



nmds-sc briefing



Spotlight on social workers in adults' services

The National Minimum Data Set for Social Care (NMDS-SC) collects data for all social workers and social care staff working in adults and childrens services across England. Detailed information was collected from local authorities for the first time in 2011 as the NMDS-SC replaced the SSDS001 as the primary workforce data return. This briefing provides a spotlight on social workers working in adult services.¹

The demand for social workers varies across adults' services with demand being stronger in mental health services.² However, the importance of minimising turnover and vacancy rates and reducing short term use of agency staff is a constant in ensuring that people receive consistent, stable and good quality services. Sickness levels provide an insight into how supported staff feel in providing services in what are sometimes difficult and stressful circumstances. The collection, analysis and publication of NMDS-SC data on these variables for social workers provide important information for service providers and workforce planners.

Total social worker numbers in adult services

Analysis of NMDS-SC data estimates there to be 16,300 social worker jobs in adults' services being performed by 16,100 social workers. In terms of whole time equivalents (WTE), there were 14,600 WTE social worker jobs in adults' services reflecting that most social worker jobs are full time. The total number of social workers in adults' services has changed very little between 2010 and 2011. The analysis below excludes senior social workers with a supervisory role who are classified as 'first line managers' in NMDS-SC.

Recruitment and retention

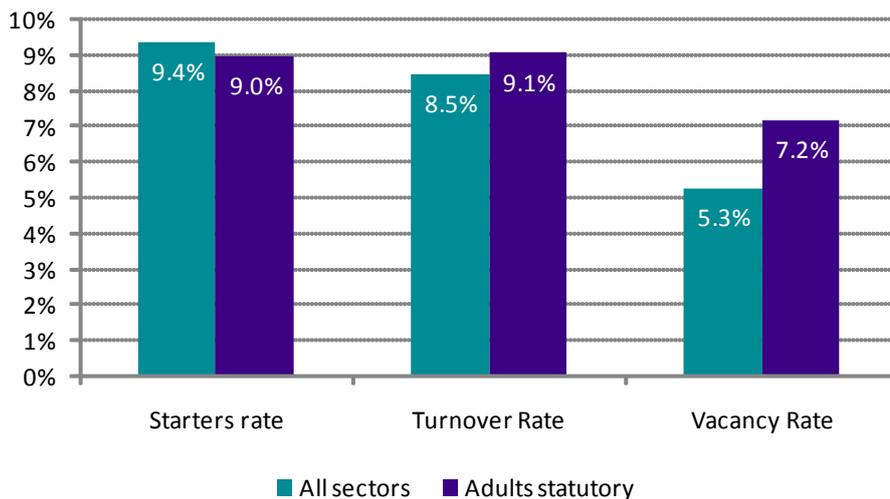
The NMDS-SC data returns identify a social worker vacancy rate of approximately seven per cent in local authority adult services with low numbers of agency workers. There have been reported difficulties in recruiting experienced social workers to work in mental health services and there is evidence that employers are favouring the recruitment of experienced social workers across adult services. Skills for Care has been helping employers to support less experienced social workers through the Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQS) programme. Skills for Care has joint responsibility for developing the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)³ framework for newly qualified social workers which will be implemented in September 2012. It is important for employers to retain more experienced social workers both to maintain service quality and to mentor those on the NQS and ASYE programmes.

¹ A fuller NMDS-SC Briefing will be published in June 2012 once the Department for Education publishes a report based on data from children's services (publication date set for May 31st 2012).

² Workforce Risks and Opportunities: Social Workers (Centre for Workforce Intelligence, March 2011)

³ www.skillsforcare.org.uk/asye

Chart 1: Starters, turnover and vacancy rates of social workers in adults' services, England



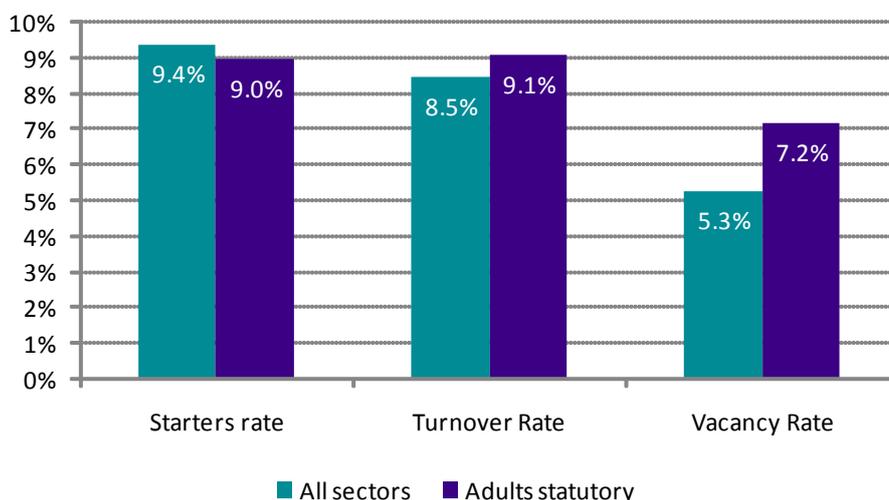
* Based on data held in the NMDS-SC as at November 2011.

Sickness

While 42% of social workers employed by local authorities in adults' services have had no days off work due to sickness, over a fifth of social workers (21%) have had over 10 days off work due to sickness. Seven per cent of social workers have had more than 40 days or two months lost to sickness. This may indicate that social workers need more support in undertaking what can be a difficult and stressful job.

High levels of sickness will have a negative impact on service quality due to a lack of consistency and stability in the social work service being provided. The provision of good staff supervision and continuing professional development should play a role in reducing work related stress. The NQSW and ASYE programmes are designed to support social workers in their first year of being a qualified social worker and have an important role to play in increasing service quality.

Chart 2: Annual sickness rates for social workers in adult services, England



* Based on data held in the NMDS-SC as at November 2011.

Conclusion

The Social Work Reform Board is implementing the recommendations made by the Social Work Task Force to improve the quality of social work, for example through the NQSW programme supported by Skills for Care. The use of NMDS-SC data for workforce planning can also help ensure that people receive consistent, stable and good quality social work services.