

Children's Social Work Workforce Spotlight Review

December 2020

1. Recommendation

1.1 In this report, we as Members of the Spotlight Review are highlighting five key themes which we believe are impacting upon the success of children's social work recruitment and retention in Devon.

1.2 We recommend that recruitment and retention strategies develop a clear focus on improvement in these five areas, recognising the action needed, as shown below.

1.3 Cabinet is asked to endorse and take forward this recommendation.

	Theme	Action needed
1	Pay and conditions	Pay and other conditions to be suitably enhanced so that Devon can be more competitive with neighbouring authorities, and access to affordable housing to be reviewed.
2	Development Opportunities and Career Pathways	<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Corporate promotion of routes into social work from social care teams;○ Embed Restorative Practice across Children's Services, as part of the Improvement Journey;○ A clear progression structure, providing opportunities for those who want to progress in practice, as well as management;○ Corporate promotion and support for social workers to gain experience across teams;○ Access to financial support for post graduate study.
3	Caseloads	Caseloads to be consistently manageable across Children's Services.
4	Supervision	All social workers to have access to quality supervision, with team managers who have the time and the skills to address social workers emotional needs and build resilience.
5	Support for workers recruited from overseas	Support with the cost of indefinite leave to remain applications for social workers recruited from overseas.

The Children's Scrutiny Committee undertakes to monitor progress of each of these five themes, holding a follow up meeting in early Spring 2021.

2. Background

2.1 Nationally there is a shortage of qualified social workers, which results in competition between local authorities for staff and high turnover levels. Devon currently has an average turnover greater than both the average South West and National rate.

2.2 Like many other local authorities, Devon is also heavily reliant on agency social workers, which has a significant impact on the budget and can have other consequences around service continuity for families, as well as staff morale.

2.3 Over the last ten years, a number of steps have been taken to attract new permanent staff and stabilise the social work workforce in Devon. These measures have had an impact in the short term, but as surrounding local authorities have developed their offers and agency working remains attractive to many social workers, the recruitment and retention of permanent qualified social workers in Devon remains a considerable challenge. More recently, the impact of the Council's Ofsted rating of 'inadequate' has added to this challenge, as well as the many complexities resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

3. Scope of the Review

3.1 The Spotlight Review was held on 20th November 2020 and aimed to:

- understand the challenges facing the Children's Services in recruiting and retaining a stable social work workforce in the long term;
- understand the views and experiences of social workers, and the reasons that they choose to leave or stay with Devon CC, including management style and culture;
- review proposed strategies for delivering a more stable workforce and make recommendations for any identified changes or improvements.

3.2 Members heard from a range of staff including a senior manager, practice development advisors, student social workers, newly qualified social workers, experienced social workers (including those recruited from overseas) and a team manager. One social worker kindly shared the findings from her Masters dissertation which had specifically considered issues around recruitment and retention in Devon

3.3 This report is intended to append and be considered alongside the business case 'Investment in Recruitment and Retention of Children's Social Workers in Devon: A Value for Money Proposition' being considered by the Council's Cabinet at its meeting on 9th December.

3.4 The five key factors highlighted in this report were not the only issues raised by witnesses, but were those which were raised consistently throughout the review.

4. Pay and conditions

4.1 Currently social work salaries in Devon are not competitive with the majority of neighbouring authorities. Cornwall and Torbay Council's both offer lower starting salaries than Devon, but have higher salaried end points. Other terms and conditions in Devon (such as annual leave) do not compare favourably with neighbours. Housing and living costs are also high in Devon, meaning that pay is often a more important factor for social workers in Devon than other parts of the country. Devon is also competing for social workers with the independent sector and agencies. Agencies continue to pay considerably higher hourly rates which remain attractive to some social workers, who are willing to sacrifice the terms and conditions which come along with a permanent job.

4.2 What have social workers said?

- Pay is a key factor when considering job options, but it is not the only factor;
- Additional terms and conditions such as student loan contributions, retention bonuses, access to lease cars, annual leave and flexible working practices can all help make an employer more attractive;
- It is different for different people, for some people salary will always be the most important consideration.

4.3 Action needed

Pay and other conditions to be suitably enhanced so that Devon can be more competitive with neighbouring authorities, and access to affordable housing to be reviewed.

5. Career Pathways and Development

5.1 Devon is actively working to encourage and recruit student social workers through the Open University, the University of Plymouth and Bournemouth University, and has also had great success with its ASYE programme, but has in the past struggled to retain newly qualified social workers following completion of their ASYE year.

5.2 Over the last year, the Council has been working to embed [Restorative Practice](#) in Children's Services which should not only result in better outcomes for children and families, but can help to build the reputation of Devon as forward thinking and attractive place to build a career.

5.3 Social work career pathways in Devon are unclear and provide few opportunities for progression and this has led to social workers seeking career advancement elsewhere. This is now being addressed through a new career pathway which will clearly mark the transition between newly qualified social worker, social worker, and experienced social worker.

5.4 What have social workers said?

- Step Up bursary offered a great opportunity to start a career in social work in Devon;
- Managers have generally been supportive of staff in social care teams taking up student social work opportunities, but this approach isn't promoted corporately cross the Council;
- Career pathways in Devon do not offer what I want; other authorities have better opportunities;
- I want to develop and progress but not to a team manager role, but there are no other options in Devon;
- Training in Devon is generally good, but they do not financially support post graduate development as other local authorities do;
- Secondments and other opportunities to get experience across different social work teams is great for personal and professional development, but this is 'tolerated' by managers and isn't promoted corporately;
- Devon's approaches such as Restorative Practice were a key factor in me choosing to work for Devon.

5.5 Action needed

- Corporate promotion of routes into social work from social care teams;
- Embed Restorative Practice across Children's Services, as part of the Improvement Journey;
- A clear progression structure, providing opportunities for those who want to progress in practice, as well as management;
- Corporate promotion and support for social workers to gain experience across teams;
- Access to financial support for post graduate study.

6. Caseloads

6.1 High caseloads can have a significant impact on the wellbeing of social workers, sickness rates and retention, as well as the quality of social work practice. Caseloads can differ significantly across local authorities and Devon has worked to reduce its own caseloads over the last couple of years, seeing some success. However, Devon's difficulty in recruiting social workers and high turnover means that caseloads can fluctuate, and remain higher in some teams.

6.2 What do social workers say?

- Peer support and supervision is really important, particularly for less experienced social workers, but caseloads are so high, however much colleagues want to support us there just isn't the time;
- Having a manageable caseload isn't just about feeling less stressed but about job satisfaction, feeling like you are 'on top of it', like you are doing a good job; the higher your caseload is the less time you spend with each of your families;
- You know that when someone in your team leaves, your caseload will instantly go up, just making the issues worse.

6.3 Action needed

Caseloads to be consistently manageable across Children's Services.

7. Supervision

7.1 Social work supervision is a time specifically set aside for social workers to discuss their cases, review decision making and reflect on their social work practice with their team manager. It is also an opportunity to discuss personal development, and the impact of their work on them personally. Supervision plays a vital role improving social work practice and promoting the emotional resilience and wellbeing of social workers, and because of this, there are links between the quality of supervision and retention.

7.2 What do social workers say?

- Team managers are very busy, not always enough time for regular/quality supervision;
- Supervision tends to be 'caseload led' with little time left to discuss our own emotional wellbeing;
- It's important that team managers understand the specific needs of their social workers, particularly those social workers who have been recruited from overseas;
- Being able to offload to a team manager, to someone who can help you manage things positively, can make a real difference to how you feel about your job;
- Quality supervision has a positive impact on retention.

7.3 Action needed

All social workers to have access to quality supervision, with team managers who have the time and the skills to address social workers emotional needs and build resilience.

8. Support for workers recruited from overseas

8.1 Devon has a successful overseas recruitment strategy and has attracted a number of skilled and experienced social workers to Devon from overseas. Many social workers recruited from overseas want to stay in Devon beyond their visa period, but there are some barriers.

8.2 What do social workers say?

- Devon offers an attractive package to overseas workers, including five-year visa sponsorship;
- Devon has a good reputation as an employer, a place to work and a place to live/raise a family;
- As workers recruited from overseas we do not have access to support like child benefit and social housing and do not have a credit rating, so can only access loans at very high interest rates;
- If we wish to stay in Devon/the UK at the end of our visa period we have to apply for indefinite leave to remain (currently costing £2,389

per person) which many people struggle to afford; some other local authorities contribute towards or pay this cost in full for their social workers.

8.3 Action needed

Support with the cost of indefinite leave to remain applications for social workers recruited from overseas.

9. Conclusion

9.1 What has become clear through this Spotlight Review is that social worker recruitment and retention is complex. Developing a competitive pay and conditions package will go some way to making Devon a more attractive option for social workers locally, nationally and from overseas, but this only addresses part of the challenge.

9.2 We understand that the business case being considered by Cabinet aims to address some of the themes highlighted in this report, including salary rates and career progression, and Members of the Spotlight Review are pleased to see that this is being addressed.

9.3 However, our recruitment and retention strategies also need to focus on areas such as caseloads, supervision and the long term needs of our workers recruited from overseas, if we are to see real and sustained change to the stability and quality of the Children's Social Work Workforce in Devon.

10. Membership

Councillors Rob Hannaford (Chair), Su Aves, Julian Brazil, Christine Channon, Linda Hellyer, Richard Hosking, Andrew Saywell and Margaret Squires.

11. Contact

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12. Witnesses

The Spotlight Review heard testimony from a number of stakeholders and witnesses and would like to express sincere thanks to the following people for their contribution and the information shared.

Andrea Morris	Senior Manager, Social Work Academy and Workforce Development
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Marion Meyers	Social Worker (Masters student)
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Abbey Rowland	Practice Development Adviser (Restorative Practice)
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Marianne Jackson

Practice Development Advisor

3 Student Social Workers

2 Newly Qualified Social Workers

4 Experienced Social Workers
(including 3 recruited from overseas)

1 Team Manager

13. Bibliography

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