



**CHILDREN'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE: 5**  
**NOVEMBER 2018**

**RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

**REPORT OF THE DIRECTOR OF CHILDREN AND FAMILY**  
**SERVICES**

**Purpose of report**

1. The purpose of this report is to provide an update on the department's position in relation to the recruitment and retention of social workers, including the national and local issues and some of the measures already taken to tackle the current challenges.

**Policy Framework and Previous Decisions**

2. The development of a dedicated Recruitment and Retention Strategy was reported to the Children's Social Care Panel on 28 June 2018.

**Background**

3. The challenge to recruit and retain a stable social worker workforce is experienced across the UK. Whilst Children and Family Services in Leicestershire has enjoyed stability for a relatively long period, this has now changed with more significant levels of churn experienced across teams. In response, a dedicated strategy to focus on the recruitment and retention of children's social workers is being developed.
4. Working in children's services is extremely challenging. The nature of the work is increasingly complex and focused on the most vulnerable children who have experienced significant trauma from their earliest years. Daily working in situations of abuse and risk, witnessing high levels of distress and trauma takes its toll on individuals. The risk of 'burn out' is real and some workers choose agency work as a way to vary their experience and provide the flexibility to take regular breaks. Research indicates that the average career span of a children's social worker is seven years (Reforming Social Work 2013<sup>1</sup>).
5. There is persistent difficulty in recruiting more experienced social workers meaning the department is increasingly recruiting newly qualified social

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<sup>1</sup> Reforming Social Work. Policy Exchange 2013

workers. For 32 vacancies, 28 of those appointed were newly qualified (87%). Whilst this successful recruitment is positive, these workers are required to undertake an Assessment and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) which involves a reduced caseload and greater level of support and supervision. Maintaining the right balance between newly qualified and experienced social workers is essential to ensure an appropriate level of knowledge and expertise, but also to ensure that newly qualified workers feel supported and confident that their future is with Leicestershire County Council.

6. The market for social workers is exceptionally competitive, with strong competition from other authorities and agencies, particularly near neighbours. In comparison, Leicestershire salaries are below those of neighbouring authorities and this is contributing to the difficulties in recruitment of the necessary number and grade of staff. At October 2018, the department has 37 vacancies.

### **Developing a Dedicated Strategy**

7. In response to these challenges, a dedicated strategy for social work recruitment and retention has been developed that sets out the department's work in the following key areas:
  - **Attracting, developing and retaining the best staff:** Through the strategy there will be a commitment in Leicestershire to support workers to have a good work/life balance. The department has already refreshed its learning offer and intends to broaden opportunities for career development, including ways to 'grow our own' social workers. It is the intention to review the model of social work delivery and develop peripatetic provision which can proactively respond to sudden pressures in teams. Additionally, high quality supervision and leadership of staff is critical and there will be investment in this aspect of the offer with additional training and support to managers.
  - **Ensuring the overall offer is competitive and attractive:** The offer to those working in Leicestershire will be substantially strengthened through the strategy. Whilst social workers' main motivation for choosing an employer is rarely pay, Leicestershire wants to ensure it offers a fair pay deal and knows it must remain competitive.
  - **Effectively marketing the offer (both internally and externally):** Working closely with colleagues across the Council, the department will contribute to a shared plan to develop both long and short term interventions, including strong marketing and branding.

### **Current Position**

8. The strategy is based on the analysis of a range of data which confirmed much of what is known anecdotally:

- Over the last 18-24 months there has been a gradual loss of permanent staff that has contributed to an increased reliance on agency staffing across teams.
- There has been a significant Full Time Equivalent (FTE) vacancy gap at Social Worker, Senior Practitioner and Team Manager levels. This creates pressure in teams and has led to some workers having caseloads that are too high.
- 68% of those leaving are highly experienced workers operating at level 3, whereas only 45% of new starters are experienced. This creates pressure, as the newly qualified workers have a reduced caseload and cannot safely take on the full breadth and complexity of work.
- There is potential for some hidden or masked turnover with the movement of staff between teams. Whilst this sort of movement often supports overall retention of staff it will have an impact on team capacity and pressures experienced within teams as experienced staff move to new roles.
- Leicestershire pay scales are well below its closest competitors. This applies across social worker (level 3), Senior Practitioner, IRO and Team Manager posts.
- The department has demonstrably poor success rates in recruiting to experienced workers, including level 3 workers, Senior Practitioners and Team Manager vacancies
- The quality of the wider employment offer (linked to learning, development, career pathway) and the availability of other benefits are seen as strong influencing factors for current staff and new candidates.

### **Departmental response**

9. As part of the new strategic approach a variety of measures have already been taken:
  - An increase in the establishment of 37 new permanent social workers was agreed to help reduce caseloads.
  - The introduction of a targeted market premia to increase competitiveness for the hard to recruit posts of Senior Practitioner and Team Managers.
  - A Review of status for Independent Reviewing Officers, with regrading equivalent to a team manager (grade 13)
  - Three additional Continuing Professional Development days awarded to all HCPC registered social workers.
  - The introduction of routine exit interviews offered to social workers.
  - A flexible response to those workers wanting to move internally to encourage experienced workers to remain in the department
  - A partnership with Frontline to host a 'fast track' social work qualification programme.

10. Further measures agreed by the Children and Families Services Departmental Management Team as part of the dedicated strategy include:
- New expanded routes into social work (including apprenticeships)
  - Commissioned training for supervisors and managers on supervision/systemic practice
  - The development of a tailored programme of workshops for new and aspiring managers
  - Revisions to the role of Senior Practitioner to be more focused on development and support of practice
  - Opportunities for secondments to provide a greater range of experience and avoid burnout.
  - Level 3 Market Premia from 1 October 2018.

### **Impact of measures taken to date**

11. The impact of measures taken to date include:
- An improved response to advertisements for Team Manager and Senior Practitioner posts.
  - Whilst caseload pressures have reduced for some teams, significant challenges remain in child protection teams to allocate new cases, particularly those with high numbers of newly qualified staff.
  - The Frontline student unit started in September 2018, with the appointment of four high calibre individuals. The unit is already taking cases.

### **Resource Implications**

12. £500,000 was allocated as part of the growth money into the Department following the 2016 Ofsted inspection. In addition to this there has been additional pressure on the social care staffing budget as a result of the increase in agency social workers to support ASYE Social Workers as part of the Recruitment and Retention Strategy.

### **Conclusions**

13. The difficulties currently being experienced in social work recruitment and retention are a national issue. The new dedicated strategy recognises that good social workers are critical to success in achieving aspirations. The department needs to ensure there is a sufficient calibre staff to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children and their families.
14. Despite the proactive measures taken to date, this remains a significant challenge for the department. The instability generated by the use of agency workers continues to pose significant obstacles in maintaining caseloads at reasonable levels consistently and particularly in child protection teams.

15. The majority of successful recruitment has been in newly qualified social workers. There is persistent difficulty in recruiting more experienced social workers. Maintaining a balance between newly qualified and experienced social workers is essential to ensure an appropriate level of knowledge and expertise, enable manageable caseloads and the ability for new cases to be allocated, at the same time as ensuring newly qualified workers feel supported and confident that their future is with Leicestershire County Council.
16. As at October 2018, there are 49 agency social workers deployed across all teams and 37 vacant posts in social work and management roles. The costs of this, combined with the increased turnover experienced by the department, are significant in financial terms but also in time and effort of managers (with repeated recruitment, induction, training).
17. Whilst some financial provision has been made for the on-going use of agency staff, budget pressures for 2018/19 are likely to persist in this area and continue to create considerable budgetary pressure.

#### **Background papers**

18. None.

#### **Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure**

19. None.

#### **Equality and Human Rights Implications**

20. Teams within the Department work with children and young people from across the demographic profile of the County. Direct, face-to-face work with those children and their families is often as a result of concerns or potential risk. Many of these children and young people live in families which are marginalised, and more likely to experience discrimination or disadvantage in their lives. The strategic approach adopted to tackle the current issues in social work recruitment and retention is part of ensuring that children and young people remain at the centre of practice, that their voice is prioritised and that the additional factors affecting and complicating their lives are addressed fully.

#### **Officer to Contact**

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