

# **RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORKERS**

## **SCRUTINY TASK GROUP**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

- 1.1 Scrutiny members requested a task group to look to diagnose some of the challenges in retaining children's social workers, to test the robustness of the current recruitment and retention strategy and to make recommendations on actions that should be taken to improve.
- 1.2 There is a great deal of work being undertaken nationally with many local authorities facing similar challenges. Members have looked to understand this national context and consider best practice and how it could be applied in Gloucestershire.
- 1.3 For the 2015/16 budget, Safeguarding staff costs within Children and Families and Referral and Assessment teams are forecast to over-spend by £0.9 million (13.6% of budget). This is a continuing trend from 2014/15 and is due to the use of agency staff to cover staff vacancies, maternity leave, long-term sickness and increasingly to support the increased workload within teams and where there are newly qualified workers.
- 1.4 The Local Government Association and Public Service People Manager's Association released a member guide on recruiting and retaining qualified social workers. This guide has been used to help the task group assess and understand the challenges faced by social workers and has provided case studies to further develop members' thinking on this issue.

### **1.5 Membership of the task group**

Councillors David Brown, Tim Harman, Richard Leppington, Tracy Millard, (Chair) and Lesley Williams.

### **1.6 Who did the task group speak to?**

- Commissioning Director: Children and Families/ Director of Children's Services
- Operations Director – Children's Safeguarding
- Principal Social workers
- Team Managers
- Social workers on the ground

- Prospects
- Human Resources
- Local Government Association
- Principal Social Worker, Essex County Council
- Strategic Lead for ICT
- Families First

## **2. BACKGROUND**

- 2.1 The issues around recruitment and retention of children’s social workers can not be viewed in isolation; they must be considered within the context of the wider children’s safeguarding model in Gloucestershire and the picture nationally. With this in mind, members have sought to understand the workflow arrangements within Children, Young People and Families Services, recognising that issues in any team can have an impact on the workload further along this pathway.
- 2.2 Without qualified and experienced social workers, we are unable to build a safe and responsive service. Currently Gloucestershire is holding a number of vacancies across a number of teams, particularly in Gloucester. Costs in this area were high due to the employment of agency workers in order to meet the demands of increased referrals.
- 2.3 Members note the introduction of the Gloucester Pod approach and Multi-Agency Safeguarding hub (MASH).
- 2.4 There are a number of strands of activity being undertaken in Gloucestershire with regards to recruitment including revamping the website, streamlining the process to include a single point of access, and writing to previous employees to attract quality staff back to the County Council. Members welcomed the strands of work taking place in this area.
- 2.5 With regards to retention, members understood that a health check and exit interviews had been carried out to help the authority understand the needs of social workers and uncover some of the reasons why social workers might leave the service. Members considered this intelligence alongside their own evidence gathering.

### **3. FINDINGS**

- 3.1 Members have spoken to a variety of individuals and partners throughout this process, but most importantly they have met with social workers to understand what they believe to be the most significant issues. Members have then focussed their findings on particular points that they believe can help to alleviate some of the pressure on our social workers and therefore improve retention.
- 3.2 Alleviating issues around the recruitment of social workers is trickier, particularly when aspiring to recruit more experienced social workers, which is a challenge nationally. Members have made recommendations that look to give the Council the best chance in this environment, but consideration must be given to how to make best use of our newly qualified social workers who make up much of this pool of potential employees. Newly qualified social workers are an excellent resource and bring many positives to the organisation. A strong learning and development programme can help develop these social workers, appropriate staffing models can help provide resilience and a positive and vibrant environment with competitive pay and rewards can help retain them.
- 3.3 As stated in the LGA guide, these represent the steps that can be taken to achieve greater stability and individual career satisfaction and in turn achieve more positive outcomes for children and families. When speaking to social workers in Gloucestershire, their thoughts echoed these five key themes.

#### **3.4 Workload**

- 3.4.1 Perhaps the most significant theme identified in the comments made, not only by social workers, but by all the individuals and organisations approached, is in relation to caseloads. The Council has an aspiration to reduce caseloads for experienced social workers to 16 by April 2016 and to reduce caseloads for newly qualified workers (NQSWs) to 9. Anecdotal evidence suggests that at the moment caseloads in some areas can be as much as 30-35 and for NQSWs at around 20. Illness and staff vacancies only increase this pressure. It was suggested that caseloads at this higher end severely impact the level of service being provided.
- 3.4.2 There is no quick fix to managing caseloads per social worker. With recruitment continuing to be a challenge nationally, it is not just a simple case of recruiting social workers to reduce caseloads. In addition, this does not get to the heart of the issue as to why there are these numbers of cases and

additional recruitment alone does not ensure that we are providing the best response to the children who need it.

3.4.3 Developments nationally and high profile media cases has had the effect of creating fear and risk averseness across the public sector with regards to children. High workloads for social workers can often be viewed as a result of them having to manage the anxieties of other professionals who are reluctant to carry appropriate risk. It is important that the right tools are in place to allow professionals to make the right choices when it comes to assessing this risk.

3.4.4 Members recognise the importance of investing in 'early help'. This is vital in engaging with young people at a stage before they require specialist support. In theory, this could help to reduce caseloads further in the system and help to make future savings where solutions are more cost effective, as well as benefitting the young people involved. This is very much a long term strategy.

**The task group recommends that Cabinet continue to make early help and early intervention a priority and that the level of investment reflects this.**

3.4.5 Where teams have high caseloads it is important that they are able to work as flexibly as possible in order to maximise their time and allow them the autonomy to manage their workloads appropriately. This requires a working environment that is conducive to that approach. Social workers in various parts of the county do not have the same consistency of facilities, with Gloucester offices in particular being flagged up as having a poor location and issues around parking. Plans are in place to consolidate staff within Shire Hall and maximise capital receipts by selling peripheral buildings. This is an approach that makes sense, but consideration needs to be given to the future location of social worker teams taking account of their unique requirements.

**The task group recommends that discussions are held between senior staff in Children's Services and Property Services to ensure that the needs of social workers are taken into account as arrangements are made to relocate staff, particularly around office accommodation and parking. Any changes need to be communicated effectively.**

3.4.6 To ensure that social workers are able to maximise their time effectively it is vital that our ICT systems are fit for purpose. The task group recognise that the Worksmart programme is underway to replace our current ICT devices with solutions that better meet the needs of the organisation. This programme should address many of the concerns of social workers regarding the speed and reliability of the equipment they are using. Communication of the changes

taking place in this area are generally carried out through updates on Staffnet and through third and fourth tier managers for them to cascade down. Those teams who find themselves busy with high workloads might not have the opportunity to pick up these messages and that there needs to be a conscious effort to engage with these staff better.

- 3.4.7 Members understand that many social workers would like to have remote access to the Council network in order to allow them to work flexibly. This approach should be available to all; currently it is up to team managers to sign off the business needs and associated costs and this does not appear to be applied consistently. Members understand that there is a need to balance the costs of providing remote access against the benefits, as well as to take into account the potential dangers of this 24 hour access on work life balance. It was suggested that restrictions could be put in place to ensure that where appropriate remote access could be switched off at certain times. This seems like a solution worth exploring further.

**The task group recommends that meetings are arranged between social workers and their team manager to discuss their needs with regards to remote access to the Council's ICT network.**

- 3.4.8 New technology is increasingly being used to help improve the service we provide and the use of interactive websites and apps can be a tool used by Children's Services to engage with families. If the appropriate technology such as a smart phone or tablet is not available to the team then it is difficult for them to demonstrate the facility to service users; there is currently a reliance on individuals using their own devices. When developing these new initiatives, it is important that there is early engagement with ICT in order to help facilitate the process.

### **3.5 Staffing**

- 3.5.1 Some teams have historically had high numbers of vacancies that put more pressure on social workers. It is newly qualified social workers who apply for the posts, as opposed to more experienced individuals, and so teams such as Gloucester have a high ratio of NQSWs. In addition, there are high numbers of agency workers to fill the vacancies despite the higher cost they come with and the pressure this places on budgets.
- 3.5.2 Some qualified social workers work for the Council in a non-social worker role. Given the lack of experience currently in the service, efforts should be made to encourage them back into the profession. It was suggested that for those experienced social workers who had been out of the profession for a while

there might be a fear that they would return to high caseloads straight away. There should be an integration process where caseloads are managed and capped in a similar way to social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE).

**The task group recommends that a 're-integration programme' is put in place to encourage and support qualified social workers to return to the service.**

- 3.5.3 Members understand that recruitment is underway for a 'Development of Social Care Recruitment Co-ordinator' to oversee recruitment of agency workers and to maintain oversight of levels of experience.
- 3.5.4 The aim over the long term has to be to reduce the amount of agency workers in teams. This will depend on the success of recruiting new social workers to fill the current vacancies and improved retention of existing workers. For our ASYE workers it is important to support them in their first year and members have suggested that there would be benefit in there being greater link up across teams for ASYEs so they can receive that peer support.
- 3.5.5 There is a piece of work needed to understand how staffing should be allocated across teams if all vacancies were filled. There is a question here as to how many social workers are required and in what areas? It is important that we understand where the areas of highest need are in Gloucestershire and develop a model which addresses that need. This should be the starting point for any allocation of staffing.

**The task group recommends that an exercise is undertaken to look at the whole children's safeguarding service and map the number of social workers required in the County and where they should be best allocated.**

- 3.5.6 The task group notes that the Council currently employs 33 agency provided social workers (around 17% of frontline social workers) with the cost to the authority from April to September for agency staff at around £746,000. This includes cover for maternity/sickness leave and a need to ensure sufficient experienced workers across teams as well as cover for vacancies.

The task group believes that it is important to identify opportunities to 'invest to save'. The current use of agency workers in the service is putting increased pressure on a budget which will only become tighter as funding from central government is reduced over the coming years. The complexity of the issues and challenges in projecting demand and need into the future means that it is not possible to guarantee that investment in this area will result in savings in

the coming years, but members do believe that a lack of further investment will lead to a failure to avoid escalating costs in the future.

The use of agency staff and caseload levels in some teams is not sustainable over the long term, so there is an argument that further recruitment of staff (building on recent success in appointing social workers) can help to reduce the reliance on agency workers and should reduce caseloads. There is unlikely to ever be a complete move away from agency workers, but additional capacity should help to improve practice and begin to address other cost pressures. A phased introduction of additional resource year on year would help to ensure that the service has the staffing to meet increased demand.

**With a view to 'cost avoidance', the task group recommends that there is further investment in the Children and Families revenue budget to increase capacity through the recruitment of social workers. The level of investment is to be determined but the task group believes it should be sufficient to have a demonstrable impact over a four year period and therefore needs to be in the range between £2m and £6m.**

**The task group requests that through the MTFS process officers are requested to develop options which demonstrate how an investment in children's social care could**

- a) Reduce the costs associated with agency workers**
- b) Reduce caseloads to manageable levels**
- c) Cap current trends of rising cost and need**
- d) Begin to address cost pressures across the budget area**

**The task group is further concerned that any budget proposals do not result in a reduction in the quality of service delivery.**

**The task group will reconvene in January 2016 to consider the proposals as part of the budget scrutiny process.**

3.5.7 Members understand the role the website plays in being the focal point for the recruitment of children's social workers. It is important that this website is regularly updated to ensure that it continues to attract interest and does not become tired and out of date. In addition, consideration should be given to how visible the website is on search engines. It may be that some investment in this area would be worthwhile considering its importance in our recruitment strategy.

**The task group recommends that the website is regularly updated and that Cabinet explore the option of further investment to ensure its increased visibility on search engines.**

## **3.6 Morale**

3.6.1 Social workers are focussed on doing a good job, often under difficult conditions. The perception of social workers nationally has been damaged; attention from the media, MPs and even local members has contributed to negativity around the profession. Concerns were expressed to members about assumptions being made that it is 'the social worker's fault'. If social workers can look across at other professions and think they can get the same, or better, pay with less stress and negativity then it is not surprising that some may consider a change. It is passion for the job that keeps social workers in the profession and this must be valued and protected.

3.6.2 Members want to highlight the good work that social workers do and demonstrate how highly they value them. The task group feel that the council should ensure that there are regular events that celebrate the work of social workers. As well as demonstrating how highly valued our existing work force is, it will help promote the role to a wider audience and help with our recruitment.

**The task group recommends that regular events are arranged to celebrate the role of the social worker.**

3.6.3 There are a mixture of things that allow a social worker to feel valued, such as pay, training and secondment opportunities and positivity in the media. In addition to these, the right environment must be cultivated that allows for a high level of support and a culture that doesn't look to just place blame.

3.6.4 Social workers discussed how senior managers were accessible and showed that they cared with an open door policy. There was some variation across teams but, in the main, social workers spoke highly of the support in place from managers. Some teams talked about the benefit of team away days and informal events that helped team building and to develop a positive atmosphere to work in. Other teams suggested that they did not have these same arrangements and it is important that this inconsistency is addressed.

3.6.5 Some teams have clearly built up strong relationships and social workers feel valued. Where there have been regular changes to the team, with different managers and high numbers of agency workers, it is difficult to develop those same relationships.

3.6.6 Given that social workers work in a highly stressful environment, it is important that mental health support is in place. They should have access to support from line managers, supervisors and their peers, with opportunities for informal discussion and more formal counselling services. Members understand that social workers build up their own emotional resilience, but it is

important that in doing so they don't entirely lose that natural emotional reaction that makes them so good at their jobs.

- 3.6.7 Clinical and reflective supervision was cited as something which social workers felt would help them. Some expressed concern that there might be an assumption that social workers are 'just able to cope, regardless'. Team managers suggested that sometimes there was a stigma attached to a referral to occupational health; social workers did not want to be seen as 'not coping'.

**The task group recommends that the opportunity for 'clinical and reflective supervision' is embedded within social worker practice.**

- 3.6.8 For those that take time out with mental health issues, there needs to be the right processes in place to support them on their return. Anecdotally members have heard differences in the way in which those with mental health issues were supported on their return to work to those returning from a physical injury. Those returning from a physical injury had reduced caseloads, where it was suggested that those returning from mental health issues were quickly returned to a high level of caseloads and felt like there were questions around their capability to do the job. While this may be isolated issues with individual and unique factors that members are not aware of, it re-enforces the importance of their being parity in the support provided for those with mental health issues and those with physical issues.

**The task group recommends that more is done to support those returning to social work after a period of ill health and that mental health issues are given parity with physical issues.**

### **3.7 Learning and Development**

- 3.7.1 A large part of social workers feeling valued is the access to continuing professional development. When looking to retain workers, it is important that they can see a clear pathway to progress within the service and develop their craft. Some social workers expressed concern that when looking to achieve further qualifications, there was no reduction of caseloads or increased support provided. It is important that the routes for further development are clearly signposted and that support is provided for those who seek to develop.

**The task group recommends that a flexible approach is taken in supporting career development including a possible reduction in caseloads for those social worker undertaking further qualifications.**

- 3.7.2 Members understand that work is being carried out to produce a more robust training and development programme. This will include a mixture of in-house workshops and the buying in of specialist support when required. Members welcome this move and feel that a formalised approach will help to ensure all social workers know the opportunities available to them. It is important that in organising our staffing structure consideration is given to provide opportunities for staff to progress and develop while still working within day to day practice.
- 3.7.3 The task group wish to emphasise the importance of secondment opportunities to allow flexibility for social workers to move to other areas within the service to vary their career and develop a wider range of expertise. Some social workers indicated that they had looked at other teams where there were vacancies and wanted to try through secondment before making the move. They were nervous about making the move to another team and finding that they did not like the work, but then feeling that they could not return to their own team without 'losing face'. It is important that our approach is flexible enough to ensure that individuals do not find themselves restricted and looking to neighbouring authorities when things do not work out.
- 3.7.4 When it comes to secondment opportunities, members feel it is important that this is discussed as part of the appraisal process each year and that a conscious effort is made to accommodate requests. Members recognise that it is important to ensure that posts are filled within teams and that the pressure of workloads can make it difficult to release workers. Despite this, a release to secondment is better than losing the social worker permanently because their requests have not been carefully considered and all options haven't been explored.

**The task group recommends that secondment opportunities be identified as part of the appraisal process each year. All options should be explored to ensure we are as flexible as possible when dealing with requests.**

- 3.7.5 It is important that there are strong placements and links with universities so that social workers beginning their careers understand at the earliest stage possible the realities of the job. Essex Council has invested heavily in their academy, recognising the importance of developing this market. Aside from any discussion around investing in this area, it is important to make the best use of the resources available to us.

**The task group recommends that the Council formalises arrangements with universities to develop an 'academy' approach, learning from the best practice of Essex Council.**

3.7.6 Members have noted the role of the Family Support Worker and suggested that this role could act as a starting point for those that wish to develop further. This would allow the individual to gain experience and would provide an ideal 'testing' ground for those who need to develop confidence and ensure that this is an environment they wish to work in.

### **3.8 Pay and Rewards**

3.8.1 Individuals do not get into social work for the pay; social workers are passionate about their work and fully understand that it is not a '9-5' job. Despite this, while it is not the only factor (or even the main factor) that prompts social workers to leave posts, the influence of pay varies for those social workers starting the profession and choosing where to work, and experienced social workers moving between jobs.

3.8.2 Pay is often seen as a sign of how much the role is valued. Where neighbouring authorities are offering greater pay and incentives such as 'golden hellos' it can make it difficult to attract staff and can say something about the way we value our social workers. Despite this, there is no sense in entering a bidding war for social workers, this does not benefit any authority and can create tension. Other authorities have developed a memorandum of understanding with their neighbours to ensure that there is some stability and this might be something worth exploring.

3.8.3 Where there are areas of greater turnover, typically in areas of intense demand and high need, it may be sensible to pay a premium. A more flexible and free movement of staff would allow social workers to take on this role for a specified period of time at a higher rate of pay. This would allow them the benefit of experience and pay rewards without the danger of 'burn-out' or disillusionment with the service.

3.8.4 It is important that our pay remains competitive and that the benefits of working in Gloucestershire are communicated appropriately. Members welcome the development of the website and the work being carried out around recruitment currently and it is important that this continues to ensure we are not left behind.

**Cabinet ensures that social worker pay in Gloucestershire remains competitive with neighbouring authorities and that the option of a memorandum of understanding with neighbouring authorities is explored.**

3.8.5 Agency workers arriving on more money can create tension within teams. The grass is not always greener though, with more travelling and higher caseloads, so some agency workers are returning to fixed employment.

3.8.6 Where additional pay and rewards are offered for new recruits, this needs to be balanced against rewards for those who have been in post for a while. This does not have to be in the form of big financial payments, it could be as simple as extra leave, vouchers and discounts from partners, or team away days.

**The task group recommends that Cabinet explores the options available to provide a sustainable package of incentives for long serving staff.**

3.8.7 Of course, with high workloads and pressure on teams, the taking of annual leave can become an issue. Social workers are doing far more than their 37 hours and some are having difficulty claiming that time back. Social workers must be encouraged to take their leave and any culture which encourages social workers to work longer and longer hours must be changed. Team managers must be more pro-active in checking leave and discussing work load issues with social workers who are not taking sufficient days off.

#### **4. RECOMMENDATIONS**

4.1 The task group recognises the excellent work that many social workers perform day in and day out and have been enthused by the passion and dedication they have seen throughout this process. There is not one simple factor that can help alleviate workloads in this area, or resolve the national issues around recruitment of experienced social workers. Members have, however, identified a number of areas where existing good practice can be built upon to ensure that the environment social workers work in is better and that it encourages social workers to enjoy long and successful careers in Gloucestershire.

**The task group recommends that:**

- a) **That Cabinet continue to make early help and early intervention a priority going forward and that the level of investment reflects this. Any changes need to be communicated effectively.**

- b) Meetings are arranged between social workers and their team manager to discuss their needs with regards to remote access to the Council's ICT network.**
- c) A 're-integration programme' is put in place to encourage and support qualified social workers to return to the service.**
- d) An exercise is undertaken to look at the whole children's safeguarding service and map the number of social workers required in the County and where they should be best allocated.**
- e) There is further investment in the Children and Families revenue budget to increase capacity through the recruitment of social workers. The level of investment is to be determined but the task group believes it should be sufficient to have a demonstrable impact over a four year period and therefore needs to be in the range between £2m and £6m.**

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- f) The website is regularly updated and that Cabinet explore the option of further investment to ensure its increased visibility on search engines.**
- g) That regular events are arranged to celebrate the role of the social worker.**
- h) The opportunity for 'clinical and reflective supervision' is embedded within social worker practice.**
- i) More is done to support those returning to social work after a period of ill health and that mental health issues are given parity with physical**

**issues.**

- j) A flexible approach is taken in supporting career development including a possible reduction in caseloads for those social worker undertaking further qualifications.**
- k) Secondment opportunities be identified as part of the appraisal process each year. All options should be explored to ensure we are as flexible as possible when dealing with requests.**
- l) The Council formalises arrangements with universities to develop an 'academy' approach, learning from the best practice of Essex Council.**
- m) Cabinet ensures that social worker pay in Gloucestershire remains competitive with neighbouring authorities and that the option of a memorandum of understanding with neighbouring authorities is explored.**
- n) Cabinet explores the options available to provide a sustainable package of incentives for long serving staff.**