

Children's Services Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review

Children's Scrutiny Committee - November 2023

Background

Nationally and in Devon, there are challenges in the Children's Services sector for the recruitment and retention of key roles including social workers, public health nursing and educational psychologists (EPs).

In Devon:

- Ofsted reported that 40% of the social work workforce was from agency staff and this rate had "increased significantly".
- The SEND Revisit highlighted Devon's recruitment and retention challenges and how the local area's plans do not address these challenges.
- The CQC Public Health Nursing inspection stated the service "did not have enough staff to provide care and treatment to children and young people" and commented on the unequal working terms and conditions with the NHS 'agenda for change'

The Children's Scrutiny Committee previously completed a Social Work Workforce Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review in December 2020. In November 2022, the SEND Task Group concluded and found recruitment and retention challenges in the SEND and Education teams. The SEND Task Group recommended a follow up Spotlight Review on recruitment and retention should be completed in order to look into any further recommendations that could be made to support Children's Services achieving a stable, permanent workforce.

What do we know about recruitment and retention in the service?

The Spotlight Review began with each service area appraising Members of their service including recent successes and challenges.

Many witnesses raised the national challenges in recruiting to their service areas and the shortages in social workers, EPs, health nurses, school visitors.

This has meant caseloads across the service were high and staff were feeling the impact of the rising demand on services.

Whilst agency rates in Social Work were a concern, witnesses generally felt that recruitment was improving and "turning a corner" because of the work ongoing across the Council to support recruitment.

Now the focus was on retention to ensure we keep staff, make sure staff valued, caseloads are manageable and that we have an competitive offer compared to other Local Authorities and the NHS.

Service or Team	Current FTE	Vacancy Rate	Agency Rate
Children's Social Work	244.4	8.5%	41.3% (The Spotlight Review was told in July 2023 it was 50%)
Education Psychology	23.9	31%	12.0%
Public Health Nursing	167.9	19% for health visitors, 30% for school nurses	3.3%
SEND 0-25 Team	78.01	2.5%	6.4%

Note: the data above is from October 2023.

Scope of the review

- To understand the challenges facing the Children's Services in recruiting and retaining a stable workforce.
- To review the impact of the recommendations from the 2020 Spotlight Review.
- To review the impact of the 2020 and 2021 Recruitment and Retention Investments as agreed by Cabinet.
- To review the approaches taken in the recruitment and retention of staff.

Spotlight Review session

The Spotlight Review was held on Wednesday 26th July 2023. Members heard from 25 witnesses across the different roles and services within Children's Services.

Much of the discussion took place in two roundtable discussions focusing on recruitment and retention where witnesses were asked to put forward their views using a derivative of a rose, bud, thorn;

- What is working? (Rose)
- What isn't working? (Thorn)
- What could the Council do to improve? (Bud)



RECRUITMENT

What is working?

Grow our own model

Our offer

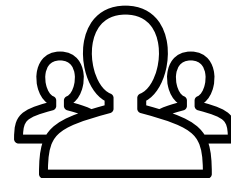
- Flexible working
- Improved pay, terms and conditions for EP service
- Good pay and allowances
- Relocation package

Marketing and promotion

Improved website
Updated wording and testimonials included
Virtual drop ins
Promotional events and videos
Promotion of Devon as a place to work
Working with Higher Education providers

Corporate and HR Support

- Monthly meetings to work together
- Working together across teams and services
- Centralised recruitment service for Children's Social Care
- People Strategy



Recruitment of new staff

- Rate of recruitment of staff into the service and low vacancy rate in social work teams
- Successes in recruiting Overseas workers
- Improved processes and personalisation of the process, speaking to candidates directly
- Improved calibre of new starters meaning candidates are more suited to jobs

What isn't working?

Our Offer

- Less competitive terms and conditions for Public Health Nursing staff compared to NHS Agenda for Change
- Other LA advertising at higher salaries

Marking and Promotion

- No creativity in advertising

Practice and services

- Family Hub development in other LA

Volume of recruitment

- More staff are needed still
- Recruitment date isn't keeping up with demand for services

Agency staff

- The Council is overly reliant on agency staff to fill vacant posts
- Number of agency staff is too high
- High cost to the Council
- Memorandum of Understanding on agency rates is consistently breached

Job descriptions

- Need to be clearer
- Don't match what the role is
- People are not sure what job they are applying for

Recruitment process

- Long winded application processes - not a 'one click' process.
- Too slow - doesn't work at the pace needed

The Council and the Service's Ofsted reputation

What could the Council do to improve?

Our offer

- Pay further incentives for permanent staff
- Ensure good pay and conditions
- Provide relocation/housing
- Ensure all staff get professional registration fees paid for



Marking and Promotion

- Ensure a wider pool of applicants by advertising in a diverse range of places
- Attending more recruitment fairs and events
- Working more closely with Higher and Further education to promote roles and careers

Workforce Planning

- An overarching Children's Services Recruitment Strategy
- Ensuring a good mix of experience and knowledge
- Succession planning
- Continue to expand the grow our own model

Job descriptions need to be reviewed so they are clearer and match the jobs staff do

Ensure a corporate induction programme alongside specific job training for new staff

Show off and celebrate staff to attract others to join



Centralised recruitment service to all of Children's Services.

Ensure we retain staff so less need to recruit.

RETENTION

What is working?

New stable leadership in Children's Services and across Senior Leadership team

Our offer

- Flexible working practices
- Improved terms and conditions for EPs

Support from Managers and Colleagues

- Supportive
- Good team spirit



Staff Voice is heard

- Staff forum
- Reconnecting interviews
- Exit interviews being shared with service areas

Caseloads

- Protected workloads for new starters
- Recruiting new staff and having different roles has taken the pressure off e.g. psychology graduates

Wellbeing

- Wellbeing supervision has been introduced alongside case supervision.
- Greater management oversight
- Wellbeing being given a greater focus

Learning and development

- Embedding of Restorative Practice
- Social Work Academy has been "instrumental"
- Thorough induction process for EPs (12 days in the first year)
- New staff assigned mentors

Joined up working within Children's Services

What isn't working?

Our offer - pay and remuneration

- Travel claims can only be on distance from office and not from home
- Retention bonus hasn't worked
- Permanent staff leaving to become agency workers as agency rates higher than permanent salaries

Training and Development

- Career progression routes are not clear with limited options available.
- Training is given 'on the job' adds to pressure for staff
- Lack of training for new managers
- Lack of professional qualifications on offer for SEND staff



High caseloads

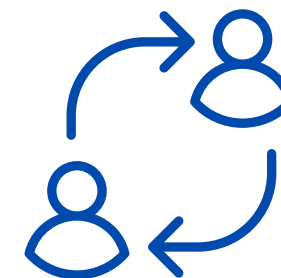
- Caseloads are 2 times what is reasonable or promised
- Expectations on new starters being ready too early and given large caseloads within weeks of joining
- Narrow focus of work
- Protected caseloads for new staff not stuck to
- New staff is still not enough to bring the caseload down
- Demands of the work are higher

EP statutory work rather than preventative work, not doing the work they "love".

- Means staff aren't doing the role they want to do
- Has had a negative impact on morale and wellbeing
- Still feel like the skills they have aren't being used

Turnover in workforce

- More staff are leaving
- Overall experience less of the workforce is decreasing
- Too much change recently in staff and management



Culture and morale

- Poor culture and "no sense of belonging" in Children's Social Care
- Burnout and exhaustion
- Silo mentality
- Children's and Corporate centre 'blame' each other
- Staff not feeling able to do their job to the best of their ability
- DCC reputation and Ofsted rating
- Low morale and staff not feeling like they are making a difference.

What could the Council do to improve?

Ensure there are reasons for staff to want to stay

- Improve culture
- Make everyone feel valued
- They have a clear pathway for development
- They have reasonable caseloads
- Good working environment
- Reduce the number of agency staff
- Ensure all staff have access to wellbeing support and ensure Wellbeing Supervision across all services.



Continue to ensure our offer is competitive compared to other LA and NHS

- Particularly our Pay, Terms and Conditions compared to NHS Agenda for Change

Improve learning, training and development offer

- Develop a Children's Services staff development strategy
- Improve training and induction for new recruits
- Ensure training for new managers is available
- Expand the role of the academy for social worker career development

Promote success more

- Staff awards programme
- Serious success reviews to learn lessons when practice goes well
- Appreciative enquiries to improve professional self esteem

Work together to create coherence and links across the service, the Council and with our partners.

- Focus on what we have in common
- Engage with partners



Members and Senior Leaders to visit staff more and hear from frontline workers

Continue to embed Restorative Practice and our Principles and Behaviours.

Conclusions

The Spotlight Review was a valuable undertaking for Members to hear directly from staff about their current work and how their service is operating to enable Members to understand services and to help drive forward improvements.

Whilst progress had been made from the 2020 Spotlight Review, a number of persistent challenges remain. Having manageable caseloads, an over reliance on agency staff, ensuring stability in teams and wellbeing supervision were recurring issues.

In putting forward this report and its recommendations, Members want to ensure they are amplifying the voice of staff in Children's Services to improve their working environments.

Members hoped that some of the recommendations will affect all staff and new staff across the Council, not just in Children's Services. This is particularly pertinent as the Council has recently launched a new People First Strategy. Members also acknowledge that some of the recommendations in this report are actions that have already agreed to in the new Strategy, such as reviewing terms and conditions.

Members of the Spotlight Review highlighted the feedback from witnesses and attendees that many of them enjoyed attending the session and discussing the shared challenges together. One witness commented after the spotlight review that "it was a great opportunity to come together across Children's Services".



The Spotlight Review's Members were Councillors Su Aves (Chair), Tracy Adams, Phil Bullivant, Frank Letch MBE, Pru Maskell and Lois Samuel.

For more information, please contact: scrutiny@devon.gov.uk

[@devondemocracy](https://twitter.com/devondemocracy)

Recommendations

- 1 As part of the recruitment theme of the People First Strategy, the Council should work more closely with schools and education providers to promote careers in Children's Services and the Council as a place to work.
- 2 The recruitment process needs to ensure that potential staff are clear about the roles and responsibilities of jobs they apply for.
- 3 The formal induction programme needs to be embedded across the service and staff must have the time built into their working day when they join to complete the programme.
- 4 The Cabinet Member to review the Memorandum of Cooperation for social worker agency rates in the Southwest with other Local Authorities so that it is effective and fit for purpose.
- 5 In the review of pay and allowances which has already begun, Members ask that reference is made to competitiveness with the NHS Agenda for Change, Professional Registration Fees and travel expenses.
- 6 Caseloads for each staff across the service should be no higher than the national averages or the recommended number for each service.
- 7 Protected caseloads for new staff are maintained.
- 8 Staff should consistently have access to both case management/practice supervision and wellbeing/personal supervision.
- 9 The Council needs to ensure managers have an appropriate number of direct reports.
- 10 Through the Voice theme of the People First Strategy to celebrate staff and their achievements more, the Council should consider celebration events, appreciative enquiries or serious success reviews.
- 11 Scrutiny Members will ensure they visit staff in their workplace and seek their feedback on an annual basis and report this back to the Children's Scrutiny Committee.
- 12 In the review of pathways, the Council should ensure that pathways for staff progression are clear, including annual appraisals, additional qualifications and leadership/manager training, where appropriate.