

Cabinet (Resources) Panel

8 December 2021

Report title	Social Work Recruitment and Retention	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Beverley Momenabadi Children and Young People	
Key decision	Yes	
In forward plan	Yes	
Wards affected	All Wards	
Accountable director	Emma Bennett, Executive Director of Families	
Originating service	Children and Young People	
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Report has been considered by	Children's Senior Leadership Team Cabinet Member briefing	25 November 2021 30 November 2021

Recommendations:

The Cabinet (Resources) Panel is recommended to:

1. Approve the establishment of a peripatetic social work team in order to reduce dependency on Agency social workers.
2. Approve the exploration of an offer that will increase the Council's ability to retain experienced children's social workers and grant delegated authority to agree this mechanism to the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Children and Young People, in consultation with the Executive Director of Families and the Director of Finance.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 This report will set out the rationale for strengthening the resources available to support the recruitment and retention of social workers and social work managers within Children's Social Care.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The recruitment and retention of high-quality social workers is a key function that supports the delivery of good and safe social work practice. Effective recruitment and retention enables the development of a stable workforce, which in turn can improve the quality of work undertaken with children, young people and families. A stable workforce is an integral part of any improvement journey as it allows the Council the opportunity to train staff, set expected standards of practice and establish these practices across the whole system.
- 2.2 Within Children's services it is also known that the turnover of staff is the biggest contributing factor, to delay in the progression of childcare cases. Workforce stability is therefore a key line of enquiry during Ofsted inspections. This is a subject that was heavily scrutinised during the last Ofsted inspection and relates to the area of leadership and governance. Ofsted state that good local authorities have a "*workforce that is sufficient, stable, suitably qualified and competent to deliver high-quality services to children and their families*". Ofsted 2016.
- 2.3 The risks associated with high social work staff turnover include:
- More cases escalating to Child Protection and Children & Young People in Care (CYPiC) due to a lack of focused and consistent intervention.
 - More children experiencing delay in the progression of their plans resulting in children remaining on plans or in care for longer.
 - Inability to embed practice that is considered to be good by both the Council and Ofsted, due to social work churn.
 - Essential training must be delivered more frequently to ensure all employees understand the city's way of working, are clear about what good looks like, and understand local processes for safeguarding children.
 - Children and families experience too many changes in their social worker meaning that they must re-tell their story too many times and are unable to develop a relationship with their social worker that helps.
 - High caseloads can increase the risk of important information being missed and failings resulting in the serious harm of a child.
 - There is reputational risk, as it is unlikely that a system characterised by high caseloads and the poorer quality of practice highlighted above would achieve a good or outstanding Ofsted judgement.

3.0 Where are we now

- 3.1 Nationally children's social work is facing workforce challenges due to a range of pressures. Child and family social work is challenged by high turnover and vacancy rates and a heavy reliance on agency staff. The demand for permanent, experienced

workers significantly outstrips supply (children's social work is now on the national occupational shortage list).

- 3.2 Official statistics published by the Department for Education published February 2020 shows the regional averages for vacancy, agency worker and turnover rates. The national vacancy rate is 16.1%, however, both Birmingham and Sandwell had vacancy rates of 26%. Wolverhampton's overall vacancy rate in children's social care was 14.8% in April 2021. The Council's agency rate was 10.4% and the national agency rate was 15.4%
- 3.3 It is argued that turnover (the frequency at which workers are leaving) is the more accurate indicator of the stability of a workforce and hence of retention. The national data published February 2020 found the average turnover rate for child and family social workers was 13.5%. Social Work turnover for statutory children's social work was 9.5% in April 2020. This figure does not however reflect the increase in leavers in August and September 2021 as the workforce begins to become more mobile following a period of stability that may have been supported by the pandemic.
- 3.4 The recruitment and retention activity within Wolverhampton for children's social workers has largely been successful and staff turnover has reduced to below national averages. There have however, continued to be a large number of secondment opportunities for social workers due to maternity leave, the creation of temporary posts like the Social Work in Schools (SWIS) team and temporary roles in CYPiC. As can be seen within the finance section the service has faced increasing difficulty to recruit agency social workers.

Child in Need (CiN) /Child Protection (CP)

- 3.5 There will have been nine leavers in CiN/CP by the end of October. This is a significant increase, but it should be noted that overall turnover remains slightly below the national average at this point. This is because there had been very few leavers within the service for the last 12 months. Social workers have chosen to move on for a number of reasons including returning to their hometown on completion of their social work training, moving to other areas of work like Fostering and Disabled Children and Young People and career progression. The Head of Service has reviewed leavers and is confident that the vast majority have chosen to leave due to their personal circumstances or for career development opportunities.
- 3.6 There are a further 9.5 uncovered posts at present due to uncovered secondments, maternity leave, sick leave and new posts created in the Multi Agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). This is an unsustainable position for CiN/CP social workers.

CYPiC

- 3.7 There have been four leavers from CYPiC Teams 1 and 3 and one worker in DCYP in September 2021; as well as maternity leave and workers taking up posts in other areas of Children's Social Care. The Head of Service has reviewed the reasons for leaving and is confident that the vast majority have also chosen to leave due to their personal circumstances or for career development opportunities. There have been additional

vacancies due to secondment opportunities. In total there are 10.5 social work vacancies and three senior social worker vacancies in CYPiC Service.

- 3.8 High vacancy rates lead to social workers trying to work with too many children. This results in less effective social work intervention and the concerns for children escalating within families. This can result in more children being received into care. There could also impact on the Council's reputation and ultimately the Ofsted judgment that is made with regards to the quality of social work practice within the city. In CIN and CP experienced social workers are working with between 24 and 30 children and in CYPiC social workers are working with between 20 and 22 children. The service believes that social workers can undertake good quality social work intervention and support when working with approximately 18 children and young people.
- 3.9 Within the region there is a high level of competition for highly skilled social workers who can choose to work in any of the 14 local authorities within the West Midlands area.
- 3.10 Further to this, there is hugely competitive agency market within the region. Social workers can therefore choose to work through an agency and achieve significantly higher rates of pay than those offered by local authorities. One Council just outside of the region is currently paying £41.00 per hour and the City of Wolverhampton Council has lost some agency social workers to this Council.
- 3.11 A search of incentives to support recruitment and retention has been completed across the West Midlands and a range of packages are being offered. These include:
- Market supplements up to £7000. per annum
 - Retention fees are being paid by one authority of £2,400.
 - Incentive packages of £3,000
 - Relocation packages with one local authority advertising that they will pay 25% of the starting salary
 - The social work registration fee is paid in regional local authorities within the including Telford, Birmingham and Sandwell Children's Trust
- 3.12 Within the City of Wolverhampton's statutory social work services, it has been noted that most social workers who leave do so after they have worked with the local authority for over three years. The second largest group are those who are in their assessed year of practice. This is often due to new social workers finding that statutory social work is not a right for them, and they occasionally find that they are unable to undertake the statutory duties of social work to a good enough standard.

	22/10/2020 to 21/10/2021		22/10/2019 to 21/10/2020		22/10/2018 to 21/10/2019	
Leavers	18		20		20	
In ASYE year	3	16.7%	4	20.0%	6	30.0%
In year 1 (SW)	2	11.1%	0	0.0%	2	10.0%
In year 2	2	11.1%	4	20.0%	4	20.0%
In year 3	3	16.7%	4	20.0%	1	5.0%
Over 3 years	8	44.4%	8	40.0%	7	35.0%

- 3.13 It is imperative to maintain skilled and experience social workers within frontline social work practice. The profession has for a long time been criticised for its failure to incentivise social workers to remain in frontline practice. This could encourage social workers to remain in frontline practice for at least an extra two years.

4.0 Recruitment and retention activity

- 4.1 A comprehensive action plan has been developed that brings together all the work currently taking place in relation to recruitment and retention. Alongside business-as-usual recruitment and retention activity some specific areas of focus have been identified for 2021-2022:
- 4.2 This has resulted in improved retention as outlined above. It should also be noted that Wolverhampton's Children and Young People's Service continues to be an employer of choice. The service attracts newly qualified social workers, and we were recently informed that we remain the top placement choice for social work students on the graduate Frontline Program.
- 4.3 The service is also good at converting agency social workers into permanent staff. Five agency social workers have been successful in securing permanent positions within the authority in the last six months. Two of them have been agency social workers for many years. Below is a quote from one of these new employees.
- "I think Wolverhampton council is excellent and the only council to persuade me to go permanent after 14 years as an agency worker. I'm looking forward to developing and learning more!"*
- 4.4 In order to address the immediate social work sufficiency, the service has agreed to enhance the offer made to agency social workers in line with other Councils within the region.
- 4.5 Agencies have reported that this has already resulted in a greater interest amongst agency social workers but at this stage this has resulted in the temporary recruitment of just 1 additional agency social worker.

5.0 Evaluation of alternative options - Medium to Long Term 2021-2022

5.1 Option One

5.2 Implement the active current Recruitment and Retention plan but do nothing additional.

5.3 Risk and Benefits

5.4 There will always be some level of social work turnover as individuals progress their careers or try new areas of practice. The Children and Young People's service is committed to offering secondment opportunities as part of its support of continuous professional development and retention planning. This gives social workers opportunity to try new areas of practice on a short-term basis, which also supports their development and retention.

5.5 The risks associated with having an insufficient Social Workforce are highlighted in 3.8

5.6 Option two

5.7 Recruit a permanent peripatetic team of nine social workers who will cover temporary vacancies across all statutory social work teams. The cost of the team would be £510,350 per year and would be paid for by the salary savings each year caused by unfilled vacancies. This would avoid the constant use of agency social workers.

5.8 In the unlikely event that peripatetic social workers were not required within the services there would be opportunity to make use of these social workers to promote our whole family approach and potentially work with Adult Social Care or provide extra support to schools.

5.9 Agency workers are expensive (on average 58% above the cost of an employee) and excessive turnover wastes extensive time and effort (repeated recruitment, induction, training etc).

5.10 In discussion with key stakeholders explore mechanisms that could be utilised to incentivise social workers to remain in frontline practice for longer.

5.11 It is not felt that any other incentives would have a significant impact on the Council's ability to attract and retain social workers.

5.12 Risks and Benefits

5.13 Recruiting a peripatetic team would reduce the reliance on the agency market and enable temporary posts to be filled in a timely manner. This would bring greater stability to the sufficiency of the social work workforce, ensure that social workers workloads remain manageable and ensure there is consistent capacity to deliver good quality service to vulnerable Children and families.

- 5.14 Taking no action could result in higher turnover and vacancy rates as social workers find it difficult to manage the extra pressures caused by having unfilled social work positions. This could result in a decline in services as outlined in section 3.8.

6.0 Reason for decision

- 6.1 This decision will improve social work sufficiency across the Children and Young People Service. This in turn would enable the Council to continue to deliver Good services to the most vulnerable children and families within the City.
- 6.2 The risks associated with not taking this decision have been clearly outlined within the content of this report. In summary:
1. It could negatively impact the services ability to keep vulnerable children safe
 2. It could result in more children being received into care, due to a lack of resources to provide the intensity of service many families need for in order to remain safely together
 3. It could result in social workers having to work long hours and eventually choosing to leave the Council which would deepen the issue further
 4. The council would face reputational damage if a serious incident happened that could have been avoided
 5. The Council would face reputational damage if the Good Ofsted judgment is not maintained

7.0 Financial implications

- 7.1 The approved 2021-2022 staffing budget for the Strengthening Families Service, within Children and Young People, is £8.7 million and the staffing budget for the Children and Young People in care Service is £6.1 million.
- 7.2 The Peripatetic Team would cost in the region of £510,000 per annum. Across the two services there have been substantial staffing underspends in the previous three years, partially offset by spend on agency staff. This has been due in part to vacant posts and secondments, but also due to the fact that there is often a lag between staff leaving and new staff starting at the Council.
- 7.3 If the underspends on staffing for the reasons outlined above continue, then the cost of the peripatetic team can be met from those underspends. In the event that there is insufficient underspend against existing budgets, the cost over and above this will be met from the Supporting Families grant.
[JB/26112021/C]

8.0 Legal implications

- 8.1 The local authority has a duty to protect and promote the welfare of children in need in its area. To do this, it must work with the family to provide support services that will enable children to be brought up within their own families where possible. To ensure this there must be an adequate and qualified workforce in place to deliver services that will

safeguard and protect our children. It is also imperative to maintain skilled and experience social workers within frontline social work practice.

[TC/24112021/A]

9.0 Equalities implications

- 9.1 Wolverhampton seeks to recruit social workers who can meet the needs of our local population. This includes working with children, young people and adults with additional needs from a diverse population. From a gender perspective there are many more female social workers across the Children's workforce (over 80%) however the general social care workforce is more evenly split and better reflects the local population. In terms of ethnicity social workers who are from White, Mixed Heritage and Asian backgrounds are slightly under-represented compared to the local population, but there is an over representation of those who are from a Black background. However, it is important to note that some staff have declined to provide the information (19%). No other diversity information has been provided to the service to date but this is being explored with the Equalities team. The Council's approach to fair recruitment is fully followed for the recruitment of all posts within the Children and Young Peoples Directorate. This includes anonymous application forms, progression of people with disabilities to interview and diverse recruitment panels.

10.0 HR implications

- 10.1 HR policies and procedures will be followed in terms of the establishment of the peripatetic social work team and engagement and consultation will take place with unions to explore options to recruit and retain social workers. HR acknowledges that there are broader recruitment and retention issues across the council to be considered and reviewed.

11.0 Schedule of background papers

- 11.1 There are no preceding reports or documents that have relevance to the subject matter.