

Childrens Social Work Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers

Report of the Head of Children's Social Work

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.

Recommendation:

That Cabinet agree additional investment to ensure recruitment and retention of social workers to improve value for money and outcomes for children. That Cabinet agrees to invest up to £200,000 in this financial year, and a further £519,000 in 2021/2022 from the Business Rates Pilot reserve for this invest to save strategy.

The Children's Scrutiny Committee and its Members be thanked for their diligence in their Spotlight Review Report and the Recommendations of the Spotlight Review be considered as part (b) of this agenda item.

1. SUMMARY

- 1.1 This paper and business case appendix sets out the national and local context regarding social worker recruitment and the challenges currently facing Devon and proposes a social work career pathway and remuneration, comparable to the offer in our neighbouring authorities.

2. INTRODUCTION

- 2.1 Nationally there is a shortage of qualified social workers. Social work has been listed on the Shortage Occupation List since 2014¹ and this shortage is reflected across the UK, with additional challenges in rural and sparsely populated areas. Devon County Council needs to address 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. In the same period Devon's turnover averaged 17.7% (this will be higher in 2020). Local Authorities in the South West have refreshed their recruitment packages to address retention challenges. Cornwall undertook this 5 years ago and their turnover rate is 11.6%. Plymouth, 3 years ago with turnover at 14.3%. Torbay has this year increased its financial incentives to address their turnover rate of 22%. In 2019: 33.6% (96 out of 286) of frontline roles were occupied by agency staff. In 2020: 44.5% of frontline roles were occupied by agency staff (119 out of 266). Within Devon, this turnover is acute in our Children and Families Teams, but not in all areas of the service. We do not have recruitment and retention issues within our MASH, Youth Offending, Fostering and Adoption services.

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

- 2.3 212 staff responded to a survey on retention in Spring 2020. Workers advised comparable annual leave (with other authorities), a recognised career pathway, recruitment and retention payments, achievement recognition, flexible working arrangements and car leases as important factors in retention. Exit interviews in 2020 have all identified better pay as a key reason for leaving.

We have invested in our Restorative Practice Model to ensure a culture which is high support, high aspiration and high challenge. We have implemented Stage 1 of the Social Work Development Pathway, reduced caseloads and are embedding high-quality supervision and support services.

- 2.4 Devon has been able to engage and support newly qualified social workers in their assessed and supported year in employment (AYSE) and starter pay rates are competitive. At the point a social worker becomes experienced the pay scales become significantly less competitive than our neighbours. As well as being uncompetitive with our neighbours in relation to salary, our pathways for social work progression (as an alternative to management) are less well-developed.
- 2.5 The high use of agency social workers impacts on the experience of children and families and on the budget. An agency worker on average costs £28,300 per annum more than a permanent worker. £77,700 compared with £49,400 per year. Teams with high levels of social worker turn-over lack cohesion, offer reduced support to colleagues and have lower local knowledge. Frequent changes lead to disrupted and delayed plans and poorer outcomes for children.
- 2.6 Devon County Council needs to be a more attractive option for social workers. The impact of the 2020 Ofsted Inspection judgement has made Devon less attractive and we need to rebuild our reputation.
- 2.7 Two of the eight recommendations, of the Commissioner for the Department for Education, focus on addressing the challenge of recruitment and retention. The commissioner urged the Council to act with pace and urgency. The Commissioner's final report was agreed by the Minister, Vicky Ford, in October 2020.
- 2.8 The Childrens Scrutiny Committee completed a Social Work Workforce Spotlight Review on the 20th November to understand:
- the challenges facing Children's Services in recruiting and retaining a stable social work workforce in the long term;
 - 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;
 - proposed strategies for delivering a more stable workforce and make recommendations for any identified changes

The Report of the Spotlight Review forms part (b) of this agenda item.

- 2.9 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. It is well evidenced where good practice flourishes, costs reduce.

3. PROPOSAL

The proposal to address the current recruitment and retention concerns outlined above is twofold:

3.1 **Improve salaries for experienced Social Workers, Team Managers and Independent Reviewing Officers**, we recommend matching frontline Social Worker, Team Manager and Independent Reviewing Officer salaries with their counterparts in Torbay. This would be applied to the following teams only

- Children and Families
- Permanency and Transition
- Initial Response
- Disabled Children's Service
- Quality Assurance and Reviews Service

The pay differential for experienced social workers in Devon compared to counterparts in Torbay, is two incremental points (Torbay pay up to point 35 - £38,890 p.a. compared to point 33 - £36,922 p.a. in Devon).

Team Managers and Independent Reviewing Officers in Torbay are paid the equivalent of a Devon T Grade, whereas our posts are set at H grade plus various market supplements. The job descriptions for both roles will be reviewed and re-evaluated to match Torbay and obviate the requirement for ongoing market supplements.

Accelerate implementation of the career progression scheme with additional advanced practitioner roles within the service.

This will create 24 Advanced Professional roles for Social Workers. These posts will be converted from existing Experienced Social Worker posts. This will provide an opportunity for enhanced career progression and provide greater support and mentoring for new and less experienced colleagues. These roles will apply only in the areas of the service where we have significant staff shortages.

The career pathway project has been a joint piece of work between Children Services and Adult Services and aligns Job Descriptions and progression practice across the authority for Social Work colleagues. This acceleration, and the change in salaries for social workers and team managers, will mean that Children's will be moving ahead of Adults in the implementation of this phase. The two service areas will also be paying staff different salary end points which will require careful communication and implementation.

3.2 A Recruitment and Retention Board, chaired by the Head of Service to oversee implementation, will be in place. The wider Recruitment and Retention Strategy for the Children's Social Care Service is in development.

Modelling assumes a reduction to 10% agency use for vacancies and to 15% agency use for sickness/maternity leave. These are stretching but achievable targets.

4. OPTIONS/ALTERNATIVES

- (i) Do nothing was considered and discounted, the consequences for Devon would be further drift downwards.
- (ii) Propose a more ambitious investment to match Cornwall. Before recommending a more ambitious course of action we wanted to test whether the more modest proposal would achieve the intended impact
- (iii) As well as matching Torbay's salary offer, include some additional incentives that are offered in Torbay. Torbay's turnover challenge is greater than Devon's and has a much longer history. We don't know at this point whether the actions we are taking will have enough impact. We think it will be better to take incremental steps and test their impact, if necessary, coming back to cabinet to recommend further steps. The Council's Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee plan to include a review of impact in their work/programme for 21/22

5. CONSULTATIONS

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. Exit interviews in the localities hardest hit by retention challenges overwhelmingly endorse pay as the main reason for leaving, market supplements are not regarded by staff as a sufficiently secure alternative to a consolidated salary offer.

6. FINANCIAL CONSIDERATIONS

- 6.1 The Recruitment and Retention proposals are an invest to save strategy. By strengthening our ability to recruit and retain social workers, we should be able to significantly reduce reliance on more costly agency staff. The financial appraisal is based on the following assumptions:
 - pay rates are comparable with the local market
 - introduce career progression through creating Advanced Practitioner roles
 - no increase in the number of full-time equivalent staff
 - reduce the use of agency staff to 10% for vacancy turnover and 15% of the social worker FTE establishment for maternity and sickness absence
- 6.2 In order to commence this strategy, a cost of £200,000 is estimated for the current financial year, with reductions in agency costs not being realised until 2021/22. The profile of the expected cost reductions requires a further net investment of £519,000 in 2021/22 before moving to a net saving in subsequent years. It is recommended that these initial investments are drawn against the Business Rates Pilot reserve which has previously been identified for investment in Childrens Services.
- 6.3 Modelling has been carried out to assess the ongoing financial impact of the proposals and by 2023/24, an annual investment of £973,000 is expected to result in reduced cost of £1,294,000, resulting in an estimated overall net saving of £321,000 a year.

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 predicted to be positive.

9. EQUALITY CONSIDERATIONS

- 9.1 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. This policy/proposal has been assessed and all necessary safeguards or action have been taken/included to safeguard the Council's position.

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 wellbeing of individual children and their families.

12. SUMMARY/CONCLUSIONS/REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Cabinet note the rationale and proposals for career progression and the necessity to improve 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.

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