

November 2022

Social Worker Recruitment and Retention

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 support the recruitment and retention of social workers.

2. Recommendations

A stable, permanent workforce is a priority in Children's Social Care, and provides the foundation for consistency and good practice that makes a difference for children and families. The work outlined in the detail of this report should continue in order to continue a positive trajectory in the recruitment and retention of social workers, especially given the sector-wide challenges noted.

3. Report detail – know

Context

- 3.1 Social worker recruitment and retention has been a key area of development for Walsall Children's Social Care, and the approach taken and progress made is outlined below. This progress was reflected in the Ofsted Inspection and report from last year, which observed the commitment within Walsall Council to supporting Children's Services, and the positive impact that steps taken has had on workforce stability and development. It was considered that this, in turn, provided a foundation for improvements in consistency and quality of practice for children, young people and families.
- 3.2 There are significant national and regional challenges in the retention of experienced social workers in frontline practice. National research by the Department for Education has shown the numbers of experienced social workers leaving has now reached a five-year high, with successive year on year increases in the percentages of experienced social workers who leave local authority roles, and indeed the profession entirely. 16% of experienced children and families social workers left local authority roles 2020 to 2021. This crisis, and its implications for

local authorities, both financially, and in the capacity to deliver the best services for children and families, has been recognised in the recent national Care Review for Children's Social Care services (MacAllister, 2022). These challenges have, in turn, had a significant impact on social worker recruitment, as there is a lack of candidates for experienced Social Worker roles and they have led to the agency social worker market becoming inflated. There is significant demand for experienced social workers, and agencies are able to offer social workers attractive rates of pay. As more experienced staff leave either the profession entirely, or to move to agencies, this leaves a gap in local authority staffing, which can require some local authorities with high vacancy rates to pay higher rates of pay for agency social workers. This challenge has been exacerbated by agencies making specific demands on pay and conditions for agency social workers, or creating 'project teams' of groups of agency staff that can struggling local authorities can be required to hire at significant cost.

- 3.3 Across national and regional network meetings attended by senior leaders and managers these challenges and themes are consistently reported. It appears within the West Midlands, Walsall Children's Services is one of the more stable local authorities in respect of social work staffing. Walsall is one of the local authorities in the West Midlands that has maintained a clear commitment to remaining within the regional memorandum of understanding which sets out agreed rates for agency social worker pay, and has not had to seek permissions to step outside of this arrangement as a number of local authorities have.
- 3.4 The above LGA research does also indicate there are sufficient numbers of newly qualified social workers joining the profession each year to replace those who leave. The challenge is that if too many experienced staff continue to leave, and are replaced only by newly qualified practitioners, this creates a significant knowledge and skills gap. In turn, this places significant pressure on those more experienced social workers who remain.
- 3.5 The national context frames the approach taken here with a robust focus on the retention of experienced social workers, and on training and developing newly qualified social workers – who will become the next generation of experienced social workers. This is about getting the right structures in place for future workforce stability. Each year, the service has taken on a large number of newly qualified social workers: the aim being that with the right conditions, support and progression and development opportunities, these social workers will remain with Walsall and we are able to build towards an increasingly permanent workforce. As this happens, we can reduce the numbers of agency social workers in a sustainable and measured way, which maintains the levels of experienced social workers needed to safely run services. The use of agency social workers then becomes more centred on covering for shorter-terms needs such as maternity and secondment opportunities, instead of vacant posts.

Work Undertaken

3.6 A range of measures have been used to promote retention in Children's Social Care, and these have been implemented through continued consultation and engagement with our workforce. These have included:

- The use of retention payments in key identified service areas
- The introduction of a new Senior Specialist Social Worker role as a progression opportunity for all Social Workers to support in retaining experienced Social Workers.
- Re-evaluation and regrading of Senior Practitioners, Social Work Assistant Team Managers and Consultant Social Workers to support the retention of experienced Social Workers in these key frontline roles.
- Our Supervision Framework and training for all managers and senior managers has been redesigned to embed a consistent approach to staff support and development. This is supported by a relaunched Practice Leadership Programme involving the whole management team.
- Together this work has helped to create a more defined social worker career pathway.
- There has been a focus on internal development and progression of staff so that people can see there are opportunities for them.
- We have a continued focus on social worker workloads.
- A new Workforce and Wellbeing Strategy for 2022 was developed and launched, with a positive and proactive focus on welfare and enhanced support and flexible working.
- This included securing grant funding for a trial, which means that Walsall is one of the first local authorities in the country to offer social workers clinical supervision.
- The Practice Development Hub has been restructured to offer greater training and support, especially for experienced staff.
- There is a cycle of communication and feedback with practitioners and managers to seek feedback and shape this thinking. This will lead to a revised Workforce and wellbeing Strategy for 2023.

3.7 There has been targeted approach to recruitment to ensure that there is a strong pipeline of good social workers joining Walsall. Measures to support this have included:

- Targeted over-recruitment in some areas and teams in order for a group of newly qualified social workers can grow and develop together, and to offer future investment in the workforce.
- The creation of robust recruitment processes, especially in recruiting newly qualified social workers.
- Investment in Practice Education (experienced social workers who take on students) to increase student numbers through the traditional university route, and a diversification of student entry routes. This has led to an increase in students appointed as newly qualified social workers who already know Walsall and are known by us.

- 3.8 There was some delay in the over-recruitment of newly qualified social workers in 2021 due to a need to bring in the right practitioners with sufficient skills and experience. Last year's recruitment cycle included many candidates with limited experience due to the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on learning opportunities. This has not been an issue this year. In this recruitment cycle so far, 30 newly qualified social workers have been appointed, of which 13 of whom are were students who have progressed or been recruited into permanent roles.

Impact

- 3.9 The impact of the work undertaken is reflected in data collected as part of national Social Worker Census, which shows as steady decrease in the use of agency data reporting as per the table below:

	2021	2020	2019	2018
Percentage of Agency Staff	9.52%	15.1%	19.1%	27.3%
Staff Turnover	16.9	15.8	26.7	30.4
Absence rate	2.1	2.1	3.7	3.3
Vacancy rate	7.2	13.3	26.0	27.6

- 3.10 The percentage of agency staff for this return was completed at a specific point when the numbers were particularly low, and these have risen somewhat across the year. This is due to the need to have experienced agency social workers to meet immediate service needs whilst the longer-term work set out here is undertaken.
- 3.11 There are currently 31 agency Social Workers in frontline practice and management roles across Children's Social Care. The breakdown of agency staff by service area is as follows:

Number	Service Area
Locality Family Safeguarding Teams	13
Locality Duty and Assessment Teams	6
Corporate Parenting	4
MASH	3
Fostering	2
Disabled Children's and Young Person's Team	2
Safeguarding and Review	1

Of the above staff, 5 are in management and Independent Reviewing Officer roles, and 26 are in frontline Social Worker and Senior or Advanced Practitioner roles. In respect of the reasons for agency usage, 18 agency staff are covering posts (7 covering secondments elsewhere in the service, 7 covering maternity leave and 3 covering sickness). 13 agency social workers are covering vacant posts.

- 3.12 A key indicator here is the vacancy rate, with targeted recruitment activity over the last four years having reduced the number of vacant posts that are either unfilled or filled by an agency social workers. Where agency social workers are currently retained against vacant posts, this is order to retain experienced staff in particular teams or to meet specific demands. This demonstrates the impact of recruitment activity to meet service needs, albeit noting the challenges above and that almost all social worker posts recruited to permanently this year have been filled by newly qualified social workers.
- 3.13 The key aim going forward is to retain social workers and for newer social workers to grow and develop in Walsall into experienced practitioners. Social worker turnover has reduced significantly, although there is no complacency around this, especially given the national and regional challenges outlined above. There will always be some level of turnover, as staff move for progression opportunities and for personal reasons, and at times this can be the right decision for individual staff and the service. What is important however is that wherever possible we are able to keep social workers who want to remain in practice, and that we are able to do so over a sustained period so we are not losing social workers two and three years into their careers.
- 3.14 Overall, this year 16 frontline social workers and managers have left Children's Social Care. There is no consistent pattern in exit questionnaires, interviews and conversations, except that social workers have left the local authority to go to an agency role. The other reasons included two staff retiring, two leaving due to ill health, one staff member being promoted in another local authority, and other individual reasons.
- 3.15 Overall, work to decrease the reliance on agency social workers in Walsall has had a significant impact over the preceding years, with the total agency staff spend in Children's Social Care reducing from £4,677,602 in 2018-19 to £2,409,464 in 2021-2022.
- 3.16 Work continues to reduce the spend on agency staff through a recruitment and retention transformation plan focusing on the work outlined here. The aim is that this will each year reduce the Central Agency Budget (the additional costs of agency staff over the underspends of unfilled posts within the staffing budget), as more permanent social workers are recruited and then staff working for the council. For the financial year 2021-22, the benefits sought were achieved.
- 3.17 This is because of the costs of over-recruiting newly qualified social worker recruitment to 'future-proof' the service with staff who become our future workforce, and as this happens there is a need to retain some experienced agency social workers to meet service needs. This work now will, however, support the service in moving closer to having a permanent settled workforce in future years, and continued transformation activity. The priority has to remain being able to deliver effective help and protection to children and families in Walsall, and so this work and staffing levels will continue to be reviewed as a priority.

Next Steps

- 3.18 The wellbeing of our workforce and support for practitioners doing complex and challenging work is a key area of focus. An updated Workforce and Wellbeing Strategy will be developed each year to set out this work and the practical things being done to support and develop our practitioners in Children's Social Care. This is a key service priority and this strategy is informed by a range of feedback and consultation processes. In addition to understanding why a staff member may chose to leave, a key focus for us is to understand why our social workers and other practitioners chose to stay.
- 3.19 In respect of further development work, the key identified areas are to further advance and develop the support systems around social workers to further improve working conditions and build on the positive reputation Walsall is developing. This includes:
- Further review of the practice and professional development support for newly qualified and experienced social workers.
 - Reviewing the Business Support offer social Workers can access.
 - To review Social Care Practitioner roles and career pathways to explore how these roles can best support social workers.
 - Continuing to embed the Family Safeguarding Model.
 - Specialist assessments and areas of work, and supporting social workers with clinical expertise and adult and child specialist practitioners.
 - Working with vulnerable adolescents and children and young people at risk of exploitation, to develop and refine the expertise and support for this work.

4. Financial information

Please see the detail of the report above.

5. Reducing Inequalities

Work continues, in consultation with staff, to ensure that recruitment reflects 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. Decide

To note the contents of this report and to support recommendations.

7. Respond

A further updating report on planned activity to support social worker recruitment and retention is being prepared for the Children's Services Directorate Management Team in November 2022, and feedback and recommendations from this report will be incorporated into this work.

8. Review

Social worker recruitment and retention is regularly reviewed and reported on to the Children's Services Directorate Management Team, with continued oversight and consideration of measures to continue to support recruitment and retention.

Background papers

[Children's social work workforce, Reporting Year 2021 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

MacAlister, J. (2022) The Independent Review of Children's Social Care: Final Report [Home - The Independent Review of Children's Social Care \(childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk\)](https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk)

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