



Northumberland

County Council

FAMILY AND CHILDREN'S OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY COMMITTEE

7TH APRIL 2022

Annual Report of the Children's Principal Social Worker

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

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 2021 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 'Being Safe and Feeling Valued' priority included with the NCC Children and Young People's Plan 2019-22 and NCC Children's Service Statement 2019/21.

4. Key issues

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

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 January 2021. 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 2022/23.

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 2021.

5.3.1a

Indicator	NCC Oct 20 to Sept 21	NCC Oct 19 to Sept 20	National figure (19-20)	Regional figure (19-20)
a) Turnover Rate	16.0%	14.7%	14%	12.0%
b) Agency Worker Rate	10.0%	9.4%	15.4%	11.0%
c) Vacancy Rate	12.0%	9.7%	16.0%	8.0%
d) Days lost to sickness absence	2000	1903		
e) Absence Rate	4.0%	3.0%	3.0%	3.0%
f) Caseload average at 30-09-20	15.1	15	16	18

5.3.2 The turnover rate (16%) remains higher than the national average of 14% and the regional average of 12%. This is also an increase on the previous year's figure of 14.7%. However, while vacancy rates have increased there are positive reasons such as retirement or moving closer to family. We have also used vacancies to increase the ASYE Cohort.

5.3.3a **Reason for leaving**

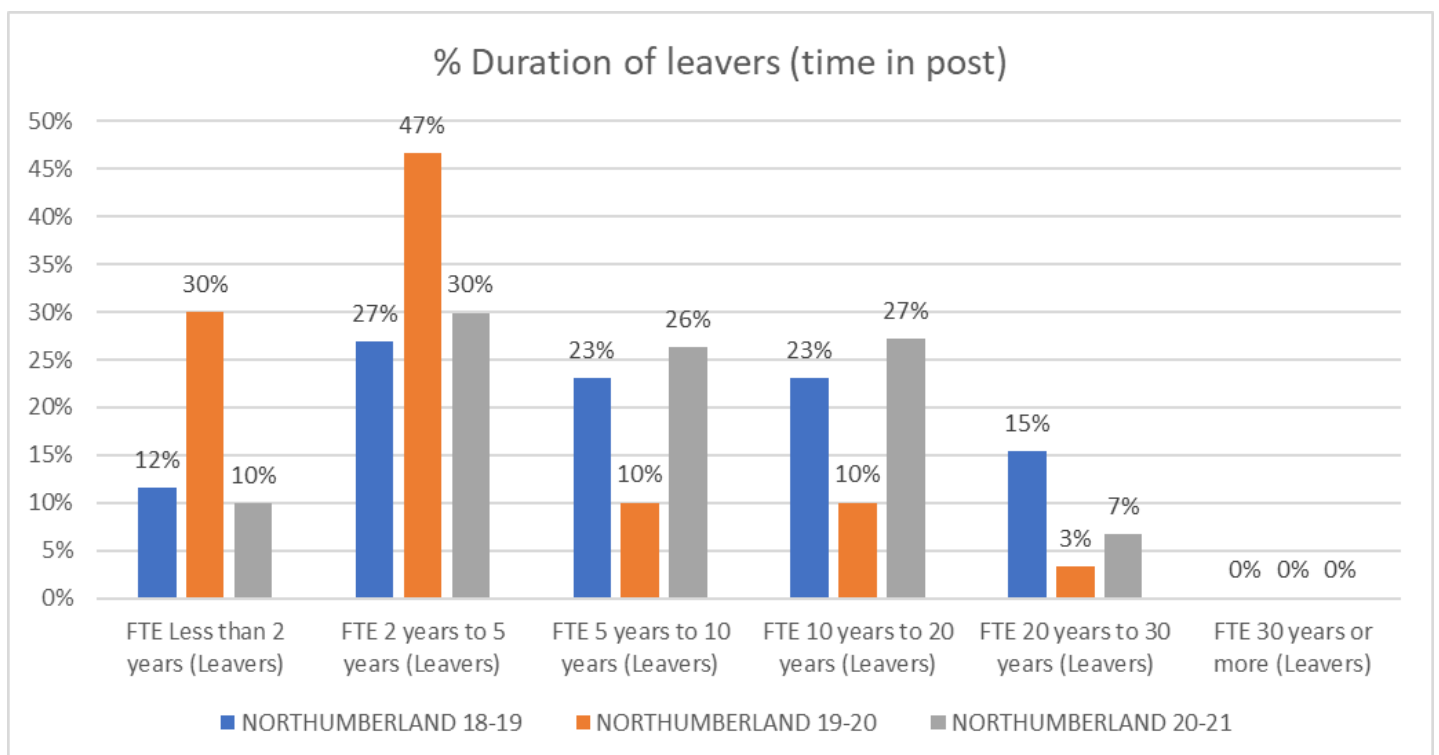
Resignation	29
Voluntary Redundancy	1
Retired	3
Deceased	1

5.3.3 **Destination of leaver**

Social worker role in different LA in England, for example leavers who moved to a role as a child and family social worker in another LA in England	10
Social worker role outside England, for example leavers who moved to a role as a child and family social worker outside England	1
Agency or consultancy social work (in England), for example leavers who moved to a role as a children's agency worker or consultant in England	4
Other social work role non LA (in England) for example leavers who moved to a non-LA social work role other than agency or consultancy work, for example, employment as a social worker in a charity	7
Non-social care role / no employment / career break / any other role outside England / left England	8
Other	1
Not known	3

5.3.4 Social workers who left to work in other Local Authorities were 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. Unfortunately transferring to other Local Authorities to fulfil the same role can be a sign of staff starting to feel 'burnout'. However the graph above at 5.3.3 also evidences 7 leavers remain in non-statutory social work therefore not leaving the profession in its altogether.

5.3.5 There are also a number that have left children's social work in its entirety. As per the graph below at 5.3.6.



5.3.6 Department for Education's Children's National Workforce Data Report (30th September 2021)

5.3.7 Nationally there has been a 3.7% increase of Full Time Equivalent (FTE) child and family social workers in post at 30 September 2020. However, as per the graph below (5.3.6a) during the year ending September 2021, 40% of FTE child and family social worker leavers had been in service in their Local Authority for less than 5 years. This percentage is lower than the 2020 figure of 77%.

5.3.8 Northumberland's vacancy rates have grown over the past year. Whilst lower than the national average the percentage is markedly higher than the regional average, although as noted above, we have used vacancies to increase the ASYE cohort.

To further understand this, we continue to 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 now offer an additional exit meeting between myself and the staff member. These meetings are attended on a 1:1 voluntary basis and have been held virtually due to COVID restrictions. Since September 2021, 10 members of staff have been offered a meeting. Of these 10 staff 3 made the decision to stay with Northumberland following the meeting.

5.3.10 The roles 7 staff members held in Northumberland prior to leaving

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

5.3.11 Themes identified in the exit interviews include:

- Moved due to career progression opportunity
- Disgruntled staff due to not securing a promotion
- Minimal career progression opportunities above Team Manage level
- Travel time/costs from home

5.3.12 It is envisaged continual monitoring and evaluating data *and* speaking directly to leavers/prospective leavers will assist us in taking corrective actions moving forward.

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 have continued to work collaboratively to ensure the cap of charges payable to agency staff is adhered to through the regional memorandum of understanding (MoU).

5.3.14 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. This is particularly relevant in the current climate due to the pandemic.

Please find further information regarding staff wellbeing within the wellbeing section below.

- 5.3.15 The workforce return table at 5.3.1a illustrates that Northumberland’s use of agency staff has increased since last year. However, remains lower than the region and markedly lower than the national average.
- 5.3.16 COVID and the impact on staffing has also dictated the use of agency staff where some staff have had to isolate/or work from home, concerns of hidden harm remained at the forefront of service delivery therefore it was imperative to ensure the frontline workforce were available to fulfil the role.
- 5.3.17 Agency staff are only utilised when all other avenues have been exhausted. 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.
- 5.3.18 Sickness absence is a key priority for the Council and Children’s Services. Every effort was and is made to remain in regular close contact by line management and peers alike to support each other during this time. Some staff have had to isolate due to Covid, or to stay at home due to their child/ren having 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. Of note, Children’s Services sickness absence is currently lower than other areas of the Council.
- 5.3.19 As a leadership team we have continually focused on staff wellbeing throughout the 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 2020 to Sept 2021). A significant percentage is due to emotional health. On average 1 member of staff was off sick for 8.72 days.

5.3.20a

Absence Reason	FTE Lost days	Occurrences
Other	896.19	54
Stress, Depression, Mental Health & Fatigue Syndromes	662.32	18
Stomach, Liver, Kidney & Digestion	173.41	16
Back & Neck Problems	120.60	7
Other Musculo-Skeletal Problems	70.38	5
Infections	52.05	18

Genitourinary/Gynaecological problems	51.95	4
Neurological	46.34	9
Cancer	27.57	1
Pregnancy Related	18.00	4
Chest & Respiratory	9.00	1
Heart, Blood Pressure & Circulation	1.22	1
Eye, Ear, Nose & Mouth/Dental	1.00	1

5.3.21 Stress/depression etc is the highest denominator of sickness. The impact of Covid coupled with national headlines around the very sad outcomes for children such as Arthur and Star has impacted social work/care morale. To address this, specific PSW drop-in sessions have been held to support staff and provide a safe environment for them to discuss and reflect on the above. These sessions were well attended. Our Director of Service - Graham Reiter also partook. We listened and more importantly 'heard' staff and offered reassurance balanced with expectations. Much of the feedback was positive about the support offered and in addition, staff are signposted and encouraged to utilise the corporate wellbeing services.

5.3.22 The caseload average figures 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. 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 77% of Practitioners were working at or below capacity in February 2022. This has improved from 75% as at the same period in 2021 however the aim is for this to be 100%.

5.3.25 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.

- 5.3.26 However, we are pleased efforts are reflected in the graph above (5.3.1a) citing our caseloads are lower than the regional and national average.
- 5.3.27 A national Health Check survey completed by members of our staff recently (further information available within the wellbeing section at 5.7 below cites 'staff recognise effective workforce planning systems' as the highest standard overall.
- 5.3.28 The staff with additional workloads are concentrated in the 14 + Team, the South East and Central Safeguarding Teams. These teams are prioritised for placing newly recruited experienced staff into them *and* the non-social work 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 During 2021 recruitment and development of Newly Qualified Social Workers has been successful. 23 new starters joined us in 2021. However, another round of recruitment held in December 2021 (with a start date of March 2022) saw a very low number of applications. For some of those that did apply, their interviews did not meet the reassuring standard required to support the children and families of Northumberland. This is very disappointing as the cohort interviewed were predominantly MA students.
- 5.4.2 Another round of recruitment has commenced for the September 2022 Cohort. It is envisaged these numbers and quality of candidate will be markedly higher due to a larger pool to select from.
- 5.4.3 Our first Cohort of BA Social Work Apprentices (in their final year) will join the Academy in September 2022 (pending successful completion of the Programme). This Cohort commenced the 3-year programme in 2019.
- 5.4.4 We have subsequently doubled capacity to 4 per annum. Therefore, in line with succession planning, we currently have 10 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.
- 5.4.5 As discussed, routes into the Academy include successful completion of a BA or MA degree via local universities. We are also part of the DfE Step Up to Social Work initiative which occurs every 2 years. We currently have 3 Step Up students who commenced the 14 months Programme in January 2022. This too supports capacity within teams as the students fulfil a number of duties including supervised contact and direct work with children and families.

- 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.
- 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 we have proactively reached out to local Universities and have commenced attendance during their recall days to discuss the benefits of working in Northumberland by attending with alumni who work for us. We have also used these sessions to dispel the myth of 'extra travel' with the area being geographically large.
- 5.4.9 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 however the pandemic and media headlines has impacted this somewhat.
- 5.4.10 It seems the pressures of Covid and the associated risks around frontline social work impacted interest in joining Children's Social Work. From anecdotal conversations with our local university representatives, the appropriate promotion nationally and high regard of health staff and their invaluable role during the pandemic has supported uptake and interest for nursing, which is markedly higher than that of social work. It is disappointing (both nationally and via media) that the same promotion and acknowledgement of social work staff and all that has been done to support the most vulnerable in society, has not been as recognised.

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.
- 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 March 2021 we had 3 x Academy Team Managers and a Senior Practitioner, dedicated to supporting the Academy through their ASYE Programme. (This has subsequently been scaled back due 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 Cohort 8 of the Academy - September 2022 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 has greatly impacted staff regularly working/attending their office bases, every effort (Covid safe by socially distancing and wearing masks as applicable) has been made to provide an opportunity for the newly qualified Cohorts to commence their careers as a 'Cohort'. 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. Again, every effort has and will be made to ensure staff are working 'COVID safe in line with Corporate requirements.
- Support continues from the Academy Team Managers and the Senior Practitioner 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 now applied for the Advanced Practitioner posts 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 and our Northumberland Adults Service have sought our advice in terms of implementing this Model in their respective areas.

5.6 Staff Retention

5.6.1 To ensure continual recognition and encouragement of staff, we held graduation ceremonies for staff who completed their ASYE. Practice Assessors were also invited and acknowledged for their part in developing the ASYE's. These events were well received with attendee staff saying they feel recognised and valued. Unfortunately, the continuation of the pandemic has meant we are unable to hold the significant event in person. However, every opportunity to encourage and support staff to grow, is utilised to build morale and resilience, especially during these testing times. We have plans for World Social Work Day (held every 3rd Tues of March) where staff will be invited to attend a coffee morning/afternoon *and or* a lunch time session to build morale and remind staff why they joined social work. This year's theme includes 'leaving no one behind'.



5.6.2 As discussed, due to careful development and recognition of their skillset, our Academy Alumni have successfully transitioned into experienced Social Workers. We have 7 Academy Alumni applying for Advanced Practitioner roles across the service. 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.
- 5.6.6 We 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 - *'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'*.
- 5.6.7 September 2021 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 2 Advanced Practitioners partaking in the regional Leadership and Management - Social Worker to First Line Managers Programme.
- 5.6.10 We currently have 4 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 students partaking in the Think Ahead Programme. They have fulfilled the role of Practice Supervisors. This again provides opportunity for staff to hone/share skills by partake in our adhering to our ongoing 'Learning Culture' as an organisation.
- 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.

- 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 a quarterly PSW Briefing and during meetings with staff.

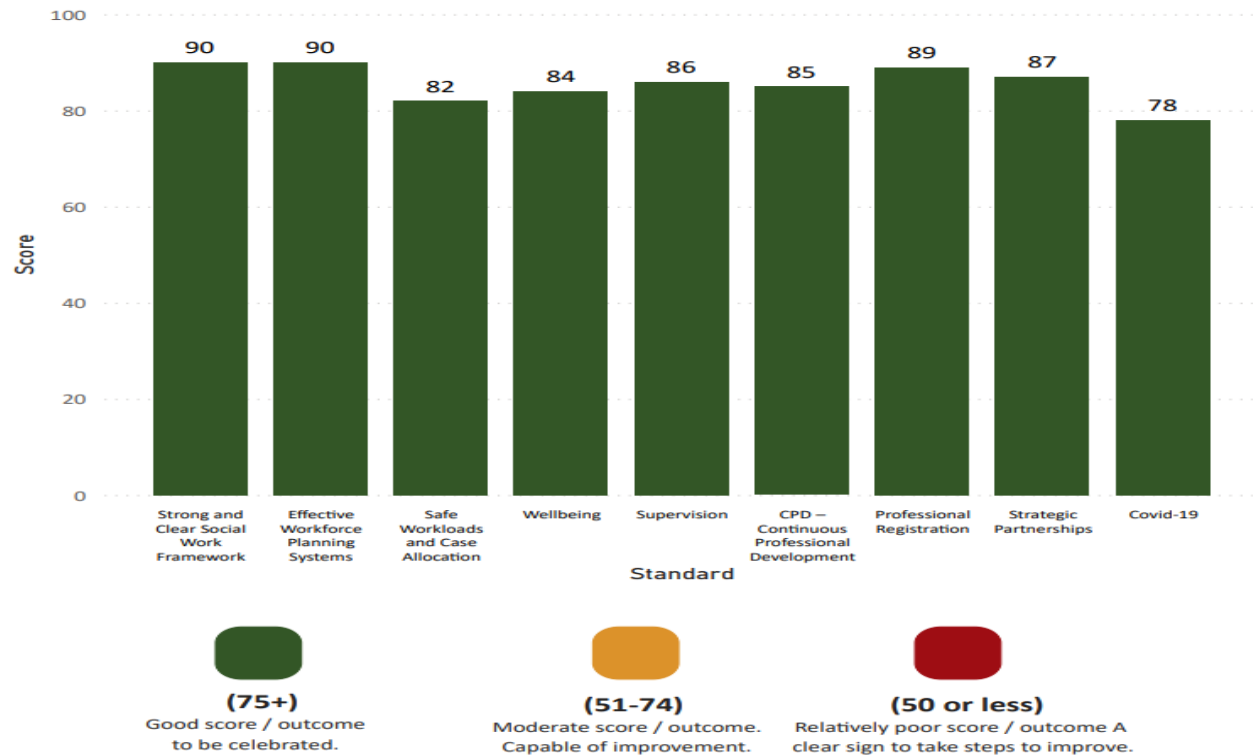
5.7 Wellbeing

Considering all of the above and the concern Children's Social Care staff carried around 'hidden harm' due to reduced access to the child's lived world/experience and vulnerable primary carers (domestic violence) we have made every effort to support social workers as professionals by supporting wellbeing. This is in line with our Corporate Plan 2018-21 Involving staff in '*Creating a healthy and positive working environment*'. Pg. 4 CP 2018/21.

- 5.7.1 Northumberland Children's Social Workers have recently completed a PSW Health and Wellbeing Survey via the Local Government Association. This has provided insight and will assist in sharpening the focus on celebrating strengths whilst addressing challenges.
- 5.7.2 The graph at 5.7.2a provides an overview of standard scores. However, I will refer to specific segments within the wellbeing section further below. It is reassuring to read there is recognition of the efforts made by the Leadership to ensure our Social Workers can meet the needs of the role by being valued as an invaluable resource, in turn meeting the needs of our most vulnerable residents.

5.7.2a

Figure 1: Standard Scores



5.7.3 Information at 5.7.3a displays our social workers views specifically around wellbeing

5.7.3a

Wellbeing	
Questions	Score
I feel safe in my role and the work I am expected to do.	82
I have access to private, quality space in order to meet my supervisor and people I work with.	88
My employer has in place caring and effective systems for reporting and responding to concerns I raise, and will act to ensure I am able to work safely.	85
My organisation facilitates my access to my Professional Association, Trade Union and other supportive organisations	80
My organisation is actively committed to anti-racism and a positive, inclusive culture of opportunity for members of staff of all backgrounds and protected characteristics	89
My organisation recognises the emotional demands of social work and provides me with supervision, support and tools I need to deal with this	80
My organisation takes appropriate action to prevent and deal with risks of violence, bullying and harassment in any aspect of my work	85
I am encouraged and empowered by my organisation to make time for my own self-care and wellbeing activities	78
I feel cared for by my managers and/or supervisor	89
I have time and space for supportive peer to peer and team discussion	81

5.7.4 As discussed, retention of experienced staff is critical to maintain low turnover rates. Regardless of Covid, Children’s 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.

5.7.5 The LGA PSW Health Check survey also looked at the impact on practice in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Covid-19	
Questions	Score
Changes during the pandemic have enabled me to work in a more strength based way with my clients	62
I have been able to continue to access relevant learning opportunities and training through my organisation	88
I have been able to maintain enough, high quality, safe contact with people I work with to ensure their welfare and to meet my statutory and/or organisational responsibilities	82
I have been supported by my organisation to continue to work safely and effectively within a clear social work practice framework	89
I have had access to the practice guidance and technology I have needed to work online/ remotely with people using services and colleagues	91
My organisation has ensured all staff are appropriately protected from the risk of infection by the virus and taken account of different individual risks of infection on grounds of (e.g.) age, ethnicity, prior health conditions, caring for others etc	91
I have continued to have satisfactory one to one supervision	94
I have experienced an increase in severity of need in people being referred to me and/or my team*	75
I have felt positive and able to cope with work most of the time	72
My supervisor has helped me manage my overall wellbeing and work life balance	82

5.7.6 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.

5.7.7 We understand effective supervision is a priority. It is important for staff to have the opportunity to focus on both case management and reflection.

Supervision	
Questions	Score
I can raise concerns about the quality and suitability of my supervision with an appropriate person in the organisation if I need to	78
I have uninterrupted, scheduled supervision at a suitable frequency with an appropriately skilled social work supervisor	90
I identify my learning needs and access professional development opportunities and training through supervision	91
My supervisor coaches me in the development of my professional judgement, creativity and autonomous decision making	88
Supervision helps me critically reflect on my work including working relationships, emotions and use of evidence	85
Supervision helps me reflect on how I meet professional regulatory standards	85

5.7.8 In order to continually listen and in turn understand social workers experiences nationally as well as locally, staff partaking in completion of the Health Check provides an important barometer for the Department for Education to understand

national workflow and barriers to effective practice and in turn important for us to build upon worker strengths and take corrective actions as required.

5.7.9 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.

5.7.10 Targeted support has been offered to social workers/managers via 2-hour virtual sessions with a focus on:

- Stress management, emotion management techniques, work life balance activity, self-care and self-esteem activities.

5.7.13 There are 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.

5.7.14 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.

5.7.15 The social work force demographic is also considered, and staff are encouraged to attend relevant staff network meetings for 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.

Professional Registration	
Questions	Score
I am confident my organisation would support me if I challenged unsafe practice or reported other concerns about services	86
I have found the registration/ re-registration process with Social Work England straightforward	90
My organisation promotes a working environment that upholds ethical practice and quality standards	92
My organisation supports me in keeping my CPD record up to date on the Social Work England website	86
My organisation understands, supports and provides conditions for social work practice that help me meet my professional standards	90
I am aware of the circumstances under which I could be referred to the regulator	91

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 (albeit virtually due to adapting to the current situation).

CPD - Continuous Professional Development	
Questions	Score
(If you have completed the ASYE in the last three years in your current organisation) My ASYE programme was effective in helping me learn and develop as a social worker and be more confident	89
I take action to ensure I am up to date with my CPD	91
My organisation has non-discriminatory and transparent systems to enable all social workers to develop their professional skills, knowledge, specialisms and AMHP, Practice Educator, Practice Supervisor careers including access to accredited courses	88
My organisation provides effective induction for all social workers when they join the organisation	84
My organisation provides regular/ annual appraisals (or performance reviews) that are relevant for social workers	92
Within my organisation, I have an up to date plan of my professional development needs and how I and my employer will contribute to them	84
I have dedicated time, resources, opportunities and support to carry out my CPD and record my learning in line with regulatory requirements	76
Through my organisation, I can access funded non-mandatory CPD	78

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 recognises and encourages staff to develop expertise in specific areas of practice, acknowledging this with an Advanced Practitioner status. 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.

5.8.7 Quality assurance has been developed further, incorporating practice days 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 also, 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 During 2020/21 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, assists in providing a comprehensive audit programme which measures the impact of the improvements. During 2020/21 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. This has been recognised by Ofsted.

'Leaders make good use of the improved performance and quality assurance framework. Learning from audits, practice days and complaints enables leaders to review progress and the impact of practice on children's experiences effectively. A recent review of auditing has led to the focus of future audits moving from one of compliance to one of quality. Early indicators are that this new model provides an improved focus on identifying learning opportunities for staff.'

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.

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 (SoS) which is a recognised model of social work intervention had been utilised. Training has been refreshed and the recording system as been adapted to reflect SoS requirements, thus providing social workers more time to build relationships and less on the demands of recording in duplication.

5.9.6 There is regular attendance by a SoS Consultant and practice champions identified and appointed from across all areas of social care practice. There are 4 workstreams chaired by Senior Management to ensure strategy aligns with operational practice. These consist of:

- Learning and Development
- Systems
- Quality Assurance
- Comms and Partnership

5.9.7 Senior managers are role modelling the use of this approach in order to instil confidence to frontline staff. 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. SoS 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 ensure practice is not only 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.

Strategic Partnerships

Questions	Score
I have good and effective relationships with key partners such as in the NHS, wider social care, education, housing, the third sector etc	90
My employer has a clear policy for recruiting, training and supporting social workers to train as practice educators, and practice supervisors	85

- 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 and practice supervisor 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 questionnaire during conferences, via the complaints process. All of the information collated is utilised to continually develop practice.

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. I have also maintained virtual contact with the Chief Social Worker for England and the DfE.

5.11 Priorities for 2022

- Whilst Ofsted recognised the significant progress made, we are keen to further develop ourselves and our practitioners to address areas identified during the Inspection.
- Since January 2020 (Inspection) we have focused on the quality of all child/ren's plans by continually implementing 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.
- We have worked on the overall quality of the recording of management oversight in supervision records.
- Recovery planning to emerge from the pandemic and adapt service delivery and workforce planning in light of the learning.
- We will maintain consistency and momentum of embedding Signs of Safety into all elements of practice and leadership.
- We will continue implementing the Leadership Pledge across all levels of staffing to ensure all staff recognise themselves as leaders, ensuring hierarchy is not a barrier to positive communication in the best interests of children.
- Further develop a robust and creative strategy for recruitment of experienced staff - to include ongoing retention.
- Review the staffing structure to meet demand across the service.
- 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
- Remain engaged with regional and national social care initiatives to support and influence practice in Northumberland.

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
Monitoring Officer/Legal	Suki Binjal
Executive Director of Finance & S151 Officer	Alison Elsdon, Service Director Finance and Deputy S151 Officer
Relevant Executive Director	Graham Reiter obo Cath McEvoy-Carr
Chief Executive	Cath McEvoy-Carr obo Daljit Lally
Portfolio Holder(s)	Guy Renner-Thompson

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