

Report to:	BOARD
Date:	22 September 2022
Executive Member:	Councillor Bill Fairfoull, Deputy Executive Leader (Children & Families)
Reporting Officer:	Tony Decrop, Assistant Director, Children's Social Care
Subject:	EXTENSION REQUEST: PROJECT MANAGED CHILDREN'S SOCIAL WORK TEAM
Report Summary:	<p>The Managed Project Team was agreed by Executive Cabinet on the 23 March 2022 in response to increasing demand and an acute staffing situation in the Children in Need/Child Protection Service. Approval was made for 6 months at a cost of £250K.</p> <p>The Team commenced on the 11 April and is due to end on the 23 September 2022.</p> <p>The extra capacity the team have brought has relieved pressure on existing teams, allow existing work to be progressed whilst allowing the service to recruit to unfilled vacancies through agency and permanent staff. The majority of permanent staff recruited are newly qualified ASYEs (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment) and have a reduced case load.</p> <p>During the past 5 months, existing work has been able to progress and caseloads for existing staff have reduced. Moral and confidence in the Service has improved and there has been less turnover in staff.</p> <p>During the Ofsted Visit at the end of April 2022, although the Project Team had just started, Inspectors reported the Team was likely to support improvements in social work practice, staff morale and partnership working.</p>
Recommendations:	That Executive Cabinet be recommended to consider the merits of extending the Contract by up to a maximum of 6 months having considered budget implications balanced against maintain and sustaining Service Improvement to date.
Corporate Plan:	The delivery of effective outcomes for children and families requiring support is a key element of the delivery of the Corporate Plan
Policy Implications:	There are no policy implications
Financial Implications: (Authorised by the statutory Section 151 Officer & Chief Finance Officer)	<p>The contract for the first 6 months is expected to cost £255,000 against budget of £250,000 agreed by Cabinet. The cost of the team has been £4,000 more expensive than expected approx. £1,000 of travel costs</p> <p>To extend the program for a further 6 months it is estimate the cost would be £255,000.</p> <p>The service does not have budget to pay for this therefore would need to request an allocation from Corporate Reserves to fund this.</p>
Legal Implications: (Authorised by the Borough	The report sets out the need for this significant support and elected members need to determine both whether this is value for money

Solicitor)

as against Ofsted requirements, recognise that it creates a bigger budget burden across the Council. which needs to be managed and the Council's transfer of knowledge and exit plan.

Risk Management:

The project to-date has fulfilled the desired outcome of bringing a stable experienced qualified social work team to provide extra capacity to the duty and assessment function to improve quality and timeliness of statutory social work assessments whilst taking pressure off existing front line social work teams. The contract has and will continue to be well monitored and performance managed with the extension allowing for an effective and secure withdrawal to more stable and resilient social work teams.

Background Information:

The background papers relating to this report can be inspected by contacting Tony Decrop, Assistant Director of Children's Social Care:



Telephone: 0161 342 3725/ 07545 648754



e-mail: tony.decrop@tameside.gov.uk

1. INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 In March 2022 the Executive Cabinet approved the funding for a self-contained managed social work project team from a specialist recruitment agency to provide additional capacity to the duty and assessment social work service to respond to increasing demand and significant recruitment difficulties with a number of unfilled vacant social work posts. The funding agreed was for 6 months at an approximate cost of £250K.
- 1.2 The project team's comprised of 1 Project Team Manager and 6 Social Workers with the remit of completing Statutory Children & Family Assessments coming through the Multi-agency Safeguarding Hub (MASH). This has allowed existing teams to complete ongoing case work whilst we have actively recruited to existing unfilled vacancies through permanent and agency staff.

2. IMPACT

- 2.1 In conjunction with a competitive agency rate of pay, and a consistent, targeted and reactive recruitment strategy for permanent social workers, the managed team have had a significant impact in regard to the stability and morale of the work force, and in turn the quality of social work practice within Tameside.
- 2.2 The additional capacity provided by having a specialised assessment team has allowed the 4 Neighbourhood teams to focus on the casework that they were already holding in their teams, and in the 5 months since the managed team has started in Tameside we have seen a 21% drop in cases open to the Child in Need and Child Protection teams. In turn this has allowed managers to reduce caseloads for social workers, and has supported our recruitment and retention strategy.
- 2.3 For several years, Tameside Children's Social Care has been caught in a cycle of high caseloads, high agency numbers, and a high staff turnover. At any point over the last few years, several of the social work teams were carrying unfilled vacancies and the other teams would have to take additional workloads to stabilise the teams in difficulty. This has caused considerable reputational damage for Tameside in a competitive employment market for social workers. However, over the last 5 months Tameside been able to reduce a staffing shortfall of 17 social work vacancies, and are set to achieve all vacancies being filled by a mixture of permanent and agency staff across the service by mid-September 2022.

3. QUALITY & PERFORMANCE

- 3.1 Since the introduction of the managed team the service has seen an improvement in many important and indicative Key Performance Indicators:
- Improved timeliness of allocation of cases
 - Improved timeliness and better attendance at Strategy meetings
 - Improved timeliness of completion of Child and Family assessments
 - Improved timeliness of Child in Need and Child Protection Visits
 - Lower caseloads for all social workers
 - Protected caseloads for ASYE social workers
 - Nearly 100% employment rate for social workers in the Child in Need and Child Protection Teams.
 - Better throughput of cases, leading to less drift and delay for children and families, and reduction in overall Child in Need cases
 - Reduction in the amount of changes of social worker whilst a case to open to a specific child and family
- 3.2 Between the 11 April 2022 and 26 August the team has:

- Received 428 cases from MASH
- Stepped Down/Closed 272
- Transferred on to Neighbourhood Teams 94

3.3 By reducing caseloads the Managed Team has created capacity within the Neighbourhood Teams for social workers to spend more time completing direct work with children and family, improving the quality of assessments, and better implementing our model of practice, Signs of Safety

3.4 On the 27 and 28 of April 2022, an Ofsted focused visit took place where the inspectors made reference to a previous focused visit in May 2021, and were critical of the pace made in improvement over the previous 12 months, they did acknowledge however that the Managed Team had just been set up and stated that this was likely to support improvements in social work practice, staff morale and partnership working.

4. WIDER BENEFITS

4.1 Over 33% of the social workers within the service are in their first year of practice, and are referred to as ASYEs (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment). These ASYE workers are promised a reduced caseload of no more than fifteen children; however, before we addressed the issues with recruitment, retention and the volume of referrals, this caseload reduction was not always possible to achieve.

4.2 One of the key benefits we have seen from the managed team is fewer cases coming through to the Neighbourhood teams, the team managers have been able to carefully consider the complexity of cases being allocated to the ASYE workers, and been able to adhere to the agreed reduced number of cases being held.

4.3 This in turn has given the 2022 cohort of ASYE social workers a better experience of working at Tameside, has supported their learning and professional development, and is contributing to higher levels of retention of staff when the workers have completed their first year in practice.

5. CURRENT CONTEXT

5.1 As previously highlighted, the capacity that the Managed Team has created within the social work teams has made an important contribution to reducing caseloads, improving staff retention, and increasing the quality of social work practice for Tameside's children and families; however, these improvements are relatively short lived and there are a number of vulnerabilities that could potentially reverse this progress if this capacity the managed team created was removed from the service on the 23 September 2022.

5.2 Nearly 60% of the permanent social workers employed within the service have less than two years' experience of frontline practice, 30% of the work force consists of agency workers, and only 10% of permanent workers have two or more years of post qualified social work practice. The workers in their ASYE year can only have a maximum of fifteen cases per social worker, and this puts additional pressure on the more experienced workers to carry high caseloads which in turn impacts on retention and stability.

5.3 The national picture for social work recruitment remains extremely challenging, and it is unlikely that any Duty and Assessment Teams or Safeguarding and Support Teams will recruit experienced social workers, and as we continue to recruit permanent ASYE social workers in 2022 this will decrease our capacity across the service due to the reduced number and complexity of cases that these workers will be able to manage.

6. NEXT 6 MONTHS & PLANNED EXIT

- 6.1 If the managed team is extended for a further 6 months this will provide the service with the additional capacity through reduced caseloads to, maintain improved performance in our statutory duties, further develop the 2022 cohort of ASYEs, and give the Duty and Assessment teams the additional time and capacity address the issues in practice identified by Ofsted. Which were as follows:
- Timely interventions to assess and reduce risk to children, including multi-agency strategy meetings and the allocation of a social worker to see children.
 - The quality and timeliness of child and family assessments to inform next steps planning.
 - The effectiveness of management oversight, including the frequency and quality of supervision and the challenge of poor social work practice that causes drift and delay.
- 6.2 In mid-September 2022, and for the first time in over two years, the social work teams will be fully staffed. There is a robust package of training and support through our ASYE coordinator, the expanded Signs of Safety support team, and a robust training package for all of our social workers that will encourage and support retention of our permanent social work staff.
- 6.3 With 6 months of additional capacity through the managed team, we will have further developed our large cohort of ASYEs, who will be able to carry higher and more complex caseloads. Tameside will have bettered its reputation as a stable work place, with high quality social work practice and manageable caseloads.

7. FINANCIAL COST

- 7.1 The current contract is due to end on the 27 September 2022. If the project team was to be extended by six months, this would take the Contract to 28 March 2023 and would be at a cost of £255,000.
- 7.2 A 6 months extension as this would give greater time to further reduce existing caseloads and support ASYE's, it is recognised the current budget position is challenging. The position the Child Protection & Children in Need Service staffing situation is much improved since at the beginning of the year and it is believed a 6 month extension would enable the Service to maintain and sustain the improvements made thus far and achieve a managed exit.

8. CONCLUSION

- 8.1 There is strong evidence as outlined in the report that the establishing of the project managed social work team has made a positive impact on the Service and has assisted in stabilising the staffing issues whilst improving the performance and quality of social work practice.
- 8.2 The extra capacity has also reduced pressure on existing teams and enabled the Service to recruit to unfilled vacancies through both permanent and agency staff.
- 8.3 The staffing situation is much improved and by extending the project further will ensure that progress can be maintained and sustained whilst newly recruited staff are supported and embedded into the Service.

9. RECOMMENDATION

- 9.1 As set out at the front of the report.