



Northumberland County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE 18TH JANUARY 2018

Annual Report of the Principal Social Worker

Executive Director for Children's Services, Cath McEvoy

Cabinet Member Councillor Wayne Daley, Deputy Leader and portfolio holder for Children's Services.

Purpose of Report

To advise and update the Scrutiny Committee about the activities of the Principal Social worker in 2017 and an overview of the quality of practice and development needs of frontline social workers.

Recommendations

It is recommended that:

- 1) The committee acknowledges the contents of the report and the work that has been completed over the last year.
- 2) Members agree the priorities and identifies any further areas for scrutiny or challenge if required.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the Stronger Communities and Families, Health and Well Being and Developing the Organisation priorities included in the NCC Corporate Plan 2013 – 2017.

Key Issues

1. Recruitment and development of Newly Qualified Social Workers has been successful and will be further built on with an academy model in 2018
2. Recruitment of experienced staff remains a challenge which impacts differentially in some services

3. Social work caseloads are reducing and the development of a workload weighting system has helped to understand demand better but more consistency is required
4. Quality assurance is strong and is an evolving programme, supported by a robust audit schedule which identifies key areas for development.
5. Improvement in practice standards continues with further initiatives planned for 2018

BACKGROUND

1.1 The role of the Principal Social Worker is to take a professional social work lead across the organisation to influence strategic decision making, respond to national initiatives and take part in developing a body of knowledge that supports front line practice.

1.3 Part of this function is to provide feedback to key groups including elected members. An interim report was provided by the Principal Social Worker to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Group in August 2017. This provided information about activity relating to recruitment, staff training and development, caseloads and practice improvement. This report will further elaborate on those themes and outline the plan for 2018.

STAFF ISSUES

2.1 The Local Authority workforce return to the Department of Education covers the period between September 2016 and October 2017 and provides statistical information about the social work force. The headlines are incorporated in the table below.

Indicator	NCC 16/17	NCC 15/16	Nat Av	Reg Av
Turnover rate	9.5%	13.9%	15.8%	15.7%
Agency worker rate	4%	10.2%	15.7%	12.7%
Vacancy rate	0%*	9.1%	16.7%	12%
Days lost to sickness absence	2193	2983	N/A	N/A
Absence rate	4.4%	7%	3.5%	4.7%
Caseload average at 30-09-17	16.6	17.2	16.1	17.4

*Due to rolling recruitment

2.2 Staff turnover has improved and since January 2017 there has been a rolling recruitment program to add capacity to the social work force. The vacancy rate is recorded as 0% although this is in part due to workforce restructure and changes to the staffing establishment as the service transforms. There continue to be certain teams where the impact of vacant posts are felt and demand continues to place pressure on staff in post.

2.3 The recruitment campaign has been successful in 2017 in attracting Newly Qualified Social Workers also referred to as ASYE's (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) who add value to the service with enthusiasm and up to date knowledge of theories and practice. However they also require intensive support and development in their first year as qualified social workers. This is resource intensive as assessors and supervisors have to be identified and time afforded to the new workers to develop their practice. (See ASYE section below)

2.4 The challenge in 2017 has been attracting and recruiting experienced staff in addition to the ASYE applicants. The number of applications received from qualified social workers with experience has been minimal in spite of targeted advertising.

2.5 Recruitment of experienced staff is both a national and regional issue with all Local Authorities in the North East experiencing similar difficulties. Action has been taken in an attempt to address the issues with a regional recruitment initiative focussing on the benefits of working in the North East. Northumberland have attended national job fairs in London and Manchester with colleagues from other Local Authorities and Edinburgh University to promote the region and attract staff from other areas.

2.6 The purpose of these events has been to raise the profile of the region and develop relationships with recruitment companies, the impact in terms of staff recruited is difficult to determine and maybe a longer term benefit.

2.7 Retention of experienced staff is critical to maintain low turnover rates. Safeguarding teams commonly experience staff moving on after a short period of time as they feel burned out or stressed by the type of work and its associated demands. Although the numbers of staff leaving have been relatively low the impact is felt particularly in certain safeguarding teams in the Central and SE localities.

2.8 Some of these staff have moved onto other areas of work (often within Northumberland) some have moved due to issues such as travel and personal commitments. The additional work pressures may have contributed towards some staff moving onto to other areas or fields of work. An audit of staff turnover and reasons for leaving is planned to better understand the issues.

2.9 In order to maintain and develop our workforce Northumberland continue to offer comprehensive and fully funded training and CPD opportunities, competitive salaries and graded career structures. In 2018 the Service Director and Principal Social Worker will be implementing a new staff development structure that recognises and encourages staff to develop expertise in specific areas of practice, acknowledging this with a senior practitioner status.

2.10 This new senior practitioner role has been piloted in one locality and will offer a career pathway for those experienced staff who want to remain in practice and not move into management positions. This role will be complemented by a deputy manager role which will provide an alternative management career route for those interested in this as a form of progression.

2.11 A number of experienced workers choose to work for social work agencies and historically due to local demand they have been in a strong position to command high rates of pay. In a bid to take control of the market the regional workforce leads and principal social workers worked on a collaborative framework to cap the charges payable to agency staff which was implemented in October 2017 for any new contracts.

2.12 The workforce return table illustrates that Northumberland's reliance on agency staff is comparatively low at 4%. We have complied with the regional agreement on pay rates and the impact of this has been felt in some teams where agency workers are required as they are more difficult to source and agency workers are tending to stay with their current Local Authorities where they are enjoying the pre capped rates of pay. Recent feedback from the lead organisation managing the agency workers contract indicated that some agency workers did not rate Northumberland positively as a place to work. It is possible that this is a result of a number of agency contracts being terminated and poor practice challenged.

2.13 The staff absence rates due to sickness are encouraging and indicate a fall in the number of staff missing days at work due to ill health. The senior managers meet monthly to consider all HR issues and focus specifically on sickness management. More robust monitoring of long term sickness absence has been effective and there has been a notable reduction of staff who are absent for long periods of time.

2.14 The caseload average figures indicate a downward trend which is better than national and regional averages. This is positive and reflects the work that is being undertaken to manage demand at the front door and apply appropriate thresholds and also step down cases without delay once interventions have been offered. Further detail behind the averages however does indicate a wide range in caseloads across the service. Although there has been a reduction, the data confirms that we are still not where we want to be.

2.15 A caseload weighting system has been devised to reflect the complexity of work in a more meaningful way than purely reporting on case numbers. This tool takes account of number of children, distance to travel, complexity of the case issues and administrative work required to provide a more helpful comparator. Using this tool it is clear that there are some staff and in certain teams (approx 10%) who have a workload higher than our target standard.

2.16 The staff with additional workloads are concentrated in the 14 + team and the South East and Central safeguarding teams. These teams are also characterised by higher sickness, ASYE staff numbers and agency workers. These teams have particular plans in place to manage the caseloads and are prioritised for placing newly recruited staff into them. In January 2018 the staff structure will be reviewed

alongside the recruitment strategy to determine what changes are needed to specifically support these areas of the service.

ASSESSED AND SUPPORTED YEAR IN EMPLOYMENT

3.1 During 2017 the ASYE programme developed in the previous year has been consolidated. Newly Qualified Social Workers who join the organisation are offered a comprehensive support package which includes a thorough induction, a dedicated practice assessor to provide reflective supervision and support their development, a training plan and protected and graduated caseload.

3.2 The benefits of this approach have been realised as the ASYE's who have completed their first year under these arrangements describe a largely positive experience. This contrasts starkly with the evidence gathered from ASYE's who joined the organisation in 2013-15 who described a mainly chaotic and unsupported start to their career. None of the newly recruited ASYE's have left the organisation and they are all offered the opportunity to spend time in different teams to broaden their experience.

3.3 It has been difficult for some team managers to keep caseloads at the agreed protected levels as they manage the competing pressures of allocating work. The practice assessors have had a role in advocating on behalf of the ASYE to ensure their caseload is managed. There are still some instances where the caseloads have exceeded the limits and the recruitment strategy and staff structure review will take account of this and offer a solution in 2018.

3.4 The next stage in the development of the ASYE programme in 2018 will be to introduce an academy. This will be operational in the summer period and will be led by a team manager and senior practitioner who will be dedicated to supporting a cohort of ASYE's for 6 months as a defined team. For the first six months they will be taken through a structured training program and slowly introduced in a supported way to case work. This will ensure that they are afforded the opportunity to develop very clear practice standards and an understanding of policies and procedures. After this initial period the ASYE's would join safeguarding teams to complete their second 6 months in practice and apply their learning.

3.5 This academy model has been implemented successfully in other Local Authorities and lessons learned from their experiences. The aim would be to offer Newly Qualified Social Workers the support to make the transition from academic study to the world of work, nurturing them through their ASYE (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) to become capable practitioners with the ability to critically analyse and evaluate their practice and always keep the child at the heart of everything that they do.

SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

4.1 Practice development and improvement is one of the key functions of the Principal Social Worker. During 2017 the management team have worked to implement the SIF action plan which has been succeeded by a new improvement plan. A comprehensive audit programme measures the impact of the improvements.

During 2017 a range of themed and standard audits have been completed and the process has been continuously refined and adapted to explore different areas of practice.

4.2 The audits have identified some key areas for further improvement and these are fed back to the work force and related training put in place. The next task within the audit plan is to track the direction of travel in specific areas to monitor progress.

4.3 The plan for audit and quality assurance will expand in 2018 with a regional peer challenge planned for March and also some collaborative regional audits facilitated through the regional Assistant Directors group that will allow us to consider regional practice and learn from colleagues in the area.

4.4 In January 2018 a Practice Week is planned where a group of 20 senior managers from children's and adults services will spend the week observing practice across the service with a focus on customer service and engagement with families. The information gleaned from this exercise will be analysed and used to identify good practice that can be shared and drive up standards of social work practice further.

4.5 Other initiatives that have been introduced during 2017 to support good practice have included a good practice folder, access to a web based children's social care research site and comprehensive training and briefing sessions for all staff.

4.6 Consideration has been given to the model of social work practice adopted by Northumberland. This is crucial to provide a common set of principles and a practice framework within which social workers can practice with confidence. Signs of Safety which is a recognised model of social work intervention has been utilised to some degree in the authority for some years. A review of this approach has highlighted that the approach is not embedded and its' implementation is patchy.

4.7 Advice has been taken from the licensed Signs of Safety organisation about how the approach could be refreshed and embedded within the organisation. As a result the training is to be refreshed, a consultant introduced and practice champions appointed. The benefits will be a clear and evidence based approach to practice that unifies social work interventions across the service and provides clarity and confidence to the workforce.

NATIONAL AND REGIONAL INITIATIVES

5.1 Putting Children First (July 2017) presents the Government's vision for improving children's services nationally under the 3 headings of people and leadership, practice and systems, and governance and accountability. Each of these areas has implications for the delivery of social work services in Northumberland.

5.2 People and leadership incorporates a range of initiatives for training and developing student social workers, newly qualified staff and experienced leaders. In Northumberland during 2017 we have

- Participated in the Step Up to Social Work training programme for social workers in training.
- Are supporting 5 team managers through the first line leadership development programme and potentially 4 more will enrol in spring 2018.
- Have actively engaged in the regional teaching partnership (NESWA) around student placements, curriculum of social work courses, CPD for qualified workers.
- Engaged with the development of the National Assessment and Accreditation Scheme in time for roll out in 2020.
- Preparing for the introduction of the apprenticeship programme for social workers currently in development

5.3 Practice and systems describes initiatives that can support best and innovative practice. The focus is a new what works centre which extends the concept of partners in practice and the innovation programme by providing a £20M grant to fund a central repository for excellent practice from which other agencies can learn.

5.4 Working with the Signs of Safety organisation will introduce Northumberland to the what works centre and the consultancy that it can offer to help us shape our practice in 2018.

5.5 In addition, we are involved in a North of Tyne Collaboration which is funded by the Social Work Innovation Fund and is looking at where there can be some joint working within children's services. Although this is not specifically about social work, there may be opportunities to consider how social work can be developed north of the Tyne.

5.6 Governance and accountability will have an impact on the delivery of children's services across all Local Authorities. In 2017 this has been evidenced in the work that Northumberland has been engaged in with other neighbouring authorities around the launch of a Regional Adoption Agency. Other collaborative schemes that consider how services are shared and delivered are possible in light of the devolution deal.

PRIORITIES FOR 2018

- Launch the ASYE academy
- Develop robust and creative strategy for recruitment of experienced staff
- Review the staffing structure to meet demand across the service
- Continue to adapt and learn from the quality assurance programme, (audits/practice week)
- Introduce and embed Signs of Safety as the model of practice
- Remain engaged with regional and national social care initiatives to influence practice in Northumberland.

IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy:	Putting Children First (Delivering a vision for excellent children's social care) July 2016 will have an impact on the work force, training accreditation and staff development.
Finance and value for money:	Potential financial implications for training and accreditation costs
Legal:	Focus on improving performance within the child care legal cases, care planning and permanence for children as highlighted within the Children's Services improvement plan
Procurement:	None identified
Human Resources:	Staffing, training and development implications
Property:	None
Equalities: (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	All procedures and policy changes will take account of impact and equalities for all groups.
Risk Assessment:	Risks for Ofsted inspection if improvements and activities not implemented
Crime & Disorder:	None
Customer Considerations:	Positive outcomes for children and families are realised if staff are well trained, supported and motivated.
Carbon Reduction:	N/A
Wards:	N/A

Report Sign Off

Finance Officer	Suzanne Dent
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Liam Henry
Human Resources	Sarah Farrell
Procurement	N/A
I.T.	N/A
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