



**CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY**  
**COMMITTEE: 3 SEPTEMBER 2019**

**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 work undertaken by the department to tackle the challenges around the recruitment and retention of social workers and the current position.

**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 and 26 February 2019.
3. A report was presented to the Children and Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 5 November 2018 providing an update on recruitment and retention. It was agreed that further updates would be provided to the Committee.

**Background**

4. The challenge to recruit and retain a stable social worker workforce is experienced across the UK. In July 2019, MPs launched an inquiry that will investigate workforce pressures faced by children's social workers and explore their ability to perform their roles.
5. Whilst Children and Family Services in Leicestershire enjoyed stability for a relatively long period, this has now changed with more significant levels of churn experienced across teams. The department recognised the significant and sustained pressures on teams resulting from agency staff turnover, high levels of sickness and maternity leave as well as the complexity of cases. As a result, additional temporary capacity has been approved through DMT in 2018/19 to seek to address this (20 wte agency workers).
6. Working in children's services is extremely challenging. The nature of the work is increasingly complex and is 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 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>).

7. There is persistent difficulty in recruiting more experienced social workers meaning that the department must rely on recruiting newly qualified social workers. 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. Currently, the department has six agency workers providing additional support for ASYE workers.
8. The market for social workers is exceptionally competitive, with strong competition from neighbouring authorities and local agencies. In comparison, Leicestershire salaries are below those of neighbouring authorities and this is contributing to the difficulties in the recruitment of the necessary number and grade of staff. At end of June 2019, the department had the following vacancies:
  - 15 x Social worker
  - 6.5 x Senior Practitioner
  - 3.5 x Team Manager

### **Developing a Dedicated Strategy**

9. A dedicated strategy was developed as a short/medium term response to the significant recruitment and retention challenges within Children's Social Care and has remained a dynamic and responsive tool steering this work. The department is in the second year of the strategy and has made good progress over the past year, with actions largely delivered. These have positively impacted with some reductions in turnover and vacancy rates.
10. In June 2019 new goals and additional actions for year two of the strategy were approved by DMT. These are intended to further consolidate progress and provide a focus more specifically on the emotional impact of the work experienced by workers.
11. The implementation plan for the strategy has a total of 24 actions identified. Of these, 20 have been completed and 4 are partially completed. The following points summarise some of the main work completed in the last year:
  - The introduction of a market premium for key roles in social work has seen a positive impact in terms of attracting candidates. This action has taken Leicestershire to the market median.

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

- The department has adopted a 'grow your own' approach to widen the routes into social work. Three Frontline students will qualify in September 2019, with a further five in September 2020. There are six social work apprentices deployed who will finish a three-year qualification programme in summer 2022. This means there will be a steady number of qualified workers coming through to fill vacancies.
- The refreshed ASYE programme ensures that newly qualified social workers receive a strong support offer in their first year in practice. Success is seen in the high retention rates of Level 2 workers remaining in Leicestershire.
- New policy and guidance documents are helping to strengthen the development of high-quality supervision across social work practice. The emphasis on reflection and analysis is a response to staff feedback.
- An annual programme of leadership training for new and aspiring managers is underway, giving a strong emphasis on the expectations of leaders in Leicestershire. This programme will help the department to better 'talent spot' and develop future managers – critical for succession planning.
- Minimum monthly protected learning is now a requirement for both managers and teams, giving a focus on active learning and continuous professional development. This has been part of the efforts to create a safe learning culture which both Ofsted and peer reviewers complimented.
- The new career pathway, alongside a refreshed learning offer, ensures that workers are fully aware of the knowledge and skills statements and the professional capabilities framework. As a result, the ASYE workers and Level 2 social workers will all be better prepared for future national accreditation and demonstrating their fitness to practice.
- There has been a streamlined coordination of recruitment processes with dedicated business support.

### **Assessing Impact**

12. Assessing impact is complex with so many inter-dependencies. However, from the 2017/18 baseline, three data measures are being used to monitor the effectiveness of the strategy. The table below shows the progress made:

Measure	Baseline (2017)	December 2018	March 2019	June 2019
Turnover rate <sup>2</sup>	19.6% (38.8)	13.3% (31.3)	13.3% (31.3)	13.3% (31.3)
Vacancy rate <sup>3</sup>	18.5% (50.2)	9.8% (23.5)	4.6% (13.5)	9.6% (25)
Agency rate <sup>4</sup>	18.7% (49)	17.5% (48.5)	14.2% (41)	16.9% (53)

13. Data in relation to vacancies shows some improvements from the baseline. However, the figures show a fluctuating picture. Whilst the table above shows a recent significant rise in both vacancy and agency numbers, the majority of this is due to the additional permanent posts recently agreed by DMT (two team managers (part time) and seven social workers). These posts will be built into future budgets to ensure the department is meeting its statutory requirements. Without this additionality there would be a small percentage rise (1.6%) showing as a result of slowed recruitment success. The department operates a rolling recruitment process which is centrally managed.
14. In summary, as of June 2019 there are 15wte social work vacancies remaining with 6.5wte senior practitioner vacancies and 3.5wte team manager vacancies. (This is inclusive of the additional capacity referenced above).
15. Pressures remain on teams (resulting from agency turnover, sickness and maternity leave as well as the complexity of cases). Despite the permanent appointments made over the last six months, the number of agency workers in the department remains high. At end of June there were 53 agency workers, broken down as follows:

Rationale	Number
Covering vacancies	17.5
Covering maternity	6
Covering long term sickness	1.5
Awaiting transfer to permanent roles	2
ASYE support	6
Additional capacity	20
<b>Total</b>	<b>53</b>

16. The additional capacity (20) is a temporary arrangement in areas where there is increased demand or high absence. Plans are underway to find permanent solutions and reduce the dependency on agency workers including, for example, a review of capacity and demand. This work is led by the

<sup>2</sup> This is currently an annual figure provided in September each year. Number of leavers divided by HCPC registered social workers (number updated 2x annually).

<sup>3</sup> Vacancy number divided by total HCPC registered social workers

<sup>4</sup> Number of agency workers divided by total current social worker workforce

transformation unit working closely with the business in order to better anticipate future resourcing needs.

### **Resource Implications**

17. Following the 2016 Ofsted inspection, £500,000 was allocated as part of the growth money into the department to support recruitment and retention issues. This has enabled the payment of a market premia for key roles for two years but has been fully absorbed by these costs.
18. The pressure on the social care staffing budget persists due to the high level of agency workers still required to manage business demands. Whilst the budget for 2019/20 does provide £250,000 for agency spend, the current spend significantly exceeds this. It is anticipated that whilst the use of agency staff will remain stable in 2019/20, the need for agency staff will reduce once permanent posts are recruited. Work to reduce budgetary pressure is ongoing. For example, robust contract management to ensure costs are controlled is delivering results over time as a result of adherence to the corporate Mstar contract with Reed.

### **Conclusion**

19. 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 departmental aspirations. The department needs to ensure that there is a high calibre of staff to meet the needs of the most vulnerable children and their families.
20. Despite the proactive measures taken to date, this remains a significant challenge for the department. The instability generated by using agency workers continues to pose significant obstacles in consistently maintaining caseloads at reasonable levels both in child protection and children in care teams.
21. Most of the 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.
22. As of June 2019, there are 53 agency social workers deployed across all teams and 25 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).

23. Whilst some financial provision has been made for the on-going use of agency staff, budget pressures for 2019/20 are likely to persist in this area and continue to create considerable budgetary pressure.

### **Background papers**

24. None.

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

25. None.

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

26. 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 because 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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