



Buckinghamshire County Council

Children's Social Care & Learning  
Select Committee

***Buckinghamshire County Council  
Children's Workforce Inquiry***



### **The Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee**

The Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee is appointed by Buckinghamshire County Council to carry out the local authority scrutiny functions for all policies and services relating to learning and the social care of children.

### **Membership of the Select Committee**

Mrs. Margaret Aston  
Mr. David Babb (Co-opted Member)  
Mrs. Patricia Birchley  
Mrs. Janet Blake  
Mr. Dev Dhillon  
Mr. Phil Gomm  
Mr. Paul Irwin  
Mrs. Valerie Letheren (Chairman)  
Mrs. Wendy Mallen  
Mr. Michael Moore (Co-opted Member)  
Mrs. Monique Nowers (Co-opted Member)  
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## Chairman's Introduction



Few play a more significant role in the lives of our children and young people than the staff within the Children's Social Care & Learning Business Unit. Highly trained, motivated and experienced staff members are at a premium as social care providers vie with each other to recruit and retain the best possible practitioners in the right quantity necessary to address ever-increasing demand for services.

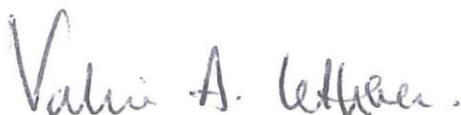
There is an academic pipeline of workers that is producing a steady number of graduates into the social care workforce, but for various reasons many of these workers are choosing not to remain within the profession. This is one of the biggest factors contributing to the gross imbalance between supply and demand; there are simply too few workers within the marketplace that have practiced for sufficient years to be considered 'experienced'.

There are great incentives for both experienced and less experienced workers to be self-employed, rather than occupy permanent positions within local authorities and hospitals. Whilst non-permanent staff can play a useful role, an overreliance upon them is undesirable and unsustainable as, typically, agency costs tend to outstrip those associated with retaining a permanent member of staff within the organisation. There are many excellent temporary staff members, but the hope is that they will commit to Buckinghamshire and convert onto permanent contracts.

The many generous incentive packages available to recruit and retain workers within the county must demonstrate effectiveness and value for money. If the package results in the retention of a high quality worker within the county for a good duration of time, then the cost may be justifiable, especially if it works out cheaper than retaining the equivalent member of staff at the agency rate.

Nevertheless, the situation is far from ideal, as there should be a good supply of high quality and experienced workers available to apply for jobs irrespective of the 'golden handshakes' on offer. The situation can never be ideal, as it encourages prospective employers to seek to outbid each other in terms of the packages on offer to qualified and experienced workers.

This drives costs up for all organisations concerned, potentially adding to already costly staffing overheads. To that end, we welcome the talks that are underway across the South East to introduce a Memorandum of Understanding between social work employers, which would ultimately involve a regional pay cap and some standardisation of terms and conditions.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Val Letheren".

**Mrs. Val Letheren**

Chairman, Children's Social Care & Learning Select Committee

## **Recommendations**

**Recommendation 1: There should be systematic analysis by the Children's Social Care & Learning Business Unit Management Team of the findings of social worker exit interviews.**

**Recommendation 2: Efforts should be made to address the underrepresentation of men in the social care workforce.**

**Recommendation 3: Legal assurance should be sought around the implementation of Phase 2 of the South East Memorandum of Cooperation.**

**Recommendation 4: The Cabinet Member for Children's Services and Director of Children's Services should take a lead on developing collaborative approaches on workforce issues with other authorities both nationally and locally.**

**Recommendation 5: The Hillingdon Hub model should be explored with a view to deciding whether it should be replicated in Buckinghamshire.**

## **Introduction**

1. The Select Committee has taken a new approach this year which has involved taking a more targeted look at key issues of relevance to the children's services improvement process.
2. A new Inquiry methodology has accompanied this refocus, which has involved using a one-off evidence session as the basis of the Inquiry. This is in contrast to the previous approach, which involved longer projects lasting several months, depending upon the subject.
3. The rationale for this is straightforward: we hope to bring our perspective on the issues to Cabinet's attention more frequently, whilst remaining evidence-based and focussed on outcomes. We have achieved this through Inquiries in the past; we now hope to utilise this way of working more often, driving improvement in areas that are critical to the success of the organisation.
4. This report is a summary of the evidence and recommendations arising from a meeting we held on the children's services workforce. Whilst we have education services within our remit, we focussed on the social care side of the business as it pertains directly to the Ofsted improvement work.
5. We received evidence from the following people:
  - A young person in care in Buckinghamshire
  - Lin Hazel, Cabinet Member for Children's Services
  - Carol Douch, Director, Children & Family Services
  - Chris Daltry, Head of HR Operations
  - Jenny O'Neill, Resourcing Manager
  - Kate Glover-Wright, Learning & Development Business Partner
  - Sinclair Coward, Head of Academic Department Social Work and Integrated Care, Bucks New University

## **Workforce Issues: The Context**

6. The importance of a high quality, stable workforce has been a consistent theme of the work that we have undertaken on the Ofsted improvement journey. All have emphasised the importance of this to achieving successful outcomes for the children and young people with whom the authority works.
7. The workforce is the bedrock upon which a successful children's service is built, but workforce issues provide a host of challenges. The challenges exist across the full spectrum of activities that the County Council as an employer undertakes, from recruiting new workers to retaining them within our workforce in the face of various 'push' and 'pull' factors.

8. The challenge extends to the provision by the employer of sufficient learning and development opportunities, high quality supervision and manageable caseloads. However, to whatever extent the employer can control these, it cannot control the factors in a practitioner's private life which may tempt him or her away from the employer or the profession itself. Although flexible working can help, it is not a cure-all and can only be viewed as part of an overall package of measures to help staff balance work and home responsibilities.

9. A shortage of experienced and suitably qualified staff members is the principal concern for providers of social care. As with other professions, there is a shortage of key staff, although in social care the shortage is particularly acute and is exacerbated by ever-increasing levels of demand for services.

10. The reasons behind the shortage of experienced practitioners are varied. Factors that are often seen as contributory include perceptions about the social work profession, issues around pay and conditions, and issues such as stress and work / life balance.

11. Whilst similar factors impact on other caring professions, we know that fewer people appear to want to practice social work as a long-term career choice compared to the numbers willing to stay within nursing and general medical practice.

12. The impact of this is twofold. Firstly, it places pressure upon operations, as key positions within the workforce are either vacant or are filled by temporary workers. Secondly, it distorts the market for suitably qualified workers as demand far outstrips supply, resulting in pay inflation and escalating costs for employers. This results in a 'perfect storm' for providers of social care, which see increasing demand for services that outstrips the supply of experienced workers required to meet the demand.

13. Increasingly constrained financial resources compound the issue, as does the increasing need for specialised workers with the experience to deal with issues such as female genital mutilation and child sexual exploitation.

## **What We Learnt From Young People**

14. We were fortunate enough to be able to hear directly from a young person about his views of the children's social care workforce. This followed a video which had been produced which included young people talking about their experiences of the workforce.

15. From the video, we gained the following insights about the young people's experiences in care:

- Some stated they were being treated well and getting looked after better than at home
- They enjoyed having adults caring about them
- Doing fun things was important

- Not being able to get to visit family during a crisis was a particular issue for one young person
- Missing family members was upsetting, as was having things taken from them and not feeling as if they are 'normal' in relation to other children
- One described 'stupid' rules for a teenager, e.g. needing permission for haircuts and sleepovers
- One young person described having worked with 'numerous' different social workers
- Their carers provide comfort, support and understanding
- The young people experienced a lot of waiting; i.e. waiting for something to go over time and then something is done
- Some of the young people didn't like responding to personal questions that they didn't want to answer
- Some sports events were cancelled at short notice due to social work-related appointments with the young people
- The young people thought that there should be a greater welcome extended to children when they first come into care
- Some of the young people wanted to be able to attend court
- When a young person was unhappy with her social worker, she got a new one
- The young people made the following comments about their Looked After Children Reviews: they tried to say something but the professionals in the room just argued; they were not included in decisions; nothing that they wanted happens; they found it a bit scary, intense and not inclusive; and points they had made were not passed on in the meeting.

16. The video gave us a useful perspective on what young people themselves wanted most from the people that work with them. Unsurprisingly, care, support, understanding and attentiveness were the common themes.

17. The young person who spoke to us was able to describe how he felt he was in the right place in his traineeship, which suited him better than being at school. Alongside this, he was doing a college course and was being supported in this by his carers.

18. We had heard from the Director of the Child & Family Service about 'Staying Put', which facilitated young people remaining in care beyond age 18. The young person was availing himself of this as he felt that he would be better prepared to leave at age 19. He is placed with an Independent Fostering Agency (IFA) and felt that the level of support from them, for services such as counselling, was very good. Also, through the IFA he was able to access grants for furniture and other items when he did decide to set up a home of his own.

19. We asked him about how frequently young people encountered issues with their social workers. He recounted his personal experience that the first three that he had

worked with had been good, but then there was a one that didn't communicate with his foster carer. He mentioned that each social worker had a different style and this also had an impact.

20. Interestingly, he mentioned that, in his experience, social workers tended to be better at working with children younger than him, and suggested that perhaps further training in working with mid- to late-teenagers was required.

21. It was positive to hear that he was able to chair his own Looked after Child Review and that he felt able to get involved and have his voice heard. However, he did mention that opportunities to get involved were sometimes limited because of the need to involve new cohorts of younger children in the various forums.

22. We were interested to hear about how young people are paired with social worker and the numerous factors that are taken into account, such as the gender of the worker and whether they are likely to know the young person's friends. Availability is also a factor and it is obviously unknown whether or not the relationship between young person and social worker is going to work well until it has started.

23. We explored the level of contact that the young person has with his social worker. He mentioned that he sees her every six weeks and that this was enough for him, although every child or young person is different. He uses text messages to keep in touch with his social worker. We were interested in other means and explored whether video conferencing and other technologies could be utilised. We were informed by the Director of the Children & Family Service such methods were being trialled.

24. We also explored what support the young person was getting in terms of setting up a bank account and other similar things that would be necessary when achieving independence. He had been put in touch by his social worker with a personal adviser and he was getting support from the Independent Fostering Agency. He was also able to apply for a grant for furniture and other items.

25. The Committee received the report of the Director of the Children & Family Service, the Head of HR Operations, the Resourcing Manager and the Workforce Development Manager for Children's Social Care.

26. We queried the balance between the requirement for life experience and the need for the right qualifications to do the job. We were informed that obviously in an ideal world, the people employed would have a combination of life experience and qualifications and such people were at a premium. It was clarified for us that the social work degree is generic and once completed, people then decide whether to specialise in work with children or adults.

## **Workforce Development Board**

27. We heard that the Workforce Development Board aims to put the child at the heart of the workforce development vision. The challenges facing workforce development are both national and local; in the case of the former, there are issues facing all authorities in terms of the recruitment and retention of staff; and locally, the negative Ofsted inspection had made the issue more problematic.

### **Reward Packages**

28. The Committee was informed that the recruitment and retention packages that have been introduced have impacted positively on the workforce data, with the headline figures including:

- Social Worker annual turnover halved between 2014 and 2015 (25% 2014) to (12.5% 2015);
- Leavers reduce from 38 to 25; Leavers in first year reduce from 8 to 2;
- Increase in recruitment to perm Social Care posts from 19 (2014) to 75(2015);
- Increase in number of perms from 183 (April 2015) to 209 (Dec 2015);
- Number of agency workers remains consistent – although downward trend - (21% April 2015 to 17% Dec2015); First Response corresponding figures are 71% to 52%;
- No significant reduction in vacancies (81 in April 2015 to 79 in Dec 2015)

29. Whilst the data shows much to be positive about, we are keen to ensure that the recruitment and retention packages are as effective as possible. We also explored the gender balance of the workforce, actions to address the health and wellbeing of the workforce and issues around workers' spoken and written English.

30. The data indicate a halving of the turnover rate between 2014 and 2015. This is an excellent development and complements the programme of rolling recruitment very well. The pipeline of new workers is kept open with the rolling recruitment and the halving of turnover translates into increased retention of organisational knowledge and expertise.

31. What is less positive is the big increase in Social Work Team Manager turnover in the same period; this places in jeopardy efforts to create higher quality management oversight. We acknowledge that leaver surveys have been used in the past, but believe that this should be done much more consistently and methodically.

**Recommendation 1: There should be systematic analysis by the Children's Social Care & Learning Business Unit Management Team of the findings of social worker exit interviews.**

32. The Director for the Child & Family Service informed us that workers' wellbeing was supported by a cap on the number of cases per worker and investment in the quality of frontline managers. There is also oversight of the supervision process and an emphasis on worker learning and development and career progression. Sickness figures are relatively good and, in terms of spoken and written English, there are a host of tests applied to ensure workers' standards are sufficiently high.

33. We were informed that it is a challenge to get the right number of males through the courses. The Committee is of the view that it is important to have a higher number of males in the workforce; this links back to our earlier line of enquiry around the effective matching of social workers to clients. Clearly, a more gender-balanced workforce will contribute positively to this.

**Recommendation 2: Efforts should be made to address the underrepresentation of men in the social care workforce**

**Memorandum of Cooperation**

34. We heard from the Resourcing Manager that the South East Director of Children's Services Group have been working on a South East regional Memorandum of Cooperation (MoC). A phased approach is being taken, with phase one active from November 2015 and phase two is under development.

35. Phase one has involved:

- Sign-up to an agreement across the region
- The adoption of a common minimum standard for referencing
- The use of reviews at the end of placements

36. Phase two, which is expected to be introduced from April 2016 is to focus on:

- The agreement of capped regional pay rates for agency workers
- The implementation of a cooling off period for permanent staff wanting to move into agency work
- The development of a regional workforce strategy

37. We believe that the MoC is a positive development which should begin to control a market that has in some respects become distorted. However, the Committee raised some questions to seek assurances on the legality of aspects of phase two, specifically the proposal to cap pay rates across the region.

**Recommendation 3: Legal assurance should be sought around the implementation of Phase 2 of the South East Memorandum of Cooperation.**

38. The other cause for concern is that there are authorities in the region that are yet to sign-up to Phase 1. For the agreement to be fully effective across the region these organisations need to be engaged.

**Recommendation 4: The Cabinet Member for Children’s Services and Director of Children’s Services should take a lead on developing collaborative approaches on workforce issues with other authorities both nationally and locally.**

## **Rolling Recruitment**

39. The Committee welcome the campaign of rolling recruitment and the revamped recruitment website. We agree that the traditional method of placing adverts in the trade press is no longer sufficient to attract the best talent in a market in which demand far outstrips supply.

40. Frontline and Step up to Social Work are useful schemes which are being utilised by the authority as a means to access high quality workers. We were informed that there are seven workers currently with the authority under the Frontline scheme. Step up to Social Work involves the engagement of high calibre people with a degree and some relevant experience.

41. Work with Oxfordshire and Central Bedfordshire has shaped various other ‘grow your own’ programmes. The Open University Programme is highly regarded amongst Child & Family Workers as it gives them access to the courses that allow them to progress their careers. They can learn in their own time and do contrasting placements to enhance their experience.

42. We were informed that 56 practitioners had been trained through the ‘grow your own’ route over 10 years, and 45 are still with Buckinghamshire. One of the key benefits of ‘growing your own’ is that the staff members know what they are getting into when the support is removed as they have a better understanding of the organisation and the local area.

## **Buckinghamshire New University Social Work Academy**

43. The Committee would like to express its gratitude to the Head of Academic Department, Social Work and Integrated Care at Buckinghamshire New University (BNU) for his attendance at the meeting to describe to us the Social Work Academy.

44. The Academy trains workers in return for Buckinghamshire County Council taking a student on placement. The university contributes to the students’ first year as a Newly Qualified Social Worker, so it is clearly a mutually beneficial arrangement. Buckinghamshire County Council staff members attend the university to teach the students.

45. The intention is to contribute further to the continuing professional development of workers, which might involve the use of the Aylesbury BNU site as a hub. Representatives from Buckinghamshire County Council HR attend university recruitment days and conversations are started at the earliest point with the undergraduates with the most potential.

46. The Committee had described to it the social work pod based in a primary school in partnership with the London Borough of Hillingdon. Parents coming into the school can be put in touch with further education colleges, etc. with some issues facing children being addressed on site. This sounded like a useful development which played an operational role and contributed to a raised awareness of the work of social care amongst parents and pupils. This may encourage more children to consider social work as a profession.

**Recommendation 5: The Hillingdon Hub model should be explored with a view to deciding whether it should be replicated in Buckinghamshire.**