

## **Briefing paper for West Sussex Health and Wellbeing Board**

### **Recruitment and Retention in relation to the workforce in Children's Social Care (Social Workers and Residential Child Care Officers)**

**5 October 2018**

#### **Introduction**

This paper looks at the challenges of recruiting to roles in Children's Social Care, specifically Children's Social Workers and Residential Child Care Officers, and retaining this workforce.

#### Social Workers

#### **Background**

The context for this paper is that there is a national shortage of Children's Social Workers and there are some specific challenges in West Sussex, which we have tried to understand and take steps to address. In 2017, the national vacancy rate was 17% with 68.7% of vacancies were being covered by agency staff. The average working life for a social worker is under eight years which, for example, compares to 25 years for a doctor.

There is fierce local competition for experienced social workers with other authorities in the region increasingly taking steps such as offering financial incentives upon appointment and retention payments.

#### **The West Sussex Picture**

In 2016, the key workforce challenges were identified as:

- High levels of staff turnover (20.9% against a national average of 16%);
- a high degree of agency reliance (running at circa 20% of staffing); and
- a higher than average vacancy gap (18.09% against a national picture of 17%).

In 2018, our challenge has broadened. Whilst recruitment remains an issue in a competitive market where there is under supply, we are equally focused on retention, where our biggest challenge is around volume and complexity of work,

#### **Our approach**

A strategy was developed in 2017 which aimed to achieve the following:

- a) Increase rate of recruitment of experienced social workers
- b) Reduce the need to rely on more expensive, and less reliable agency staff
- c) Reduce staff turnover to increase the stability of the workforce

One of the first activities carried out was a benchmarking and review exercise to compare WSCC pay with pay in the South East region. This indicated that WSCC was below local competitors and as a result, a market supplement was introduced to address this differential.

In addition, we have undertaken a range of activities to boost recruitment, a flavour of which is given below:

- Developing a social media presence, building our brand (“with you, with the child, every step of the way”), attended national recruitment events and hosted our own recruitment events
- Involved our own workforce in developing website content, imagery, online articles and videos.
- Rejuvenated the “Return to Social Work” scheme, including contacting ex-employees to invite them to get back in touch
- Commissioned a specialist agency to recruit experienced social workers from overseas
- Launched a Casual Bank Scheme for social worker staff.
- Ensured our advertisements are fresh, exciting and inviting.

In the past 12 months, we have done the following to boost retention:

- Carried out a ‘health check’ with staff to see how they are feeling and to learn about how we can improve the experience of working at West Sussex
- Invited all leavers to an exit interview in order to learn their reasons for moving on
- Refreshed and encouraged use of flexible working options and career break
- Introduced career progression schemes for Social Workers and managers
- Run CPD events for staff
- Strengthened the induction and welcome for new starters
- Set up an internal “Academy” programme for newly qualified social workers to give them a supported first year in the profession
- Added additional team members to teams in the form of Children and family workers and administrators, to free up social workers and enable them to focus their time where it is most needed
- Introduce new forms of mobile technology to avoid the need for Social workers to return to base between meetings.

### **Summary of Impact**

The rate of external recruitment has increased significantly compared to before the launch of the recruitment strategy. Since January 2017, on average 5.58fte appointments per month have been made compared to 2.6 per month prior to commencing the recruitment strategy. The table below summarises the impact of the recruitment and retention strategy and the impact on staff turnover, suggest that these interventions are having a positive impact.

Measure	WSCC Dec 2016	WSCC May 2018	National Average
<b>Social Worker Turnover</b>	20.9%	17.79%	16%
<b>Agency Staffing</b>	20.1% (82FTE)	13.13% (58FTE)	16.0%
<b>Vacancy Gap</b>	18.09%	16.78%	17.0%

### **The current position**

Recruitment and retention of Social workers continues to be a challenge.

Pay is a constantly moving agenda, with fierce competition between employers in terms of salary and benefits. We monitor this regularly. Alongside pay factors, higher house prices than in other parts of the country, and increasing volumes and increasingly complex work, provide a challenging recruitment arena.

#### Residential Child care workforce

### **Background**

West Sussex has experienced difficulty in recruiting experienced Child Care Officers, Assistant Managers and Residential Managers into its Residential Children’s homes. Whilst the vacancy gap is different at the different homes, the organisation has found it difficult to recruit and retain into this sector as well.

The key issues within residential are similar to those with Social workers, namely, a vacancy gap of 16.25%, a turnover rate of 17.5% and a high reliance on agency staff.

### **Our approach**

The County Council has established an Improvement Board to oversee a range of actions within children’s Residential. One of the key pillars of this work is the development of a workforce strategy to address these issues, alongside other initiatives in relation to the buildings and services offered at the homes.

To date, the most significant achievement has been the redesign and relaunch of a new residential recruitment website, and early indications are that this is proving successful at attracting candidates to the residential homes. Further work in this area is planned.

### **Working with the Health and Wellbeing Board**

We would welcome the opportunity to work with partners in Health as we refine and refresh our recruitment strategies for both residential and social workers. This could include looking at opportunities for joint advertising and recruitment events, and development of staff.

In addition, we recognise that staff morale, wellbeing and engagement are key drivers in boosting retention of the workforce and we would be interested in greater collaboration and challenge in these work areas.

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