

Children's Social Care Recruitment and Retention Update

Corporate Parenting Committee: May 2017

Introduction:

1. The purpose of this report is to update the Committee on recruitment activity and workforce stability since these issues were last considered by the Children & Families Scrutiny Committee in November. As then, we are aware from discussions around the region that the recruitment and retention of social workers and team managers remains a challenge for all local authorities. Therefore whilst improvements in Cheshire East's ability to attract permanent experienced staff are to be welcomed, there is still an ongoing need for a small cohort of agency workers as identified below.

2. Activity is planned and monitored by the Recruitment and Retention Task Group, under the leadership of the Children and Families Social Care senior management team. Membership of the group includes senior managers from across the service, representatives from Workforce Development, HR and the Communications Team. The Recruitment & Retention Strategy for 2015-17 retains four key priorities:

- to recruit sufficient permanent high quality staff with suitable qualifications and experience;
- to retain existing employees by ensuring they have the right skills, equipment and support to carry out their roles effectively;
- achieve manageable social worker caseloads; and
- increase engagement and communication with social work staff.

Background Context:

3. At the time of the last Ofsted Inspection in July 2015 it already felt as though significant progress had been made in relation to recruitment and retention and this was recognised in the final report. As we moved into 2016, it was apparent that we had entered a new phase of our improvement plan: turnover had continued to reduce and the workforce had stabilised; we were therefore able to move from a rolling programme of social worker recruitment to a more targeted approach as individual vacancies in the various parts of the service arose. Over half of the appointments made in 2016 were of experienced workers from other authorities which suggests that Cheshire East is increasingly seen to be an 'employer of choice' in the region. The social work microsite has recently been updated and was Highly Commended at the *Children and Young People Now Awards* at the end of last year.

4. Just as importantly, we have moved from a position in which the service has been heavily reliant on expensive agency management to only requiring agency cover for temporary situations as they arise. The Children in Need/Child Protection (CiN/CP)

Team in Crewe is now fully staffed with five permanent Team Managers; the final agency manager in the Permanence and Throughcare Team will be replaced next month and there is currently one short-term cover arrangement in the CiN/CP team in Macclesfield. Permanent managers are key to providing a sound base for the longer term development of practice and the nurturing of new students and workers.

Retention:

5. Cheshire East has a comprehensive two year programme for newly qualified social workers which involves completion of the ASYE (Assessed & Supported Year in Employment) and a further year of consolidating practice. The programme is supported by colleagues in Workforce Development and involves extensive additional training, supervision and peer support; feedback from new social workers to the service is consistently positive and it therefore fosters staff retention by supporting and mentoring staff at this most vital part of their careers.

6. Turnover in the social work teams is currently stable with any recent departures being essentially due to personal circumstances and the desire of people to reduce expensive and time-consuming commutes. 'Internal turnover' ie SWs looking to move out of the CiN/CP Teams as soon as they have finished the ASYE programme remains an issue on occasion albeit one over which we are able to retain a level of control and influence. Despite the high volume of referrals and the increase in the cared for children population, caseloads are currently proving manageable and in the busiest area of the service in Crewe for example, only two social workers are marginally over the agreed target level of 25 cases.

7. Sometime around July 2017 we expect training to start in the implementation of our Signs of Safety programme and it is expected that this will also have a positive impact on staff retention through the development of a single and coherent working model across the department.

Summary of Recent Activity:

- Recruitment activity has continued with a number of appointments made across the service as identified below. Social Worker interviews for Crewe and Macclesfield were completed in February; Team Manager interviews for Macclesfield have been arranged for April.
- Changes to the way in which agency staff who operate as limited companies pay their taxes (the IR35 reforms) have led to a small increase in enquiries on the website from people who are considering the option to return to a substantive post in a local authority; two of the applications for the Team Manager role in Macclesfield looked to be of this type. We will be meeting

again with the main agencies at Cheshire West and Chester Headquarters in May to review the effectiveness of the salary cap.

- A potential concern for future recruitment activity is something of a downward trend in the number of applications we have recently received for social worker posts. One possible explanation for this is our geography (ie we are generally too far north to be considered 'midlands' and too far south to be thought of as North West) and our absence from the two main recruitment websites used by north-west authorities (<https://greater.jobs/>) and those in the midlands (<https://www.wmjobs.co.uk/>). As a trial, we have advertised the Head of Service for Cared for Children role on WM Jobs (including a slot as 'Job of the Week') and because they issue a daily update of the number of times our listing has been viewed, we will be able to monitor its effectiveness and make a judge local authorities for Greater Jobs, we are unable to advertise on this platform.
- As the contract for The Children's Society has been reduced, it relies on the service to identify, train and support young people to take part in recruitment. This is a challenge and our pool of young people for interviews has become depleted of late. We have names for two young people who can be trained up and we are also looking at generating further interest through the Care Leavers Forum.

Area Updates

Crewe: five agency workers are still in post covering the skills gap arising from the higher numbers of ASYE and inexperienced workers in the team; we recently appointed a part time senior practitioner from Staffordshire, a progressed SW from Buckinghamshire and an ASYE applicant currently on placement in the team.

CHECS: there are no social worker vacancies; a consultation exercise has recently been conducted to reduce the number of Team Managers to two.

Permanance and Throughcare: a Team Manager from Bucks who is relocating will join the service in June; a new social worker started as an ASYE on 3rd April and we are looking at an internal transfer from the Youth Offending Service in May.

Macclesfield: various workers are due to return from maternity leave in the coming months; with the recent appointments of a part time progressed social worker from Gloucester and an ASYE applicant with 5 years' Police Public Protection Unit experience, the team will essentially be fully staffed again.

Fostering: two appointments were made in the recent round of interviews; two agency staff are covering acting up arrangements and the agency panel advisor is likely to leave at the end of April.

Adoption: interviews for a social worker post in the Regional Adoption Agency will take place in April and there is one agency social worker covering an acting up arrangement.

Independent Reviewing Officers: two permanent appointments from the last round of interviews are due to start on 5th April and 22nd May; there will shortly be a leaver due to retirement and an additional post has been agreed subject to two year funding.

Recruitment Activity: further advertisements and interviews will be scheduled for the coming months as per the requirements of the service outlined above.

Steve Nevitt, Service Manager, Resources