

North Somerset Council

Draft Report to the Children's and Young People's Services Scrutiny Panel

Date of Meeting: 22nd February 2024

**Subject of Report: Children's and Young People's Social Worker
Recruitment and Retention**

Town or Parish: N/A

Officer/Member Presenting: Joe Tristram

Key Decision: Yes

Reason: Children's Services has been judged "Needs Improvement". The status of our social worker team is a critical element of our service.

Recommendations to the Executive Member:

1. That career progression within the social work team be reviewed.
2. That staff retention be promoted by implementing a revisit of the learning and development offer, improving the quality and consistency of North Somerset's children's services presentation online and in other public fora, considering "golden handshakes" or retention bonuses, and to insert the question at leaving interviews: "what would make you want to return at a later point in your career?"
3. That the permissions on social workers' work phones be reviewed.
4. That regular invitations for members to observe and understand the work of children's services be created.

1. Summary of Report

This report is commissioned by the Children and Young People Services (CYPS) scrutiny panel for a working group tasked with looking into why the children's social work team has 40% agency workers.

For most family interventions, continuity of support is crucial and this necessitates a team of long-term committed social workers. Research conducted by the working group confirmed that our problem is part of a national one, but the picture is not consistent. Other local authorities in the southwest with a similar demographic have made great improvements. North Somerset benefits from being a very attractive and relatively cheap place to live, and our council has the reputation for being a kind and caring employer but this is not widely enough or well enough publicised.

Research also questioned current social workers and managers and found a number of suggestions to improve the service's working practices and public profile that it was felt would encourage social workers to work with us and stay.

2. Details

The need for a review of career progression was highlighted by a number of social workers who gave evidence that the post of deputy team manager (recently abolished) had been a valuable one as it both provided support and oversight and a small step up the promotional ladder.

A number of evidence givers discussed the current difficulties over learning and development, that there isn't a clear plan or pathway, and that when an individual does find time to attend a learning event there is no time made to pass this learning on, so it can feel wasted. The 2019 learning and development pathway authored by Shelley Caldwell "was a gold standard that social workers aspire to return to".

Evidence from Torbay Local Authority, backed up by our own team, suggests that the establishment of an in-house Children's Services Academy would boost morale and create a structure to hold learning and development.

It was also evidenced that although some of our children's services team post about the service on social media, principally LinkedIn, other local authorities do this in a more managed way that means the good aspects of their service are highly visible compared to ours. It was also suggested that LinkedIn is not viewed by the generation of younger social workers or SW students we might want to attract, and that the same content would be more useful on Instagram and TikTok. It was felt that we come across as badly presented and that social workers wondering whether to relocate to N Somerset may be influenced by this. Suggestions for making a consistent improvement in our media visibility were:

1. that we make it an existing officer's responsibility to post on social media about NSC children's services.
2. That we coordinate with the Council's graphics and comms teams on how we publicise ourselves and on what platforms.
3. That when creating content or printing literature, such as those we use at recruitment fairs, we compare our output to that of other local authorities' posts and publications.
4. That it is given to a member of HR or Comms to make a weekly request to the children's social work team to ask for content to post, and that they take charge of this presentation rather than the children's team themselves.

There was inconsistent evidence about the use of golden handshakes/recruitment or retention bonuses. In some London boroughs we were told that a yearly retention bonus had a significant effect on keeping staff, whereas in Devon this was not found.

Social worker work supplied phones are apparently locked down so that they can neither use the MOMO (Mind of My Own) app nor read QR codes to access this app. It is hoped this will be a relatively simple and inexpensive IT change to make.

Create regular invitations for councillors to view the work of our children's teams, eg by extending the invitation at "practice week" to all councillors, and all CYPS scrutiny members to have a standing invitation to observe the work of the MASH.

3. Consultation

Councillors: Joe Tristram, Wendy Griggs, Catherine Gibbons, Nicola Holland, Clare Hunt, Sue Mason, Michael Pryke

Officers: Jane Anstis, Kate Chilcott, Sarah Heather, Elena Morales Pozo, Joe Suckling, Linda Walsh, Jo Ratcliffe.

Outside agencies/individuals: Cordelia Law of Torbay Council (summary of meeting attached as an appendix), and a working group of Devon County Council (report and infographic attached).

4. Financial Implications

This report has explored some of the needs of the current team of children's social workers and the recommendations for improving their working life and the visibility of the service. Further work would be needed before any financial implications or costs could be defined.

Costs

See "financial implications" above.

Funding

See "financial implications" above.

5. Legal Powers and Implications

It is implied that there might need to make small changes in contracts of employment if an additional step in the employment ladder were made.

6. Climate Change and Environmental Implications

Better cared for children and families produce better citizens who are able to be more aware of their social responsibilities and thus be less of a burden on the environment. They are also likely in the longer term to cost the council less.

7. Risk Management

Further work on risks will need to be done once the recommendations in this report are implemented.

Equality Implications

No equality impact assessment undertaken. No equality impact implied.

8. Corporate Implications

Cross directorate cooperation may be requested of HR and Comms.

9. Options Considered

Given that there are seven recommendations made with some detail as to how they could be followed, there are many options.

At one extreme it is an option to take no action which would make it more likely that our children's services continue to operate under considerable staffing and other stress, fail to gain permanent staff and find it difficult to fulfil our obligations to the families and children under our care.

Preferably actions will be taken of the types recommended here and this helps lead our service to improvement in morale, staffing levels and provision, and helps us move from "needs improvement" towards "good" in our OfSTED inspections.

Author:

Joe Tristram (Councillor)

Appendix:

Notes from meeting with Cordelia Law, ex lead for Torbay Council's children's services

During the time she was in charge they went from 10 years of "inadequate" to good.

She said: churn at senior level is very important/disruptive and need to look at why it's happening.

Is the IT too hard for SW to use?

Is there good CPD support?

What's the availability of supervision?

Is there clear progression?

Do we run exit interviews?

They have/had 5 themes: 1 workload

2 learning and development

3 staffing

4 pay and reward

5 morale

Cordelia says to all councillors whenever she gets the opportunity that our children are our resource for the future (this is to appeal to the ones mainly interested in buildings roads and money).

Suggests reading the Case for Change report [Case for change: initial report of the independent review of children's social care in England | NSPCC Learning](#) from which comes how crucial it is to have good synergy between the lead member (Catherine) the leader (Mike) and the director of children's services (currently Carolyn).

She established a Learning Academy (all in house) which addressed Workload, learning and development and (one other topic from the list of 5 above).

They trained everyone in restorative practice.

They started a 3 year training and development programme from Y1 to advanced practitioner.

They started a "grow your own social worker" scheme so that people could retrain from other areas.

(ask Rachel.setter@torbay.gov.uk about the learning academy)

They have a Wellbeing Officer and a wellbeing offer too.

They go big on employee recognition, with a weekly star who can be nominated by anyone. They don't only get recognition, the reason why they're a star is published so everyone can see the good practice. They have length of service recognition with a celebration at 1 year, then every 5 years. They also have an annual "conference" (= get-together at a leisure centre with awards) and again get to nominate one-another for these awards. (Ditto for foster carers) A keynote speaker is invited to this.

This all cost £44K (which Cordelia was suggesting was not much). UK Engagement journal did a Gallup poll which found that employee disengagement cost 34% of their salary so these sorts of things quickly pays for themselves.

They invite councillors to visit and experience service delivery and generally they come out with eyes properly opened.

They regularly ask any business the council engages with for sponsorship and get for instance free panto tickets, free trips on the Santa train, for fostered children and carers, and also for social workers (this last seems a bit unlikely, but that's what I wrote!)

They have applied to be a Unicef Child Friendly Town [Child Friendly Cities Initiative | Child-Friendly Cities Initiative](#).

Background Papers:

Devon Childrens Services Recruitment and Retention Spotlight Review:

<https://democracy.devon.gov.uk/documents/s47310/Spotlight%20Review%20Report%20-%20Recruitment%20and%20Retention.pdf>