

# Press release: Employment rate reaches joint record high

Figures released by the Office for National Statistics show that 402,000 more people have moved into employment in the last year.

The unemployment rate (4.3%) has not been lower since 1975, and the number of people out of work is down by 127,000 compared to a year ago.

The number of people not working and not looking for work fell by 158,000 on the year. The rate has not been lower since records began.

Since 2010, over 70% of employment growth has been in permanent roles, with around 70% in higher skilled work.

Secretary of State for Work and Pensions Esther McVey said:

Getting a job means securing an income for a family and the chance to build a better future. That's why up and down the country we are doing all we can to help people into work.

And from next month, we'll be taking thousands more people out of paying tax and also increasing the National Living Wage, benefiting those on the lowest pay and making sure they keep more of what they earn.

In fact by raising the National Living Wage we have ensured that the lowest earners have seen their wages grow by almost 7% above inflation since 2015."

The amount of money people can earn before they start paying income tax will rise in April 2018 from £11,500 to £11,850. From 1 April 2018, the National Living Wage – the minimum paid to employees aged over 25 – will rise from £7.50 an hour to £7.83, equating to a £600 annual pay rise for full-time workers on basic pay.

This comes as we have reformed welfare to make work pay, backed businesses to take more people on, and built a stronger, fairer economy.

But we want to help even more people benefit from a well-paid job. That's why we are:

- improving the welfare system with Universal Credit, which helps people move into work faster and to stay in work longer than under the old system
- introducing a modern Industrial strategy to help businesses create better, higher-paying jobs in every part of the UK
- helping people stay in work longer with our Fuller Working Lives

strategy, which supports employers to recruit, re-train and retain older workers

- tackling inequalities in employment highlighted by the Race Disparity Audit, through targeted support in 20 areas around the country and £90 million announced by the Prime Minister to help young people

Today's figures also show:

- since 2010, the number of people in employment has increased by around 3.2 million
- 83.4% of employment is in the private sector, with 16.6% in the public sector
- the female employment rate is at a record high of 70.9%, with over 15 million women in work – a rise of 234,000 on the year

Separate figures out today showed that [770,000 people are now on Universal Credit](#) as the rollout of the new benefit continues. Of these, 39% were in employment (300,000). Through Universal Credit, people are keeping more of their earnings as their Universal Credit payment gradually adjusts when their income climbs.

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## [Press release: New river forecasts for North East communities](#)

A new service which allows people to get forecasts for river levels to help them plan for flooding is available for two locations in the North East.

It is being provided by the Environment Agency on the gov.uk website for the River Tyne at Hexham, Northumberland, and Lustrum Beck at Stockton-on-Tees.

All communities can see observed data for river levels for the past five days. Now people living in these two areas can also see their future flood risk in a 36-hour river level forecast.

The aim is to help communities be more aware of their flood risk and be able to plan for potential flooding incidents. The new river forecasts are calculated by computer models that take into account data like current flows and expected rainfall.

Forecast information can change quickly so people are still advised to sign up for the Environment Agency's free flood warning service to ensure they are notified if a warning is issued for their community.

And residents and businesses can still get the most up-to-date and accurate

situation from the [live online map](#) which updates every 15 minutes and details the current Severe Flood Warnings, Flood Warnings and Alerts in place.

## **Help residents manage flood risk**

Phil Taylor, from the Environment Agency's Flood Resilience Team in the North East, said:

We are always looking at ways to use technology to better share information with people, and residents have told us that they would find it really useful to see these forecasts to help them manage their flood risk.

We want people to know if they are at risk of flooding, be prepared, and take action to protect themselves and their families. A wealth of information is available on our website for people to find out if they are at risk and understand how to prepare.

Everything residents and businesses need to know about how to check their risk and prepare for flooding is online on the [Floods Destroy website](#).

The new 36-hour river forecasting for Hexham and Stockton can be found online at:

[Lustrum Beck, Stockton-On-Tees](#)  
and  
[River Tyne at Hexham](#)

The plan is to continue to refine the service based on feedback from users before rolling it out to other areas in the future.

People who live in areas where the 36-hour forecast is not available can still view data on river levels from the previous five days.

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# [News story: National Democracy Week 2018](#)

Regardless of who we are or where we are from, we must work together to ensure that every member of society has an equal chance to participate in our democracy and to have their say.

National Democracy Week, 2-8 July, is week-long celebration of democracy in society, including events, talks and fun activities, an opportunity to celebrate progress and champion future democratic participation in this historic Centenary year of Suffrage.

National Democracy Week is being delivered in collaboration by the National Democracy Week Council members, the Cabinet Office and partners across the country. Together we will deliver a range of exciting democratic engagement activities in the lead up to and during the week.

If you have any questions about National Democracy Week please contact [nationaldemocracyweek@cabinetoffice.gov.uk](mailto:nationaldemocracyweek@cabinetoffice.gov.uk).

Back to [National Democracy Week homepage](#).

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## [Speech: Social care commentary: what do local authorities need to do to improve from inadequate](#)

In this commentary, I want to share some of the things we see local authorities (LAs) across the country doing as they move away from inadequate – the ingredients for improving, if you will. I also want to celebrate the commitment and passion of leaders, managers and professionals in these areas by showing examples of what specific LAs have achieved.

The difference that these LAs make to the lives of children and families is really positive. Some LAs such as Rotherham, Doncaster and West Berkshire have recently moved from inadequate to good and they have all transformed the response to children in care, children in need and families in their areas.

Every LA's journey out of inadequacy is unique, but there are always some common themes. To discover what these themes or ingredients look like, we have spoken to inspectors, LAs and the Department for Education (DfE). During this research, we also found some challenges and barriers that LAs had on their journey to improvement. We were particularly struck by the resilience

of leaders, managers and frontline staff.

Below, I will discuss these common themes we see across improving LAs in the hope that they will be useful for those of you also on an improvement journey.

## **Accepting the report's findings**

One of the biggest initial barriers to improvement is denial. This can really delay an LA beginning to focus on improvement. West Berkshire accepted the findings in its report straight away and focused on how to make the improvements identified. There was ownership across the local authority and partnership for making those improvements. It was therefore able to begin developing and implementing a plan straight away. West Berkshire involved all staff at the earliest stage and created a shared sense of responsibility.

One director of children's services (DCS) described how you might have to accept that things may get worse before they get better, because staff may choose to leave if they do not like the changes that are taking place. It may take time to recruit social workers, but staying on track with the plan is critical.

## **Having vision and ambition**

It is important for leaders to articulate and communicate a clear vision across the whole council and partnership. We saw LAs improving when effective visions and supporting plans were child focused. What was really striking was the ambition of LAs spoken to. Their aim was not just to be no longer inadequate, but to at least aim for good, or even outstanding – for example, Doncaster Children's Services Trust has a clear aim to become outstanding. All these LAs strived to deliver excellent services for children. This ambition was very effective in motivating and engaging staff and partners.

## **Knowing about frontline practice and children's experiences and progress**

LAs expressed the importance of ensuring that they had a clear understanding of why children's services are inadequate. This understanding enables the improvement plan to focus on the right things and helps staff to prioritise accordingly. It is important not to have an initial knee-jerk reaction, because this may slow the improvement journey.

To understand the impact of actions on practice, it was critical that LAs developed an effective quality assurance system and ensured that they could access timely performance information. Auditing was a very important part of this.

For example, Rotherham has access to comprehensive and live performance information using a new electronic recording system and an online performance portal and dashboard. These systems ensure that the LA has immediate,

effective oversight of frontline practice. A revised quality assurance framework and a 'Beyond auditing' tool give managers knowledge of the quality of practice.

Rotherham also has a team of auditors who are engaged with a programme of 'deep dives' across all social work teams and services. The 'Beyond auditing' approach involves the auditor working with allocated social workers and team managers to carry out audits and provide coaching. This is part of a reflective conversation to bring about immediate impact and change to address identified practice issues. It supports a strong culture of learning. Manchester also described the importance of 'closing the loop' when auditing and checking that the actions were completed.

Many LAs highlighted the challenge they face when electronic recording systems do not support social workers to do their jobs. Significant investment and time were often needed to get a new electronic recording system in place. However, some local authorities were better able to overcome these barriers and implement an effective electronic recording system in a timely way. The dilemma for some local authorities was about how this affects the pace of improvement, because in the long term this investment will support social workers but in the short term it may mean a drop in performance that cannot be fully mitigated.

Some LAs, such as Manchester, bought in performance clinics to better understand frontline practice and children's experiences. These were chaired by the deputy director and attended by managers across services. They were effective in holding managers to account and in embedding an increased focus on quality.

## **Prioritising and organising your improvement journey**

LAs stressed how important it was for a plan to be co-produced with, and therefore owned by, partners, social workers, managers and young people. Planning needs to be long term and actions measurable. Different improvements to parts of the system will take different amounts of time.

There needs to be a clear operating model that sets out:

- the LA's vision and values
- the LA's philosophy of social work
- the structure of teams
- how cases move through the system
- how social work practice will be carried out
- the provision of help, protection and care for children
- what thresholds are
- what services are expected to do and their effectiveness

When LAs have kept on track with their operating models over a long time, changes are sustained. Essex and Leeds are good examples of LAs that have kept on track with their operating models and enabled an effective service to

be provided to children. LAs described the importance of not being taken off track through other events, such as serious case reviews, major investigations and increased demand for services.

It is important that the improvement plan is communicated to all staff. LAs have done this in different ways, such as newsletters, blogs and regular conferences. For example, Bromley produced a 'roadmap to excellence', which is an easy-to-read document for all staff.

Getting the governance right is also really important. The governance arrangements need to ensure that there is a golden thread linking governance to frontline practice. Leaders need a comprehensive understanding of practice and must ensure that the timeliness and impact of actions to improve services to children and their families are closely monitored. Improvements needed to be continually tested.

It was vital to all LAs that plans focused on getting the basics right. The first priorities were to focus on the things that could mean children were not protected, to ensure compliance and to have a clear methodology of how social work practice should be carried out. This led to a relentless focus on practice.

Desired improvements must also be manageable. For example, Somerset had a defined number of priorities for its first year of the plan, and then also for the second year. Setting yearly goals in this way meant that teams could easily focus on a small number of critical areas to improve the response to children. In Leicester's inspection report, we noted that 'changes made through the local authority's improvement plan have now become part of everyday practice.'

When organising improvements, LAs highlighted the importance of ensuring that each part of the service was resourced sufficiently. Under-resourcing in one team or service may cause blockages in the system, particularly at the front door. Some LAs stated that getting the front door right at the beginning of the improvement journey was critical. Other LAs reviewed the scope of their teams, for example expanding the role of the children in care team so that the social workers became engaged at the beginning of care proceedings. This led to social workers having a better understanding of the child's experiences and enabled children to have stability of social worker during and after proceedings.

The pace of change is important. The DCS for Bromley, an LA still on its improvement journey, says that their mantra is: 'every day lost is a day lost in the life of a child'.

## **Making it easier for social workers to practice**

The focus on supporting social workers to do their role effectively was a major factor for LAs' improvements. They had different methods of doing this, but all engaged with social workers to find out what was important and what could support them better to do their role.

The key ingredient here was how the LA engaged its staff. For example, it worked well when managers regularly met and listened to staff and when staff held managers and leaders to account for agreeing actions. The best leaders were highly visible and understood the day-to-day experience of social workers. In response to listening to social workers and their managers, LAs took various actions such as improving car parking and office accommodation, and providing laptops and mobile phones. Cumbria shows that it values its social workers by hosting annual social work conferences. Staff are able to benefit from valuable learning and development opportunities. The conferences are attended not only by frontline staff, but also by the chief executive, DCS and the portfolio holder.

Improving LAs told us that they made sure they had even workloads across the system, manageable caseloads and effective management oversight. Somerset and Bromley, for example, introduced smaller teams and increased the number of managers so that managers had a smaller span of control to support more effective oversight and practice. This was important in removing barriers to social workers being able to carry out effective practice. It also reflects the importance of supervision in supporting social workers and improving practice.

The DCS for Essex explained the importance of 'holding the emotional challenge of the work, cognitive empathy, and providing the practice challenge about whether the work being undertaken with the family is effective and helping the family'. This creates a culture of support for the workforce.

In Cumbria, managers used DfE funding to develop a teaching partnership with Lancaster University. This supports recruitment and continuous professional development. The LA has focused on increasing the skills of experienced workers, for example in offering a new postgraduate certificate in child protection.

## **Making social workers want to stay**

The offer to social workers and the focus on recruitment and retention are essential.

There are a large number of ingredients to create workforce stability, most importantly:

- the physical environment that social workers work in
- providing them with good support
- arranging training opportunities and career development and progression
- creating a learning environment that includes regular good-quality supervision

- ensuring manageable caseloads
- providing the right tools for them to do their work.
- engaging staff in the ambition and vision for children's services

As part of their improvement journeys, LAs have increased staff stability, often through increasing the number of permanent posts and reducing staff turnover. Local authorities 'growing their own' social workers was seen as an important part of increasing the number of permanent staff.

In Rotherham, we noted:

Staff across early help and children's social care report positively on training, development and career progression opportunities. Investment in advanced practitioner posts and coaching and mentoring for all managers support their capacity to implement the reflective social work model across the service. This, combined with restorative practice, enables staff to help children and their families to understand what needs to change to improve children's outcomes.

It may take some LA areas considerable time to create a permanent workforce. Some LAs have recognised this and worked to make agency staff part of their workforce, engaging them in training and learning opportunities and the vision for children's services. This in turn supports greater stability and more consistent practice.

## **Getting the culture right**

The way that LAs value their social workers was significant. Improving LAs celebrated their good practice. Social workers and managers were involved in defining what good looks like through developing practice standards. They were continuously engaged and communicated with.

The importance of social workers owning the improvement plan was seen as critical. LAs also valued appreciative inquiry and coaching and mentoring staff, creating a culture of learning from mistakes. In Doncaster, there has been a strong focus on the voice of the child. Leaders have used the development of a children's services trust to articulate how it is a champion for social work.

The links between culture, morale and building confidence in the workforce come across strongly in our inspections. For example, in Manchester we noted:

The vast majority of social workers were very positive about working for Manchester, and particularly mentioned the visible and

supportive leadership and management. Social workers described a more positive and engaging culture and working environment since which gives them a greater sense of confidence.

It was important for improving LAs to change their culture to one of high support and high challenge. In other words, they created a learning culture and not a blame culture. Staff benefited from a shared sense of ownership and openness.

We saw more good examples of getting the culture right in our inspections. The DCS for West Berkshire regularly updates her staff through a blog, creating a culture of honesty and transparency. Cumbria focuses strongly on the voice of the child. The LA regularly uses feedback directly from children and staff to shape all service developments. For example, care leavers' own evaluation showed that services for children looked after have significantly improved when compared with previous years. In Leicester, we saw a 'radical transformation of culture, whereby staff feel safe working in an open and transparent environment'.

## **Making the most of the support on offer**

LAs saw corporate ownership and good engagement with partners as critical for improvement. For example, Rotherham developed strong corporate ownership, well-cultivated partner relationships and increased financial investment. This enabled the service to be highly responsive to local needs. Rotherham managed its improvement while dealing with increased demand.

As well as good strategic engagement with partners to deliver a shared vision, training across agencies is also important. Shared training encourages a common language and helps support partner agencies in delivering improvements consistently. LAs recognised the importance of good communication with schools.

Cross-party political support was also important. Improving LAs tend to have good engagement from local politicians and good scrutiny arrangements, in which children's services are a priority.

LAs spoke about the support on offer through peer reviews, the Local Government Association (LGA), the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS), the DfE and other LAs. They also spoke about ensuring that they took control of what help they needed and drove its focus. The best help supported their improvement plan, offered challenge and enabled them to evaluate how effectively improvements had been made. They were outward-looking and able to use the available support to keep them focused on their improvement journey and not to be distracted.

LAs also found Ofsted's monitoring visits an important part of their improvement journey. They were most beneficial when the monitoring visits were linked to improvement plans. The focus of the visits should reflect the timescales for improvement in different parts of the plan. LAs described how a trusting relationship with the lead inspector was important and maximised

learning. They particularly welcomed the discrete focus of monitoring visits.

## **Doing the right things for families**

During their improvement journeys, LAs remained focused on doing the right things for families. It is important to keep a proportionate response to children and their families. When an LA is inadequate, there is the risk of staff over-intervening because of a lack of confidence.

Some LAs described having to challenge a culture of fear and risk aversion across the partnership. They built confidence so that the response to the needs and risks of children and their families became proportionate.

It is also important that LAs engage and support other agencies to manage risk and concerns appropriately, otherwise the demand on the front door and services may be a barrier to improvement.

## **Summary**

In my last commentary for Ofsted, I wanted to recognise LAs' very significant achievements when moving up from inadequate. The resilience, commitment and ambition for children shown by staff at all levels are striking.

I hope that the examples above are useful to any LAs on their improvement journey. The examples show that even in the most challenging environments, improvements can both be made and sustained. It takes leaders, managers, staff, the LA as a whole, local politicians and partner agencies working together to do this. They must share an ambition for children and their families and use external support effectively to deliver this ambition.

Leadership is critical in improving the quality of children's services. Leaders must have the qualities we outlined in our report [Effective leadership of children's services: joining the dots](#):

They are credible and highly visible, and inspired staff to perform well. They set high standards for workers and developed a culture which was supportive and challenging while acknowledging risk and the need for clear accountabilities.'

One DCS said: 'my focus is practice, practice and practice'. This focus is essential to create an environment where social work can flourish. Confident and skilled social workers make the biggest difference to the lives of children and their families through working directly with them.

I really do believe passionately in the messages that I have consistently given while being Director, Social Care at Ofsted. I have reiterated these below:

1. It can be done.
2. Leadership is critical.

3. Make leaders visible and engage all staff.
4. Get the culture right and create a learning culture of high support and high challenge.
5. Know what is happening in frontline practice.
6. No agency can do this by themselves – partnerships with other agencies are critical.
7. Have a relentless focus on practice.
8. Enable good relationships between social workers and families by prioritising a stable workforce.
9. Create an environment for social work to flourish.
10. Focus on the experiences and progress of children.
11. Respond to what children say. Concentrate on getting it right for children and their families.
12. Recognise the complexity of work with families.
13. Build on solid foundations and getting the basics right.

If you would like to go over my previous commentaries, all of which highlight these messages, the links are below: