

TITLE OF REPORT: Retention and Recruitment of children's Social Workers

REPORT OF: Interim Strategic Director, Care Wellbeing and Learning

POLICY CONTEXT

1. It is well understood that Social Work is a tough and demanding career that requires people who are highly skilled, resilient and intellectually able. Over the years many tragic child deaths have led to Government commissioning reviews and reforming statutory guidance and legislation.
2. Significantly in July 2016 the DFE published its strategy to transform Children's Services due to ongoing concerns that the reforms of the previous 6 years had not improved the quality of work with children and families. 'Putting Children First' describes fundamental reform using 'three pillars' the DFE (Department for Education) identify as significant in the children's social care system as it stands:
 - **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.
3. A significant part of the reform thus far has also involved the DFE and the Chief Social Worker for children, Isobel Trowler, publishing Knowledge and Skills statements (KSS) for Children's Social Workers (to be known as Approved Child and Family Practitioners) and their Team Managers (to be known as Practice Supervisors) and senior managers (to be known as Practice Leaders). The holders of these posts will be subject to an accreditation and assessment process delivered through the DFE over the next 3 years. The first round of accreditation and assessment for Practice Leaders will take place during 2017. Local Authorities are expected to ensure that Social Workers working in the 3 tiers described above are ready for the accreditation and assessment process by endorsing their practice.
4. The Government introduced, and currently supports, two fast track training programmes for would be Social Workers. The first, called 'step up to social work', launched in 2010 is a graduate scheme for those switching career. Evaluation of the

programme has indicated that it has generated a group of highly capable and committed new entrants to social work.

5. The second, is called Frontline, launched in 2014 and is based on the Teach First fast track model. High-flying graduates, typically from Russell Group universities are recruited and trained as Social Workers. An evaluation of Frontline in 2016 found that early indicators were 'most positive'.
6. Both of these programmes involve partnership arrangements with interested Local Authorities of which Gateshead is one.

Background

7. The recruitment and retention of Children's Social Workers is a national issue. The market leans in favour of the employee as a valuable resource crucial to the success of the organisation's work. The quality and stability of the Social Work workforce within authorities is all too easily influenced by external factors, such as a poor Ofsted judgement, and internal factors, such as the CPD (continuous professional development) offer, caseload size, salary and allowances, organisational reputation, leadership and culture. Increasingly a significant threat is the growing market for agency Social Workers who have been enticed away from permanent posts to agency work with promises of very lucrative salary packages. Put simply a Social Worker who is dissatisfied, for whatever reason, with their local Authority has no worries about securing alternative employment elsewhere.
8. We know that the North East is not a high exporter or importer of Social Workers with most Social Workers qualifying and training in one of the region's Higher Education Institutes, and securing employment in one of the twelve Local Authorities. The available market is therefore small in relative terms.
9. The current work force development strategy includes working proactively with the Regional Teaching Partnership to promote the recruitment of student social workers and proactively working with universities to support entry into social work by providing social work practice educators across a wide range of in house placement opportunities. Newly qualified social workers appointed to the Council are provided with additional supervision, protected caseloads and comprehensive induction training in their first assessed year in practice.
10. The service has also entered into partnerships with 'step up to social work', and Frontline which is providing a strong alliance in terms of succession planning. These initiatives are supported by dedicated management of student social workers in placement. Furthermore, Firstline - a leadership programme associated with Frontline is being utilised to help grow future leaders in Social Work for Gateshead.
11. In addition the Council has a comprehensive training and development programme for social workers which include post qualification opportunities.

12. In no small measure the quality of our workforce and their commitment to children and families contributed in October 2015 to Gateshead Children's Services receiving a 'GOOD' judgement following Ofsted's regulatory inspection. This is a noteworthy judgement and set Gateshead amongst the top 25% of Children's Services in the Country. Under normal circumstances receiving a good judgement would have resulted in Gateshead being the 'go to' authority for the region's social work workforce. However, shortly after the judgement a neighbouring authority was judged inadequate and began a vigorous and targeted recruitment of staff, offering amongst things financial incentives to Social Workers. Gateshead was unable to match the financial offers and as a result lost a great deal of talented staff.
13. The risk of this continuing remains a significant threat: Of the twelve neighbouring authorities three have yet to receive their regulatory inspection all of which are close neighbours. (Two from the south of the region also received a Good judgement, a further one received an inadequate judgement and the remaining 3 were judged as requiring improvement). We know that Local Authorities respond to poor Ofsted judgements or anticipated inspections by seeking out experienced quality Social Workers.
14. Since April 2016 sixteen (16) Social Workers have left the Council. A rolling programme of recruitment advertising for newly qualified and experienced staff since April 2016 has thus far successfully appointed ten (10) Social Workers against those vacancies. However, this has not attracted sufficient numbers of experienced Social Workers and this continues to be a challenge. Nine (9) newly qualified Social Workers have been appointed and whilst this is helpful in terms of a longer term strategy to 'grow our own' the limits placed on newly qualified Social Workers prevent a full caseload and the allocation of complex cases. Therefore there is a limit to how many newly qualified Social Workers the service can manage as experienced staff are needed to maintain the safety of the service.
15. The hiatus in filling vacancies generally and specifically with experienced Social Workers within Gateshead has had a knock on effect upon the capacity for our existing Social Workers within a context of an exponential rise in caseloads over the year. Children & Families social work continue to face unprecedented pressures with recruitment and retention of Social Work posts and in order to be able to meet our statutory requirements the appointment of agency workers is at an all-time high.
16. In addition to this national agency recruitment agencies target Social Workers both experienced and newly qualified with lucrative financial packages and guaranteed lengthy placements often providing salaries in excess of £50,000 per annum.

SUMMARY

17. The employer practice endorsement process, assessment and accreditation and new KSS provide an opportunity for Gateshead to build on the success of the Ofsted judgement. We want to attract and retain talented Social Workers, develop our succession planning to ensure the best Social Workers stay in Gateshead and become the Practice Leaders of tomorrow. In future we will need to avoid being in a position where the retention of our Social Workers is vulnerable by having an offer sufficient to retain talented Social Workers who have been well supported and schooled in Gateshead.

NEXT STEPS

18. To that end the Children's Principal Social Worker along with colleagues in Workforce development are developing an offer for current and future Social Workers - articulated in the six outcomes below:

1. A competitive, if not higher salary offer, than our competitors based on new job profiles aligned to the KSS standard.
2. A recruitment process that is in line with the KSS and selection processes that provide a solid baseline assessment of candidates that can pull through into the employer practice endorsement process.
3. 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.
4. A clear progression structure that invests in preparing the talented to become future Practice Supervisors and Leaders.
5. 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.
6. 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.

RECOMMENDATION

19. Committee is asked to;

1. Continue to champion the work undertaken by the Council's Children's Social Workers.
2. Note the content of this report.
3. Agree to receive regular reports from the Children's Principal Social Worker regarding the progress of work against the six outcomes articulated above.

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