

**Committee and Date****People Overview Committee****10<sup>th</sup> July 2024**

Item

Public



## Social Worker Recruitment & Retention

**Responsible Officer:**

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**Cabinet Member (Portfolio Holder):**

Cllr Gwilym Butler, Finance & Corporate Support

### 1. Synopsis

The recruitment and retention of social workers is challenging due to high turnover and reliance on agency workers. Initiatives like payments, campaigns, & apprenticeships aim to stabilise the workforce. Recent success has been seen in targeted children's services recruitment, but challenges remain.

### 2. Executive Summary

- 2.1. The report provides an overview of the challenges and actions taken to address the recruitment and retention of social workers as part of our commitment to a Healthy Organisation within the Shropshire Plan. The latest national research into children's social worker workforce shows investment by councils in recruiting social workers, but this remains very challenging as all local authorities compete for the best talent.
- 2.2. High turnover and reliance on agency workers affect the stability and continuity of care for children and vulnerable adults and increases costs and caseloads. Over the last 5 years the council has implemented several pro-active initiatives including welcome, retention and agency conversion payments, market supplements, targeted recruitment campaigns and the apprenticeship programme to address the

workforce challenges. Regular benchmarking with other local authorities in the region takes place to ensure that the offer is competitive and has recently been reviewed.

- 2.3. Council wide improvements such as enhancing the employer brand, improving the recruitment system and processes, clarifying and supporting the role of the manager, improving the induction and exit process and the use of artificial intelligence have also been implemented or are making good progress.
- 2.4. The recent targeted recruitment campaign for social work roles within children's services has been largely successful, although some of the vacancies have had to be advertised more than once and some vacancies remain. Successful conversion of agency to permanent roles has also assisted with the challenges. The use of social media campaigns is a key tool in attracting candidates to apply for our vacancies. There is a national shortage of social workers and in the West Midlands Region. In particular experienced child protection social workers.
- 2.5. Workforce Planning is key to addressing the recruitment and retention challenges, encouraging a younger and more diverse workforce into local government as a whole, supported by apprenticeships and clear career pathways. Work is ongoing with all service areas to create plans for the future and a council wide strategic approach.
- 2.6. Currently, in children's high caseloads contribute to the cycle of agency social worker turn over, as highlighted in the recent OFSTED report. Some teams have workers with caseloads that are considered acceptable, others carry high caseloads and this impacts on retention of workers, both permanent and agency.
- 2.7. There is a requirement for children's social care to undertake an annual health check of the workforce, this is currently out for completion. The outcomes inform the workforce strategy review for next year.

### 3. Recommendations

- 3.1. That the People Overview Committee note the contents of the report and support the ongoing work to address the challenges around recruitment and retention of Social Workers.

## Report

### 4. Risk Assessment and Opportunities Appraisal

- 4.1. Failure to have a stable workforce and an over reliance on agency social workers results in less stability and continuity for our vulnerable clients and increased caseloads. These concerns were raised by Ofsted as part of their focussed visit in November 2023.
- 4.2. With an ageing workforce, failure to have robust workforce and succession plans in place will result in further reliance on expensive agency workers.

Risk table

<i>Risk</i>	<i>Mitigation</i>
Failure to recruit permanent social workers results in increased costs and high levels of turnover which impacts on children and vulnerable adults.	Enhanced package including welcome payments, agency conversion payments, retention payments available. Targeted recruitment campaigns for both children's and hard to fill areas of adults. Additional capacity within children's social care agreed and recruitment underway/partially completed. Workforce & Succession Plans in place to grow the future workforce of Social Workers, via apprenticeships. Children's Improvement Board in place to oversee actions relating to children's services. Promotion of employer brand and the Shropshire offer, including emphasis on apprenticeships and career progression.

## 5. Financial Implications

- 5.1. The use of agency staff to fill permanent Social Worker roles places considerable budget pressures on staffing budgets, with each agency worker costing between 25 and 30% more than recruiting permanently.

## 6. Climate Change Appraisal

- 6.1. Shropshire's rurality, and therefore the significant amount of travel that Social Workers must undertake to fulfil their duties, results in increased carbon emissions. The Council has a fleet of pool cars available, where appropriate for staff to use for work related travel and many of these are electric vehicles. The Council also offers staff a salary sacrifice car purchase scheme, which includes electric vehicles.
- 6.2. Where possible and appropriate, the use of online meetings is encouraged to reduce travel and therefore impact on the environment.

## 7. Background

- 7.1. The crisis in the recruitment and retention of social workers is a well-documented national issue with all local authorities across the country competing in the same pool of experienced professionals.
- 7.2. High stress, high demand and high burnout are reported as being the main causes of the crisis as social workers struggle to cope with more challenging caseloads following the pandemic and cost of living crisis. This has resulted in many social workers also leaving the profession altogether or leaving permanent roles to work on an interim basis with agencies, giving them added flexibility of being able to move from authority to authority when they wish. In most cases the additional cost of a social worker who is agency rather than permanent is the agency fee which equates to between 18% and 30% additional cost.

- 7.3. Recent national workforce statistics<sup>1</sup> report an increase of 4.7% (1,485) of the number of FTE children's social workers in post since 2022 (total workforce of 33,119). This was the highest level and largest year on year increase. There was also an increase in the use of agency social workers by 6.1%, a record high. The number of leavers fell from a record high of 5,421 in 21/22 to 5,254 in 22/23. Despite the increased recruitment, vacancies only reduced slightly (2.4%) to 7,700 FTE.
- 7.4. These figures are largely positive with an increase in the number of social workers being recruited to however, the sector remains under significant pressure as demand continues to increase alongside increasing complexity of caseloads.
- 7.5. Children's social care have a workforce Strategy that has been implemented over the past 4 years. It focuses on 'growing our own' through a successful apprenticeship programme, qualifying as social workers and then completing their first year in practice (ASYE). There is also a linked scale programme in place to enable social workers to progress to a senior social worker level when they have the right experience and skills, so that they can achieve promotion without having to leave the authority.
- 7.6. Over the past 2 years work to reduce reliance on agency social workers has taken place. There was a peak of 48 agency workers several years ago, whereas we are currently at 31, a reduction of 17. For other vacancies we recruit newly qualified (ASYE's) to where possible, but they have to have a protected caseload for the full year.
- 7.7. The linked salary scale, aimed at enabling social workers to progress in their careers when they have the necessary skills and experience has been key in retaining experienced social workers and contributing to stabilising of the turnover rates.
- 7.8. Benchmarking with regional Local Authorities and a Children's Trust was undertaken and is regularly updated to compare our offer for children's and adult social worker roles. The salary and additional payments payable are broadly comparable however, are less favourable in some cases. Further detail can be found at Appendix A. It is important to note that whilst an important factor, pay is only one element of the overall employment offer.
- 7.9. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the West Midlands relating to caps on the amount paid to children's social workers has been in existence for some time and last updated in 2022. However, many of the Local Authorities who signed up to this have had exemptions granted whereas Shropshire remains within the MoU. An MoU for adult social worker roles is currently in development for the region. Local Authorities across the region have contributed to a report by providing data on salary information, vacancy, number of agency and hourly rates applied.
- 7.10. To respond to the challenges, in 2019 the council implemented a Recruitment & Retention package for children's social workers which consisted of a Welcome Payment of £5,000 and a Retention Payment to permanent workers of £5,000

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<sup>1</sup> [Children's social work workforce, Reporting year 2023 – Explore education statistics – GOV.UK \(explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk\)](https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk)

after 2 years' service (repaid if individual leaves within the 2 years). Initially it was targeted at hard to recruit teams but in 2022 it was offered more widely to qualified social work posts that were case holding / front line.

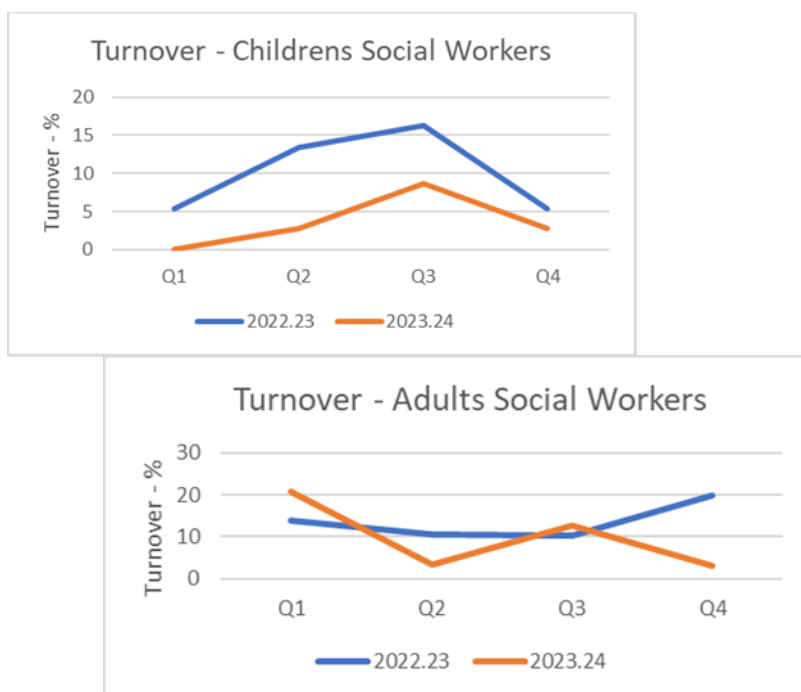
- 7.11. These payments have recently been reviewed and extended until 31 March 2025 whilst we undertake a further review of the overall offer but have also been applied to social workers within adults where recruitment and retention issues are also beginning to pose similar challenges in specific, hard to fill areas.
- 7.12. Given the particular challenges in recruiting social workers for child protection (case management and court teams) in April 2024 an increase to the recruitment and retention payment was approved by the Executive Management Team to pay £7,500 per year for 2 years. This applies to 39 posts
- 7.13. The amount of travel that social workers undertake, particularly given Shropshire's rurality can be significant. A review is underway on work-bases and the future use of designated hubs around the county. This should therefore reduce the amount of travel time and cost of travel in undertaking duties. Employees have told us that this is a significant factor when leaving, especially for agency staff who often live at a distance from the county.
- 7.14. During the last year regular conversations have taken place with agency workers to convert into permanent roles and this includes the payment of the welcome payment detailed above. In addition to this payment, Shropshire Council service in the agency role will also count towards annual leave entitlement which is seen as an enhanced benefit.
- 7.15. A total of 17 successful conversions from agency to permanent roles has been achieved, including some managers. However some still remain on agency, preferring to continue with the flexibility of such a contract. Conversion conversations continue on a regular basis.
- 7.16. From October 2024 the council is moving to a new agency framework provider; Opus People Solutions (West Midlands Temps). Opus are one of the largest recruitment agencies working with local authorities across the country to support management of the temporary workforce. They are working with a number of LAs in the region as part of WM Temps and are looking to reduce costs, move temporary to permanent and support workforce planning across the sector.
- 7.17. The independent review of children's social care, published in May 2022, described the case to reduce overreliance on agency social workers in order to provide more stable relationships for children and families and reduce costs. The Department for Education consulted on national rules on local authority use of agency child and family social workers.
- 7.18. The government response to that consultation, published in October 2023, set out the agency rules and confirmed a commitment to introducing statutory guidance. A further consultation took place in January and February of this year on the technical detail of the agency rules that will become statutory guidance for local authorities and we await the outcome of that consultation and timelines for such guidance to be in place.

- 7.19. Over the last 5 years there has been several targeted recruitment campaigns to help attract social workers to Shropshire – these include videos and blogs of the Director and members of the teams talking about how it feels to work at Shropshire and the supportive teams that individuals would be working with, as well as more recently, targeted social media campaigns. Proactive and personal, values-based attraction strategies help to attract passive job seekers and those who wish to change careers and move into social work in future.
- 7.20. The recent targeted recruitment campaign within children’s services included 20 FTE roles including Team Managers, specialist Child Protection Social Workers (a pilot), Trainees and Independent Reviewing Officers and the majority of these have now been appointed to with many having started in post. The additional capacity child protection social worker roles have not attracted applicants with experience, and some have been filled with newly qualified social workers.
- 7.21. There are 3 active adverts, 2 of which are open ended and the remaining 1 due to close at the end of July.
- 7.22. ‘Growing our Own’ is key to establishing a future talent pipeline and stable workforce. To date, Shropshire Council has recruited 23 apprentices to the Social Worker Level 6 Degree Apprenticeship programme over 4 years. Retention rates are high with the majority moving into permanent roles once qualified.
- 7.23. Workforce planning is key to addressing the challenges longer term, attracting a younger, diverse workforce, creating career progression pathways so that employees want to stay with the council. By 2030 there will be a 25% increase in the number of 18-year-olds potentially entering the jobs market and it will take a decade for this to fall again<sup>2</sup>. This presents a real opportunity to engage with school and college students over the next few years to encourage them to take up a career within social care, and indeed wider local government.
- 7.24. Wider council improvements are part of the ‘Shop Window’ Project and include:
- Enhancements to the recruitment pages on the council website to promote the employer brand including a standardised recruitment pack;
  - Enhanced candidate attraction i.e. social media campaigns;
  - Creation and pilot of shortened application form, use of CVs;
  - Revised and streamlined Job Description and Person Specification templates;
  - Enhanced Induction/new starter checklist/online induction modules including videos of CX and Leader;
  - Streamlined and improved exit process including exit interview;
  - A review of terms and conditions of employment for all council employees;
  - Clarity on the Role of the Manager in future, aligned to the TOM;
  - Additional support to services in recruitment through centralisation of admin activities to the recruitment team and changes to responsibilities within systems/self-serve;
  - Requirement for Workforce Planning/Succession Planning to take place in service areas;
  - Utilise Artificial Intelligence (AI) via Microsoft Copilot to undertake initial shortlisting of applications and bespoke candidate interview questions.

<sup>2</sup> West Midlands Employers Recruitment Insights Report 2024

-Attendance at careers fairs in schools, colleges and skills shows.

7.15. The below charts show how turnover has changed and overall improved during 2023/24 when compared to 2022/23. This reinforces the above efforts to retain social workers within Shropshire is working by the reduction in turnover per quarter.



7.16 In addition, annual figures for turnover shows an improvement as follows:

	<b>2022/23</b>	<b>2023/24</b>
Children's Social Workers	10.06%	3.44%
Adults Social Workers	13.73%	9.83%
	<b>Pre Covid 2018/19</b>	
Children's Social Workers	13.3%	
Adults Social Workers	9.5%	

## 8. Additional Information

8.1. The recruitment landscape has changed significantly over the last 5 years compounded further by the pandemic in 2020. We have an ageing workforce, post Covid many employees left the sector, and we are competing against other councils for the same pool of talent. Deep cuts to local government funding and increasing demand for services has affected our ability to compete with other sectors on pay and conditions. We are seeing more and more challenges in recruitment, with many areas across the council, not just social care, having roles which are extremely hard to recruit and retain.

8.2. Across the council, for all services, this means that the approaches to recruitment need to adapt and evolve to meet these challenges from several perspectives: The employment offer, systems and processes, roles, responsibilities and cultural issues all need to be reviewed. It should be acknowledged that good practice does

exist, and progress has been made to address these challenges but there is more to be done.

- 8.3. **The Employment Offer** - It is no longer adequate to place an advert on the council website, for the shortest amount of time and expect to attract quality candidates. Marketing of the council, leadership, culture and its offer is key. Work continues to develop in this area, particularly utilising social media channels.
- 8.4. The employment offer has to be attractive and promoted, not just in pay terms but non-pay elements such as flexible working, development and opportunities to experience different things and career progression.
- 8.5. As part of the work to move to a new operating model for the council, a review will be undertaken to benchmark all terms and conditions against other Local Authorities to determine what this needs to look like for the future to attract and retain a talented workforce, balanced against available resources.
- 8.6. Recruiting managers will have to be much more engaged in attracting and recruiting their future team members. Aligning the values of the organisation to those of future employees, particularly the younger generations (Z and Alpha) through in-person events/meetings, keeping in regular contact before start date and engaging induction programmes for new starters will lead to successful recruitment and retention, a more stable workforce and increased employer brand. These events have been tried in some areas which learning being that support in an 'event management' approach is needed to ensure they have the desired impact.
- 8.7. **System & Process** - The 'time to hire' is measured from the date of advert until the offer is made (not taking account of notice period). The average time is estimated at 12 weeks, but this is dependent upon external factors i.e. DBS checks and references and is on a par with the regional average.
- 8.8. Current application processes have flexibility with application route with use of CV and a soon to be rolled out shortened application form. The recruitment system is intuitive, provides all the information a recruiting manager requires and therefore can progress quickly through the recruitment stages.
- 8.9. **Roles/Responsibilities and cultural issues** - The recruitment landscape has changed significantly since the current systems and processes were introduced and needs to be revisited so that line managers are owning the parts of the process that they should be, with support services undertaking the administration as efficiently as possible. Additional support is provided to children's services from the central recruitment team to assist with the administration tasks that are required to recruit employees.
- 8.10. Workforce Planning is key to plan for future workforce needs, reviewing roles and career development pathways / succession plans to ensure that we have a more stable workforce in future.
- 8.11. Surveys of our new starters are undertaken regularly to gain valuable insight into the processes and experiences from the candidate/new employee perspective. Keeping in regular contact with candidates and proactive communications in the lead up to starting and a robust, supportive induction results in high retention rates.



## 9. Conclusion

- 9.1. There remain significant challenges in the recruitment and retention of social workers and this is recognised as a national issue. High turnover and reliance on agency workers impact the stability, quality and continuity of care for our most vulnerable.
- 9.2. Adults and children's social care are subject to inspection frameworks and the workforce is a key element that forms part of the inspection.
- 9.3. In response to these challenges, the council has implemented various proactive initiatives to address the workforce issues, including welcome, retention, and agency conversion payments, market supplements, targeted recruitment campaigns, and apprenticeships.
- 9.4. This has resulted in some success in the recent targeted recruitment campaign for social work roles within children's services, but further work is required to reduce the reliance on agency workers, reduce turnover and have a more stable, permanent workforce. Turnover rates for both children's and adults have reduced which is encouraging.
- 9.5. Council wide improvements to recruitment should also ensure that Shropshire Council is an employer of choice and can attract and retain a talented workforce for the future.

**List of Background Papers (This MUST be completed for all reports, but does not include items containing exempt or confidential information)**

**Local Member:** N/A

**Appendices :**

Appendix A – Social Worker (Children's) Benchmarking Data