

CREATING OPPORTUNITIES AND TACKLING INEQUALITIES	Agenda Item No. 8
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Report of the Corporate Director for People and Communities

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RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF QUALIFIED SOCIAL WORKERS IN CHILDREN'S SERVICES

1. PURPOSE

- 1.1. This report is to inform Members about the current challenges in recruiting qualified social workers, and the actions we are taking to address these.
- 1.2. The report also considers the impact of the cap that has been applied to the cost of agency social workers and team managers across all authorities in the Eastern Region.

2. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 2.1. That Committee notes the contents of the report and in particular endorses the general strategic approach being taken to reduce our reliance on qualified social workers through the development of a new approach using alternatively qualified workers to work with some of our vulnerable children, young people and families.

3. LINKS TO THE SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY STRATEGY

- 3.1. Creating Opportunities - Tackling Inequalities
 - Supporting vulnerable people

4. SUMMARY

- 4.1. Recruiting experienced qualified social workers is a particular challenge in many areas of the country.
- 4.2. Many local authorities report high vacancy levels among qualified social workers and team managers in particular. Most of these vacant posts are covered by agency staff. While this means that the work with children, young people and families continues, agency staff are much more expensive than permanent staff.
- 4.3. The position in Peterborough remains challenging in this area. However, we have successfully recruited 12 newly qualified social workers who are joining the authority during September and October 2015, which will help to reduce our reliance on agency staff.
- 4.4. In the longer term, we are working on ways to develop our services so that we need fewer qualified social workers in post, and support more children, young people and families through the use of alternatively qualified professionals who are easier to recruit and to retain – people like youth workers and nursery nurses for example. We believe that by developing a more mixed set of skills among our workforce, we will also be able to deliver a better quality of service by better matching the skills of the practitioner with the needs of the child, young person, or family.

5. BACKGROUND

- 5.1. Vacancy rates among social workers are currently high; some 30 of our 87 front-line social worker posts are currently vacant, most of which are covered by agency social workers. There was a period of particularly high rates of staff turn-over from around September 2014 to around March 2015, when significant numbers of permanent staff left the service, many leaving to work as agency social workers elsewhere.
- 5.2. The position relating to team managers has improved over recent months. Three of our 13 team manager roles are currently covered by agency team managers and we have recently made one permanent appointment. In February of this year, six of our team manager posts were covered by agency staff.
- 5.3. There are a number of indications that the current position is improving; we have successfully recruited 12 newly qualified social workers, for example, along with a small number of more experienced qualified social workers. Once these people are all in post – by the beginning of November 2015 – we will have around 18 social worker and team manager posts covered by agency staff – this is back in line with the position in autumn 2014. However, recruitment and retention is likely to continue to remain a challenge. This report summarises our approach to managing this issue in the short and medium term.

Recruitment and Retention

- 5.4. We have redrafted the materials sent to social workers when they express an interest in working in Peterborough. These materials emphasise the benefits of working in a People and Communities Directorate that includes adult services and many services relevant to working with families including early help and housing services.
- 5.5. The recruitment website has had a temporary makeover but is not yet as we would want it to be. We have learned from the designers of the 'Teach Peterborough' website, which is the site used to recruit teaching staff in the City. This has been a very successful site in terms of the number of applications it has attracted. The benefit of adapting it for use as a means of recruiting social workers is that much of the work has already been completed.
- 5.6. The site being developed will offer similar functionality and video clips, setting out the benefits of living and working in Peterborough generally and as a social worker in particular. We are working with HR colleagues to enable application forms to be completed via direct input applications via tablets as well as laptops, so that we reduce any barriers to people making an application. The site will also enable and promote links via Twitter and other social media applications.
- 5.7. We are also exploring how we can improve our retention of staff. Salaries in Peterborough are very competitive and are already among the highest in the region. We have to acknowledge, however, that Peterborough is also a challenging place to work in comparison with some of our neighbouring authorities.
- 5.8. We are therefore proposing the development of a retention bonus system that will reward social workers who join the authority and remain in post for at least three years.
- 5.9. This approach is currently being costed but the expectation is that any such system should be self-financing by contributing to lower use of agency staff, who cost on average at least £40,000 per annum more to employ than permanent staff.
- 5.10. Recruitment and retention is not only about salaries. Social workers want to work in places where they have stable management in place, where there are opportunities for them to learn and to develop, and where they have caseloads which are manageable and enable them to work effectively with children, young people and families.
- 5.11. we have a very good training and support programme for newly qualified social workers in place, and we are working with our Workforce Development colleagues to implement team

manager and social worker development programmes, which will begin to be rolled out in the autumn.

- 5.12. The service is now seeing the benefit of a much more stable management team: we have a permanent assistant director and of our five key heads of service, four are now permanent. This compares with the position in December 2014 where we had an agency assistant director and only two of our heads of service were permanent members of staff.

Restructuring our Services

- 5.13. Although the current trajectory in terms of social worker recruitment is positive, we acknowledge that vacancies remain a significant issue [as they are for many local authorities] and that we are unlikely to ever recruit and retain the number of qualified social workers in our current staffing structure.

- 5.14. There are certain tasks that must be undertaken by qualified social workers. These include:

- Undertaking child protection enquiries;
- Completing assessments of need;
- Working with children and young people subject to child protection plans;
- Working with children and young people who are looked after;
- Assessing and supervising foster carers; and
- Assessing prospective adopters and matching children to adopters.

- 5.15. In Peterborough, practice has traditionally been for all children assessed as being children in need to be allocated to a qualified social worker. There is, however, more flexibility around the types of practitioner who can be allocated to children in need, providing there has first been a detailed assessment of the needs of the child by a qualified social worker and there is on-going oversight by a qualified team manager.

- 5.16. Of the 1,800 children and young people open to the service at present, around 360 are children who are looked after and 300 are subject to child protection plans. Of the remaining 1,100 children and young people, 400 are in the process of having needs assessed, while around 150 are children with disabilities and as such will require a qualified social worker to work with them as they will have complex needs.

- 5.17. This leaves around 600 children open as children in need, could potentially be allocated to alternatively qualified workers. However, we estimate that 25-30% of these children will again have complex needs, requiring a qualified social worker, leaving around 400 children and young people who could be allocated to alternatively qualified practitioners.

- 5.18. We are therefore piloting an approach that involves the recruitment of 20 to 22 alternatively qualified workers – people like youth workers, nursery nurses, family workers and similar – with the intention of allocating these workers to those children and young people in need where appropriate. As well as enabling us to reduce our demand for qualified social workers through this action, and so also reducing our dependency on agency workers, we believe that the quality of service offered will also improve through this approach.

- 5.19. This is because where social workers have high numbers of children and young people on their caseloads, those who are perceived as having less complex needs will receive a less priority service than children subject to child protection plans, for example. This means that children with lower level needs often remain open to the service for longer periods, which is clearly not in their best interests and also contributes to a cycle of higher overall numbers of children in the system and hence to higher caseloads.

- 5.20. It is also the case that differently qualified workers may have a better skill set to meet particular needs than qualified social workers. Youth workers, for example, may be more successful in engaging with challenging young people than some social workers.
- 5.21. Alongside this pilot, we are seeking to develop an adolescent service to be located within the Youth Offending Service. Young people who are placing themselves at significant risk through risk taking behaviour, or who are vulnerable to becoming looked after because of fraught family relationships, often need a significant level of engagement in order to build relationships that can then be used to help reduce risks.
- 5.22. This high level of engagement is often incompatible with the needs of the rest of a social worker's caseload within family support teams where frequently it is the risks faced by much younger children as a result of parenting that command most attention.
- 5.23. Creating a dedicated service will assist in this area. Locating this service within an already multi-disciplinary service that includes input from qualified mental health practitioners and from practitioners used to meeting the needs of highly challenging young people engaged in offending behaviour is a logical development. This is because many of the young people currently open to social workers in family support services display some mental health and emotional difficulties.
- 5.24. Finally, we are also exploring whether we can develop pilot approaches that are targeted at particular areas of need in the City with partners. An example could be that of chronic neglect. Schemes in other authorities have evidenced significantly positive outcomes through such partnerships by providing intensive support programmes to address the issue of chronic neglect in families. We know that neglect is a significant issue in the City, and such programmes may provide an opportunity to improve outcomes for children by supporting families to make sustainable changes in their parenting, while offering social workers working with children on child protection plans an important source of support with their caseload.
- 5.25. If the pilot of the alternatively qualified practitioners is successful, it may be possible to develop the approach further and allocate more work directly to this type of practitioner as well as using this approach to help to support the work of allocated social workers in more complex cases.

Impact of Eastern Region Capping of Agency Rates

- 5.26. As from April 2015, all local authorities in the Eastern Region agreed to maximum hourly charge rates for agency social worker and team manager roles.
- 5.27. This was in response to a situation where the imbalance between supply and demand for experienced qualified workers was leading to rapid increases in the costs of these staff.
- 5.28. The scheme was also intended to help reduce numbers of agency staff moving between authorities in the region. In a market where every new role was offered at a higher rate of pay, there was little incentive for agency staff to remain in the same authority for any length of time. This turnover of agency staff moving between authorities contributed to the high levels of turnover being experienced in Peterborough during the last financial year.
- 5.29. Social workers moving from authority to authority has an impact on the continuity of work experienced by children and their families – an issue that we identified in our self-assessment completed in March 2014. This frequency of movement also provides an element of cover for practitioners who are not up to the demands of the job. In busy services, it can take time for managers to identify that cases are not progressing as they should, and some workers have become adept at moving on from an authority just before their shortcomings are identified.
- 5.30. The capping agreement has had considerable success. The agreement has held and the agreed fees have not been exceeded in the region. Movement of agency staff between

authorities has also reduced significantly – partly because many agency staff were being paid rates higher than the cap on the date that the agreement came into force. The agreement included a clause that respected rates of pay agreed prior to implementation. This means that any agency worker in place and in receipt of a higher pay rate prior to April 2015 would lose money if they were to accept an agency role elsewhere in the region.

- 5.31. This feature of the agreement has caused some difficulties in Peterborough, however. There have been very few good quality experienced agency practitioners looking for new roles since the agreement came into force, and this has increased the time it takes to fill roles with suitable agency workers.
- 5.32. Overall the agreement has had a very positive impact. It has ended the ever increasing charge rates for agency staff, helping to reduce high rates of churn between local authorities in the region. The negative impact of fewer practitioners circulating is to some extent an inevitable consequence, although the contributing factor of some staff being reluctant to move because they would be re-employed at lower pay rates will decline over time.
- 5.33. There are some indications that other regions in the country are considering implementing similar schemes. The West Midlands has done so and we believe that London Region is actively considering such a move.

6. KEY ISSUES

- 6.1. Key issues arising from the above include:
 - Vacancy rates for qualified social workers are currently very high in Peterborough, but will reduce significantly as the current round of newly qualified staff begin in their new roles;
 - Progress has been made in recruitment of team managers, heads of service and above and this stability has also assisted in reducing the high rates of permanent and agency staff turnover experienced in Peterborough from around September 2014;
 - A new website is in development that will be much more user friendly and will therefore assist in attracting candidates to apply for roles in the City; and:
 - Work is taking place to develop and cost a retention package for long-serving experienced qualified social workers.
- 6.2. However, despite these initiatives, we are aware that in common with other local authorities, we will always be likely to struggle to recruit staff. We are unlikely to be in a position where we have filled the number of qualified social workers in our current structure.
- 6.3. We are therefore piloting the recruitment of a number of alternatively qualified staff who can undertake a significant proportion of the direct work with children and young people who are subject to child in need plans.
- 6.4. There was a very positive response to the recent adverts for these roles. Despite being only for 6 month contracts, more than 80 people applied and 15 of the planned 20 roles have been filled following interviews. We have set the bar high in terms of experience because we want to ensure that we do all we can to secure success in relation to the pilot. We are now in the process of completing pre-employment checks and we are aiming for all 15 applicants to commence together at the beginning of November 2015.
- 6.5. Those employed have come from a diverse range of backgrounds, which is important for us in terms of successful engagement with the communities of Peterborough. At the time of writing this report, an additional advert was being prepared in order to recruit to the final few post.

- 6.6. A detailed induction programme has been prepared for all the successful candidates in order to ensure that they are fully prepared and supported for case holding responsibilities.
- 6.7. The arrangements in the Eastern Region to cap fees payable to agency social workers and team managers have had a positive impact. The agreement has held, and turnover rates have reduced significantly.

7. IMPLICATIONS

- 7.1. Although most of our agency practitioners are very committed to Peterborough, with many having worked in the city for considerable periods, the cost of employing them compared with directly employed staff, is significantly higher.
- 7.2. While taking actions to improve the website and the retention offer to social workers will assist us in recruitment, all the indications are that there are too few experienced qualified social workers for the roles available.
- 7.3. The recent success in recruiting alternatively qualified team support workers illustrates this point; over 80 people – most of whom had considerable skills and experience to offer – applied for these roles, despite them being advertised as temporary 6 month appointments.
- 7.4. We are therefore committed to developing the pilot in order to explore the extent to which we can use alternatively qualified workers to support the work of the service. We are also of the view that bringing this skill mix to the authority will help us to work more effectively with certain groups of children and young people than is currently the case.

8. CONSULTATION

- 8.1. Consultation has taken place with senior officers within Children's Social Care and with key partners including colleagues within HR.

9. NEXT STEPS

- 9.1. The next steps are to secure the starting dates for the newly qualified social workers and the alternatively qualified workers. From there we will be able to assess the extent to which we can reduce the existing number of agency social workers.
- 9.2. The redesign of the recruitment website will continue over the next 6-8 weeks and it should be available for launch after this time.
- 9.3. Costings of a recruitment and retention package will also be confirmed within the next 4 weeks, and Cabinet approval sought.

10. BACKGROUND DOCUMENTS

Used to prepare this report, in accordance with the Local Government (Access to Information) Act 1985:

- 10.1. None

11. APPENDICES

- 11.1. None.