

Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee

7 March 2024

Children's Services Workforce Update

Report from: Dr Lee-Anne Farach, Director of People and Deputy Chief Executive

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Summary

This report provides an update on progress to recruit a permanent workforce, build a sustainable model of growth and reduce the use and/or cost of agency staff. The report outlines steps taken to accelerate progress.

1. Recommendations

- 1.1 The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note the report, the challenges and barriers to recruiting a permanent workforce and the steps taken to drive progress.
- 1.2 The Children and Young People Overview and Scrutiny Committee is asked to note that improving workforce stability will significantly contribute to better outcomes for children and families in Medway.

2. Budget and policy framework

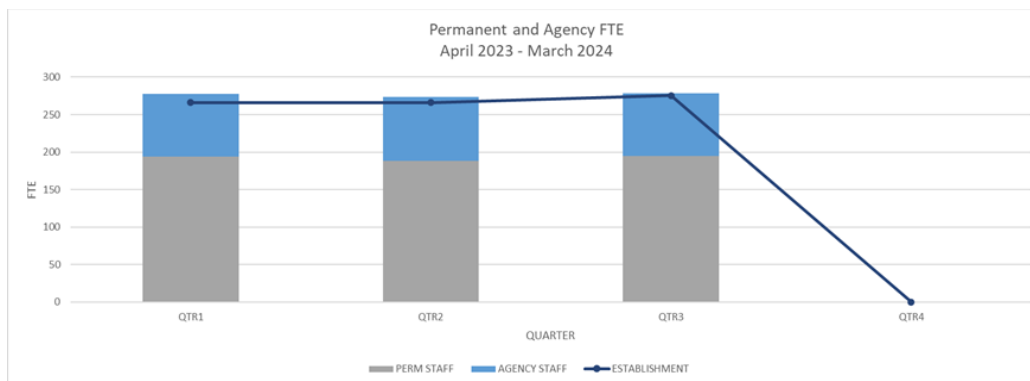
- 2.1 This report supports the Council Strategy priority "Supporting Medway's people to realise their potential" to achieve the outcome 'Resilient Families'.

3. Background

- 3.1 The service remains persistent in driving activities to increase the capacity and stability of the workforce. There is an effective line of sight and leaders are creative and flexible in mobilising to address any issues. However, there continues to be significant recruitment and retention challenges. The service is not making sufficient progress despite the recruitment efforts made.
- 3.2 The establishment for social work qualified posts as of 31 December 2023 is 275.43fte. The total number of social work qualified posts filled by permanent employees as of 31 December 2023 is 194.51fte (70.62%). Case holding

workers (social workers and senior practitioners) account for 170.79fte posts, of which 122.0fte are permanently filled (71.4%).

- 3.3 The total number of posts covered by agency social workers as of 31 December 2023 is 83.60fte. The agency worker rate is 30.06%. This figure includes additional bank staff and project teams hired to alleviate pressures across the service.



- 3.4 As of 31 December 2023, there were a total of 24.23fte social work qualified posts unfilled, which continues to impact capacity across the teams, both in terms of caseload numbers and employee's wellbeing. As of 31 December 2023, the overall vacancy rate for social work qualified posts was 29.38% (80.92fte).
- 3.5 A total of 37 appointments (internal and external) were processed during the period October - December 2023. Of these, 26 appointments were new joiners to Medway, 1 converted from agency to permanent employment and 10 staff moved internally. 11 of the new joiners to Medway were social work qualified roles.

For the period 1 October 2023 to 31 December 2023, a total of 33 staff left the service. Of these:

- 11 were social work qualified roles (11.00fte perm leavers)
- 8 were agency social work qualified roles (8.00fte)
- 14 were other/non stat roles (11.92fte perm leavers)

- 3.6 This indicates that the service is recruiting to social worker qualified roles but that any gains in permanent appointments are being lost as workers are leaving at the same rate.
- 3.7 The cumulative annual turnover rate is 27%. Over the last year the main factors contributing to staff leaving include pay, career progression, workload, excessive hours and work life/balance.
- 3.8 Agency Project teams (operating above establishment) have been used during 2023 to stem demand and rising caseloads in addition to more expensive agency bank staff to cover unfilled vacancies. Two of the three agency project teams ceased in November 2023 and January 2024 respectively. The final of the 3 agency project teams is planned for exit in March 2024.

3.9 Since autumn 2023 additional capacity (Strategic Workforce Lead) has been brought in to review and drive the workforce plan with an initial focus on effective recruitment planning, recruitment campaigns and support to drive retention.

4. Options

4.1 This report provides an update on progress on recruitment and retention.

5. Advice and analysis

5.1 A review of the workforce plan and current workforce position has been undertaken. An effective approach has been outlined in the workforce plan. It sets out actions to develop a recruitment plan that can attract candidates, is supported by a website and recruitment processes that have the candidates experience at their heart, attracting interest and applications, and minimising the potential of loss to offers from elsewhere.

5.2 The review showed that this effective approach is severely hampered because there is not enough resource in the Recruitment Team to effectively run the service at current recruitment volumes. Neither is there the capacity to robustly manage the permanent or temporary candidate market.

5.3 Prompt action has been taken to identify additional staff resource to support the recruitment team to deliver and recruitment to the posts is underway. Two strategic workforce posts have also been agreed to support the service to drive the plan and work alongside the recruitment team to manage the market.

5.4 A robust recruitment plan has been developed. A 'glidepath' showing a trajectory of estimated recruitment numbers required to move the service from an agency to permanent workforce, can be seen at Appendix 1. This sets out estimated numbers or permanent posts to be recruited across the main priority recruitment areas (social work qualified staff – mainly social workers, senior practitioners and assistant team managers). This has taken a prudent view given the market, current turnover levels and has assumed the growth in permanent staff is coming from the service's 'grown our own' model.

5.5 It is evident that the service's 'grow our own' model is providing a sustainable supply of social workers. Since February 2021, 27 NQSWs have completed their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and 19 (71%) have stayed. There are currently 2 active cohorts of Newly Qualified Social Workers who will complete ASYE between now and March 2025. This is expected to supply 14 social workers for the service. A third cohort of 7 is imminently starting in April 2024 and a further 12 planned for October 2024. By October 2025, as these cohorts complete their ASYE, the service will be much closer to the target permanent number of social workers in the establishment.

5.6 The additional capacity provided by the strategic lead is driving a refreshed approach to digital communications and social media. A competitor analysis shows the website to compare well with competitors and is a solid platform.

Increased use of social media along and new graphics to attract and signpost permanent candidates to the website to apply has been mobilised. The refreshed approach will see the recruitment based on specific campaigns that can be measured and a step away from rolling adverts which will be in place by March 2024. Beyond this more work to create engaging content (videos, testimonials, etc) to drive and motivate candidates to apply is required.

- 5.7 More coordination will be in place to magnify the impact of each campaign, with the timing of 'temporary to permanent events' and reminders to 'refer a friend' around specific campaigns.
- 5.8 The 'temporary to permanent' events for agency staff will continue to be run regularly throughout 2024 involving the Director and Assistant Director to encourage further conversations. Heads of Service are taking a more targeted approach and personal follow up to increase the likelihood of conversions of agency staff to a permanent post. Over the last year 9 agency workers converted to permanent posts and there are workers actively enquiring in the pipeline.
- 5.9 Overseas recruitment will form part of the recruitment plan for permanent social workers. The support to such a campaign is resource intensive for the service and the recruitment team so the feasibility of running the programme, at least in the short term, is under review.
- 5.10 Reducing the cost of agency staff and increasing stability across the workforce is a key target. The exit of two agency project team workers have already lessened the reliance and cost of agency staff. However, the financial imperative to reduce agency social workers must be balanced with workload pressures and caseload levels which are currently increasing. Given the pressures in the system the final agency project team will not exit in March 2024 as planned but will be extended for 3 months to June 2024.
- 5.11 Effective management of the agency market will be essential during 2024. There are significant challenges recruiting agency social workers on Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC) rates which led to the use of more expensive bank staff in 2023. The current pressures on the system and caseloads mean bank staff will reduce more slowly than expected.
- 5.12 The retention of staff will be a key focus in the next period given that the cumulative annual turnover rate is high at 27%. This will include understanding in more detail the reasons for leaving and how the chances of success in retaining staff might be improved. This may include recommendations to improve the workforce 'offer'.
- 5.13 The service needs to understand whether recruitment activity has had an impact on increasing the permanent workforce and reducing the use and/or cost of agency staff. A workforce dashboard will be developed to create a more transparent view of the performance. This will also include performance of the overall recruitment processes and effectiveness of campaigns. This will take time, but some initial measures will be developed to create visibility in the short term.

5.14 Progress against the workforce and recruitment plan will continue to be monitored and tracked by the Workforce Strategic Board led by the Assistant Director of Children’s Social Care.

6. Risk Management

6.1 The service is currently managing a high level of risk in relation to the workforce. The pressure on the system and caseload levels, unfilled posts and the challenges in sourcing agency social workers to cover vacancies all present a risk to the service meeting its statutory responsibilities. In addition, there is a risk to the budget outturn for 2023-24 and budget planning for 2024-25.

6.2 The key risks for the workforce are as follows:

Risk	Description	Action to avoid or mitigate risk	Risk rating
Operational risks	Insufficient Workforce (Social Workers) to deliver statutory and non-statutory responsibilities Reputational risk impacting on ability to recruit and retain workforce.	Additional recruitment resource. Effective workforce planning. Improved social media and recruitment advertising drives.	BII
Financial risks	Risk that agency staff costs do not reduce	Effective workforce planning. Improved social media and recruitment advertising drives. Additional recruitment resource Effective market management	All

Likelihood	Impact:
A Very likely B Likely C Unlikely D Rare	I Catastrophic II Major III Moderate IV Minor

7. Consultation

- 7.1 This workforce update has been undertaken in consultation with HR colleagues, Heads of Service and the Children's Workforce Strategic Board.

8. Climate change implications

- 8.1 There are no implications as a direct result of the recommendations of this report.

9. Financial implications

- 9.1 The Service aims to draw on its improved reputation associated with a 'Good' rating from the latest Ofsted inspection and the increased pay award to improve staff recruitment and retention.
- 9.2 During 2023/24, three project teams have been engaged and each agency project team costs approximately £250,000 per quarter to employ. The reduction and removal of two of the project teams (in November and January) has reduced and lessened the reliance on agency staff as well as delivering an in year spend reduction of circa £710k. The third and final project team was expected to be released in March 2024.
- 9.3 However, given the current pressures on the system, this team cannot be released as planned in March but has been extended for 3 months to June 2024 creating a potential budget pressure of £250,000 in 2024/25. However, the service remains confident that this pressure will not materialise and could be offset by the work currently underway on the trajectory of permanent recruitment to vacant posts.

10. Legal implications

- 10.1 No direct legal implications arising from this report.

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Recruitment Glidepaths

Background papers

None.