



Northumberland

County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: JULY 2019

Annual Report of the Principal Social Worker - Su Kaur

Report of Cath McEvoy-Carr, Executive Director of Adult's and Children's Services

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Councillor Wayne Daley

Purpose of report

To advise and update the Scrutiny Committee about the activities of the Principal Social Worker in 2018/19 and an overview of the quality of practice and development needs of frontline social workers.

1. 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.

2. Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the 'Being Safe and Feeling Valued' priority included with the NCC Corporate Plan 2018 -21 and NCC Children's Service Statement 2018/19

3. Key issues (of note; the issues are also recognised as national issues)

- Recruitment and retention of social workers
- Manageable caseloads - consistently
- Budget pressures in key areas nationally

- Reduced offer of associated universal support services

4. **BACKGROUND**

4.1 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.

4.2 Part of this function is to provide feedback to key groups including elected members. A report was provided by the Principal Social Worker to the Corporate Parenting Advisory Group in January 2018. This included information about activity relating to recruitment, staff training and development, caseloads and practice improvement. This report will elaborate on those themes and outline the plan for 2019/20.

4.3 **Workforce**

4.3.1 Facts/figures

Northumberland Local Authority Social Work Workforce statistical information data is provided to the Department of Education on an annual basis. The reporting year runs from October to September. The graph below provides the information submitted by Northumberland for the period 2017/18 and internal statistical information collated May 2019

Indicator	NCC Oct 17 to Sept 18 (as of May 2019)	NCC Oct 16 to Sept 17	National Av	Regional Av
a) Turnover rate	14.8% (32 individuals) 14.59%	8.4%	13.6%	13.2
b) Agency worker rate	6.6% 6.18%	4%	15.8%	12.6%

c) Vacancy rate	7.7%	0%	16.7%	12%
d) Days lost to sickness absence	1595	2983		
e) Absence rate	3.5%	3.6%	3.1%	3.4%
f) Caseload average at 30-09-18	18.9	19.3	17.8	18.3

4.3.2 The turnover rate consisted of 28 permanent staff and 4 agency staff. There are no clear patterns to discern the reason for the rise over the past 2 years. However half of the social workers who left were based in the Blyth and Ashington Safeguarding Locality Teams. The Safeguarding Locality Teams manage very complex, serious child and family cases. In line with thresholds, a number of these children have or may have suffered significant harm. The emotional impact on staff who work in this particular sector can be high.

4.3.3 The workforce return table illustrates that Northumberland's reliance on agency staff is comparatively low at 6.18%. As discussed below, every effort is made to ensure stability of the permanent workforce. Agency staff are only utilised when all other avenues have been exhausted. This includes fully utilising the role of social work support assistants and back office support.

4.3.4 Sickness absence is a key priority for the Council and Children's Services, particularly as the rates continue to be high. However the staff absence rates due to sickness indicate a fall in the number of staff missing days at work due to ill health. 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. The sickness rate for Children's Social Care continues to fluctuate however March 2019 to May 2019 saw a month on month drop in numbers.

Reasons recorded for sickness are listed below. Please note the information includes *all* of Children's Social Care for the month of May (2019) ;

Absence Reason	FTE Lost days	Occurrences
Stress, Depression, Mental Health & Fatigue Syndromes	257.05	23
Other Musculo-Skeletal Problems	67.66	6
Eye, Ear, Nose & Mouth/Dental	52.22	5
Stomach, Liver, Kidney & Digestion	48.2	5
Other	42	2

4.3.5 A health and wellbeing roadshow is planned for October to coincide with the flu jabs to raise awareness of the impact of sickness related absence and also promote a positive message about personal responsibility for health.

4.3.6 The caseload average figures indicate a downward trend from last year. This 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. A caseload weighting system is utilised 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 (Northumberland does have challenges due to the geographic vastness of area) complexity of the case issues and administrative work required to provide a more helpful comparator. The workload weighting system shows 69% of social workers had the maximum points level in January 2018. This has improved slightly at 73% currently however the aim is for this to be 100%.

4.3.7 Although there has been a reduction in caseload, the data confirms that we are still not where we want to be and we remain higher than the national and regional average.

4.3.8 The staff with additional workloads are concentrated in the 14 + Team, the South East and Central safeguarding Teams. These teams are also characterised by higher sickness and agency workers. These teams are prioritised for placing newly recruited experienced staff into them. The staff structure will be reviewed regularly alongside the recruitment strategy to determine what changes are needed to specifically support these areas of the service.

4.4 Recruitment

4.4.1 Recruitment and development of Newly Qualified Social Workers has been successful and will continue to develop within Northumberland Children's ASYE Academy model in 2019/20.

4.4.2 Current routes into the Academy include successful completion of a BA or Masters degree via local universities and the DfE Step Up to Social Work initiative. Further routes will include the Social Work Apprenticeship Scheme.

4.4.3 Recruitment of experienced staff remains a challenge which impacts differentially in some services.

4.4.4 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. 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.

4.5 Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)

4.5.1 During 2018 the ASYE Programme was further developed via the Academy. The Interview panel includes a representative who is an expert by experience and also one of our Northumberland Apprentices. This particular Academy model is the first in the North East, supporting the transition from academic study by offering high support *and* high challenge to ensure social workers keep children at the heart of everything they do during and after transition to experienced social worker.

4.5.2 Newly qualified staff in the Academy are offered a comprehensive support package which includes:

- A thorough induction (Corporate and social work specific) for each cohort of 8 ASYE's
- The Academy Team Manager and Senior Practitioner are dedicated to supporting the cohort for 6 months as a defined team; taken through a structured training programme and graduated caseload
- The workers transition to Safeguarding Teams for the following 6 months of the ASYE programme
- Support continues from the Academy Team Manager and Senior Practitioner until completion of the Portfolio. This includes Practice Assessor responsibility and regular reflective supervision

4.5.3 The benefits of this approach have been realised as the ASYE's who have completed their first 9 months under these arrangements describe a positive experience. This is also noted in subsequent recruitment; visible via the large volume of applications for a place within the Academy.

4.5.4 Timing of recruitment is aligned with university/course completion in order to ensure Northumberland attracts 'the best candidates'. Some candidates who provide particularly strong application forms, evidencing their transferable skill-set and desire to support children and families, are interviewed prior to full completion of their degree and offered a post as a social work support assistant within Locality Safeguarding Teams. This has been effective in terms of offering an opportunity for new staff to envelop themselves into the positive culture of Northumberland Children's Service. To understand what local services are available in order to support children and families internally

and universally once they are 'closed' to safeguarding. It is also an opportunity for new appointees to network and build relationships whilst offering support to 'pressure point' teams.

4.5.5 The evidence gathered from ASYE's who joined the organisation in 2013-15 contrasts significantly to the current offer. They described a less supportive introduction to the Organisation.

4.5.6 Prior to the development of the Academy, there had been challenges for some team managers to keep caseloads within the agreed protected levels as they managed the competing pressures of allocating work. The practice assessors had a role in advocating on behalf of the ASYE to ensure their caseload was managed. For ASYE's not in the Academy, there are still some instances where the caseloads have exceeded the limits however this is being addressed via the recruitment strategy to ensure all ASYE's enter via the Academy route.

4.6 Staff Retention

4.6.1 To ensure continual recognition and encouragement of staff, we hold graduation ceremonies for all staff who have completed their ASYE. Practice Assessors are also invited and acknowledged for their part in developing the ASYE's. These events are well received with attendee staff saying they feel recognised and valued.

4.6.2 As discussed, we have retained a high volume of ASYE's since 2016 and due to careful development and recognition of their skillset, some have successfully transitioned into the Advanced Practitioner role. Given the regional and national issue around a shortage of experienced children's social workers it is envisaged Northumberland's 'Grow our Own' model of effective, confident, competent social workers will assist in addressing the local shortage of experienced children and family social workers.

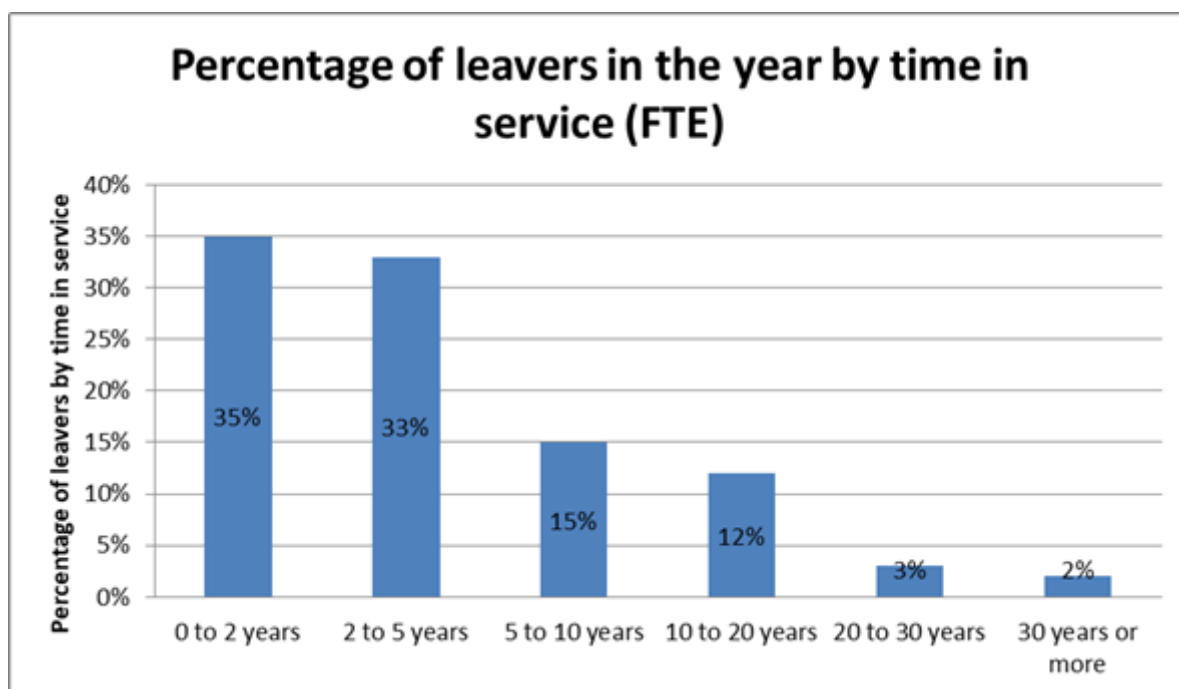
4.6.3 The challenge in 2018/19 has been attracting and recruiting experienced staff. Northumberland have attended national job fairs with colleagues from other Local Authorities. As Principal Social Worker, I represented all 12 North East Local Authorities during a recent recruitment campaign presentation.

4.6.4 Representatives from Northumberland have also attended Edinburgh University to promote the county and region and attract staff from other

areas. The number of applications received from qualified social workers with experience has been minimal in spite of targeted advertising.

- 4.6.5 Retention of experienced staff is critical to maintain low turnover rates. Some staff who have left their roles have moved onto other areas of work (often within Northumberland) some have moved due to issues such as travel and personal commitments. 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.
- 4.6.6 As per the graph below (4.6.7) sourced from the Department for Education's Children's Workforce data - during the year ending September 2018, 68% of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) child and family social workers leaving in the year, had been in service in their local authority for less than 5 years; up from 63% in 2017 regardless of alternative routes into social work.

4.6.7



- 4.6.8 Although the numbers of staff leaving have been relatively low, the impact is felt particularly in certain Safeguarding Teams in the Central and South East localities. 16 of the 32 leavers were from these 2 Localities. Exit interviews are held by the respective Team Manager.
- 4.6.9 In order to fully ascertain the reasons for staff departures, Human Resources personnel ask leavers to complete an online exit questionnaire. It is endeavoured this information will assist in identifying themes. Monitoring and evaluating this data will assist in us taking corrective actions to alleviate this recurring issue.
- 4.6.10 It should be noted some social workers have left the Local Authority, however some staff have returned to fulfil the same role. It is hoped this is in recognition of the positive culture here in Northumberland.
- 4.6.11 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 have continued to work collaboratively to ensure the cap of charges payable to agency staff is adhered to/by. This has also provided consistency of key worker for children and families. Another benefit has been consistency of team building, peer support and stability; which is vital in this service area due to the emotive issues which safeguarding children can bring.
- 4.6.12 Currently there are 8 agency Social Workers across Northumberland. 4 are located in the South East Locality Team, 1 in the Central Locality Team and 3 within MASH.
- 4.6.13 Northumberland County Council's Staff Survey is useful in terms of providing a forum for staff to inform the Council of their views/experience. The results for Children's Social Care is much more positive than in 2016. It identifies;
- Social work staff are generally enthusiastic about their roles and described supportive colleagues, teams and line managers
 - They reported feeling trusted and understood their responsibilities with good opportunities for training and development.
 - There is a marked improvement in communication from senior managers

4.6.14 As part of the Standards for Employers of social workers, some staff have completed the Social Work Health Check in January 2019. It identifies:

- All participant staff have supervision in line with requirements
- 84% have been able to attend the continued professional development opportunities planned in their appraisals/developmental reviews
- Only 57% of staff have used annual leave within the same leave year

4.6.15 Other findings suggest - whilst there has been an improvement around manageable caseloads, use of flexi and hours worked remains a challenge.

4.6.16 The Health Check will be completed on an annual basis moving forward as it is an important barometer of workflow and barriers to effective practice and more importantly for social workers to feel listened to and corrective actions taken as required.

4.7 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

4.7.1 In order to maintain and develop our workforce, Northumberland, in line with our learning culture ethos, continues to offer comprehensive and fully funded training and CPD opportunities, competitive salaries and graded career structures. The Advanced Practitioner role has been rolled out to locality Safeguarding Teams to address pressure points in the service, whilst offering a career pathway for those experienced staff who want to remain in practice and not move into management positions. The implementation of the staff development structure recognises and encourages staff to develop expertise in specific areas of practice, acknowledging this with an Advanced Practitioner status. It is envisaged further development of this role will ensure Northumberland has 'champions' in their given service area interest/passion, resulting in CPD via regular research and dissemination of knowledge to staff across Children's.

4.7.2 This role is complemented by a Deputy Manager role which provides an alternative management career route for those interested in this as a form of progression.

4.7.3 Quality assurance has been developed further, incorporating a number of initiatives including the practice week and practice days. The premise is to include all levels of staff *and* the use of peer audit to ensure everyone understands their role as a leader; taking responsibility for their own practice and supporting others also, in line with our Leadership Pledge around accountability, offering high support and constructive challenge. The robust audit schedule assists in identifying key areas for development.

4.7.4 Improvement in practice standards continues by building upon initiatives around:

- Retention/restructure
- Continued CPD and learning offer
- Workforce strategy
- Regional workforce links workforce group and NESWA

4.8 Wellbeing

4.8.1 Staff wellbeing across Northumberland has been prioritised with additional opportunities for staff to partake in activities which support a healthy lifestyle.

4.8.2 Corporate opportunities are available via Learning and Development. These opportunities include attendance and participation in Mindfulness training. We have identified health and wellbeing champions.

4.8.3 Other opportunities include joining a choir, yoga classes, a number of exercise classes and access to manicures during lunch times!

There is encouragement for staff to move away from their desks and fully utilise their break for that exact purpose. There are specific areas in all of the Safeguarding Locality Team buildings for staff to eat lunch away from their desks.

4.8.4 There is also access to Occupational Health for staff to engage with as required. Managers are being encouraged to recommend and refer to Occupational Health proactively for staff who are in work to prevent sickness rates increasing with resulting absenteeism.

4.8.5 As Principal Social worker I regularly attend team bases on team meeting days, providing social worker drop in sessions for staff. In line

with efficient and lean working and more importantly, for practitioners to spend time with children and families building positive relationships, staff are encouraged to work agilely. However it is very important for staff to have a sense of belonging and come together as part of a community, therefore attendance at weekly or fortnightly team meetings is an expectation which social workers do embrace on the whole.

4.8.6 The drop in sessions are an impartial forum with a focus on; Staff wellbeing, a forum for social workers to make suggestions around improving the work environment or practice suggestions and/or for social workers to attend if they have a query about anything and unsure where to go. The ethos is in line with Northumberland County Council's *Vision and Values* within the Corporate Plan 2018-21 Involving staff in '*Creating a healthy and positive working environment*'. Pg 4 CP 2018/21.

4.8.7 Building upon initiatives to retain a stable workforce, Northumberland has celebrated World Social Work Day (WSWD) by Executive Director/Head of Service and myself attending social work teams to serve coffee and cake to the staff, in line with WSWD 2019 theme - 'Promoting the Importance of Human Relationships'.

4.8.8 The social work force demographic is also considered and staff are encouraged to attend relevant staff network meetings for LGBT, Autistic Spectrum Disorder staff network, BAME and Menopause and Andropause staff network.

4.9 Practice and issues which impact social workers

4.9.1 Practice development and improvement is one of the key functions of the Principal Social Worker; offering high support and high challenge in order to continually develop staff.

4.9.2 During 2018 the leadership team have continually worked on the improvement plan. Participation by myself and senior representatives from Social Care, Early Help, Performance Team, Health and Education and the LSCB, monthly Quality Practice and Audit Group (QPAG) sessions are held. This forum assists in providing a comprehensive audit programme which measures the impact of the improvements. During 2018/19 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. Of particular note is

the development of the process whereby auditors meet or speak to social workers face to face in order to have a discussion about a particular child's case. This model ensures auditors are coming from a social worker strengths base as opposed to providing a list of actions to the social workers line manager of what needs to be completed. The improved model of speaking to the key worker assists in building positive morale *and* provides clarity of what is expected from recording and practice moving forward.

- 4.9.3 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. Impact on practice and outcomes for children and families is a key theme moving forward.
- 4.9.4 The plan for audit and quality assurance continues to expand in 2019 with regional peer challenges and 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.
- 4.9.5 In January 2019 a Practice Week was held, where a group of 20 Senior Managers from Children's, Adults and Health Services spent the week observing practice across the service with a focus on customer service and engagement with families. The information collated from this exercise has been analysed and used to identify good practice that can be shared and drive up standards of social work practice further, as well as areas for improvement.
- 4.9.6 Other initiatives that support good practice have included the roll out of Tri.x which is a forum for access to up to date policies and procedures. A monthly working group chaired by me, has commenced in order to ensure there is consistency and standardisation of documentation and application of practice. This forum also identifies gaps and corrective measures taken to address this.
- 4.9.7 There is access to a web based children's social care research site. Usage is monitored regularly by myself to ensure this invaluable tool is utilised to its best advantage. Moving forward, in collaboration with the 12 Local Authorities regionally, consideration has been given to the usage of the same research tool for all social workers in the region. This will assist with consistency and standardisation of practice and being resourceful whilst considering financial prudence.

4.9.8 Northumberland also facilitates comprehensive training and briefing sessions for all staff. Evaluation of impact for children and families is a priority. The development of a learning offer/culture in Northumberland is imperative and regular action is taken to apply this.

4.9.9 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 (SoS) which is a recognised model of social work intervention had been utilised to some degree in the authority for some years. However advice has been taken from the licensed Signs of Safety Organisation about how the approach can be fully embedded within the Organisation. As a result the training has been refreshed, regular attendance by a SoS Consultant and practice champions appointed. The benefits of this approach are being seen however there is still some way to go for full implementation of this evidence based approach to practice, that unifies social work interventions across the service and provides clarity and confidence to the workforce. Senior managers are role modelling the use of this approach in order to instil confidence to frontline staff.

4.9.10 Participation and attendance at training via the 'Learning Offer' provided to social workers is being developed further to ensure this is resource effective and has the desired effect of continually improving practice. For training where places are numbered, specific social workers are identified to attend and then encouraged to disseminate the learning to their team/s on their return. This in itself is a development opportunity for attendees who improve skills in identifying key points from the training and presenting/sharing their learning. Every opportunity is utilised to instill confidence *and* accountability in our staff.

4.10 NATIONAL AND REGIONAL INITIATIVES

4.10.1 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.

4.10.2 **People and leadership** incorporates a range of initiatives for training and developing student social workers, newly qualified staff and experienced leaders. In Northumberland from May 2018/19 as the Principal Social Worker I have;

- Supported the Step Up to Social Work training programme for social workers in training and will be supporting an additional number of 4.
- Supported 3 practice leads through the Practice Supervisor Development Programme and have identified another 3 to commence the Programme.
- Fulfilled the role as Practice Assessor for ASYE's
- Completed observations of experienced staff completing their Practice Educator qualification, facilitating supervision with their final year students.
- Facilitated chronology training to Safeguarding and Early Help staff
- Actively engaged in further securing £280k for the regional teaching partnership (NESWA). The monies will be utilised to continue development around student placements, curriculum of social work courses, CPD for qualified workers.
- Actively involved in the regional Practice Educator CPD Programme. This Programme has been shortlisted for the Skills for Care Accolades 2020
- Engaged with the development of the National Assessment and Accreditation Scheme.
- Provided opportunity for non qualified internal staff to partake in the apprenticeship degree programme for social workers. The shortlisting process is complete and next steps are being taken to progress this route for acknowledgement of succession planning for staff who have shown a loyalty to achieve positive outcomes for the residents of Northumberland - in line with the Northumberland's Corporate Plan mandate - *'regardless of age, have the right qualifications and skills to secure a good job that pays well and provides the prospect of a rewarding career'*.
- Actively involved in the development and facilitation of the Regional Social Work Conference Oct 2018. The feedback was that this initiative was successful in raising the profile of social work regionally. I am actively involved in phase 2.
- Chairman for the PSW North Cohort Network (Northumberland, North Tyneside, Newcastle, Gateshead, Durham, South Tyneside and Sunderland). A Plan is in development, focussing predominantly on:

- Recruitment and retention
- Strengthen and promote good practice across the North East
- Raising the profile of social work in the North East
- Developing a relationship with the new registering body - Social Work England. Social Workers in England are experiencing a change in the Registering Body which governs practice. As of 2nd December 2019, Social Work England will replace the Health Care Professions Council (HCPC). It is envisaged this will be a positive for the profession as the incoming Body is social work specific. The PSW Network has assisted in consultations around professional standards.
- Northumberland has been engaged in with other neighbouring authorities around the launch of a Regional Adoption Agency. I am an Early Permanence Champion.

4.10.3 Other collaborative schemes that consider how services are shared and delivered are possible in light of the devolution deal.

4.11 Priorities for 2019

- Full implementation of the Leadership Pledge across all levels of staffing
- Embed the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Child and Family Practitioners
- Fully roll out the Signs of Safety as the model of practice
- Further develop a robust and creative strategy for recruitment of experienced staff - to include ongoing retention via the Academy Model
- Review the staffing structure to meet demand across the service
- Continue to adapt and learn from the quality assurance programme, (audits/practice week) - to ensure all auditors prioritise service user feedback
- Further identify better use of back office support to free social workers up to complete direct work with children and families
- Consider and identify CPD for social workers in line with key national themes and local requirements
- Remain engaged with regional and national social care initiatives to support and influence practice in Northumberland.

5. IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy:	Putting Children First (Delivering a vision for excellent children's social care) July 2017 will have an impact on the workforce, training accreditation and staff development.
Finance and value for money:	Potential financial implications for training and accreditation costs
Legal:	Performance within the child care legal cases, care planning and permanence for children as highlighted within the Children's Services improvement plan
Procurement:	Regional research tool - Community Care Inform won the tender
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

6. CONSULTATION

7. BACKGROUND PAPERS

8. Report Sign Off

Finance Officer	initials
Monitoring Officer/Legal	
Human Resources	
Procurement	

I.T.	
Executive Director	
Portfolio Holder(s)	

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