

Title of the Report: Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers

Ward(s): All wards

Portfolios: Councillor Wilson, Children's Services

1. Aim

The aim of this report is to provide an overview of Social Worker staffing in Children's Social Care, and to outline activity undertaken over the last year to improve the recruitment and retention of Social Workers.

2. Reason for Scrutiny

This report is to provide an update for Members of the Children's Overview and Scrutiny Committee to enable them to fulfil their key responsibilities and duties in holding the council and its partners to account for its work in preventing and protecting children and young people from harm in Walsall. A stable and fully staffed Social Worker workforce (encompassing Social Workers, Senior Practitioners and Team Managers) is essential to this work.

3. Recommendations

To note the work undertaken across 2020 to develop a stable, skilled Social Worker workforce and establish the structures and conditions for longer-term sustainability in this workforce.

To continue to build on this progress through further targeted recruitment and a focus on the retention of Social Work practitioners through the measures set out here.

4. Report detail – Know

4.1 Activity and Impact This Year

There have been staffing challenges for Children's Social Care over a number of years, and creating the conditions to develop a stable, permanent Social Worker workforce was identified as a key priority this year. This provides the foundation for restorative, relational Social Work practice, and analytic, timely, purposeful assessments and interventions, as these are based on consistent relationships between Social Workers and children, young people and families. Workforce stability and progression is needed for practice improvement and embedding new models of practice, as Social Work practitioners are able to develop their skills and familiarity with these approaches. Also, this stability means consistent relationships in teams, and between Social Workers and their Team Managers, which in turn contributes to how supported Social Workers feel.

The plan established this year as part of the workforce and recruitment and retention strategy in Children's Social Care was to adopt a targeted approach to recruitment, and to develop a stronger focus on retention.

The recruitment of experienced Social Workers is a challenge both locally and nationally. This has been reflected in our data and activity this year. A total of 14 experienced Social Work practitioners have been recruited through both an ongoing open Talent Link advertisement and five rounds of recruitment. Knowing this was likely to be the challenge, the focus has been on growing and developing our own workforce whilst undertaking these rounds of recruitment to bring in experienced staff where this has been possible. Although there have been challenges in recruiting experienced Social Workers, focused activity has allowed for the recruitment of 35 newly qualified (first year ASYE) Social Workers. This was supported by a proposal put forward in April 2020 to over-recruit to 9 Social Worker posts, supported by recruiting 2 additional Senior Practitioner posts to support these less experienced workers. These Social Workers have all joined and are now established within the workforce and are currently completing the first year ASYE programme with the Academy for Social Work.

Alongside recruitment, the focus this year has been, and will continue to be on the retention and development of Social Workers: with the intention being to keep these practitioners and also to enable them to develop into skilled, competent practitioners who reflect the values, ethos and methods adopted in Children's Social Care in Walsall. In addition to the large numbers of new staff, another key reason to focus on retention is to reflect how retention challenges can arise with Social Workers who have been with a Local Authority for 2-3 years. This is because this is a point where they have gained some experience and are looking for development and progression opportunities. Analysis undertaken this year indicated that in July, there were 18 Social Workers at this point within frontline Social Care teams, and a further 39 Social Workers coming up to this stage in their careers.

The focus on retention has been achieved through two connected areas of activity this year. First, there has been ongoing work to have individual development conversations and offer opportunities to staff. Second, work has started and will continue in order to establish structures for long-term sustainability for staff development, wellbeing and career progression.

In the first respect, a number of staff have progressed within Children's Social Care this year. 19 Social Work practitioners have advanced within Children's Social Care, and a further 6 practitioners have had the opportunity to move across service areas to gain a variety of practice experience. This has meant that those staff individually feel supported and able to develop, and also creates a wider culture of staff knowing that there are progression and development opportunities available. This has also meant a reduction to the costs of agency staff at a senior level, as available posts have been filled internally up through the staffing structure.

In the second area, in establishing the right longer-term structures, the first key part of this work was to understand how staff feel and what they want. To do this consultations were undertaken with staff. Briefings were undertaken as a follow on from the Children's Services Health Check questionnaire sent to staff in January, with a series of sessions held to share the results and hear from staff. Separate briefings were also held with Team Managers, as well as focus groups with staff who have remained with WMBC for

an extended period to understand what has made them stay, and with the newly qualified ASYE Social Worker cohort.

The result of these sessions, amongst other key identified areas for development, has led to the following key areas of activity in establishing long-term workforce structures:

- 1) Developing a clear Social Worker career structure, including establishing a Senior Social Worker role.
- 2) Refining the offer for experienced practice supervisor roles in Children's Social Care, including developing the Senior Practitioner role, and establishing a development programme for practice supervisors and a Team Manager programme.
- 3) Developing a 'Staff Wellbeing Strategy' as part of the Recruitment and Retention Strategy, to consider the needs and challenges of frontline Social Work within the wider corporate offer.
- 4) Developing the Health Check methodology as well as other feedback and consultation mechanisms so that Senior Leaders are visible and connected to the workforce. This will create a continued cycle of listening to staff and acting on what they tell us.
- 5) Reviewing the use of Market Supplement payments where these are in place, and replacing these with a Retention Payments scheme that offers a greater incentive to Social Work practitioners who remain with WMBC for longer periods.
- 6) Developing a revised core training programme and practice development offer to support Social Worker's learning and progression.
- 7) Reviewing the offer provided by the 'Academy for Social Work' so this service is embedded in practice, and as effective as possible in supporting and developing staff.
- 8) Continuing to develop and refine the newly qualified ASYE programme, which has been identified as a national example of good practice by Skills for Care.
- 9) Reviewing and continuing to develop student progression routes so there is a steady flow of new staff who have already had practice experience in Walsall Children's Social Care.
- 10) Embedding clear models of practice and support structures so that Social Work practitioners feel they have the tools and resources to effectively do their jobs. This work is underway with the establishment of the Family Safeguarding model, which sets Walsall out both regionally and nationally.

The impact of this work has yet to be fully realised, and will continue to be reviewed and refined to make sure it is positively impacting on how Social Work practitioners feel about working for Walsall, and on recruitment and retention. What can be reported is that the current direction of travel is positive, with a reduction in the vacancy rate for Social Work practitioners, which it is anticipated provides cautious grounds for optimism and further advances next year. Recent analysis for the Children's Social Work Census, shows the following key developments:

- The percentage of staff turnover has reduced in 2020 to 15.8%. This means staff turnover has nearly halved since 2018, and places WMBC below regional and statistical comparators.

- The vacancy rate has reflected this, and reduced by 12.7% in the last year to 13.3% in 2020.
- The percentage of the workforce who are agency staff has also fallen by 12.2% from 2018 to 2020, and currently stands at 15.1%, which is lower than regional and statistical comparators.
- The absence rate for 2020 is at an average of 2.1 days per staff member, down from 3.7 days in 2019, and 3.3 days in 2018.

These positive trends provide the foundation for further work to build on this progress and to continue to improve on workforce stability. The planned over-recruitment of newly qualified ASYE Social Workers in 2020 was quickly reabsorbed into the staffing establishment mainly due to internal progression opportunities as set out above. This year has demonstrated the effectiveness of targeted recruitment and the approach of growing our own Social Worker workforce. Another year of undertaking such recruitment alongside focused work on retention should enable even greater stability as more Social Workers are recruited and develop, and the majority of these staff then remain with WMBC and progress. The intention is to therefore continue to embed the approach taken this year, and to really drive the focus on the retention and wellbeing of Social Work practitioners to create an effective, sustainable approach to workforce stability. Further, there will be additional targeted work on Social Worker Practice Education and students as this offers both progression to experienced staff as Practice Educators, and is an effective way of identifying and recruiting newly qualified Social Workers. With this work coordinated alongside other progression routes such as the Social work Apprenticeship, the intention is to have a clear 'pipeline' of potential recruits each year.

The impact of this work and levels of need will be monitored through the bi-monthly Workforce Steering Group that has been re-established, through updated reporting to the Directorate Management Team, and demonstrated through continued positive trends in the data, and in feedback from staff. In undertaking this work, the emphasis will remain on supporting Social Work practitioners, providing them with opportunities to develop and progress, giving them the right tools and resources to do their jobs, offering reasonable workloads, a competitive pay and retention package, listening to them, and recognising the importance of their wellbeing and achievements.

5. Reducing inequalities

Work is being undertaken in consultation with staff to ensure that recruitment processes reflect the diversity of the Children's Social Care workforce and communities that it serves, and that all staff feel able to develop and progress in WMBC. This will include analysis of staff data and consultation exercises to align with the work set out in this report.

6. Links to Council Corporate Plan Priorities

The Walsall Right for Children Transformation Programme contributes to a number of our Council Corporate Plan priorities:

a) People

A stable Social Worker workforce provides the foundation for services for children, young people and their families to ensure they have increased independence, improved health, and can positively contribute to their communities.

b) Internal Focus

A stable Social Worker workforce provides the foundation for maximising the effectiveness of services in Children's Social Care.

c) Children

A stable Social Worker workforce is an essential condition to be able to provide effective services for children so that they can have the best start and are safe from harm, are happy, healthy and learning well.

7. Decide

To note the contents of this report and to support recommendations

8. Respond

A further updating report on planned activity to support Social Worker recruitment and retention is being prepared for the Directorate Management Team in January 2021, and feedback and recommendations from this report will be incorporated into this work.

9. Review

The Workforce Steering Group will meet bi-monthly, and will review activity to support Social Worker recruitment and retention.

Background papers

- Ofsted Children's Services Inspection Report (2017): [2752938 \(ofsted.gov.uk\)](https://www.ofsted.gov.uk/reports/2752938)
- Department for Education Longitudinal Study of Local Authority Child and Family Social Workers (2020)
https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/906778/Longitudinal_study_of_local_authority_child_and_family_social_workers_Wave_2.pdf

Author

Antony Schaffarczyk
Principal Social Worker

☎ 07584 543243

✉ antony.schaffarczyk@walsall.gov.uk

