

Social worker recruitment and retention: Social work workforce comparison with neighbouring authorities

Report of the Acting Head of Children's Social Care.

Please note that the following recommendations are subject to consideration and determination by the Committee before taking effect.

Recommendation: that the Children's Scrutiny Committee note the findings.

~~~~~

## 1. SUMMARY

Social work recruitment and retention is a priority for Children's Services in Devon.

- 1.1 This paper sets out the national and local context regarding social worker recruitment and considers the challenges currently facing Devon.
- 1.2 A proposal is put forward to establish a social work career pathway, in the context of the offers made by our neighbouring authorities.
- 1.3 Additional recruitment activity and incentives are also set out for consideration and recommendations made.

## 2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Nationally there is a shortage of qualified social workers. Social work has been listed on the Shortage Occupation List since 2014<sup>1</sup> and this shortage is reflected across the UK, with additional challenges in rural and sparsely populated areas. Devon County Council needs to address both the impact of this shortage and the effect of local influences on recruitment and retention.
- 2.2 Turnover of social workers across England between 2015 and 2019 averaged 15.76% per year. By comparison across the same period Devon turnover averaged 17.7%. Turnover in 2020 is expected to be significantly higher than this.
- 2.3 Devon currently has an average turnover greater than both the average South West and National rate for comparison, retention of social work staff in neighbouring authorities across the same period 2015-2019 is as follows:

---

<sup>1</sup> Full Review of the Shortage Occupation List, May 2019, Migration Advisory Committee, <https://www.gov.uk/Government/organisations/migration-advisory-committee>

- Cornwall 11.06%,
- Plymouth 14.38%,
- Somerset 16.84%
- **Devon 17.7%**
- Dorset 18.76%,
- Torbay 22.94%.

2.4 Torbay and Dorset have recently revised their recruitment packages to address their retention challenges (see below).

2.5 Across the South West, a Memorandum of Understanding is in place for the terms and conditions for agency staff. In 2019, due to significant staffing shortages, Devon advised partners that it needed to step outside of the Memorandum to offer higher hourly rates to attract social workers in two localities (North and South Devon). This action was temporarily successful, but costs continued to rise as other areas have begun to rely more on agency staff.

2.6 There are 'hotspots' in relation to agency staff in the social work teams.

- Mid and East 35.5%
- South 29.6%
- Exeter 26%
- Disabled Children's Service 26%
- Corporate Parenting 16.9%
- North 14%

\*These figures do not include agency managers. In some areas 5/6 managers are agency colleagues.

2.7 The use of agency workers impacts on the budget. An agency worker on average costs £23,732 per annum more than a permanent worker. (£71,807 compared with £48,075 per year). Staff, understandably, become disillusioned when there are high numbers of agency workers being paid at significantly higher rates than the permanent staff. An embargo is in place for social workers who become agency colleagues in that they are not allowed to work for Devon for a year after their permanent employment ends.

2.8.1 There is competition between neighbouring local authorities for permanent qualified staff where variations in terms and conditions add to recruitment and retention difficulties. South Devon locality particularly loses social workers and managers to Torbay, Plymouth and Cornwall due to their attractive packages. Devon is not currently competitive with our neighbours, in relation to salary (see Appendix 1) and in the wider offer to social workers.

2.8.2 Cornwall for example, recognises its social workers through a 'Career and Qualification' pathway – which provides colleagues with career options and remuneration that match achievements. They offer career progression through a core curriculum of evidence-based practice skills and access to accredited post-qualifying awards.<sup>2</sup> Ofsted (2016) recognised that Cornwall's investment

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.cornwall.gov.uk/jobs-and-careers/work-in-social-care/childrens-social-worker-careers/>

in high quality training and support 'resulted in a skilled and stable workforce'. They went on to build upon this in 2020 with an Ofsted outstanding judgement.

2.8.3 Other local authorities have incentive schemes that Devon is not currently matching. For example, our near neighbours in Torbay offer:

- Golden hello - payment of up to a maximum of £3,000.
- Retention - receive up to £3,000 after 12 months completed service.
- Professional Subscriptions - workers receive reimbursement of professional subscription.
- Student Loan Allowance Scheme - workers receive reimbursement equivalent to between 50% to 100% of student loan payment each month.

(Four frontline managers from South Devon are currently moving to Torbay).

2.9 Locally, competition from neighbouring authorities impacts on our ability to recruit. A straightforward example is in relation to ongoing salary. Appendix One shows the difference in Devon's pay grade for social workers compared with neighbouring authorities. A comparison with Cornwall suggests an early salary advantage in Devon, but latterly as they become more experienced Devon's salary is lower. There is also career advantage (and therefore likely long-term retention incentive) in Cornwall. This means that after recruiting social workers through our successful ASYE programme they leave for other local authorities (for an increase in salary and leave offered for an experienced social worker). Devon has the second lowest 'end' salary for social workers across the South West.

2.10.1 Our approach in Devon since 2013 has been 'grow your own', resulting in the development of our Social Work Academy and a well-respected programme for newly qualified staff. However, this is not matched by a clearly mapped career progression route. Somerset has a progression career pathway with different routes depending on whether workers wish to remain in practice or become a manager. They also offer mentoring for social workers who are in their second year of practice (which appropriately tapers the support following the highly supported first year in practice). Dorset also have a new social work academy, and career pathway for the professional development of their staff.

2.10.2 Devon's ambition is to be a good authority, whose social workers are well trained, deliver positive interventions and improve outcomes for children and families. To achieve this ambition, we need a stable and largely permanent workforce. Whilst there are some strengths in our recruitment of Newly Qualified Social Workers and of overseas social workers, we need to improve our recruitment of experienced social workers, and ensure that we retain them

### **3. PROPOSAL AND RATIONALE**

3.1 Over the period December 2018 – July 2020, 21 permanent staff left (see Appendix 2) and 35 started, of whom 12 are social workers who have been recruited from overseas and 9 are newly qualified social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE). Newly qualified social workers and those recruited from overseas both need additional support for a year to induct and familiarise them into the role. They also have a reduced caseload. Whilst we are keeping pace with this recruitment, the figures mask

the fact that we are not replacing 'like with like' in terms of experience. In the same period, 45 agency staff left (usually within one year) having covered vacancies for more experienced staff. This level of change impacts adversely on children and families and workers as in most circumstances notice given can be short.

- 3.2 Frequent changes lead to disrupted and delayed plans and poorer outcomes for children. Teams with high levels of social worker turn-over can lack cohesion, offer reduced support to colleagues and have lower local knowledge.
- 3.3 Devon County Council needs to become a more attractive option for social workers. In response to the 2020 Ofsted inadequate judgement we must demonstrate the progress we are making in practice and also recruit and maintain a stable workforce. The impact of Covid-19 across the UK provides an opportunity to promote Devon as a very safe place to live and work, where quality of life throughout the year is high.
- 3.4 A range of recruitment and retention actions to invest in our staff group are required to address this issue. The service completed a survey on retention in Spring 2020 with 212 responses from Children's Social Care. There was no one single influence for recruitment and retention. Workers advised comparable annual leave (with other authorities), recognised career pathway, recruitment and retention payments, achievement recognition, flexible working arrangements and car leases are all important. However current market supplements for managers mean they are not able to incorporate this into financial agreements such as mortgages.

To address these matters:

- We are developing a fully costed business case, as part of the preparations for the 2021 budget, which will clearly set out (on an invest to save basis) proposals to boost and sustain our social work workforce. The business case will be complete by September 2020.
- The Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Children's Social Work will provide a transparent framework for staff to broaden our recruitment profile, to set out our offer to new and existing staff. This will incorporate recruitment career pathways, accredited courses including the development of social work apprenticeships and fully exploiting all routes to qualification and employment as a social worker. This will need to be complemented by retention strategies which ensure that the newly qualified workers stay with Devon well beyond their ASYE year.
- The strategy will align Devon's Children's Services career pathway to a nationally recognised framework and will also offer some unification with Devon's Adult Services (who are also working to introduce the same scheme). The progression scheme is planned in two waves, the first wave is cost neutral and supports career development in respect of demonstrating skill and knowledge with progression through panels to evidence competence to advance. The second wave (under development) promotes, supports and incentivises career development (either into advanced practice or into

management) by setting out our learning and development offer to experienced staff alongside our recruitment and retention offers.

- The career pathway will clearly mark the transition between newly qualified social worker, social worker, and experienced social worker. This removes the current nonsensical leap after one year from 'newly qualified social worker' to 'senior social worker' (which for historical retention issues was introduced, but which puts too much pressure on relatively inexperienced workers, and which flattens the career progression opportunities).
- We are encouraging agency staff to become part of the permanent workforce, the planned changes outlined will assist with this. We are also promoting high quality supervision, development and support of workers across Devon, including strengthening of the development programme for experienced social workers.

There is, of course, a price tag attached to some, though not all of the proposals, which will be fully costed in the business case and considered corporately in the context of the significant challenges the Council is facing in the coming year and anticipated for future years.

#### **4. OPTIONS / ALTERNATIVES**

The following alternative options have been considered and rejected.

- 4.1 Continue to operate with a high percentage of agency staff: this is expensive and not in the best interests of children and families representing very poor value for money. A reduction of agency workers by 20% (approximately 21 agency workers) will bring a saving of £498,372 based on the differential between an agency SW and a permanent equivalent.
- 4.2 In 2013, after Ofsted, Devon had its last major recruitment and retention difficulty. At that stage, additional financial incentives were paid to social workers as retention payments £2000 (pro rata for part time colleagues) paid over two instalments six months apart. Attraction payments (over the same period 2013-2014) were paid to new starters - £1000 on joining and £1000 six months later. Neither of these measures had an appreciable long-term impact.

#### **5. CONSULTATIONS/REPRESENTATIONS/TECHNICAL DATA**

- 5.1 Consultation with social work staff took place via survey in Spring 2020, which highlighted that pay is not the sole reason that workers choose an employer and indicated a range of other reasons to join and stay.

#### **6. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- 6.1 Wave 1 of the Career Progression Scheme to implement new job descriptions has been agreed and is cost neutral. (This will be implemented for joining workers – there will be no expectation of any existing 'senior social worker' dropping back to 'social worker' due to length of service unless they wish to.)

Wave 2 will be explored and costed with the Recruitment and Retention Strategy. Any associated changes which can be implemented without cost will be expedited. Options for improved recruitment and retention with associated cost will be proposed for agreement and will form part of the invest to save business case.

## **7. LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS**

- 7.1 The lawful implications of the proposals have been considered in the preparation of this report set out above. Devon is required to meet statutory functions in relation to work with children and families, some of which require qualified social workers to undertake the tasks. These proposals support our need to continue to recruit and retain high calibre social workers to meet these legal obligations. The legal implication of insufficient social workers would be a failure on the part of the local authority to exercise its statutory duty to safeguard children.

## **8. ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT CONSIDERATIONS (INCLUDING CLIMATE CHANGE)**

- 8.1 In general terms, the likely environmental impact of this recruitment and retention work would be neutral, but the social capital (in respect of safeguarded children, functioning families and promoting of best outcomes) is expected to be positive.

## **9. EQUALITY CONSIDERATIONS**

- 9.1 The appointment of competent permanent social workers will have a positive impact on children and families in our communities – specifically those who are in need or who require protection.

Support groups are in place for staff in some minority groups such as LGBTQ and BAME. This therefore also promotes equality of opportunity for applicants and members of staff.

## **10. RISK MANAGEMENT CONSIDERATIONS**

- 10.1 This proposal has been assessed and all necessary safeguards or action have been included to safeguard the Council's position. The risks identified are largely manageable within 'business as usual' – for example financial risks due to insufficient permanent staff recruited and agency staff continue to be required at high cost.
- 10.2 Further potential risks include insufficient recruitment (permanent and agency social workers) leading to children's cases not being able to be allocated, and children being left at risk. Managers within the service are alert to this and take necessary remedial action to reduce risk, but the long-term implication is a possibility of statutory work remaining undone or being delayed.

## **11. PUBLIC HEALTH IMPACT**

- 11.1 Public health impacts on the general population of these proposals would be minimal, but lack of social workers could be profound on the health and well being of individual children and their families.

## **12. SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS**

- 12.1 It is recommended that Scrutiny Committee note the rationale and proposals for aligning Devon Children's Services against the national framework for career progression and the case for improving our offer to social workers. This is to stabilise and value our workforce and promote better outcomes for children and young people. These measures will help us to be able to meet our statutory obligations to children and families and will promote the development of a skilled and effective workforce.

Rachel Gillott  
Acting Head of Service

[Electoral Divisions: All]

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Councillor James McInnes

Chief Officer: Jo Olsson / Acting Head of Service; Rachel Gillott

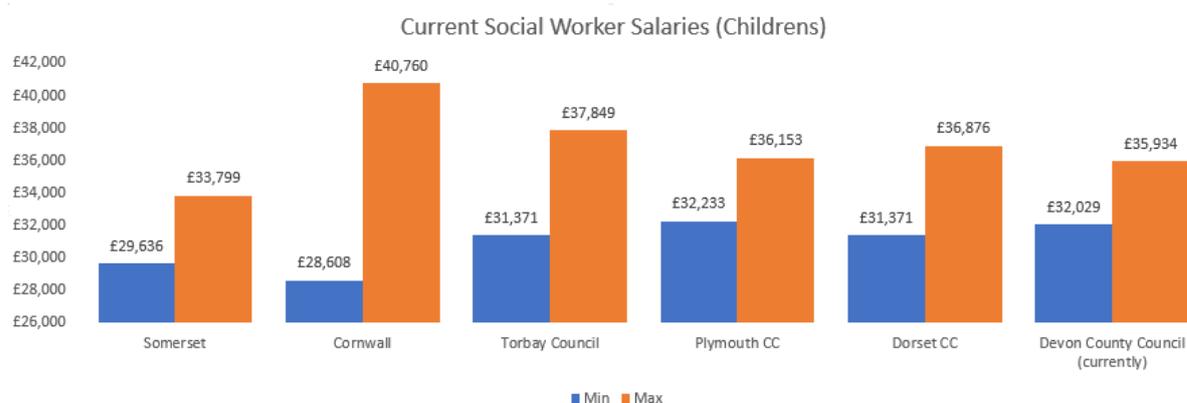
### **LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972: LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS**

Contact for Enquiries: Andrea Morris  
Tel No: 01392 38000

| <b>BACKGROUND PAPER</b> | <b>DATE</b> | <b>FILE REFERENCE</b> |
|-------------------------|-------------|-----------------------|
| Nil                     |             |                       |

## Appendix 1

Comparison of South West Peninsula starting and end salaries for social workers (as at June 2020)



## Appendix 2 December 2018 – July 2020 Breakdown of Social Workers Leaving Devon

| Row Labels                      | Count of Length of Service Sum |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| <b>1 to 2 yrs</b>               | <b>6</b>                       |
| Newly Qualified Social Worker   | 2                              |
| Senior Social Worker            | 4                              |
| <b>10 yrs +</b>                 | <b>3</b>                       |
| Senior Social Worker            | 2                              |
| Senior Social Worker - Plymouth | 1                              |
| <b>2 to 5 yrs</b>               | <b>5</b>                       |
| Senior Social Worker            | 5                              |
| <b>5 to 10 yrs</b>              | <b>5</b>                       |
| Newly Qualified Social Worker   | 1                              |
| Senior Social Worker            | 4                              |
| <b>Less Than 12 mths</b>        | <b>2</b>                       |
| Senior Social Worker            | 2                              |
| <b>Grand Total</b>              | <b>21</b>                      |

Note: The Plymouth reference is a legacy title with regard to a worker who chose to retain Plymouth terms and conditions on transfer to Adopt South West (hosted by Devon)