

Wokingham Borough Council

Children's Services

Social Work Recruitment & Retention Strategy

2022-2024



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1	20 July 2022	Alix Williams & Jo Jolly
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Background and Context

In order to sustainably improve services for children and young people, achieving stability in our children's social care workforce is vital. It underpins everything we are doing to improve the lives of the Borough's most vulnerable children.

A stable and effective workforce builds knowledge, expertise, and improves practice quality through long-term individual and group learning tailored to workers' particular needs. It develops an excellent knowledge of the local area and the challenges children, young people and families face. Leadership and management focusses on achieving practice excellence, with expensive and time-consuming recruitment activity kept to a reasonable level, and teams can truly bond and support each other. Children and young people benefit from workers who know them well, and who can develop trusted long-term relationships with them and with their families.

In the most recent full inspection of Children's Social Care Services (June 2019), Ofsted advised that improvement was needed in the "stability of the workforce in the disabled children's team and the three long-term teams".

Over the past two years, our recruitment and retention strategy has led to a number of changes and improvements in our approach and our offer to our staff. However, after some improvement in stability, the post-covid experience is of staff re-evaluating their work-life balance leading to some loss of staff. The marketplace for Social Workers remains extremely challenging.

This is our two-year strategy for continuing our work to achieve the stable, high-quality children's social care workforce we need to deliver consistently good services to children and young people.

Children's Services Vision and Strategic Principles

Achieving a stable, high-quality social care workforce is vital for achievement of our vision for Wokingham to be:

"A Borough in which all children and young people are safe and cared for, enjoy and achieve, are healthy and resilient, grow up ready for adulthood, and feel happy, hopeful and loved."

This vision is supported by five values which drive the way we work and what we do in pursuit of our vision:

- Improving outcomes for children, young people and families is our priority.
- We have high aspirations for every child.
- We are responsive to need and performance information, managing resources effectively and efficiently.
- We highly value and support our children's workforce across the partnership.
- We work in partnership with professionals, children, young people and families to achieve our collective aims for children and young people.

Where are we Now?

Recruitment and Retention Activity

The well-publicised national shortage of Social Workers, in particular experienced Social Workers, has presented a challenge for many Local Authorities, including Wokingham. In addition to this national shortage, we are challenged with a post-covid movement of Social Workers re-evaluating

their careers – this has been given the national tagline of ‘The Great Resignation’. This has resulted in greater numbers of permanent vacancies which have been filled in the short term by agency staff.

In November 2019, a Recruitment & Retention Specialist joined Children’s Services on an initial 12 month contract to manage Children’s Social Care recruitment and retention activity and provide much needed dedicated focus to this area of work. This short term resource has proven to be a long term business requirement, and we have extended the duration of this role to take us to March 2023 in the first instance. As a result of the R&R Specialist role, we have proven we are able to deliver accurate management information about the workforce on a monthly basis. This post ensures that decision-making debate takes place and is put into practice. The social media recruitment campaign “#why Wokingham” was launched in January 2020 and we continue to use this hashtag on social media. Most recently, the LinkedIn page has seen rapid growth in followers which in turn helps raise the profile of Wokingham in addition to live vacancy advertisements. We have continued our ASYE recruitment programme, which continues to be successful. In 2020/21 a total of 8 newly-qualified social workers joined Wokingham. In 2022/23 we are forecasting a total of 8-10 ASYE’s to start with us. Our experience shows that many of our ASYE workers, some of whom undertake their undergraduate placements here, choose to stay on with us in Wokingham. This demonstrates the success of our focus on “growing our own” workers.

We have recently recommissioned a nationally reputed organisation (Community Care) to spend an additional 12 months working with us to continue building our brand and alert Social Workers to the benefits of working in Wokingham.

Social Care Establishment 22/23 and Agency Staffing

In 21/22, Wokingham Social Care has an “establishment” of 83.7 Full-Time Equivalent (FTE) social work qualified posts at Team Manager level and below across 7 teams. At the end of May 2022, 26% of this FTE was filled by agency workers. This is an improvement since June 2020/2021 which we reported as 36% in comparison.

Workforce Stability

Workforce stability figures as measured by longevity of tenure are mixed. At the end of May 2022, 49% of social work qualified staff (team manager and below) had been with Children’s Services for less than 2 years, whilst 51% of workers had been with us for longer. 22% of Social Workers have been with us for over 5 years.

All teams across Children’s Social Care can now boast that they have at least 2 members of staff who have been with WBC for over 2 years. This is a huge improvement in comparison to our 2020/2021 data.

A new Progression Policy which was implemented in Spring 2022 enables staff to progress internally to become Senior Social Workers based on the quality of their work. This has had a positive impact on morale and overall stability which is demonstrated in the tenure figures.

Where do we Want to Be?

Our goal is to achieve stability and consistently high-performance in the social care workforce. This means staff seeing their long-term future in Wokingham, with consistently low turnover of staff at team level and the majority of workers staying with their team for a minimum of 36 months before considering a move to another part of the service.

Workforce Stability: Agency Vs Permanent Staff

A high proportion of agency workers does not necessarily indicate workforce instability. Agency workers provide a valuable contribution to the work in their teams. However, they are expensive in comparison to permanent workers, their tenure is often short, and the nature of their role lends them to be specialists in short-term, intensive case work which does not foster long-term relationships with children, young people and families.

Our goal, therefore, is to get to a point where we are only employing agency social workers to cover relatively short periods of absence such as maternity or sick leave. Our target is to ensure that the level of agency cover amounts to no more than 10% of the Social Care workforce at any point.

The MoC (Memorandum of Cooperation) came into effect in April 2022. This agreement is designed to promote better collaboration between Local Authorities in the South East region when recruiting Agency Staff. The key terms of the new MoC are to apply maximum hourly pay rate caps for agency social workers and managers, it also applies restrictions with regards to frequent movement between neighbouring Local Authorities of agency staff. (See www.seslip.co.uk for more information).

Our Approach to Recruitment and Retention of Social Work Qualified Staff

Our approach to achieving the stability and high performance of our Social Care workforce is multi-faceted, with culture change at its heart. Creating conditions where Social Workers see their long-term future in Wokingham is vital and requires us to pay attention to what we know about workers' needs and motivations.

Our Strategic Priorities

1. Design and implement a resilient service, with a commitment to manageable caseloads

Why?

Social care demand is rising nationally, and is subject to fluctuations in need and complexity, particularly where numbers of children supported by services are relatively low, which is the case in small authorities like Wokingham. Recent experience has demonstrated how disruptive and damaging large rises in demand over a short period of time can be to the workforce, and it is important that we have early warning systems in place to be able to react quickly to change to prevent the workforce from being overwhelmed. A commitment to manageable caseloads sets the standard for ensuring the workforce can do high quality work with children, young people and families, and is protected when demand rises.

2. Lay out clearly the tangible financial and non-financial benefits and rewards offer for social work qualified staff, keeping abreast of those offered by neighbouring authorities, and allowing flexibility to respond to changes in the social worker marketplace

Why?

Prospective and current social workers need a clear understanding of the benefits package on offer to them. It is certainly not all about money, but salary remains an important part of the package alongside non-financial benefits and rewards. Remaining sensitive and responsive to other authorities' packages and the state of the social worker marketplace will enable us to ensure we continue to have a competitive offer, and that we are communicating it in the right way.

3. Continue to commission and deliver recruitment campaigns and activities which build Wokingham's brand, and attract talented workers to the Borough

Why?

Wokingham is a small authority which has not been well promoted in previous years. Since employing a Recruitment & Retention Specialist, the social media presence of Wokingham – specifically around Childrens Social Care, has grown and improved dramatically. We now have an online presence with regular updates that include quotes from our workforce, recommendations to work for Wokingham, and new vacancies which followers are encouraged to apply for.

We have continued to commission Community Care to support us in building our online brand, to increase visibility, and reach. This in turn will aid us in the overall awareness of Wokingham with a positive reputation for prospective candidates.

Our goal is for the reputation of Wokingham as a great place to work to be better publicised as we continue our journey to being a “good” or better authority.

4. Ensure equality of opportunity and diversity in the workforce, and that safer recruitment standards are met

Why?

Children's Services and the wider organisation are committed to ensuring that the best candidates join a high-functioning council workforce which reflects the cultural diversity of our users, and that equality of opportunity is actively promoted and evidenced. The Council's Equal Opportunities Policy can be accessed [here](#).

Safer Recruitment is a set of practices which helps make sure staff and volunteers are suitable to work with children, young people and vulnerable adults, and is a vital part of our safeguarding role. The approach taken by the council is informed by national best practice and includes: follow up calls with referees, requesting a full employment history with all gaps explained, and at least one member of the selection panel having undertaken relevant and appropriate safer recruitment training.

5. Continue to build a pipeline of newly qualified social workers alongside recruitment of experienced staff

Why?

Experience has shown us that “growing our own” staff is an effective way to recruit social workers who know Wokingham well and stay with us in the longer term. This could be through hosting student placements and the ASYE programme. This needs to be balanced with experienced staff in a team to ensure new workers are well-supported.

6. Design and implement effective onboarding and induction for new staff

Why?

The onboarding and induction experience for new staff sets the standard for the professionalism and quality of work expected in Wokingham. It should reinforce the impression a worker will have developed of Wokingham during the recruitment process and be thorough and well-organised. Onboarding and induction should be a priority activity for all new staff.

7. Continue to design and deliver an effective continuous learning, development and support offer

Why?

Senior leadership is committed to the personal and professional development of staff. Effective staff are eager to develop their knowledge and expertise in their role to improve outcomes for the children, young people and families they support, and to promote career progression. A good learning and development programme delivered as part of a learning culture can motivate workers to reflect on their practice, try new methodology, and become more effective in their role. Effective staff will seek out a workplace where the learning and development offer is good. Children and young people benefit from a well-informed workforce where continuous learning and improvement is embedded.

8. Ensure career progression routes are clear and equitable

Why?

Effective staff are keen to progress their career over time, and it is important for both recruitment and retention that progression routes are equitable and clear, so that workers can envisage staying with Wokingham long-term. This includes routes into management and leadership along with parallel routes into senior practitioner roles in recognition of the individual talents, skills and ambitions of each worker.

9. Focus relentlessly on staff wellbeing

Why?

Keeping in touch with how staff are feeling about working for Wokingham is key to developing an understanding about whether our strategy is working or not and provides an important source of information about what needs to change or improve. Staff whose wellbeing is prioritised are better able to perform in their role and are less likely to suffer stress-related illness or leave the authority. Children, young people and families benefit as a result.

10. Ensure robust succession planning

Why?

Support for children and young people achieves better outcomes when trusted relationships are built between those providing the support and the child or young person. Minimising instability in the workforce and the resulting changes of social worker for children and young people is key to providing the best service possible. In some cases, however, loss of staff is unavoidable due to, for example, retirement, moving away from the Borough, or normal levels of staff turnover. Services will have clear plans to ensure that disruption for children and young people is minimised in these circumstances through effective succession planning.

11. Provide accurate and timely management information about the workforce including recruitment and retention activity

Why?

Having a suite of information about recruitment and retention activity facilitates effective learning about which actions work, and which don't work, facilitating timely decision-making and minimising time wasting.

12. Embed consistently good practice, and aspire to establish a culture of practice innovation and excellence

Why?

Good staff will seek out and stay with an authority which is known for delivering good practice, promotes continuous improvement and innovation, and pursues practice excellence. The priority for Wokingham is to ensure first that practice is delivered to a consistently good standard. Once achieved, the ambition is to go further, establishing a culture of continuous innovation and excellence.

Strategic Targets and Performance Indicators

Target	By When?	Performance Indicator
Reduce the % of agency social work qualified staff to 10%.	End of March 2024	% FTE Agency Social Workers (Team Manager and Below)
Reduce social work qualified staff turnover (permanent staff) to less than 10% per annum.	End of March 2024	Staff turnover (Rolling 12 months)
Achieve sustained high staff satisfaction and work/life balance	End of March 2024	Indicators taken from the annual Social Worker Health Check Survey

Budget and Investment

In 2022/23 and 23/24, the authority has approved a social care funding model which supports this recruitment and retention strategy, providing one-off “special item” funds to cover the costs of agency staff whilst recruitment activity is underway, as well as ensuring that ongoing revenue funding supports manageable caseloads.

BUDGET	2022/23	2023/24 (still TBC)
BASE	269,013	345,013
EXTRA INFLATION	76,000	TBC
EXTRA SPECIAL ITEM	255,000	163,000
TOTAL	600,013	508,013 + inflation

Governance and Accountability

We have implemented a monthly Recruitment & Retention Steering Group. This meeting enables oversight of recruitment and retention activity and progress against our strategic targets by Senior Management and relevant stakeholders. We provide a monthly Dashboard to present accurate data around our Recruitment & Retention activities and enable informed discussion.

A collaborative Children’s Services Departmental Leadership Team dashboard is currently in development, and will include relevant Recruitment & Retention data to ensure strategic oversight.

This strategy will be reviewed in March 2024.