

REPORT TO: Executive Board

DATE: 17 November 2022

REPORTING OFFICER: Strategic Director, People

PORTFOLIO: Children & Young People

SUBJECT: Children Social Work Workforce Recruitment and Retention Package

WARD(S) Borough-wide

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

1.1 A report to Executive Board setting out a series of proposals to support the permanent recruitment and retention of staff in qualified social worker posts in Children's Social Care.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATION:** For the Board to endorse the recommendations set out in this report, namely:

- a.) Proposals to support the conversion of agency social worker to becoming permanent (set out in para. 3.8), including payment of a 'conversion allowance of £4,000 paid over a two year period;
- b.) Agreement to fund Social Work England registration for permanent staff employed in a qualified social work role (up to Principal Manager level) for a two year period (set out in para. 3.9b);
- c.) A recognition and performance allowance is paid to existing permanent staff employed in a qualified social work role. This would be a £2,000 payment paid over a two year period, and would supporting the retention of existing staff (set out in para. 3.9c);
- d.) A form of "golden hellos" is offered to new recruits employed in permanent social work roles (set out in paras. 3.10a, c); and
- e.) An annual allowance of £2,000 is paid to social work staff employed in case management child protection teams, reflecting these are considered "hard to fill" posts.

3.0 SUPPORTING INFORMATION

National context

3.1 There is a national context surrounding the children's social work workforce that will be familiar to the Executive Management Team, as such this report will only provide a brief overview in setting the context to the business case.

3.2 Unfortunately children's social work isn't necessarily a "desirable occupation" given how it's often perceived by the public and portrayed in the media, particularly following cases of child deaths as a consequence of abuse where

there is perceived failing in safeguarding systems including the role of social workers. Most recently the death of Star Hobson (2020) and Arthur Labinjo-Hughes (2020) illustrates these points. Previously there has been the deaths of Victoria Climbié (2000), Baby Peter (2006) and Daniel Pelka (2012).

- 3.3 The nature of the children's social workforce has changed. Many social workers have left the profession, and there are fewer now being trained in the profession. The majority of Councils report challenges in recruitment and retention, particularly "hard to fill" posts in frontline child protection. Social workers no longer value the security of having a permanent contract of employment and will move several times during their career. There has also been the emergence of social work agencies and more recently "managed teams" that has transformed the labour market. Working outside of permanent local authority employment has become a positive career choice for a significant proportion of social workers.
- 3.4 In a national context this has significantly contributed to Councils (as the main employers of children's social workers) reporting challenges in recruitment and retention and operating with an unstable workforce.

Local context

- 3.5 The Council is aspirational in becoming a local "employer of choice" for children's social workers, in developing a permanent, stable, skilled and motivated workforce. This forms part of the Children's Improvement Plan and is linked to a transformation of services. It is also about Children's Services becoming financially sustainable due to the high costs of managing a workforce with a heavy reliance on agency staffing often a factor in poor quality case management.
- 3.6 In order to become an "employer of choice" for social workers there are common characteristics in an organisation, whether this is a Council, Children's Trust, or a dedicated social work organisation (e.g. CAF/CASS; NSPCC). These characteristics include (not considered an exhaustive list):
- Valuing the social work workforce, recognising its uniqueness, particularly in Councils where there is a wide-range of services being delivered;
 - Systems and services in place that support good practice and focused on positive outcomes for children. This includes clear pathways supporting children and families in accessing services; i.e. early help, edge of care or children looked after;
 - Access to 'tools' that enable social workers to fulfil their role. Examples include effective electronic recording system, good IT, facilities and premises that support their work;
 - A vision underpinned by a set of strong cultural values about how the organisation wishes to work with children and families that is aspirational, recognises the strengths of families and their communities, and is committed to co-production and partnership working. This approach is often supported by a practice model that can often be wider than Children's Services, whether this is restorative or systemic practice;
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- Manageable caseloads that support their work with children and families, allowing them to deliver direct work and build trusting relationships;
- Access to good quality supervision that is supportive and challenging, whilst leadership is visible and instils confidence, particularly in managing change;
- A clear Continuous Professional Development offer (CPD) for social workers supported by effective training, progression, and opportunities for career development;
- Terms and conditions of employment are competitive with other organisations. This doesn't solely refer to salary, but can include flexible working arrangements, leave entitlements, access to car schemes, health and leisure benefits etc;
- The workforce is experienced, skilled, motivated and stable, with an emphasis on being permanent.

3.7 The Children's Services Self-Assessment recognises that there is a significant amount of work to do in order for the Council to be an "employer of choice" for social workers. Not all of the characteristics referred to in paragraph 3.6 are in place or embedded. Although recent investment has led to manageable caseloads due to the turnover of social workers this results in too many changes of social worker for children and families. This can then lead to drift in care planning and a cycle of re-assessment which inevitably produces poor decision-making and outcomes for children.

3.7 The biggest challenge is the instability in the workforce with only 60% being permanent. There is a high turnover of staffing, with a dependence on agency workers. This creates uncertainty amongst the workforce, it doesn't support effective relationships with children and families and is financially unsustainable. There are 41 agency staff employed in the Service, in different social work type roles. The monthly expenditure on agency staffing is £328k (*July 2022 and excludes cost of Innovate managed team*). The predicted outturn position for spend on agency staffing is £1.8m for this financial year, placing an overall pressure on the staffing budget of £3m.

Options for consideration

3.8 **Converting agency workers to permanent staff** - we have 41 plus agency workers, some of whom we believe are capable in their role and would be interested in becoming a permanent member of staff. The target would be to convert between 6-10 agency workers to becoming permanent employees. It's estimated that if we were to converting 10 agency social workers to permanent positions would result in a £480K annual saving. A target of circa 25 permanent QSW will reduce spend by circa @1.2M. We believe a number of agency staff would be receptive to a discussion about becoming permanent employees. To do this we need to construct an offer that is sufficiently competitive to persuade them to switch to a permanent contract. This comprises of two components:

- a) **Contractual entitlements** – agency workers would be entitled to receive Local Government terms and conditions of employment as a Council

employee. We are proposing there is flexibility in the starting salary within the existing paygrade, dependent upon their experience. For those agency workers that have been with Halton for in excess of six months there wouldn't be a requirement to complete a probationary period. Conditions would be in place to ensure this was only available to those who had a distinguished period of employment whilst working in Halton. It's further proposed there is an offer of annual leave entitlement at the mid-point, as opposed to starting with the minimum number of days. In the first months of employment there exists a mechanism to support the transfer from weekly pay to monthly pay, to help with any adjustments for individuals.

- b) **The right financial package** - as an agency worker an individual would receive a significantly higher daily pay rate in comparison to a permanent member of staff. Whilst there is a regional agreement for a capped rate for agency workers, experienced social workers can now expect to be paid anything from £35-£50 per hour (excluding on costs). This has become more competitive taking into account 'managed teams' given they pay higher rates and work outside of IR35. An option to incentivise agency workers to become permanent staff is to offer a 'conversion allowance'. This is a national approach taken by local authorities in the recruitment of agency social workers. This is a payment over a period of time usually one or two years. The range of payment can be anything between £1,000 to £5,000. It's proposed that a conversion payment is offered over a two year period of employment. This would be a payment of up to £4,000. It is proposed £1,000 would be paid at the point of employment, with further equal instalments at 6, 12 and 18 months. These payments would be conditional and linked to performance. An additional annual allowance of £2,000 would be paid to those staff based in the frontline child protection teams, to reflect these are 'hard to fill' posts. This would be payable in two instalments, 6 and 12 months. One neighbouring Council has begun to pay this allowance to social workers based in their child protection teams.

3.9 Supporting improved retention – there is a risk with offering what's seen as an enhanced package to agency staff by our existing social work workforce. Whilst it's imperative to recruit new social workers, it's important that the contribution of the permanent workforce is acknowledged. We have experience of permanent staff being spoken to by agency workers about the benefits of being employed via an agency route, particularly given some of the financial hourly rates now available (£35 - £50). The following is proposed:

- a.) A full review of existing salaries and terms and conditions for qualified social work posts. Comparatively Halton is at the lower end (if not the lowest) of the scale amongst the 11 local authorities in Cheshire and Merseyside.
 - b.) The Council funds the £80 annual subscription fee for social workers to be registered with Social Work England. This would be payable for a period of two years and would be considered as a 'benefit in kind'.
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- c.) Employees in a qualified social work post up to the level of Principal Manager would receive a 'recognition and performance' allowance paid over a period of two years. This would be a £2,000 allowance paid in four instalments. It would be linked to retention and performance. There would be an additional allowance for staff based in the frontline child protection teams paid over the two year period (as outlined in para. 3.8b).

3.10 Supporting recruitment - in attracting new recruits there has to be a focus on a 'grow your own' approach to developing newly qualified social workers. This will have a number of elements:

- a.) Attracting newly qualified social workers in the final year of studies - we know the majority of recruits are newly qualified social workers, who have previously been students in the social work teams. As such, we are maximising our capacity to provide additional placements to final year students. We are now ensuring that there is a presence by Halton at social work job fairs, and this includes those facilitated by the local Higher Education Institutes. It's proposed that we have a targeted recruitment of final year social work students annually in October, with a view to offering conditional contracts of employment to coincide when they become qualified in the following September. We have trialled this process October 2022 (three students were interviewed week of 23 October 2022 and been offered jobs with start dates March 2023). In the intervening period between the offer of employment and their start date, there would be a series of 'inset' days to begin their induction and support professional development. In order to be competitive with other local authorities regarding pay rates we would need to review the salaries for newly qualified (*linked to para. 4.2a*). There would be a 'golden hello' payment to newly qualified social workers of £2,000 that would be paid over a two-year payment. They would be entitled to receive the child protection allowance referred to in para. 3.8b.
 - b.) Frontline Practice Unit – in September we had a meeting with Frontline organisation that is commissioned by the DfE to provide a 'fast track' approach to training graduates to become social workers as part of a 12 month programme. Frontline have a visit to Halton on 1 November to evaluate our readiness to operate a Practice Unit. If taken forward, we would be providing four social work trainees a full year work experience placement, with the guarantee of a one year contract as a newly qualified social worker. This is part funded by the DfE (previously LA would receive a grant of £60k for four social work trainees). The requirement of the Council is to provide a social work manager to have operational responsibility for the programme. The next intake for the programme is due to begin in July 2023. This would potentially provide a guarantee of four new social workers by September 2024.
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- c.) Outside of these proposals, it will be challenging to recruit experienced social workers to join Halton as permanent employees. This is often the case because individuals we are trying to recruit are employed in neighbouring local authorities with similar or better terms and conditions. However, if we begin to attract staff from neighbouring authorities, particularly those in manager roles, what often happens is that their colleagues may follow in joining Halton. The recommendation is that a 'golden hello' payment is offered to new recruits, with the package tailored dependent upon the role being recruited to. This would be £4,000, paid in instalments similar to what is being proposed in supporting the conversion of agency staffing. To be entitled to the allowance, social workers will be required to have progressed beyond the first year (ASYE).

Developing the right organisational offer

- 3.11 It is critical that we create the right environment in which our staff can thrive in Children's Social Care. It needs to be centred on how we develop and support the workforce, including recruitment, retention, and career progression, CPD, and practice improvement. This will be linked to what we will define as the "Halton Offer" that will be delivered under a social work academy/ centre for practice excellence model. We have had recent discussions with two HEI's (Liverpool John Moores and Hope University) about the possibility of establishing a strategic partnership (outside of the Cheshire and Merseyside Teaching Partnership. Thoughts thus far with some already in process are:
- A revised induction process for Children's Services that would be rolled out across the Directorate;
 - A strengthened approach to re-positioning Halton as a social work employer utilising digital platforms such as LinkedIn and Instagram;
 - An overhaul of our approach to social work recruitment. This would be delivered via information held on a microsite, moving to CV applications, holding virtual recruitment events (supported by key speakers), and having a rolling advert;
 - Trial new ways of working within the existing framework of flexible working, including the idea of teams working a 9 day fortnight based on compressed hours;
 - Career pathways – progression on a page. What they need to do and how we can support this?;
 - An infrastructure that supports the ASYE and progression programme for social work, ideally linked to one of the HEIs.
- 3.12 Clarity of our offer will be finalised as part of our Improvement programme and will be completed by December 2022, as this will require consultation and engagement with the existing workforce, along with the Trade Unions.

4.0 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are several proposals in this report that would have policy implication that would need to be considered further, particularly in dealing with the employment and human resources factors.
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5.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

5.1 The financial costs associated with these proposals are detailed in the table below:

Comparison per Worker	Agency Cost to LA based on £32p/hr	Permanent Cost	Proposal CiN/CP	Annual Saving
Social Work Cost Mid-Point Salary 29 Conversion Proposal	£61, 568	£35, 411	£5, 080	£21, 077
Comparison per 10 Workers	Agency Cost to LA	Permanent Cost	Proposal CiN/CP	Annual Saving
Social Work Cost Mid-Point Salary 29 Conversion Proposal	£615,680	£354, 110	£50, 800	£210, 770

Proposal	No Staff	Year 1 (cost)	Year 2 (cost)	Total
Social Work England Registration	80	£6,400	£6,400	£12,800
Agency conversion allowance	10	£20,000	£20,000	£40,000
Retention allowance	60 (Y 1) 70 (Y 2)	£120,000	£140,000	£260,000
Golden Hello (ASYEs)	8	£8,000	£8,000	£16,000
Golden Hello to Exp SWs	5 (Y 1) 5 (Y 2)	£10,000	£20,000	£30,000
		£164000	£194000	£358000

6.0 IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES

6.1 Children & Young People in Halton

Having a strong and robust framework for identifying and responding across all agencies is the key to ensuring that children and young people are safe and protected, and partners are clear about their responsibilities and role in working together.

6.2 Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton

None identified.

6.3 A Healthy Halton

Children and young people whose health needs and level of development is potentially compromised are identified early and multi-agency support is in place to support them.

6.4 A Safer Halton

Children who are at risk of harm are identified quickly and services work together to minimise the risk of harm and take action to formally protect children in a timely way.

6.5 Halton's Urban Renewal

None identified.

7.0 RISK ANALYSIS

7.1 Consideration of the possibility of equal pay claim for staff of similar work. The majority of neighbouring authorities have in place or are planning similar schemes targeted at this professional group due to acute shortages and associated safeguarding risks. This scheme is based on current market conditions for a specific professional group and the scheme may be appropriate for other services where the size and scale of the problem is not surmountable by the current market supplements.

8.0 EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES

8.1 None Identified

9.0 REASON(S) FOR DECISION

To improve the recruitment and retention of Qualified Children Social Workers and reduce the reliance and cost of agency staff

10.0 ALTERNATIVE OPTIONS CONSIDERED AND REJECTED

A review of schemes of a similar nature across the region have been considered and the proposal is set within similar parameters found regionally.

11.0 IMPLEMENTATION DATE

1 December 2022

12.0 LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972

None.
