

CHILDREN AND YOUNG PEOPLE'S SOCIAL CARE AND SERVICES SCRUTINY PANEL

A meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was held on 6 January 2020.

PRESENT: Councillor Garvey (Chair), Councillor Dodds (Vice Chair); Councillors: Cooke, Hill, Saunders, J Walker, Wilson and Wright.

OFFICERS: S Butcher, J Dixon and S Kitching.

PRESENT BY INVITATION: Councillor J Thompson – Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Board.

PRESENT AS AN OBSERVER: J Cain – Local Democracy Reporter.

An APOLOGY for absence was submitted on behalf of Councillor Uddin.

**** DECLARATIONS OF MEMBERS' INTERESTS**

There were no Declarations of Interest made by Members at this point in the meeting.

MINUTES

The minutes of the previous meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel held on 16 December 2019 were submitted and approved as a correct record.

MANAGING DEMAND IN CHILDREN'S SOCIAL CARE SERVICES – FURTHER INFORMATION

As part of the Panel's current review of Managing Demand in Children's Social Care Services, it had requested further information relating to the recruitment and retention of children's Social Workers in Middlesbrough.

Subsequently, S Butcher, Interim Director of Children's Care, and S Kitching, Principal Social Worker, were in attendance at the meeting to provide Members with a presentation.

The Principal Social Worker advised that she been involved in national research and would brief the Panel on:-

- Findings from the research/evidence.
- Key challenges for Middlesbrough.
- What was being done – five key priorities.

The National Picture

In August 2019, the Department for Education (DfE) published the findings of the first year of a five-year longitudinal study of local authority children and family social workers. The aim of the study was to collect robust evidence on recruitment, retention and progression in child and family social work in order to establish a greater understanding of recruitment issues, career pathways, choices and decisions and how these differed according to demographics (age, gender, ethnicity etc), different entry routes into social work, roles and responsibilities, region, LA performance and local labour markets.

The Panel was informed that when asked about their motivation to join the profession, the majority found the job satisfying and were loyal to their employer. Although the majority felt well-prepared for entry into the profession, within two to three years they became dissatisfied across a range of factors:-

- Around half felt stressed – linked to excessive or unmanageable caseloads.
- Majority of Social Workers worked at least seven hours per week above their contracted hours in order to fulfil their job.

Evidence from the study also showed:-

- 59% of Social Workers left their Local Authority within the first five years. In Middlesbrough this figure currently stood at 72%.
- Those employed for less than three years were more likely to plan to leave and actually did leave.
- The average career span of a Children's Social Worker was less than eight years. This compared with an average of 16 years for a nurse and 25 years for a doctor.
- The loss of experienced social workers impacted significantly on Local Authorities in terms of the quality of service; relationships with children and families were compromised; the cost of investment in staff was lost.

The Panel was provided with information relating to the profile of Middlesbrough's Children's Services Social Workers as at December 2019. It showed:-

- 170 FTE children's Social Workers employed by Middlesbrough Council.
- 76 (45%) of those Social Workers had less than two years' experience.
- 123 (72%) had less than five years' experience. The national average was 68%.
- The turnover rate of Social Workers was 20.8%.
- There was a vacancy rate of 3.95%, compared with the national average of 16.5%.
- The absence rate was 3.23%, compared with 3% nationally.
- 3.15% of Social Workers were agency staff. This figure was 15.4% nationally.

The Panel was informed that the Council had actively targeted the recruitment of Children and Families Social Workers to encourage a 'home grown', stable workforce. Whilst all newly qualified social workers required higher levels of support during their first year, a permanent, stable workforce resulted in lower levels of agency staff being required. The cost of employing agency workers was far higher than employing permanent staff. Although the numbers of agency staff fluctuated, the current number was well below the national average.

It was highlighted that the national average career length for children and families social workers was eight years. The DfE research showed the following top five reasons for leaving local authority children and family social work and the top five influencing factors in remaining or returning to children and families social work:-

Top Five Main Reasons for leaving/considering leaving LA children & families Social Work

- 13% - did not like the culture of local authority work.
- 12% - due to retire/had retired.
- 12% - high caseloads.
- 10% - did not/was not making the best use of skills and experience.
- 9% - not compatible with family/relationship commitments.

Top Five Main Reasons that would influence Social Workers to remain or return to LA children & families Social Work

- 21% - More manageable caseload/workload.
- 18% - Nothing would encourage them.
- 11% - higher pay.
- 11% - More manageable admin/paperwork workload.
- 7% - better/more promotion/progression opportunities.

The Panel was advised that Children's Services had developed a Workforce Strategy and the key priorities included:-

- Retention and recruitment with revised advertising promotion.
- Strengthened career progression and continuous professional development and learning programme. High quality training.
- Manageable caseloads, quality supervision and well-being support.

- Strong Assessed and Supported Year in Employment Programme (ASYE). Continued partnership with Frontline and Step-up programmes.
- Support and endorse staff to take the National Accreditation and Assessment System (NAAS).

Recruitment and Retention

In response to evidence that showed Social Workers were leaving Middlesbrough Council due to dissatisfaction over salary and limited or no applications for vacant posts, Middlesbrough had implemented a Recruitment and Retention Policy for experienced Social Workers with a salary to match regional local authority pay.

Work was ongoing with HR to revise Middlesbrough's on-line profile with emphasis on clarity around the Middlesbrough offer.

It was recognised that recruitment and retention of a skilled workforce presented one of the greatest challenges. This was acknowledged by Senior Leaders nationally as one of the greatest risks to effective service delivery.

The recruitment and retention offer in Middlesbrough was explained as follows:-

- A one-off payment to Social Workers who sign up to stay in an eligible post for a minimum of three years. (Should they decide to leave during that period they would be required to pay back a percentage reducing over time).
- The offer was 15% of the current salary – ranging from £4,706 - £6,695.
- The recruitment offer was applied to eligible social workers and formed part of the advertised offer.
- The offer was for experienced social workers grade K, L, Assistant Team Managers and Team Managers.
- The retention offer was available for eligible children's social workers grade K, L, Assistant Team Managers and Team Managers.
- Since October 2019, to date, 68 out of the 82 eligible Social Workers had signed up to the recruitment and retention offer.
- The aim was to attract experienced Social Workers, with a minimum of two years' experience, and to offer a proportionate financial incentive that would make them feel valued and want to remain with the authority.

Progression

The Panel was informed that Middlesbrough Council was undertaking the following to support progression/succession:-

- Revising its career progression in order to support succession and talent.
- Investment was being made in managers who would support the process via supervision and mentoring programmes – Firstline and Practice Supervisor Development Programme.
- Investment in high quality skills-based programme and delivering core learning (Action Learning Sets) directly linked to case audit and learning reviews.
- Supporting staff to meet the new Social Work England regulators registration requirements. (All Social Workers must be registered with SW England).

Well-being and Caseloads

- Caseloads were monitored on a weekly basis and detailed performance reporting was in place to support managers.
- Every effort was made to cap caseloads, with newly qualified Social Workers having protected caseloads.
- A specific annual social work survey, based on LGA guidelines, was undertaken to inform workforce planning and assess the well-being of the workforce. In addition, the Principal Social Worker met on a quarterly basis with teams.
- The Workforce Strategy linked directly to the Council's People Strategy and the Council's values.

Learning and Development

- The Council was partnered with 'Frontline' and 'Step Up' Programmes to attract high calibre students/recruits. (Link to the website: <https://thefrontline.org.uk/our-programmes/frontline-programme/>). The Panel was advised that participants worked towards a master's degree. 15 newly qualified social workers had joined the workforce via this route and a part-time manager had recently been recruited to manage newly qualified social workers.
- Strong Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and offer for newly qualified Social Workers.
- Investment in high quality training and learning programmes.
- Supporting staff to meet the knowledge and skills (KSS) required to meet the standards required for a children and family practitioner and practice supervisor.
- Access to up to date research and evidence to support practice.
- Support the delivery of quality reflective supervision.

National Accreditation and Assessment System (NAAS)

- Middlesbrough was part of phase two supported by the DfE.
- NAAS provided a national benchmark of good practice and was an improvement tool to enhance the expertise and knowledge of social workers that aimed to improve the quality of practice.
- Middlesbrough had received funding to support the programme and were using the money to invest and support the professional development of Social Workers.
- NAAS linked to support career progression of Social Workers.
- NAAS supported the Council's vision to develop excellent practitioners.
- Currently, eight Social Workers had been accredited and a further 25 endorsed and waiting for results/assessment dates.

Discussion ensued and the following issues were raised:-

- A Panel Member queried whether exit interviews were undertaken with Social Workers leaving the authority and, if so, what the top three reasons were for leaving. The Principal Social Worker advised that exit interviews were conducted and that she would obtain the information regarding the reasons as to why for circulation to the Panel.

- A Panel Member also requested the 2018 profile of Social Workers in Middlesbrough.
- It was queried whether agency staff converted to work for the authority. The Panel was advised that some agency staff wanted to come and work for the authority but it was still a challenge to recruit the experienced staff required to deal with very complex families.
- The Panel asked whether the complexity of cases was taken into account when planning caseloads. It was confirmed that this was the case and that newly qualified Social Workers were mentored by more experienced workers within the teams. It was highlighted that Middlesbrough had a high number of referrals coupled with high levels of poverty and public health challenges.
- A Panel Member queried whether University student social workers had the opportunity to work alongside/shadow qualified social workers in a work setting and concern was expressed that they might be leaving the profession after a short length of time as they did not have sufficient 'hands on' experience required for the role. The Principal Social Worker confirmed that students were required to undertake a minimum 100-day work based placements and that Middlesbrough had a good record regarding university students coming to work for the Council but acknowledged that closer working with the University might be required. Both the Step up and Frontline programmes provided good on the job training.
- In response to a query, it was confirmed that a Social Worker's contracted hours was 37 per week with flexible working and that other services worked alongside to provide out of hours response.
- Reference was made to the high numbers of children in care in Middlesbrough. The Panel was advised that taking a child into care was a last resort. Middlesbrough was unique in some of the particular challenges it faced in relation to adult substance misuse and domestic abuse which impacted on young people.
- A Member of the Panel asked whether Social Workers worked with partners such as MIND. It was confirmed that the service worked closely with Police, public health and voluntary sector partners in order to provide families with additional support as required.
- In relation to Social Worker apprenticeships, the Panel was informed that this was a new pathway into social work in partnership with Sunderland University. Government funding would be provided to establish this.

The Chair thanked the Officers for their attendance and the information provided.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That the Panel noted the information provided and considered it in the context of the Panel's current scrutiny topic.
2. That information in relation to the following be circulated to the Panel:-
 - The top three reasons provided during exit interviews as to why children and families social workers left the authority.
 - Middlesbrough's Social Worker profile for 2018.

ANY OTHER URGENT ITEMS WHICH, IN THE OPINION OF THE CHAIR, MAY BE CONSIDERED

The Chair advised Panel Members that as part of its review into 'Managing Demand in Children's Social Care Services', Children's Services had been invited to its next Panel meeting to provide information relating to the Transformation Theme of Building in-house fostering and residential capacity. At approximately the same time, the Overview and Scrutiny Board had also invited Children's Services to provide updates on financial controls, including any transformation initiatives.

External factors, such as the Parliamentary election, had affected the business of many

committees, causing a backlog of business. This resulted in both the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel and the Overview and Scrutiny Board requesting similar information at both its meetings, from Children's Services, during the same week (commencing 10 February).

Subsequently, Democratic Services Officers, in consultation with the Chair of Overview and Scrutiny Board and the Chair of the Scrutiny Panel attempted to avoid any unnecessary duplication by ensuring that all of the information requested by both bodies be provided at one meeting.

The following was considered:-

- As building in-house fostering and residential capacity formed part of wider spending mitigations, it was felt a strategic overview of all mitigations should be provided to OSB (on 13 February).
- Children's Services were specifically asked to include matters surrounding building in-house fostering and residential capacity in their presentation to OSB on 13 February.

The Chair asked that Panel Members submit any specific requests for information to be included in the Children's Services presentation, or questions relevant to the Panel's scrutiny topic, be forwarded to him, or the Democratic Services Officer, prior to the OSB meeting on 13 February 2020.

In addition, the Chair of the Overview and Scrutiny Board extended an invitation to all Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel Members and advised that they would be encouraged to participate and ask questions at the meeting.

AGREED as follows:-

1. That, for the reasons outlined above, all Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel be invited to attend the Overview and Scrutiny Board meeting on 13 February 2020 at 4.00pm.
2. That any specific requests for information to be included in the Children's Services presentation, pertinent to the Panel's current scrutiny review, be forwarded to the Chair of the Scrutiny Panel or the Democratic Services Officer.

DATE AND TIME OF NEXT MEETING

The next meeting of the Children and Young People's Social Care and Services Scrutiny Panel was scheduled for Monday, 10 February 2020 at 4.00pm.