



Northumberland

County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S SERVICES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

DATE: 4TH NOVEMBER 2021

TITLE OF REPORT: Social Worker Recruitment and Retention

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

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

Report prepared by Adele Wright, Head of Service Social Work and Safeguarding

Purpose of report

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

Recommendations

- To note the contents of the report
- To identify any issues for further scrutiny

Link to Corporate Plan

This report is relevant to the Living and Learning priority in the NCC Corporate Plan 2018-2021

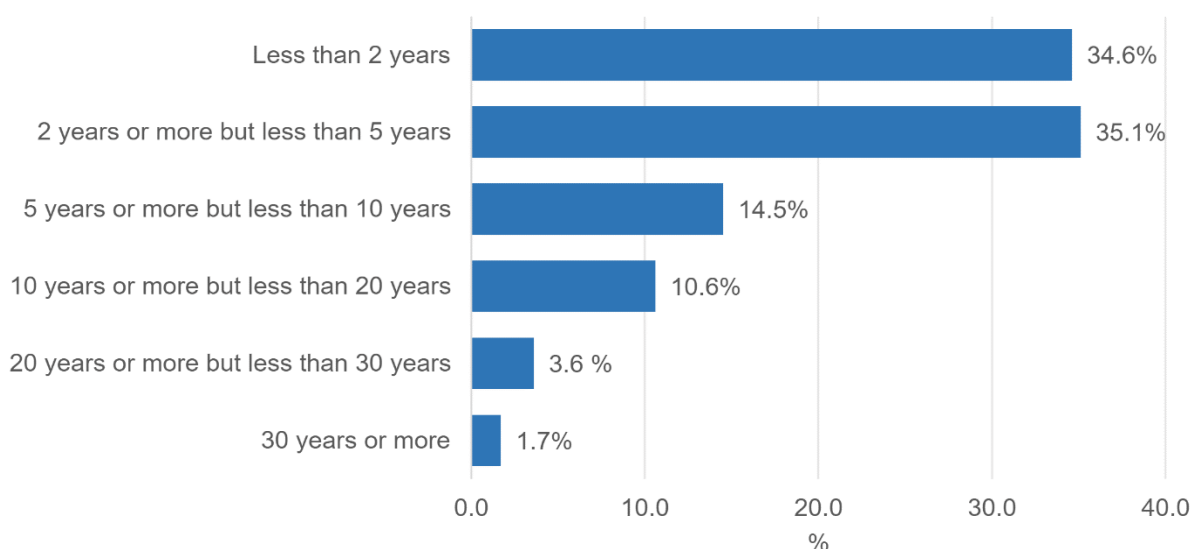
Key issues

1. Social work recruitment and retention presents a perennial challenge nationally, regionally and in Northumberland and has been further compounded by the covid pandemic. It is one of the key areas of focus in the national independent review of children's social care currently taking place.
2. Locally, the issue is recruiting sufficient numbers of experienced social workers and ensuring retention of those that we develop in the academy, once they move into safeguarding 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 increases pressure on existing staff, impacting staff wellbeing and sickness absence.
5. Innovative approaches to recruitment need to be applied and creative opportunities to retain staff need to be further developed.

Background

Recruitment of qualified children's social workers into Local Authority safeguarding teams is a challenge across the country. The Department of Education 2020 children's social work force return informs us that in 2020 31,854 FTE children and family social workers were employed by Local Authorities. In the same year, 4,294 left the profession resulting in a turnover rate of 13.5%. Of those staff who left the profession nearly 70% 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 2020



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.

Covid has exacerbated concerns about staff morale and turnover. A longitudinal study of children and family social workers published by the Department of Education and updated in 2021 highlights

The impacts of Covid-19 on social workers' experiences have been challenging in terms of increased feelings of stress and anxiety, more complex cases, and depleted relationships with colleagues and to a lesser extent, service users. ASYEs in particular report higher levels of stress and anxiety as a result of Covid-19, than more experienced social workers

Key features of working culture which could influence decisions to leave or to stay emerged in the qualitative interviews as: a supportive working environment; being treated well and feeling valued both by immediate line managers and the organisation as a whole;

Within the North East region, the issues are acknowledged by all 12 Local Authorities who work collaboratively to create solutions and attempt to manage the social work market. A successful example of this over recent years has been the Memorandum of Understanding relating to agency worker pay rates which were escalating as Authorities competed to secure the agency workers available, by offering increasingly higher pay rates. In spite of the co-operation social workers are very mobile within the relatively small region and staff are frequently attracted by opportunities in other Authorities. As the most northerly Authority geographically Northumberland has the additional challenge of attracting people to travel to the upper limits of the region.

The Northumberland Position

Over the last 12 months in Northumberland, the turnover rate for social work qualified staff in front line roles has been 16.99% with 35 social workers leaving the Authority. This compares to 14.71% in the previous 12 months. Analysis of the reasons for leaving indicates that approx. 40% moved to a different social work role in another Authority or the voluntary sector. 20% went to work for an agency, a further 20% stopped working due to ill health or caring responsibilities and the remainder moved out of the area or were on temporary contracts.

We have employed 20 agency staff over the period, which is a rate of 9.7%, compared to 9.4% in the previous 12-month period.

The sickness rate amongst this group (% days lost to sickness in the last 12 months) is 4.93%, compared to a rate of 3% last year and an NCC target of 3.5%. The rate of 4.93% is more in line with the 2019 pre covid rate of 5.14%

We have developed a workforce strategy that has recruitment, retention and staff wellbeing at its core in an attempt to redress the increasing turnover, recruit newly qualified and experienced staff and retain them once in our employ by offering a supportive, learning environment in which to progress their career.

What has been working well

- Northumberland have a well-established and successful social work academy which is currently supporting its 7th cohort. Newly qualified social workers join the academy on completing their social work degree and spend the first 6 months of their careers being nurtured and supported into the role with learning opportunities and protected caseloads. The Northumberland academy model is well regarded in the region and has been replicated by other Local Authorities and competition for the available places is strong. This means that we are able to recruit the best newly qualified social workers available and 'grow our own' staff.
- Although we have had some turnover from within the academy staff group this was predominantly from cohort 1 and we have learned from the feedback from this cohort and now manage the transition between the academy and social work teams more gradually. Turnover from later cohorts has been much lower. We have links with the University and can feedback about the requirements for training for qualifying social workers to prepare them for the role.

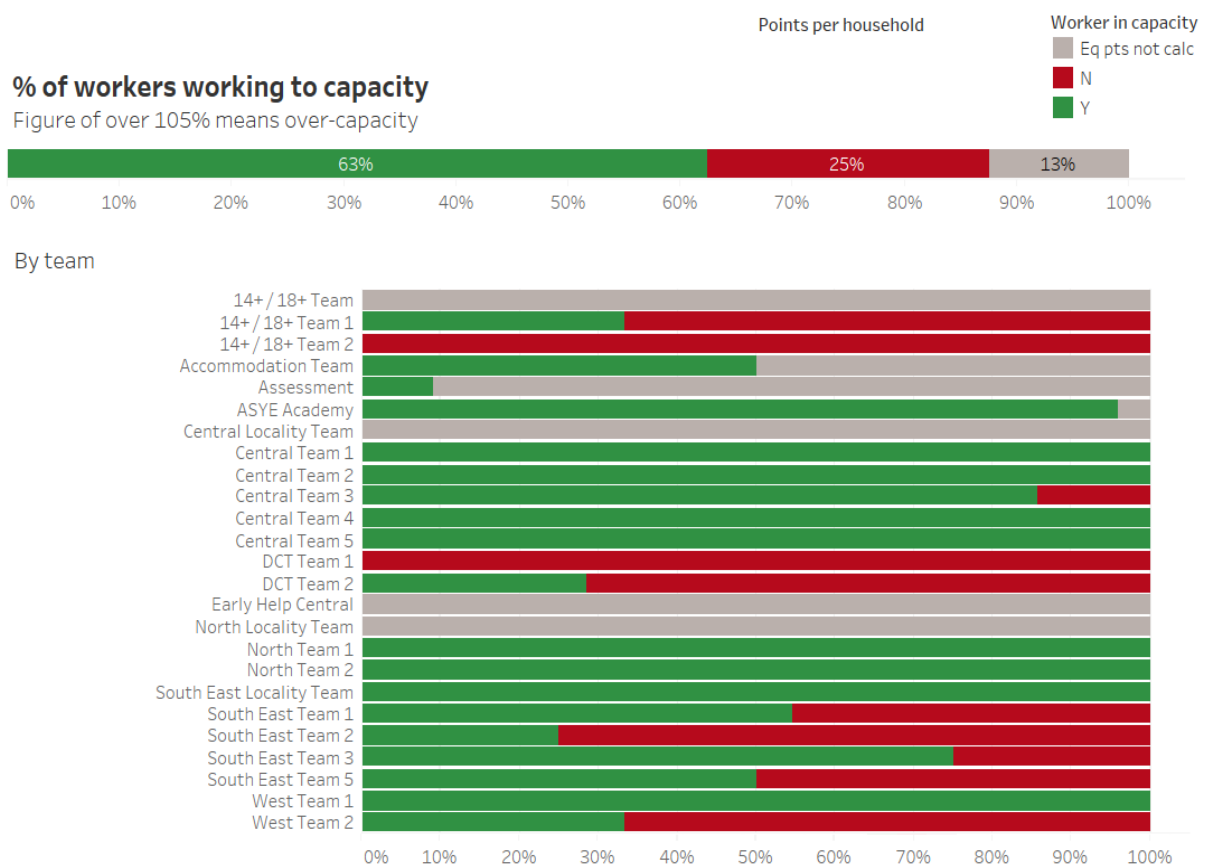
- Northumberland have a strong front line team manager group. Most have been promoted from within our own staff group and are committed to the organisation. We have been able to support and train these team managers with external training opportunities offered by the Department of Education and the Firstline leadership programme but also with training packages created internally. Recently the teams were restructured to ensure that each manager has a smaller staff group to supervise to enable them to offer additional support and be able to quality assure the practice better.
- Children's social care have adopted a new practice model known as 'Signs of Safety' which has been embedded with extensive training and support for staff as they familiarise themselves with a new approach. The model requires much closer working with families and the feedback from staff is that they enjoy this way of working which fits with their professional ethics. This offer has attracted some new staff to join Northumberland as they are aware of the model in place and support available.
- Practice days are undertaken by senior managers on a monthly basis focusing on a specific service area each month. On these days staff are spoken to with the aim of understanding the culture and the level of support and supervision on offer in the teams. Without exception staff relay that they feel well supported by their line managers and by the organisation and that they enjoy a positive working environment. They particularly appreciate the relationships that they have with colleagues and peers which is facilitated by working from an office base. Exit interviews are undertaken whenever staff leave and generally staff also report that Northumberland is a supportive organisation to work for and they have been positive about their line managers.
- Front line social work staff have continued to work during the Covid pandemic. They have continued to visit and support families face to face and have run complex meetings and court hearings virtually. This has been without the usual support of their colleagues and managers on hand in the office. In spite of the restrictions social workers and managers have devised creative methods to keep in touch and offer support to each other. Nationally the efforts and resilience of social workers has received minimal recognition but in Northumberland they have done an excellent job of continuing to offer services to children and families in the challenging circumstances.

What are we concerned about

- Although we can successfully recruit newly qualified social workers it is much more challenging to fill vacancies with experienced social workers. We need to ensure that we retain the newly qualified workers that we are investing in so that we can replenish the workforce in a sustainable way. We have experienced some turnover in the newly qualified group and we look carefully at the reasons when one of these workers leaves. Usually, it is due to ill health or a realisation that the role is just not suitable for them. 6 out of the 68 staff have left for this reason. We have only had 2 out of 68 staff leave to work in a similar role for another Local Authority, 2 have left to work for an agency 1 has gone travelling around the world. The concern is that if we are not able to retain the newly qualified staff or recruit sufficient numbers of experienced workers, we will have teams filled with inexperienced workers with

insufficient numbers of staff who could coach or mentor the new starters as they learn the role.

- The challenges around recruitment and retention are particularly difficult in one or two of the teams. This does change from time to time but at the moment the issues are pressing for the South East locality team based in Blyth and also the Disabled Children’s and 14+ teams. Staff vacancies and sickness absence places additional pressure on workers in the teams as the cases need to be managed. Teams do work cooperatively to share work wherever possible but inevitably caseloads will increase. The table below illustrates the current caseloads for the social work teams. Those highlighted green are operating within the recommended caseload, the staff in red are above the recommended capacity. SE, 14+ and DCT are clearly the teams with higher vacancy rates and consequently staff in these teams are carrying more cases.



- A consequence of unfilled vacancies and increased caseloads can be work related stress resulting in sickness absence. Work related stress and anxiety is the major reason for sickness absence in children’s social work teams. This is managed well by team managers in conjunction with HR but the pattern is obvious when looking at absenteeism rates in particular teams. At the beginning of the Covid lock down we experienced a reduction in sickness levels as staff were benefitting from an improved work life balance whilst working from home, however the sickness rate has returned to its pre Covid level and we need to continue to address the issue of burn out and stress in the workforce whilst ensuring service delivery continues.

- In spite of efforts to improve our advertising of vacancies with ‘talking heads’ of social workers and promotion of the benefits of working for Northumberland the number of applications submitted to our rolling recruitment campaign is minimal.

What are we doing to address the challenge

- A work force steering group has been established with representatives from HR and children’s social care to implement the workforce strategy.
- Work force is a key priority in the improvement plan which also aligns with the strategy and focuses attention on delivery against the actions.
- We continue to learn from feedback from exit interviews and other staff about how we can shape and improve the support that we offer.
- We have adapted the transition from the academy to the safeguarding teams to continue to offer support to the workers, so they do not experience a ‘cliff edge’ when they leave the academy environment.
- A facilitated development session is planned for early November how we could improve and invigorate our recruitment programme.
- We are creating a mixed economy of new starters with a well-established apprenticeship programme and the step up to social work to further enhance the quality of the academy recruits.
- We continue to promote the health and wellbeing of staff using the corporate offer and other team initiatives.
- The advertising literature continues to be refreshed to emphasise the benefits of working for Northumberland e.g.: care lease scheme, flexible working, active Northumberland membership.
- Promotion of the excellent CPD offer available and encouraging staff to take advantage of the training opportunities available.
- Continue to work with the regional work force group and particularly with the newly formed regional recruitment and retention group which is chaired by the Northumberland Service Director.

What do we need to do more of

- The workforce steering group needs to be consolidated and develop a performance dashboard to track progress against the objectives.
- Implement learning and actions identified from the development session planned for November.
- Review the academy to determine how the resource could be used to support other teams/staff who may be struggling with capacity.
- Consider creation of specialist teams and posts that may be attractive to experienced staff and retain current workers and/or attract new and experienced social work staff.
- Use the regional resources more collaboratively to attract experienced workers to the region
- Work closely with the Universities to ensure that the newly qualified workers are as prepared for the role that they will undertake as possible to manage unrealistic expectations.

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	N/A
Human Resources	Supports workforce strategy
Property	N/A
Equalities (Impact Assessment attached) Yes <input type="checkbox"/> No <input type="checkbox"/> N/A <input checked="" type="checkbox"/>	N/A
Risk Assessment	Reputational risk associated with Ofsted judgement which considers work force capacity and planning
Crime & Disorder	N/A
Customer Consideration	Recruitment and retention critical for delivering best service to children and families.
Carbon reduction	N/A
Health and Wellbeing	Sufficient recruitment and retention has an impact on workloads health and wellbeing of the employed staff group.
Wards	County wide

Background papers:

Report sign off.

Authors must ensure that officers and members have agreed the content of the report:

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Monitoring Officer/Legal	Helen Lancaster
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Jan Willis
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