

Report to:	Overview and Scrutiny Committee (Children's Services and Safeguarding)	Date of Meeting:	31 January 2023
Subject:	Recruitment and Support for Newly Qualified Social Workers		
Report of:	Executive Director of Children's Social Care and Education	Wards Affected:	(All Wards);
Portfolio:	Children's Social Care		
Is this a Key Decision:	No	Included in Forward Plan:	No
Exempt / Confidential Report:	No		

Summary:

This paper sets out Sefton's response to the recruitment and support for our newly qualified social workers (NQSW's). The paper details the problem that exists on a national and local level and the impact on the local authority, the newly qualified social worker and most importantly the families who we work with.

The paper details Sefton's response and outlines our new Social Work Academy. The report sets out the Academy working model and the impact we hope to achieve and some of the early signs of impact. The report concludes with how the Academy can continue to support Sefton children services and the wider council

Recommendation(s):

- (1) That the report be noted.

Reasons for the Recommendation(s):

To provide Committee Members with information on recruitment and support for newly qualified social workers.

Alternative Options Considered and Rejected: (including any Risk Implications)

The continuation of Business as usual would have not addressed the recruitment and practice concerns that exist within Sefton Children Services. The continuation of high-cost agency staff would have impacted on present and future budgets.

What will it cost and how will it be financed?

(A) Revenue Costs

The Academy has been created via temporary funding of £1.2million for a full year, as approved via the July 2022 Council Report. An additional £300,000

has been awarded from the DFE in recognition of the innovative approach and potential national learning, following a successful bid.

This money has covered the cost of the leadership teams the 30 NQSW posts which sit outside the permanent children services staffing structure.

(B) Capital Costs

N/A

Implications of the Proposals:

<p>Resource Implications (Financial, IT, Staffing and Assets): The creation of the Academy will ensure that Sefton will grow their own social workers. This will reduce the over reliance on high-cost agency staff.</p> <p>It is also expected that a minimum of 85% of NQSW's will remain with Sefton following completion of their ASYE. These staff members will fill current vacancies and therefore reduce the need for temporary agency staff or managed teams.</p> <p>In Sefton, an agency social worker can cost between £25,000 to £35,000 additional per annum in comparison to a permanent member of staff. If Sefton can successfully keep only 85% of the ASYE cohort this would mean ongoing annual savings of between £510,000 and £765,000 as opposed to the recruitment of agency staff.</p>									
<p>Legal Implications:</p>									
<p>Equality Implications: Recruitment to the Academy will be within Sefton's equal opportunity employment.</p>									
<p>Climate Emergency Implications:</p> <p>The recommendations within this report will</p> <table border="1"> <tr> <td>Have a positive impact</td> <td>No</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Have a neutral impact</td> <td>Yes</td> </tr> <tr> <td>Have a negative impact</td> <td>No</td> </tr> <tr> <td>The Author has undertaken the Climate Emergency training for report authors</td> <td>Yes</td> </tr> </table> <p>There are no direct climate emergency implications arising from this report.</p>		Have a positive impact	No	Have a neutral impact	Yes	Have a negative impact	No	The Author has undertaken the Climate Emergency training for report authors	Yes
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Contribution to the Council's Core Purpose:

Protect the most vulnerable: Social workers have contact with the most vulnerable children, young people and their families.
Facilitate confident and resilient communities: As above.
Commission, broker and provide core services: As above.
Place – leadership and influencer: N/A

Drivers of change and reform: As above.
Facilitate sustainable economic prosperity: N/A
Greater income for social investment: N/A
Cleaner Greener: N/A

What consultations have taken place on the proposals and when?

(A) Internal Consultations

The Executive Director of Corporate Resources and Customer Services (FD 7096/23) and the Chief Legal and Democratic Officer (LD 5296/23) have been consulted and any comments have been incorporated into the report.

(B) External Consultations

N/A

Implementation Date for the Decision

Immediately following the Committee meeting.

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Appendices:

There are no appendices to this report

Background Papers:

There are no background papers available for inspection.

1. Introduction/Background

1.1 The approach to the recruitment of training of NWSW's in both Sefton and nationally is unfit to support the future direction of social work. Although Sefton does undoubtedly support the development of a level of excellent quality social workers there are also a number of problems this approach does create.

1.2 Recruitment and retention

Over the last three years Sefton children services, along with many other Local Authorities, has experienced a decreasing amount of social worker applications. This has contributed to Sefton's increased vacancy rate across all service areas and an over reliance on agency staff and managed teams.

Excessive cost, transient and in some cases poor quality agency workers mean that children, young people, and their families are receiving a poor service. Multiple changes in social workers for our Cared for Children mean the retelling of their stories whilst plans are delayed, and families experience drift and different advice and guidance depending on the new social worker. Whilst in our locality teams these on-going changes can result in both significant drift and the potential to miss significant safeguarding concerns. Sefton has experienced serious problems relating to retention with high numbers of permanent staff becoming agency workers or leaving the profession altogether.

1.3 The impact on Children, young people, and their families

The OFSTED inspection in February 2022 identified the over reliance on agency staff and vacancies. The reports stated that there were; “Serious and widespread failures” in safeguarding, creating delays in meeting the needs of “highly vulnerable children,” leaving them at risk of “significant harm.” This was in part due to “insufficient workforce capacity and lack of management oversight and challenge” Inspectors found that an “overreliance on agency staff at all levels” was contributing to delays and leading to children experiencing many changes in social worker and essential work not always being completed.

1.4 Impact on Budget

The impact of the use of agencies can be significant in terms of financial spend. The average cost of an agency social worker costs between £25,000 and £35,000 extra per annum when compared to a full time equivalent. A managed team, consisting of 1 team manager and seven social workers is currently costing Sefton £573,000 for a 6-month period. This is more than double the amount for a permanent staff team over the same period. The impact of these excessive costs means that resource is being diverted from other areas of focus and that children’s needs are not being met.

1.5 The experience for those studying on the ASYE

Sefton’s approach to the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) replicated most other Children Services in the United Kingdom. A range of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW’s) were recruited to Sefton from several nearby universities and enrolled on the ASYE programme. Once recruited the NQSW is dispersed into an already formed team within a service area such as Corporate Parenting, Child Protection or Children with Disabilities. The NQSW is given, or at least intended to be given, a reduced caseload to allow their practice to develop without the pressures associated with being a fully qualified social worker. The NQSW would be supervised by a Practice Educator around the teaching element of the ASYE who would offer support and guidance around practice development and the completion of reflective learning reports including their final portfolio of learning. The Practice educator would undertake a review of the NQSW’s progress, jointly with the relevant team manager, at the 3-, 6-, 9- and 12-months stage. These reviews highlight areas of development and strength to support the NQSW in completing the ASYE.

ASYEs progress would be monitored and tracked by our ASYE coordinator who will also arrange regular meetings, or forums, to create a place in which NQSW's can share their experiences and any concerns they may have with their peers. The fundamental ethos for ASYE programme is to allow the NQSW to develop into their role. The aim is to give a balance of experience and protection and allow additional space for reflection and learning.

Reduced caseloads, additional support, regular training and forums for reflection were key mechanisms in Sefton's offer. However, the reality for the NQSW in Sefton, and other Local Authorities, is that they were quickly seen as part of the team. A NQSW in Sefton could be case holding between 20 and 30 children and managing cases which were in the court arena. Many of our NQSW's were also not completing the programme in the allotted 12 months and still have outstanding work up to 2 years post qualifying. Additionally supportive forums and training programmes were not always attended due to the NQSW being busy.

The impact of this meant that some NQSW's would fail to complete the year whilst others leave the authority, and even the profession, within three years. Current figures show that over the past three years almost a third of those who have completed the ASYE programme have left Sefton Children Services.

Feedback from our NQSW's suggest they did not feel supported, the offer is disconnected and that another approach is necessary. One in which they feel supported, have a clear identity, and have a real opportunity to develop.

2 Our solution - The Sefton Social Work Academy

Sefton have developed and implemented a social work Academy in which the learning and development of all staff, including those staff the ASYE programme is held. Funding for the creation of the Academy has been met through additional financial resource from the council (1.2 million) and financial support from the DFE (£300,000).

2.1 The Academy Structure

The Academy is led by a newly created service manager post who supervises the practice leads for the five Academy teams. The Academy is situated within the Help and Protection Service with strong links to the PSW, and the Quality Assurance teams.

Each of the five teams are led by Practice Leads who will both manage staff welfare but focus on practice development. Each team consists of six NQSW's and share both a business support officer and Practice Educator with another team.

Our initial aim was to recruit and develop up to 30 NQSW's within 12 months of operation who will then join our permanent workforce. It was first envisaged that there would be two recruitment points, October and February, with approximately 15 NQSW's being recruited at each point.

These NQSW's will receive a prominent level of support and training to ensure that they remain committed to working in Sefton where they can continue their professional development. It is anticipated that upon completion of their ASYE at least 85% of the cohort (25) will fill current vacancies and replace roles which are currently filled by temporary agency staff.

2.2 Jointly worked and capped case loads

NQSW's in the teams have significantly reduced caseloads holding no more than five families in the first six months. These cases are jointly worked with others within the team to help develop the NQSW's own "blind spots" and challenge their prejudices and biases. This model of practice is also shown to reduce staff stress and sickness rates.

Joint working also supports the family in a more holistic approach and ensure, that if one NQSW is not available then plans are not delayed.

2.3 Weekly Practice Reflective Meetings

Weekly reflective practice meetings will ensure that every family is receiving regular management oversight and that assessments and plans are progressing. These meetings should not only ensure a lack of drift and delay but also help reduce staff burnout.

2.4 Support around emotional Resilience

One of the fundamental aims of the Academy is to assist with Sefton's retention and reduce social work burnout. Exit interviews within Sefton have highlighted that for a few our social work staff emotional resilience was a significant factor in them choosing to leave. Additionally, Sefton's sickness rate amongst social workers is high in comparison to other areas of the council.

Social work burnout is a recognised phenomenon in the profession and seen as one of the primary reasons for both sickness and early retirement. In Sefton's Academy we want to not only to prepare our NQSW for the practice of social work, but also how to emotionally manage the stress and pressure of the profession.

We are therefore delivering support our NQSW's through an evidenced based programme based on Compassion Focussed Therapy. This approach is evidenced to support individuals who struggle with critical decisions and stress associated with shame. We will constantly be reviewing the impact of the training on both sickness rates and staff retention within the Academy.

3. How are we Doing - An update on the first three months of the Academy

3.1 Staffing

The Academy has been open since October 2022 and is progressing in line with expectations. We have been able to recruit permanently to all posts including the service manager, team managers and practice educators. Our initial aim had been to recruit up to three teams by December and then look to recruit to the further teams in the February cohort.

However, we have managed to recruit to all 30 posts by December with 19 NQSW's undertaking the ASYE program with a further 9 to start during January. One change that was made in the first few months of the Academy was to not limit acceptance to the ASYE program to October and February cohort. It was quickly recognised that social work students could finish their studies at any time of the year which meant that potential applicants could be waiting for the cohort to begin and would take alternative jobs in the interim. By opening up the application process we were able to fill our spaces in a much faster timescale.

Another significant change was to include those professionals who were social work trained but had let their registration elapse. To reregister it is essential to

complete 60 days of supervised work before they could re-register. The Academy currently has a few of these applicants but it has the potential to be developed further.

3.2 Creating new ways of working

The Academy gives a space in which new ways of working can be developed and implemented. We have already seen the teams develop new ways of working which are being incorporated into other service areas. One example is “The Pledge” which sets out a working agreement between the social worker and the family as to how they will work together. The Academy has also created introductory brochures for families which set out what they should expect from a social work intervention and how they may experience working with children services.

3.3 International Social work support:

Another approach to address our employment gaps has been to recruit up to 20 social workers from South Africa. Although the social workers will be experienced in the field of Child Protection in South Africa, they will still require a lot of support and training to adapt to UK legislation and practice.

The SW Academy will be a supportive environment in which these social workers will spend up to two days per week receiving supportive and intensive training.

4. In Summary

A further year of funding have been included in the proposed budget spend for 2023-24. At a cost out lay of 1.2 million the savings of a potential 30 full time staff is clear when compared to possible agency spend.

Moving forward we perceive the Academy to be the beacon for both practice and staff development within Sefton. This will be the mechanism for creating systemic changes across the workforce and ensuring we always have a cycle of permanent staff.

We also believe that there is wider learning for the social work sector which is beyond Sefton Children services. This links to the development of NQSW's and the improvement in emotional resilient has not been assessed in the social work field. There is a potential for new learning which could impact on how the ASYE programme is implemented.

In addition to the benefits already highlighted in this report we can also perceive an Academy that delivers programmes for both Adults and Children's social work and the opportunity to create social workers who have crossed learning.

The initial 3 months has progressed well and ongoing review by a multi-agency strategic group will ensure this progress continues.