

CYNGOR SIR POWYS COUNTY COUNCIL.

**CABINET
22nd February 2021**

REPORT AUTHOR: County Councillor Rachel Powell
Portfolio Holder for Children and Young People

REPORT TITLE: Response to the staffing and other pressures in the
Children's Social Services

REPORT FOR: Decision

1. Purpose

To inform Cabinet of the staffing crisis and other pressures across the workforce in Children's Services, the potential associated risks and impact, and to seek support for the recommended short- and longer-term solutions.

2. Background

A combination of factors has led to Children's Services being placed under considerable and sustained pressures, resulting in the risk of it being unable to meet its statutory responsibilities and regulatory requirements. There is an increasing likelihood that risk management for children will be compromised as social workers and practitioners become overwhelmed with the responsibility of having to manage their workload across all levels of need and demand.

Powys Children's Services is facing severe recruitment challenges in the Assessment, Care and Support, Court and Through Care social work teams. The shortage of adults and children's social workers is acknowledged as a UK-wide issue. The social worker vacancy rate in these teams is currently 54%.

Some nearby Local Authorities are responding to the crisis by increasing the payments to social workers. An example, as reported in the [press](#), is Swansea Children's Services who have announced that they are introducing an additional £6,000 payment incentive to social workers in hard to recruit frontline teams. In response, Pembrokeshire has introduced a £5,000 payment. There is a real risk that we will lose permanent social workers and will have to replace them with temporary agency workers at a current average additional cost of £23,500 per social worker per annum.

If Powys Children's Services were to follow suit and increase the existing market supplement, it would create a pressure of £123,194.47 (21/22) and £257,000.00 (22/23).

Whilst there have been well-documented challenges, it is evident that the global pandemic has impacted further on the ability to maintain a stable workforce who have case responsibility for the most high-risk and complex children in the service.

Staffing has been at a critical point in key service areas, since the summer and despite consistent attempts to recruit, including reenergised corporate support for a recruitment campaign, success has been limited.

One of the consequences of the high vacancy rates in these teams is that we remain over-reliant on agency staff. Managers at all levels are spending a great deal of time managing the day-to-day prioritisation of work, matching limited social work resource to the most critical work.

The Grow our Own Social Workers programme is helping to mitigate this situation. However, the large contingent of newly qualified social workers brings its own challenges. When we embarked upon the programme, we were not anticipating social work students and newly qualified social workers working in the conditions we are all now enduring. Some newly qualified social workers that we have recruited externally, having undertaken their training in universities, have never undertaken a face-to-face visit as part of their training due to COVID restrictions. In addition, they are not receiving the day-to-day support and learning gained through working shoulder to shoulder with experienced colleagues.

Complex high-risk situations are increasing and with fewer staff and solutions, they are carrying through into the night and the weekend. Senior Managers are having little respite from their work. Senior Managers also cover an out of hours duty rota which is increasingly busy. This is taking its toll on the resilience of the Children's Services Leadership team.

The Integrated Disability Service are experiencing increasing pressures with children with complex needs. The pandemic has taken a particular toll on children with disabilities and their families. The disruption to the support available for these children in particular has had a big impact. The Service has responded to this by increasing the visits to children at home and significantly increasing the provision of short breaks. At the same time there is sickness impacting management capacity. The small teams are struggling to manage these high-risk situations and additional management capacity is required for a short period of time.

A further risk is generated by the continued, well-documented deficits of WCCIS, which became even worse during recent system failures following a national upgrade in October and a current system failure.

The workforce is tired and worn-out, having worked under these taxing conditions for some time whilst managing their own experiences of caring responsibilities, illness, bereavement and loss. We need to ensure that we are able to support and sustain our people so that they can continue to undertake the vital work of the service.

3. Advice

3.1 Key Principles

The following four principles have been applied to this plan:

- a. This is an interim and short to longer-term plan.
- b. The approaches to supporting children, young people and families are alternatives to the usual practice in Powys to enable a safe and effective service to be provided.
- c. The reduced resources in the teams will be deployed proportionately across cases depending on need, using a variety of methods for contact and support, and applying the standard RAG rating response to manage risk.
- d. This is to reduce and mitigate risk rather than attempting to maintain the same level of service with the same approach.

A range of solutions are being recommended over the immediate, short and medium term to alleviate the pressures in social work teams, offer incentives to retain and attract social work staff and provide assurances that statutory duties and regulatory requirements can be met.

3.2 Solutions

- a. Alleviating the pressures in social work teams
 - i. People have been redeployed within the Service to respond to priorities.
 - ii. The Service is using all grants available to add additional SW and other capacity to Front Door, Assessment Teams, Early Help and administration to respond to increased demand and to cover absence.
 - iii. A temporary Care and Wellbeing team has been created, staffed and managed entirely by agency workers. The care and support and court teams have been focusing on the more complex cases (those in court, for example) which has meant they have not had the time

needed to progress and move on other cases. The temporary Care and Wellbeing team has been commissioned to accept case management responsibility for many of the children in need of care and support cases from the Care and Support teams. They will review and progress these and it is expected that this will lead to a high number of cases either being stepped down to early help or being closed. This team will also take assessments directly from Front Door where it is assessed that the work is unlikely to progress to child protection or court.

- iv. Wellbeing workers, whilst not qualified Social Workers, are able to undertake several key tasks within the case managing teams enabling social workers to prioritise the work they are required to complete as qualified workers. Work that can be undertaken by wellbeing workers includes:
- Liaising with agencies to gather information for assessments
 - Direct work with children and young people – visits to children open on a child in need of care and support basis
 - Visits to children and young people who are on the child protection register or looked after. This is in addition to routine statutory visits which qualified social workers must undertake, where additional visits are required
 - Facilitating and supporting contact (including transport where required) between children and family members
 - Covering duty calls
 - Undertaking direct work with parents/wider family to develop their confidence/parenting skills
 - Undertaking crisis visits to avoid escalation
 - Preparing chronologies, genograms, life story books
 - Writing case notes for joint visits undertaken with social workers including assessment sessions
 - General support to families, for example signposting, liaising with housing, domestic abuse services, etc.
 - Attending appointments with families where support is needed
 - Attending child in need of care and support meetings as required
- v. A prioritisation framework has been introduced and is included below for your information. The measures include:
- Statutory visits for looked after children being undertaken on a rotational basis between the allocated social worker and the independent reviewing officer, fostering social worker or the youth justice worker (if a qualified social worker). This will be agreed on a case-by-case basis depending on the child/young person's circumstances.
 - As a last resort, a blend of virtual visits will be introduced for amber and green RAG cases in the Assessment, Care and Support, Integrated Disability and Through Care social work teams.

- vi. In order to enable the service to continue in the face of the workforce crisis it is proposed that Wellbeing Workers be recruited and assigned specific tasks to support the social work teams. This would significantly alleviate the pressure on social workers and strengthen their capacity to undertake meaningful work with children and families to avoid the escalation of need. This will ensure social workers are afforded the time to prioritise the high risk and complex work open to the service and ensure children are safe and their outcomes achieved. It will also enable us to provide a consistent secondary allocated worker for some children with the greatest care and support needs. This will help mitigate the impact of the churn of temporary social workers and the inconsistency during those periods where large numbers of staff are absent or isolating.

This additional capacity will also enable the Service to end the temporary Care and Wellbeing team safely.

A further benefit of recruiting wellbeing workers is that these frequently become the social workers of the future.

Whilst there has been difficulty recruiting into social work posts (permanent and agency), historically we have been successful with recruiting to the non-social work posts in the service.

This is the most cost effective option and we will be looking to invest in and develop these staff to become our permanent social workers.

b. Incentives to attract and retain social work staff

There are a number of options:

- i. Move all newly qualified social workers across Children's Services to the top of the grade 10 salary range.
- ii. Enable colleagues to work a 9-day fortnight to support the health and wellbeing of the workforce.

d. Medium to longer term solutions

It is acknowledged that the recommendations and solutions above, to provide immediate support, are short term in nature.

- i. Strengthen the implementation of the Children's Services Grow Our Own Social Worker project.

- ii. Undertake an analysis to understand the longer-term impact on the Service, of the sustained increase in demand in Children's Services
- iii. Work with other Local Authorities in our Region is underway to look at how we can harmonise our social work offer so that we promote stability in the workforce together.
- iv. AWHOCS representatives are exploring with ADSS Cymru, Social Care Wales and Welsh Government the development of a number of All Wales initiatives such as a social work recruitment campaign, and a memorandum of understanding with recruitment agencies to agree standards of behaviour and control and cap the hourly rate paid for agency social work staff.

Risks

| Risk description | Actions to mitigate |
|--|--|
| IF staff absence and vacancy rates do not reduce THEN it is likely the mental and emotional well-being across the wider CS workforce will deteriorate further due to higher caseloads. This will lead to higher staff sickness and shortages which will prevent the service from being delivered safely and effectively. | Move newly qualified social workers to top of grade 10 Support staff to return to office-based working Active promotion by managers of wellbeing support and timely referrals to occupational health |
| IF staffing levels cannot be maintained THEN as a service the likelihood is that statutory duties and requirements will not be fulfilled | Recruit additional wellbeing workers Re-assign work from social workers to wellbeing workers Strengthen the Grow our Own Project to bring long term stability to the Workforce |

4. Resource Implications

Each component of the solutions being considered, to attract and retain staff, has been costed and is shown in the table below. No additional funding is being requested; this is all within existing budget.

| Solution | Costs (includes on-costs) | |
|---|-----------------------------------|--|
| All newly qualified social workers moved to top of grade 10 | £5,000 (21/22) £10,000 (22/23) | Factored into budget as budget already set at top of grade |
| Enable colleagues to work a 9-day fortnight to support the health and wellbeing of the workforce. | No cost | |

| | | |
|--|----------|---|
| Creating 22 Wellbeing Worker posts (2 per critical team) | £836,000 | Managed through existing service resources. |
|--|----------|---|

The posts will be recruited to as the funding is identified by releasing agency staff.

The solutions above will be managed within existing service resources. These Wellbeing Workers will be recruited as the budget is released or grant funding is identified. This work will begin as soon as possible. If Wellbeing Workers are recruited this year, it will not result in additional in year budget pressure.

The role of social worker is a statutory role, enabling the local authority to carry out statutory duties. The risk register sets out the risks to PCC and Powys citizens if the authority is unable to carry out these statutory duties. It is vital that we respond to ensure that we can continue to perform these functions even in the face of this staffing crisis and other pressures.

The Head of Finance (Section 151 Officer) notes the content of the report and that the actions will be delivered within existing service budgets.

5. Legal implications

- 5.1 Legal: the recommendations can be accepted from a legal point of view
- 5.2 The Head of Legal and Democratic Services (Monitoring Officer) has commented as follows: “ I note the legal comment and have nothing to add to the report”.

6. Data Protection

- 6.1 This proposal does not involve the processing of personal data, other than such processing as is already undertaken.

7. Comment from local member(s)

This effects children, young people and families right across the county.

8. Impact Assessment

- 8.1 Actions, if agreed, will only improve the situation and there are no anticipated negative impacts.

9. Recommendation

The recommendation for Cabinet is:

9.1 To acknowledge the current staffing crisis in the Children's Social Services workforce, the other pressures including increased demand, and the impact this is having on the Council's ability to consistently deliver a safe and effective service.

9.2 To note and support the responses to this crisis that have already been implemented.

9.3 To support the proposed solutions to mitigate the impact of this crisis

Contact Officer: Jan Coles, Head of Children's Services

Tel: 01597 826393

Email: jan.coles@powys.gov.uk

Head of Service: Jan Coles

Corporate Director: Alison Bulman

Appendix 1

Priority Framework

Appendix 2

Service Priority Task List