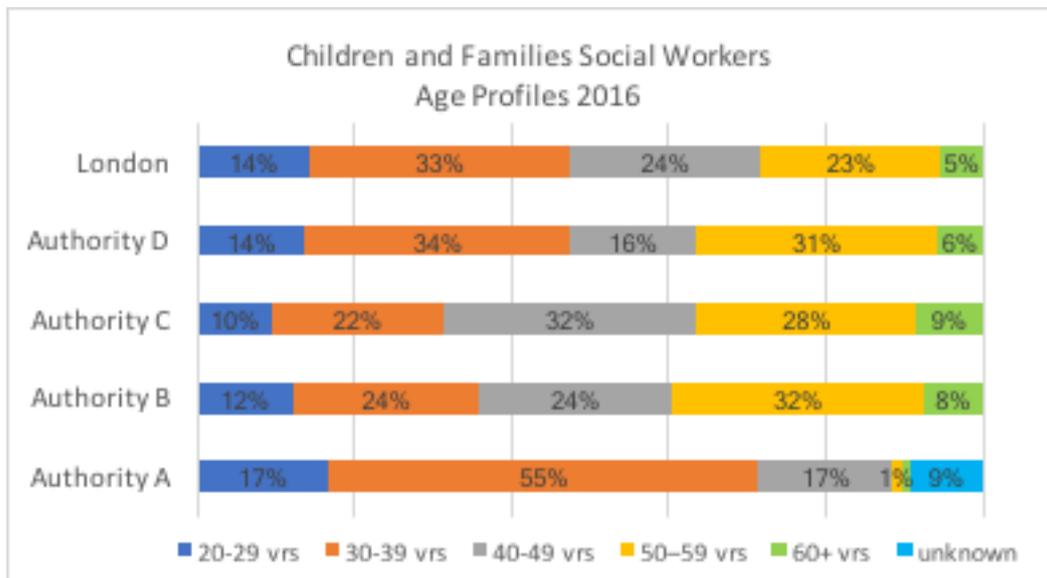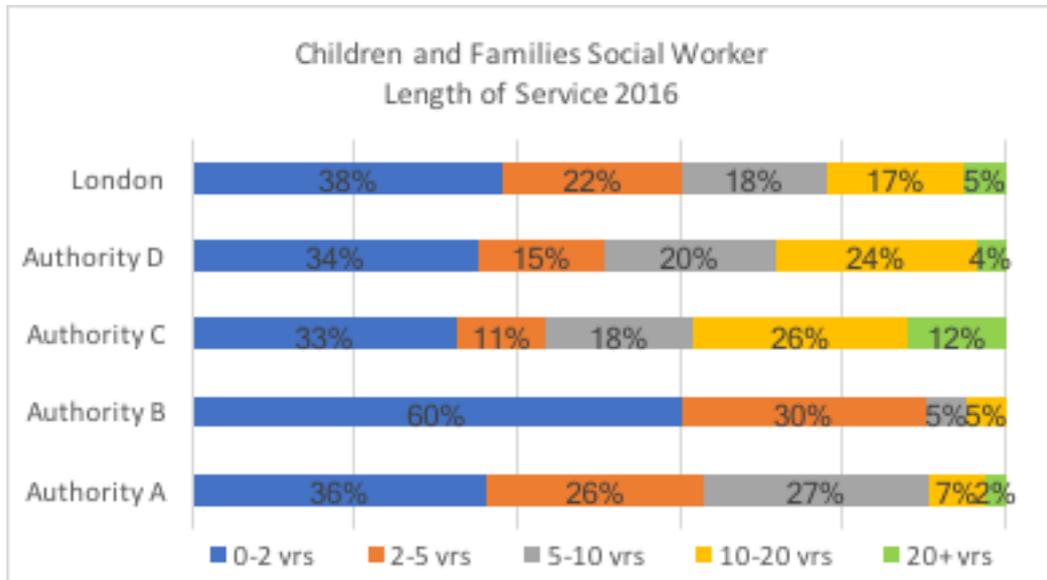
Labour market information was gathered from a wide variety of sources, including government departments, national censuses, professional bodies and local authorities. The NLSWTP examined the existing workforce data for the four partner authorities and comparisons were made with regional figures as appropriate. Since different information is recorded in the respective statutory returns, the adults and children & families' workforce data were also analysed separately. The workforce analytics helped identify trends and issues of common concern, with respect to recruiting and retaining social workers across the region, particularly:

— A significant proportion approaching retirement age
— Shortening job tenure
— Rising turnover and vacancy rates
— A fall in the number of permanent contracts
— Increasing agency worker rates

The current workforce

The profiles of the social workers employed in the four North London authorities were quite varied; some authorities have a relatively stable workforce and others are more changeable. Since grouping the NLSWTP workforce data neutralized some of the individual effects, similarities and differences in the local authority-level data were explored. The following charts illustrate the age profiles and tenure (i.e. length of time workers have been in their current job or organisation) of social workers employed by the four partner organisations. [Nb. Some of the differences could be associated with reporting inconsistencies: e.g. one authority excluded agency staff from their figures.]

Adult Social Workers
Age Profiles 2016

	<25yrs	25-34 yrs	35-44 yrs	45-54 yrs	55-64 yrs	>64 yrs
London		17%	25%	33%	23%	2%
Authority D		17%	22%	31%	25%	4%
Authority C		8%	15%	36%	34%	7%
Authority B		11%	26%	41%	22%	
Authority A		14%	28%	34%	21%	3%

Adult Social Workers
Time in Role 2016

	<1 yr	1-2 yrs	3-5 yrs	6-10 yrs	11-20 yrs	>20 yrs
London	24%	24%	13%	15%	18%	6%
Authority D	26%	26%	27%	12%	7%	3%
Authority C	14%	19%	11%	30%	26%	
Authority B	13%	7%	33%	19%	28%	
Authority A	17%	19%	22%	26%	14%	2%

Children and Families Social Worker Length of Service 2016

	0-2 yrs	2-5 yrs	5-10 yrs	10-20 yrs	20+ yrs
London	38%	22%	18%	17%	5%
Authority D	34%	15%	20%	24%	4%
Authority C	33%	11%	18%	26%	12%
Authority B	60%	30%	5%	5%	
Authority A	36%	26%	27%	7%	2%

Children and Families Social Workers Age Profiles 2016

|	20-29 yrs	30-39 yrs	40-49 yrs	50–59 yrs	60+ yrs	unknown
London	14%	33%	24%	23%	5%	
Authority D	14%	34%	16%	31%	6%	
Authority C	10%	22%	32%	28%	9%	
Authority B	12%	24%	24%	32%	8%	
Authority A	17%	55%	17%	1%		9%

Examination of the individual data sets illustrated that there are local recruitment and retention issues, in addition to regional commonalities. Consequently, individual authorities need to continue to develop and implement local initiatives as part of their own corporate strategic plans e.g. the organisation's learning and development strategy.

Historical supply of social workers

From 2013 to 2016 inclusive, the size of the NLSWTP's children's social worker workforce (including agency staff) increased, and the adult social worker workforce remained relatively stable. Nonetheless, there were reductions in the numbers of social workers employed on permanent contracts. For example, the total number of permanent adult social workers employed by NLSWTP authorities decreased every year (by an average of 6 per cent) as for the comparable London social worker population.
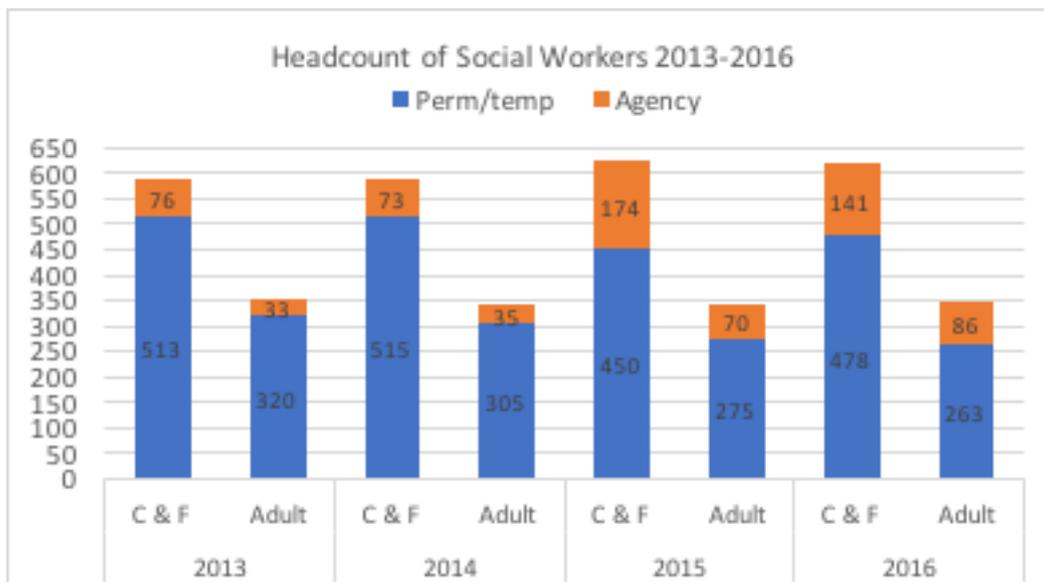
NB: The figures exclude Enfield children and families' social workers

The shortfall in supply is being bridged by the employment of additional agency workers in both sectors – this is a London-wide trend: the London adult and children's social worker agency rates[1] peaked in 2016 at 27 and 26 per cent respectively.

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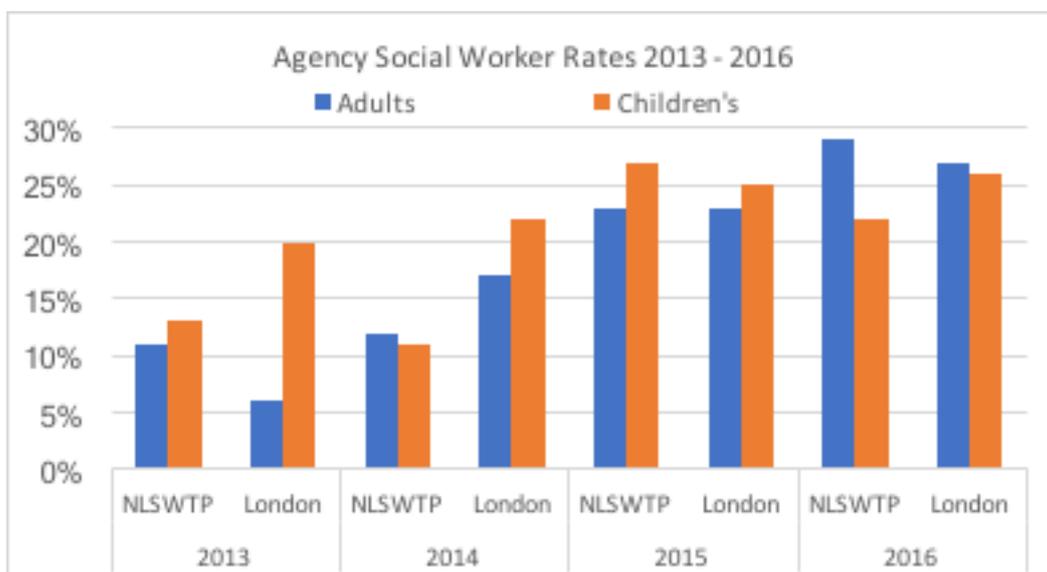
[1] The agency worker rate is defined as agency workers, as a proportion of agency workers plus social workers, based on FTE at 30th September

Although turnover of social workers in individual authorities did not display a particular pattern over time, the London regional figures exhibited clearer trends: The turnover of adult social workers has increased steadily over the past three years, reaching 21 per cent in 2016, and the turnover of children's social workers was relatively constant between 2013 to 2016, at 21 or 22 per cent.

Turnover rates	2013		2014		2015		2016	
	Adults	C&F	Adults	C&F	Adults	C&F	Adults	C&F
NLSWTP average	13%	22%	18%	13%	20%	26%	21%	16%
London average	13%	21%	17%	21%	17%	21%	21%	22%

Note: On inspection of the raw data, it was apparent that incomplete or incorrect information had been submitted by some authorities, perhaps due to misinterpretation of the definition of certain items and census requirements, which may have skewed the reported regional figures.

Demand for social workers

The most challenging aspect of the workforce planning exercise was determining what factors influence the demand for social workers, and the associated difficulties identifying statistics that are representative of each factor and understanding how they translate into demand for social workers. For example, analysis of the NLSWTP local authority Children in Need data[2] for the previous three years showed non-linear increases in the total number of referrals, section 47 enquiries and child protection plans, but the relationship between these figures and demand for social workers was not clear-cut. In addition, the number of adults accessing long term social care[3] decreased from 2015 to 2016 – but social care needs do not necessarily translate into demand for care services, as not all people who need help receive any (and some people are reluctant to seek formal help).

Consequently, it was initially assumed that population growth was the main driver of demand. One may then expect demand for adults and children's social workers in the NLSWTP region to increase by a minimum of 1.7 and 1.5 per cent a year respectively over the next five years.   Based on the size of the existing workforce, this growth in demand would translate into a required expansion of the adult and children's workforces (incl. agency workers) by a total of 31 and 45 social workers respectively over the next five years. Taking the fact that over 65-year olds make up two-thirds of all adult service users, the expected increase in demand for adult social care could rise to 2.1 per cent a year.

Table to show how population growth may lead to a higher demand for social workers:

Demand for social workers in the NLSWTP authorities	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	Total
CHILDREN'S (FTE) +1.5%	583	592	601	610	619	628	**45**
ADULT (headcount) +1.7%	349	355	361	367	373	380	**31**

[2]DfE Statistics: children in need and child protection https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-children-in-need#history
[3]NHS Digital, Community Care Statistics: Social Services Activity, England, 2015 http://www.content.digital.nhs.uk/catalogue/PUB21934

ADULT (headcount) +2.1%	349	356	364	371	379	387	**38**

NB: FTE figures were not collected as part of the adult workforce census

Basing labour market forecasts on population growth alone is rather simplistic, particularly since population change has historically not matched demand for social care. Consequently, it is recommended that further research is undertaken into identifying other predictors of demand, in order that the labour market plan can be improved to take other demand factors into consideration.

Future forecasts

Various assumptions were made before formulating predictions about future demand and supply, i.e.:
— The annual supply of social workers continues at the historical rate
— The annual turnover of social workers stays at the current rate
— All current agency staff are covering permanent vacancies
— All leavers are successfully replaced by permanent or agency workers
— All other factors (such as budgets, policy changes and practice methods) remain stable
— The number of people by age changes in line with the ONS population projections.

Applying these assumptions to the NLSWTP figures forecasts potentially high agency rates across the partnership in five years. For example, if the annual supply of children's social workers continues at the existing rate of 2.7 per cent a year across the NLSWTP, then the agency rate may rise to 32 per cent. Similarly, maintaining a stable adult social worker workforce, but only replacing 71 per cent of leavers with a permanent member of staff could result in a 45 per cent agency worker rate.

Table to show the forecast in the supply of children's social workers, assuming:

— Agency workers only are employed to meet the annual growth;
— Turnover and joiner rates stay at 19%; and
— All leavers are replaced by a permanent member of staff.

NLSWTP children social workers (FTE)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Starting no. permanent SWs)	456	456	456	456	456	456
Starting no. of agency staff	127	143	159	176	193	210
Total supply of social workers (+2.7% a year)	583	599	615	632	649	666
Agency worker rate	**21.8%**	**23.8%**	**25.8%**	**27.8%**	**29.7%**	**31.5%**

Table to show the forecast in supply of adult social workers, assuming:

— No growth in the total size of the workforce;
— Turnover stays at 20.5%; and
— 71% of leavers are replaced by a permanent member of staff.

NLSWTP adult social workers (headcount)	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Starting no. permanent SWs	263	247	232	219	205	193
Starting no. of agency staff	86	102	117	130	144	156
Total supply of social workers (+0% a year)	349	349	349	349	349	349
Agency worker rate	**24.6%**	**29.2%**	**33.4%**	**37.4%**	**41.1%**	**44.7%**

Comparison of the forecasted supply and demand figures predicts future workforce shortages: Although the supply of children's social workers could exceed demand, this scenario would rely on increased utilization of agency workers, as described above; and, if the size of the adult social worker workforce remains constant, then it is expected to fall short of demand.

Consequently, various computations were applied to the model, such as changing the proportion of permanent vacancies filled by agency staff. Indeed, the forecast is alleviated if the model is adapted to assume that every leaver is successfully replaced by a permanent social worker (i.e. turnover rate equals starter rate) and if the increase in demand is not totally satisfied by the employment of agency workers. Nevertheless, the potential for a disproportionately high agency rate and an associated unstable workforce is a strong possibility for the near future, should employers refrain from action.

Conclusion

What happens in the labour market ultimately determines how many staff organisations need to recruit, retain and develop to meet demand. Examination of the existing labour market, and studying historical trends, helped identify emerging labour market challenges. As the supply of labour can come from within or outside the organisation, local authorities need to look at both external recruitment and internal retention (incl. promotion) of their social workers. Indeed, the fall in the number of enrolments onto university social work degree courses necessitates expansion of employment-based training routes to qualification, provided employers intend to recruit additional newly qualified social workers to help meet the anticipated growth in demand. In addition, training and professional development plays a key role in easing recruitment and retention difficulties through equipping staff with the tools to do their job and providing a career progression pathway. Consequently, it is advised that a regional NLSWTP 'recruitment and retention' strategy is devised that takes the issues raised in the labour market analysis into consideration.

If the region is to be able to adapt to the changing economic and social realities, it is necessary for employers, government and other stakeholders to have access to accurate and relevant information on the labour market. For instance, understanding the ways in which people enter the workforce, move through it, and leave it is an important aspect of workforce planning. However, this information is presently deficient at local authority level. Consequently, it is recommended that the Teaching Partnership encourages and supports its partners in collecting comprehensive, accurate and up-to-date information about its workforce. In addition, continuing to monitor the labour market will provide a valuable source of intelligence that can be used to monitor progress of specific initiatives/programmes and guide future strategy.

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