

TITLE OF REPORT: Social Work Recruitment & Retention/Quality of Social Work Practice – Performance update

REPORT OF: Strategic Director, Children, Adults & Families

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Children and Families Principal Social Worker (C&FPSW) has previously briefed OSC members on the origins and purpose of the C&FPSW role. In September 2019 the Gateshead C&FPSW role was taken over by the former Senior Practice Supervisor (Quality of Social Work) and became a stand-alone role, having always been performed by a 'Service Manager' alongside significant operational and strategic duties.

Background

1. Principal Social Workers have a key role in ensuring the quality and impact of social work for children and families. The latest statutory guidance on arrangements to safeguard and promote the welfare of children, Working Together 2018, requires that:

Para 19. Designated Principal Social Workers have a key role in developing the practice and the practice methodology that underpins direct work with children and families.

Para 50. Principal Social Workers should support social workers, the local authority and partners to develop their assessment practice and decision-making skills, and the practice methodology that underpins this.

2. Members have been briefed previously on Gateshead's strategy for C&F social work (SW)
 - i. A competitive, if not higher, salary offer than our competitors based on new job profiles aligned to the Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS)
 - ii. A recruitment process that is in line with the KSS and selection processes that provides a solid baseline assessment of candidates that can pull through into the employer practice endorsement process.
 - iii. A clear programme of development that can demonstrably attract Social Workers, both newly qualified and experienced to Gateshead because they will know their practice will be enhanced and developed within an

organisation that is prepared to invest in their future development and achieve accreditation.

- iv. Caseloads that are manageable and allow for quality social work, whereby risks are appropriately assessed, and proportionate responses provided; helping to manage needs 'down' and preventing them from escalating up.
 - v. A clear progression structure that invests in preparing the talented to become future Practice Supervisors and Leaders.
 - vi. A unique selling point that is rooted firmly in social work and appeals to the hearts and minds of our existing social workers and those who we seek to recruit.
3. The strategy has, logically, been aligned to the government's prominent social work reform policy of 2016, 'Putting Children First' which required local authorities to work purposefully towards the reform of social work practice across three contexts;

People and leadership – bringing the best into the profession and giving them the right knowledge and skills for the challenging but hugely rewarding work ahead, and developing leaders equipped to nurture practice excellence.

Practice and systems – creating the right environment for excellent practice and innovation to flourish, learning from the very best practice, and learning from when things go wrong.

Governance and accountability – making sure that what is being done is working and developing innovative new organisational models with the potential to radically improve services.

4. The policy was subsequently enacted via the 2017 Children and Social Work Act, giving the Secretary of State the authority to impose 'improvement standards' on professional social work and to assess and 'accredit' or 'approve' statutory social workers against these.
5. The KSS have since been designated the Post-qualifying Standards for Social Work. They equate to the 'improvement standards', defined within the s42 of 2017 Act as a 'professional standard the attainment of which demonstrates particular expertise or specialisation' and which the Secretary of State is entitled to 'carry out assessment of whether people meet'.
6. The last PSW report explained further that 'local authorities are expected to ensure that Social Workers working in the three tiers described above are ready for the accreditation and assessment process by endorsing their practice'. So far there are only two 'post-qualifying standards' against which C&F Social Workers can be assessed and accredited under the National Assessment and Accreditation System (NAAS): the 'practitioner' and 'supervisor' standards.
7. Very recently, the DfE announced another pilot phase – the 'ASYE Pathway to NAAS' described as a 'continuation of the existing ASYE programme'. ASYE, the Assessed and Supported Year of Experience, is the first year of employed practice of any social worker post-qualification and registration.

Social Work Regulation

8. All statutory Social Workers: practitioners, supervisor and leaders, need to be registered with the independent regulator. In December 2019 the independent professional regulator for social work changed from the generic Health & Social Care Professional's Council (HSPCC) to the newly created and very specific Social Work England (SWE). All of Gateshead's social work – qualified workforce have successfully transferred their registration to the new regulator.
9. SWE was also established by the Children and Social Work Act 2017. It says; *'Our central focus is public protection. We have, however, been given the tools to achieve this objective in different ways. Our secondary legislation – the Social Workers Regulations 2018 – drew on evidence and recommendations for effective professional regulation from numerous places. This include reform proposals for healthcare regulation and the Professional Standards Authority's (PSA) right-touch reform report'*.
10. Gateshead has built strong links with the regional engagement lead of SWE. The relevant HR and WFD leaders and the PSW are confident in their understanding of the expectations of the new regulator. SWE has a statement of purpose that resonates with our Social Workers.

'Every day, Social Workers support millions of people to improve their chances in life. Social Work England is a specialist body taking anew approach to regulating Social Workers in their vital roles. We believe in the power of collaboration and share a common goal with those we regulate – to protect the public, enable positive change and ultimately improve people's lives. Social work is about people. Our purpose is to regulate Social Workers in England so that people receive the best possible support whenever they might need it in life. We are committed to raising standards through collaboration with everyone involved in social work'.

11. Accordingly, SWE have introduced a wide range of 'rules' and 'standards', most significantly the 'professional standards' described as 'the threshold standards necessary for safe and effective practice'.
12. Standard 4 of the SWE professional standards requires that registered social workers take responsibility for maintaining and evidencing their 'professional development' via a range of expectations amounting to the need for a continuous portfolio of evidence to be submitted electronically on an annual basis. To maintain their registration, Social Workers must demonstrate that they are meeting the standards set by SWE, rather than those against which the DfE proposes to assess them for its national accreditation scheme.

Social Work Capability

a: The Professional Capability Framework (PCF)

13. A professional framework, the PCF is defined by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) as *'the profession-owned, overarching framework of social work education and professional development in England'*.

14. Where the DfE's KSS post-qualifying standards define broad levels of what Social Workers should know, and be able to do, the PCF provides detailed level descriptors for progression over 9 level within the social work career pathway. It is the framework which underpins the evidence-focused pre-qualifying route to becoming a qualified Social Worker, eligible for professional registration, and tracks development throughout the registration period. It defines increasing levels of responsibility and professional expectation and key points of progression and attainment which can be reflected in salary grading.
15. Many Social Workers spend their entire career within the definition of the 'practitioner' standard of the KSS and therefore the PCF is needed to be mapped alongside the KSS to support evidence for key progression points.

b: The Corporate Assessment Framework

16. In addition, Gateshead Council has an achievement and development (A&D) framework to which Social Workers, as all other employees, are subject. Being corporate, the framework is different from the DfE's post-qualifying practice standards or SWE's professional standards or BASW's capability framework.
17. For most of the Council workforce, the corporate A&D process is the key means through which to monitor and evaluate motivation, application, progression and development of employees. Gateshead Council also has a capability framework designed to address robustly the failing of any employee to meet the reasonable expectations of their role.

The current recruitment and retention picture in Gateshead

18. There are currently approximately 150 qualified Social Workers employed in Gateshead across 144.5 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) posts. Of these, around 11 are in social work practitioner roles, 21 in Practice Supervisor roles, 3 in Practice Leader roles and 10 are employed in the Safeguarding Children Unit as Independent Reviewing Officers and Child Protection Chairpersons (generally known as IROs).
19. There are approximately 20 vacant positions across all C&F social work teams, with 10 of these vacancies currently covered by agency Social Workers (7 in A&I and 3 in LAC). Many of these positions are temporary vacancies, due, for example to maternity and unpaid leave or 'secondments' to other teams.
20. The service is currently actively recruiting to five permanent posts in Edge of Care, Safeguarding and Care Planning and LAC while permanent vacancies in the A&I team have been advertised up to five times in 12 months with just 2 any successful appointments.
21. Over the last 12 months, Gateshead has appointed 26 qualified Social workers who remain in post. Of these, 15 are newly-qualified Social Workers, 12 of whom completed their social work training in Gateshead via Frontline/Step-Up and 2 of whom qualified through an HEI route including a practice placement in Gateshead.

22. The Children with Disabilities Team is fully staffed with permanent Social Workers for the first time in many years. The Safeguarding and Care Planning Service is also fully recruited to permanent posts. Recruitment is underway to cover a position that will become vacant in March due to an internal transfer.
23. Gateshead has 69 qualified Social Workers who have been employed by the Council for five years or more, including 32 who have been with us for 10 years or more and 11 have been here for over 20 years. Looking forward, the number of qualified Social Workers eligible for retirement (55 and over) is 15. Of these, eight are practitioners, four are Practice Supervisors and in addition all three Practice Leaders are eligible to retire.

Caseloads

24. The number of children in Gateshead, as at the end of January 202 deemed to meet the threshold for allocation to a qualified and registered C&F Social Worker in Gateshead is 1475, making an average caseload of 17 children for the 86 qualified Social Workers who can be allocated with children. This calculation does not allow for part-time workers who will have smaller caseloads to reflect their working hours.
25. Social Workers may also be supported in their casework by student Social Workers, of whom there are currently nine placed in Gateshead Children's Services, five through Frontline and four through HEIs and all are in Safeguarding and Care Planning. Two Step-Up to Social Work students have just begun their programmes in Gateshead but are not yet placed within Children and Families.
26. As well as caseloads of children, Social Workers in the Fostering Service hold a caseload of foster carers. We currently have 168 fostering households, including 'connected carer' households (friends and family) plus nine potential fostering households being assessed at present, all of whom require allocation to a Social Worker. There are currently five full-time and five part-time case holding Social Workers in the Fostering Service plus two full-time workers in the duty 'placements' team who also hold small caseloads. This then, is a very busy area of our service.

Professional confidence and safety

27. In the PSW survey, asked to scale from 0 (not at all) to 10 (very much) the statement 'Professionally, I feel safe, supported and confident to practice social work in Gateshead', a very encouraging 84% of respondents selected 7 or more and 66.7% selected 8 and above.

Sickness absence

28. Sickness absence among qualified Social Workers (not including IROs) has reduced from 9.96 days lost per FTE for the same period in 2018/19 to 7.42 days per FTE in the last 12 months. The overall sickness days have reduced from 1540.08 to 1048.36.
29. Stress, depression, anxiety, mental health and fatigue remain the biggest causes of sickness with a slight percentage increase from the previous year on

days lost but a reduction in the number of employees affected, down from 20 to 18. Post-operative recovery has reduced significantly. Muscular-skeletal problems is no longer reported as an absence reason which is positive as these categories alongside stress, viral and stomach issues are consistently the highest sickness categories across the Council.

Gateshead's partnership with Frontline

30. Gateshead is currently hosting its 4th cohort of five pre-qualifying participants on the Frontline programme. A current total of 17 of Gateshead's qualified social workers have been 'home-grown) in Gateshead, through Frontline with the support of one of our Consultant Social Workers (CSWs). As the committee has been previously briefed, the Frontline programme recruits high-calibre graduates who progress through a rigorous assessment process to get onto the programme and an intensive 'summer school' experience to prepare them for placement in local authorities.
31. Over the years that we have partnered with Frontline, more and more participants have been recruited from the North East and therefore it is reasonable to foresee fewer issues with people leaving the area once they have qualified and achieved their ASYE/Masters. Our current participants are due to complete the programme in July and Gateshead intends to take a further cohort of Frontline participants in September 2020.
32. Because of our partnership with Frontline, we have been able to enter six of our experienced Social Workers on Frontline's 'Systemic Practice for Child Protection Social Work' programme, including three who are currently doing the programme. This provides a systemic qualification and a high degree of skill in supporting others to embed systemic and relational social work in their practice.

Step-Up to Social Work

33. Step-up is another of the 'fast-track' programmes for the entry of high-calibre candidates into a social work qualifying programme, placed with local authorities. Gateshead has supported four C&F Social Workers to qualify through this route and retains three in paid positions including one who is currently preparing for progression to Level 3 and two who are doing their ASYE years. Again, Gateshead has successfully recruited a graduate of the Step-Up programme from another local authority.

The Social Work Degree Apprenticeship

34. In November 2018, the DfE approved for delivery an 'Integrated Degree Apprenticeship for social Workers' as another alternative route into the profession. The Training Advisory Group for Children's Services is considering the potential to develop an apprenticeship offer within Children's Services, looking at succession planning and career pathways between Early Help and statutory social work teams.

Gateshead's unique selling point

35. The current strategy for C&FPSW is predicated upon the 'unique selling point... rooted firmly in social work (that) appeals to the hearts and minds of our

existing Social Workers and those who we seek to recruit.

36. The Systemic and Strengths Based Practice (SSBP) development programme delivered to most of the social work qualified and allied workforce on a rolling basis over several months in 2019, was a collaboration in design and delivery between Workforce Development, the current and former C&FPSWs and the University of Northumbria (UNN). The programme ran on a modular basis to allow workers to build their skills and knowledge and to allow greater access to the training. The programme included a two-day practical skills session at the UNN Simulation Suite, allowing workers the opportunity to practice the skills they have learned in a safe but realistic environment.
37. Following on from the SSBP development programme, an overarching model for Gateshead social work and multi-agency statutory intervention with children and families has emerged, the Gateshead CAN (Context, Action, Narrative). While the model would need to be subject of a whole other briefing to the OSC, these are the comments in the C&FPSW survey:

- *I enjoy the team spirit of Gateshead and working collaboratively with Social Workers across different teams. By having an overarching principle model that unifies us all and brings together the different systemic, relational strengths-based approaches together it means that it is made accessible and easy to grasp for everyone – whatever their background experience/preferred way of working might be. I like the flexibility it provides but also the structure it brings to set an overriding ethos for us all to come alongside with.*
- *I feel very fortunate to be in an organisation that has embraced systemic practice in a meaningful way and that this is being embedded on a whole system level.*
- *I see this model as truly systemic and I find it inspirational to work within an organisation which has taken the time to invest in such an approach.*
- *I think it's a really good model, I support the ideas behind systemic practice, and I think the CAN model brings systemic therapy into the field of social work in the context of Gateshead Council.*
- *I believe that Gateshead CAN gives us as a borough the opportunity to lead our own practice; through collaboration and use of tested and meaningful models of intervention.*

38. This enthusiasm for a shared practice model needs to be viewed alongside a sense of frustration at 'performance management' and 'compliance' issues:

- *There is an emphasis on sitting at your desk to ensure your paperwork is up to date and ticking all the green boxes rather than being out spending more efficient time with the children and families.*

Why Social Workers say they stay in Gateshead

39. Respondents in the C&FPSW survey were asked: *What are the most important things that keep you working in Gateshead?*

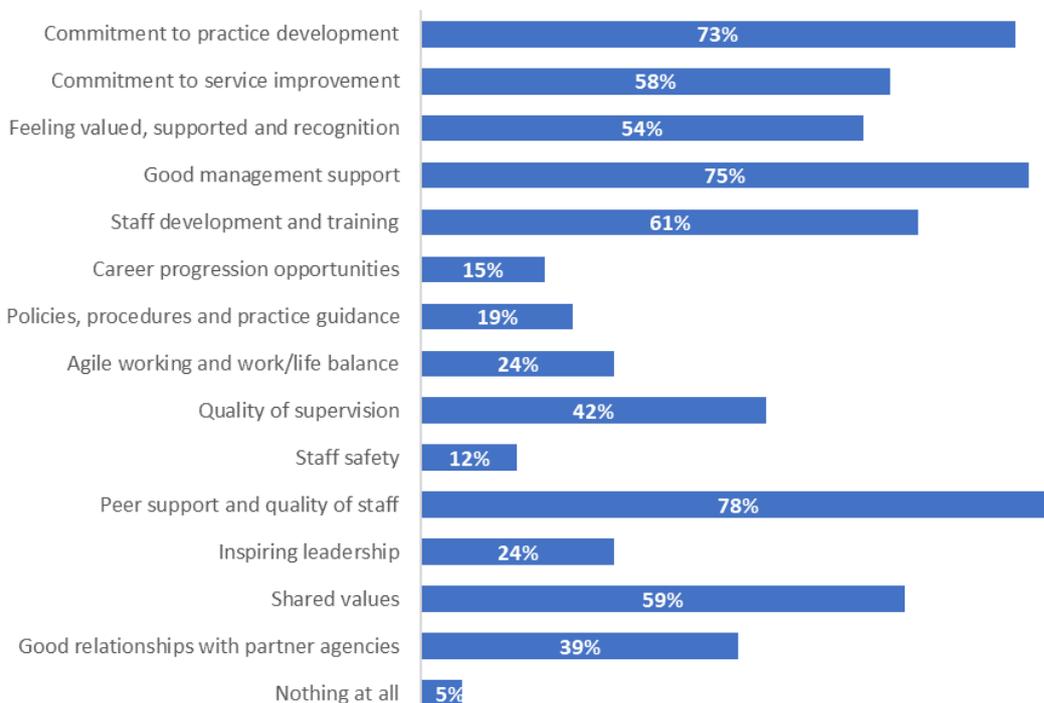
In 2019, as in 2018, by far the most popular overall response was 'colleagues and team' with 85% of respondents suggesting that their relationships with peers are the main factor that motivates them to stay here.

40. 'Making a difference' was the next most popular answer, followed by 'job satisfaction' and 'learning and development'. Again, these are consistent with the findings in 2018, and the two least popular responses remained 'money' and 'career prospects'. Those who checked the box for 'something else' referred to supervision and caseloads and also offered these as motivators to work in Gateshead.

- *A genuine belief in the power of social work which is shared throughout the hierarchy*
- *Ability to practice in the way that I think works best for the children and families I work with as well as being part of innovation in practice.*

41. Asked 'What are the really good things about working in Gateshead?' Social Workers answered as follows:

What are the really good things about working in Gateshead?



In keeping with earlier questions, the top answer was 'peer support and quality of staff'. 'Good management support' was also highly rated, as was 'commitment to practice development'. The next most popular was 'staff development and training'. Only 24% selected 'inspiring leadership' or 'work/life balance' and the least popular responses were 'staff safety', 'career progression' and 'policies and procedures'.

42. Respondents were then provided with a free text box to add any other comments and the majority of these were very positive, typified by:

- *I love that there's a constant sense of learning from each other (no matter the experience) and sharing of ideas which makes for a productive and collaborative work environment.*
- *Aspiration for success and excellence.*
- *Really like working here and have no complaints... When people ask,*

they are sometimes surprised as often children and families Social Workers have negative things to say but I do not. The managers are all very good and supportive.

The social work career progression framework

43. Gateshead Council's strategy for Social Workers aims to have a 'clear progression structure that invests in preparing the talented to become future Practice Supervisors and Leaders'. As outlined in the early part of this report, any such structure needs to take account of numerous corporate, statutory and regulatory frameworks.
44. Gateshead has a well established and valued programme of development during the crucial ASYE year and the C&FPSW is currently working with colleagues in HR and WFD on significant proposals for the development of the C&F social work career pathway thereafter.
45. An integrated portfolio route for Social Workers to progress to 'Level 3' or PCF 'experienced Social Worker' status and salary has been developed and is currently being piloted in several teams.
46. Those Social Workers who want to stay in practice and do not want to move into 'management' positions in order to develop their practice leadership skills currently have minimal opportunity for progression since the deletion of all 'Senior Practitioner' roles in Gateshead's social work teams. Those wishing to move into supervisory positions currently have no pathways into 'team manager' roles since the deletion of all 'Assistant Team Manager' roles.
47. Gateshead continues to support Social Workers to undertake a range of academic post-qualifying awards including the Practice Educator Programme (PEPs) and, where possible the 'Consultant Social Worker' programme offered by Frontline and adapted in partnership with Gateshead to include a 'Deputy Consultant' pathway.

Conclusion

48. Gateshead has a relatively stable workforce of qualified Social Workers who, largely, find this a safe and supportive environment within which to practice social work. A 'home-grown' approach to social work qualification has enabled us to grow our workforce in line with local need, but at the busiest times, our relatively lower numbers of very experienced workers in 'front line' positions creates some real stresses and pressures with periods of unacceptably high caseloads for those workers.
49. Continuing to retain our experienced Social Workers in a competitive market place remains a priority, and we therefore need to build on the strong reasons why Social Workers say they stay in Gateshead. That is, they value a strong culture of mutual care, support and learning and they are motivated to 'make a difference' for vulnerable children in Gateshead. Social Workers value Gateshead's commitment to practice development and are excited about the potential future developments of the Gateshead CAN practice approach.

50. Social Workers feel that their opportunities to work directly with children and families are limited by a continued focus on repetitive recording and time-consuming form filling. Social Workers are hopeful that the commissioning of a new integrated social care recording system will streamline processes, lead to more meaningful recording and provide a much-needed opportunity to rebalance their work in favour of a direct impact on children and families.

Recommendations

It is requested that the Families Overview and Scrutiny Committee

1. Continue to champion the work undertaken by the Council's Children and Families Social Workers
2. Note the content of this report
3. Agree to receive regular reports from the C&F Principal Social Worker regarding issues affecting the workforce recruitment and retention.

CONTACT: Lesley Holden

EXTENSION: 2637