



**Children's & Education
Select Committee
Review on Recruitment & Retention
of Social Workers**

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Introduction

In November 2021, the Children's and Education Select Committee considered there was an urgent need to form a rapid review group to investigate Social Worker recruitment and retention at Buckinghamshire.

I agreed to chair this group and was joined in this by three other colleagues, Cllrs Karen Bates, Patricia Birchley and Rachael Matthews.

The aim of the review was to focus on the issues relating to the problem of recruiting and retaining enough training and qualified social workers in Buckinghamshire. This has been a subject of much concern for local authorities nationally for over 10 years and has been experienced in varying degrees in different areas of the country depending on varying local and national factors.

Social work is often an extremely demanding career and particularly so during and since the Covid pandemic. Our social workers are to be highly valued and supported for the work they do to support the people of Buckinghamshire.

I hoped that by leading the rapid review group and undertaking a thorough investigation into the issue of social worker recruitment and retention that we would be able to contribute to and build on the Council's and Directorate's efforts into improving the numbers of social workers in our workforce.

I would like to extend my thanks to my colleagues on the review group as well as all the Council Officers we spoke to with particular thanks to Richard Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services.

Cllr Mark Dormer, May 2022



Councillor Mark Dormer



Councillor Karen Bates



Councillor Patricia Birchley



Councillor Rachael Matthews

Executive Summary

The following findings were reached for the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams:

- There is a national shortage of quality staff, both permanent and agency
- Caseloads in Buckinghamshire are high, but not out of kilter with the national picture
- Demand is high which is leading to longer hours worked than the service and the council would expect
- The HR support needs of these teams have changed and therefore require reorientation to provide a different and higher level of support
- The implications of the COVID pandemic are having a significant impact on the service in terms of increased caseloads and we see this gathering momentum
- The group has full confidence in the service leader Richard Nash
- The ASYE Academy is a significant asset for recruitment and retention in Buckinghamshire
- The service needs to do more to help develop the skillsets of first Line Managers
- Additional injections of money will not alleviate the challenges faced
- Improvements in technology, software and hardware would increase efficiency and reduce workload
- Measures and procedures can be introduced swiftly which will have positive material impact in the short and long-term at negligible cost

Initially the intention of the rapid review group was to consider Social Worker Recruitment and Retention across Children's Services. However, it became apparent very early on in the evidence gathering, that the key focus of our review should be the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams, where turnover of staff and use of agency social workers is highest and work pressures are intense. The review group was advised that there had been a 60% increase in Child Protection work since September 2020 therefore our key findings and recommendations are focussed on these two teams.

Recommendations for Child Assessment and Child Protection teams:

Recruitment:

1. Overhaul of the approach, understanding and procedures of HR for recruitment
2. Introduction of a new strategy to promote the benefits and advantages of working at Buckinghamshire
3. Consideration of the introduction of an additional payment for permanent staff to be paid 1/3rd after Year 1 and 2/3rd after Year 2, with costs offset by fewer agency staff
4. Improvements to career development opportunities and progression within Buckinghamshire Council

Retention:

5. Dedicated HR resource integrated into these two teams and sitting alongside them
6. Improve and upgrade technology (hardware and software) to increase efficiency
7. Investigate the Introduction of an additional payment for permanent staff to be paid 1/3rd after Year 1 and 2/3rd after Year 2, with costs offset by fewer agency staff
8. Introduction of core skills training for line managers immediately on appointment, potentially through an extension of the AYSE Academy
9. Improved career development path both within and outside of current roles
10. Further investigation into pastoral care and support, including supervision sessions and the introduction of a buddy/mentor scheme
11. Introduction of 360° reviews across all levels and teams including HR support
12. Introduction of administrative support staff to assist with time consuming administrative functions and non-core responsibilities
13. Corporate Director to gather feedback, views and experience of IT from frontline staff to identify areas for improvement of existing software and the introduction of new technology hardware
14. Improved communication and cascading of information of benefits and support available

Additional key recommendations:

15. Consider a review to investigate the effectiveness of HR support across services
16. Expansion of the ASYE Academy
17. Continue to examine other counties with 'Good' and 'Excellent' OFSTED ratings to see what can be learned and which procedures and approaches could be adopted
18. Weekly report to the Cabinet Member and Corporate Director detailing average caseload per social worker (including highest and lowest level), changes in total team numbers together with historic data for comparison and direction of movement to identify trend with the trend trailing two weeks to smooth intra-day movement*

(*unless this report already exists)

Context

The recruitment and retention of social workers has been a key issue for local authority Children's Services departments for over ten years and has been well documented by various national organisations with statistics relating to the issue published annually by central government. Local authorities have been focussed on the attraction, recruitment and retention of social workers and social worker managers, using various methods to improve the situation. However, the success of the actions to address the social worker deficit in each area has varied depending on competition, pay and employment packages as well as geographical location, reputation, development opportunities, caseloads and quality of support, supervision and leadership.

As an often extremely stressful area of work, the role of an agency worker has become more attractive to social workers due to the opportunity for earning a higher rate of pay, working more flexibly and moving local authority if the work becomes untenable in one area. It perhaps also makes it easier to have a break between roles. The use of agency workers has increasingly become an essential part of a local authority's provision of social workers in order to meet demand for children's care services.

There has been a dramatic increase in the numbers of children being referred to the service and being subject to child protection plans and those children are also presenting with increasingly complex needs. This trend has been further compounded by the pressures brought about by the Covid pandemic.

The Children's Social Work workforce statistics published by gov.uk for the year October 2020 to September 2021 show that the total number of FTE social workers nationally was 32,502 and there were 6,522 vacancies and 5,977 agency workers. The agency worker rate had increased by 3% since the previous reporting year to 16%. The number of children and family social workers increased to the highest point in five years, however there were 5,000 leavers in 2021, up 16% from the previous year.

The mismatch in social worker requirements between over demand and under supply is affecting all local authorities. It is an issue represented in many local authority Ofsted reports where the success or otherwise of recruiting social workers has a major impact on the provision of services to children.

In Buckinghamshire, as in other local authorities, the social worker shortage has presented several challenges and this has been further compounded by the pressures of the pandemic. The recent Ofsted report of Buckinghamshire's Children's Services department noted the extensive work that had been undertaken by staff during the period which included the Covid pandemic, to move from "inadequate" to "requires Improvement to be good". However, the report noted that "the scale and speed of improvement work have been impeded by acute and persistent recruitment and retention difficulties of both social workers and frontline managers and the depth and extent of poor social work practice dating back to the last inspection in 2017".

In October 2021 the total number of qualified social workers in post in Buckinghamshire was 339 of which 221 were permanent staff and 118 were agency staff (35%). In addition, 53 posts were vacant. Since 2019, the authority has undertaken several initiatives to improve social worker recruitment and retention including setting up a social work academy to develop and support newly qualified social workers. Due to the vacancy rate and high turnover of agency staff, caseloads are often high, particularly in the Child Assessment and Protection teams, resulting in long working hours and stress for the social workers.

Methodology

The rapid review group held a series of meetings as follows:

21-1-22	Meeting with Children's Social Care Corporate Director, Richard Nash & HR
28-1-22	Meeting with Elizabeth Williams, Head of Finance
2-3-22	Focus Group discussion with 5 Social Work Line Managers
2-3-22	Focus Group discussion with 3 Social Workers
16-3-22	Meeting with HR Officers
17-3-22	2nd Focus Group discussion with 6 Social Workers

These meetings provided an opportunity for Officers in the respective areas to give their perspective on a range of issues relating to the recruitment and retention of social workers. The focus groups held with social workers and their managers were held in strict confidence, so they were able to speak openly. Participants were also encouraged to provide any additional thoughts via email.

Research information was also gathered and analysed on the national picture of social worker recruitment and retention, as well as information from other local authorities.

Initially the intention of the rapid review group was to consider Social Worker Recruitment and Retention across Children's Services. However, it became apparent very early on in the evidence gathering, that the key focus of our review should be the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams, where turnover of staff and use of agency social workers is highest and work pressures are intense. The review group was advised that there had been a 60% increase in Child Protection work since September 2020 therefore our key findings and recommendations are focussed on these two teams.

The rapid review group considered the following issues:

a) Recruitment Issues:

- (i) HR recruitment practices, processes, and how these adapt to the changing environment e.g. improved Ofsted result
- (ii) Understanding of pay levels and inter-authority agreements
- (iii) Issues relating to the geography of Buckinghamshire including the travel demands on social workers
- (iv) Career progression and planning
- (v) Management training and induction
- (vi) How the well-being of staff is supported

b) Retention Issues:

- (i) Investigating how we can address high caseloads and long working hours
- (ii) Addressing the particular Child Protection and Assessment team pressures and issues
- (iii) HR processes and procedures, pay and reward issues: overtime, time off in lieu
- (iv) Provision of a visible career path for all social workers
- (v) Management and supervision of social workers
- (vi) Technology issues and work processes within the role
- (vii) The geography of Buckinghamshire
- (viii) Improving communications

Key Findings

After carefully considering the evidence we collected through interviews, alongside desktop research into the national situation regarding recruitment and retention of qualified social workers, the review group wish to report the following observations and key findings, which are pertinent to the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams:

Recruitment

1. Overhaul of the approach, understanding and procedures of HR for recruitment

- Members would like to see a far more proactive and supportive approach from HR, particularly when responding to vacancies in the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams.
- We heard from social workers how an agency worker leaving at very short notice can have a significant impact on the rest of the team, who have to pick up their cases. Some managers were unsure who to contact in HR for support with recruitment, so there needs to be increased visibility and urgency from HR when vacancies arise. HR should formulate a plan to address the situation within an agreed response time to ensure that managers are well-supported.

2. Introduction of new strategy to promote the benefits and advantages of working at Buckinghamshire

- The findings of the Ofsted inspection undertaken in late 2021, which rated the service as 'requires improvement to be good' demonstrates that social work practice is moving in the right direction, despite the increased challenges in complexity and demand resulting from the Covid pandemic.
- The review group recommend that a new recruitment strategy should be developed by HR to promote working at Buckinghamshire, in light of the recent improvement in the Children's Services Ofsted rating. As a large unitary council, Buckinghamshire is well-placed to offer attractive career development opportunities alongside a competitive financial package.
- Existing members of staff were also complementary about the Tusker car scheme which should be highlighted as part of the overall benefits package.
- The possibility of using video testimonial of a social worker who has completed the ASYE Academy training to promote this opportunity to new recruits on the Council's website should be considered.

3. Consideration of the introduction of an additional payment for permanent staff to be paid 1/3rd after Year 1 and 2/3rd after Year 2, with costs offset by fewer agency staff

- Members are aware that the Council has some existing arrangements for offering an additional market premium to help with hard to recruit roles. These additional monies are currently paid on successful completion of a probation period.
- This recommendation would introduce an additional 'retention' bonus to encourage new permanent staff to stay. Crucially, this would benefit both children and families by providing more stability and individual social workers, who would have more opportunity to gain experience and adjust to the Council's specific processes and ways of working.
- We understand that a new memorandum of understanding has been signed by 19 local authorities in the South East, which is designed to set a maximum agency pay rate for different social work roles. This should minimise competition between councils for agency staff and it is hoped that this will help to stabilise the agency workforce.

4. Improvements to career development opportunities and progression within Buckinghamshire Council

- Members would like to see a more structured and consistent approach to career development. Managers should be encouraged to discuss opportunities for progression with social workers regularly, not just at their formal annual performance review.

- As a large unitary authority, Buckinghamshire is well-placed to offer opportunities for progression within the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams, and crucially across other social care teams, which would help to build a more stable workforce.
- A well-conceived and ongoing Learning and Development offering demonstrates that an employer values their staff, as well as being a valuable opportunity to upskill individuals. The Council wants individuals to succeed and build a career in Buckinghamshire. However, we heard that social workers often found it hard to attend training because of their high caseloads.
- We recognise that this is difficult when demand for the service is high. Perhaps the concept of 'protected learning time' could be considered where teams, on rotation, to ensure that there is always emergency cover, could have two hours of protected learning once every quarter.
- A clear career pathway would also boost the Council's recruitment offer and whilst many social workers might aspire to be promoted to team managers, consideration should also be given to other options, for example, quality assurance or training type roles or moving into other more specialist areas of social work.

Retention

5. Dedicated HR resource integrated into these two teams and sitting alongside them

- The review group believe that there is a disconnect between HR and the Child Assessment and Child Protection teams. A dedicated HR resource would help to improve HR's understanding of the demands of the role, which in turn will help them in improving their approach to recruitment and retention practices. It will also help HR to react quickly to changing circumstances with staffing levels in the teams.
- Social workers we spoke to suggested that exit interviews should be conducted by HR alongside team managers to ensure that any trends in reasons for leaving are quickly identified and where possible, responded to and immediately reflected to senior service and HR managers in a formalised manner. For example, we learned that a number of staff left in quick succession when Slough Borough Council was offering a higher rate of pay.

6. Improve and upgrade technology (hardware and software) to increase efficiency

- We heard from social workers that their laptops can create a physical barrier when they are meeting with children and families in their home environment, and we suggest that using a tablet device instead could be a helpful alternative.
- In addition, it would be helpful for Child Assessment and Child Protection social workers to be able to use voice-recording devices to note their observations when they have conducted a s47 assessment or a review visit. These could then be typed up by administrative staff in the office and checked and verified by the social worker thereafter. Voice-recording and voice-recognition software has improved in recent times so this should be investigated as a way of ensuring more efficient record keeping.

7. Investigate the Introduction of an additional payment for permanent staff to be paid 1/3rd after Year 1 and 2/3rd after Year 2, with costs offset by fewer agency staff

- Please see the explanation above, set out under Recommendation 3.

8. Introduction of core skills training for line managers immediately on appointment, potentially through an extension of the AYSE Academy

- We are aware that there is a council wide 'Being a Buckinghamshire Manager' programme that has been introduced recently alongside a number of specific management training courses and videos online through the Corporate Learning Hub.
- The review group see a need for additional training for new line managers, ideally immediately on appointment, which would focus more on the specific core skills needed to be an effective

manager in children's services. This would be an opportunity to introduce a consistency of approach and set clear expectations.

9. Improved career development path both within and outside of current roles

- See recommendation 4 above

10. Further investigation into pastoral care and support, including supervision sessions and the introduction of a buddy/mentor scheme

- Supervisions are key to supporting frontline social workers, both in terms of developing quality social work practice and supporting an individual's own emotional wellbeing. We heard that due to the pressure of workloads, some supervision sessions were focussed on the headlines of specific cases with little time available for personal reflection.
- The review group recognise that this is a consequence of the high levels of demand that the service is currently experiencing but it is important that there is a consistent approach to supervisions.
- We heard from some managers that it is difficult to devote enough time to newly qualified social workers when workloads are high, but newer social workers really need to form connections to help support them in the workplace. We therefore suggest the introduction of a buddy/mentor scheme across each of the teams.
- The details of how a buddy/mentor scheme should operate can be worked out by the Senior Managers – perhaps new members of staff could request a mentor and the Principal Social Worker can facilitate this.
- We heard of valuable initiatives that had been introduced including making Educational Psychologists available to social work teams and senior managers regularly checking in with staff with particularly high caseloads.
- There is also a corporate employee assistance package known as PAM Assist where counselling, legal, financial and health and wellbeing advice are available. This confidential service can be accessed online or via a telephone helpline. The availability of PAM Assist should be promoted more widely by line managers and HR.

11. Introduction of 360° reviews across all levels and teams including HR support

- The review group believe that there would be value in introducing 360-degree reviews across the teams. This is a method whereby individuals are reviewed 'laterally' by their peers and also 'vertically' by their managers and by the staff who they line manage. This would be a useful tool for supporting consistent management practice and would also encourage an open working environment, where all staff should be comfortable to share feedback.

12. Introduction of administrative support staff to assist with time consuming administrative functions and non-core responsibilities

- We acknowledge that there are administrative support staff in children's services currently, but we feel that introducing additional support staff could help to relieve over-stretched social workers of some of their administrative burden by updating files and typing up assessment reports on their behalf. Social Workers will still need to check and verify these reports to ensure they are accurate, but this would be quicker than writing them from scratch themselves.
- It was noted that whilst additional social workers have been recruited as project teams in response to the increased demand in child protection work, there has not been a commensurate increase in administrative support staff.

13. Corporate Director to gather feedback, views and experience of IT from frontline staff to identify areas for improvement of existing software and the introduction of new technology hardware.

- The review group are aware that LCS, the main file recording system for Children's Services is quite 'clunky' and very form intensive. The Council has tried to make some amendments to the system, but these have had a mixed reception from social workers who are using it on a daily basis. We heard, for example, that it can be very time-consuming to upload reports.
- We therefore propose that the Corporate Director should gather feedback from frontline staff and investigate what further improvements could be introduced to make this element of social work easier.
- The review group is confident that there will be technology software packages and Application Programming Interfaces (API) which will alleviate the time-consuming processes that social workers currently face, enabling them to spend more time with children and families.

14. Improved communication and cascading of information of benefits and support available

- During our discussions with social workers, it appeared that there was not a consistent approach to disseminating information.
- Social workers wanted to hear more feedback from the Improvement Board, especially what was going well. They also wanted to understand their connections in with other services e.g. HR and Communications contacts.
- Health and Wellbeing advice and encouragement to take breaks should also be promoted to staff.
- We heard that National Social Work Week had not been promoted to teams. This was a missed opportunity, and it was suggested that the Council could have its own celebration event for Social Work.

Additional key recommendations

15. Consider a review to investigate the effectiveness of HR support across services

- We suggest that it is time to review the effectiveness of the corporate HR delivery model.

16. Expansion of the ASYE Academy

- Additional funding to expand the ASYE Academy over the next three years was agreed by Council in the Budget in February 2022. After speaking with social workers who had come through the Academy and with Richard Nash, Corporate Director for Children's Services, the Review Group believe that the ASYE Academy has been highly effective in enabling the Council to grow its own social workers and endorse the continued commitment to and further expansion of this initiative.

17. Continue to examine other counties with 'Good' and 'Excellent' OFSTED ratings to see what can be learned and which procedures and approaches could be adopted

- As part of the Ofsted improvement journey, the Council has sought to learn from best practice elsewhere, with external expertise brought in through the Improvement Board and senior managers networking with their counterparts across the country. Members would like to see this continue as the service works towards 'Good'.

18. Weekly report to the Cabinet Member and Corporate Director detailing average caseload per social worker (including highest and lowest level), changes in total team numbers together with historic data for comparison and direction of movement to identify trend with the trend trailing two weeks to smooth intra-day movement*

(*unless this report already exists)

Conclusion

It is clear that whilst caseloads remain high, the pressure on social workers is immense and the review group wish to pay tribute to all Children's Services staff who are working incredibly hard in very difficult circumstances to improve the lives of children and families in Buckinghamshire. We hope that the recommendations in this report will help to improve the Council's recruitment and retention of staff and create a more stable workforce which will be beneficial for both service outcomes and individual social workers.