

NAME OF COMMITTEE	Care Scrutiny Committee
DATE OF MEETING	June 22nd, 2023
TITLE	Children and Family Support Workforce
PURPOSE	To share information about the current situation and operational plans in relation to recruitment and retention of the professional workforce within children's services
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CABINET MEMBER	Councillor Elin Walker-Jones

Background

1. The purpose of this report is to inform the Care Scrutiny Committee on the findings and recommendations of a report commissioned to review the issues affecting Children's Services in relation to recruiting and retaining professional workers, and to update on the recommendations agreed by the Cabinet in November 2022 in order to ensure sufficiency for the future.
2. Towards the end of 2020 and the beginning of 2021, the service began to experience a staff turnover which had the potential to have a negative impact on the Council's ability to fulfil statutory responsibilities in relation to children and families services, including safeguarding and services for children who are looked after. Following the COVID period, workers began to leave the service to work in services and teams where there was a perception that those service areas were easier in relation to work pressures; to neighbouring authorities where they would receive a pay increase for doing the same work or with less of a workload; to other agencies such as CAFCASS who were paying a substantially higher salary to social workers, or some left the profession altogether as they felt that the workload during COVID had been unprecedented and enormous and had affected their wellbeing.
3. In response, the Head of Service escalated the issue to the Chief Executive, the cabinet member and to the Statutory Director of Social Services. A waiting list and delay in responding to safeguarding matters were avoided at the time by relocating staff within the teams and allocating child protection and court work to staff within teams other than the front line teams. This was totally dependent on the good will of our workforce who were eager to ensure that we were able to respond within a timely manner. This wasn't without risk but due to the staff's commitment, the need to approach social work agencies to employ workers was avoided.
4. It was identified that further work was needed to look closely at the issues that were influencing the professional workforce to leave the service area, and with corporate support, the Management Team commissioned Chris Edwards, independent consultant to work with the service in October 2021. His brief was to work with the service to bring recommendations in relation to any strategies that needed to be implemented to ensure the

sustainability of the workforce. The report was published during the Summer of 2022 and an executive summary is available for members if needed.

5. The independent consultant recognised that the staff group were very eager to be a part of the resolution for the service, and he identified that staff commitment to the service was a very clear strength in Gwynedd. The Management Team are however aware that some of the good will that has been present over many years has somewhat eroded recently due to many factors, and there is a clear commitment to regain what is at risk of being completely lost.
6. The report suggests that the challenge of working through COVID had added to several of the recent problems, but at the same time, some of the problems were evident prior to COVID. In other words, if COVID hadn't brought this to our attention it is likely that these issues would have come to light sooner. It is fair to state that the service experienced trauma during COVID and following the initial COVID period. It has been a time of surviving the challenges of the period and it has had a significant impact on the determination and energy to build for the future.
7. The report focuses on several factors that have contributed to the recent problems of recruiting staff to posts and keeping staff, especially experienced, registered staff. As well as identifying these factors the report also presents a series of ideas in relation to what could help to respond to the deficits. There are a number of ideas that will depend on developing a series of strategies and plans and this is welcomed, but the priority is to focus early on the issues that are pressing.

8. 2. Management team priorities

- 2.1 Children's Services Management Team are of the view that there are 4 main approaches needed to respond to the challenges. The author of the report describes these as 'levers' to create momentum and we are of the view that these need urgent attention.

They are:

- Resolving the **salary** issue which has been a longstanding issue.
- Developing a **Recruitment and Retention Strategy** recognising the solutions that are important to staff and listening to their voices and their concerns
- Investing in **new workers** via a professional trainee programme
- Developing staff wellbeing through mentoring, reflective practice and reflective supervision

2.2 A: Salaries.

- 2.2.1 This is the main issue that affects staff morale. There is a need to respond to the perception that Cyngor Gwynedd underestimates the value of the posts compared to other authorities by paying less than neighbouring authorities. The issue has been known to the Council for many years, but there is a need to understand whether the perception is true or false and as a result find a way of bridging the gap in relation to salaries and/or conditions of employment. The result of inconsistency in relation to pay scales is that the service have entered into temporary arrangements such as agreeing a market supplement to some posts rather than truly recognising the disparity with comparable posts. This has clearly enabled the service to recruit to critical posts and to stop some individuals from leaving the service,

but it has also caused tension in the service between workers who deem the internal inequality as being unfair. There is a constant call on Welsh Government to set a national pay scale for social workers in order for local authorities to be able to recruit staff on a level playing field and to avoid paying an extortionate amount of money to agency staff to cover vacant posts. However there is a view that waiting for a resolution from Welsh Government shouldn't be a reason for the Council to delay a response to the main issue affecting professional staff on the front line as failing to fulfil statutory duties is of high risk.

2.2.2 In response to the above there was an agreement to set up a task and finish working group specifically in relation to salaries. The group meets regularly and has representation from the front line teams in adults and children's services alongside HR personnel, members of both services' management teams, the Heads of Service and it is chaired by the Statutory Director of Social Services. The work of comparing with other authorities is underway and there have been discussions with the workforce in relation what they see as improvements to work conditions. Work is also being undertaken in relation to developing a career pathway connected to pay scale and experience levels, and this is welcomed.

2.3 B: Recruitment and Retention Strategy.

2.3.1 There is recognition that we are able to attract students from training and qualifying programmes and that this has been successful for decades. However we have recently seen a trend of the loss of experienced staff and of being in an impossible situation of finding experienced staff to fill posts even though there are career pathways, better life work balance and flexibility in working patterns. Although people's reasons for leaving are often personal and unique, there are also clear patterns. In order to address these patterns the support of the team managers and workers is critical in order to identify the best 'levers' to change the situation.

2.3.2 As we celebrate our ability to attract new workers, there is also a challenge in supporting and developing their experience. We need to understand that they cannot do the same tasks as experienced workers as they need to complete their first years in practice and be protected and supported. Newly qualified workers cannot take the place of an experienced worker and due to being able to offer posts to newly qualified workers, it is a systemic loss for a number of years. Added to this is the additional pressure of managing, supporting and developing these individuals and needing to be aware of the resilience of these arrangements and finding ways of supporting our managers to deal with the additionality that this brings to their workload.

2.3.5 The work to create a Recruitment and Retention Strategy should be a collaborative approach between Children's Services and other departments within the Council for example Human Resources.

2.4 C: investing in new workers.

2.4.1 Social Services' programme to create qualified bilingual workers has been in place for decades. It has been one of our most successful achievements, being innovative and providing pathways into the profession for the workforce.

2.4.2 Experience tells us that we cannot afford to miss a single year in this chain of investing and creating a stream of qualified workers into the service.

- 2.4.3 A few years ago there were discussions about recruiting agency staff as a 'Plan B' or a 'back up plan'. Currently most local authorities use agency staff as their core workforce and this comes with extortionate costs that erodes the reasonable argument with the authority's own staff for parity of pay. We know that if we had to recruit agency staff now that we would struggle as the market is so strong. However, if this was the back up plan in Gwynedd it would remove our ability to provide a bilingual service overnight and would completely disregard our language policy. There is no doubt that the strategy has been successful, and we need to focus on developing a sustainable trainee plan over a period of a number of years. This is at a cost to the Council, but it is a cost that has to be balanced with a failing service or one that is dependent on agency staff at a 40% to 70% increase on the current payroll.
- 2.4.4 Our managers and experienced staff sponsor and accommodate students on placements regularly and this is key to welcoming and attracting new staff to the service. But, this is an additional pressure and we need to ensure that we can sustain this in the future.
- 2.4.5 We need to identify pathways and opportunities with the Workforce Development Department to bring in new staff and to support staff who are qualifying. Innovation over a number of years has created new pathways and has given the service flexibility to grow from our own resources. We are of the view that we should continue with this ambition by focusing on the short term and investing in the trainee programme. This programme recognises the barriers, especially financial barriers that impact on an individual's ability to follow their career pathway, but it also creates capacity whilst staff are training which is of benefit to the service.
- 2.4.6 In response to the above a bid for 3 trainees was presented in the last financial year with a condition that if supported the individual worker would commit to working in Gwynedd for a period of time in order to pay back the investment through their service e.g for 5 years. Unfortunately the bid was not successful against competing bids and the recommendation was for the service to look at prioritising resources in order to invest. These discussions are ongoing..

2.5 D: Innovating in mentoring, reflective practice and training for staff.

- 2.5.1 A reflective establishment protects services from the effects of trauma by working in children's services. The report refers to the investment in staff wellbeing. The service is known to be innovative and ambitious in mentoring staff, developing reflective practice and reflective supervision. Experimenting with practice mentors is an example of the developmental support that is different and adds value to the manager's role. As part of these developments, we are keen for some elements to be mainstreamed and to strengthen our ability to underline their importance. We are eager to look at the most important issues that need to be resolved whilst at the same time being able to continue to show leadership and inspire others.

3 Strategic options

- 3.1 There are three strategic options to follow:

- 1 continue with the 'status quo'
- 2 choose a transformative, ambitious approach
- 3 choose a proactive approach to achieve continuous improvement

- 3.2 **Strategic option 1 – continue with the ‘status quo’:** What is happening at the moment is not working therefore doing nothing is not an option.
- 3.3 **Strategic option 2 – Transformative:** This option is a response to the author of the report’s response to the restrictions that he sees due to the Council’s language policy. He sees us as unique and due to this we place restrictions on ourselves which causes difficulties in a challenging labour market. In his opinion; rather than being an informal ‘college’ to raise bilingual social workers and then lose the investment to other agencies, his transformative model celebrates this and creates a business opportunity. In our view, there would need to be good will from Welsh Government, other local authorities and other agencies to recognise the need for a ‘college’ and an ‘innovation centre’. In our experience there is very little evidence of these factors outside of Gwynedd. We believe that the timescale to win this argument in order to create a strategy is too far in the future to prevent the slippage in the service and is therefore unachievable even though it’s an interesting idea.
- 3.4 **Strategic Option 3 – Proactive and continuous improvement:**
- In the service’s view this option is achievable and calls on the Management Team with the support of the whole service to be more proactive in planning solutions for problems that we can’t foresee.
 - To coincide with being proactive we need to be enterprising, confident and clear
 - The report provided a menu of options that we should select and work on. Some of them are unachievable for the Management Team to progress on their own. Our vision therefore is to focus on 4 things that we want to achieve with the service. These are :
 - Resolve the long awaited comparable salary issue.
 - Develop a Recruitment and Retention Strategy
 - Invest in new workers through a professional trainee programme
 - Develop staff wellbeing through mentoring, reflective practice and reflective supervision

4. Recommendation

- 4.1 The Scrutiny Committee are requested to accept the report and support the intentions of the service to focus on the 4 main themes identified above as the urgent response to the concerning staffing issues and to recognise that the work of exploring these matters has already begun as stated in this report.

Marian Hughes,

Pennaeth Gwasanaeth Plant a Chefnogi Teuluoedd

Mehefin 12fed, 2023