

Atkinson Secure Children's Home

Report of the Head of Children's Social Care (Deputy Chief Officer)

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Cabinet (and confirmation under the provisions of the Council's Constitution) before taking effect.

1. Background to the Report

- 1.1 The Atkinson Secure Children's Home is one of 15 secure children's homes providing secure accommodation to children across England. Demand for secure beds far outstrips supply. It is not uncommon to be unable to secure a place in a secure children's home. Some secure homes meet the needs of children who are secured through criminal proceedings, others are designated for welfare, some do both. Atkinson is a welfare secure home. Children are placed there because professionals and courts have determined it is in their best interest, because of the risks to which they would be exposed in a non-secure setting. Inevitably this means that secure children's homes are designed to meet the very highest levels of need in children. This makes the work, while intensely rewarding, extremely demanding.
- 1.2 The DfE has invested significant capital in Atkinson to support the Local authority in the delivery of the function. The DfE plans to move to a commissioning model in 2020/21. Their intention is to commission sufficient capacity to meet need and reduce the financial risk to those Local Authorities that host a secure children's home. Most Local Authorities in the South East/South West, that operate secure children's homes, are reporting a situation similar to Devon, where the recruitment of staff is becoming an increasingly challenging proposition. In the North East and North West there are much higher levels of unemployment and a residential child care role may be a more attractive proposition.
- 1.3 The Atkinson is the only secure children's home in the South West and is very highly valued by neighbouring Local Authorities. The next closest secure home is in Hampshire. Placing very vulnerable children far away from their home is often inevitable and is recognised as almost invariably having an adverse impact on their outcomes.

2. The Atkinson Secure Children's Home

The recent Ofsted interim inspection (30th October 2018) confirmed that the home has evidenced sustained effectiveness as a 'Good' provision. A full inspection is expected before the end of March 2019.

- 2.1 The home has space for 12 young people. Staffing levels have never been sufficient to enable this number of placements. The ratio of staff support, for example 1:1,2:1 or even 3:1, impacts on the number of children that can be safely looked after at any time. Admissions decisions are the responsibility of the Registered Manager, who has to take into account the matching of children and staff and children with other children, ensuring all children can be safely cared for. Currently, there are 5 young people in placement; 3 requiring standard levels of staff support, one requiring 2:1 support and one requiring 1:1 support.

Low levels of occupancy impact adversely on budget forecast. The current occupancy level is not sustainable financially. We expect the planned commissioning approach by central government will help to resolve this.

- 2.2 The recruitment of residential care workers, who have the resilience and skills to undertake intensive direct work with young people in this setting requires careful selection, induction and ongoing support to ensure they remain in their posts. Exit interview analysis reveals a mismatch between what staff expect from the role and their actual experience given the complex emotional needs of children placed, the need to physically intervene at times and the level of verbal and physical assaults they can experience. During the second half of 2018, considerable support has been offered via Devon County Council's Human Resources Team to develop the recruitment approach and this has proved successful.

- 2.3 Since April 2018, there have been three recruitment cycles, each resulting in several applicants and a selection of candidates being taken forward to recruitment. Changes have been made to the process, since September 2018, including:

- Inviting interested candidates to information sessions prior to making an application. This gives them realistic information about the role and the work involved.
- Candidates who are offered employment are invited to undertake a series of 'shadow shifts' so that they can try before their final recruitment is confirmed. This initiative has been in place since September 2018 and we wait to evaluate the impact of this on retention over the coming months.

- 2.5 The home will continue to hold a rolling programme of recruitment activity throughout the coming year to anticipate any ongoing vacancies.

- 2.6 In September 2018 there were 9 residential care staff vacancies and active efforts to recruit have been ongoing. 5 permanent members of staff have been offered posts and are all due to commence work in early January 2019. They will have a period of induction / shadowing and training to support them in their role and occupancy is expected to increase once new staff have settled in their roles. Assuming a satisfactory period of induction, the plan between now and the end of the current financial year is to increase occupancy to seven young people (four standard placements and three young people requiring 1:1 support).

2.7 A range of support is offered to promote retention, including:

- A robust induction programme to support residential workers' understanding of all processes and requirements for their role
- Comprehensive training in trauma informed practice approaches
- Close support while on shift via an experienced Team Leader
- Regular monthly supervision
- Team meetings that support reflection and training needs
- On-site CAMHs support/consultation for staff to review their experience of work with young people.

Consideration is being given to a range of financial retention options, such as, increasing the current secure allowance paid, or offering market supplements. Work is ongoing with Human Resources to consider which option(s) may be appropriate and to develop these through relevant processes.

2.8 In addition to the changes to the recruitment and retention activity included in the report, the following actions have been taken:

- The Chief Officer has written to the Department of Education to enquire if there is any additional support that might be offered to support the home. No additional support is available from this source.
- Charges to local authorities for placement at the home have been increased and came into effect from 1 January 2019.
- Budget planning for 2019/2020 have been built on the basis of a maximum occupancy of 10 and assuming an 80% average occupancy over the year.

3. Conclusion

3.1 Atkinson is a very highly valued, national resource. The financial burden of budget shortfall currently falls to Devon County Council. This should be significantly mitigated by the commissioning approach planned for 2020/21. The needs of this group of children and particularly complex and behaviours can be very difficult to manage. The workforce with the moral purpose to persevere to ensure children's complex needs are met is limited. Children's residential care generally and the secure estate in particular is under extraordinary pressure. This will continue to be an area of focused attention for Children's Social Care

Darryl Freeman

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Children's Services

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Children Services and Schools: Councillor James McInnes

LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972: LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

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