

Action to address continued recruitment challenges in children's services including the recruitment of Additional Temporary Social Workers in Children's Services

To: Children and Young People Committee

Meeting Date: 30th November 2021

From: Director of Children's Services

Electoral division(s): All

Key decision: No

Forward Plan ref: n/a

Outcome: This report is for Members to consider the impact of the national shortage of qualified and experienced social workers on services in Cambridgeshire. The report outlines the long and short term measures being taken to address this, and informs committee of a recent urgent decision to award a contract for the supply of locum social workers.

Our aim is to ensure that the children's social care service has sufficient staff to safeguard children in the short and longer term.

Recommendation: The Committee is recommended to:

- a) Note the details of the urgent decision to award a contract for the supply of staffing on an interim basis, as set out in Exempt Appendix 2.
- b) Note and comment on the measures being taken to improve the permanent recruitment and retention of our staff.

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1. Background

- 1.1. After a period of increased stability in staffing in children's services, the position has been deteriorating over the last 3-6 months. The market for temporary agency staff has become very difficult over recent months, and we have recruited only a small number of permanent staff over the same period. At the same time, the usual turnover of existing locum and permanent staff has resulted in a situation where staffing levels are at a critically low level.
- 1.2. While we have been working to address recruitment and retention issues with longer term solutions, as detailed below, we have reached a position where urgent action has been necessary to stabilise the service and allow for those longer-term measures to have impact.
- 1.3. The immediate pressure on staffing and the highly competitive market for locum staff meant that we have needed to take an urgent decision to make a direct award for the supply of locum staff. Because of the commercial sensitivity of the contract, the details are contained in Exempt Appendix 1.
- 1.4. Taking the decision in this way has meant that the first cohort of locum staff should be joining us in the first week of December 2021.

2. Main Issues

- 2.1. Staffing in children's services in all authorities, but especially those in the South and East of the UK, is an area of continuing challenge and one where constant action is required.
- 2.2. A successful recruitment campaign in Cambridgeshire during 2019/20 brought in a number of experienced and qualified social workers, after a period where staffing shortages had been particularly acute.
- 2.3. In the early stages of the pandemic, there was also some continuing success in recruiting permanent staff as at that point it seemed that some agency social workers were seeking certainty at that time.
- 2.4. As the pandemic has progressed, however, the flow of permanent applications has faltered and it has also become increasingly difficult to recruit agency staff.
- 2.5. We are no longer competing with authorities only in our area; changes to expectations about being present in offices for meetings has resulted in it being possible for people based locally to work across the country. Visits are undertaken in two or at most three long days, meaning that typically only one night in a hotel is needed. The rest of the time, people are able to work from home.
- 2.6. Senior staff in our front-line services have been spending an ever increasing amount of time interviewing locum staff who accept the offer, but then do not begin the assignment. This is because their current authority ups their pay rate when they say they are leaving, or because they have accepted a number of roles and are waiting for the best offer before making a final decision.
- 2.7. As these increasing challenges have become clear, we have undertaken a number of measures including the commissioning of an external agency to develop a new marketing campaign for permanent staff [launched on 17th November] and by taking steps to improve

our ability to retain staff once we have recruited them. More information about these measures can be found below.

- 2.8. However, the service reached a position where urgent action was needed to address the growing staff shortage. This is the context behind the Chief Executive taking an urgent decision to allow immediate recruitment of additional agency staff, as set out below.

Urgent Decision by Chief Executive

- 2.9. Under the constitution the Chief Executive may take a decision which is normally reserved to committee or another officer, where they believe the decision is urgent. The Chief Executive took an urgent decision to allow the direct award of a contract to deliver a number of experienced social workers to Cambridgeshire County Council children's services by the end of the calendar year.
- 2.10. Details of that decision are included in the first appendix to this report, which is exempt from publication on the grounds that it contains commercially sensitive information. The decision itself is included as Exempt Appendix 2. This is also exempt from publication, again because it contains commercially sensitive information.
- 2.11. The decision was urgent because with the continued loss of agency staff, the situation was now becoming critical, with the potential for impact on our ability to meet our legal obligations. In addition, the supply of experienced locum social workers takes place within a highly competitive market. Once it became apparent to the authority that a number of experienced social workers would be becoming available owing to the ending of assignments, we had to move extremely quickly in order to avoid any possibility of other local authorities taking advantage of their availability.
- 2.12. The agency concerned was not in a position to begin the process of allocating the staff to Cambridgeshire until they were in possession of a contract for their supply. No contract could be offered before the decision was taken. The contract needed to be completed in the week commencing 15th November 2021 in order to secure the supply of the staff in the required timeframe. The only mechanism for achieving this was via a decision by the Chief Executive.
- 2.13. For the above reasons, the Chief Executive made the urgent decision to enable the making of a direct award to the agency using the Eastern Shires Purchasing Organisation [ESPO] framework and to agree to the use of a waiver from the Cambridgeshire Contract Procedure Rules, which allow for a waiver to be given by the appropriate committee or through this decision mechanism where there is insufficient time to go to Committee. This approach was also agreed by the s151 officer.
- 2.14. Before making the decision, the Chief Executive consulted as required by the Constitution, including with Group Leaders, the Monitoring Officer and chairs and vice chairs of relevant committees.
- 2.15. This approach was necessary because the staffing position within children's services was becoming critical and continued failure to recruit locum staff through usual mechanisms could have resulted in us struggling to provide an appropriate level of service to vulnerable children, young people and their families.

2.16. Taking this action means that we will be able to address the current capacity issues and provide the necessary time for the longer term issues we have put in place to take effect, as detailed below.

Longer term measures to address staffing challenges

2.17. As noted above, a new campaign for the recruitment of social workers has been developed alongside our existing staff. The campaign is fresh and describes what social workers like and value about working in Cambridgeshire. The campaign launched in the week commencing 15th November 2021, and is being pushed across various social media platforms as well as more traditional recruitment platforms.

2.18. We also have a number of schemes that support entry into social work for those who are at the beginning of their careers. These staff are the experienced staff of the future, of course, but we need to ensure that we have the right balance between new and more experienced staff throughout the organisation.

2.19. Alongside recruiting staff, it is also extremely important to retain the staff we have. Some turnover of staff is healthy in any organisation, but particularly in children's services, it is essential to have a stable core.

2.20. We have consulted extensively with our staff and one issue that has come up very frequently is that of pay, and the extent to which they are able to progress through the pay bands. In response, we have developed a social worker progression programme, which enables qualifying staff to progress in line with continued training and development. This scheme is open to all qualified social workers in practice roles.

2.21. We have also worked with colleagues in HR and finance to develop a retention bonus scheme for those front-line teams where recruitment of qualified social workers and team managers has been most challenging. These include our assessment, Family Safeguarding and corporate parenting teams.

2.22. For eligible permanent social workers and senior practitioners joining the authority as permanent employees, a retention payment will be paid over the course of their first 3 years in post. These payments are paid as a lump sum on the anniversary of appointment and are based on the bottom of the pay-scale.

2.23. After the 3-year period is completed, an annual retention payments will be paid on the anniversary of appointment for eligible social workers, senior practitioners and team managers.

2.24. The payment of a lump sum has a more visible impact for staff than including these payments within a monthly salary.

2.25. Eligible staff who have held permanent positions for at least 12 months will receive a payment equivalent to the first year of the above scheme in the current year, moving onto the year 2 payment next year and so on.

2.26. The cost of implementing the retention scheme is estimated to be £300K to £350K per annum, if we were to achieve full staffing. This cost can be met within existing resources, including as a result of employing fewer higher cost locum staff.

- 2.27. Cost is not the only issue here. While many locum social workers make an excellent contribution to the overall delivery of children's services in Cambridgeshire, higher turnover rates of staff results in more changes of social worker for children, young people and their families, and delays in progressing individual plans.
- 2.28. Not only is this an issue for individual children and their families in terms of the quality of the service they receive, but it means that our work takes longer to complete, increasing the overall number of children open to the service.
- 2.29. The consequences of high staff turnover and levels of vacancies are increasingly borne by our most capable and long-service staff, who end up being asked to cover more work. This can have an impact on morale and on levels of stress and sickness in the organisation if it is not addressed.

Alignment with corporate priorities

3.1 Communities at the heart of everything we do

The following bullet points set out details of implications identified by officers:

- Children do best when they live in stable family homes, attend a consistent school and build sustainable community relationships.

3.2 A good quality of life for everyone

The following bullet points set out details of implications identified by officers:

- Effective children's social care services enable families to address issues that would otherwise have an adverse impact on their children. Achieving the best outcomes for vulnerable children within the community as well as for those in care requires that the service is staffed with sufficient suitably qualified social workers.

3.3 Helping our children learn, develop and live life to the full

The following bullet points set out details of implications identified by officers:

- Children do best in learning and development if they are able to live in stable and loving homes, with their own families if at all possible, or with well-matched foster placements or other care settings if remaining at home is not in their best long-term interests.

3.4 Cambridgeshire: a well-connected, safe, clean, green environment

There are no significant implications for this priority.

3.5 Protecting and caring for those who need us

The following bullet points set out details of implications identified by officers:

- Vulnerable children are entitled to be supported to remain at home with their parents wherever possible. Our social care services work with families where parents are

struggling to meet the needs of their children so that they are supported to make the changes they need to make.

- Where children would be at risk of significant harm were they to remain in the care of their parents, or where they have very complex needs that require specialist care, we provide well-matched placements to enable children and young people to grow up safely and achieve the best possible outcomes.
- These activities all require the service to have sufficient numbers of suitably qualified social workers.

4. Significant Implications

4.1 Resource Implications

The following bullet points set out details of implications identified by officers:

- The cost of the retention bonus scheme can be met from within existing budgets, in part because there will be a reduction in the use of higher cost locum staff.
- The costs associated with the decision to make a direct award for the supply of a number of locum staff discussed within the confidential appendix can be met through the over-achievement of vacancy savings in the current financial year.

4.2 Procurement/Contractual/Council Contract Procedure Rules Implications

The procurement arrangements associated with the making of a direct award in the confidential annex have been agreed by the s.151 Officer.

4.3 Statutory, Legal and Risk Implications

There are no significant implications for this priority.

4.4 Equality and Diversity Implications

There are no significant implications for this priority.

4.5 Engagement and Communications Implications

There are no significant implications for this priority.

4.6 Localism and Local Member Involvement

There are no significant implications for this priority.

4.7 Public Health Implications

The following bullet points set out details of implications identified by officers:

- Supporting good outcomes for children, young people and their families contributes to an overall improvement in public health outcomes.

Have the resource implications been cleared by Finance? Yes
Name of Financial Officer: Martin Wade and Roger Brett

Have the procurement/contractual/ Council Contract Procedure Rules implications been cleared by the LGSS Head of Procurement? Yes
Name of Officer: Henry Swan

Has the impact on statutory, legal and risk implications been cleared by the Council's Monitoring Officer or LGSS Law? No
Name of Legal Officer: Fiona McMillan

Have the equality and diversity implications been cleared by your Service Contact? Yes
Name of Officer: Lou Williams

Have any engagement and communication implications been cleared by Communications? Yes
Name of Officer: Christine Birchall

Have any localism and Local Member involvement issues been cleared by your Service Contact? Yes
Name of Officer: Lou Williams

Have any Public Health implications been cleared by Public Health? Yes
Name of Officer: Raj Lakshman

5. Source documents guidance

5.1 None