

Workforce Stability: Attracting Agency Children's Social Workers to Devon - Agency Pay Rate Proposals

Report from Head of Childrens Social Work

Recommendation:

To seek a decision and investment to increase the agency social worker hourly pay rate for all children's services social worker roles, as outlined in section 6 of the Report. Whilst there is a strategy in place to recruit and retain permanent social workers there is an urgent need to stabilise the workforce and cover existing vacant posts in order to meet the needs of children and families requiring social work support.

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1. Summary

We need to be achieving the best possible outcomes for children and young people in Devon, especially those most vulnerable within our Initial Response and Children and Family services. We know that the best way of achieving and making a real difference for children and young people is through positive, strong and consistent relationships with them and their families/carers and we are investing in restorative ways of working to achieve this, but this cannot be achieved without a stable and high performing children's social care workforce.

Historically we have had challenges in both recruiting and retaining the best quality workforce and are currently operating 44 social work immediate vacancies across our social work services.

We are faced with significant demographic, geographical remoteness and access to good quality workforce limitations, coupled with excessive travel across Devon for case visits and the increase in fuel costs. There are also shortages in availability and cost-effective accommodation for social workers travelling from outside Devon, particularly in summer months. This has been exacerbated by the pandemic, as applications from permanent staff and the supply of agency staff have declined with poor volumes of cv submissions along with other local authorities, managed services and specialist social work project teams providing a higher hourly pay rate and benefits for interim staff.

2. Introduction

The intention of increasing the agency social worker pay rate is to stabilise the workforce and reduce the high turnover until we can then in turn improve the workload and stability of our permanent workforce.

Recruitment and manageable caseloads

Ofsted noted in the most recent monitoring visit that “while recruiting and retaining social workers is a priority that senior leaders fully understand and have a strategy to address, the situation is yet to improve”. Ofsted also commented on the workloads of the current workforce: The high caseloads of social workers in the IRTs make it very difficult for them to pause and reflect on the best way forward for individual children while juggling priorities daily, with many workers reporting that they work additional hours to keep up with demand.”

Current social work caseload across the service is higher than the national average with social workers in some parts of the service managing more than 40 children

Filling existing vacancies in the service pending successful permanent recruitment within the existing agreed pay rates and terms and conditions for social workers has become increasingly difficult. The unfilled posts increases the workload and demand of existing permanent and agency workers which impacts on their ability to form relationships and meet our statutory duties.

Devon County Council is signed into a Memorandum of Cooperation (MOC) with South West Councils where we have agreed a commitment to cap agency pay rates to prevent spiralling costs and growing competition between the South West LAs. The MOC is not a legally binding agreement but a statement of intent. The MOC currently operates an exception which allows Devon to offer more competitive rates.

3. Proposal

In order to reflect current market forces with regional and the wider national shortage of experienced children’s social workers available, there is an urgent need to be more competitive and financially attractive in the agency job marketplace and this can only be achieved in the short-term solution by increasing the agency worker pay rate.

This will in turn over the next 6-12 months it is hoped, stabilise the workforce, reduce the high turnover of staff, whilst we focus on reshaping and transforming our permanent recruitment and attraction activity in the external candidate marketplace.

This will be achieved with clear defined succession planning campaigns and programmes as building on ‘growing our own’ through dedicated pathways like ASYE, Apprenticeships, International Recruitment, which will incorporate a clear-cut strategic recruitment and marketing plan mapping out our key short, medium and long term objectives in stabilising and growing our workforce to reflect our improvement strategy.

4. Options/Alternatives

Retaining the status quo would mean that social workers would continue to have higher caseloads which impacts on outcomes for vulnerable children and young people. High caseloads also will also affect the retention of our existing permanent staff and our ability to attract permanent social workers to Devon.

5. Technical Data

We currently have 44 immediate experienced social worker vacancies, which are across all localities, mainly in our Child and Family services.

6. Financial Considerations

The proposed increase in agency social worker pay rates will be as follows for all social work positions in hard to fill service areas, e.g. MASH, C&F, IRT, DCS and P&T :

- Upto an additional £4 per hour for Experienced Social Workers
- Upto an additional £2 per hour for Assistant Team Managers and Team Managers

To apply the proposed uplifted costs across all current agency staff within 'hard to recruit teams' we would require investment of £785,347. This assumes however that all current staff in post remain for the entire financial year and therefore a 'worse case scenario'.

		Annual rate based on 48 weeks	
		Agency	SW
		£	£
Current	SW's	6,230,989	5,541,120
	TM	1,852,723	1,633,920
	ATM	1,789,498	1,562,880
		9,873,210	8,737,920
Proposed	SW's	6,854,365	6,095,232
	TM	1,933,354	1,704,960
	ATM	1,870,838	1,633,920
		10,658,557	9,434,112
Additional cost	SW's	623,376	554,112
	TM	80,630	71,040
	ATM	81,341	71,040
		785,347	696,192

In addition to this we have a discretionary accommodation allowance for Experienced Social Workers which will be considered on an individual basis and circumstances as agreed with line manager.

We have additionally scoped the option to incorporate an agency margin rate review and potential increase if required, this would be additional investment of £557,557 per annum. This again assumes that all current eligible staff remain in post for the full financial year 22/23.

The maximum summary investment totals would be as follows in the 'worse case scenario' for a 12 month period would be:

Proposal	Investment Required
Hourly Rate Uplift	£785,347
Agency Charge Rate	£557,557
Discretionary Allowance	£71,040
TOTAL	£1,413,944

7. Legal Considerations

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 and take account of the prevailing market forces and recruitment difficulties.

8. Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change)

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.

Flexible / hybrid smart working methodology and operation reduces travel time and cost, which will make a positive contribution to reducing damaging environmental impact, particularly in the forthcoming summer months where Devon's road network is congested.

9. Equality Considerations

Appointment of competent agency social workers for a minimum 6 month placement, 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 all agency and permanent staff in some minority groups such as LGBTQ and ethnic diversity. This therefore also promotes equality of opportunity for applicants and members of staff.

The relevant workforce is gender balanced and these proposals will apply to that cohort equally.

10. Risk Management Considerations

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 operations' – for example risks due to insufficient social work staff will lead to burnout / exhaustion / increase of sickness with current workforce in unmanageable caseloads and may result in workers leaving the Council as a result.

Further potential risks include insufficient recruitment of children's social workers leading to children's cases not being able to be allocated, and children being left at a high level of 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

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

It is critical to ensure that Devon has sufficient high quality experienced social workers and managers to effectively work with children, young people and their families/carers, whilst keeping children and young people consistently safe and risks are minimised.

We require a stable workforce to meet statutory obligations and deliver the urgent improvements required in the service. To do so, we need to sustain an attractive agency employment offer, based on current market forces and in line with social worker career needs. We are implementing non-cost options and fully exploring all recruitment routes alongside the proposals in this paper.

We are engaged in tackling the impact of the pandemic on availability of social workers and increased demand and are establishing additional routes to qualification in Devon as strategically succession planning to ensure all. We respectfully recommend approval of the measures to reach a competitive place in the social work employment market in the South-West and assisting us in becoming an Employer of Choice.

Melissa Caslake, Chief Officer for Children's Services

Electoral Divisions: All

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Councillor Andrew Leadbetter

Contact for Enquiries: Lisa Bursill, Deputy Chief Officer, Head of Children's Social Care

Local Government Act 1972:

Contact for Enquiries: Harriet Cadman

Tel No: 01392 383000