



Northumberland County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN OVERVIEW & SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

2ND FEBRUARY 2023

Social Worker Recruitment and Retention

Report of Councillor Guy Renner Thompson

Interim Joint Directors of Children's Services, Graham Reiter and Audrey Kingham

Purpose of Report

To provide an overview of the challenges of and responses to the recruitment and retention of social workers.

Recommendations

The Committee is recommended:

1. To note the contents of the report.
2. To identify any issues for further scrutiny.

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the 'living and learning' priority within the Corporate Plan 21-24.

Key Issues

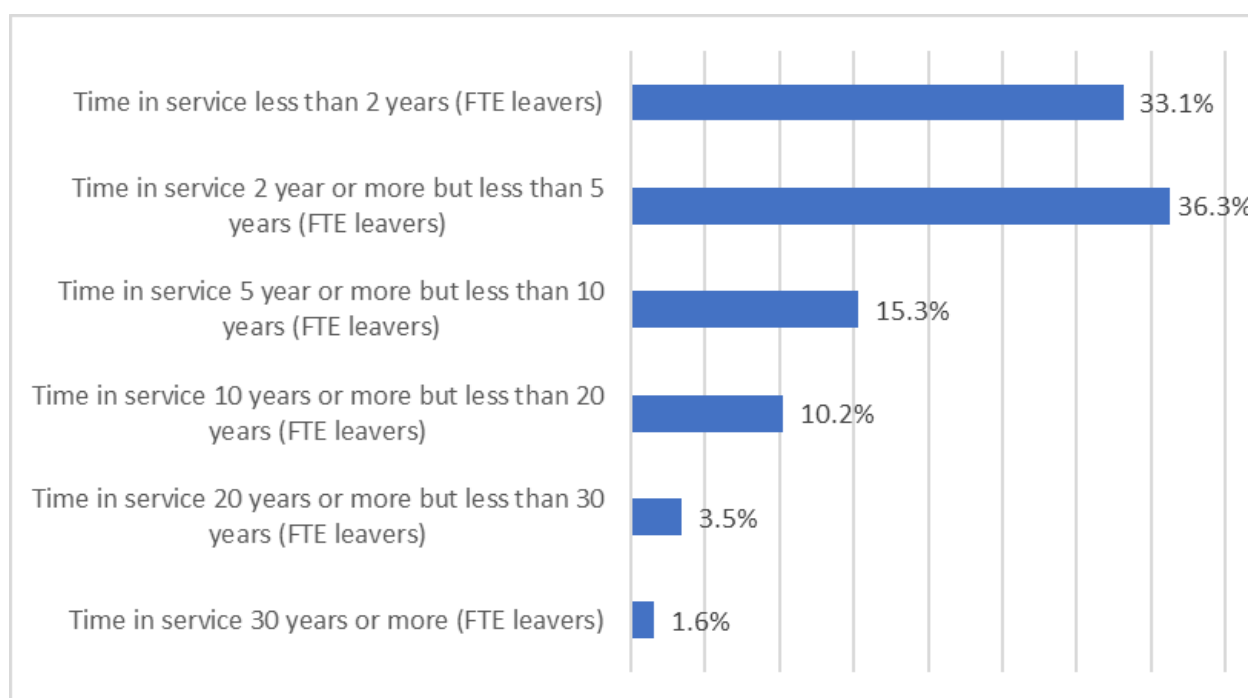
1. Social work recruitment and retention presents a perennial challenge nationally, regionally and in Northumberland. It is one of the key areas of focus in the national independent review of children's social care which was published earlier in the year.
2. Locally, the issue continues to be recruiting sufficient numbers of experienced social workers and ensuring retention of those that we develop in the academy, once they move into frontline social work teams.
3. The academy continues to be a supportive model attracting newly qualified workers and the team management group is stable and recruited from within existing staff.

4. Gaps in particular teams increase pressure on existing staff, impacting staff wellbeing and sickness absence. The importance of support from team colleagues and managers cannot be underestimated in supporting this.
5. Work is ongoing with HR to look at creative and innovative ways to support recruitment and retention.

Background

Recruitment of qualified children's social workers into Local Authority safeguarding teams is a challenge across the country. The Department of Education 2022 children's social work force return informs us that in 2022, 32,502 FTE children and family social workers were employed by Local Authorities. In the same year, 4,995 left the profession resulting in a turnover rate of 15.3%. Of those staff who left the profession nearly 69% had been in the role for less than 5 years. As indicated above, the national review of children's social care has workforce as one of its priority areas.

Percentage of FTE leavers in the year by time in service, England 2022



A healthy and stable workforce underpins effective support for children and their families. Good social work is relationship based and therefore minimising the number and changes of social workers that children and families work with is important in achieving this.

The Independent Review of Children's Social care written by Josh McAllister published in May 22 has a section which has a particular focus on workforce:

<https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Realising-the-potential-of-the-workforce.pdf>

Within that the report identifies five key areas to develop the potential of the workforce:

- Reducing bureaucracy
- Developing expertise through an early career framework
- Tackling social work agencies
- Developing the wider children's social care workforce

- Supporting Leadership

We are awaiting a response from central government to the publication of the review which was due before the end of the calendar year but is now expected by end of January 2023. The response from the Association of Directors of Children's Services (ADCS) both nationally and regionally has been broadly supportive of many aspects of the review but require the detailed government response to understand more fully how this may translate into any changes in policy or legislation. This includes in relation to the recommendations around the workforce.

Regional work in response to the workforce challenges has continued. The Memorandum of Understanding in relation to the employment of and pay rates for agency staff is currently being reviewed, this work is being led by the Northumberland Service Director for CSC. However, as the challenges of recruiting experienced social workers continue this has become increasingly more difficult for all authorities to adhere to and there is a particular challenge with the increasing use of project teams regionally and nationally. The regional proposals are to be considered further once there is a national response from DfE about the agency workforce which is expected in early January.

The Northumberland Position

Over the last 12 months in Northumberland, the turnover rate for social work qualified staff in front line roles has been 15.9% with 28.8 social workers leaving the Authority. This compares to 15.8% in the previous 12 months. Analysis of the reasons for leaving indicates that there continues to be a mixture of staff leaving to go to other authorities or organisations, staff moving to agency roles, staff moving out of area, retiring or choosing different career paths. We have had a small number of staff who left Northumberland previously return for different roles or a promotion.

At the end of September 2022, we had 12 agency workers, which is a rate of 6.2%, compared to 10.0% in September 2021.

The sickness rate amongst this group (1302 days lost to sickness in the last 12 months) is 1.9%, compared to a rate of 3.6% last year and an NCC target of 3.5%. The rate of 1.9% is the lowest seen by Northumberland in a 12m period (for this cohort).

We have continued to develop our workforce strategy led by a workforce steering group comprising of representatives from children's social care and HR.

The ASYE academy continues to attract a high calibre of applicants and we have recruited a further cohort of 15 in recognition of the strength this approach has with a further small cohort due to start in March 2023. From the staff cohorts recruited in 2021 16 passed their ASYE year and all remain working in Northumberland.

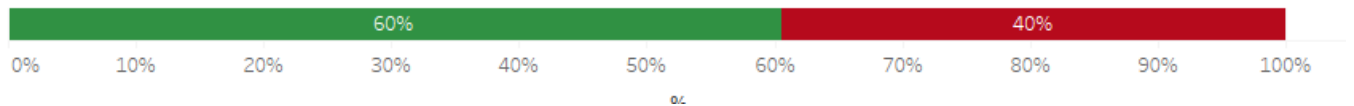
During our most recent focused visit in July 2022 Ofsted reported:
'All of the social workers spoken to by inspectors during the visit were positive about working for Northumberland. They describe managers as supportive and available to them. The social workers enjoy the range of work allocated to them.'

However, the challenge continues to remain amongst the social work workforce that

it is incredibly difficult to recruit experienced social workers from outside of the authority. This has been exacerbated by the number of staff leaving the authority as detailed above creating real challenges in some of our front line social work teams. In previous years this has focussed on particular teams but it is now impacting on most teams at various times across the year. This is demonstrated by the number of staff working at above workload capacity:

Workload Weighting: % of social workers working within the desired level

Includes social workers, agency social workers, advanced pracs and ASYE academy social workers



We continue to have a generally stable team manager and senior management team although there has been some small movement this year linked mainly to career progression including for one of the Heads of Service. Our team and senior managers continue to work incredibly hard to ensure that the challenges with workforce do not impact on our service to children and families.

What are we doing next?

There are a number of actions which have been and are being progressed across the service to retain the social work staff we have and attract new staff. This is based on analysis of a survey with staff completed over the summer:

1. Maximise flexible working arrangements for staff working across the county and in large rural areas to support best use of work bases and home working.
2. Working with the HR recruitment consultant to develop new platforms and ways of targeting and identifying staff who may want to work with us. This includes developing a specific children's social care recruitment landing page.
3. Looking at career progression routes within the social work role working with HR and adult social care.
4. Supported frontline staff and operational managers by funding the Social Work England registration costs for 22/23.
5. Ensuring that social work staff have regular opportunities to meet face to face with their team colleagues for support.
6. Exploring ways to provide frontline social work staff with regular support to reflect the traumatic experiences they are supporting families and children with.
7. Continuing to make opportunities for senior managers to have regular contact with frontline staff through different mechanisms and encourage our culture of openness and honesty as a learning organisation.
8. Piloting a specialist prebirth team to add to the PAMS team.
9. Ensuring that the allocation of posts from the ASYE academy is aligned to the needs across the service.

Implications

Policy	Supports the children's social care work force strategy.
Finance and value for money	Improved recruitment and retention of social workers reduces agency staff costs.
Legal	Related to statutory responsibilities undertaken by social workers.
Procurement	Would reduce the number of social work agencies needing to be used if the work force were more stable.
Human Resources	Supports the workforce strategy.
Property	Were all social workers to return to working in offices this may cause some challenges because of changes made to workspaces during the pandemic.
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Risk Assessment	Reputational risk associated with Ofsted judgement which considers work force capacity and planning.
Crime & Disorder	Ensuring children are safe and supported includes reducing and removing their involvement with any criminal or anti-social behaviour.
Customer Consideration	Recruitment and retention critical for delivering best service to children and families.
Carbon reduction	Providing flexibility around work bases supports unnecessary use of cars for workers reducing pollution.
Health and Wellbeing	Sufficient recruitment and retention has an impact on workloads health and wellbeing of the employed staff group.
Wards	All

Report Sign Off

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Monitoring Officer/Legal	Lynsey Denyer obo Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
Relevant Executive Director	Graham Reiter
Chief Executive	Rick O'Farrell
Portfolio Holder(s)	Cllr Guy Renner-Thompson

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