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**Recruitment, retention and role slumping in child protection:  
The evaluation of in-service training initiatives**

## Abstract

This paper explores recruitment and retention of frontline child protection social workers across eight West London local authorities. Our multi-method study of this multi-organisational in-service training initiative gathered insights from distinct stakeholders, and examined the design and delivery of two high quality, bespoke, evidence-based skills programmes for team managers and senior social workers. We found the programmes supported retention through clear career progression, and provided participating authorities with an array of skill-enhancing and confidence boosting opportunities for staff, more cheaply and with greater accessibility than could be achieved by any single authority. Integral action learning sets allowed rapid development and dissemination of new ideas, enabling organisations to benefit immediately from delegates' new learning, while also providing peer support to delegates. We identify the pernicious affect of *role slumping* within social work, and showed how through agreed role criteria and competencies up to first level management its impact might be reduced. We discuss further improvements that could be made to increase the current and longer term impact of the initiatives.

## keywords

In-service training evaluation , recruitment and retention, role slumping

## Introduction

There are endemic problems across many countries in the recruitment and retention of social workers, especially in child protection (Caringi et al., 2008). Within the UK, while a high proportion of newly-qualified staff take up initial paid employment in the profession, there is scant attention paid to their on-going retention (Moriarty and Murray, 2007). Indeed, comparisons of the expected average working life of other professions within a care context shows the relatively short retention of trained social workers (Curtis et al., 2009).

Studies have identified a range of factors that contribute to social workers' decisions to leave both their current employer and the profession as a whole. These factors include:

work stress and burnout, job dissatisfaction, low organisational and professional commitment, inadequate reward, and lack of social support (Barak et al., 2001; Burns, 2010). Healy et al.'s (2009) recent study of social work retention outlined two competing tensions: the *pull* of career opportunities, and organisational *push* factors creating disincentives to remain. They discussed the need to develop clearer pathways that support career progression from newly-qualified social worker through to experienced team manager level. Our study evaluated the impact of developing such a pathway on a multi-organisational basis for frontline child protection social workers across eight West London local authorities.

This paper begins by identifying the wider context for this profession, highlighting the external pressures and exploring how and why social workers are leaving frontline work. Then this in-service training initiative is summarised and their early impact on staff retention, and other indicators outlined. Finally, we consider the effectiveness of these programmes, and identify some additional steps to help consolidate their impact.

We make three contributions. First, we reflect how current externally-derived concerns are promoting a climate conducive to micro-management and task checking, which effectively duplicates effort. We develop the concept of *role slumping*, building Katz and Kahn's (1978) roles theory and research showing how clarity of role division has a clear moderating impact on the relationship between role efficacy and role performance effectiveness (Bray and Brawley, 2002). *Role-slumping* is defined as a process where critical tasks are inappropriately undertaken by staff at a higher level. This process can impact by eroding the confidence and competence of social workers whose roles are being performed by those more senior. Second, we assess the impact of this in-service training to improve retention through creating clearer progression within social work. We use a multi-method approach for data collection incorporating a variety of outcome measures. Finally, we

question the viability of solutions focusing on one just set of Healey et al's (2009) factors in securing longer term change in social work.

### **External focus on the profession**

In the U.K. social work as a profession is under siege from a range of external forces. In particular there is an intense scrutiny of social workers' action by the press, which impacts not only on those involved directly, but can also have serious consequences for more senior staff and directors. Munro (2010) highlights the inherent uncertainty of child protection in which improbable events can occur resulting in the death of a child, even where a high standard of social work care has been provided. As a result, those involved in high profile cases can be pilloried, for example, Sharon Shoesmith in the recent Baby P case.

Governmental response has been to increase regulation, creating systems of greater accountability (Brown, 2010), with a net effect of making local authorities more risk-averse (Petts et al., 2001) and more likely to increase their use of managerialist cultural practices (Beresford and Croft, 2004). Earlier attempts to reform child protection have ultimately seen growing imbalances between technical solutions (e.g. formal systems and regulations), and those which focus on improving social worker skills (Munro, 2010: 7).

In contrast, media scrutiny has focused on the low skill levels of social workers, with local authorities identifying further development and training programmes as a means of reducing their exposure to risk. The continual exposure to negative coverage and constant public scrutiny serves neither clients nor the profession well. Instead, it increases the anxiety and stakes for social workers at every level. At an organisational level it can perpetuate a culture of blame and self-protection within child protection (Lachman and Bernard, 2006).

## **The impact of staff turnover in child protection**

In the last few years, endemic problems in the retention of social workers have emerged, particularly within child protection (Collins, 2008; Morris, 2005; Tham, 2007). The present crisis is so severe, that social work is now on the national occupational shortage list (Curtis et al., 2009). Earlier census-based research indicated that qualified social workers tended to remain within the profession (Smyth, 1996), but recently there has been an escalation in this group deciding to leave (Dominelli, 2004). Comparative expected working life studies reveal social work to be relatively short, at around eight to 13 years compared to other allied care professions (e.g. nursing) (Curtis et al., 2009).

The failure to retain experienced social workers has a range of serious impacts. First, poor retention can contribute to the reduction of service quality offered to some users. Lord Laming (2003) identified high staff turnover as a contributor to Victoria Climbié's death. Case review studies reveal important differences between novices and experienced staff (Fook et al., 2000: 197), with longer serving staff taking "multiple viewpoints, conflicts and complexities" into account; such complexities are particularly likely within child protection where the child, and invariably wider parent and family problems also need to be considered (Forrester, 2000). Consequently, the retention of experienced staff members can directly enhance the type and quality of service provided.

Second, low retention has a detrimental impact for the continuing development of the whole profession (Burns, 2010). Decisions to leave their jobs effectively remove expertise, experience and insight into case management, depriving more junior social workers access to more rounded and sophisticated perspectives. In addition, it also reduces organisational capacity for effective supervision, a critical task performed by experienced social workers (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 1992) and a pivotal factor in professional support and training.

Third, these decisions have clear financial consequences for employers, brought into sharper relief during a period of heightened austerity. In order to prevent shrinkage of the available national labour pool, a larger number of social workers will need to be trained simply to replace those who have left. The present high turnover in social work represents a significantly lower return on training investment than that achieved by other similar professions. Such education has further hidden costs for organisations, through having to offer placements and practice supervisions, the employment of temporary agency staff to meet shortages, and recruitment costs to attract and select experienced recruits from here or overseas.

During the interim period between a social worker leaving and a replacement being found, existing social workers can be placed under increased strain, which contributes to increased turnover intention (Kim and Stoner, 2008). Therefore, those who remain begin to question whether they too should leave an under-staffed organisation.

Finally, endemic retention failure of experienced staff may actively dissuade those currently training to see this as a long-term career option (Jones, 2001). In turn poor retention significantly and detrimentally impacts on recruitment (Schneider, 1987; Searle, 2003).

### **Push Factors**

Extant research indicates a number of critical factors promoting and escalating social workers' decision to leave, including increased work stress and high burnout, job dissatisfaction, low organisational and professional commitment, inadequate reward and recognition and poor social support (Barak et al., 2001; Burns, 2010; Healy et al., 2009; Lachman and Bernard, 2006). These also reduce employees' trust in the organisation further undermining intentions to stay. In contrast high trust enhances employee retention, commitment and job satisfaction (Searle et al., 2011). Further, the organisational climate and culture, can critically influence the quality and outcome of service delivered (Glisson, 2007).



King et al's (2010) suggested that the combination of high work demands, tension with the social work philosophy coupled with the ineffective organisation of the work environment may lead to high levels of stress. Social work remains a profession in which physical safety can be a real concern (Macdonald and Sirotich, 2005). As many of the factors which incline social workers to leave appear to be job- and organisation-based, both employers and policy-makers could have considerable scope by devising new and appropriate strategies.

Supervision and team support are two significant factors that can ameliorate these more detrimental factors (King et al., 2010). In particular, mutual group support, as well as that obtained from home, appear to enhance positive well-being and thus may play a significant role in social worker retention (Collins, 2008).

Healy et al. (2009) comparative study of the U.K., Australia and Sweden differentiated between two competing push and pull tensions which helped determine whether social workers remained. Factors which pushed staff out included: high volumes of inexperienced staff, limited opportunities for reward, high work stress, lack of professional support and development, and a culture of blame. Indeed, Pritchard and Williams' (2010) study of fatal child abuse cases underlined the critical attitudinal and organisational shift necessary to alter the prevailing defensiveness and tendency to attach blame in these cases. Without such changes, the profession remains stuck; unable to learn or improve from critical events.

In contrast, Healy and colleagues identified factors which created incentives to remain within the profession, which clustered around the availability of career progression opportunities into three distinct types of jobs: i.e. administrative and management, non-statutory and non-frontline social work, or advanced child protection practitioner roles. Burns (2010) supported this perspective in a small-scale Irish study, indicating the merit of career progression opportunities for newly-qualified staff.

## Research aims

This study investigates the impact of an in-service training initiative in West London, involving eight boroughs, namely: Brent, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Harrow, Hillingdon, Hounslow, Kensington and Chelsea, and Westminster. The initiative was a two year project funded by the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF), and supported by the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC). It was designed to reduce turnover and promote recruitment through creating more wide-ranging career progression for social workers from advanced practitioner and management levels. Instead of one-off training courses, it involved two longer development programmes, one aimed at team managers and the other at experienced social workers, lasting twelve days, and involving cohorts of between eight and thirty-two delegates. We examine the impact of these programmes on the retention of these key groups and reviewed their impact on staff competence, confidence and outcome metrics including: intention to remain, job satisfaction, motivation and trust in the organisation.

## Methods

A mixed method approach was adopted to examine the training initiative (Riggin, 1997) and through data triangulation a more comprehensive insight into the impact of the initiative is developed, drawing on the perspectives of several levels within and across these organisations. Data were gathered following University ethical approval using four tools, interviews with Associate Directors (ADs) for frontline child services in each borough, and initiative staff; desk research of operational documents relating to the initiative; surveys of delegates and their managers; and focus groups with delegates and other stakeholders.

## **Interviews and desk research**

In-depth audio-taped semi-structured interviews lasting at least one hour were conducted with ADs from each borough . Questions included: their views and understandings of the project, and each of the constituent programmes.

Project staff responsible for organising the different programmes were also interviewed and access provided to all the paperwork pertaining to the content, attendance and evaluations of each programme. From this, the skill components for each programme were identified and used to design survey questions.

## **Survey**

Four online (survey monkey) surveys were developed for staff across the boroughs. The surveys targeted: ADs, senior managers, frontline team managers and senior social workers who had participated in the career pathways programme (see table 1). This enabled a vertical slice to be taken through the organisations allowing comparison of the view of delegates and their line and senior managers. Each survey comprised mainly closed questions with conditional logic used to direct delegates to only those questions relevant to them. The questions utilised a five point rating scale from ‘strongly disagree’ (one) to ‘strongly agree’ (five), with three being undecided. Items were worded to capture delegates’ perceptions of their own competence in key skill areas targeted by the training, as well as the transfer of new skills to their current job role. We also included items concerning their levels of confidence and contributions to the organisation post-training. Managers and senior staff were also asked about their engagement with, and support of, newly-trained staff. Outcome measures included: turnover intentions, motivation, job satisfaction and levels of trust in the organisation. We utilised items from existing scales, (e.g. Landau and Hammer,1986; authors' own, 2011; Trevor, 2001) and adopted an overall assessment approach which has been used extensively in job satisfaction (e.g. Wanous et al., 1997; Nagy, 2002) and happiness (e.g.

Abdel-Khalek, 2006) research, and been confirmed as a robust method for assessing overall levels of job satisfaction and trust (Cummins, 1995, Bergkvist and Rossiter, 2007). Finally, a few open response items were added about the particular programme the delegates had attended, providing an opportunity to comment generally about the project as a whole.

Insert table 1 about here

Quantitative data was extracted from Survey Monkey into EXCEL format and processed directly in Excel or imported into SPSS for further analysis. Quantitative analyses comprised basic descriptive analyses, cross-tabulations, simple inferential tests of significance and stepwise hierarchical regression. Qualitative survey data were collated and a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006) applied, summarising data and establishing clear links with the research questions. This qualitative-inductive approach is well suited for research into areas related to strategy development and management (Kwan and Tsang, 2001). The inclusion of both inductive and deductive aspects strengthens the ability to address specific concerns in an evaluation, rather than becoming bogged down with paradigmatic issues over interpretative, methodological, or philosophical assumptions.

### **Focus groups**

Finally, two focus groups were conducted using a dual moderator format (Krueger and Casey, 2009). The first focus group targeted delegates from both programmes. We differentiated their responses during the focus group as each programmes had distinct content. This provided insights into the processes underpinning the programmes, evidence of impact, and consideration of how the programme could be made more effective. Areas covered included programme content delivery and relevance, support for learning transfer into on-going social work practice, and impact of the programmes on organisational learning and change.

The second focus group targeted members of the programme development teams, in order to gain their insight into the initial goals of the project, their achievements and the effectiveness of each programme.

Questions were presented to the groups on flip charts and participants invited to write their own thoughts on yellow adhesive labels, before sharing them with others. Then, with facilitation, each group arranged these labels to form overarching themes. The facilitators encouraged contrasts to be made between programmes, identifying unique and common themes. Participants had the opportunity to reflect upon the accuracy and appropriateness of the emergent themes as descriptors of their experience, and were assured from the outset of their anonymity.

No digital recordings of proceedings were produced as this was felt to be intrusive and difficult to manage due to the layout of the room and residual noise. Instead, facilitators took detailed notes of each session, and flip chart pages were collected for further analysis. Due to the timing of the evaluation over the Christmas period, participation rate was 55% (N=4 and N= 5). However, although lower than anticipated, this size has been found acceptable for small groups (Krueger, 1994; Morgan, 1997).

## **Findings**

The evaluation revealed evidence of four important and interrelated issues which will now be discussed in turn. The first concerns the lack of clarity about roles within these organisations and how the initiative laid a foundation to reverse present role slumping. The second focuses on the confidence and competence of newly trained social workers, which in turn is related to a reduction in the necessity for role slumping. Thirdly, the impact on recruitment and retention is assessed, which is influenced by the preceding two issues. Finally, we report how sustainable these improvements might be over time.

### **a. Role slumping**

Concerns about the earlier levels of performance of social workers emerged from both the AD and focus groups interviews. ADs highlighted how in meeting work force numbers, they often employed significant numbers of newly-qualified social workers. As a result they had some concerns about the levels of expertise and experience in their frontline teams. ADs found some staff uncertain and lacking in confidence to make decisions, indeed one commented that: *"we did some research about this with our social workers about what they would change and what stopped them and got in their way... they was pretty universally agreement about this whole thing of not being able to make a decision about anything without consultation - that infantilising that we have within social care is rife at all levels. Even at my level, we pay a lot of people, a lot of money to make decisions around adoption and fostering, we have independent chairs and more paper than you can fit into a small aircraft carrier to inform those decision, but ultimately the decisions come to myself, I have to read all the papers and sign them off - it is just mad!"*

The interviews also revealed ADs' awareness of the negative impact of such monitoring and micro-managing on their staff's job satisfaction and competence. Yet, while aware these activities may not be appropriate, senior staff felt compelled to continue them in order to assure their own protection. Three factors appeared to compound their concerns: inconsistent key-skills of social workers from their initial training lack of adequate record keeping regarding social worker in-service training; and the necessity of complying with government's performance indicators.

Through the pilot managers and development staff were able to identify the skills they expected staff to have at each level. In this way the roles of social workers became more consistently defined, making it easier, especially at senior social worker level, to remedy the

current gaps in basic social work skills, such as risk assessment. Our analysis revealed these new programmes could improve the competence and confidence of those trained.

## **b. Confidence and competence**

These programmes brought together eight boroughs in the development and commissioning of two areas which had received little attention in the past. As one AD identified: *"this training really leapt out for me, tacking training and development for experienced staff, as once you get beyond the basics most local authorities struggle, there are exceptions, the higher you get in an organisation, the harder it gets to identify things that are beneficial."*

Each programme was based around an agreed role competency framework. Deliberately distinct from one-off training events, these had more in-depth content and were of a longer duration. For example, in addition to class-based activities, each programme included action learning sets comprised of smaller on-going cross-borough groups, which promoted the more rapid reflection, comparison and transfer of learning back into each work-place. The team management programme comprised six inter-connected modules: *effective supervision and leadership, supervision of assessments, risk management, managing care planning, processing feelings and unconscious material*. Healy et al. (2009) have argued such processing is vital for long term retention of social workers. The provision offered for experienced social workers was similar in duration, but comprised three distinct speciality routes: *advanced child protection, domestic violence, or mental health*. In addition, delegates from both programmes were able to attend a module supporting the transition to effective team manager. All senior social workers chose to attend this session.

Delegates were enthusiastic about the programmes. They were stimulated by the *"vast amount of topics and areas covered"* and *"the high quality of the trainers"*. They appreciated the benefit of having dedicated time for their development and, while some were

disappointed these programmes were not formally accredited, many just wanted further programmes of a similar nature. Senior staff reflected that they wished more staff could benefit from these programmes in future.

In addition to the breadth and depth covered within each programme, each was designed to bring together a cross-borough cohort, offering exposure to different approaches, challenging current thinking on local practices, and expanding delegates' insight. In this way the initiative introduced cross-borough networking typically enjoyed only by those more senior in the organisation. Evidence has suggested that peer support systems can enhance well-being (Collins, 2008) and results from both surveys and focus groups confirmed the value of such networking and cross-borough peer support. For example delegates valued having "*a diverse mix of social workers who shared their experiences at work in their LAs.*" Even from the focus groups we observed how every opportunity of gathering information to assist social workers was utilised.

In focusing on delegates' post-training confidence and competence, both delegates and their managers identified positive changes (see table 2). In parallel with their delegates, line managers' from both programmes reported increased confidence in their social workers' skills following these programmes, with negligible non-statistically significance differences between the two groups. For those attending the team manager training, delegates and their line-managers confirmed improvements in team organisation, along with smaller increases in the quality of teams' assessments and analysis. They also agreed that under-performance within teams was now being more effectively challenged. In this way the aforementioned role slumping was starting to be addressed. For example, a newly-trained team manager commented on their new approach to dealing with their staff: "*...the social worker accepted personal responsibility for some areas of performance, but we also identified specific actions we could undertake within formal supervision which may help in the quality and efficiency in*



*which she produces her work.*" The largest difference occurred in the lower ratings given by managers concerning the quality of outcomes for clients; They indicated more limited improvements.

Insert table 2 around here

In addition to formal training, the team managers' action learning sets focused on a wide array of issues. These groups considered how to develop systems to better support and update managers'/ supervisors' knowledge, to improve communications between legal departments and social work managers, and enhance supervision through the more effective identification and management of social workers' anxieties and other unconscious processes. This latter topic involved better utilisation of case consultation from CAMHS and external consultants. Extant research has shown that effective anxiety management can influence retention and effectiveness of staff positively (Healy et al., 2009), as well as reduce burnout and enhance job satisfaction (Zapf, 2002).

For the senior social worker's programme we found line managers reported marginally higher levels of confidence than senior social worker delegates, but t-tests did not confirm these as statistically significant thus confirming comparable increases (see table 3). Both of these groups indicated that the programme had provided delegates with greater role clarity, wider perspectives and contacts, as well as given time to reflect on complex cases. Significantly, senior social workers were found to be more enthusiastic about their organisations as a result of the changes being made. A stepwise hierarchical regression indicated that over 62% of the variance in *enthusiasm for their organisation* was predicted ( $R^2_{\text{adj}} = .62$ ,  $F(1, 12) = 12.49$ ,  $p < .05$ ) by two variables *improvements being made in how they performed their job* ( $\beta = .59$ ,  $t(12) = 3.43$ ,  $p < .005$ ) and *in a new approach to supervision* ( $\beta = .59$ ,  $t(12) = 2.49$ ,  $p < .028$ ). These results suggest that the in-service programme had provided

an impetus to positively change job performance, as well as increasing motivation and commitment.

Insert table 3 around here

### **c. Recruitment, retention and attitudes to work**

Although the inception of this initiative occurred during a vastly different economic landscape, it nevertheless demonstrated an impact on recruitment and retention. As one AD commented: *"when we started, we were looking at a situation with real recruitment and retention problems, a reasonable amount of financial stability, but a government that really ratcheted up the bureaucracy and demands on local government especially in social work over the years."* The changed economic climate makes it difficult to comment with any definitive authority on the longer term impact on recruitment and retention, but our data has identified areas in which improvements have been made.

Evidence from interviews and focus groups showed increases in the number of applications. While, this in part might reflect the lack of alternative opportunities, these figures are encouraging. In addition, some applicants commented favourably on the training provisions now being offered. Thus, senior social workers are now seeing West London as a more desirable potential employer.

In terms of retention, 82% of delegates who responded indicated an intention to remain with their current employer, with no differences between the programmes. Job satisfaction levels amongst delegates who intended to stay were also higher ( $M = 4.14$ ,  $SD = 0.54$ ), than those who were considering leaving ( $M = 2.83$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ). Testing this for significance indicated that Levene's test for the assumption of equality of variances was violated ( $F(1,41) = .7749$ ,  $p = .008$ ). Using adjusted values for degrees of freedom in order to compensate for this violation nevertheless showed statistical significance between the means ( $t(5.345) = -2.682$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ). More strikingly, of the 18% who were considering a change,

80% reported they would look initially at other West London boroughs before searching further afield. Therefore, , the benefits of these programmes were are likely to be retained within the partners authorities. Further longitudinal data should be collected to confirm this result.

In addition to the impact on retention, the availability of different programmes had a broader positive impact on job satisfaction, motivation, enthusiasm and trustworthiness (see table 4). In looking at other work-related attitude measures, enthusiasm was higher amongst senior managers (mean 3.45), but both groups of delegates reported high job satisfaction and motivation. Although the sample size was small, a stepwise hierarchical regression indicated that nearly 60% of the variance in senior social workers' levels of motivation in their job was predicted by their perceived enhanced level of confidence ( $R^2_{adj} = .59$ ,  $F(1, 14) = 21.02$ ,  $p < .001$ ). Other variables such as changes to supervision and new work practices made no significant contribution to this prediction. Delegates' trust in the organisation was also high, particularly amongst senior social workers. Research indicates that trust is important in enhancing performance effectiveness, but also indirectly influential through facilitating greater citizenship and other pro-social behaviours (Searle et al., 2011). These findings suggest similar potential benefits for these organisations, however, as no base line measure of trust was available this remains speculative. .

Due to the cross-sectional nature of the survey method, we can not directly attribute these attitudes necessarily to the in-service training, but they do reflect more positive attitudes towards the organisation and work. Our findings have been corroborated by the many reports from delegates of the cascading of their newly-acquired knowledge within their teams. Further gathering of data will enable the veracity of these results to be examined.

Insert table 4 around here

#### **d. Concerns about sustainability**

Our analysis identified two critical aspects which appeared to limit the programmes' effectiveness. First, sustained management support is inherent to prevent current and future role slumping. In this study some delegates received strong endorsement and support from their direct managers, for example: "...*support of team manager and service manager to apply for the programme and being given the time to attend.*" They commented on the privilege of being given dedicated time to learn and reflect on complex cases. In contrast, however, for others there was a dearth of support. Critically for such individuals the training was actively ameliorating their dissatisfaction with line management. For example, one delegate outlined how their manager undermined the programme through lack of "*support ...with case loads which would enable me to spend time to explore the research methods*" and by not "*meeting ...to talk about the programme further.*"

A factor contributing to managers' lack of support which emerged was their limited awareness of the initiatives. Unless involved directly, managers appeared to have incomplete insight into the content of the programmes for which their staff had been nominated. The interviews and survey results confirmed that the project had not been communicated as widely as expected, with organisers slow to engage more actively with managers; For example, only latterly had materials been designed to prompt managers to consider how to use their staffs' newly-acquired skills.

Line and middle managers ongoing support is likely to be essential in sustaining the benefits of these programmes as any lack of engagement from this key group will prevent their staff from performing at the appropriate level. In a high risk context, there will always be an on-going temptation to ensure the task has been done adequately by doing it oneself, however, managers need to be able to discern whether their staff possess the requisite skills, or they are actually choosing not to perform at the required level. Research shows that

allowing individuals to continually underperform, reduces their future performance, but also has a corrosive impact on the wider team (Trevino and Ball, 1992). Without knowledge of the newly-acquired skills of delegates, and support from middle managers in challenging and prompting line managers to be more empowering, the current cycle of monitoring and infantilising social workers is likely to remain. Only when line managers begin to show social workers that they believe they are capable of performing to the required standard, and when they actively challenge the necessity of escalating tasks and decisions upwards, will social workers be able to perform their own duties. This will free up more senior staff to engage in more appropriate and strategic duties. Without more effective communication of social workers capability and more direct leadership role slumping will not be challenged and removed.

The second critical factor which may threaten the ongoing viability of the project concerns the narrowness of its focus, solely on development. Our surveys and focus groups indicated that these programmes had raised expectations amongst delegates of their own potential.. While some team managers *"felt privileged to have been nominated for the programme"*, others reflected how it met their ambitions; for example, *"my need to further develop my skills and knowledge base."* The programmes may have created a period of grace in which Healy et al's (2009) other push factors, including lack of management support remain, but with a diminished impact. In the short run these programmes have been shown to offer some support regarding recruitment and retention, however, in practice they may have merely diverted attention temporarily from the push factors, such as a lack of recognition, poor management and a culture of blame. All of these factors may still remain in these organisations. In addition, delegates may choose to use their development time designed to facilitate the exchange of work-based information, to gain more candid insights into working conditions across different borough. When the economic situation improves these insights

may be used to identify more conducive employment opportunities in other authorities. The omission of any attention towards push factors may, in the long run, severely and considerably undermine the ultimate impact of this and similar career progression programmes.

## **Conclusion**

This in-service training project created and delivered two high quality, cost-effective, wide-ranging, skills-focussed and evidence-based programmes operating across eight boroughs aimed at team managers and senior social workers. These programmes offered a clear career development progression, including agreed role criteria and a competency framework up to first level management. They have provided the participating authorities with a superior array of skill-enhancing and confidence boosting career development opportunities for their staff, more cheaply and with greater accessibility than would be achievable by any single authority, particularly for smaller boroughs. The integral action learning sets have enabled the more rapid dissemination of new ideas across all eight boroughs promoting learning-focused cultures, and enabling organisations to benefit immediately from delegates' new learning, as well as offering delegates additional peer-support. The programmes represent an important tool to combating role slumping. Through enhancing skill levels providing clear and generic performance standards, and allowing responsibility for decisions to be pushed back to the appropriate level. These programmes offered managers a means of resisting the pressures to micro-manage. For experienced social workers, the programme has precipitated changes in their own work behaviours, and critically for the enhancement of the profession, their approach to supervision (Skovholt and Ronnestad, 1992). The peer-support inherent in both programmes is likely to promote further employee well-being and job satisfaction (Collins, 2008). Overall, the programmes appeared to be assisting local authorities to both attract and retain staff. We found that delegates who

reported a desire to remain in their job role also reported higher job satisfaction, increased motivation, and trust levels in their employing local authority. Through the improved retention of staff in these critical roles, and the enhancement of the skill base these programmes could ultimately raise the quality of service offered to clients, enrich the supervision and the development of those new into the profession, and create a more satisfying work context for all. Further longitudinal analysis is suggested to explore the stability of these findings in the long term, and the direction of causality.

Importantly, this evaluation has identified two critical shortcomings which threaten to reduce the ongoing impact and viability of project. Central to social workers being able to operate at an appropriate level is the awareness and understanding amongst all staff of these new development opportunities. To date, surprisingly little attention or communication has focused on line and middle manager, who are pivotal in encouraging, supporting and empowering staff, to develop and embed their new skills. Unless directly involved, this group were likely to be unaware of the project as little information about the programmes' design and content was given to new staff or managers. Second, scant attention has been paid to the simultaneous consideration of more detrimental organisational push factors, such as reward and recognition, management support and the pervasive culture of blame within social work. While the attention on appropriate training and development is laudable, it is evident from the literature that without attention on both of these issues, push factors will remain and may ultimately undermine any gains made to recruitment and retention.

The project has offered the means for social workers at all levels to be potentially released from the ongoing cycle of micro-management. This micro-management is costly in many ways, it absorbs those at senior levels in inappropriate activities aimed at minimising their risk, which in turn diminishes their capacity to engage in more strategic activities that

could focus on countermanding the current weaknesses in organisational design that are contributing in some ways to the present crisis in social work retention and recruitment.

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Tables

Table 1: WLP survey participation rates

<b>Group</b>	<b>Invited N</b>	<b>Completed N</b>	<b>Survey Participation rate</b>
Career Pathways Participants	50	27	54%
Team Managers	92	54	59%
Senior Managers	40	28	70%
Assistant Directors	9	8	87%

Table 2: Comparison of survey means: Team Manager programme - Delegates and Line Managers

<b>Area</b>	<b>Team Manager programme Delegates</b>	<b>Their Line Managers</b>
More confidence in skills	3.91	4.00
Increased contribution to team development	3.90	3.78
Improved organisation of team	4.0	3.6
Dealing with under performance in team	3.78	3.56
Better case assessment	3.44	3.11
Improved case analysis	3.60	3.33

Improvements in outcomes for clients	4.00	3.33
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Table 3: Comparison of survey means: Senior Social Worker programme - Delegates and Line Managers

Area	Sen. Social Worker programme Delegates	Their Line Managers
More confidence in skills	4.09	4.11
Improved role clarity	4.04	3.89
New perspective on work	4.09	3.85
New contacts to assist work	4.03	4.0
Reflection on cases	4.36	4.05

Table 4: Mean Delegates' Outcome measures

Area	Sen. Social Worker programme Delegates	Team Manager programme Delegates
Job satisfaction	3.95	3.75
Motivation	3.70	3.38
Enthusiasm for the organisation	3.09	3.18
Trust in the organisation	4.71	4.50