

**CHILDREN, FAMILIES, LIFELONG LEARNING AND CULTURE SELECT COMMITTEE**

Item under consideration: CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE WORKFORCE

Date Considered: 2 March 2023

1. The Committee learned that an average of 27 per cent of children's social workers chose to leave the role in the year ending 31 January 2023. As well as the disruption to families, a vicious circle is created by the pressure added to the remaining workforce. Ofsted highlighted the need to improve "the proportion of permanent staff, to reduce turnover" in the 2022 Inspection of Local Authority Children's Services. Just over two thirds (66.9 per cent) of the HR establishment are permanent currently, with an aim to increase this to 85 per cent. The CFL directorate recognises that recruitment and retention is its single biggest issue and that its programme, having not had sufficient impact after a year, required a change of approach to improve the quality of its services. It is developing a business case for a refreshed plan alongside HR and Finance and asked the Committee for suggestions.
2. Committee Members made a series of visits to quadrants between November 2022 and February 2023. There they spoke with Assistant Directors, Service Managers and Social Workers to gain an understanding of what issues they face and what might encourage staff retention. The Committee also took evidence from the Director of Family Resilience and Safeguarding in reports in October 2022 and March 2023, and at the latter meeting questioned the HR People Business Manager and Assistant Director of the South East Quadrant. In addition, three Members of the Committee attend meetings of the Recruitment, Retention and Culture Board.
3. It is clear from the conversations with managers that they believe stability in their workforce is what is needed to enable Surrey's Children's Services to reach a Good Ofsted rating. Retention, which provides teams with a level of experience, appears to be more problematic than recruiting newly qualified social workers, with the number of degree places regarded as sufficient. The three stages people tend to leave at are: after their first year on recognising the reality of statutory work; when they want to leave the parental home and live independently but cannot afford to do so in Surrey; three years into the job when the new retention payment ends. More than two in five (41.3 per cent) of those leaving in the year to January had been in the role less than two years.
4. Service managers reported that a deficiency in key worker housing had a significant impact on their workforce. This gave rise to recommendation #3, which was put to Cabinet at its meeting of 28 March and reflected in the housing, accommodation and homes strategy.

5. An exit interview process was set up in June 2022; however, only 71 per cent of children's social workers were offered this before leaving in the period June-August 2022. Participation in exit interviews may be increased by holding them face-to-face, rather than the current practice of sending a link to an online survey. To encourage candour, they may be better conducted by a colleague of the leaver rather than their line manager.
6. In the first quarter of exit interviews with social workers, work-life balance was cited as the primary deciding factor for leaving, by eight of the 14 who left, with six indicating they did not think their workload was manageable. A common emerging theme was that if high caseloads had been addressed, the social worker would have considered staying. They ranged from 20-30 in the North East and North West quadrants, while 15 is generally considered ideal to work effectively. Managers informed Members of stress and fatigue because of high vacancies pushing up the number of caseloads, with almost a third of the North East's Family Safeguarding service vacant in November 2022.
7. Members on site visits were informed that heavy workloads were exacerbated by the long distances social workers must travel to visit children placed out of county, since the Council's Surrey Homes for Surrey Children ambition is yet to be fully achieved. In order to resolve the issue of recruitment and retention, it is necessary that the Sufficiency Strategy already underway is progressed in tandem.
8. The second most frequently selected deciding factor for social workers leaving was a better reward package elsewhere. Almost half (48.8 per cent) of Surrey's social workers do not stay beyond three years, which is when the new retention payment ends. Benchmarking has identified that many authorities' total package is higher than Surrey's current offer, and in the cases of West Sussex and Kent is £5,000 per year higher. The national shortage of social workers makes it imperative that the salaries of permanent staff are competitive. Furthermore, it would save the Council money to convert locums to permanent staff, who each cost around £22,000 less per year.
9. Some social workers are leaving to become self-employed: a locum is paid up to £42 an hour, whereas the wage of a higher grade team manager who is permanent works out at around £26 an hour. Across Surrey, 22.3 per cent of social workers are agency. However, in the North East Quadrant, locums comprise more than half of the Family Safeguarding team and 40 per cent of Assessment. This results in instability as well as varying levels of competence.
10. More than one in five (21.4 per cent) children's social worker respondents to exit interviews said they had experienced bullying, harassment or discrimination. In addition, Members were informed that some employees recruited internationally did not stay after experiencing culture shock.

11. The Committee learned that an insufficient number of pool cars for general use means the use of a personal car is required for work because public transport cannot be relied upon to visit families. The costs of motoring have risen since the annual lump sum payment for car upkeep was phased out following a proposal in 2016, so the offer of a lump sum for Council employees is very welcome. On being phased out it was incorporated into the mileage allowance; however, a common gripe among social workers was that at 10,000 miles their allowance is reduced from 45p to 25p per mile. Moreover, a shortage of parking at the North West Quadrant office was said to deter locums from becoming permanent, or even from returning. Many recruitment and retention initiatives can be delivered within budget, but in its report to Committee the Directorate stated that declining to make additional investment may impede improvement.
12. Slow communication from the broker Connect2Surrey, a joint venture between Surrey County Council and Kent Commercial Services, was reported to have consistently resulted in lost interviews with locums who had already accepted work elsewhere.
13. Lack of opportunities was the joint third most common reason cited in exit interviews, alongside child dependents. The role of assistant team manager does not currently exist in Surrey, while the number of supervised social workers per team is restricted in Family Safeguarding. Creation of this intermediary role may allow teams to be expanded while at the same time provide opportunity for promotion.
14. Family support workers were said to be easier to recruit but not seen as a solution because they are unable to do statutory work. If they were encouraged to step up to social work, the Council could utilise their knowledge of the sector, and the fact they already know what to expect may also aid retention.
15. Another measure to help make staff feel valued could be assigning desk space, which would also ensure office time was effective and productive.
16. Members heard that some new social workers, on first experiencing work in the face-to-face family support teams, decide that they are not suited to such long-term work. University placements may not be challenging enough to equip new social workers for the realities they will face on the job. This could be resolved by making a statutory service placement a compulsory part of the social work degree.
17. Pre-2020 an Academy had a bespoke team of newly qualified social workers in each quadrant, who gained experience in each aspect of the child's journey and at the end of the year went into one of the specialist teams with a good overall foundation knowledge. It may be beneficial to review this practice,

since currently ASYEs accommodated in each of the quadrant teams were reported to have limited exposure to other services.

18. The Chief Executive of Orbital South College Group suggested to the Committee's Task Group on Adult Learning and Skills that their students needed placements. This has the potential to incite loyalty towards the Council and encourage Level 3 students to progress onto its apprenticeship scheme.
19. The Recruitment, Retention and Culture programme has proposed several robust initiatives towards a more stable workforce, including wellbeing support, a new apprenticeship scheme and postgraduate training for existing employees, and the Select Committee has added to these in the recommendations that follow.

## Recommendations

The Select Committee welcomes the Children, Families and Lifelong Learning directorate's aim of having 85 per cent permanent social workers. To reach this position, the Committee proposes the following:

1. The Committee fully supports the proposal of a market rate supplement of £5,000 per annum for all social workers in Family Safeguarding teams and Independent Reviewing Officer roles. It recommends that the Council matches the salary package for children's social workers offered by neighbouring local authorities, and undertakes annual salary benchmarking to ensure this package, both monetary and non-monetary, remains competitive (Lead Member: Cabinet Member for Children and Families);
2. An action plan with SMART criteria to achieve the aforementioned 85 per cent is developed and shared with the Committee, including a timeline and target date by which to achieve this goal (Lead Member: Cabinet Member for Children and Families);
3. Key worker housing is included as a deliverable in the Cabinet report *A Housing, Accommodation and Homes Strategy for Surrey*, for decision in March 2023 (Lead Member: Cabinet Member for Children and Families);
4. The Cabinet Member(s) and Directorate Leadership make immediate efforts to investigate the scope of issues of discrimination and bullying in Children's Services reported in exit interviews and to the Select Committee, and take action to address these issues;
5. The Cabinet Member for Children and Families, Cabinet Member for Finance and Resources and the CFLL Assurance and Performance Board give consideration to the following initiatives, outwith the 2023/24 budget envelope where necessary, to help recruit and retain social work staff:

- (a) Ensure a face-to-face exit interview is offered to every single leaver. These could be with a colleague of the leaver's choice;
- (b) Look at ways to make Connect2Surrey more efficient and communicate with managers more swiftly;
- (c) Provide administrative support to social workers;
- (d) Create a clear route for family support workers and administrators to step up to social work, with training suggested at their annual performance review;
- (e) The Committee supports the plan to reinstate the annual car user lump sum for upkeep of cars assigned to business use, and recommends also investing in more pool cars for visits to families out of county, exploring the use of electric vehicles to reduce the Council's carbon footprint;
- (f) On taking control of on street parking enforcement in April 2023, provide front line and peripatetic social workers with parking permits for use on Council business;
- (g) Take action to ease parking constraints experienced by social workers at Surrey County Council offices;
- (h) Assign sufficient desk space to social workers in Surrey County Council offices;
- (i) Create an assistant team manager role to help supervise extended teams;
- (j) Offer support to international employees to help adjust to cultural differences;
- (k) Encourage local universities to make a statutory service placement a mandatory part of the social work degree;
- (l) Review if it would be beneficial to ASYEs to bring back the former practice of rotating them between teams for a variety of experiences before they choose where to settle;
- (m) Work with East Surrey College to give placements to their Level 3 course in Access to Social Work students.

6. The Committee continues to engage with the Recruitment, Retention and Culture Board.

**Liz Bowes, Chairman - Children, Families, Lifelong Learning Select Committee**

## **Background papers**

[Pages 79-97 & 145, Children, Families and Lifelong Learning Select Committee, 2 March 2023](#)

[Item 7, Children, Families and Lifelong Learning Select Committee, 4 October 2022](#)

Visits to North East and North West Quadrants, 24 November 2022, 9 January 2023, 28 February 2023.