



COVID-19 Recruitment Spotlight:

Qualified Social Care



The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted all professions across the world. Social Care is one such sector that has had to adapt rapidly to changing demand and the needs of the people and communities they serve. We spoke with three qualified social work recruitment specialists - Sanctuary Personnel, Liquid Personnel and Tripod Partners, and asked them how demand for social workers has been impacted over the last 12 weeks, what's changed and their expectations of the coming weeks.

A circular portrait of Jon Milton, a middle-aged man with a beard and short hair, wearing a grey blazer over a white shirt. The background is a blurred indoor setting.

Jon Milton,
Director,
Comensura

Joining the debate was.



James Rook,
CEO, Sanctuary
Personnel



Stuart Ward,
Managing Director,
Liquid Personnel



Dean Covill,
CEO, Tripod

We thank James, Stuart and Dean for their time and input into the sessions.

Has demand for social care changed in England?

Comensura's experience of demand over this period has been that the number of existing assignments has remained relatively stable, with workers retained. Albeit with some exceptional requirements in the early parts of lockdown, as authorities have looked to safeguard service delivery. The demand for new qualified social work roles declined by over 26% in April to June, when compared to the same period in 2019. The panel's responses echoed our own experience, and provided some deeper insights into other outcomes, including new ways of working using digital tools.

James Rook, Sanctuary:

“ At the start of COVID-19 jobs stopped coming out, and then we went through a phase of unusual requirements appearing. Clients coming to us asking for staff to help set up care homes for example. This was at the period of time when testing wasn't happening, and people had gone into a hospital and had a procedure but still needed some nursing, and we found that local authorities who would normally talk to us about Adult Social Work, were in a position where they'd received funding from Government and were trying to look at solutions where they couldn't get people back into a nursing home but wanted to get them out of the NHS. Lots of different projects.

Social work became very quiet, although most authorities continued worker assignments, particularly those that were case holding. They've tried to have them working from home, and some of them have done it incredibly well. There's been some interesting things that I hope social work learns from. For example, some authorities have had to hand out mobile phones in a panic, and those phones aren't limited in the same way that others are, so Social Workers have been able to use Whatsapp to communicate with children. Which means they can do fun things, like setting children targets to draw pictures

for the NHS and 'try and break your record for doing keepie-uppies and send me the video at the end of the day'. Fun engagement using a modern tool that has helped changed the relationship.

There is however another side - what we've seen particularly on the front door are fewer referrals coming in, and that's scary. Cases are far more complex when they do come in now, and that's a sad thing. There are some obvious unusual issues that lockdown has caused, lots of substance misuse, drugs and alcohol. Where events have taken place that were alcohol induced, lots of previous issues come out that weren't previously known. People are waiting for schools to go back to make sure that those vulnerable children that we know of are seen. Unfortunately, COVID-19 is quite an excuse for some to say why their child isn't at school, and an excuse to not give access to their home. Social Care therefore have a very difficult task in working out 'how do we gain access and get sight of those children we know are at risk, and make sure that they're safe.

Most local authorities are working as a region, and in their regions', they've created post COVID-19 plans, but within that there's a lot of speculation - will there be another spike in August and so on. They're all just doing their best and that's all they can do.”

Stuart Ward, Liquid:

“ Worker numbers / hours worked in Childrens QSW have been fairly stable, although the number of new jobs released, and temp placements made is down on previous years. This looks to be in part due to workers being reluctant to change jobs unless they have to. Traditionally a high number of vacancies have been to back fill permanent staff resignations or agency workers who have decided to switch to another role or client. Presently people feel that it is safer to hold on to their current role, even if it isn't ideal long term and some feel an increased sense of loyalty / duty to their current team so they would feel guilty about handing in their notice to take on a new job during COVID-19 as they worry that their manager may struggle to interview and recruit a replacement.

In Children's there's also an uncertainty about what they might be going in to if they move roles. For example, if they are currently in a situation where they can work from home, will they be expected to go out and do visits in a new role? What PPE will they be provided with? etc...

Adults QSW has seen a drop in active workers and demand due to the difficulties in arranging visits to service users who may be in care homes, hospitals or shielding in their own homes. The relaxing of statutory deadlines for certain types of assessments has enabled councils to save these visits until such time as lockdown is relaxed.”

Dean Covill, Tripod:

“ Whilst Tripod have seen the majority of our existing locums retained in their existing assignments there was a noticeable slowdown in new locum positions being released to us during April & May. The early indicators so far in June that roles are increasing but this is still not to pre COVID-19 levels. Our consultants have also noticed that a higher proportion of locum roles are being cancelled across the VMS's at this time and this applies to roles in both Childrens & Adults Care. We have however seen a noticeable increase in demand for support with filling permanent vacancies and the challenges presented by the COVID-19 situation has led to a greater reliance on technology platforms such as Microsoft Teams, Skype and Zoom to complete the interview and assessment process.”



-26.6%

Decline in new orders for qualified social workers

In April to June
2020 v 2019



Has demand changed in the regions of England?

Comensura's experience of demand across the regions has been relatively consistent, albeit with some regional differences particularly outside of London. The panel concurred to a degree, but pointed out that different recruitment approaches had been applied in different authorities.

Stuart Ward, Liquid:

“ No regional differences, however, as always different Local Authorities have dealt with the impact of COVID-19 differently. There have been some instances of agency recruitment being frozen whilst they redeploy their own internal employees to areas with the highest need. Some authorities have continued to release vacancies as normal. Others have continued to recruit but there has been a delay in feedback perhaps due to some staff (non-SW) being furloughed /working remotely.”

James Rook, Sanctuary:

“ Not specifically. There are areas where deprivation is greater of course and perhaps more in the North over the South, but not specifically.”

Dean Covill, Tripod:

“ We have noticed a greater slowdown in the regions and larger county councils when compared to the London Boroughs and AGMA however it is worth noting that the impact on this of either a very good or very poor Ofsted inspection prior to COVID-19 still applies. Locum workers are either less able or less prepared to travel to take up new roles elsewhere in the country than was previously the case.”



What types of roles are being requested?

As local authorities have sought to manage the impact of COVID-19, Comensura has seen a slight change in demand for different roles, such as support to set up new care homes or temporary facilities. The panel have also experienced this, but we wanted to know if the roles and responsibilities of their qualified care workers had changed, and if so what sort of changes they had seen...

Stuart Ward, Liquid:

“ At the start of lockdown we actually saw a sharp increase in adults QSW roles however, disappointingly, a high proportion of the vacancies went on to be cancelled. In some cases, clients later told us that they had really wanted to test the market and be reassured that there were volumes of workers out there “just in case”. Sadly, the only way they knew of to do this was to release roles, assess CV’s submitted and in some cases even interview applicants. ”

Dean Covill, Tripod:

“ Over the last 3 months Tripod has increasingly been asked to source non-qualified Social Care and Support Workers into care & nursing homes, often at very short notice and to cover multiple posts. ”

James Rook, Sanctuary:

“ Social Care and Health seem to have come together. Social Care are looking to health for learnings and that’s been reflected in some of the roles that have come out. With Education piloting having 150 social workers in schools, there may be some adjustment. ”



-24.7%

Decline in new orders
for all social workers
In April to June 2020
v January to
March 2020

How have work requirements changed?

The lockdown period has seen the UK begin perhaps one of the most seismic shifts in working practices, with everybody that can work from home doing so. Within Comensura a significant proportion of our staff worked at home in some guise prior to the lockdown, so the transition of 100% of staff to home working arrangements has been seamless, but how have local authorities embraced the change, particularly in relation to their use of temporary qualified care staff? Have there been any challenges?

Dean Covill, Tripod:

“Other than the roles received in the care & nursing homes and a small amount of senior interim posts which require workers to be onsite, the majority of roles received now offer at least some remote or home working as standard.

Particular challenges facing new starters include getting set up on the secure IT Systems used by local authorities along with the challenges in sourcing appropriate PPE equipment for all workers. This has presented challenges to both suppliers and hirers alike.”

James Rook, Sanctuary:

“Some services have been shut or scaled down, with more people working across the front door.”

Stuart Ward, Liquid:

“End clients have moved quickly to embrace the work from home message and the majority were able to supply workers with the correct equipment and IT access to be able to do as much as possible from home. Naturally, a number of roles released since COVID-19 have been specifically designed as WFH roles however clients have still wanted to employ local people as their intention is to convert these vacancies into office / home visit roles as soon as it is safe to do so.”



What does demand look like for the near future?

Demand for children's social workers often accelerates in September when children return to school, and referrals are made. Given the amount of time that many children have spent at home during the lockdown, with parents that are not used to being at home, and the potential for alcohol and drug related issues, we asked the panel to comment on their expectations for the full return of children to schools in September.

James Rook, Sanctuary:

“ I hope that proactive activity happens before September. There's always a spike in September when children go back to school and after such a period, either signs are detected by a Teacher or the child isn't present and Social Care are informed, and when going out unfortunately lots of things are found out. It's a good thing that those things are found out of course, but that's the worry now, that we haven't got sight on all those vulnerable children right now, and some vulnerable adults too.

In terms of demand, we are starting to see that pick up, and instead of services saying can we have 1-2 they're starting to say can we have 10. One authority has asked us for 100. They are forming plans and starting to execute those plans. All Community services are starting to go back - allied health, occupational therapists - obviously mental health practitioners have been pretty busy throughout. ”

Stuart Ward, Liquid:

“ Childrens Referral & Assessment teams always see a spike in demand following the summer holidays as Teachers and School staff are a huge source of referrals to social services. Due to the time spent on lockdown and the prospect of many children not being seen by their teacher from April to September we think that this year there is a risk of some “front door” teams being overwhelmed by the volume of referrals once children return to school. Although there may be a staggered approach with some small groups having already returned, the best estimate currently is that the majority will go back at the same time in September.

This is also backed up by the NSPCC currently running a high-profile media campaign. They are encouraging people to be more alert to signs of neglect or abuse and to report any concerns they might have, or to get in touch with the charity if they need help and advice themselves. With families spending lots more time at home, many households might be facing pressure on incomes, increased tensions, struggling to support children with complex needs, or all sorts of other issues which aren't as easily identified under 'lockdown' conditions. ”

Dean Covill, Tripod:

“ Whilst there are ordinarily seasonal spikes in demand for workers in both Children and Adults this has not been represented in the current COVID-19 environment. The number of referrals to local authorities has slowed down significantly during this period. In April alone referrals plummeted by 50% in some areas according to an article on the Community Care website. Local Authorities had to adjust to a new way of working and to changes in the Care Act at extremely short notice. The consistent viewpoint from both

our clients and the senior leaders that we have spoken to is that the number of referrals will increase dramatically once the schools return fully & working patterns return to some semblance of what was previously considered normal. This sentiment has been echoed by the frontline practitioners our consultants speak to on a daily basis and this will lead to a significant & sustained increase in the pressures placed on existing resource and also impact the services and support required by Councils nationally. ”

Summary.

With the imminent recession and its likely impact on so many families, the next few months will no doubt bring new challenges for local authorities. Given the obvious benefit of sharing knowledge across this sector, we will be returning to ask the views of our panel in September. In the meantime, we thank James, Stuart and Dean for their valuable insights.

To find out more.

To find out more about the demand for social care or any other sectors please contact Jon Milton at:

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About Comensura.

Comensura is part of Impellam Group plc - the 2nd largest staffing business in the UK and 6th MSP provider worldwide.

Comensura has grown to become a market leader in managing the supply of temporary, permanent and contract labour for organisations across multiple sectors. With a combined client base of over 120 public and private sector organisations across the UK and Australia, we are trusted to manage over £700m of our customers' recruitment spend each year.

We are obsessive about delivering a smarter way to work for customers with complex contingent, permanent and other sourcing requirements. From maximising relationships with recruitment suppliers to bringing efficiency to processes, we're there at every stage.

To find out more please contact Comensura on 01582 542700 or email us at enquiries@comensura.co.uk.



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way to work.**

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