

Title of report: Workforce Challenges in Children's Services

Meeting: Children and Young People Scrutiny Committee

Meeting date: 13 June 2024

Report by: Director of Human Resources and Organisational Development

Classification

Open

Decision type

This is not an executive decision

Wards affected

(All Wards);

Purpose:

The purpose of this report is to update the committee on the workforce challenges in children's services and to outline the work being undertaken to address those challenges.

Recommendation(s)

1. That the committee reviews the report and determines any recommendations it wishes to make.

Alternative options

2. The committee could choose not to review the report. This option is not recommended because the report is provided to ensure the committee is sighted on key workforce issues.

Key considerations

The workforce challenge

3. Herefordshire Council, like every local authority across the country, has seen significant challenges in the recruitment and retention of staff in children's services. The national shortage of social workers is well reported as organisations compete to fill vacancies.
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4. Prior to 2021, the council was already experiencing difficulties in recruiting permanent social workers and work was underway to increase permanency. At that stage the council was working on a permanent to agency ratio in social work posts of approximately 80:20. One of the key factors in causing recruitment difficulties at that time was understood to be Herefordshire's geography and transport infrastructure and work to address the recruitment problem focused on attracting new recruits to the county.
5. From April 2021, the adverse court judgments, Ofsted judgment and government intervention compounded the difficulties in Herefordshire and severely impacted our reputation. These events made it almost impossible to recruit new permanent employees to the council and over a period of time, every senior manager in children's social care left the council. Children's services then struggled to fill vacant posts with agency workers, which up until this point it could reliably do. This inability to fill vacancies with agency workers and a high turnover in management, placed enormous strain on our current workforce and it led to poor staff retention, high turnover and even higher caseloads.

Reliance on agency workers

6. Agency workers are a valued and essential part of our workforce. When we are not able to recruit good agency workers it has a serious detrimental effect on our permanent workforce. The fact that the council wishes to drive down our reliance on agency workers does not in any way diminish the important contribution agency workers make and any workforce modelling undertaken assumes that agency workers will form part of our workforce for the foreseeable future.
7. That said, in most circumstances the council would prefer to make a permanent appointment because it provides greater stability for the council and for children and families and it is almost always more economical to do so.
8. A summary table setting out the proportion of permanent and agency workers by role since January 2023 can be found in Appendix A.
9. The table shows that the proportion of agency workers is too high and has been increasing. This is due in part to the considerable investment in children's services which has increased the number of social worker posts overall. The immediate effect of this investment is to increase the number of posts that need to be filled and initially these posts are filled by agency workers. This means that although the council has recruited 71 social workers since February 2023 and retention is now good, the total number of permanent social workers still needed has increased.
10. The Children and Young People Directorate spent £12 million on agency staff in 2023/24. The ambition is to develop a stable and resilient workforce to make a positive and sustained difference to the lives of children, young people and families in Herefordshire. There will be a continued focus on the conversion of high cost agency staff to permanent posts and this is represented by a £1.006million savings target for 2024/25, with a target to convert 30 social workers from agency staff to permanent by the end of June 2024. Activity is underway to deliver this target by the end of quarter 1 in 2024/25. In addition, the reduction of the number of children in care will mean a reduction in the overall number of social workers.

Strategies for addressing the challenges

11. The council aims to reduce the proportion of agency workers by:

- appointing more permanent social workers into posts that are filled by agency workers and
- reducing the overall number of posts that we have in the establishment.

12. These two aims are underpinned by detailed plans and strategies which include:

- the children's improvement plan which has a strong workforce element and has its progress monitored at the Children's Improvement Board
- a Workforce Delivery Board which reports into the Improvement Board and has a programme of work to deliver against the improvement plan.
- A new corporate workforce strategy
- A new workforce strategy for children's services. A draft of which is included in Appendix B
- 3 year financial plan for children's services.

13. The plans and strategies cover a number of areas where we have made good progress. Areas where we have done well include:

- Team manager recruitment which was highlighted as a priority by the DfE's Commissioner. At the time of writing we have moved from an almost entirely agency team manager workforce to one where 24 out of 25 posts in social care will be recruited to on a permanent basis when new recruits join us in July.
- Senior manager recruitment where all posts have been appointed to on a permanent basis and we have secured a fixed term contract for the incoming Corporate Director, Children and Young People in July
- Developing our 'Spirit of Herefordshire' microsite and branding
- Procuring a new recruitment portal
- Growing a dedicated recruitment team within children's services to support managers who are recruiting
- Developing a suite of recruitment materials to better articulate our offer to applicants
- Simplifying the process for agency workers to convert to permanent.
- Ensuring or pay is competitive
- Making sure our wider employment offer is good including increasing annual leave for new starters from 25 to 31 days, removing unpaid leave days and having a strong wellbeing and benefits offer.
- Increasing our welcome payment to £5,000
- Reimbursing 'Social Work England' professional fees for social workers.
- Introducing a retention payment scheme which is payable annually
- Introducing a clear development and career progression scheme
- Creation of employee networks to develop a sense of belonging
- Creation of forums such as the staff reference group and aiming high group so that employee voices can be heard
- Reducing case loads
- Significantly reducing our turnover rates for permanent staff, making our workforce more stable which is good for children, families and our workforce.

14. There are also some areas where we have yet to make a significant impact and these areas include:

- Telling our story better about what has changed and why we are now a positive place for social workers to come and develop their careers in a supportive working environment.
- Making recruitment personal, rather than just a process
- Thinking about the workforce more holistically and not just in terms of social workers
- Making a significant impact into the number of agency social workers we engage
- Reducing the rates we pay for agency workers by returning to the rates set as part of a regional memorandum of understanding (referred to as The M.O.U.).
- Having sufficient capacity to respond to the high demand for social work apprenticeship places.
- Maintaining a robust local process to capture exit intelligence from leavers.

Social Work Pipeline

15. The council recognises the importance of having a good and consistent pipeline of newly qualified social workers and has a number of partner arrangements in place with higher education institutions to support the career pipeline into social work. At the time of writing, the council's academy is supporting 15 apprentices at different stages of their apprenticeship journey.
16. The council is partnered with Coventry University and the University of Kent to deliver a 3 year social work apprenticeship programme, where one cohort completed earlier this year and a second cohort is due to finish their 3 year course in September 2024. Plans are in place for all successful apprentices to join the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) programme in 2024.
17. The council also has traditional social work students on placement from the University of Gloucester, University of Birmingham and Worcester University. We attend development sessions at Worcestershire and Gloucestershire University to address and recruit students onto our ASYE programme. Strong links with Birmingham University have also been established via the step up to social work programme.
18. To support more students and trainees we need to develop the number of practice educators and a number of staff members have attended the Practice Leadership programme provided by the University of Worcester. Social workers are also undertaking their Practice Educator One awards and Practice Educator Two awards at Worcester University.
19. Moving forwards, links with the Heart of Worcestershire University are being developed and work is planned with our Leeds partners to develop ideas around using our University colleagues to deliver master classes.

Being a good employer

20. When we talk to social workers about what matters most to them, we are told that a supportive environment where they can practice safely, with good supervision and an opportunity for development is key. This together with competitive pay, being valued and having positive relationships with their manager are all important. It's not a big ask, but for the last few years, an almost entirely agency leadership team within children's services has not been able to routinely meet all of these needs. Despite this, many workers did stay with the council during this time and the council is incredibly grateful to those who have remained with us in the last 3 years.

21. We've worked hard to improve the lived experience of social workers who work for us and we have improved our employment offer in a number of way, some of which we have set out in paragraph 13 above. Improvements take time to embed and now we have a more permanent leadership team, there are strong signs that our culture is improving, but getting under the skin of what it's really like to work here can be challenging.
22. Managers play a key role in listening to employee voices on a day to day basis and more formal groups such as the staff reference group and aiming high group are useful for some workers who thrive in speaking up in a structured environment.
23. Not everyone has a manager who they feel they can talk to and not everyone feels confident to say what they think in front of others. To give all employees the chance to be heard, the council undertakes an anonymous employee survey every two years and this does provide a totally safe space for employee feedback about what it's like to work for the council. The most recent survey was carried out in 2022 which was before many of the improvements we have made had been embedded long enough to have significant effect. The summary data for children's services from that survey is included in Appendix C.
24. The next employee survey will be launched on 12 June 2024 and The Committee may want to scrutinise the outcome of that survey in the autumn. The Committee may also decide that talking to front line workers, to validate the data would be beneficial.
25. In addition to the employee survey and any other formal or informal feedback mechanisms we have, we also have a set of metrics which give us some information about what it's like to work here. Some of these are summarised in the table below:

| Metric | Children and Young People Directorate | Council |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|---------|
| Absence rates (number of days lost annually per fte) | 8.3 | 9.2 |
| Turnover rate (the council figure is temporarily inflated by MERS) | 12.4 | 15.9 |
| Employee engagement score (taken from employee survey) | 70% | 71% |
| Employee survey 2022 response rate | 44% | 56% |
| Employee Survey 'Check in' 2023 response rate | 36% | 46 % |
| Mandatory training completion rates | | |
| Information Governance – | 93% | 96.1% |
| Information Security – | 93.3 % | 96.4% |
| Fraud Awareness – | 92.8% | 96.2% |
| Prevent - | 92.8% | 96% |

The data tells us that currently the children and young people directorate is performing close to or better than the corporate average in most areas. This is a marked improvement on previous years where compliance with mandatory training, turnover rates and engagement all performed worse than the council average.

Community Impact

26. A skilled and stable workforce in children's services will ensure delivery of key community objectives set out in Herefordshire Council's Plan and delivery of the children's improvement plan. Having the right workforce in place will enable us to ensure all children are healthy, safe and inspired to achieve and that care experienced children and young people are well supported to make good life choices.

Environmental Impact

27. Whilst this report will have minimal environmental impacts, consideration has been made to minimise waste and resource use in line with the council's environmental policy.

Equality duty

28. Under section 149 of the Equality Act 2010, the 'general duty' on public authorities is set out as follows:

A public authority must, in the exercise of its functions, have due regard to the need to –

- a) eliminate discrimination, harassment, victimisation and any other conduct that is prohibited by or under this Act;
- b) advance equality of opportunity between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it;
- c) foster good relations between persons who share a relevant protected characteristic and persons who do not share it.

29. The public sector equality duty (specific duty) requires us to consider how we can positively contribute to the advancement of equality and good relations, and demonstrate that we are paying 'due regard' in our decision making in the design of policies and in the delivery of services.

30. The council's human resources policies pay full regard to the council's responsibilities as set out in the public sector equality duty.

Resource implications

31. There are no direct resource implications arising from this report.

Legal implications

32. There are no specific legal implications arising from this report.

Risk management

33. There are no specific risk arising from this report.

Consultees

34. Not applicable

Appendices

- A - Agency and permanent profile by role and key
- B – Children and Young People Workforce Strategy
- C - Employee Survey Outcomes for Children and Young People 2022

Background papers

None identified

Please note this section must be completed before the report can be published

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| Governance | Simon Cann | Date 04/06/2024 |
| Finance | Click or tap here to enter text. | Date Click or tap to enter a date. |
| Legal | Click or tap here to enter text. | Date Click or tap to enter a date. |
| Communications | Michala Lee | Date 31/05/2024 |
| Equality Duty | Harriet Yellin | Date 31/05/2024 |
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| Risk | Click or tap here to enter text. | Date Click or tap to enter a date. |

Approved by Click or tap here to enter text. Date Click or tap to enter a date.

Glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.

ASYE - Assessed and Supported Year in Employment

A 12 month programme of support and assessment, in the workplace, for newly qualified social workers

MERS – Mutual Early Resignation Scheme

A programme the council has in place to reduce the size of the headcount on a voluntary basis.

MOU - Memorandum of Understanding.

An agreement between all local authorities in the West Midlands region to cap the rates of pay for agency workers, so that we do not compete with each other.

Practice Educator

Someone who has responsibility for teaching, supervising and assessing social worker students on placements in the workplace.