A research report into the Recruitment and Retention of International Workers within the Social Care sector – Greater Merseyside

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

April 2008

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Introduction

1. ‘A research report into the Recruitment and Retention of International Workers within the Social Care sector - Greater Merseyside’ is the outcome of research commissioned by Skills for Care North West and conducted by Merseyside Social Inclusion Observatory (MSIO) between January and April 2008.

2. Skills for Care North West commissioned the research having noted the recent large increase in the numbers of international workers arriving in Greater Merseyside, many of whom were employed in the social care sector. They further noted that whilst many social care employers had been trying to apply ‘best practice’ in their employment of these workers, including through the provision of positive help and advice, there was currently no regional co-ordination of their activities and no specific guidance supporting the development and implementation of best practice in the employment of international workers in the social care sector. MSIO was therefore asked firstly to establish existing social care employment practice in the recruitment and retention of international workers and secondly to produce a Good Practice Guide to the Recruitment and Retention of International Workers and to recommend measures which could be introduced to act as drivers to improve social care workforce recruitment and retention in this area and thereby develop more sophisticated and responsive employment mechanisms.

3. Following a period of desktop research and data analysis, MSIO conducted a series of interviews with 14 social care employers based in the Greater Merseyside area (Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, St Helens, Sefton, Warrington and Wirral) and 8 international staff members employed within the same sub-region. Supplementary interview material with international workers employed in the social care sector was included
from previous research conducted by MSIO. All interview material included in the report has been anonymised.

4. A summary of the main issues raised is set out below. These are discussed in greater depth in the main body of the report. The Good Practice Guide produced as a key output of the research will be published separately by Skills for Care North West.

Summary of findings

- **Numbers** – The 14 employers who participated in the study employed a total of 2,484 staff and were responsible for staff teams ranging in size from 34 to 560, with international staff accounting for between 0.45% and 57% of the total workforce – averaging 16% across the participating group.

- **Recruitment / turnover / Reasons for leaving** – Staff turnover rates within the participating organisations tended to be between 10% and 25% per year and although not all employers felt that they had a particular problem with recruiting ‘local’ staff, a number did state that consistent staff turnover, often related to the realities of the job not being reflected in average rates of available pay, meant that recruitment was an ongoing ‘headache’. This was compounded in almost all cases by the frustrations of having to wait for CRB checks and completion of mandatory training before a high proportion of new staff decide they’re not suited to the work. Employers noted that some local recruits hadn’t enjoyed school or had been out of work or training for a long time and didn’t want to do a qualification for a job that paid ‘no more than working in a supermarket’. This underlined the general feeling amongst interviewees that efforts to professionalise the sector, while welcome, were not supported by associated financial incentives and that the sector was still not valued highly enough. The situation had been compounded by local authority contracts becoming increasingly restrictive financially (for instance one domiciliary care employer in Liverpool had lost 75% of its staff in the 3 months after the local authority changed the terms of its contract in 2007
and was still 15% short 9 months later) which prevented care work from being considered seriously as a career but viewed instead as a temporary ‘stop gap’ or secondary source of family income. Other employers stated that whilst 16 or 17 year old school leavers are unable to work in the sector a significant potential staff cohort is ‘lost’ and hard to re-attract at 18+.

- **The need to recruit from overseas** - The issues outlined above had led several employers to believe that the time and money invested in recruiting and ‘losing’ local staff might be better invested in recruiting overseas. However, whilst staff recruited in this manner were almost universally praised for their contribution and abilities, there appeared to be a consensus that agencies were not as helpful as had been anticipated and that staff recruited overseas were, in fact, no more likely to stay long-term than local staff, often seeing care work as a temporary source of income and/or a stepping stone to a ‘professional’ career in other fields although those working on visas within nursing homes tended to remain for as long as they had entitlement and in some other cases international staff had remained as long as 10 years. International staff were not viewed by any employer as being intrinsically easier or cheaper to recruit than local workers, or to offer a ‘cheaper’ workforce – indeed in many cases they represented a significant investment. However, they were seen as an additional or supplementary source of recruits which could or should be explored by any employer where recruiting from the ‘traditional’ labour pool is problematic

‘I don’t think *(the current climate)* makes it more attractive *(to recruit international workers)*... I think it forces us to look at any angles that we can and if that’s a potential source of workers then yes we would look at that... So yes, it’s led us to look at where we can bring other folk into the workforce because we’re struggling’

*Development Manager, Domiciliary Care*

Indeed, whilst recruiting overseas continued to be an attractive option for some nursing / residential care providers, concerns about the Points Based System (PBS) for migration *(see below)* may make it less so in
future. Certainly, the majority of international workers employed within domiciliary and supported living services had already been resident in the UK and had been recruited ‘locally’ through standard recruitment processes – not from overseas.

- **Recruiting methods** – Besides using agencies to assist in overseas recruitment and, in some cases, local recruitment – employers used a range of methods to recruit within the local area including Jobcentre Plus, JET (Jobs, Education and Training) Centres, The People Pool, local newspapers, job / recruitment fairs, leaflets, web-sites, local radio and events at local universities (including actively targeting student nurses and international students). Most found that word of mouth could often be as effective as any other method but felt they did not generally put enough time or resources into developing contacts with migrant or BME communities and organisations and therefore lacked the word of mouth ‘factor’ within such groups. As noted, domiciliary and supported living services tended to recruit their international staff through these standard recruitment processes rather than by specifically targeting candidates who were not UK nationals – although some had specifically recruited overseas where vacancies had been persistently hard to fill. Residential care and nursing homes were much more likely to have recruited overseas with the support of recruitment agencies and, correspondingly, less likely to attract international workers from within the locally resident community.

- **Induction** – Employers demonstrated that they followed existing good practice guidelines for induction programmes (e.g. Skills for Care’s own Common Induction Standards relating to the principles of care, the organisation and the role of the worker, safety at work, effective communication, recognising and responding to abuse and neglect and development as a worker) although practice varied regarding local orientation, welcome packs and support (e.g. mentoring/buddy systems) for international staff. For example whilst all employers noted that induction was exactly the same for all staff regardless of nationality but some employers made efforts to offer additional support to ANY member of staff who might require it for instance with regard to basic skills including
literacy and numeracy (for instance by offering access to free classes at a local college or, in one case, by working with the support of Skills for Care North West to train a group of Migrant Mentors to work specifically with staff from overseas). It was generally accepted that any additional support provided should be available on an Equal Opportunities basis and not aimed exclusively at international staff although in several cases employers spoke of how they and their staff teams had made considerable efforts to support colleagues who were new to the country by providing furniture, help with looking for accommodation and general advice and support. In some cases this sort of local advice and information was now being formally collated into ‘Welcome Packs’ which would be available to all new staff.

- **Terms and conditions** – Again all employers reported that equal opportunities considerations ensured that terms and conditions of employment must be equitable. However, some reported that employment/recruitment agencies had tried to suggest ways of ‘underpaying’ staff recruited direct from overseas in particular and others noted that overseas staff were more likely than local workers to voluntarily sign agreements to work excess hours. Where staff recruited from overseas were given assistance with the provision of accommodation, transport etc it was suggested that similar provisions would theoretically be available to UK staff if required although this did not appear to be actively promoted as an option, despite one employer noting that a local staff member was currently living in ‘proximate housing’ normally utilised by overseas staff.

- **CRB checking and References** – All employers understood the need for CRB checks for all staff and actively supported this although all were critical of the length of time involved in the process particularly, but not exclusively, in relation to international staff and found it costly both financially and logistically when waiting for international staff to begin work. Employers adopted very different attitudes to references however, with some insisting that international workers provided checkable references in English whilst others regarded the process of chasing and checking the
veracity of references from overseas as being needlessly onerous and preferred to base their opinion of a worker on observed behaviour only.

- **Qualifications and Training** – In the vast majority of cases international staff were working in roles which did not require them to have any formal qualifications although employers noted that they were often well qualified and possibly over-qualified for their posts. In cases where international staff had been employed specifically because of their qualifications (e.g. qualified nurses or social workers) they were also often working at below their skills level. However all international workers were not only provided with all mandatory training but encouraged to access additional training wherever possible. Most had gained or were expected to gain NVQ 2 qualifications in care whilst some had achieved Level 3 or had been offered the opportunity to pursue it. Social Workers had also been offered the opportunity to undertake PQ1 qualifications. The exception to this was the position of ‘relief’ staff who did always not appear to have access to the same level of training opportunities. This issue applied to relief staff regardless of nationality but it may be a particular concern where international staff comprise a particularly high proportion of relief ‘banks’.

- **The Points Based System (PBS)** – There were varying degrees of awareness of the PBS and its potential implications for the recruitment of non-EU nationals within the care sector. Even within nursing and care homes – where changes to migration policy are likely to have the biggest impact – the levels of understanding were mixed. This is a potentially important issue for the sector not only as it relates to the ability to recruit staff from non-EU countries but also as it impacts on existing international staff from outside the EU whose visas may not be renewed.¹

- **Language and communication** – These were key issues raised by all employers and felt to be central to the successful employment of international staff for the sake and safety of employers, employees and service users. Some employers felt unsure of how to judge an international

¹ N.B. It remains to be seen how far, if at all, the recent High Court ruling (8th April 2008) that changes to visa regulations for highly skilled migrants under the PBS are unlawful will effect non-EU migrants currently employed in social care in England and Wales.
worker’s capacity to speak and understand spoken and written English and whilst some used pre-interview telephone or face-to-face conversations with applicants living overseas and utilised written tests for all candidates (to assess comprehension of written materials and writing skills) others did not make this a requirement. Some employers who had recruited overseas via agencies felt that the agencies had not been as rigorous as they might have been when selecting candidates, with the result that time was wasted, and expectations raised, for candidates and employers alike. It was suggested that lessons should be learned from this and that employers needed to be more explicit with agencies about the levels of English language skills required within the sector. International workers themselves felt that language had not generally been a problem but that communication in a wider sense had often been a greater stumbling block regarding such issues as local geography, public transport routes, the location of service users homes and local amenities which service users may wish to access, the location of care plans within service users homes and the completion of written reports. Relief staff in particular felt that they would benefit from more background information about service users conditions and behaviour being communicated to them prior to being sent to unfamiliar environments. Employers too commented that language skills in themselves were not sufficient but that wider communication skills were vital for international staff to build up positive relationships with colleagues and service users.

- Racism / Xenophobia - Some evidence was presented both by international workers and employers that racism or xenophobia could be experienced by international staff and that whilst this could occasionally come from co-workers it came mainly from service users or their families. Whilst stressing that this did not appear to be widespread it is of concern that staff should experience it in any circumstances. Where employers were aware of it they provided varying degrees of support to their employees including offering them counselling, moving them to work with other service users, working to address myths or misconceptions of co-workers through training and education or being prepared to use disciplinary procedures where necessary. In cases where abuse had come
from service users or their families some employers were prepared to withdraw services where the behaviour continued after sufficient warning (and in consultation with local authorities / social services where necessary). Others felt that owing to the level of support needs required by some service users it was not possible to withdraw a service but concerns would be drawn to the service user’s attention and support staff substituted. However, interviews with international workers themselves indicated that incidents were not always brought to the attention of management with some staff preferring to deal with them on a personal level – particularly where the problem involved a colleague. In several cases where staff had been recruited overseas, employers had been proactive about discussing plans to recruit international staff with existing staff prior to recruitment campaigns and had attempted to assuage any fears about issues such as job security or wage cuts before international workers were introduced to the workforce. This was largely felt to have been successful in reducing tensions and fostering a welcoming environment for new colleagues from overseas.

- **Good Practice** – It is clear from the interviews conducted with employers and international workers that much good practice already exists and that, with initiatives such as the introduction of Migrant Mentors and the development of Welcome Packs in some organisations, this is set to continue. In all cases it appeared that every effort was being made to include and support international workers and to make them feel welcomed and valued as part of a staff team, to provide additional support where required and to ensure that good employment practice extended to all staff regardless of nationality. However, there were also still some areas where employers expressed concerns or confusion and these tended to centre on the reliability of CRB checks for overseas nationals, language and communication issues, the Points Based System, cultural issues including misunderstandings (both linguistic and social) and the legal obligations of employers to accommodate diverse cultural or religious practices within the workplace – although this last point has a broader relevance as it can relate equally to a diverse UK workforce as to international staff.