



Northumberland

County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

1st June 2023

Annual Report of the Children's Principal Social Worker

Report of: Audrey Kingham, Executive Director of Children, Young People and Education and Graham Reiter, Service Director, Children's Social Care

Cabinet Member for Children's Services: Guy Renner-Thompson

1. Purpose of report

To advise and update the Scrutiny Committee about the input and work of the Principal Social Worker in 2022 and an overview of the quality of practice and development needs of frontline social workers.

2. 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 identify any further areas for scrutiny or challenge if required.

3. Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the NCC Children and Young People's Plan 2019-22

4. Key issues

- Recruitment and retention of children's social workers
- Manageable caseloads
- Practice improvement
- Impact post pandemic on practice and service delivery

5. BACKGROUND

5.1 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.

5.2 Part of this function is to provide feedback to key groups including elected members. A report was provided by the Principal Social Worker to FACS (Family and Children's Services) Scrutiny meeting in April 2022. 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 2023/24.

5.3 Workforce

5.3.1 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 at 5.3.1a provides information submitted Nov 2022.

5.3.1a

Indicator	NCC Oct 20 to Sept 21	NCC Oct 21 to Sept 22	National figure (21-22)	Regional figure (21-22)
a) Turnover Rate	15.8%	15.9%	17.1%	13.7%
b) Agency Worker Rate	10.0%	6.2%	17.6%	9.7%
c) Vacancy Rate	11.6%	8.1%	20.0%	11.2%
d) Days lost to sickness absence	1713	873.7		
e) Absence Rate	3.6%	1.9%	3.5%	3.1%
f) Caseload average at	15.1	17.1	16.6	18.0

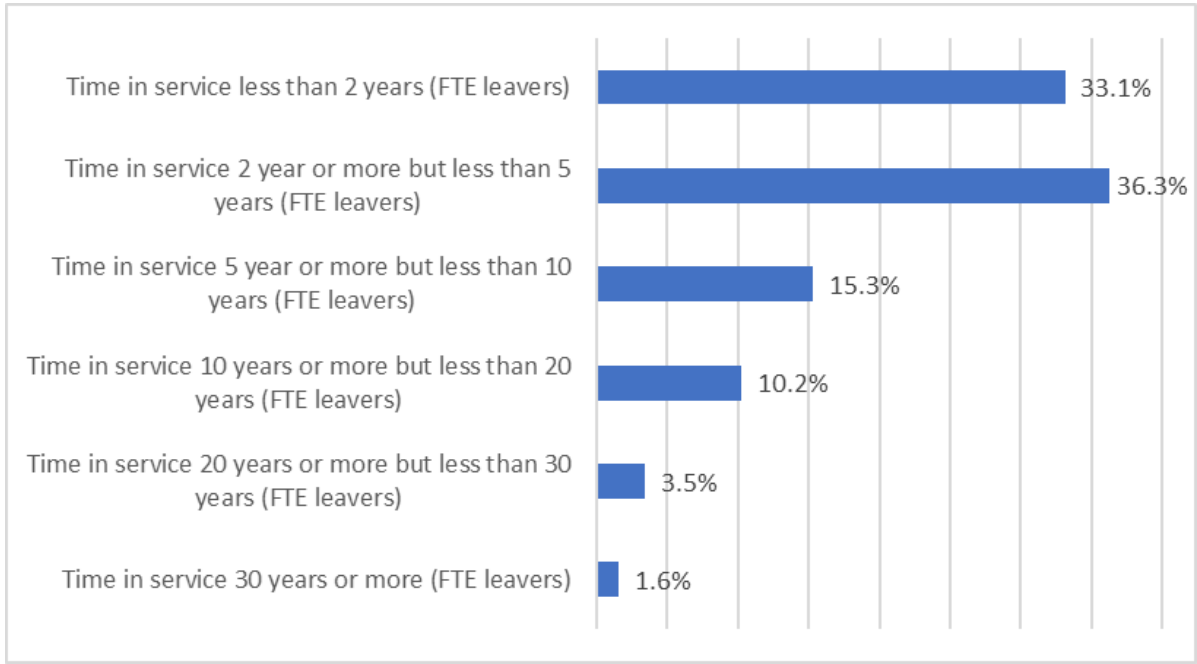
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5.3.2 Northumberland Children’s turnover rate (15.9% - 28.8 social workers) is lower than the national average of 17.5% however higher than the regional average of 13.7%. This is a slight increase on the previous year's figure of 15.8%. However, the vacancy rate has reduced for Northumberland and markedly lower than the national average *and* lower than the regional average.

5.3.3 Reasons for leaving include staff going to other authorities or organisations for new roles or promotion, staff moving to agency roles or choosing another career path. There are also positive reasons for staff leaving which includes retirement or moving closer to family. (Please see further information below for initiatives taken to retain staff).

5.3.4 Social workers who left to work in other Local Authorities were predominantly based in the safeguarding locality teams. These teams manage very complex, 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.

5.3.5 There are a significant number of social workers nationally who have left children’s social work in its entirety. (As per the national graph below at 5.3.6). The length of service of 5 years or less equates to 69.4% of the national workforce. This is particularly concerning as the role can be challenging and complex therefore workforce time served experience is an important factor.



5.3.6 Department for Education's Children's National Workforce Data Report (September 2022)

5.3.7 Nationally there has been a 2.7% decrease (or 900 social workers less from a year earlier) of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) child and family social workers in post at 30 September 2022. To assist with recruitment of experienced social workers, I have supported the development of a Northumberland children's specific recruitment landing page which is disseminated via a number of social media portals. Current adverts are live and prospective applicants' access vacancies in real time via the link.

The Department for Education commissioned an Independent Review of Children's Social care which was published in May 22. A review has been welcomed by the PSW Network

https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20230308122535mp_/https://childrensocialcare.independent-review.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/The-independent-review-of-childrens-social-care-Final-report.Fpdf

The PSW Network is heavily involved in consultation events to support practice and in turn, positive outcomes for children and families moving forward. A section of the review has a particular focus on workforce with 5 key areas considered to develop 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

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

5.3.8 A stable workforce is imperative. It offers consistency of key worker for children and families whilst providing an anchor for colleagues to manage the demands of the role. To better understand the reasons for Northumberland's social workers leaving, we offer exit meetings between the leaver and their line manager prior to departure and an exit questionnaire via HR.

5.3.9 However, to enhance understanding of the reasons for departure I continue to offer an additional exit meeting between myself and the staff member. These meetings are attended on a 1:1 voluntary basis. Since September 2022, 6 members of staff have been offered a meeting.

5.3.10 The roles 6 staff members held in Northumberland prior to leaving

- 2 x Advanced Practitioner
- 3 x Social Worker
- 1 x Newly Qualified Social Worker (both no longer fulfil the role of Social Worker)

5.3.11 Of note, all 6 worked in Locality Safeguarding Teams and have moved into other areas of social work or the private sector. Roles include;

- 2 x Children Looked After Team. Each in a different Local Authority
- Children with Disabilities Team in another Local Authority
- Family Court Advisor
- Specialist Mental Health Mentor in the Private Sector
- Supervising Social Worker for an Independent Fostering Agency

5.3.12 It is envisaged continual monitoring and evaluating data *and* speaking directly to leavers/prospective leavers will support us to better understand the reasons for staff choosing to leave. As discussed, the Care Review is welcomed, and it is hoped effective changes are made nationally to support retention of staff in these hard to retain/recruit to service areas.

5.3.13 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 were working collaboratively to cap charges payable to agency staff through the regional memorandum of understanding (MoU). However due to the increased issues around recruiting experienced social workers, this has been challenging in terms of all 12 LA's adhering to the memorandum. The regional lead for this is Northumberland's Service Director and the regional Directors of Children's Services are currently reviewing this.

5.3.14 The memorandum had supported consistency of key worker for children and families within the region. Another benefit was 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. However, staff wellbeing, specifically post pandemic has been a priority. We understand employees bring their whole selves to work and as discussed above, it is important to support staff who may

experience vicarious or secondary trauma from their roles. Please find further information regarding staff wellbeing within the wellbeing section at 5.7.

- 5.3.15 The workforce return table at 5.3.1a illustrates that Northumberland’s use of agency staff has decreased since last year and remains lower than the regional and national average.
- 5.3.16 Staffing capacity remains a challenge. However, in line with the Corporate Plan we are keen to increase the number of skilled staff in permanent positions and reduce numbers of agency staff.
- 5.3.17 To support our staff capacity, we are utilising the role of social work support assistants and back-office support staff, creatively. This includes effectively utilising staff joining the Children’s Academy to add additional capacity before they commence in their social work roles. The development of the apprenticeship route is also supporting capacity issues as well as student placement opportunities.
- 5.3.18 Sickness absence is a key priority for the Council and Children’s Services. The sickness rate for this group is 1.9% compared to a rate of 3.6% last year and an NCC target of 3.5%. Every effort was and is made to remain in regular close contact by line management and peers alike to support each other during these times. There are still occasions when some staff have to isolate due to Covid. It is testament to our staff that they have continued to work from home to fulfil their role in safeguarding our children and supporting families.
- 5.3.19 As a leadership team we have continually focused on staff wellbeing throughout *and* post pandemic ensuring we are trying to offer support to staff in a range of ways through virtual means as well. We continue to address and monitor sickness absence.
- 5.3.20 The graph below at 5.3.20a provides the reasons recorded for sickness leave (period Oct 2021 to Sept 2022). A significant percentage is due to emotional health.

5.3.20a

Absence Reason	FTE Lost days	Occurrences
Anxiety/stress/depression/other psychiatric illnesses	755.59	23
Other Reasons	625.63	57
Pregnancy related disorders	133.73	7
Cold, Cough, Flu - Influenza	124.18	32

Gastrointestinal problems	66.81	15
Benign and malignant tumours, cancers	64.00	1
Infectious diseases	50.50	9
Chest & respiratory problems	40.00	6
Genitourinary & gynaecological disorders	29.32	2
Ear, nose, throat (ENT)	17.64	5
Headache / migraine	10.60	6
Eye problems	10.00	1
Dental and oral problems	3.00	1

5.3.21 Stress/depression etc is the highest denominator of sickness. The ongoing impact post covid coupled with national headlines around the very sad outcomes for children such as Arthur and Star has impacted social work/care morale. This is reflected in the number of social workers leaving the profession last year (900 nationally).

However the NCC staff survey identifies Children's Services Directorate as relatively positive in comparison to other NCC Service Directorates. This is testament to our staff and the leadership in managing relational practice to effect, under challenging circumstances and the impact of vicarious trauma. I will discuss specific survey responses within the wellbeing section below.

Directorate Comparison

	Positive about work	Positive about flexibility	Mental Wellbeing	Benefit of H&W Provision
Adult Services Directorate	7	8	7	7
Chief Executive Directorate	7	9	7	7
Children's Services Directorate	7	8	7	6
Communities and Business Development	7	8	7	7
Finance Directorate	7	8	7	6
Fire and Rescue	7	7	7	6
Planning and Local Services Directorate	7	8	7	7
Public Health and Community Services	7	8	7	6
Regeneration Directorate	7	8	8	7
NCC	7	8	7	6

5.3.22 The caseload average figures on 5.3.1a indicate a slight increase from last year, however, well below national and regional averages. Complexity of cases has not reduced. To the contrary, this reflects the significant work that is being undertaken to manage demand at the front door and apply appropriate thresholds and the effectiveness of the early help offer which also supports the step-down of cases without delay once social work interventions have been completed. 3 years later, covid has continued to bring about challenges to service delivery in terms of the pressures this ongoing phenomenon has placed upon families and practice.

- 5.3.23 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.
- 5.3.24 The workload weighting system shows 60% of Practitioners were working at or below capacity in February 2021. This has declined from 77% at the same period in 2020.
- 5.3.25 Media headlines, residual issues of covid including challenges for families around significant growth of mental health *and* the cost-of-living crisis has resulted in additional referrals, in turn placing further pressure on social worker capacity.
- 5.3.26 The graph above (5.3.1a) cites our caseloads are slightly lower than the regional average but higher than the national average.
- 5.3.27 As a service, all attempts are made to address caseloads however the recurring issue of retention within children's social care, both locally and nationally can impact this as work does need to be allocated with children being the priority. We continue to contribute to regional work on this.
- 5.3.28 The service areas with additional workloads are prioritised for placing newly recruited experienced staff into them *and* support staff, to relieve pressure. The staff structure will be reviewed regularly alongside the recruitment strategy to determine what changes are needed in line with requirements.

5.4 Recruitment

- 5.4.1 Recruitment and development of Newly Qualified Social Workers has been relatively successful. However, we are mindful of lower numbers of applicants regionally *and* other LAs are emulating our successful Academy model therefore the pool is becoming smaller. 15 new starters joined us with an additional cohort of 5 joining recently (March 2023).
- 5.4.2 We are currently interviewing for the next Cohort who will commence their role as social workers in the Academy - September 2023.
- 5.4.3 To address regional shortages, in line with 'Our Grow our Own' initiative our first Cohort of BA Social Work Apprentices in their final year (5) will join the Academy in September 2023 (pending successful completion of the end point assessment - June 2023).

- 5.4.4 In line with succession planning, we currently have 9 BA Apprenticeship students (sourced internally) in the pipeline/system. We endeavour to utilise this route to provide a steady stream of social workers moving forward as it also provides opportunity to staff who have been loyal to Northumberland County Council as an employer of choice. However due to the nature of children's social work and the recruitment challenges nationally we have extended our BA Social Work apprenticeship net to include external applicants with transferable skills. We have received a pleasing number of applications and hope to monopolise on this.
- 5.4.5 As discussed, routes into the Academy include successful completion of a BA or MA degree via local universities. Student placements supports capacity within teams as the students fulfil several duties including supervised family time contact and direct work with children and families. I am strategic lead for the DfE's Step Up to Social Work fast track initiative which occurs every 2 years. We had 3 Step Up students who commenced the 14 months Programme in January 2022 and conclude June 2023. Participants have been interviewed for the subsequent Academy Cohort.
- 5.4.6 Recruitment of experienced staff remains a challenge which impacts differentially in some services. We use a number of means including targeted social media to attract experienced social workers. We also include staff 'talking heads' within our advertisements for prospective applicants to hear from individuals with actual work experience in Northumberland.
- 5.4.7 We remain part of the regional North-East Social Work Alliance (NESWA) which includes all 12 LA's and local universities. We recognise the importance of relationship building with peers/colleagues to support and implement our strategies. I am also the Vice Chair for the Regional BAME Liaison Group.
- 5.4.8 We are always looking for ways to further strengthen recruitment and retention. We are keen for Northumberland Children's to remain an employer of choice. With that said, positive relationships with local universities supports our participation during recall days to discuss the benefits of working in Northumberland. We attend recall days to ensure maximum in person audiences, due to the new world of hybrid practices, which brings challenges around relationship/rapport building. We also ensure an alumnus of the respective university (who now works for us) also attends to discuss his/her own experience. We have used these sessions to dispel the myth of 'extra travel' with the area being geographically large.
- 5.4.9 We have extended our reach by engaging with Cumbria and Edinburgh Universities to support recruitment for our West Locality Team and North Locality Team.

- 5.4.10 As discussed, recruitment of experienced staff is both a national and regional issue with all Local Authorities in the North-East experiencing similar difficulties. Ongoing attempts have been made to address the issues.
- 5.4.11 It seems the pressures of covid, and the associated risks around frontline social work has impacted interest in joining Children's Social Work. Recruitment to study social work from staff working in children's residential homes was a regular stream of future social workers. However anecdotally, it seems people generally are less inclined to do shift work since covid. It has become an employee market across every sector, whether that is retail or hospitality for example. More prospective employees are seeking employment which permits them to work entirely or predominantly from home. This has added to the challenges of recruitment for social care generally, notwithstanding children's social work which has experienced retention issues for a number of years pre covid. It is disappointing (both nationally and via the media) that promotion and acknowledgement of children's social work staff and all that has been done to support the most vulnerable in society during and pre covid, has not been as recognised.
- 5.4.12 In line with future planning for social work recruitment in Northumberland, I partook in an online question/answer session (via the SpringPod initiative) with 16–18-year-old students interested in a career in children's social work.

5.5 Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE)

- 5.5.1 Since the previous Annual Report, Northumberland Children's ASYE Academy has supported new starters into post. This Academy model continues to support the transition from academic study by offering high support *and* constructive challenge to ensure social workers keep children at the heart of everything they do during and after transition to experienced social worker. This has been recognised during a review by Skills for Care citing; *The programme has continued to grow in strength which was evident from the self-assessment and the 360-degree evaluation... NQSWs in Northumberland benefit from consistent assessors who are well experienced and work collaboratively with senior leaders to ensure that there is a culture of learning and shared values which is a strength. Equality, diversity, and inclusion are a strength in Northumberland ASYE programme despite a limited diverse population*.
- 5.5.2 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. We have developed a social care induction SharePoint to assist with this. <https://northumberland365.sharepoint.com/sites/ChildrensSocialCareInduction>

- Consistent experienced management provides a high level of accessibility to ensure effective, approachable line management. In September 2022 we had 3 x Academy Team Managers, dedicated to supporting the Academy through their ASYE Programme. (This has subsequently been scaled back to reflect reduced numbers). Every effort is made to make effective use of management generally, reflected by wider service need. We will review this dependant on the numbers following recruitment for the next Cohort 10-September 2023 start).

5.5.3 Regardless of the challenges faced due to covid, every effort has been made to continue the offer of a thorough, structured training programme and graduated caseload to ensure these cohorts are fully supported to develop their skills.

5.5.4 Whilst covid greatly impacted staff regularly working/attending their office bases on a daily basis, every effort has been made to provide an opportunity for the newly qualified cohorts to commence their careers as a collective. The invaluable peer learning and open office conversations with managers is a key aspect of effective social work action learning during their first 6 months in children's social work.

- The workers have and will continue to transition to safeguarding teams for the following 6 months of the ASYE programme. This will include a mix of working virtually and attending the office during duty days and team days in line with regional competitive flexible working.
- Support continues from the Academy team managers until completion of the portfolio. This includes practice assessor responsibility and regular reflective supervision. I have also fulfilled the role of practice assessor in order to fully support and monitor the high level of practice expected of the social workers.

5.5.5 The benefits of the Academy model adopted since 2018 have been realised as the ASYE's who have commenced their career via this route describe a positive experience. (A significant number of the Academy alumni have successfully applied for internal promotions in line with effective succession planning).

5.5.6 Timing of recruitment continues to be aligned with university/course completion in order to ensure Northumberland attracts 'the best candidates'. As discussed, 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.

5.5.7 It is also an opportunity for new appointees to network and build relationships whilst offering support to 'pressure point' teams.

5.5.8 Due to the success of the Academy, other regional LA's have sought our advice in terms of implementing this model in their respective areas. Our own Northumberland Adult's Service have also emulated the Academy model which commenced in September 2022.

5.6 Staff Retention

5.6.0 To ensure continual recognition and encouragement of staff, we have recommenced a graduation ceremony for staff who completed their ASYE. Practice assessors are also invited and acknowledged for their part in developing the ASYE's. The event was well received with attendee staff saying they feel recognised and valued.

5.6.1 World Social Work Day is celebrated by senior management and service users recording words of affirmation. These recordings are disseminated throughout the day/week in acknowledgment of all that social care staff do to support Northumberland's most vulnerable children and families. This year's theme was:



5.6.2 As discussed, due to careful development and recognition of their skillset, our Academy alumni have successfully transitioned into experienced social workers, advanced practitioners and now team manager level. This is testament to the programme as the alumni are proactively role modelling future opportunities for their peers.

5.6.3 However, we fully recognise it is imperative to support staff to 'walk' before they 'run' in order to ensure we continually support children and families here in Northumberland. We have focused heavily on our 'learning culture for staff' which I will discuss further on.

- 5.6.4 We are extremely conscious of the regional and national issue around a shortage of experienced children's social workers. Therefore, it is envisaged Northumberland's 'grow our own' model of effective, confident, competent practitioners will continue to be a route to assist in addressing the local shortage of experienced social workers.
- 5.6.5 We have continued to develop this route by proactively upscaling the BA Social Work Apprenticeship numbers. We are keen to progress alternatively qualified staff into the masters apprenticeship. I am supporting Sunderland University to progress this route, as a member of the regional apprenticeship strategic group.
- 5.6.6 Until now, we have intentionally selected internal applicants to recognise and support staff who have shown a loyalty and commitment to working for Northumberland Council. This is in line with Northumberland's Corporate Plan mandate.
- 5.6.7 September 2022 saw another 4 Apprentices join the programme from internal routes. A mentor role is required as part of the programme. We continually encourage managers and their social workers to fulfil this role as part of their continuing professional development (CPD). It is important to always consider and implement CPD opportunities for social workers to continually develop their practice within a number of forums.
- 5.6.8 We also recognise from exit meetings/information staff move to other areas for promotion/s development. Therefore, we endeavour to offer this in house in the first instance and retain staff in the best interests of consistency and relationship building.
- 5.6.9 We have advanced practitioners partaking in the regional leadership and management - social worker to first line managers programme.
- 5.6.10 We currently have 3 team managers partaking in the practice supervisor development programme. This DfE funded programme is a CPD offer for staff who are responsible for supporting and developing the practice of others.
- 5.6.11 Experienced social workers have also supported apprentices, by fulfilling the mentor role. This again provides opportunity for staff to hone/share skills by partaking and adhering to our ongoing 'learning culture' as an organisation. A mentor is the consistent link for BA social work apprentices throughout the duration of their degree. The mentor facilitates reflective supervision with the apprentice and completes documentation for the tri partite meetings which occur every 8 weeks. As the apprenticeship is relatively new, I also fulfil the role of mentor for one of our apprentices. I am also a panel member for end point assessments. This involvement supports a clearer understanding of best practice expectations. I hold

regular meetings with the apprentices and mentors to support both elements as required.

5.6.12 We have strong positive working relationships with higher education establishments through the teaching partnership, supporting students to be equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge in preparation for being part of our future social work force. We offer high quality placements and this in turn provides an opportunity to further develop current staff by supporting social workers to become practice educators. We are conscious of expanding our practice educator stock due to alternative routes into social work, such as the apprenticeship which requires 2 placements; one 70-day placement and one 100 -day placement. This is also supporting continued professional development of staff. As an experienced practice educator, I complete verification and observation of trainee practice educators.

5.6.13 In turn it is also beneficial to have a pool of 'seasoned' practitioners once they have completed their studies. This is evident in the high number of students who have successfully transitioned (via a thorough recruitment process) into a permanent social work post.

5.6.14 As Signs of Safety is our chosen practice model, the senior management role model expectations of service delivery by partaking in sessions with our frontline staff. We are keen to display learning happens at all levels and is continual.

5.6.15 As a predominant WB demographic both resident and staffing, we are mindful of ensuring our staff consider all elements of inclusivity, including race. My managers have supported my chairing of the race equality network for Northumberland Council. I ensure learning and information is shared regularly with our own staff within children's social care to raise awareness and build confidence in delivering an effective, informed service to all. This information is shared via PSW interactions with staff.

5.6.16 As the PSW I have promoted children's social care/private fostering during Northumberland's national safeguarding adult's week.

5.7 Wellbeing

Considering all of the above and the rising referral rates, we have made every effort to support staff wellbeing. The table below at 5.7.0 provides the responses of Children's Social Care who participated in the NCC Corporate Survey.

Table 5.7.0

Out of 100%	Question/statement
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76.09%	I often/always look forward to going to work.
84.54%	I feel trusted to do my job.
88.34%	I am able to do my job to a standard I am satisfied with.
76.35%	I am able to meet all conflicting demands on my time at work.
77.29%	I have adequate resources to do my work.
52.68%	Are there enough staff in my department for me to do my job properly?
91.17%	I am satisfied with support from immediate management
96.53%	I feel my role makes a difference to residents/service users/customers
81.07%	Communication between senior management (Head of Service level) and staff is effective

- 5.7.1 Results of the staff survey conducted has provided further insight into priority areas. As discussed, retention of experienced staff is critical to maintain low turnover rates. As discussed regardless of covid, children’s safeguarding teams commonly experience staff moving on after a short period of time as they can feel stressed by the type of work and its associated demands.
- 5.7.2 It is reassuring to read there is recognition of the efforts made by the leadership to ensure our social care staff can meet the needs of their role by being valued as an invaluable resource, in turn meeting the needs of our most vulnerable residents.
- 5.7.2a Covid has had an impact on our staff. Overall, our social workers have been tenacious and resourceful in their approach during these unprecedented times. A ‘can do’ attitude remains, regardless of the concerns around themselves as professionals and all that this entails, as well as factors which impact on their personal lives. All of this test’s resilience which is borne from a balance between the personal and professional.
- 5.7.3 We understand effective supervision is a priority. It is important for staff to have the opportunity to focus on both case management and reflection.
- 5.7.3a Staff wellbeing across the whole of Northumberland Council remains a priority area. This is specifically important due to the pandemic and the offer has been adapted accordingly, providing virtual forums.
- 5.7.4 I hold a regular PSW virtual forum for staff to connect with me.
- 5.7.5 Support has also been offered to frontline/ keyworkers who can ring Northumberland’s Psychological Wellbeing Coordinator between 9-10am Tuesday/Wed/Thurs/Friday mornings

5.7.6 There are also numerous corporate wide opportunities accessible to social care staff and staff are encouraged to partake. These include amongst others; online fitness classes apps. Staff mental wellbeing network. Choir. A monthly calm space which provides tips for mental wellbeing.

5.7.7 There is 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.

5.7.8 The social work force demographic is also considered, and staff are encouraged to attend relevant staff network meetings including LGBTQ, Autistic Spectrum Disorder staff network, Race Equality Network and Menopause and Andropause staff network.

5.8 Continuing Professional Development (CPD)

5.8.1 Social Work England (SWE) is the registering body for over 100,000 social workers in England. Social Worker is a protected title, and it is against the law to practice as or take up a post of a social worker without being registered with SWE. The regulator has a set of practice standards and code of conduct by which registered social workers must adhere to. Social workers renew registration on an annual basis. CPD is a prerequisite for renewal of social worker registration. As Principal Social Worker I monitor and support social workers to meet the requirements of registration. As registration/reregistration is fundamental in order to be permitted to practice as a social worker I lead on ensuring each worker – whether in work (or on leave) is registered as required.

5.8.2 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 virtually and/or in person.

5.8.3 We review our training/learning plan on an annual basis during consultation with frontline practitioners/managers to understand what actually impacts/nurtures practice and more importantly what creates positive outcomes for children and families. National themes are also considered to inform our offer. We also offer competitive salaries and graded career structures.

- 5.8.4 The advanced practitioner has been effective in terms of addressing 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.
- 5.8.5 The implementation of the staff development structure recognised and encouraged staff to develop expertise in specific areas of practice, acknowledging this with an advanced practitioner status. Further development of this role would 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. However, the current pressure on capacity has meant most advanced practitioners are burdened by additional caseload/complexity.
- 5.8.7 Quality assurance has continually developed. Practice days are held to fully understand the worker experience. We continue 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 too, in line with our Leadership Pledge around accountability, offering high support and constructive challenge.
- 5.8.8 Improvement in practice standards continues by building upon initiatives around:
- Retention/restructure
 - Continued CPD and learning offer
 - Workforce strategy
 - Regional workforce links

5.9 Practice and issues which impact social workers

- 5.9.1 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.
- 5.9.2 The leadership team have worked on a continuous improvement plan following self-assessment in April 2022. Participation by senior representatives from social care, early help, performance team, health and education, assists in providing a comprehensive audit programme which measures the impact of the improvements. A range of themed and standard audits are completed, and the process has been continuously refined and adapted to explore different areas of practice. The comments below are from Ofsted during a focussed visit in July 2022

The senior leadership team provides strong and effective oversight when children need to achieve permanence. An established quality assurance framework assists senior leaders and managers in monitoring the progression of children's plans and the quality of

social work practice. There are robust tracking systems and panels in place to review children's progress. Senior leaders support managers and social workers to make timely and effective decisions about children's futures.

5.9.3 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 continues to be a key theme moving forward.

5.9.4 There is access for all social workers/social care staff to a web-based children's social care research site. (Community Care Inform) In collaboration with the 12 Local Authorities regionally, the same research tool has been commissioned. It is envisaged this will/has assisted in consistency and standardisation of practice and resourceful whilst considering financial prudence. I utilise this resource to develop specific training workshops/sessions I facilitate to staff.

The Ofsted focused visit in July 2022 cited 'Social workers describe feeling valued by their managers. They appreciate the learning and service development opportunities provided by senior leaders'.

5.9.5 It is crucial to provide a common set of principles and a practice framework within which social workers can practice with confidence. Signs of Safety (SofS) which is a recognised model of social work intervention continues to be used as the practice model of choice in Northumberland. Training has been refreshed and the recording system has been adapted to reflect SofS requirements, thus providing social workers more time to build relationships and less on the demands of recording in duplication.

5.9.6 2021/22 saw regular attendance by a SofS consultant and practice champions identified and appointed from across all areas of social care practice. There were 4 workstreams chaired by senior management to ensure strategy aligned with operational practice. These consisted of:

- Learning and Development
- Systems
- Quality Assurance (co-chaired by me and the quality assurance manager)
- Comms and Partnership

5.9.7 Following a review, next steps are focussing on the practice champions being sourced from team manager level to support quality assurance practices. Effective communication is key to ensuring consistency of message to all areas, especially here in Northumberland where staff are dispersed over a large geographical area. SofS discussions are set as a regular agenda item during team meetings.

5.9.8 The benefits of this approach are being seen. A focus now is to build upon practice not only being measurable but meaningful. Please see the 5 Meaningful Measures;

Counting what Counts

Meaningful Measure 1	Keeping children safe, supported, and improving their lives.
Meaningful Measure 2	Making sure we are working with children, parents, important family and friends so that they are fully involved in developing plans that are clear about who will do what and when.
Meaningful Measure 3	Making sure that children are living safely and securely as soon as possible.
Meaningful Measure 4	Making sure families and staff from all services work with each other to make things better for children.
Meaningful Measure 5	Offer the right training and supervision to improve confidence, skills, and knowledge of workers.

5.9.9 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.

5.9.10 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 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 instil confidence and accountability in our staff.

5.9.11 We recognise multi-agency partnership working as fundamental to meet the needs of our most vulnerable residents and encourage effective relationship building/networking. After all, safeguarding children is everyone's responsibility. Incidentally a positive of Covid is effective use of remote working which has resulted in additional attendance of partner agencies at care team meetings.

5.9.12 We also recognise the importance of developing role models for new and current staff therefore prioritise staff development via the practice educator role, the practice supervisor role and the mentor role mentioned above.

5.9.13 Evaluation of impact for children and families is and remains a priority. We have further developed a feedback strategy in order to ensure the voice of children and

families is heard and considered in all elements of practice. Feedback is collated via numerous routes including direct interaction with children and families by auditors, feedback questionnaires, the use of Mind of My Own and via the complaints process. All of the information collated is utilised to continually develop practice.

5.9.14 As part of Northumberland Policies and Procedures Group, I supported triangulation of information and expectations of multi-agency partners in the best interests of children and families

5.9.15 I am a domestic abuse champion and regularly prompt, promote campaigns, for example - the white ribbon campaign.

5.10 Raising the profile of social work nationally and regionally

5.10.1 I have continued attendance at national and regional meetings as the chair of the regional PSW network.

I have contributed to and maintained a Northumberland Children's presence in national practice developments, including regular consultations with the DfE regarding the Care Review. I have also maintained virtual contact with the Chief Social Worker for England.

I have represented the NE PSW Network during a session with Community Care Inform and Lemn Sissey.

I have organised and facilitated regional PSW wellbeing sessions for social care staff specifically around hints and tips to support productivity.

5.11 Priorities for 2023

- As part of the workforce steering group, I will proactively support ongoing development as required, including relevant priorities within the continuous improvement plan.
- I will continue to support retention of social workers and support staff in the best interests of our children and families. To remain competitive, we will support a balanced approach to flexible working arrangements, whilst ensuring staff build effective, relational practice by utilising a hybrid approach of in person and remote engagement with children, families, colleagues and networks.

- Staff will be supported to effectively utilise Northumberland's vast array of wellbeing initiatives to address vicarious trauma often associated with children's social work.
- As lead for recruitment of the ASYE Academy from Cohort 1 in 2018 to the present, I will continue to creatively support our 'grow our own model' of recruitment.
- Whilst Ofsted has recognised the significant progress made, we are keen to continuously develop ourselves and our practitioners to address areas identified during visits and from our Self-Assessment.
- We continue to focus on the quality of all child/ren's plans by the Signs of Safety Model. We actively encourage staff to work 'with families' in the best interests of their children as opposed 'doing to families' as families and networks are the experts of their lives.
- The quality of analysis and more importantly 'impact on children' is an area of continual development. Ofsted's July 2022 visit cited '*An established quality assurance framework assists senior leaders and managers in monitoring the progression of children's plans and the quality of social work practice*'.
- We will continue implementing the Leadership Pledge across all levels of staffing to support all staff to recognise themselves as leaders, ensuring hierarchy is not a barrier to positive communication in the best interests of children.
- Continue to adapt and learn from the quality assurance programme, (audits/practice days/themes from complaints/) - to ensure all auditors prioritise service user feedback.
- Consider and identify CPD for social workers in line with key national themes and local requirements. For example - Contextual Safeguarding role out to ensure all social work staff complete this to support their practice.
- Remain engaged with regional and national social care initiatives to support and influence practice in Northumberland.
- Continue to support awareness raising around Corporate Parenting responsibilities.

- Continue to build upon and deliver the pledge cited within the Living and Learning section of Northumberland's Corporate Plan 21-24 - *'We are also committed, through Children's Services to providing sustainable support to children and families into the future, innovating new ways of working and focusing on early intervention backed up by adequate investment'*.

6. IMPLICATIONS ARISING OUT OF THE REPORT

Policy:	Policies are aligned with statutory requirements and case law. Policies and procedures pertaining to safeguarding children are held within Tri.x and considered to inform this report.
Finance and value for money:	Training costs are covered within the current training budget.
Legal:	Performance within the childcare 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
Health and Wellbeing	Corporate health and wellbeing strategies are considered. Staff are encouraged/directed to source this invaluable support alongside supervision and training as required, to strengthen the service provided to children and families.
Wards:	N/A

Report Sign Off

	Full Name of Officer
Interim Director of Law and Governance and Monitoring Officer	Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Resources and Transformation (S151 Officer)	Jan Willis
Executive Director of Children, Young People and Education	Audrey Kingham
Chief Executive	Helen Paterson
Portfolio Holder(s)	Guy Renner-Thompson

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