

27 OCTOBER 2021

REPORT TITLE:	CHILDREN'S SERVICES SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE OVERVIEW POSITION
REPORT OF:	DIRECTOR FOR CHILDREN, FAMILIES AND EDUCATION

REPORT SUMMARY

This report provides a brief overview to the Children, Young People and Education Committee (CYPE) on the current position of the social work workforce in the Council's Children's Services Directorate. The report highlights some key challenges faced by the Service, including the workforce adapting to new ways of working, supporting recruitment and retention, managing staff absence rates, and the use of temporary agency staffing.

This is not a key decision.

RECOMMENDATION/S

The Children, Young People and Education Committee is recommended to:

1. Note the current position regarding the children's social workforce position;
2. Consider the proposed actions outlined in the report, including the development of a revised Social Work Workforce Strategy.

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

1.0 REASON/S FOR RECOMMENDATION/S

- 1.1 To ensure Members of the Children, Young People and Education Committee have the opportunity to monitor and scrutinise the social work workforce position of the Council's Children's Services Directorate.

2.0 OTHER OPTIONS CONSIDERED

- 2.1 Not applicable.

3.0 BACKGROUND INFORMATION

- 3.1 The current challenges faced by the Council's children's social work workforce is likely to be no more acute or challenging than that faced by the majority of Councils across England. A significant number of Councils are reporting challenges with workforce instability in children's social work staffing, a position that has been exacerbated during the Covid pandemic. Establishing a stable, permanent, motivated, and skilled social work workforce is a key factor in delivering effective children's safeguarding services.
- 3.2 Children's Services 'journey of improvement' since 2016 has been characterised by having in place all the factors that contribute to an effective social work workforce strategy. Whilst challenging, Children's Services has been successful in the recruitment of new social workers, albeit the majority were newly qualified. The retention of new and existing social workers has been a key achievement with the offer of Continuous Professional Development, manageable caseloads, and opportunities to move to specialist roles or successful in applying for promotion to management posts. Sickness absence levels, either personal or work-related reasons was relatively low and either in line or below the Council's target of 10.75 days per fte. The period of stability amongst the workforce helped to reduce the necessity to employ temporary agency social workers into either unfilled posts, or where there was a requirement to create additional capacity to meet Service demands.
- 3.3 With the onset of the Covid pandemic in March 2020, there remained a stable workforce for a period of almost 12 months. This was, in part, related to a desire for employment security and familiarisation in the workplace due to the challenges and unpredictability associated with the pandemic. It was also partly due to the successful awarding of grant funding to support a range of different innovative projects such as the 'We can talk about domestic abuse' and the 'Social Worker in Schools' programmes. These projects attracted social workers from across the country and resulted in the recruitment of six experienced social workers into project teams and other service teams. A targeted campaign which sought to encourage agency workers to convert to become permanent employees at this time, also resulted in the successful conversion of eight agency workers to permanent.

3.4 What has emerged amongst the workforce since the easing of Covid-related restrictions is greater challenges, particularly in the areas of recruitment, and to a lesser extent the retention of existing social workers. Coupled with increases in staff absence rates, cited mainly as a consequence of 'Covid fatigue' and the strains of working during a pandemic, this has ultimately placed increased pressures on the workforce.

3.5 Social work 'establishment' position

3.6 On 30 September 2021, there was 191.9 full time equivalent (fte) social work posts in Children's Services. This includes all those staff where there is a requirement in their job description to be a professional registered social worker. These posts would include social workers at various level of experience, including those newly qualify (ASYEs), and advanced social workers, team managers and independent reviewing officers.

3.7 The table below (fig 1) shows there has been an increase of 6.1% in the vacancy rate amongst qualified social work posts during the period December 2020 to August 2021, with an outturn position of 27.9% (vacancy rate), which equates to 53.6 vacant posts. Most of these posts are at social worker level based in the case management teams, notably Assessment and Intervention, and until most recently the Permanence Service. The tally below doesn't account for 11 frozen social work posts, the funding of which has been diverted to invest in family support workers, which assists the teams in alleviating some of the operational pressures caused by running with such vacancy rates. Considering the reported 53 vacant posts these are currently being covered by the employment of family support workers (11 'frozen' posts) and agency social work staffing that is detailed in para. 3.16 of this report. This is enabling the Service to maintain manageable caseloads.

Fig. 1 Establishment Posts

Social Workers	Dec	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug
In post	139.46	134.96	132.96	131.46	129.36	133.74	134.74	129.74	127.31
Vacancies	42.06	46.56	48.56	50.06	51.56	47.18	46.18	51.18	53.6
Established	192.52	192.52	192.52	192.52	191.92	191.92	191.9	191.9	191.9
Vacancy Rate	21.8%	24.1%	25.2%	26.0%	26.8%	24.5%	24.0%	26.6%	27.9%

3.8 Social Work recruitment and retention

3.9 Over a 12-month rolling period up until 30 August 2021 the Council recruited 36 new employees into qualified social work posts. In the same period 39 employees left social work posts in Children's Services. This is the first period in over 12 months when the Service will be reporting a deficit position in analysing recruitment and retention numbers. In the period between January 2020 and December 2020, the Service was successful in recruiting 16 experienced and 11 newly qualified social workers. At the same time, 15 total social work practitioners left the Council bringing with it a period of workforce stability. Much of this was related to the initiatives as outlined in section 3.3 of the report.

3.10 As part of the 'Grow Your Own' Strategy the Service has focused on recruiting newly qualified ASYEs (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment). This has proved successful each year. However, one of the challenges facing the Service in terms of workforce is in recruiting experienced social workers. Whilst this is challenge for all Councils, the increase in recent months of more 'project' style work has proved an attraction for experienced social workers (due to the high pay and time-limited nature) and subsequently thwarted current recruitment drives. The agency social work market has also become a positive career choice for social workers. The average payrate working on an agency basis exceeds that paid to permanent social workers employed by Councils. Also, it offers flexibility to individuals who may not want to commit to long term permanent posts.

Fig.2 New Starters and Leavers

	Social Workers ASYE	Social Workers	Experienced Social Workers	ASWP	Team Manager	Service Manager	IRO	Total
Starters	14	6	6	0	6	0	0	32
Leavers	5	16	9	3	3	0	0	36
Total	+9	-10	-3	-3	+3	0	0	-4

3.11 To address the challenges in recruitment, the Service has started to implement new approaches. These include:

- Online open evening social work recruitment events;
- Launched an internal social work degree apprenticeship programme, with a cohort of four family support workers set to start the qualification in January 2022. This is a long-term strategy underpinned by the apprenticeship levy with the potential for this cohorts beyond this initial pilot;
- Targeted agency to permanent campaign;
- Rebranding of recruitment adverts and promotional material, moving away from focus on Ofsted and improvement and encouraging social care practitioners to come and help #bethedifference for children and young people in Wirral;
- Social media campaigns;
- Press coverage and newspaper adverts;
- Entering a second year of the Frontline training programme recruiting four social workers per year. In 2022/23 consideration is being given to extending the programme to include training eight new social workers.
- Use of recruitment agencies for permanent worker.

3.12 In moving forward it is anticipated that the recruitment of new permanent social workers will remain a challenge. The likelihood is that most social workers recruited to the Service will be inexperienced or newly qualified. In planning for this, the Council must consider how it can provide additional training and support (particularly in their first year of employment) and ensure caseloads remain manageable for newly qualified social workers without placing additional burdens on the Service. Considering this there will be a need to invest in further training and management capacity. There

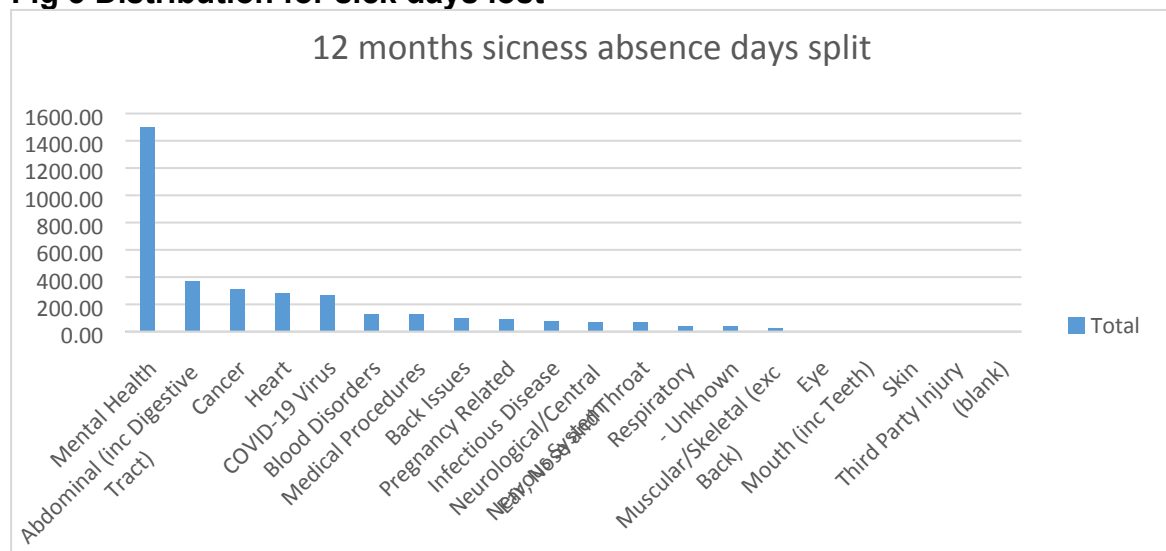
may also be the need to increase the number of overall social worker posts to maintain caseload capacity.

Finally, given that most vacancies are in the safeguarding teams (Assessment and Intervention), it will be important to avoid the risk of having too many inexperienced social workers in teams where the nature of the work is fast moving, challenging, complex and high-risk safeguarding.

3.13 Social work absence management rates

3.14 During a rolling 12-month period ending 30 August 2021 staff absence levels amongst qualified social workers was 15.08 days per fte. This compares to the whole Council target of 10.75 days per fte and the overall Council position of 10.16 days per fte. The percentage of short-term absence represent 27% of the overall number, with long-term showing as a percentage rate of 73%. The cumulative total of days lost for 12 months is outlined as 3,515.64, the split for the reasons is detailed in Fig 3 below. To reduce the sickness levels within the service and particularly reduce mental health absence, we have recently introduced a Wellbeing Manifesto as part of the workforce strategy, which will hopefully see an impact on these levels within the next 12 months.

Fig 3 Distribution for sick days lost



3.15 Social work agency staffing levels

3.16 The use of agency social workers has remained consistent in Children’s Services since December 2020 as illustrated by the table below (Fig 4) averaging between 28 (lowest point) and 45 (highest point).

Fig 4 Agency Social Work Staffing Levels

	Dec	Jan	Feb	March	April	May	June	July	Aug
Agency Numbers	41	39	39	37	34	30	28	28	45

3.17 In the period between December 2020 to June 2021 there was a net reduction of 13 agency social workers. This reduced capacity within the Service to manage in the region of 200 plus children's cases. Given the scale of the change, it was difficult to find suitable agency staff at the pace required. Equally, considering the predicted demand on social care services, primarily as a result of Covid and children returning to education, the Service made the decision to commission a 'managed service' (Innovate) in August 2021 that consisted of employing a team of social workers and a team manager that is based in the Assessment Service where vacancies and absence management was most acute.

3.18 Innovate is due to end its contract in early November after a 12-week period. Officers are currently working on an exit strategy to support this.

3.19 **Workforce Strategy**

3.20 Led by the Children's Principal Social Worker and the Performance and Improvement Manager in Children's Services, a new Social Care Workforce Strategy is being devised. This work is being managed via the governance arrangements provided by the Children's Social Work Workforce Strategy Group. Whilst it would have been necessary to update the workforce strategy to ensure it's aligned to the needs of the Service, and the priorities set out in the Wirral Plan, this has become of greater importance due to the impact of the pandemic and how it's influenced safeguarding services, including demand and delivery an effective social work workforce. The outcome of this work will be completed in January 2022.

4.0 **FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 There are no financial implications arising from this report.

5.0 **LEGAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 There are no legal implications arising from this report.

6.0 **RESOURCE IMPLICATIONS: STAFFING, ICT AND ASSETS**

6.1 There are none arising from this report.

7.0 **RELEVANT RISKS**

7.1 The Council's Corporate and Directorate Risks Registers are currently under review to reflect the thematic priorities of the Council's new Corporate Plan including the impact and recovery from Covid-19. Information on the key risks faced by the organisation and the associated mitigations and planned actions will be reported to Committee once refreshed.

8.0 **ENGAGEMENT/CONSULTATION**

8.1 There will be a process of staff engagement in developing the workforce strategy. The outcome of the work will be reported to this Committee for endorsement, in line with relevant timelines for completion.

9.0 EQUALITY IMPLICATIONS

- 9.1 Wirral Council has a legal requirement to make sure its policies, and the way it carries out its work, do not discriminate against anyone. An Equality Impact Assessment is a tool to help council services identify steps they can take to ensure equality for anyone who might be affected by a particular policy, decision, or activity. There are no equality issues arising from this report.

10.0 ENVIRONMENT AND CLIMATE IMPLICATIONS

- 10.1 There are no environmental or climate implications generated by the recommendations in this report.

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APPENDICES

None

BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

