A rapid review of innovations for attraction, recruitment and retention of social care workers, and exploration of factors influencing turnover within the UK context

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ABSTRACT

Context: The UK social care sector has come under increased pressure to combat workforce shortages. With international recruitment of professionals impacted by Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic, social care is in need of innovations to attract, recruit and retain staff.

Objectives: This review aimed to identify (1) innovations to attract, recruit, and retain social workers (professionals working with children and adults to protect them from harm, often as case managers) and the wider social care workforce (workers providing direct practical support to children and adults with their daily activities) and (2) factors influencing staff turnover in the UK context.

Method: Pre-defined inclusion criteria were developed using the SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) framework. Searches were conducted across three databases and 32 key United Kingdom third sector and government organisations from 2001. In total, 1,835 citations were retrieved and 40 met the eligibility criteria (13 for social workers and 28 for social care workforce). Thematic analysis was used to explore the data and presented across two evidence maps.

Findings: Evaluation evidence was only available for a small portion of innovations identified. Practice learning, fast-track graduate programmes, and apprenticeships may support the retention of social workers, while pre-employment training, national recruitment campaigns, care work ambassadors, and values-based recruitment could help attraction, recruitment, and retention of the wider social care workforce.

Limitations: Most of the included studies were conducted pre-pandemic and mainly relied on descriptive and explorative methodologies.

Implications: Future policy initiatives should include an evaluation strategy from the outset to develop a more extensive evidence base. Funding bodies should offer schemes supporting research in this area.

INTRODUCTION

The shortage of staff in adult and children's social care services, and the pressures faced by the sector, predates the COVID-19 pandemic (CQC 2021; The King's Fund 2018; Turnpenny & Hussein 2020). Attracting, recruiting, and retaining staff in social work and social care has been a known issue for several years affecting numerous countries (Colombo et al. 2011; Moriarty et al. 2018).

In the United Kingdom (UK), retention in adult social care is particularly problematic. For example, in 2020/21 it is estimated that an average of 6.8% of roles in the adult social care sector in England were vacant. This is higher than the National Health Service (NHS) (5.9%) and the wider UK economy (2.1%) (Skills for Care 2021a).

The reasons for the challenges in recruiting and retaining staff are manifold and include shortages of workers, poor perceptions of care work, low pay and poor working hours, and the demanding nature of care work (Devi et al. 2021). Since Brexit in 2016, international recruitment from the European Union for health and care has become problematic in the UK, with the added impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on attracting, recruiting, and retaining staff (Devi et al. 2021). These challenges are against a backdrop of increasing demand by a rising number of adults who need support from social care services (Moriarty et al. 2018). By 2035, the number of adult social care jobs in England alone is expected to increase by 29% to meet these growing needs (Skills for Care 2021b).

Amongst the social work profession, recruitment and retention issues are also significant (Scourfield et al. 2020). A 2010 study found that the average working life of social work practitioners is less than eight years, compared with approximately 25 years for doctors and 15 for nurses (Johnson et al. 2019). Issues with retention exist across both children's and adult's social work, with vacancy rates in both rising (UK Government 2021). In the face of these recruitment and retention challenges, employers and policymakers are seeking effective ways to attract, recruit, and retain workers in both social care and social work.

The first step is to attract individuals to social care and social work roles. Examples include promoting the positive aspects of the work or incorporating schemes like apprenticeships or pre-employment training (Skills for Care 2021c). Recruitment then focuses on employing people with the values and behaviours that will complement the workplace and contribute to the delivery of high-quality care and support (Skills for Care 2021d). Retaining good staff is a key element to the success of the delivery of social care, and focusing investment on retention is important (Figgett 2017). Turnpenny and Hussein (2020) suggest that better recruitment practices can reduce turnover, but the effectiveness of different approaches and innovations is unclear.

An initial search of the literature identified several systematic reviews that explored recruitment and retention issues for the social care workforce. However, these were based on international literature (Lethbridge 2017; Turley et al. 2020; Turnpenny & Hussein 2020; Webb & Carpenter 2012), while the remit of this review was to examine the UK context given the dual pressures relating to Brexit and COVID-19. We conducted a rapid review of the evidence for innovations to attract, recruit, and retain social care workers and to understand which factors influence turnover within the UK context. The review was focused on two groups: the profession of social workers and the wider social care workforce (for example support worker, care assistants). Social workers in the UK are professionals who 'aim to improve people's lives by helping with social and interpersonal difficulties, promoting human rights and wellbeing. Social workers protect children and adults with support needs from harm' (British Association of Social Workers 2021). In the UK, social workers are generally employed by local authorities, with the remainder employed by either the NHS or the independent sector (Skills for Care 2021a).

The wider social care workforce provides direct support to adults, such as personal care or practical assistance, because of needs related to age, illness, or disability, to help them live their lives as comfortably and independently as possible (TLAP 2021). For adult social care in the UK, this includes residential care, domiciliary (home) care, and care in other settings, such as day centres or extra care housing. Workers are employed across a range of local authority, independent, and third sector employers (Skills for Care 2021a). For children in England, Scotland, and Wales, local authorities have a number of statutory duties in relation to the children taken into their care and are obliged to safeguard and promote their welfare, including through the provision of accommodation and care (Competition & Markets Authority 2021).

This rapid review was conducted as part of the Wales COVID-19 Evidence Centre Work Programme (Wales COVID-19 Evidence Centre 2021), and the question was suggested by Social Care Wales (Social Care Wales 2021). Rapid review methodology was used to provide a timely response for our stakeholders to inform decision-making in the Welsh context in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our methods are based on the latest guidance for undertaking rapid reviews (Garritty et al. 2021; Plüddemann et al. 2018; Tricco et al. 2017).

METHODS
ELIGIBILITY CRITERIA

The inclusion criteria were informed by SPIDER (Sample, Phenomenon of Interest, Design, Evaluation, Research type) framework (Cooke et al. 2012) and is presented in Table 1.

SEARCH STRATEGY

Searches were conducted across three databases from 2001 to November 2021: MEDLINE, Social Policy and Practice, and SCOPUS. The websites of 32 key UK third sector and government organisations were searched (click here for full details). Initial keywords were (retention or retain* or recruit* or turnover or attract AND social work* or care work* or "domiciliary care" or "residential care"). The search strategies were tailored for each information source see additional material (originally there was a link here to the additional material, so there is transparency and people can find the full search strategy) and an example, the full search strategy for Social Policy and Practice is provided in Table 2. The reference lists of all included studies were screened for additional studies.

STUDY SELECTION PROCESS

All citations retrieved from the database searches were imported into EndNote™ and duplicates and irrelevant citations removed and then imported to Covidence™ for study selection. Two reviewers dual screened at least 20% of citations using the information provided in the title and abstract using the software package Covidence™, resolving all conflicts. The citations were then screened by a single reviewer with categories of include, exclude; at least 50% of all those that were categorised as exclude were screened by a second reviewer, resolving all conflicts as needed. For citations that appeared to meet the inclusion criteria, or in cases in which a definite decision could not be made based on the title and/or abstract alone, the full texts of all citations were retrieved. The full texts were screened for inclusion by two reviewers and any disagreements resolved by a third reviewer.

DATA EXTRACTION

All demographic data were extracted directly into tables by one reviewer and checked by another. The data extracted included specific details about the innovations, populations, study methods, and outcomes of significance to the review question and specific objectives. All outcome data were extracted independently by two reviewers, and the software package NVIVO™ was used to facilitate this process.

	INCLUSION CRITERIA	EXCLUSION CRITERIA
Sample	All staff working within child and adult social care employed by care providers. For example, social workers; community occupational therapists; care workers; support workers; day services workers; domiciliary care workers; nurses	Volunteers, lay family members Personal assistants employed by individuals
Phenomenon of interest	Innovations or factors that help to attract, recruit, and retain Factors that influence turnover	Predictors of intention to leave / turnover by organisational and demographic characteristics
Design	Published literature of any research design, grey literature (UK third sector and government reports and briefings)	
Evaluation	Characteristics, views, experiences	
Countries	UK	
Language of publication	English	
Publication date	2001 (year of the Care Standards act) to November 2021	

Table 1 Eligibility criteria.

SEARCH NUMBER	DESCRIPTION	RESULTS
1	((retention or retain* or recruit* or turnover or attract*) adj3 (worker* or workforce* or staff* or employe* or workplace or "work place*" or "human resource*" or occupation* or personnel or profession* or practitioner*)).tw.	1,948
2	("turnover rate*" or "turnover intention*" or "voluntary turnover" or "inten* to leave" or "inten* to stay" or "retention rate" or "leave intention*").tw.	276
3	1 OR 2	2,118
4	(care adj2 (worker* or workforce or assistant* or staff or sector or home* or system*)).tw.	18,769
5	(nurs* adj2 (home* or residence* or residential or institution* or facilit*)).tw.	5,512
6	("social care" or "social work*" or "social service*" or "child welfare" or "child protection" or "welfare service*" or "welfare system*" or "support work*" or "day service*" or "domiciliary care" or "residential care" or "residential aged care" or "residential home*" or "care residence" or "assisted living facilit*" or "supported living" or "occupational therap*").tw.	78,868
7	OR (4 – 6)	91,083
8	3 and 7	**1,207**

Table 2 Search strategy adapted for Social Policy and Practice.

QUALITY APPRAISAL

The methodological quality of all the research studies was assessed by one reviewer (and judgements verified by a second reviewer) using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT) Version 2018 (Hong et al. 2018). The MMAT contains two initial screening questions and five separate study design sections for the appraisal of qualitative, quantitative (randomised controlled trials, non-randomised, and descriptive studies), or mixed methods research. Each section contains five questions inquiring about the quality of the methods used and their appropriateness to answer the study question and can be answered as 'yes', 'no', or 'can't tell'. In this rapid review, an overall study quality rating was generated, in which stars (*) were allocated to each 'yes' answer, if any questions were answered 'no' or 'can't tell', no stars were given. Based on how many stars a study had, a final quality percentage was provided. Studies that scored five stars (*****) in the given study design section were rated as 100% meeting the MMAT quality criteria, while studies with no stars were scored 0%, indicating poor reporting or methodological quality (Thordardottir et al. 2019).

SYNTHESIS

The data were reported narratively as a series of thematic summaries (Thomas et al. 2017), full details can be found here (link to the full report). The themes were developed a priori based on one recent third sector report (Skills for Care 2021e) and evidence review with sector consultation (Swift & Teicke 2021). These themes were workforce planning, increasing diversity,

promoting career opportunities, pre-employment initiatives, local and national recruitment campaigns, values-based recruitment, supportive induction and development, pay, rewards and recognition, training and career development, apprenticeships, and good working conditions. The evidence was presented in the form of a graphical evidence map (Klinger et al. 2021), populated by information describing the number and types of studies, reviews, organisational reports (non-research) with the innovation paired alongside the outcomes of interest (attraction, recruitment, and retention). If an innovation was described within the evidence as having the potential to have an impact on the outcomes of interest, then this was indicated on the evidence map using the following key in the appropriate boxes (mixed methods: M; quantitative descriptive: D; qualitative descriptive: Q; reviews: R; organisational reports (non-research): O). If an innovation was implemented and also evaluated to determine its effectiveness on the outcomes of interest, then this was indicated in bold on the evidence map with a suffix of a plus sign (for example **M+**, **D+**, etc.).

RESULTS

Of the 1,835 citations retrieved from our searches, 40 met our eligibility criteria. The flow of citations through each stage of the review process is displayed in a PRISMA flowchart (Page et al. 2021) (see Figure 1). The findings are presented separately for the social worker profession and the wider social care workforce (see Tables 3 and 4).
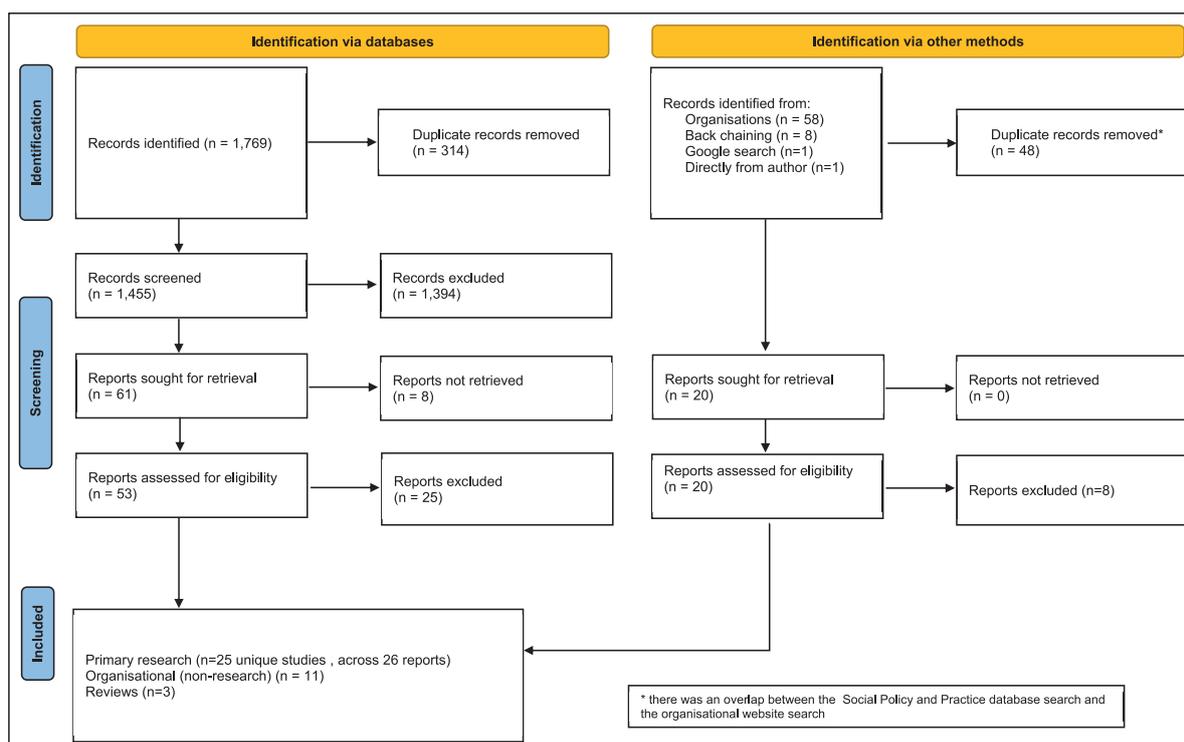

Figure 1 PRISMA 2020 flow diagram for primary research, review articles and grey literature which included searches of databases and other sources.

AUTHOR SETTING, LOCATION	PARTICIPANTS FOCUS	STUDY DESIGNS DATA COLLECTION METHODS DATA SUMMARY
Social workers		
Baginsky et al. 2010 Adult and children's services England	Employees (n = 1153)/Employers (n = 52) Factors that impact on frontline social work practice Survey of workloads and pressures facing social workers	Mixed methods Diary, survey (with open and closed questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data), and interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 80%
Baginsky 2013 Children's services England	Employers (n = 20) Summary of the approaches being taken to recruit and retain experienced social workers and any additional suggestions	Qualitative descriptive Group discussions and interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 80%
Baginsky & Manthorpe 2016 Child and family services England	Employees (Step up to Social work Graduates n = 138) Implementation and evaluation of a training and career development initiatives (Step up to Social Work)	Mixed methods Surveys (online survey with open and closed questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data) MMAT critical appraisal scores: 40%
Evans & Huxely 2009 Adult services Wales	Employers (n = 22) Employees (n = 998) Factors associated with recruitment and retention	Quantitative descriptive Surveys MMAT critical appraisal scores: 100%
Parker et al. 2006 Parker & Whitfield 2006 Adult and children's services England	Employers (training managers responsible for practice learning) Employees (n = 66) Implementation and evaluation of a pre-employment initiative (practice learning)	Mixed methods Surveys and interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 80%
Scourfield et al. 2020 Child and family services England	Employees Step up to social work graduates (n = 404) Frontline programme graduates (n = 281) Implementation and evaluation of a training and career development initiative (Step up to Social Work and Frontline)	Mixed methods Survey (online survey with open and closed questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data) and interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 20%
Smith et al. 2013 Child and family services England	Employers (n = 168) Implementation and evaluation of a training and career development initiative (Step up to Social Work)	Mixed methods Quantitative analysis of recruitment and selection patterns and outcomes, analysis of key policy and programme documents, interviews, and surveys MMAT critical appraisal scores: 40%
Smith et al. 2018 Child and family services England	Employers (n = 14) Employees Step up for social work graduates (n = 201) Comparators trained via traditional route (n = 148) Implementation and evaluation of a training and career development initiative (Step up to Social Work)	Mixed methods Survey (online survey with open and closed questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data) and interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 80%
Stone & Worsley 2021 Social work Higher education England	Employees (students n = 29) Implementation and evaluation of the social work degree apprenticeship	Mixed methods Survey (online survey with open and closed questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data) MMAT critical appraisal scores: 80%
Social workers and social care workforce		
Mulholland et al. 2017 Adult and children services Scotland	Employers of social workers and social care workforce (n = 213) Recruitment and retention issues and potential solutions	Mixed methods Survey (online survey with open and closed questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data) and interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 40%
Social care workforce		
Atkinson et al. 2016 Adult social care Wales	Employers (n = 72)/Employees (n = 41) Factors that affect recruitment and retention	Qualitative descriptive Focus groups and interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 100%
Consilium 2016 Adult social care England	Employers (n = 112) Implementation and evaluation of the values-based recruitment toolkit	Mixed methods Surveys (online), interviews, and case studies MMAT critical appraisal scores: 20%

AUTHOR SETTING, LOCATION	PARTICIPANTS FOCUS	STUDY DESIGNS DATA COLLECTION METHODS DATA SUMMARY
Cornes et al. 2011 Adult and children social care England	Employers (n = 23) Implementation and evaluation of a training and career development initiative (emotional loyalty training)	Qualitative descriptive Focus groups and interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 20%
Dobson & Byrne 2010 Adult social care England / Wales	Employers (n = 30) Implementation and evaluation of pre-employment initiatives (Care First Careers)	Mixed methods Survey (conducted as interview with open and closed questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data) MMAT critical appraisal scores: 40%
Ekosgen 2013 Adult social care UK	Employers (n = 192)/Employees (n = 160) Measures that employers can take that can influence retention	Mixed methods Interviews, focus groups, surveys, and an evidence review Analysis of data from the NMDS for Social Care MMAT critical appraisal scores: 20%
Ekosgen 2016 Adult social care England	Employers (n = 88)/Employees (n = 46) Event organisers (n = 10)/Programme Stakeholders (n = 6) Implementation and evaluation of a promoting career opportunities initiative (*I Care...Ambassadors*)	Mixed methods Surveys and qualitative consultations MMAT critical appraisal scores: 80%
Figgett 2017 Adult social care England	Employers (n = 140) Factors contributing to the success of recruitment and retention	Mixed methods Surveys (online or mailed survey with open and closed questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data) MMAT critical appraisal scores: 40%
Goode 2014 Adult social care UK	Employers (n = 102) Implementation and evaluation of the values-based recruitment toolkit	Mixed methods Surveys (with open and closed questions that generated qualitative and quantitative data) and case studies MMAT critical appraisal scores: 60%
Johnston et al. 2017 Adult social care England (East London)	Employers (n = 43) Challenges in increasing workforce readiness in the recruitment of appropriately skilled staff and the development of high-quality career pathways in social care	Mixed methods Review of existing data and evidence on the state and size of the workforce, interviews, five case studies, and a futures workshop MMAT critical appraisal scores: 20%
Lucas et al. 2009 Adult social care England	Employers (n = 20)/Employees (not reported) Relationships between pay, other rewards and incentives, terms and conditions of employment, qualifications and human resources factors; and staff vacancy, sickness and absence, and turnover rates	Qualitative descriptive Interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 80%
Moriarty et al. 2018 Adult social care England	Employers (n = 140) To explore the best levers that can be used to improve the ongoing and systemic difficulties in social care recruitment and retention and which can be seen as representing the most effective approach	Qualitative descriptive Open and closed questions via email, interviews, and focus groups MMAT critical appraisal scores: 80%
Reddington et al. 2020 Adult social care England	Employers (n = 283)/Employees (n = 803) Factors influencing recruitment and retention	Quantitative descriptive Surveys MMAT critical appraisal scores: 60%
Ross et al. 2016 Adult social care Scotland	Employees (n = 40) Factors influencing recruitment and retention	Qualitative descriptive Interviews MMAT critical appraisal scores: 20%
Rubery et al. 2011 Adult social care England	Employers (n = 238)/Employees (n = 98) Factors influencing recruitment and retention	Mixed methods Interviews, surveys, and case studies MMAT critical appraisal scores: 60%
Skills for Care 2020 Adult social care England	Employers (n = 300) Implementation and evaluation of the values-based recruitment toolkit	Quantitative descriptive Survey (telephone) MMAT critical appraisal scores: 80%

Table 3 Summary table of included primary studies for social workers.

Key: MMAT: Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool; NMDS: National Minimum Data Set.

CITATION TYPE OF PUBLICATION	BROAD FOCUS GEOGRAPHICAL LOCATION
Social workers	
Holmes et al. 2013 Reforming social work: improving social worker recruitment, training, and retention Report of policy recommendations	Adult and children services UK
Local Government Association 2014 Helping social workers, improving social work Toolkit	Adult social care UK
Social Work Services Strategic Forum 2016 The position on recruitment and retention in the social service workforce in Scotland. Literature review report. June 2016 Narrative review	Adult and children services Scotland
Social care workforce	
Care Provider Alliance and Local Government Association 2021 Top tips for retention: A briefing for adult social care providers Top tips	Adult social care UK
Griffin 2020 Potential impact of COVID-19 government policy on the adult social care workforce Report	Adult social care England
Skills for Care 2013 Finders keepers: The adult social care sector recruitment and retention toolkit Toolkit	Adult social care England
Skills for Care 2021a Skills for Care: The state of the adult social care sector and workforce in England Report containing an evaluation of the national recruitment campaign (Every day is different)	Adult social care England
Skills for Care 2021e Funded initiatives to help you to recruit and develop staff An overview containing initiatives and infographics	Adult social care England
Social Care Leaders 2021 Vision for a future workforce strategy Report	Adult social care UK
Social Care Wales 2021 A Healthier Wales. Workforce Strategy Delivery Plan. Social Care Wales – Delivery plan 2021/2022 Strategy	Adult social care Wales
Work Foundation 2021 Social care: A guide to attracting and retaining a thriving workforce Report (containing a rapid literature review and a stakeholder consultation)	Adult social care UK
Welsh Government 2016 Domiciliary care workforce: Improving the recruitment and retention of domiciliary care workers in Wales: Consultation – summary of response Summary consultation	Adult social care Wales
Lucas et al. 2008 Employment practices and performance: Rewards and incentives and their relationship to recruitment, retention, and quality of service in adult social care in England: Phase 1: Literature review: Summary Narrative review	Adult social care England
Swift & Teicke 2021 Evidence review and sector consultation to inform Skills for Care strategy: Final sector report Evidence review with stakeholder consultation	Adult Social Care England

Table 4 Summary of evidence from UK organisational reports (non-research) and narrative reviews.

OVERVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Ten primary research studies, two organisational reports (non-research), and one narrative review provided information about recruitment and retention issues in the field of child and adult social work and provide some insight into innovations that help to attract, recruit, and retain social workers within the UK context. The primary research studies focused either on child (n = 4), adult (n = 1) or both adult and child settings (n = 5), with employers (n = 2), employees (n = 4), or both employers and employees (n = 4) included. One study was also described as being conducted in a social work and higher education setting. The research studies were conducted in England (n = 8),

Scotland (n = 1), or Wales (n = 1). The study designs were mixed methods approach (n = 8), qualitative descriptive (n = 1), or quantitative descriptive (n = 1).

INNOVATIONS THAT HELP TO ATTRACT, RECRUIT, AND RETAIN SOCIAL WORKERS

The evidence map is presented in Figure 2. The only three innovations that had been implemented and evaluated were pre-employment initiatives, training and career development, and apprenticeships. The innovations that have additionally been suggested as having the potential to attract, recruit, and retain social workers are workforce planning, increasing diversity, promoting

career opportunities, pre-employment initiatives, local and national recruitment campaigns, values-based recruitment, supportive induction and development, pay, rewards and recognition, training and career development, apprenticeships, and good working conditions. We did not identify any evidence that explored increasing diversity or working conditions for social workers.

Pre-employment initiatives

Practice learning is a pre-employment initiative that refers to learning via practicing social work and placements as a minimum requirement for a qualification and was implemented and evaluated in one study (Parker &
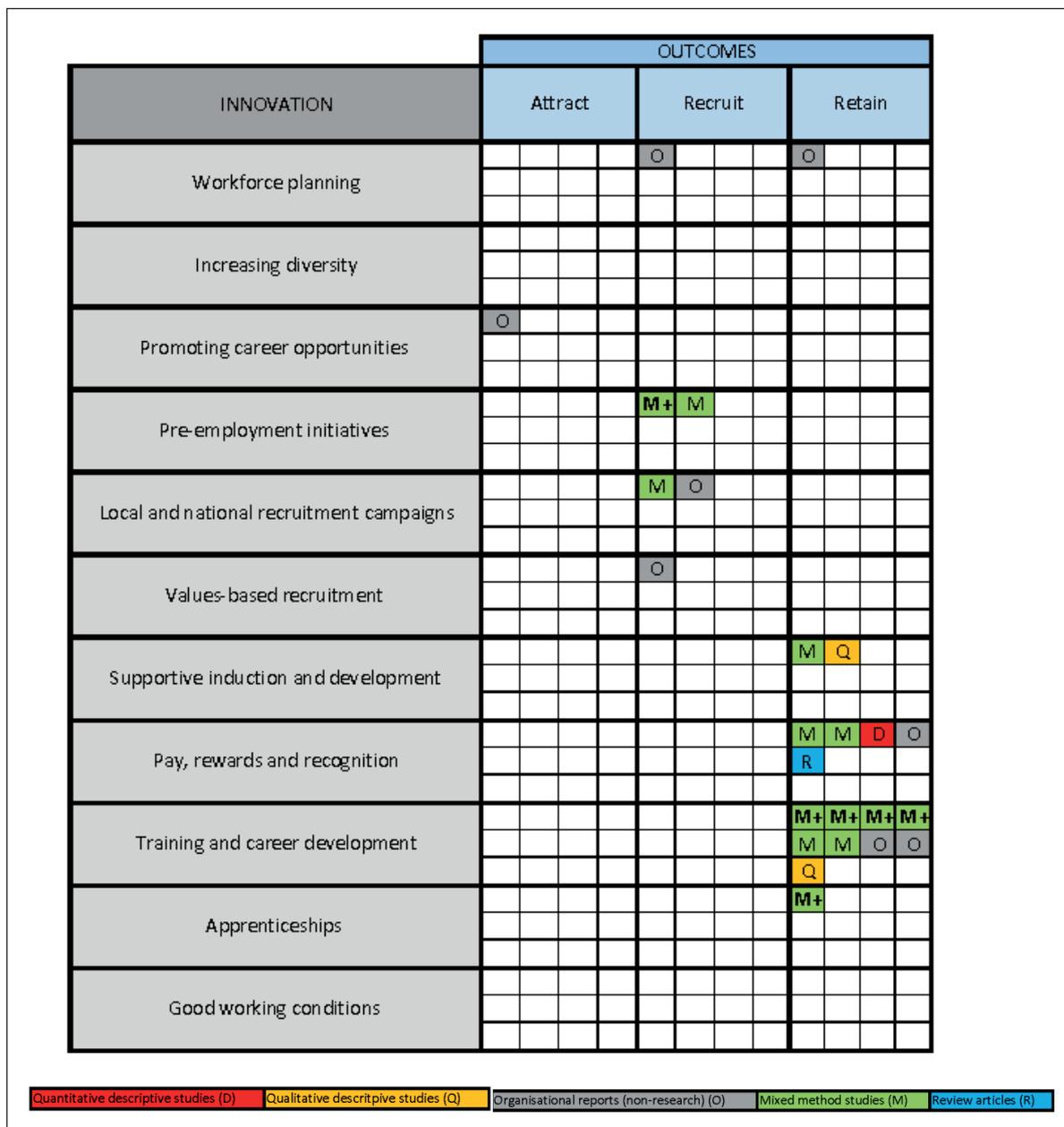

Figure 2 Evidence map of different study designs (colour) addressing various innovations (rows) against outcomes (columns) for social workers.

If an innovation was described within the evidence as having the potential to have an impact on the outcomes of interest, then this was indicated on the evidence map using the key above. If an innovation was implemented and also evaluated to determine its effectiveness on the outcomes of interest, then this was indicated in bold on the evidence map with a suffix of a plus sign (for example **M+**, **D+**, etc).

Whitfield 2006). Parker and Whitfield (2006) conducted interviews with practice teachers and newly qualified social workers who felt that there was evidence of an association between practice learning activities and the recruitment of social workers. The authors reported that practice learning is becoming increasingly embedded within local authorities and has an important part to play in the future recruitment of social workers.

Fast track graduate schemes

Two fast track graduate schemes in England have been implemented and evaluated: 'Step up to Social Work' (SUSW) (Baginsky & Manthorpe 2016; Scourfield et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2018) and 'Frontline' (Scourfield et al. 2020). These fast-track programmes are intensive courses providing increased work experience via extensive placements and support in the field of child and family social work. Both Frontline and SUSW provide a new entry route into social work with a postgraduate diploma in social work upon completion. Frontline aims to attract high-achieving graduates into child and family social work via a two-year programme that integrates theory and practice. Students are allocated to placement in a local authority, alongside which they receive theoretical education (Scourfield et al. 2020). Step up to Social Work is a 14-month long programme aiming to attract high-achieving graduates and career changers who would like to qualify as a social worker. It is designed to provide intensive hands-on, practice-based learning alongside academic progression (Baginsky & Manthorpe 2016; Scourfield et al. 2020, Smith et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2018). There are indications that graduates of both SUSW and Frontline programmes might be more likely to remain in employment (Baginsky & Manthorpe 2016; Scourfield et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2013; Smith et al. 2018).

Apprenticeships

Apprenticeships are work-based learning programmes with academic elements compressed into a 'day release' approach. Stone & Worsley (2021) conducted a survey with 29 apprentices from the first cohort of the social work degree apprenticeship in England to explore their experiences two years in. Based on the survey findings, most apprentices seemed satisfied with their learning and the support provided by academic and practice staff. The authors concluded that apprenticeships are a potentially cost-effective and impactful way to train and then retain new social workers.

FACTORS AFFECTING TURNOVER RATES FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

Six primary research studies and one organisational report (non-research) identified reasons why social workers entered or left the profession (Baginsky & Manthorpe 2016; Baginsky et al. 2010; Evans & Huxley 2009; Local Government Association 2014; Mulholland et al. 2017; Scourfield et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2018) (For further details click here). Frequently cited factors causing social workers to leave were identified as high caseloads (Baginsky & Manthorpe 2016; Baginsky et al. 2010; Mulholland et al. 2017) and excessive workload, combined with organisational stress (Scourfield et al. 2020; Smith et al. 2018).

OVERVIEW OF THE EVIDENCE BASE FOR THE SOCIAL CARE WORKFORCE

Sixteen primary research studies, nine organisational reports (non-research), two narrative reviews, and one narrative review with a stakeholder consultation provided information about wider workforce issues in the social care sector and described innovations that help to attract, recruit, and retain social care workers within the UK context (Tables 3 and 4). The primary research studies all focused on adult (n = 14) or both adult and child settings (n = 2) with employers (n = 9), employees (n = 1), or both employers and employees (n = 6). The research was conducted in England (n = 11), Wales (n = 1), Scotland (n = 2), or across the UK (n = 2). The study designs were mixed methods approach (n = 9), qualitative descriptive (n = 5), or quantitative descriptive (n = 2). Two studies also contained a literature review as part of the mixed methods approach.

INNOVATIONS THAT HELP TO ATTRACT, RECRUIT, AND RETAIN THE SOCIAL CARE WORKFORCE

The evidence map is presented in Figure 3. The only four innovations that had been implemented and evaluated were promoting career opportunities, pre-employment training initiatives, local and national recruitment campaigns, and values-based recruitment. The innovations that have additionally been suggested as having the potential to attract, recruit, and retain the social care workforce are workforce planning, promoting career opportunities, local and national recruitment campaigns, values-based recruitment, pre-employment training, supportive induction and development, pay, rewards, and recognition.

Promoting career opportunities

The 'I Care...Ambassadors' programme is run by Skills for Care in England. It seeks to develop existing staff and find new staff by delivering careers activities in the local community, such as schools, colleges, and jobs services. This initiative aims to ensure that those recruited into adult social care understand their job roles better and increases the chance of them remaining in their posts (Skills for Care 2013; Skills for Care 2021a). In the Skills for Care evaluation of the 'I Care Ambassadors' initiative, nearly half of the employers who had been involved with the programme reported it had a positive impact on retention levels and stated that retention rates had improved across the workforce as a result of programme-related activities.
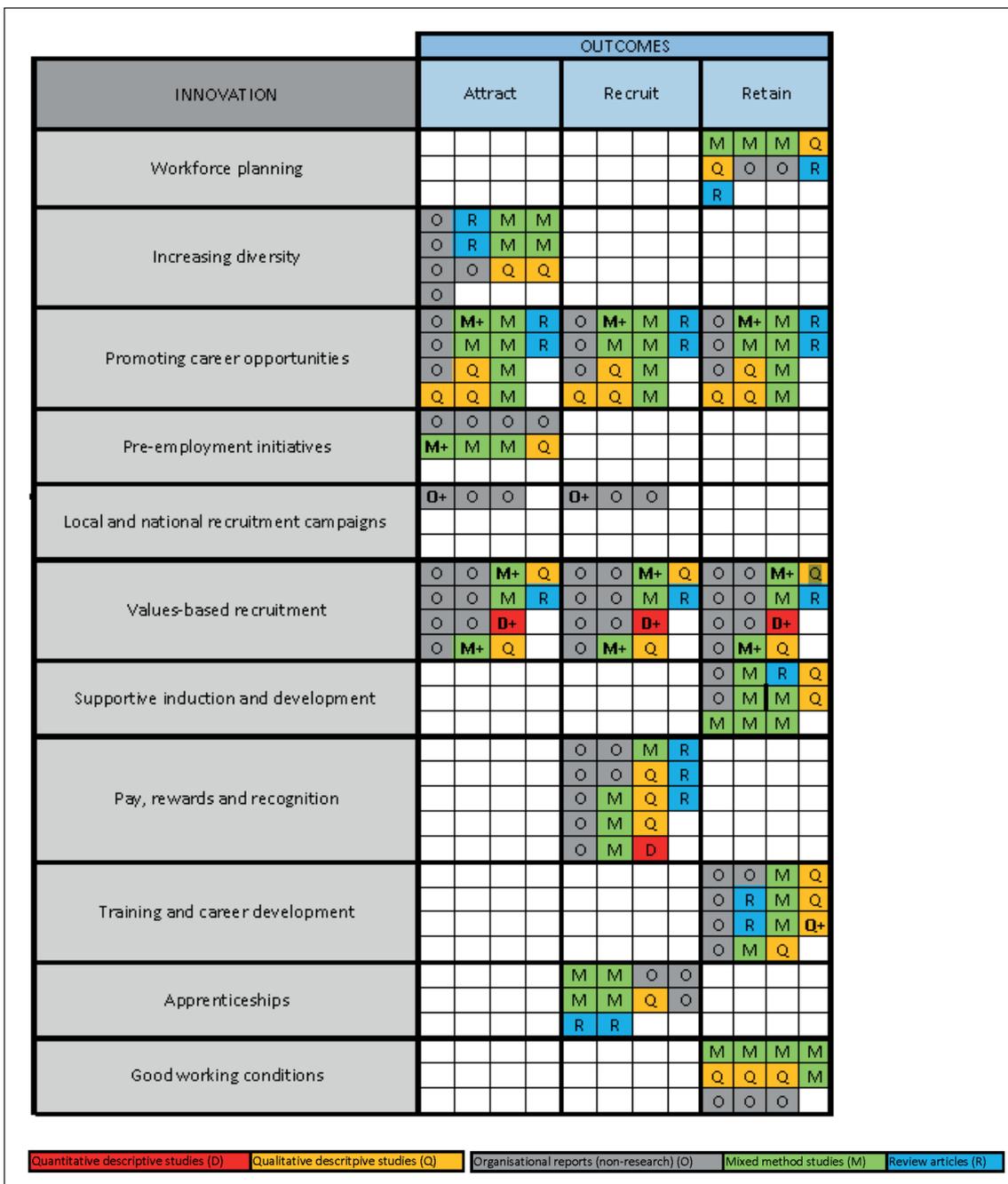
Figure 3 Evidence map of different study designs (colour) addressing various innovations (rows) against outcomes (columns) for the social care workforce.

If an innovation was described within the evidence as having the potential to have an impact on the outcomes of interest, then this was indicated on the evidence map using the key above. If an innovation was implemented and also evaluated to determine its effectiveness on the outcomes of interest, then this was indicated in bold on the evidence map with a suffix of a plus sign (for example **M+**, **D+**, etc).

Similarly, a few ambassadors provided feedback that their involvement had made them more likely to stay with their current employer, that they felt more valued, and that the initiative had enabled them to do something other than front-line care work (Ekosgen 2016).

Pre-employment training initiatives
One mixed methods evaluation explored the effectiveness of Care First Careers pilots, which were designed to attract unemployed young people to work in the care sector (Dobson & Byrne 2010). The pilot scheme, run by the Department of Work and Pensions in England, offered employers in the care sector a choice of taking candidates who had been through a two week pre-employment training (PET) programme with an entitlement to a recruitment subsidy of £650 (for the employer) or just a recruitment subsidy of £1,500 (for the employer) without the PET. Employers generally preferred training interventions to recruitment subsidies, although large employers preferred subsidies to support their own in-house training. Those who preferred PET felt it filtered

out uninterested candidates, saving time and resources. Pre-employment training was found by the Jobcentre Plus providers to be important in building basic care skills, improving interview preparation and confidence. Just under three quarters of employers surveyed believed PET enhanced recruitment, and employers who experienced recruitment or retention difficulties favoured PET over the subsidy.

Local and national recruitment campaigns

An evaluation of the national recruitment campaign 'Every Day is Different' found that, of those surveyed, over 50% of those aged 20 to 39 (target audience) took action as a result of seeing the advertisement (jobs searches and applications). An online survey with care providers was conducted as part of this evaluation, and one in four care staff reported an increase in enquiries, applications, interviews, or vacancies filled (Skills for Care 2021a). In summary, national recruitment campaigns appear to be successful in attracting people to social care and to recruiting the social care workforce.

Values-based recruitment

Values-based recruitment and retention involves establishing strong workplace values and ensuring that the workforce matches them. Attracting and recruiting the right people is seen as a key to increasing retention rates (Skills for Care 2013). Skills for Care conducted three evaluations of a values-based recruitment toolkit (VBRT) in the social care setting (Consilium 2016; Goode 2014; Skills for Care 2020). A range of resources and guidance form part of the toolkit and involve the Leadership Qualities Framework for Adult Social Care, example job adverts, online personality profiling questionnaire, suggested interview questions, Skills for Care's Qualifications and Credits Framework, suggestions on a range of ways to improve retention and recruitment, a situational judgment test, and links to other useful materials and websites (Goode 2014). The results from the initial evaluation within the first 12 months of operation indicated that the online personality profiling questionnaire when used on its own did not provide sufficient assessment about the applicant's suitability during the recruitment process, but it did prove beneficial in settings including induction, supervision, appraisal, and staff development (Goode 2014). Data from the evaluations indicated that use of VBRT tools and resources was beneficial in the recruitment of social care workers (Goode 2014) and improved rates of sickness absence (62%), skills (58%), and punctuality (52%) (Consilium 2016). Barriers to VBRT included confusion around terminology, preoccupation with online personality profiling tools, and the impression by some organisations it was too much of a step change at the current time (Consilium 2016).

In the final evaluation conducted using a survey of 300 employers (Skills for Care 2020), there was a general agreement that the use of a Skills for Care VBRT was successful. Around three quarters of respondents using values-based recruitment and retention cited at least one benefit. These benefits included improvements in staff retention (31%), help with recruiting staff with the correct values (20%), and better quality/improved person-centred care (16%). However, Skills for Care (2020) noted that whilst prevalence and awareness of VBRT is high, reported benefits are lower than expected and employers may need more support to follow values-based practice through into retention.

In summary, based on the findings of these evaluations, employers indicate that a values-based approach to recruitment has resulted in lower recruitment costs, positive return on investment, lower staff turnover, better staff performance, and improved retention of staff (Skills for Care 2021a).

FACTORS AFFECTING TURNOVER RATES FOR SOCIAL CARE WORKERS

Five primary research studies, two organisational reports (non-research), and two narrative reviews (Atkinson et al. 2016; Ekosgen 2013; Figgett 2017; Reddington et al. 2020; Rubery et al. 2011; Skills for Care 2021a; Social Work Services Strategic Forum 2016; Swift & Teicke 2021; Welsh Government 2016; Work Foundation 2021) commented on workforce factors affecting turnover (For further details click here). Negative factors were identified as poor pay and conditions, including working hours (Ekosgen 2013; Rubery et al. 2011; Skills for Car 2021a; Swift & Teicke 2021) and less experienced employees and managers (Skills for Care 2021a). Employers felt that work pressures, unsociable hours, poor terms and conditions, and low pay often dissuaded candidates from applying for care work and were reasons given for leaving the organisation (Welsh Government 2016; Work Foundation 2021). On the other hand, positive factors identified by both employers and employees included pay and retention bonuses (Ekosgen 2013; Figgett 2017; Social Work Services Strategic Forum 2016), good working environment, and celebrating achievements (Ekosgen 2013; Figgett 2017). Reddington and colleagues (2020) summarised predictive measures of retention as employee advocacy, organisational support, work engagement, and quality of conversational practice, whilst participants in Atkinson and colleagues' (2016) study argued that attraction and retention were related to worker motivations and the nature of care work.

QUALITY OF THE AVAILABLE EVIDENCE

Studies were critically appraised with MMAT based on their chosen methodologies as displayed in Table 3 and summarised below in Table 5 (for full details see link to additional materials).

The organisational reports were not quality appraised; the authors inferred the value of their recommendations and policy proposals to be credible based on the reputation for knowledge and professional expertise attached to the organisations themselves.

STUDY DESIGN	MMAT SCORE	STUDIES
Qualitative descriptive	100% (n = 1)	(Atkinson et al. 2016)
Qualitative descriptive	80% (n = 3)	(Baginsky 2013; Lucas et al. 2009; Moriarty et al. 2018)
Qualitative descriptive	20% (n = 2)	(Cornes et al. 2011; Ross et al. 2016)
Quantitative descriptive	100% (n = 1)	(Evans & Huxley 2009)
Quantitative descriptive	80% (n = 1)	(Skills for Care 2020)
Quantitative descriptive	60% (n = 1)	(Reddington et al. 2020)
Mixed methods	80% (n = 5)	(Baginsky et al. 2010; Ekosgen 2016; Parker & Whitfield 2006; Smith et al. 2018; Stone & Worsley 2021)
Mixed methods	60% (n = 2)	(Goode 2014; Rubery et al. 2011)
Mixed methods	40% (n = 5)	(Baginsky & Manthorpe 2016; Dobson & Byrne 2010; Figgett 2017; Mulholland et al. 2017; Smith et al. 2013)
Mixed methods	20% (n = 4)	(Consilium 2016; Ekosgen 2013; Johnston et al. 2017; Scourfield et al. 2020)

Table 5 Summary of critical appraisal scores.

DISCUSSION

Despite a proliferation of initiatives to promote attraction, recruitment, and retention, there has been very little robust evaluation of specific approaches, which concurs with other international work in this area (Johnston et al. 2020; Turley et al. 2020; Webb & Carpenter 2012). Out of nine innovations identified in this rapid review to attract, recruit, and retain social workers, only three have been implemented and evaluated using robust methods. Similar to the available evidence on social workers, out of 11 innovations for the wider social care workforce, only four had been implemented and evaluated. These evaluations suggest that the innovations might have beneficial impact on attraction, recruitment, and retention of social workers and the wider social care workforce. Future policy initiatives should include planning and evaluation from the outset to develop a more extensive evidence base. Research funders should also be encouraged to design funding schemes to support research in this area.

There is some international evidence, however, that interventions provided at an organisational level as opposed to an individual worker level may be effective to improve retention (Turley et al. 2020; Webb & Carpenter 2012). This is supported by this rapid review as several approaches show promise. For social work, these include a focus on practice learning, which is well-embedded in local authorities; supportive induction and development activity; fast track graduate schemes; and diverse career pathways. For social care, some schemes in England have been implemented and evaluated and include the 'I Care Ambassador' programme, 'Every day is different' attraction campaign, pre-employment schemes, and apprenticeships. A promising new scheme is the 'Care Friends' refer-a-friend app, and there is a general acceptance in the literature that campaigns to promote care work are necessary and important to counter its negative perceptions and low status. There is also some indication from the international literature that when more than one intervention is introduced at the same time this can trigger a multiplier effect (Lethbridge 2017).

The rapid review reported here and the international evidence indicate innovations that could potentially help attract, recruit, and retain social workers and the wider social care workforce. To answer what works in social care services, for which staff, and under what circumstances, one realist review of the international evidence is currently underway (Devi et al. 2021). However, there are multiple systemic and structural factors that need to be addressed for both social workers and social care workers. This suggests an opportunity to conduct more evaluations to understand how complex, system-level interventions and approaches work.

This review highlighted a broad range of factors associated with turnover and retention in social workers and the wider social care workforce. For social workers, high caseloads are cited in several studies as a cause for attrition, and other factors include stress, poor supervision, insufficient administrative support, and dissonance between social work values and practice. For social care, well-known systemic issues, such as poor pay and working hours, feature in many studies as significant barriers to attraction and retention. On the other hand, positive factors included pay and retention bonuses, good working environment, and celebrating achievements. This corresponds with previous reviews conducted across the international evidence base (Turnpenny & Hussein 2020).

LIMITATIONS

This rapid review was conducted to inform strategies that could help attract, recruit, and retain social workers and the social care workforce in the UK. While it has been mentioned that some of the workforce issues were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit, one of the limitations of this review was that most of the included primary research studies were conducted

pre-pandemic. Thus, the findings might not be fully generalisable to the circumstances brought on by the pandemic and Brexit. A more significant issue with the available UK evidence is that included primary research studies mainly relied on more descriptive and explorative methodologies, such as surveys, qualitative research, and mixed methods, and none of the available evidence used experimental (comparative) designs. This is also the case from the international evidence base, where a lack of controlled studies has also been noted (Johnston et al. 2020; Lethbridge 2017; Webb & Carpenter 2012). While this does not mean that the interventions and strategies summarised in this rapid review could not be advantageous in attracting, recruiting, and retaining social care workforce, the findings of the included primary studies should be interpreted with caution.

The strength of this review is that a thorough search was undertaken by an information specialist across three electronic databases, and the websites of 32 organisations were searched. Although this was a rapid review in which several of the systematic review processes have been streamlined, our searches covered a significant time period between 2001 and 2021, and screening, data extraction, and critical appraisal of each study were undertaken by different reviewers and then independently checked for accuracy and consistency by the same second reviewer. The synthesis identified overall that there was reasonable agreement among all the included literature, which may be considered to imply some degree of reliability.

CONCLUSIONS

Several approaches in attraction, recruitment, and retention show promise. For social work, these include a focus on practice learning, which is well-embedded in local authorities; supportive induction and development activity; fast track graduate schemes; and diverse career pathways. There is a general acceptance in the literature that campaigns to promote care work are necessary and important to counter the negative perceptions and low status of care work.

It is clear that systemic and structural factors have to be addressed to improve retention across both social workers and social care workers, and to reduce the need for attraction and recruitment in the first place. For social workers in children's social care (where we have evidence), high caseloads are cited in several studies as a cause for attrition, and other factors include stress, poor supervision, insufficient administrative support, and dissonance between social work values and practice. For social care, well-known systemic issues—poor pay and working hours—feature in a number of studies as significant barriers to attraction and retention.

Despite a proliferation of initiatives to promote attraction, recruitment, and retention, there has been limited evaluation of single interventions and a lack of research on system-wide approaches that incorporate multiple interventions. Future policy initiatives should include evaluation planning from the outset to develop a more extensive evidence base, and research funders should be encouraged to design funding schemes to support research in this area. Systems-wide research is vital as individual initiatives can have unintended consequences, for example, increasing competition for candidates in an already-stretched employment market.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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