



# West Berkshire Children’s Social Care Recruitment and Retention Strategy 2014 - 2017

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**'Nobody does this job for the money, but a competitive salary/package  
would help recruitment and retention'**

Views of a group of West Berkshire Social Workers 12th June 2014

## **1. Introduction**

The recruitment and retention of children's social workers is one of the most challenging issues facing councils nationally. The problem has been enduring, going back over fifteen years and projected to be a very serious issue for at least a further seven (Reforming Social Work 2013<sup>1</sup>). To address this it is essential that West Berkshire has an effective strategy that both helps us to retain our existing staff and also to recruit new staff. This strategy sets out how we will achieve this.

Our first priority in the strategy is to stem the loss of good quality staff from West Berkshire through effective retention. Our next priority is to become much more competitive in the children’s social work recruitment market.

## **2. Our Vision**

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<sup>1</sup> Reforming Social Work, Policy Exchange 2013  
<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/reforming%20social%20work.pdf>

Our vision is that West Berkshire should become an employer of choice for skilled and experienced children's social workers. This will enable us to have enough high quality staff to meet the needs of our community. This will be achieved by developing a reciprocal commitment from and to staff who work in this incredibly challenging area. This will include sustainable approaches which combine 'growing our own staff' with attracting the best that are available in the open market. Protecting the vulnerable is at the heart of the council's vision and we recognise this group of staff are critical to our success in achieving this aspiration.

### **3. Where are we now?**

Over the last three years we have seen a gradual loss of permanent staff that has contributed to us becoming heavily reliant upon agency staffing in our frontline teams. At the time of writing, almost a third of our frontline staff are temporary agency workers. This is both detrimental to the quality of service provided and costly. Child Protection work requires consistency, commitment and a stable workforce. Constant changes of staff are profoundly unhelpful in work that is dependent upon the quality of relationships between workers and children and their families. Agency workers are expensive (58% above the cost of an employee) and excessive turnover wastes extensive time and effort (repeated recruitment, induction, training etc). Over each of the last three years we experienced a net loss of staff (11/12 - 3, 12/13 - 4 & 13/14 - 6), we have also seen a considerable rise in turnover during the same period.

The problem has worsened despite considerable activity to address the issue, this has included:

- ❖ Implementation of a social worker career progression based on The College of Social Work Best Practice Model
- ❖ Re-grading Assistant and Team Manager roles
- ❖ Cut a management post to invest in two additional front line social worker posts
- ❖ Constant social worker rolling recruitment campaign
- ❖ Small 'grow our own' social worker scheme (two places annually)
- ❖ Developed a pan-Berkshire agreement to manage local agency staffing market
- ❖ Held staff focus groups to explore retention issues
- ❖ Held staff conference themed around retention

Research indicates that the difficulties recruiting children's social workers will continue to be very difficult for at the least the next seven years (Reforming Social Work 2013<sup>2</sup>). We are also aware that neighbouring authorities are preparing improved recruitment and retention packages for this group of staff.

During this three year period we have also seen a significant increase in the workload of our child protection staff. The number of children subject to child protection plans, looked after and care proceedings have all increased by 15-20%. Over this period we have only created two new social work posts (funded through deletion of a non social work post). Due to the recruitment challenges faced, the teams have not experienced the intended benefit of these posts. Consequently individual social workers case loads are higher than ideal.

If we do not take action we project that the gradual attrition of staff that has taken place over the last three years will accelerate and it is already presenting serious risks to the safety of the service and the finances of the council.

#### **4. Where do we need to get to?**

It is important that we stabilise children's social care and increase our ability to be competitive in a very challenging recruitment market. Our aspiration over the next three years is to ensure 95% or more of our staff are directly employed WBC staff, to reduce turnover to healthy levels (less than 10%) and to have a competent and capable children's social care workforce.

Our strategy to achieve this focuses on two key strands:

- ❖ Building on our strengths to become the employer of choice for children's social care in the Thames Valley area.
- ❖ Training and developing our own staff to ensure long term sustainability

#### **5. How will we achieve this?**

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<sup>2</sup> Reforming Social Work, Policy Exchange 2013

<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/reforming%20social%20work.pdf>

To become an employer of choice for this group of staff will require a significant improvement on what we offer today. Our staff tell us that they like working in West Berkshire because of the strong commitment to protecting vulnerable children, the open and honest style of leadership and management and because it is a great place to live and work.

We will build on these strengths in this strategy. We have identified a strong potential to promote the unique qualities of West Berkshire in our recruitment message. West Berkshire has many strengths that if clearly communicated will become a powerful recruitment and retention message. As a small authority, staff have ready access to senior management, members and a strong connection to the core values of the council.

The strategy is based around three key elements:

- ❖ Attracting, developing and retaining the best staff
- ❖ Ensuring our terms and conditions are competitive
- ❖ Effectively marketing our offer (both internally and externally)

## **5.1 Attracting, developing and retaining the best staff**

Working in child protection is a tough and gruelling profession, research indicates that the average career span of a children's social worker is seven years (Reforming Social Work 2013<sup>3</sup>). Key to this short duration is burn out, working day in day out with children experiencing distress and trauma takes a toll on individuals and many decide that they are unable to do it longer term opting for other less challenging roles. Some staff choose agency work as it offers financial independence and the ability to take regular career breaks.

### **5.1.1 Supervision, Support and Leadership**

Social Workers consistently report locally and nationally that good quality support and professional supervision is one of the most important factors in their employment. Nationally this is highlighted

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<sup>3</sup> Reforming Social Work, Policy Exchange 2013

<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/reforming%20social%20work.pdf>

in both Reforming Social Work 2013<sup>4</sup> and the 2013 All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Work<sup>5</sup>, locally our own staff identified it as a pivotal factor in the career decisions in both focus groups (Spring 2014) and our staff conference (June 2014). Staff are very positive about the supervision provided, but indicated the addition of high quality external clinical supervision would be greatly valued. Consequently we will be investing in the provision of additional external clinical supervision.

### **5.1.2 Retention Bonus and Retention Leave**

Central to our strategy is a package of benefits designed to attract staff who want to commit to one employer to enable them to provide the consistent presence children need. Staff working in the most challenging teams will be provided with a three year retention bonus and up to three months paid retention leave at the end of three years continuous service (eight weeks additional leave with up to four weeks banked annual leave). This will be costly, but still far better value than employing an increasing number of agency staff who cost 58% more than our directly employed staff. Retention bonuses have been successful in a number of other local authorities (Westminster, Bexley, Bromley, Kent and many others). Windsor and Maidenhead experienced a major loss of staff when they removed their retention bonus arrangements in 2013. Both Reading and Wokingham Councils currently pay market supplements to staff engaged in child protection work.

The retention leave element of the strategy was identified by our own staff, firstly in focus groups held in Spring 2013 and then reiterated at our Child Protection Social Work Conference held in June 2014. The retention leave will be a powerful tool in retaining staff to both West Berkshire and the profession. It will give workers a period to recover from the intense pressure of child protection and return energised and refreshed. This is an essential point of difference to our strategy which will act as a powerful inducement to both retain and recruit staff.

Existing staff already in post at the start date of the scheme will have an additional entitlement - at managers' discretion - to 'draw down' the sabbatical early, subject to the conditions that their total working time (i.e. not including sick leave or maternity leave) for West Berks council exceeds three years at the time the sabbatical is taken and that they give not less than eight week's notice.

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<sup>4</sup> Reforming Social Work, Policy Exchange 2013  
<http://www.policyexchange.org.uk/images/publications/reforming%20social%20work.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group Report on Social Work 2013 [http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw\\_90352-5.pdf](http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_90352-5.pdf)

If two or more existing staff members seek to draw down this entitlement at the same time, managers will have discretion to stagger the leave on a presumption that the member of staff with the longest service gets to go first.

Existing staff members who choose to draw down the entitlement early will be required to pay back the cost of the leave if they subsequently leave the service before the end of the three year scheme. (Thus people who took the leave early in 2015/16 would have to work 2.5 further years before they could leave us without payback but those who didn't take it until early 2017 would have given us nearly the full three additional years anyway).

This will provide existing staff with long service an opportunity to have the break they need, but would still make it more likely that we achieve the full retention benefit of the retention leave offer for those staff. It will also enable us to flex the timing of the retention leave to meet the needs of the service.

### **5.1.3 Employment of a Children's Social Care Recruitment and Retention Specialist**

This will be a critical role that will drive much of the work outlined in this strategy. The role will require expertise in both social work and recruitment processes. The role will include:

- ❖ Leading the implementation and regular reviewing of this strategy
- ❖ Co-ordinating all retention work (regular focus groups, exit interviews, tracking leavers destinations etc).
- ❖ Head hunting new staff
- ❖ Implementing an agency to permanent programme
- ❖ Expediting the recruitment process at every stage
- ❖ Managing all agency recruitment (and relationships with agencies)
- ❖ Developing relationships with universities to recruit newly qualified SWs

The success of the post will be easily measured with an initial focus on reducing the loss of permanent staff quickly and moving to an increase in the permanently employed West Berkshire staff. The scope of the role will include all 74 of the qualified social work posts working with children.

This is a tried and tested concept, it builds on work that was originally pioneered in the education sector when facing an acute recruitment crisis for teachers. Most larger authorities have this type of dedicated role already and Reading have developed something similar which has helped them to reduce their reliance on agency staffing (currently in the region of 10%).

#### **5.1.4 Social Work Academy**

The route to a sustainable position is to recruit and develop our own staff. Whilst the market for experienced staff is fierce we can recruit bright and capable, but inexperienced staff. At present workloads are so heavy that our teams have very little capacity to take on staff who are not able to do more complex work. To address this we will develop a unit with six newly qualified staff who will be supported over a two year period to develop the levels of skill and competence required. The unit will recruit high quality graduates with a connection to the local area (as this is one of the strongest factors in retention). This is a tried and tested approach. In one example (Sunderland City Council<sup>6</sup>) the introduction of an academy helped reduce reliance on agency staff from 33% in 2010 to 2% in 2014.

#### **5.1.5 Employing Four Additional Family Support Workers**

This measure supports the strategy's aspirations in two ways. Firstly it helps to reduce the workload of social workers enabling them to focus their time more effectively on working directly with children and families. Family Support workers can manage time consuming tasks on behalf of the allocated social worker, for example the organisation of contact, transportation of children, implementing elements of child protection plans. This strategy has been used very effectively in education where classroom assistants take on many tasks to free up teachers to teach.

We will also recruit Family Support Workers with the potential to go on to train to be Social Workers. Working as a Family Support Worker is the ideal foundation experience for becoming a child protection social worker and experience gained in this role will accelerate progress when they complete their social worker training. Consequently the additional Family Support Workers will help to create a pipeline of good quality local candidates for our social work academy.

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<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sunderland.gov.uk/CHttpHandler.ashx?id=11641&p=0>

### **5.1.6 Promoting Relocation Allowances**

We will be promoting our existing relocation package (which is potentially available to all WBC employees) in future advertising and consequently anticipate a significant increase in demand as we seek to attract good quality staff from further afield.

## **5.2 Ensuring our terms and conditions are competitive**

### **5.2.1 Good Team Working Environment**

Child Protection can be a frightening and dangerous role. Social Workers face threats and intimidation on a regular basis. Consequently it is essential staff return to safe and secure team environments where they can discuss complex case issues and debrief with colleagues following home visits. This is also particularly important to newly qualified staff learning their profession, but is often also essential for more experienced staff. Flexible working does not assist in this process as it erodes the team identity and makes it more difficult to find where their team colleagues will be on any given day.

The recent (2013) All Party Parliamentary Group Report on Social Work<sup>7</sup> identified the damaging effect of hot desking and makes a recommendation to end the practice for social work staff. This is also an increasing body of academic research supporting this view (Re-imagining SW).

Consequently we will move away from hot desking arrangements for frontline workers over the next year.

### **5.2.2 Use of Cars for Work**

Social Workers need their cars to work with children and young people. Research by leading Social Work academic Harry Ferguson (2012<sup>8</sup>) identifies cars as essential working tools for social workers. Many of the most difficult and challenging conversations with children and young people

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<sup>7</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group Report on Social Work 2013 [http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw\\_90352-5.pdf](http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_90352-5.pdf)

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/society/2012/oct/23/social-workers-car-place-of-sanctuary>



are held in social workers cars. The importance of the car is also recognised by the 2013 All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Work<sup>9</sup> who include a recommendation that local authorities support social workers to have access to cars for their work.

In recognition of this we will provide a range of measures to support social workers to have access to appropriate vehicles. This will include interest free loans and essential car user status for all frontline social workers. Social workers will also be provided with appropriate parking spaces.

### **5.3 Effectively marketing our offer (internally and externally)**

We are confident that we have the potential to be an employer of choice based on our existing strengths and the measures set out in this strategy. However these benefits will only be realised if they are effectively marketed both internally and externally. As part of this process we will develop a pledge/contract for existing staff setting out what they can expect from us as an employer, and what we expect from them in return. Kent<sup>10</sup> have used this approach very successfully in their recruitment and retention of social workers.

The investment in this area will be to promote West Berkshire as a great place to be a social worker using various channels (social media, trade press etc).

## **6. How we will Measure Success**

We will devise a recruitment and retention score card including detailed information including quantitative measures (vacancy rates, turnover, agency staffing etc) alongside qualitative information (outcome of exit interviews, staff surveys etc). This will be reported on a six monthly basis to management board.

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<sup>9</sup> All Party Parliamentary Group Report on Social Work 2013 [http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw\\_90352-5.pdf](http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_90352-5.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> [http://www.kent.gov.uk/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0019/11359/social-work-contract.pdf](http://www.kent.gov.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0019/11359/social-work-contract.pdf)