

Children's Social Care Visits Report – progress on recommendations Report of the Director of Children and Young People's Futures

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

1) Recommendation

That the Children's Scrutiny Committee be asked to note the progress outlined in this report.

2) Background / Introduction

2.1 Members of Scrutiny undertook several visits to Children's Social Care Services during 2023 and again in 2024. Arising out of the 2023 visits were a series of recommendations that were reported to Cabinet in November 2023. An update was provided to Children's Scrutiny Committee in March 2024 and this report provides a further update on the response of the service to those recommendations together with progress with the implementation of the recommendations arising out of the 2024 visits.

3) Progress on recommendations

3.1 Recruitment of permanent staff across the service (2023) and reducing the use of agency staff in the assessment service / speeding up the recruitment process / supporting the wellbeing of staff (2024).

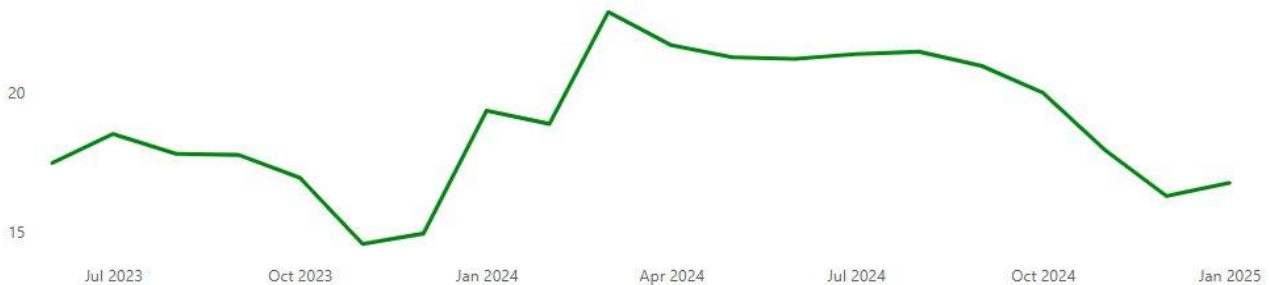
3.1.1 A dedicated Recruitment & Retention Strategy has been developed with Children's Services as part of the Recruitment theme of the People Strategy to support creation of a more sustainable workforce.

3.1.2 In March 2024 almost half of the front-line social work staff were employed through an agency, approximately 20% of social work posts were vacant. Almost all those social work posts are now filled, either by a permanent member of staff or an agency worker.

3.1.3 The number of permanent Social Workers within the front-line teams has increased by 11% or 39fte from 152fte in Dec 2023 to 191fte in Dec 2024. This has had a

significant impact on the work loads of those staff, as shown by the significant reduction in average caseloads which are now in line with national averages:

Average caseloads



3.1.4 Key elements of the Recruitment & Retention Strategy include:

- A greater focus on a 'grown your own' approach to staffing in Social Care. We have created a new 2 year 'Assessed and Supported Year in Employment' (ASYE) programme, with a cohort of 26 NQSW's starting in 2024 (an increase from 3 in 2023), which will support the plan developed to reduce our use of agency staff over a two-year period. It is planned to recruit a similar cohort of NQSWs in 2025 which will significantly change the ratio of permanent to agency staff.
- A 'step up to social work' programme, apprentices and expansion to two frontline units is also being progressed.
- A 'Temporary to Permanent' conversion project has now resulted in 18 agency social workers converting to permanent roles since the project started and the current rate of permanent Social Workers staff within Children's is now at 62% compared to 51% in December 2023.
- Turnover in Children's Social Workers has reduced to 11.8% in 2024 compared to 22.9% in 2023.
- There has been a 22.6% reduction in working days lost due to sickness over the last 18 months. Current sickness rate has continued to reduce to 2.6% in 2024 from 3.0% in 2023, 3.5% in 2022 and 3.7% in 2021. This is below the English average of 3.2%.
- Participation in the Local Government Recruitment Campaign 'Make a difference work for your local council,' a nationally funded campaign in which all councils were encouraged to take part. Resulting in over 1600 additional visits to our careers website since November. These changes have been the result of the following actions:
 - We have recently completed a review of the terms of the cabinet report that was presented in September 2021, where a paper titled "A Culture for Change in Children's Social Care - Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers and Front-Line Managers" was agreed by Cabinet.
 - The 2023 cohort of international social workers have been retained and further recruitment delayed until later in 2025 to allow the NQSWs to receive the support that they need.

- The additional allowances previously paid to attract agency social workers have been removed. This has not had an impact on the recruitment of agency staff, when they are required.
- The statutory guidance for local authorities on the use of agency child and family social workers has been deferred to an effective date of 31 October 2025 from the original date of 1 April 2025. The Southwest Regional ADCS group have agreed to implement the agency price caps from 31 October 2025. There is a transition plan in place with timescales to review regional and national data to inform the price caps. Local Authorities are required to submit their price caps to the DFE by August 2025. Effective from 1 April 2025, Devon, Torbay & Cornwall have agreed to reduce the pay rates for agency workers in scope. This change aims to reduce the pay differential between agency and permanent staff. Notice will also be being given that the current accommodation allowance will cease at the end of September 2025 and then the new national arrangements that are currently being agreed will take effect from October 2025.
- The service is preparing for the implementation of the other requirements of the statutory guidance on the use of agency staff from the autumn of 2025 with support from People & Culture – requirement to complete an ASYE programme with a local authority, restrictions on the movement of staff between permanent employment and agency work, standardised references and national monitoring of the use of agency staff.
- An additional workstream that is expected to further support the recruitment and retention of Childrens Social Workers is the development of a comprehensive wellbeing offer. Through the dedicated Wellbeing pages on the People Hub, staff are able to access timely support for a range of concerns, both work and home related. There are also further developments planned with regard to wellbeing, with a clear process map recently circulated to all directorates detailing the additional support available in the event of a staff member subjected to violence or aggression whilst at work.

3.1.5 Almost all Heads of Service and Service Managers are now permanent and there has been a reduction in the number of agency team managers from around 47% to 38% over the course of the last year which has provided stability with the service. It is expected that the implementation of the measures outlined above will result in a significant reduction in the use of agency social work staff over the course of the next 12 months.

3.1.6 These are all positive indicators highlighting increased stability within the Children's workforce.

3.1.7 The graph below highlights the percentage of agency staff within our front-line social work teams over the past year that are covering vacancies, sickness and maternity leave. The stability improvements in our permanent workforce sets a strong foundation as we work towards our goal of reducing our agency workforce and building a more permanent team.

Agency Rate % against Permanent Establishment



3.2 Increasing the Council's in house provision of accommodation for children in our care (2023).

3.2.1 Since March 2024, there have been the following developments with the provision of in-house children's homes:

- **Barnes** – Building works were completed in February 2024 and has provided a home for two young people since March 2024. The home has been inspected and judged to be "Good" by Ofsted.
- **Welland House** – The building work was completed in the summer of 2024 and Welland House now provides a home for an additional two young people as well as short breaks for others. The home has been inspected and judged to be "Good" by Ofsted.
- **The Brook (formerly Robins)** – This children's home was temporarily insourced in November 2023 at short notice. Following Cabinet approval in March 2024, we have successfully recruited permanent staff for the Brook which is now registered with Ofsted. The Brook provides a permanent home for up to 3 young people and short breaks for up to four more at any one time.
- **Lyric House** – This was initially used as an unregulated home for one young person for a step down from secure accommodation. It has now been registered with Ofsted as a home for 1 to 2 children. The home has been inspected and judged to be "Good" by Ofsted.
- **Rosalind House** – It was originally planned to convert the "Link Centre" into a three bed children's home. In the summer of 2024, it became apparent that the building was not going to be suitable and an alternative, Rosalind House was identified. Building work was commissioned for conversion into a 3 to 4 bed children's home which is expected to be completed in April 2025. A planning application is expected to be completed at the same time after which an application will be made to Ofsted to register the home.

3.2.2 In addition to the development of the children's homes, plans are progressing for the provision of "staying close" supported accommodation for care experienced young people aged over 18. They are:

- **Copperfield** – council building converted and opened in September 2024 providing supported accommodation for 4 care experienced young adults.
- **Newholme** – council building is currently being converted and is expected to be ready for use by the end of March 2025. It will provide supported accommodation for up to 8 care experienced young adults.
- **Friars Lodge** – Exeter City Council building managed by a third-party property management company. The legal agreement for the partnership between Devon, Exeter and the property management company almost complete. It is expected that this building will be available to provide supported accommodation for up to 9 care experienced young adults from April / May 2025.

3.3 Providing care experienced people with exemption from council tax (2023).

3.3.1 All of the District Councils in Devon now provide care experienced people with council tax exemption. The same benefit is provided to those living outside of Devon directly by the service.

3.4 Working with District Councils and Devon Home Choice to ensure care leavers are automatically placed in B and B for priority of accommodation (2023).

3.4.1 The joint housing protocol for care experienced young people is now operational and addresses priority needs for those care leavers who are awarded B and B from Devon Home Choice. The Care for Me subgroup is revising its action plan and will align to a needs analysis of future housing requirements across Devon for our care experienced young people.

3.4.2 Devon Chief Executives continue to work on strategic priorities for housing and to ensure that along with sufficiency, there is a relentless focus on supporting our young people to prepare and develop skills for independence being tenancy ready, support around mental health and developing opportunities for apprenticeships.

3.4.3 Joint training events continue to be held between Children Social Care and District Housing Officers to develop cohesive practice that is trauma informed and to support the relational practice between the services which focus on improving outcomes for our care experienced young people.

3.5 Provision of in-house mental health services due to rise in need and to ensure timely access to mental health professionals for children and young people (2023).

3.5.1 The Therapeutic Well-Being Service continues to offer support to children and young people across all statutory services. The service has been expanded with the

introduction of three therapeutic well-being officers for Care Experienced People. This has been welcomed and is being accessed by our Care Experienced People, with positive feedback

3.6 Care Experience as a Protected Characteristic (2023).

3.6.1 This was agreed at a meeting of the full council in the autumn of 2023. We have supported care experienced leavers into employment and through recruitment processes. We have developed a care leaver pathway plan into employment for the Council. It includes various routes/options for recruitment into DCC jobs via apprenticeships, work experience, and extended work experience or internships. We have introduced the Talent Bank, which matches employment opportunities with the aspirations of care leavers and are running the World of Work sessions to help our young people understand the work environment, alongside support with applications and interviews.

3.7 The work of Bridges, Cabinet's continued support for the service and consideration of expanding the service to support more families (2023).

3.7.1 Bridges continues to provide a good service to the children and families referred for intervention and support. Bridges has become integrated into the wider service and sits within the Early Help and Partnerships management team, meaning that the approach and resources of Bridges are being shared out more widely into families where they may not currently be at 'edge of care' but would likely take that trajectory without earlier intervention. Bridges also works to support children to successfully return to their families. Bridges share professional development sessions with the wider service and engage in the learning and development opportunities across the system.

3.7.2 More widely, Targeted Early Help Services were expanded in 2024 both in size and age range to enable the service to offer intervention to increased numbers of children and their families at an early help level, preventing escalation to statutory social work services. Practitioners and managers in the service come from multi-professional backgrounds, bringing a wealth of skills and experience. Building on this success, further growth of targeted early help from April 2025 has been agreed.

3.7.3 Further work is planned during 2025 to continue to build on services in place, ensure that they are aligned and cohesive with the aim of strengthening our response to children's emotional health and well-being.

3.8.1 A more equitable allocation of cases between Assessment Teams (2024).

3.8.2 In the autumn of 2024, line management responsibility for the assessment teams moved from the Front Door to the Children and Families Service. The change in line management arrangements, closer working relationships between the assessment teams and the children and families' teams together with actions to address staff

shortages in the assessment teams should ensure a more equitable allocation of work across that area of the service.

3.9.1 Ensure that on joint visits, the Police are always present to support our staff (2024)

3.9.1 The relates specifically to enquiries made under Section 47 of the Children Act (child protection enquiries) where some enquiries are undertaken solely by social work staff and others together with police. In some instances, where it had been planned for the enquiries to be undertaken jointly with the police, they had been unable to do so, and did not always provide notice of their inability to attend the joint visit. Discussions are ongoing with colleagues in the police to ensure that, where it has been decided that enquiries / visits should be undertaken jointly, the police, then resources will be allocated to ensure that those enquiries / visits are undertaken jointly.

4) Options / Alternatives

4.1 Not applicable.

5) Consultations / Representations / Technical Data

5.1 This report is providing an update on the actions undertaken by Children's Services following various visits undertaken by members of the Scrutiny Committee to staff in Children's Services.

6) Strategic Plan

6.1 The actions described in the report support the Council's objective of being ambitious for children and young people, as set out in the strategic plan.

7) Financial Considerations

7.1 There are no specific financial implications arising out of this report. All the initiatives referred to above are funded from within existing budgets.

8) Legal Considerations

8.1 There are no specific legal considerations arising out of this report.

9) Environmental Impact Considerations (Including Climate Change, Sustainability and Socio-economic)

9.1 There are no environmental issues arising out of this report.

10) Equality Considerations

10.1 There are no equality issues arising out of this report.

11) Risk Management Considerations

11.1 There are no risks identified in this report.

12) Summary / Conclusions / Reasons for Recommendations

12.1 This report provides an update for members of the Scrutiny Committee on the actions taken following their meetings with staff in Children's Services in 2023.

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