



Report of
Scrutiny Board
(Children and Young People)

Recruitment, Retention and Workload
of Children's Social Workers

Date of Publication: April 2006

SESSIONAL EVIDENCE

Reports and Publications Submitted

- Report of the Head of Scrutiny and Member Development – Draft Framework for Monitoring Support to Children in Care – November 2005
- Annual Performance Assessment (APA) Dataset for Leeds Children’s Services – Service Management extract
- Information provided by Social Services in response to issues raised in relation to Looked After children following the Scrutiny Board (Children and Young People) meeting on 27th September 2005
- Information circulated following the Members’ training session on Children’s Social Services – December 2005
- Report of the Director of Social Services to Scrutiny Board (Social Care) – December 2004 – Recruitment and Retention of Staff Inquiry
- Report of the Director of Social Services to Scrutiny Board (Social Care) – January 2005 - Recruitment and Retention of Staff Inquiry
- Report of the Director of Social Services to Scrutiny Board (Social Care) - February 2005 - Recruitment and Retention of Staff Inquiry
- Scrutiny Board (Social Care) Recruitment and Retention of Staff – Inquiry Report – May 2005
- Recruitment and Retention of Staff - Formal response from Social Services to Scrutiny Board (Health and Wellbeing) – July 2005
- Newham Council – Recruitment and Retention of Social Workers – Scrutiny Commission Report – July 2003
- Scrutiny Working Group on the Recruitment, Retention and Workload of Children’s Social Workers – Follow-up information

(copies of the written submissions are available on request from the Scrutiny Support Unit)

Witness Heard

- Tony Griffin, Head of Community Services (Children), Social Services
- Peter Sowden, Head of Human Resources - Children’s Services, Social Services

Dates of Scrutiny

- 17th November 2005 (Scrutiny Board)
- 12th January 2006 (Working Group)
- 30th January 2006 (Working Group)

Working Group Membership

- Councillor Bale
- Councillor Selby
- Mr Gathercole

Report of Scrutiny Board (Children and Young People)

Recruitment, Retention and Workload of Children's Social Workers

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 In the autumn of 2005, the Scrutiny Board (Children and Young People) completed an inquiry into services for Looked After Children, originally commissioned by the Scrutiny Board (Social Care). The scope of the original inquiry focused on children at risk of entering and being taken into the care system, as well as young people leaving care and being supported into independent living.
- 1.2 As a result of their involvement in completing this Inquiry, Members of the Scrutiny Board (Children and Young People) identified a need for ongoing monitoring of support to Looked After children as a key area of their work. They also highlighted a particular concern about the recruitment, retention and workload of children's social workers. This was in relation to children in public care, but also in relation to services aimed at avoiding children being taken into care in the first place.
- 1.3 Members wished to consider the staff resources available for preventative and child protection services, in order to ensure that the Council could fulfil its obligations and that an appropriate balance could be struck between prevention and intervention
- 1.4 It was agreed that detailed analysis of this issue would be carried out on the Board's behalf by a small working group, who would report their findings back to the full Board. It was agreed that the working group would look at information on recruitment, retention, pay and rewards, turnover, sickness, training, caseloads and associated issues. It would consider comparisons with other core cities but also with neighbouring authorities, due to the local competition for staff.
- 1.5 The working group met on two occasions during January 2006. In addition to the information listed above the working group considered the findings of an inquiry carried out during 2004/05 by the Scrutiny Board (Social Care) into the recruitment and retention of staff in Social Services generally, and the report of a scrutiny inquiry by Newham councillors on the recruitment and retention of social workers. The working group also considered information on the local market for agency social workers, as a competitor for staff, and the progress of the Workstream group in Social Services, set up specifically to address workforce issues.

2.0 Scope of the Inquiry

- 2.1 The purpose of the Inquiry was to make an assessment of, and where appropriate, make recommendations on, the staff resources available for preventative and child protection services, in order to ensure that the Council could fulfil its obligations and that an appropriate balance could be struck between prevention and intervention.

3.0 Summary of Evidence, Conclusions and Recommendations

- 3.1 In essence members of the working group defined their task as assessing the extent to which recruitment, retention and workload issues inhibited the authority's ability to identify and respond to children at risk.

Caseload

- 3.2 Members were informed that there were about 6,000 live 'cases' at any one time in relation to children and young people. Around 1,300 of these were children in care, with approximately a further 200 receiving respite care. About 300 children were on the Child Protection Register.
- 3.3 Given that those children taken into care should be considered to have been removed from the original risk to their wellbeing, in this piece of work the working group focused on the large majority of live cases which had not proceeded to this stage.
- 3.4 The group considered figures on the numbers of referrals received, and the relative numbers which progressed through each of the stages of assessment: Referral → Initial assessment → Core assessment → Care plan
We were given figures for the numbers of referrals received from January to December 2005.

number of referrals	11,223	
number of initial assessments	5,317	47%
number going on to core assessment	960	9%
number going on to a care plan	401	4%
number where no further action was taken	136	1%

We were informed that in any given year up to 800 new cases were picked up and allocated to social workers.

Referrals

- 3.5 It was noted that referrals could come from many sources, triggered by concerns about a child's situation for many reasons. Many referrals were filtered out at the call centre stage, possibly through signposting to other services. An initial assessment would then seek to establish whether the referral should trigger further action from a social services perspective of diagnosing a child's needs. This initial assessment needed to be done within 7 days, although in the most urgent cases, it might actually be done within a matter of minutes.
- 3.6 We discussed the need for other professionals, for example in schools and health services, to have a basic understanding of the triggers and thresholds which would indicate the appropriateness of social services input to meet children's needs.
- 3.7 The new children's services arrangements, and in particular the Common Assessment Framework, should particularly assist with this, along with the common

core of skills being developed for all staff working in this area. It was also noted that it would be part of the remit of the new Local Safeguarding Children Boards to promote understanding among all relevant professionals of triggers for concern about potential neglect or abuse of children.

- 3.8 A better understanding should help other professionals to better assess for themselves when a social services referral was, and was not, appropriate, hopefully making more effective use of social services resources. However we were assured that the need to protect those at real risk was paramount in any professional judgement of this nature, and that this would and must take precedence over any degrees of tension or disagreement within and between professions about such issues.
- 3.9 Members were also assured, in response to anecdotal evidence that those referring concerns to social services sometimes complained to elected Members that nothing seemed to have happened, that the service does need to be able to demonstrate that a positive decision has been taken in each case referred, even if that decision is that no further action is appropriate.
- 3.10 In some instances no social services input would be deemed necessary. However, this did not rule out the appropriateness of support from other children's services in all cases.
- 3.11 We also sought reassurance that there was consistency across the city in terms of the benchmark trigger levels for intervention, and the expectations of 'normal' family life and parenting skills.

Staffing Levels

- 3.12 We asked about the adequacy of staffing levels to ensure that children in Leeds received the protection they required. Our discussion took account of concerns expressed during our scrutiny inquiry on Looked After Children, and also acknowledged that there were national issues about the recruitment and numbers of qualified social workers. The background reports gave a detailed analysis of the reasons for this, and recruitment and retention strategies adopted in response.
- 3.13 Officers told us that their professional analysis led them to believe that the number of allocated social work and associated posts in Leeds was about right. However there had been a vacancy rate of around 10 - 15% in the recent past, and it was here that the challenges lay.
- 3.14 We heard about the strategies adopted to address this vacancy problem, both in the short-term to manage caseloads, and also in the longer-term to try and establish a stable workforce. In particular we heard how the following strategies were being successfully applied as part of a concerted plan:
- The allocation of resources between areas and specialist/front-line work:
 - The skills mix of Social Workers and Social Work Assistants, to maximise the use of professional Social Worker resources;
 - The use of bursary and training schemes to increase the local pool of qualified staff.

- 3.15 We also noted that in some cases, staff originally employed on part-time hours were working full-time on a temporary basis to cover vacant posts.
- 3.16 We noted that the department had been particularly successful in attracting good candidates to Social Work Assistant posts, and that they would then often sponsor such staff to go on to become fully qualified. This was a positive retention measure, and could be particularly attractive to local people with a commitment to the area.
- 3.17 We acknowledged that Leeds could also be an attractive location for young people entering social work to choose to come to, although the rates of attrition varied between different areas of the city. We were informed that there was currently no provision for key worker housing in Leeds, and it was not known whether local house prices were a particular factor impacting on recruitment and retention in this field of work.
- 3.18 We also asked about the impact of caseloads, for example whether lower vacancy levels created lower actual caseloads, and a virtuous circle in terms of stress levels for staff. We heard anecdotal evidence that this was not necessarily the case, in that officers were able to tell us of at least three staff who had recently left the authority only to return when they found that the grass was not greener elsewhere.
- 3.19 It was however noted that Leeds salaries were comparable to or slightly higher than other authorities in West Yorkshire. For example salary rates were the same as in Bradford, the entry level salary was higher than Wakefield or Kirklees, and the maximum salary point was 4 scale points higher than Wakefield, Kirklees and Calderdale. In relation to core cities, social workers in Leeds were paid more than those in Birmingham, Sheffield or Newcastle. Although the starting salaries in Manchester and Bristol were higher, the maximum salary point was lower.
- 3.20 We acknowledged that a good deal of progress had been made by the department in adopting a longer-term approach to tackling vacancies. In fact we were told that it was anticipated that the current cohort of bursary students and trainee Social Workers would fill the bulk of the current vacancies during the course of this year. It would then be a case of maintaining consistent staffing levels through the continued application of the current strategies.

Attendance Management

- 3.21 We were aware that Overview and Scrutiny Committee were conducting a major inquiry on attendance management, covering the whole council, and therefore we did not discuss this in any depth during this piece of work.

CRB Checks

- 3.22 Officers informed us that the department had overcome most of the problems arising from delays in obtaining Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) clearance for new employees. It was now taking an average of just under three weeks for checks to be completed. In addition, the department was now issuing the forms to candidates at interview, which saved about two weeks in the recruitment process. The department kept in touch with successful candidates whilst awaiting clearance, to minimise the risk of them taking up any alternative offer of employment. We learned that this was

one of a number of actions being taken by the department to try and reduce the time taken to recruit staff, and consequently to reduce the risk that the most worthwhile candidates would find jobs elsewhere whilst awaiting confirmation of appointment from Leeds.

- 3.23 We asked whether there was any preparatory work, not involving contact with children, that people could be undertaking whilst clearance was awaited. For example we had heard previously how the youth service used this period for induction work.

Recommendation 1

That the Director of Social Services considers adopting similar practices to those introduced by the Youth Service to carry out induction programmes whilst awaiting CRB clearance.

Agency Staffing

- 3.24 We also asked about the use of agency staffing to cover for vacancies. We learned that this was a particular area where progress had been made, and that as a result of the new strategies listed above the department had been able to move away from the levels of dependency on agencies that had existed a couple of years previously. Agencies were still used, but to a much lesser extent.
- 3.25 The Council had recently awarded a new contract for agency staff, having gone through a procurement process. The new framework contract included five approved agencies which managers could approach to provide cover. We noted that under the contract, the council did not have to pay an introduction fee if staff from an agency were subsequently recruited.
- 3.26 Officers provided some detailed information on the pay and benefits offered by the various agencies, and we noted that as a rule staff were not being paid higher rates than council staff. We recognised that some people would choose to work for an agency for example if they wanted to work specific hours or only for part of a year. Others might sign on with an agency to try working for a number of different employers before seeking permanent employment.
- 3.27 However, we also noted that the council was looking to develop a corporate package of fringe benefits for staff as part of the People Strategy, which would provide similar incentives to some of the fringe benefits offered by some agencies. In addition the various flexible working packages were available for staff who wished to work reduced hours, although this tended to be a reactive process, rather than being actively promoted as an option.

Skills Mix

- 3.28 We discussed in more detail how the department was adopting new methods of organising the work in order to make the most effective use of staffing. For example, whilst it was necessary for a Care Plan to be defined by a Social Worker, and for key decisions to be taken by them, much of the work towards targets within a Care Plan could be undertaken by Social Work Assistants. Employing more Social Work Assistants relied on good management of those staff, but enabled the department to

respond more flexibly to the current shortage of qualified Social Work staff (and also to cover for sickness absences) by focusing their work on core tasks. In a number of cases Social Work Assistants were undergoing professional training and going on to be promoted internally to Social Work posts once they qualified. However, there were also staff who were happy to continue at Assistant level.

- 3.29 We heard about proposals to create senior practitioner roles, which would recognise greater levels of experience, and involve more experienced staff in some supervision and mentoring of unqualified staff. This approach would enable the service to develop and reward experience without creating extra layers of hierarchy, as these staff would not be managers.
- 3.30 We also discussed the use of other providers including the voluntary and community sector to provide some services and specialised activities where appropriate. There were many other staff involved in supportive and preventative work, such as children's centres. All of these contributed to the wellbeing of children and families, enabling Social Work professionals to focus on the key safeguarding and associated specialist roles.
- 3.31 It was suggested that there might be scope to explore opportunities for staff to rotate between different jobs, or possibly even to develop secondments between sectors, particularly in order to help to manage the stress levels associated with some of the most intensive assessment roles, but also to develop the skills of individuals and generate better understanding of different roles. It was noted that there was no policy as such, but there were instances where individual requests had been agreed.

Recommendation 2

That the Director of Social Services considers the potential for developing job rotation and secondment opportunities.

Impact of the Children Act

- 3.32 The common core of skills which would apply in future to staff working in children's services should make it easier for people to move between different roles in the future. In the meantime the Common Assessment Framework and the assigning of a lead professional (not necessarily from Social Services) to each case was being piloted in the West of the city, prior to being implemented city-wide. (However, we noted that Social Workers would still be the lead professionals for all Looked After Children and children on the Child Protection Register.)
- 3.33 These new ways of working, along with the development of more multi-agency networks and co-located services, would lead to cases being managed very differently in future to current practice. Officers told us that, in tandem with the strategies currently bearing fruit of 'growing our own' staff and initiatives to increase the number of Social Work trainees, these developments provided a genuine and realistic light at the end of the tunnel.
- 3.34 We were also told that the department had recently restructured to create new posts of Head of Service Delivery and Head of Service Improvement, for both adult and children's services. The latter posts would focus on key projects including the skills mix and deployment of staff, as this was still seen as a priority area for the

department. In the case of children's services this would clearly link into the development of the children's workforce strategy for Leeds.

Case management

- 3.35 We asked about what happened with the cases of families that moved around the city, or where children were cared for by one parent or the other at different times. We were informed that family mobility did not automatically lead to a case being transferred between staff in different areas of the city. This was also one instance of the size of Leeds being an advantage, as families often moved within the city rather than to other authorities. It was therefore easier to keep track of them and there was less chance of families 'falling through the net' than when they moved to another authority.
- 3.36 The usual criteria for assigning a case to a particular area office was on the basis of the address where the child was 'normally resident', but cases were not automatically transferred when a family moved. However, it was acknowledged that there were times when there could be quite lengthy discussion between area managers to agree whether a particular case should transfer or not, as this had an impact on the overall workload of a particular area team.
- 3.37 We also noted that there had been no noticeable impact on case referral rates from the introduction of the Sure Start programmes, which focused on early intervention and support to families. Two possible reasons for this were put forward: that the time lag in seeing the benefits of the programmes was not yet being felt in terms of numbers of children referred to social services; and that in fact more cases requiring social services intervention were now being spotted at an earlier stage. We also heard how drug use among parents was increasingly a factor leading to children being referred to Social Services.
- 3.38 A further issue raised in relation to case management was a perception from Social Services that the court system had a tendency to apply more stringent standards when asked to discharge a care order and return a child to its family than when originally invoking such an order. This conservative approach was possibly leading to some children staying in local authority care longer than necessary.

Recommendation 3

That the Director of Children's Services, in consultation with the Director of Legal and Democratic Services, considers how to appropriately challenge the unnecessary prolonging of care orders.

- 3.39 In summary, we were satisfied that the Social Services Department was treating the issue of the recruitment, retention and workload of children's social workers as a priority area, and had sensible strategies in place to seek to address the shortfall in social work staff over the medium term.

Report Agreed by the Board on 26 April 2006

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**Signed by the Chair of Scrutiny Board
(Children and Young People)**