

SCRUTINY REVIEW ON CHILDREN'S WORKFORCE STRATEGY – SOCIAL WORKER RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION

1. BACKGROUND

- 1.1 It is essential that the local authority is able to employ a sufficient level of children's social workers, with the required level of experience and skills, in order to achieve confidence in the quality and effectiveness of the child protection system. Separate to this, there is an ongoing need to assess the effectiveness and responsiveness of multi-agency working arrangements, the role of professionals and developing successful partnership arrangements needed to keep children safe.
- 1.2 Children's Services continue to experience external workforce pressures, partly attributed to the pandemic and unfortunately a worsening national picture for the social work profession in general. Children's social work is a prominent occupation most recently reported with recruitment and retention difficulties.
- 1.3 The recruitment and retention of qualified children's social workers remains as a priority action within the social care improvement plan, with a varying degree of past success and sustainability. A significant amount of work on workforce recruitment and retention has taken place since the Ofsted inspection of 2016, with the aim to establish a more stable and permanent workforce. Key drivers include a need to attract high quality and experienced social workers, to address retention issues, to reduce vacancies, to reduce agency staff as a percentage of the workforce and to deliver improved leadership and support at all levels.
- 1.4 The Ofsted inspection of 2019 and subsequent focused visits have reported workforce related concerns and actions. These include:
- The need for a 'whole council' approach and commitment to improving quality and impact of services for children.
 - Children continuing to experience multiple changes of social worker.
 - Caseload levels and process for assessing the impact of training in improving practice.
 - A lack of pace and scale in actions taken to address capacity issues.
 - Ability of social workers to visit children more regularly and to reduce previous drift in progressing their plans.
 - The effectiveness of management oversight, including the frequency and quality of supervision for social workers. The challenge of poor social work practice that causes drift and delay.

2. SUMMARY

- 2.1 This report concludes activity undertaken by the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel into the workforce strategy for children's social worker recruitment and retention. A working group of the Scrutiny Panel was established to review current arrangements and with a view to support improvement priorities of the Executive. Activity took place from October to December 2022.
- 2.2 In addition to calendared meetings of the Children's Services Scrutiny Panel, associated activity includes:
- Scrutiny members receiving a scene setting update and breakdown of the children's social care workforce, service structures, demand, caseloads and wider governance arrangements for Children's Services.
 - Safeguarding training for Scrutiny members.
 - A meeting of the working group on 26 October 2022 received an overview on workforce strategy regarding the recruitment and retention of children's social workers, provided by Tracy Brennand, Assistant Director, People and Workforce Development.
 - A benchmarking visit to meet the Executive Member for Children's Services and Scrutiny Chair at Manchester City Council, on 29 November 2022.

- Desktop research into the recruitment and retention of children's social workers.

2.3 The report puts forward a number of recommendations to the Executive.

3. KEY FINDINGS

Workforce challenges

- 3.1 A rising demand for children's social workers has increased the competition for recruitment at a national and regional level. Councils are finding it more difficult to recruit and retain experienced social workers, with a visible shift in the workforce profile and newly qualified social workers accounting for the majority of new appointments. Such recruitment and retention challenges can contribute to instability and inconsistency across social care teams.
- 3.2 A report of Ofsted published in July 2022 examined the shortage of social workers. It found that more social workers were leaving local councils, with many moving into agency work or away from the profession. The report states that, "agencies often have appealing contracts, with greater flexibility and higher pay than local authorities can offer. As a result, agencies are outcompeting local authorities for staff from a limited pool of workers".
- 3.3 Leaders in Children's Services have also raised concerns about the cost, quality and profit extracted from agency work, as part of the Association of Directors of Children's Services latest safeguarding pressures report, issued in November 2022.
- 3.4 The LGA has highlighted uncertainty associated with the cost-of-living crisis and a likelihood that children currently at the edge of care may require support. This would undoubtedly challenge social care budgets, resources and capacity even further.
- 3.5 Detailed benchmarking has recently been undertaken across Greater Manchester (GM) to consider the current pay, reward and bespoke approaches used across Children's Services. GM and regional councils are working collaboratively to address national challenges in social work recruitment and retention.

Workforce summary – children's social workers

- 3.6 The recruitment and retention of children's social workers continues to be a key priority for Children's Services in Tameside. Achieving an experienced, stable and permanent workforce is important for the following reasons:
- The consistency and quality of practice
 - Stability of teams and caseloads
 - Social workers feeling supported and safe to work
 - Developing a skilled and supported workforce
 - Reducing the reliance on agency social workers
 - Promoting a strong workforce vision and culture
- 3.7 A sizeable proportion of the children's workforce consists of agency social workers. Agency social workers can be employed to cover vacancies, for which the authority seeks greater permanence, to cover short-term absences and increased demand pressures within the local social care system.
- 3.8 Most commonly adopted measures to tackle a shortage in social workers can be to offer a training and qualification programme, to 'grow your own' from the existing workforce, improve IT to aid efficiency, adapt policy to manage workloads and the provision of training and support to existing staff.

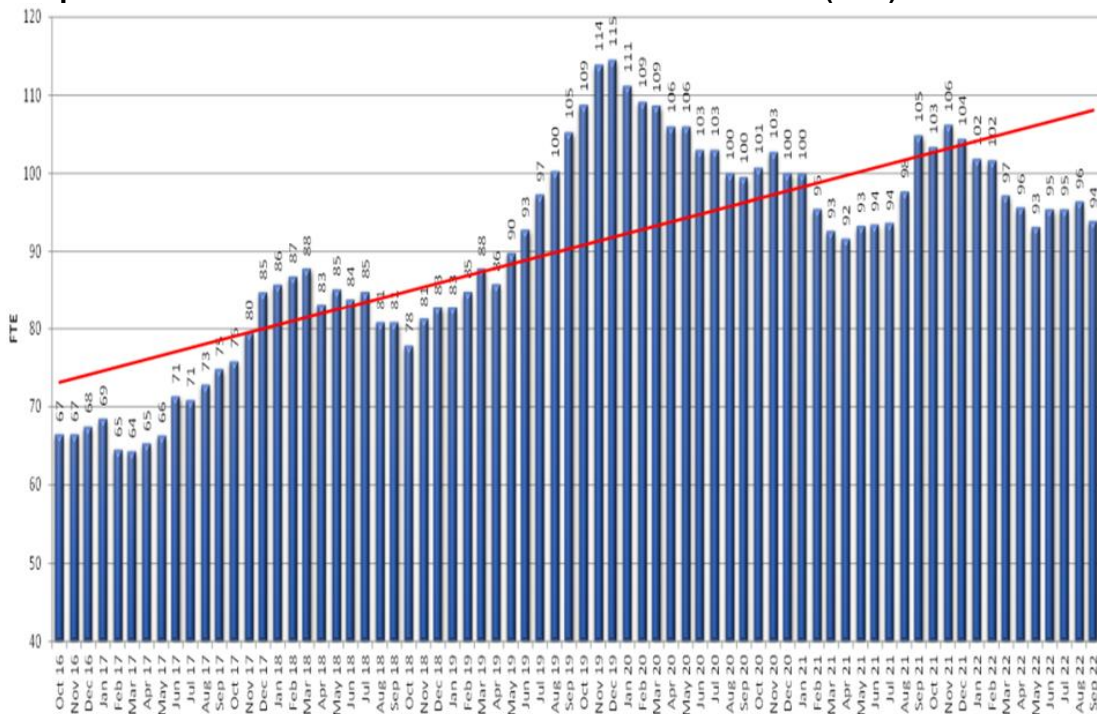
Table 1: Breakdown of children's social workers in Tameside (September 2022)

A total of 136.0 FTE Children's Social Workers		
Permanent	ASYE	AGENCY
94 FTE (69%)	39 FTE (29%) **	42 FTE (31%)

** The 39 FTE ASYE Social Workers are included in the total of 94 FTE permanent Social Workers.

- 3.9 Table 1 above shows that 29% of children's social workers in Tameside are ASYE, the assessed and supported year in employment programme that provides newly qualified social workers with extra support during their first year of employment.
- 3.10 The remaining 40% of permanent social workers therefore range in experience. This equates to 55 social workers against the 136 total. To separate this further, 81 social workers (60%) are a combination of ASYE and agency.
- 3.11 Prior to the pandemic the use of agency workers had reduced to the lowest level of around 10% of social workers. A peak for the authority was 62 FTE agency social workers in May 2018. Past data also shows that 42% of staff in the social work workforce have less than 2 years' service with the Council. This compares to 32% across our statistical comparators at 30 September 2021.

Graph 1: Number of Children's Permanent Social Workers (FTE)



- 3.12 Graph 1 above provides a breakdown of the total number of permanent children's social workers, ranging from October 2016 to September 2022. With a peak of 115 FTE in December 2019, the number stands at 94 FTE in September 2022. The data shows that 94 FTE compares to that of June 2019.

Table 2: GM Pay Scales for ASYE Social Workers (October 2022)

Childrens Social Workers	ASYE					
	Working under Assessed and Supported Year of Employment with a protected caseload. Typically referred to as a Level 1 Social Worker.					
	SCP Min	SCP Max	Annual £	Hourly £	Annual £	Hourly £
Tameside	29	31	£33,486	£17.84	£35,336	£18.82
Wigan	29	34	£33,486	£17.36	£38,553	£19.98
Bolton	27	31	£31,895	£16.53	£35,336	£18.32
Trafford	26	29	£30,984	£16.32	£33,486	£17.63
Stockport	26	27	£30,984	£16.06	£31,895	£16.53
Manchester	25	25	£30,095	£16.49	£30,095	£16.49
Rochdale	25	25	£30,095	£15.60	£30,095	£15.60
Bury	24	27	£29,174	£15.12	£31,895	£16.53
Salford	23	26	£28,226	£15.04	£30,984	£16.51
Oldham	23	23	£28,226	£14.77	£28,226	£14.77

3.13 Table 2 above shows that when compared to other GM authorities, Tameside offers the joint highest entry pay for ASYE, Level 1 social workers (October 2022).

3.14 Table 3 below shows a shift in the Council's position regarding the entry pay for higher-level social workers, which remains fixed at SCP 29. In addition, it is also known that three authorities with higher starting salaries also offer additional enhancements/allowances for level 3 social workers.

Table 3: GM Pay Scales for Experienced/Senior Social Workers (October 2022)

Childrens Social Workers	Experienced / Senior Social Worker					
	Professional bar applies with progression to this level by portfolio and assessment. Usually more than 2 years' experience and typically referred to as a Level 3 Social Worker, and historically had progressed through the PQ awards.					
	SCP Min	SCP Max	Annual £	Hourly £	Annual £	Hourly £
Wigan	34	38	£38,553	£19.98	£42,614	£22.44
Manchester	31	35	£35,336	£19.36	£39,571	£21.68
Bolton	31	35	£35,336	£18.32	£39,571	£20.51
Bury	31	33	£35,336	£18.32	£37,568	£19.47
Rochdale	30	36	£34,373	£17.82	£40,578	£21.03
Salford	30	33	£34,373	£18.31	£37,568	£20.01
Trafford	30	32	£34,373	£18.10	£36,371	£19.15
Tameside	29	34	£33,486	£17.84	£38,553	£20.54
Oldham	29	32	£33,486	£17.52	£36,371	£19.03
Stockport	29	31	£33,486	£17.36	£35,336	£18.32

3.15 Table 4 below shows that Tameside resumes a higher position when reviewing the entry pay for more senior roles such as a Social Worker Team Manager. While recruitment and retention issues are much broader than pay, this does allow the authority to consider if pay and reward is in anyway a contributing factor when seeking to attract a wider mix of experience within the social care workforce.

Table 4: GM Pay Scales for Team Managers (October 2022)

Childrens Social Workers	Team Manager					
	Manages a team of social workers					
	SCP Min	SCP Max	Annual £	Hourly £	Annual £	Hourly £
Wigan	42	45	£46,662	£24.19	£49,669	£25.74
Tameside	40	43	£44,624	£23.77	£47,665	£25.39
Trafford	40	43	£44,624	£23.50	£47,665	£25.10
Oldham	40	43	£44,624	£23.34	£47,665	£24.94
Salford	40	42	£44,624	£23.77	£46,662	£24.86
Bolton	39	43	£43,570	£22.58	£47,665	£24.71
Rochdale	39	43	£43,570	£22.58	£47,665	£24.71
Bury	39	40	£44,863	£23.25	£45,859	£23.77
Manchester	36	40	£40,578	£22.23	£44,624	£24.45
Stockport	34	40	£38,553	£19.98	£43,857	£22.73

3.16 As part of GM benchmarking activity, the Council can review the impact of financial incentives such as a 'golden hello' payment to support recruitment or payments linked to retention. With recruitment challenges greater than a single authority, such schemes can destabilise the market for children's social workers at a local.

Workforce support

3.17 A significant amount of work has taken place since the Ofsted inspection of 2016 and subsequent years to review and improve the local pay offer for social workers. It has become clear that methods to improve the recruitment and retention of children's social workers transcends that of pay and financial incentive alone.

3.18 In summary, Children's Services have receive the following support:

- Dedicated HR/OD Business Partner and recruitment lead
- Targeted recruitment activity via social media campaigns - LinkedIn and greater.jobs
- Rolling social worker adverts
- Recruitment and payroll support to ensure quick turnaround for new starter checks
- Grow Our Own – Social Work Pathways
- Dedicated Induction – no caseload for two weeks
- Exit Interviews & learning
- Embracing new pay structure to incorporate professional grades and eliminate market supplement
- Workforce Development Programme
- Package and benefits

3.19 All managers across the Council and Children's Services have access to the dedicated STRIVE Leadership and Management Development Programme. The programme supports leaders to connect with other colleagues and to develop key skills in leadership and management. Additional manager sessions can support the one to one and supervision process, to ensure good quality conversations are taking place on a regular basis to support the development of a confident workforce.

3.20 Added focus on recruitment and workforce testimonials will be captured to create a 'Working for Tameside' video that will increase social media campaigns and allow potential candidates to see and hear from senior leaders within the service.

- 3.21 A range of further actions have been identified and include a focus on:
- High quality inductions including 90 day 'check in'
 - Increasing development offer for Y2 and Y3 social workers along with more experienced professional social workers to support retention
 - Development of Children's Workforce Strategy (expand development offer)
 - Increase engagement with STRIVE – leadership development programme.
 - Educate and engage around flexibility/hybrid working options
 - Explore with Reed extending notice period for agency staff
- 3.22 Regular employee engagement sessions help to promote transparency and communication across the children's social care workforce. The sessions are received positively by staff and provide an opportunity to enhance participation and for direct feedback to be captured. In addition to this, dedicated wellbeing and personal resilience sessions have been made available to staff.
- 3.23 An independent review of children's social care, published in May 2022, recommends the development of an 'Early Career Pathway' to cover the first five years in the profession, leading to a role of 'Expert Practitioner'. Only Expert Practitioners would be able to take decisions on child protection cases, which they would co-work with other social workers.
- 3.24 The Council has recognised that a review is needed around the Practice Manager role, with proposals to develop Advanced Practitioners that will hold a number of complex cases. The review is in line with practice across both Greater Manchester and the North West. At present, there is approximately 32 roles that do not hold cases that can be reasonably allocated.

Regional review

- 3.25 Greater Manchester and regional councils are working collaboratively to address the national challenges of social worker recruitment and retention. Part of this is to review and consider examples such as the London Pledge.
- 3.26 Councils within the London area have developed an agreed approach to the engagement of agency workers in order to address recruitment and retention challenges. The London Pledge adopts a similar approach to the agreed Greater Manchester agency contract, however this is further strengthened by a signed commitment by the Directors of Children's Services.
- 3.27 Regional review and action has expanded, with examples of co-operation across authorities in the South East, South West, East Midlands, West Midlands, Yorkshire and North East. Of the most recent agreements, a pay cap for agency workers is set and involves a pledge not to actively headhunt social workers from fellow signatory authorities.
- 3.28 The London and South East agreements involve pledges not to employ staff in an agency role for six months after leaving a permanent role in another signatory authority. Authorities in London have agreed not to employ social workers with less than two years' permanent experience as agency staff, while the West Midlands have pledged not to recruit those in their first year as locums.
- 3.29 The DCS group in GM is currently reviewing this approach along with the HR Directors group. Discussions have taken place with London colleagues to understand the impact of the pledge since implementation in June 2022 and to establish how our current approach to agency engagement can be modelled on a similar basis. This has potential to:
- Agree to pay agency workers no more than the rates set out in a schedule (maximum cap included).
 - Ensure consistency in role titles, duties and pay across the area.
 - To provide no additional allowances or supplements on top of the rates.

Available learning

- 3.30 Community Care is an organisation that helps social workers stay up-to-date with developments in practice and supports social work employers and leaders understand core strengths and risks within social worker wellbeing and retention.
- 3.31 Senior leaders in children's services remain concerned of the risks associated with social worker retention, which has led to Community Care developing a retention risk tool (RRT), to support authorities in actively monitoring and engaging with their workforce.
- 3.32 The following five principles show how a local authority is performing on areas such as the availability and quality of supervision, work/life balance and career development. The tool comprises of an organisational self-assessment, social worker survey and in-depth qualitative interviews.
1. I feel safe
 2. I feel supported
 3. I feel the organisation values social work
 4. I am able to develop my career
 5. I feel happy to go to work
- 3.33 An early adopter of the RRT was the London Borough of Merton. Whilst their children's services had been rated 'Good' by Ofsted in 2017, the service was experiencing almost a 26% annual turnover of social workers, higher than the then national average of 15 to 16%.
- 3.34 The RRT analysis identified three high-risk areas for social worker retention at Merton:
1. Overload
 2. Burnout
 3. The transparency of the organisation
- 3.35 A range of authorities rated from 'Outstanding' to 'Inadequate' have now completed the retention risk tool, with 50% using this to replace the Social Work Health Check, the traditional method used by authorities to assess the wellbeing of their social workers.

Workforce strategy

- 3.36 A number of local authorities have developed a dedicated and public facing workforce strategy for children's social care. This can help to set out a clear local offer and priorities for social worker recruitment, retention and development of a permanent, stable and motivated workforce.
- 3.37 Strategies of this nature provide an overarching vision setting out what an authority aspires to be, and how it will go about achieving this. A focus on retention requires an authority to shine a light on its own policies and practices with a need to build a culture of respect, value and support.
- 3.38 The children's social worker employment market is extremely competitive and it has become increasingly important for authorities to present a brand and market a clear workforce offer and package. Understanding the importance of workforce wellbeing is not only about supporting employees but also recognising it is key to the success.
- 3.39 Strategies identify key stakeholders and set clear objectives for leaders. Priorities aim to promote and develop a service that offers real employment opportunity and choice in order to achieve a fully resourced, permanent and highly qualified and competent Social Care workforce.
- 3.40 The success of a workforce strategy relies on the co-creation and ownership by the children's workforce as a whole. It is important to be bold, ambitious and reflective, in order to achieve the required culture change. This includes adding focus and attention on the approach to the following areas.

- 3.41 **Induction** - A comprehensive and compulsory induction programme for all social workers joining an authority can contribute towards a positive start to a new role and allow new staff to feel welcomed, valued and supported from the offset.
- 3.42 **Staff engagement and co-production** – Strong, clear communication and engagement supports a culture of openness and transparency, allowing employees to feel confident, empowered, valued and listened to.
- 3.43 **Exit interviews** – A process that can provide a key source of information about why people choose to leave an authority.
- 3.44 **Evaluation** – Establishing a set of tools and measures to monitor what success will look like, specifically around retention, vacancy, absence rate and annual turnover.

4. CONCLUSIONS

- 4.1 Tameside Children's Services continue to face challenges associated with the recruitment and retention of social workers.
- 4.2 Social worker recruitment is an extremely competitive market, with the Council competing with agency pay rates and other authorities to attract high quality practitioners.
- 4.3 The Children's Social Care Improvement Plan includes priority actions related to the social care workforce.
- 4.4 GM and regional councils are working collaboratively to address national challenges in social work recruitment and retention.
- 4.5 There is a need to increase experience within the workforce and in key roles, with almost one third of children's social workers in Tameside being newly qualified ASYE.
- 4.6 The Council's fixed pay scale covering both newly qualified and experienced social workers may explain challenges in recruitment and retention of experienced social workers to permanent positions.
- 4.7 The stability of leadership and creation of an inclusive working environment that enables staff to feel valued and respected can start to achieve greater permanence and experience within the social care workforce.
- 4.8 Some authorities have chosen to introduce financial incentives such as a 'golden hello' payment, in order to attract and recruit children's social workers.
- 4.9 A range of further organisational support actions have been identified and will focus on addressing the supportive and development aspects of the local offer to social workers.
- 4.10 A national review has identified a growing need for authorities to introduce a more structured and supportive pathway for newly qualified social workers, that goes beyond the 1 year ASYE.
- 4.11 First impressions count and the Council's induction programme for new starters can further support the retention of children's social workers.
- 4.12 To further support work on recruitment and retention, local authorities are introducing a dedicated workforce strategy for children's social care.

5. RECOMMENDATIONS

- 5.1 That the Council continues to support regional conversations and decision-making aimed at stabilising the recruitment market for children's social workers.
- 5.2 To review and consider any existing delays or barriers in the application and recruitment process for children's social workers.
- 5.3 That the Council avoids the use of financial incentives to attract social workers, with concerns that this may destabilise the workforce and generate unnecessary risk to the quality and consistency of practice.
- 5.4 That the Council introduces a standalone workforce strategy for children's social care that is underpinned and driven by a vision and ambition for workforce retention.
- 5.5 To strengthen the induction programme for staff joining the authority, that includes a minimum of two keeping in touch days for children's social workers at 3 to 4 weeks and 3 to 4 months. To consider options and induction needs of agency social workers joining the authority.
- 5.6 To complete exit interviews with all social workers leaving the authority, including agency.
- 5.7 To introduce an extended career development package for newly qualified social workers that extends beyond ASYE. To routinely evaluate the retention success of ASYE social workers.
- 5.8 That Children's Services embed a learning culture and create a working environment where staff feel safe and confident to provide feedback at the earliest opportunity. To consider staff wellbeing surveys and a skills audit of the workforce and managers to inform training and development needs.
- 5.9 That a review of the non-case holding Practice Manager role is undertaken, regarding the wider impact this has on workloads and complex case management.
- 5.10 To monitor the impact that workforce pressures and instability has on staff wellbeing and social worker absence and sickness rates within Children's Service.