



**CHILDREN AND FAMILY SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY
COMMITTEE - 5 SEPTEMBER 2023**

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

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

Purpose of the Report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide the Committee with an overview of the Department's recruitment and retention activity and current position and future objective for the service.

Policy Framework and Previous Decisions

2. The Department's recruitment and retention activity is captured in a number of key policies and procedures including Road to Excellence 21/23, Workforce development plan 2022, Induction Procedure 2022, We Care Race Equality Strategy 21/24, Wellbeing Concern Process 2022, Critical response service 2022, Career Framework and Progression Handbook 2022, Apprenticeship Programme 2022, Internal transfer Procedure 2022; Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) handbook August 2022, and Making Leicestershire County Council the Best Place to Work.
3. Nationally, the Government's Children's Social Care reform strategy 'Stable homes Built on Love (2022)' sets out its overarching plans to reset children's social care in what it describes as a 'once in a generation reform'. A report on the strategy was presented to the Committee on 7 March 2023. This strategy includes specific recommendation in response to an acknowledged crisis in recruitment and retention of social workers and provides a national perspective on proposed workforce changes including amendments to the current agency market which is likely to have significant impact on social work recruitment in the future. The full details of final recommendations are not yet known.

Background – The national Picture

4. Recruitment and retention within social work has been increasingly challenging in recent years with the greater prevalence of agency opportunities alongside the existing complexity of child protection work which can be affected by negative public and media perceptions and low morale in the sector. In February 2023, the Government published its annual overview of the children's social work workforce – in place since 2017. This report based on the year 1 October 2021 to 30 September 2022 produced the following headlines:

- 31,600 Children and family social workers in post (FTE) – down 2.7% (900) from 2021 though remains higher than in 2019.
 - 7,900 Vacancies (FTE) – up 21% from 2021 and the highest recorded – with 1,400 additional vacancies recorded when compared with 2021. This accounts for 1 in every 5 Social work posts being vacant.
 - 6,800 Agency workers (FTE) up from 2021 and the highest recorded. Agency workers accounted for 18% of the workforce the highest recorded. 80% of agency workers were covering full time vacancies.
 - There were 4,800 new starts (including starts across LAs) and 5,400 leavers during the period. For the first time numbers of leavers was higher than new starts with new starts down 13% since 2021 and lowest recorded.
 - A third (33%) of leavers in 2022 had been in service for less than 2 years. 37% of leavers had been in service for 2 years or more but less than 5 years an increase of 7% since 2017.
 - 16.6 caseload average per worker (FTE) which was up from 16.3 in 2021 but down from 16.9 in 2019.
 - A Social Work England State of the Nation 2023 survey published in March 2023 noted that 24.1% of the 5335 social workers who left the professional register in the year up to 30 November 2022 had been continuously registered for less than a year – demonstrating that newly qualified social workers were not committing to a long-term career in the profession.
5. Stable Homes Built on love (2022) sets out a ‘Pillar’ of work focused on the challenges facing Local Authorities in the recruitment and retention of social workers as a national issue. Its ambition is for there to be a valued, supported and highly skilled social worker for every child who needs one. Whilst this appears a simple unarguable ambition, the ability to create a stable children’s workforce is challenging and must be addressed proactively. The proposals set out that social workers need the time and tools to do their job well. The report recognises the pressure on the social work workforce with high vacancy rates, increased use of agency provision and lack of experienced social workers with further impact on the experiences of children and families receiving services.
 6. The report points out the need for stronger training for social workers and continuous support during their career. It identifies their wellbeing to be a priority for service leaders and the Government. To achieve this, there are specific actions identified over the next two years which include the need to prioritise high-quality career development for social workers with the establishment of an Early Career Framework (ECF). The ECF is proposed to be five years which compares with the current Assessed year in practice which is for 12 months post qualification. To improve retention Local Government will be supported to improve working conditions and reduce caseload pressures, though details of this support is not yet clear. Key to this are proposals to reduce the cost and reliance on agency social workers but also suggested workforce remodelling to increase the profile of alternatively qualified staff within the children’s workforce as part of a shift to a ‘Family Help’ model. This creates stronger connections between Children’s Social Care and Early Help.

7. There has been increased visibility of interim social work posts, made more attractive based on both enhanced pay rates, sometimes preferential tax benefits and the ability to have more flexibility across authorities. This has become a much stronger feature of the current job market and has been identified in 'Stable Homes Built on Love' as a specific issue affecting the recruitment and retention of children's social workers.
8. A separate consultation on the Child and Family Social Worker Workforce was published in February 2023. This set out proposed national rules on agency usage, including potential price caps, minimum qualification rules for agency staff expecting five years post qualification experience and specific recruitment and commissioning expectations. Alongside this is an aim to boost social worker recruitment – with up to 500 additional child and family social worker apprentices developed nationally. Timescales for implementation of this aspect of the proposals are still not clear, though the changes to the agency market are welcomed across Local Authority employers, given if fully implemented are likely to significantly reduce the draw of agency positions by equalising pay and preventing moves into the agency sector within the first five years of practice.

Local challenges

9. Locally, the Department has face increased competition with local and regional Authorities for qualified social workers – both those at the start of their career and particularly those with experience. This is from the perspective of attracting external candidates to join the workforce in the competitive jobs market but also to retain our existing staff across grades, who may be attracted to offers from both permanent and agency offers externally. This has become more challenging in the context of more flexible working options post COVID-19, which has allowed social workers to look more widely for jobs.
10. The Department's vision is to make Leicestershire a First Choice Employer for Social workers and managers. Since 2020, the service has strategically focused on:
 - attracting developing and retaining the best staff,
 - ensuring our overall offer is competitive and attractive, and
 - effectively marketing our offer internally and externally,

Progress to Date

Recruitment

11. A range of activities have been implemented to strengthen recruitment with a centralised programme of advertisements and panels for all posts across all grades of Social Worker, Senior Practitioner and Team Manager. This includes regular assessment centres targeting social work students finishing their training and builds on strong well-established relationships with local universities. Officers have also attended national recruitment fayres and extended job adverts to social media, Indeed and LinkedIn.

12. This recruitment work sits alongside a 'grow your own' approach with annual cohorts of eight frontline students, through fast track social work training, as well as four social work apprenticeships annually. In September 2022, the first four apprentices completed their training and joined the workforce. Annually, these two programmes account for approximately twelve ASYE starters and in January 2024 the first cohort of three 'return to social work' candidates will enter the workforce.
13. Most significantly, during 2023 the service developed a strategic partnership with two recruitment agencies to produce a coordinated programme of recruitment of qualified social workers from abroad. A systematic approach to manage applications, interviews, and appointment of candidates with experience internationally means a cohort of approximately 13 workers will join the work force in Autumn 2023. A robust support and induction programme is being developed to ensure that these candidates are welcomed to local teams, provided with good support to transfer skills and knowledge into the local ways of working and settle into local communities with the families they support. The aim is for these staff to develop a strong commitment to build a career with the Council over the longer term. In addition to this specific cohort, general recruitment activity appears to be having some success with reaching candidates from abroad who have been sponsored to move to take up posts.

Retention

14. The Service has developed a strong connection to its staff, hearing their voices using both national and local surveys. When staff do decide to leave, a robust exit interview process is in place which provides insight into reasons for leaving. A three-monthly analysis of messages is presented to senior managers to allow themes to be identified and actions for to be agreed. In response to some of these messages the service has also more recently developed a welfare alert system providing more early and immediate pathways to identify and resolve emerging welfare issue which may lead to staff exits if not resolved.
15. It is recognised that workers make the decision to stay or leave by considering range of factors. This is reinforced from the feedback we have received from our staff surveys, annual conferences, exit interviews and staff welfare processes. Therefore, in addition to the actions already outlined above, the service has maintained the effort to address those more systematic issues associated with support and welfare including caseload management, high quality supervision, pathways to progression and building varied experiences so that staff can build a career with us. Several initiatives have been created to enhance the experience of the workforce as a means to encourage staff to remain.:
 - Established a strong shared value base set out in the Road to Excellence plan 21-23.
 - Introduced the workforce development plan (2022) setting out our commitment to staff leadership – enhancing the skills and abilities of first line and middle leaders and a strong career framework for social workers and managers.
 - Launched an updated induction booklet and procedure from June 2022.
 - Worked to enhance oversight to casework, caseloads, and personal supervision with analysis of performance presented to senior managers.
 - Launched the 'We Care' Race Equality strategy 21-24 with each service working to address barriers to promote equality inclusion and diversity in the workforce.

- Established Workforce Community Principles in August 2022 which set out a strong foundation for supporting staff.
- Introduced a targeted ad hoc welfare offer from the wellbeing service in 2022 to respond to stress in the workplace and delivered workshops to identify and prevent burn out based on learning from this initiative.
- Introduced enhanced payrates for Senior Practitioners and additional skills payments for experienced social worker in September 2022 to build experience in the workforce.
- Launched an internal transfer policy for staff on same job description to transfer between teams (2022).
- Updated the ASYE handbook with a clear offer of support and education for newly qualified staff's first year in practice in August 2022
- Launched a 'Working with us' brochure (2023) to support recruitment including the offer to encourage agency staff to move into permanent posts.
- Officered a face to face new manager group.

Impact

Measure (FtE)	2017 (benchmark)	2018	2019	2020	2021	England av. 2022	2022
Turnover rate	18.8%	13.7%	11.2%	8.5%	11.2%	17.1%	18.1%
Vacancy rate	19.6%	14%	8.2%	11.2%	11%	20%	18.1%
Agency rate	18.7%	17.5%	17.2%	16.7%	16.4%	17.6%	17.5%

16. The Table above shows the baseline for comparison from 2017. This shows that up to and including 2021 both turnover rates and vacancy rates were improving against our baseline but also in comparison with England averages most recently in 2022.
17. As of 2022, the latest figures showed that although both turnover and vacancy rates have increased from 2021, they remain better than the established benchmark in 2017 and remained under the England average. Whilst agency rates had also reduced from 2017 these are now very similar to England average.

Current pressures

18. Despite some success in recruitment, the Service continues to face challenges in its efforts to build a strong experienced and stable workforce. This means that the service continues to operate with a relatively high number of agency staff and vacancies across teams. 75 agency staff are currently in posts, with most covering vacancies, but some covering for maternity leave and sickness. Others bring resilience and experience to some teams where inexperience may otherwise leave gaps in services. As of 4 August, there were vacancies for 44 Social workers, 14 Senior Practitioners and two team managers.
19. Positively, a number of candidates have been interviewed and matched to some of these vacancies. Approximately 40 social workers, mainly either newly qualified or

from abroad, have planned start dates during September and one senior practitioner matched with an agreed start date. If all candidates take up the posts offered, this will result in the Department holding the least social work vacancies for a number of years.

20. It will be necessary to continue to focus on recruitment with particular emphasis on experienced staff for Senior Practitioner vacancies, and manager posts. Internal transfers may have a knock-on effect of success with internal progression into these posts.
21. Statutory responsibilities mean that many staff hold caseloads of complex family situations with children in care and subject to child protection plans. It is therefore likely that in the short-term agency workers will continue to feature in the workforce to support the gaps in experience as many of those recruited are typically at the beginning of their social work careers. However, the long term aim is we aim to reduce numbers over time.
22. In this context, the full financial impact of Recruitment and Retention work may not be seen in the short term. However, the Department will be closer to achieving the stability required to ensure children experience the consistency of relationship with their social worker as set out in 'Stable lives built on love' and its own ambition for children.

What next?

23. There have been some small successes in recruitment and retention work. Staff have been listened to and the service has focused on understanding that they value having a good manager, being part of a supportive team, feeling validated, and having a good work life balance.
24. The Department is in a position to pull together all recruitment and retention activity to inform an updated Recruitment and Retention strategy and associated plan complimented by the opportunities provided by the government led proposals within Stable Homes Built on Love. In addition to filling vacancies, there will continue to be a need for providing high levels of support, competitive pay and manageable caseloads for staff, and high quality supervision from managers as part of this updated strategy.
25. This will allow services to respond to workforce reforms but also the impact of local remodelling of our workforce in the new Family Help service which is anticipated to launch in late 2023.
26. The Family Help service will give greater scope for the use of alternative qualified staff in the workforce for children in need of support. The model is based on strong social work oversight of interventions delivered by members of the children's workforce, matching skills to children's needs. This is targeted at children who may be at risk of coming into care or escalating to child protection thresholds. This may for example mean allocation of a parenting worker to deliver an evidenced based parenting programme to parents in the home. Making good use of the range of skills and experiences within the workforce maximises the impact on families whilst retaining social work skills in assessment and planning.
27. Positively, the national workforce reforms are reflected in the existing recruitment and retention strategy, with regular reviews of pay and conditions in place, recent

enhancements to some pay grades and close scrutiny of caseloads on a monthly basis.

28. Whilst the use of agency social workers continues to be essential to support gaps in services, the Department aims to reduce this to a minimum and will particularly welcome changes to the agency market which will enhance its position as a permanent employer. We aim to achieve this by considering a programme of over recruitment, for example employing an increased number of permanent staff over established post numbers to provide capacity for sickness and maternity cover.

Background Papers

Stable Homes Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation Children's Social Care Reforms 2023:

https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133537/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1133537/Children_s_social_care_stable_homes_consultation_February_2023.pdf

The Independent Review of Children's Social Care (May 2022):

<https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/final-report/>

Child and Family Social Worker Workforce Government consultation (February 2023):

https://consult.education.gov.uk/social-work-reform-unit/child-and-family-social-worker-workforce/supporting_documents/Child%20and%20Family%20Social%20Worker%20Workforce%20consultation%20document.pdf

Circulation under the Local Issues Alert Procedure

29. None

Equalities Implications

30. Strategy and planning processes take account of existing barriers to recruitment and retention based on protected characteristics. The Department has a strong 'We Care race equality strategy' 2021-24 which includes the vision as an employer. Recruitment of international candidates has accounted for the challenges this group of staff may face and have adapted our support and relocation policies to account for the specific individual needs for these recruits.

Human Rights Implications

31. There are no human rights implications arising from this report.

Officers to Contact

Jane Moore, Director of Children and Family Services

Tel: 0116 305 2649

Email: jane.moore@leics.gov.uk

Sharon Cooke, Assistant Director, Targeted Early Help and Children's Social Care

Tel: 0116 305 7441

Email: sharon.cooke@leics.gov.uk

Kay Fletcher, Head of Service Safeguarding, Improvement and Quality Assurance

Tel: 0116 305 5138

Email: kay.fletcher@leics.gov.uk