

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

17 JANUARY 2023

WORCESTERSHIRE CHILDREN FIRST: SOCIAL WORK WORKFORCE

Summary

1. The Cabinet Member with Responsibility for Children and Families and the Director of Children's Services have been invited to the meeting to update the Panel on developments relating to the Qualified Children's Social Work Workforce.

Background

2. In the context of the well-known challenges of recruitment and retention of social workers and the high-profile challenging role of children's services, this report is provided to give assurance that Worcestershire Children First (WCF) are working effectively to provide a social work workforce able to deliver high quality services to children and families.

WCF Workforce Strategy

3. The workforce vision is that WCF will be an employer of choice and will have:
 - A culture where employees live and breathe our vision and values through everything they do and they want to contribute to our success.
 - An environment where employees perform at their best and demonstrate our behaviours on a daily basis.
 - A workforce which has personal and collective resilience by putting employee wellbeing at the heart of everything we do.
 - Visible leadership at all levels from leaders who have the freedom to act; making WCF a high performing organisation.
 - The right people, with the right skills, in the right roles who are empowered and supported to succeed.
 - A flexible workforce which is responsive to the needs of the people of Worcestershire both now and in the future.

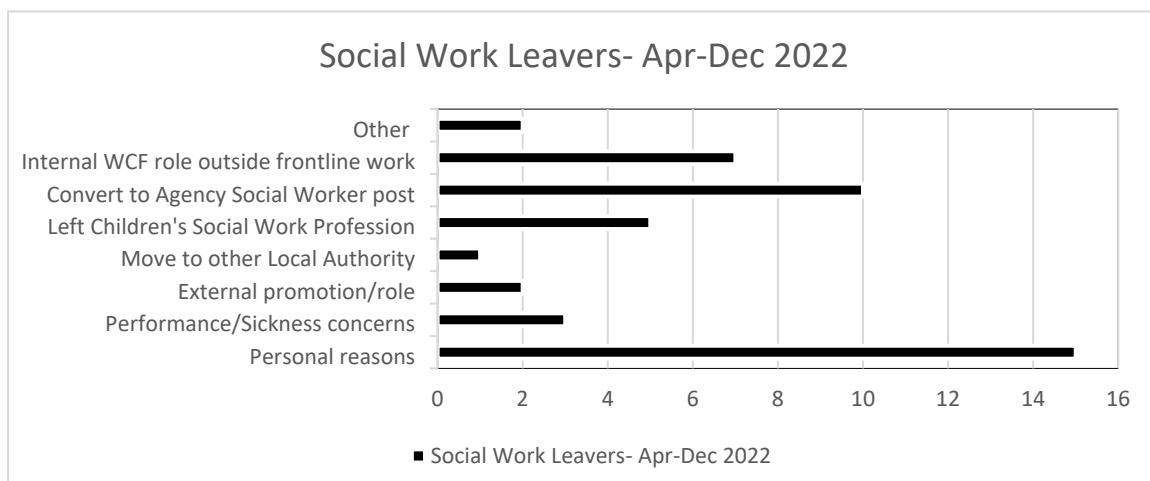
WCF Social Work Workforce Profile

4. WCF is resourced to employ 284.3 full-time equivalent qualified social workers to deliver the objectives set out in its Business Plan. This "Establishment" figure includes Social Work Management and 185.8 full-time equivalent posts for frontline Social Workers engaged in safeguarding work.
5. Permanency rates for all qualified posts and frontline posts remain broadly in line with the longer-term parameters, with rates for 2021 between 82-90%.

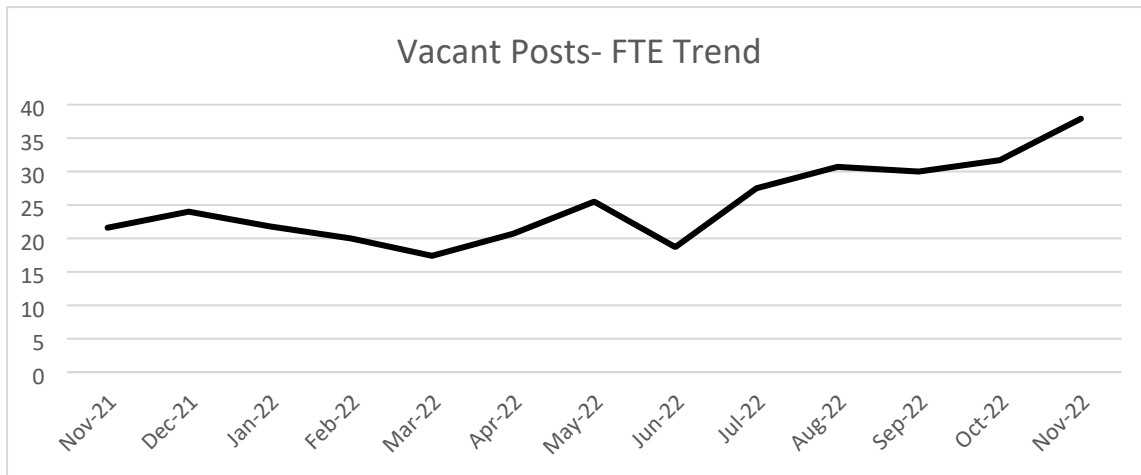
6. The level of permanent staff in Social Work Management positions has been consistently over 96% for the last 2 years. The success in recruiting and retaining managers continues to offer stable and effective leadership and support to the frontline teams and demonstrates the positive engagement of the leadership team.
7. As at the end of November 2022, 35 Agency Social Workers were employed by WCF of which 31% have been with WCF for over 12 months. This is broadly in line with the same period in 2021.

Turnover & Vacancies

8. The turnover for frontline safeguarding social work practitioners is 18% and for all qualified social work roles is 16%. The average across the previous 12 months is 14% reflecting a higher turnover than usual in quarter 1 of 2022/23 of front-line SW and information has been collated about frontline Social Worker's reasons for resignation.
9. As seen in the chart below, which reflects "personal reasons" as the highest number of leavers, this is a combination of people moving out of the area, life choices and responsibilities and we can also see a significant driver has been staff leaving the profession or front-line safeguarding followed by leaving for higher agency pay rates.



10. Vacancies have increased to 37.9 full-time equivalent posts, which is a significant increase from 21.6 at the same point in 2021 and, with 70% of all current vacancies being within safeguarding and family front door teams, the service has felt pressure in management of workload and workflow.
11. This is where we can evidence strong leadership and the "end to end" collective approach of WCF as we have been able to re-direct social work resources and funding to respond to key areas of greatest need to maintain safe practice.



Sickness

12. The majority of sick leave is long term, with short term absence figures remaining low and below those of the Council. Average days lost to the end of quarter 2 is 3.14 days per person which is lower than the equivalent period for 2021-22 and compares favourably with figures for the previous 5 years. The top cause of long-term absences is stress, followed by psychological issues (anxiety/ depression/ insomnia), then absences related to cancer.

Capacity and Performance Management

13. WCF has always had a workforce approach of “high support and high challenge”. At the end of this period there are 20 cases which are formally open to Human Resources relating to; long term/short term absences, conduct/performance issues and there are a number of staff supported through informal performance plans to support them to improve practice and provide the consistent quality of service WCF seeks to achieve.
14. The 2021-22 year-end Staff Performance Review cycle was completed with 97% of reviews taking place within timescale. 94% of employees had a rating of successful or higher which is an increase on the previous year (92%).
15. Monthly Supervisions were carried out for all Social Workers by their Line Managers, with a compliance rate of 92%.

Agency Social Workers

16. The review by Josh McCallister into Children’s Social Care launched January 2021 and reported May 2022, recognised the pressure on practice and funding for children’s services in the employment of agency staff. Whilst there is a role for agency staff in the workforce supporting need for things such as maternity and sickness cover, the aim is to have permanence and stability. 37% of agency staff have been with WCF for over 12 months. There is a regional Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) in place, and a DfE announcement is awaited in January 2023 as a response to the issue raised in the Care Review.

Principal Social Worker Role

17. Designated Principal Social Workers (PSW) were first proposed by Professor Eileen Munro in her Review of Child Protection in 2011, which identified the importance of better communication and understanding between social workers and senior management. Professor Munro stated that Principal Social Workers should:
- Create a clear line of communication between frontline staff and senior management
 - Champion best practice
 - Encourage a “reflective approach” to social work
 - Help to reduce bureaucracy and the amount of time spent on process-driven activities
 - Support social workers to use their core skills and interventions which make a real difference to people

Principal Social Worker in Worcestershire

18. The Principal Social Work Role was first introduced in Worcestershire in 2012; the current post-holder, Daniel Gray, has been the Worcestershire Children & Families Principal Social Worker since Spring 2017, bringing consistency to the role.
19. The PSW reports directly to the Director of Children’s Services, ensuring a key line of sight of practice from the Frontline to Senior Manager, as well as being a member of Worcestershire Children First Executive Leadership Team. Ofsted have previously stated of the PSW, “*Social workers and team managers spoke to the inspectors about the positive impact of recent audits and the role of the principal social worker to support their practice*”.
20. The PSW undertakes a quarterly programme of meetings with frontline practitioners, this includes meetings with Student Social Workers, Newly Qualified Social Workers, and Experienced Social Workers - this provides dedicated forums to ensure staff have opportunities to share their experiences of working in Worcestershire as a Children and Families Social Worker. This is complimented by the Principal Social Worker meeting all new staff in the WCF Induction Programme.

WCF Practice Model

21. The WCF vision is to work together with children, families, and their support networks so parents can care for their own children well.
22. Signs of Safety is the approach WCF uses in its work with children and their families. The approach is both “strength based” and focuses on what’s working well but also being clear on worries and what needs to happen to reduce these.
23. This practice model was introduced in Autumn 2017 when it went live with a whole-service training programme. Since that time, support and training have been provided for all WCF staff and an awareness and training programme delivered to partners. In the 2019 inspection Ofsted commented very positively on the value of the “common language” of social care staff, partners, and families.

Training & Development

24. The Principal Social Worker works closely with the Social Work Academy and Learning & Development; this work informs the Annual Learning Needs Analysis to support the on-going and developing training offer to the workforce from Student Social Workers to Managers.
25. Regular meetings support the sharing of learning from practice, such as outcomes of audits, complaints and learning reviews. This shapes the training offer to ensure this is up to date and relevant to legislative guidance and recent practice – both nationally but also locally for Worcestershire.
26. This work is also presented through regular learning from practice newsletters and briefings.

Health Checks

27. The Principal Social Worker manages and facilitates the Social Work Health Check and the service engagement with the Local Government Association (LGA) Health Check.
28. The Local Government Association document (Delivering standard 1: The social work health-check; LGA, November 2014) states that: *“All employers should: complete, review and publish an annual ‘health-check’ or audit to assess whether the practice conditions and working environment of the organisation’s social work workforce are safe, effective, caring, responsive and well-led”*.
29. Social Care and Safeguarding have run regular Health Checks with the Social Work Workforce since 2017, and key successes in the improvement and the sustaining of how staff experience working for Worcestershire Children First have been seen, including:
 - 99% received dedicated supervision and review of performance – up from 74% in 2017
 - 94% feel they are listened to, and their worries are dealt with by their manager – up from 45% in 2017
 - 95% feel they find our Practice Standards useful in their practice – up from 45% in 2017
 - 80% feel valued in work – up from 31% in 2017
30. In December 2021 WCF took part in the "Standards for Employers of Social Workers " - and are delighted to announce for the second year in a row WCF has been placed in the top two employers in the West Midlands and have been placed in 5th place nationally (up from 12th place in 2020) - this is an incredible outcome and is based on the views and feedback of our Social Workers.

Positive Outcomes Project

Progress report September 2020 – December 2022

31. The Positive Outcomes Project (POP) launched in September 2020 during and despite of the Covid-19 pandemic. Whilst some authorities had decided to end or

pause student placements, or offer virtual learning opportunities, WCF was in a strong position to launch the project with a newly recruited team manager and three social work practice educators.

32. This decision proved to be invaluable as the social work students were able to step into the gap created during Covid with the withdrawal of early help support and advice services provided by partners and health. The extra capacity brought by the students enabled WCF to offer more families a service, whilst at the same time providing students with a realistic and supportive social work learning placement.
33. POP provides a variety of learning opportunities including early help intervention within 2 schools in Worcestershire with emotional support and direct work with young people experiencing mental health problems (not just linked to Covid-19).
34. The project has continued to receive positive feedback from the majority of students about the quality of their learning experience and this supports students to seek employment within WCF, even in some cases, where working within children's services was not their area of interest or their preferred choice of practice area when they started their placement with WCF.
35. POP is focused on the outcome of supporting the growth of the WCF social work workforce building a resilient, well trained, and sustainable workforce with capacity to innovate, evolve and deliver services to children, young people, and families across the county.
36. Social work students living in or close to Worcestershire and who attend a higher education institution within or close to Worcestershire are targeted to complete a social work practice placement with this team.
37. In providing these placements, POP delivers extra capacity to the workforce in the provision of statutory social work assessments (supported by social work practice educators), early help direct work intervention programmes (group work and 1:1 work in schools), Life Story Books for children placed permanently with substitute families, partnership work with the Joint Decision-Making Panel (Youth Justice) and co-working with qualified social workers to support in complex case work.
38. Since the project launched in 2020, the project has provided 51 student social workers with a placement. Of these students, 35 have successfully completed placement and have either qualified as social workers or have continued to their final year and final placement. Of the remaining 16 students, 10 are currently completing placement and all are on track to pass their placement in March 2023.
39. Of the 35 students who completed placement with POP, 29 were eligible to apply for a post as a newly qualified social worker (NQSW). Of these 29 students, 19 applied for a job with WCF, 18 were offered interviews and 18 were offered posts. The other 11 qualified social workers either applied for jobs in other local authorities, continued with education or chose to focus on other priorities.
40. In the first financial year POP's student income revenue was £43,180. This year, to date, the income revenue is £28,100 with a projected income revenue of £21,600 and projected annual total of £29,600. This reduced income reflects the reduced capacity with the staff team to provide more placements with a part time Practice

Educator vacancy and with higher education institutes having had a reduction this year in requests for children’s services placements. WCF continues to re-invest this income into training and development opportunities for WCF workforce across the service.

Assessed and Supported Year in Employment

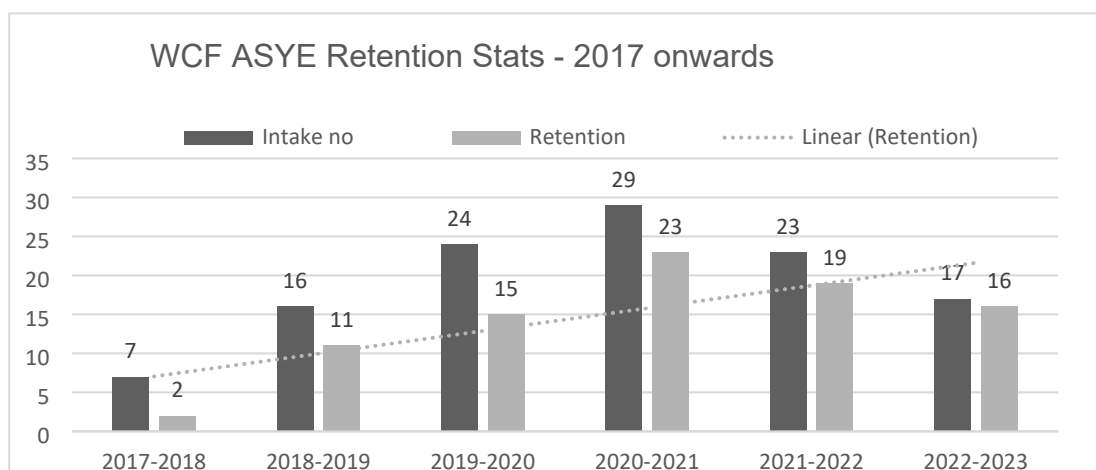
41. Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) is an employer led programme introduced by the Social Work Reform Board in 2012. The 12-month programme is designed to support newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) to develop their skills, knowledge, and capability, strengthening their professional competence. All WCF NQSWs must meet the requirements of the ASYE to pass probation. The ASYE programme supports workforce retention and the delivery of positive outcomes for children, young people, and their families.
42. The assessment standards for the ASYE programme are set out in the Post Qualifying Standards (PQS) and the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) at ASYE level. A NQSW evidences their progressive development to these assessment standards by way of a portfolio which consists of specific evidence. The Social Work Academy (SWA) uphold these frameworks including the Social Work England Professional Standards within the ASYE programme.
43. The ASYE has been embedded in Worcestershire since 2014. The Social Work Academy facilitates the programme across children and adult statutory services, including provision for external organisations such as Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS).

ASYE links with Skills for Care

44. Skills for Care (SFC) have been awarded the tender through the Department for Education (DfE) to mandate the delivery of the Programme across England. The programme is underpinned by The Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England 2020.

Data and analytics

45. Since 2017, 116 Worcestershire Children First NQSWs have commenced their ASYE. The information below sets out figures and retention rates.



Purpose of the Meeting

46. The Panel is asked to:

- Consider and comment on the content of the assurance report
- Agree any comments to highlight to the Cabinet Member
- Determine whether any further information or scrutiny on a particular topic is required.

Supporting Information

Appendix 1 – Worcestershire Children First Workforce Strategy

Contact Points

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Background Papers

In the opinion of the proper officer (in this case the Democratic Governance and Scrutiny Manager (Interim Monitoring Officer)) there are no background papers relating to the subject matter of this report.

[All agendas and minutes are available on the Council's website here.](#)