



To: Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2)

Date: 28 November 2024

Subject: Social Worker Recruitment and Retention – Workforce Update

1 Purpose of the Note

- 1.1 To inform the Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board (2) of the Social Worker Recruitment and Retention implementation and impact to date.

2 Recommendations

- 2.1 The Education and Children's Scrutiny Board (2) are recommended to:

- 1) To note the current progress.
- 2) Identify any items to look at in more detail on the work programme 2024-5.
- 3) Identify any recommendations for the appropriate Cabinet Member.

3 Information/Background

- 3.1 Recruitment and retention of social workers continues to be a national problem and accepted in the government's response to the Independent Review of Social Care. The workforce profile over the past few years has led to Children and Education Services supporting a "grow our own" approach, with a key focus on enabling social workers into the profession and developing into experienced social workers with high quality practice standards.
- 3.2 The local picture in Coventry in many ways mirrors the regional and national picture. Coventry has continued to face challenges to recruitment and retention of social workers, which has impacted the stability of the workforce, and the number of agency staff required to cover vacancies. Coventry is based within the West Midlands but also within commuter distance to East Midlands. It is therefore in an area where there are several local authorities all competing for the same pool of social workers, which makes it a competitive market for social workers.
- 3.3 In 2023/2024 investment was approved for Children and Education Services to support the recruitment and retention of social workers. This was in response to a challenging period, where a mix of high case levels, difficulty recruiting

experienced social workers and a limited supply of suitable agency staff meant that children's social worker vacancies were significantly high.

- 3.4 Coventry Children and Education Services vision for the Social Work workforce is to secure a stable, permanent, highly skilled and capable workforce. Coventry's practice approach has evolved since the launch of Coventry Family Valued, as Coventry Children and Education Services has become more relational and restorative, and more recently, Rethink Formulation has been introduced as a tool to support practitioners to rethink practice 'with' children and families further, and to support the growing relational and restorative culture in Children and Education Services and across the partnership.
- 3.5 A stable and permanent workforce can more effectively work with children, young people and families in a way which supports to improve outcomes.
- 3.6 In November 2023, a report on Social Worker Recruitment and Retention initiatives was presented to Education and Children's Services Scrutiny Board members. This report provides an update to reflect the impact over the last twelve-month period.
- 3.7 The summary below highlights the key recruitment and retention initiatives implemented:
 - In 2023/24, a retention payment was paid to experienced social workers, advanced social workers and senior practitioners who remained in post for a period of twelve months up to 31 March 2024.
 - A Progression Pathway for experienced social workers launched in April 2024 to provide experienced social workers the opportunity to progress to Advanced Social Workers.
 - A Progression Pathway for newly qualified social workers launched in September 2024 to provide newly qualified social workers the opportunity to progress six months earlier subject to meeting ASYE and competences.
 - A review of the Social Work Academy has been completed to embed a structure to support delivering the workforce to meet service demand and the needs of our children, families and communities.
 - The Social Work Academy continues to deliver with 48 newly qualified social workers coming through the Academy this year to reduce the number of vacancies and reliance on agency staff and spend.
 - A total of 25 Apprentices are undertaking a Social Work Apprenticeship (5 commenced in in September 2024; 6 Apprentices complete in June 2025, and 14 complete in June 2026).
 - 9 Social Work Students commenced in September 2024 as part of the fast-track programmes (6 Step up students), and (3 Frontline students)
 - The service is looking to develop a Social Care Academy initially for residential staff to recognise the skills and expertise of other staff within children's social care, that are not social workers to integrate knowledge, skills and training and develop staff.
 - The Clinical supervision offer extended for 2024/5 following the success of the pilot in 2023.

- Flexible Working 9-day fortnight has been piloted and rolled out to the wider service area to support staff/social workers with maintaining a work life balance.
- A successful wellbeing offer for all staff continues to be offered to support wellbeing and retention of staff.
- Regular Social Worker Recruitment open evenings, held jointly with Adults Social Care to increase the number of social workers.
- Staying Interviews are held with staff to highlight the benefits of working in Coventry and responding to areas of development.
- Children and Education Services have launched a Relational Social Work Podcast available on all major podcast platforms or via this link: [The Relational Social Work Podcast](#) to support practitioners thinking and provide reflective practice.
- A further retention payment to existing Advanced Social Workers and Senior Practitioners with no replacement progression offer who remain in post until 31 March 2025.

4 Recruitment and Retention

- 4.1 To build stability within the workforce and reduce the number of social workers leaving, experienced social workers received a retention payment in 2023/24. The retention payment of £3,000 was payable to social workers who had completed 12 months service from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, paid in their March salary. New Social Workers appointed after 1 April 2023, received the retention payment on completing 12 months service from their start date, this was replaced by a Progression pathway for experienced social workers to provide the opportunity to progress to Advanced Social Workers through a panel process implemented from 1 April 2024.
- 4.2 Data has indicated that the retention payments have made some positive impact on retention rates with a reduction in social workers leaving the service. In 2023/24 (**40**) social workers left compared with (**68**) in the previous year 2022/23. (The term social workers refer to Social Workers, Advanced Social Workers and Senior Practitioners job roles who received the retention payment). The table below provides a comparison over two years as of 31st March 2024, to highlight the impact after 12 months showing an increase in the retention rate from 44% to 58% and a reduction in the number of agency social workers providing cover from 47 to 37.

Grade	Starters		Leavers		% Retained		Agency SWs (as on 31/03/2024)	
	22-23	23-24	22-23	23-24	22-23	23-24	22-23	23-24
G6 (No retention payment) Social Worker	56	48	26	22	30%	26%	n/a	n/a
G7 Social Worker	20	20	18	9	2%	11%	23	22
G8 Advanced Social Worker	17	17	14	3	3%	14%	19	13
G8 Senior Practitioner	19	13	10	6	9%	7%	5	2
TOTAL	112	98	68	40	44%	58%	47	37

- 4.3 In April 2024, neighbouring local authorities launched retention schemes, at the time Coventry's retention payment was ending. This was a potential risk for the service for Advanced Social Workers and Senior Practitioners considering moving away from Coventry. For Social Workers this was deemed less of a risk with a new progression scheme implemented from 1 April 2024 replacing the retention payment. There was no replacement progression offer for Advanced Social Workers and Senior Practitioners.
- 4.4 In response to the risk of losing Advanced Social Workers and Senior Practitioners a retention payment of £1,800 was approved and will be paid on completion of 12 months service on 31 March 2025.
- 4.5 The service continues to hold regular recruitment Open Evening events throughout the year. An event was held in March and November this year jointly with Adults Social Care. Recruitment events are marketed as an informal networking opportunity, offering attendees the chance to engage with the team, explore career opportunities, and participate in on-the-spot interviews for permanent Social Worker positions.

5 Progression pathway for Social Workers to Advanced Social Workers

- 5.1 The retention payment offer was put in place as an interim measure from 1 April 2023 to 31 March 2024, to be replaced by a progression pathway for experienced social workers implemented on 1 April 2024.
- 5.2 The previous progression framework required social workers to wait for a vacant Advanced Social Worker position to become available prior to applying. The progression panel process provides social workers the opportunity to apply for progression by evidencing their competency at an Advanced Social Worker Progression Panel. As part of the application process, social workers can state a preference for an existing vacancy or state a preference to progress within a team where there are less than two Advanced Social Workers in a team.
- 5.3 An Advanced Social Worker is highly skilled and will take responsibility for the more complex, or high-risk work with children and families, with a high degree of personal accountability and autonomy. The role also includes supporting team members through mentoring, coaching and advancing the expertise and professional competence and confidence of others.
- 5.4 The Advanced Progression Panels are held three times a year (March/July/November), social workers applying for progression are asked to provide feedback to help improve and streamline the process.
- 5.5 The opportunity of a progression pathway has supported eight social workers to progress supporting the retention of experienced social workers who want to live and work in Coventry, reducing the reliance on agency social workers.

6 Progression Pathway for Newly Qualified Social Workers to Social Worker

- 6.1 The Social Work Academy supports Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) to grow and develop their skills, capabilities and competencies. It has enabled staggered cohorts of Newly Qualified Social Workers into the service, as a strategy to build a permanent, stable workforce whilst reducing spend on agency social workers across a medium-term strategy. This financial Year

2024/5 will bring 48 qualified social workers into children services at 4 entry points, with two support teams to safely adopt this approach.

- 6.2 Under the current social worker academy model, NQSW's progress to a social worker role after two years of service including their ASYE – Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, and through a panel progression process subject to meeting the competences required to progress to a social worker.
- 6.3 Data shows that this progression approach means that NQSW's in Coventry are paid less in their first year than those who train through other Local Authorities. In 2022/3 26 NQSW's left, with 22 leaving in 2023/24. The current Social Work Academy retention rate is 70% based on the last three years.
- 6.4 In response to the risk of NQSW's leaving, the progression pathway has been reviewed, ceasing the progression panel at year two. The new panel process is led by the service teams to support progression of those practitioners who meet the criteria to progress earlier, as each practitioner is ready at varying points with varying capabilities. The revised progression pathway commenced in September 2024, with the first panels to be held in December 2024. This will help to retain newly qualified social workers and the risk of leaving early.

7 The Clinical Supervision Offer

- 7.1 The Clinical Supervision was introduced as a six-month pilot in February 2023 to support Social Workers and address key challenges, including retention, sickness rates, and reliance on agency staff. It was extended beyond September 2023, as it offered clear benefits in reducing work-related stress and improving overall wellbeing.
- 7.2 During the pilot phase there was a total of 11 referrals, with a further 17 referrals between September 2023- March 2024. The offer continues to be provided with a further 11 referrals in the first part of the financial year. Feedback received confirms improvement in wellbeing following clinical supervision sessions, reinforcing the service's positive impact on stress management and resilience. Initial results are encouraging, the service is focusing efforts on promotion and data collection to ensure the full potential of the offer is accessed by staff.
- 7.3 The service believe good quality clinical supervision is having a positive impact on staff retention and lowering sickness rates as the Clinical Supervision is embedded and promoted further.
- 7.4 Children and Education Services continues to offer Wellbeing weeks twice a year, this includes monthly wellbeing activities. Feedback from staff is positive, *staff stating: 'inclusive and welcoming' 'real range of events' 'offer is amazing' 'don't stop all the good work with wellbeing'*. To ensure wellbeing is accessible to all staff multiple locations are offered. The service continues to improve the wellbeing offer to ensure more inclusive, flexible and accessible to all to help support retention of staff.

8 Flexible Working

- 8.1 The compressed working hours (9-day fortnight) was piloted in three service areas within Children and Education Services between October 2023 and February 2024. The pilot areas included: the Fostering service, the South Area Teams and the Professional Support service. The 12-week pilot explored the

implications of a wider roll out of the opportunity to work 74 hours over 9 days giving an additional free day per fortnight.

- 8.2 As a result of the success of the pilot, the 9-day-fortnight was rolled out and promoted further across Children and Education Services on 4 September 2024. To date 119 employees are working a 9-day fortnight. Feedback is positive providing employees with a better work life balance and support in managing family and children.

9 Overall impact – Workforce Stability

- 9.1 Children and Education Services experience significant workforce pressures, with the high turnover of social worker staff and high level of vacancies and difficulty in recruiting agency staff to cover vacancies.
- 9.2 To attract, recruit and retain a stable permanent workforce and to remain competitive in the market, the recruitment and retention initiatives are helping to support and stabilise the workforce pressures.
- 9.3 The impact of the retention payment and delivery of 48 newly qualified social workers through the Social Work Academy is supporting the reduction in the number of vacancies and reliance on agency staff. The service continues to promote the benefits of working within the service, encouraging Agency workers to apply for vacancies.
- 9.4 The impact of the recruitment and retention initiatives over the last two years are highlighted below:

	Vacancies as of October 2022	Agency staff covering vacancies as at October 2022	Vacancies as of October 2023	Agency staff covering vacancies as of October 2023	Vacancies as of October 2024	Agency Staff covering vacancies as of October 2024
Social Worker	22	12	8.5	10	9	3
Advanced Social Worker	17	12	12	10	1	5
Senior Practitioner	8	2	1	1	2	0
Team Manager	5	3	1	1	1	1
Total	52	28	22.5	22	13	9

10 Next Steps

- 10.1 The service will continue to promote Children and Education Services as a good place to practice social work and offer incentives and benefits to recruit and retain more experienced social workers to secure a stable, permanent, highly skilled and capable workforce.
- 10.2 As a Good authority, the service is proud that Ofsted recognised the achievements in supporting good outcomes for children and young people in Coventry, creating an environment where good social work practice can flourish.
- 10.3 The Children and Education Services Workforce Development Strategy is aligned to the Corporate People Plan, it outlines strategies to support and improves the recruitment and retention of children's services practitioners, including through the training and development offer.

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