



# Lancashire County Council Children's Social Care Qualified social worker Recruitment and Retention Strategy 2015 – 2018 November 2015

## 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). To address this it is essential that LCC 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 LCC through effective retention. Our next priority is to become much more competitive in the children's social work recruitment market.

## 2. Our Vision

Our vision is that LCC 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' whilst 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 in Children's Social Care, we have seen a loss of permanent staff that has contributed to us becoming heavily reliant upon newly qualified, social workers in our frontline teams. At the time of writing, 35% of our frontline staff are newly qualified and 41% have less than 2 years post qualifying experience. 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, children and their families. 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 approx 75 QSW staff.

This issue has not improved despite considerable activity to address the issue, this had included:

- Use of a social worker career progression.
- Investment in an additional 30 front line social worker posts over the last 3 years.
- Constant social worker rolling recruitment.
- Small 'grow our own' social worker scheme (step-up).
- Held staff focus groups to explore retention issues.
- Held staff conference and forums.
- Developed and delivered a good ASYE programme.
- Increase of 8 practice manager posts following stage 1 of transformation process.
- HOS keep in touch sessions with qualified social workers and practice managers.
- Introduced a balanced approach to caseload allocation.
- CAA team moved to adoption services

During the last 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 pre-proceedings have all increased. Due to the recruitment challenges faced, the teams have not experienced the intended benefit of the additional posts. Consequently individual social workers caseloads are higher than ideal. Despite increasing our QSW provision by over 30 posts in this period workloads have been compromised by the new pressures and timescales placed on staff by the implementation of the Public Law outline which has reduced court timescales within public proceedings thus increased social workers workload. Additionally there has been an increased focus on child sexual exploitation, missing from home, honour based violence, radicalisation and the impact of domestic violence which have all added to the amount of work and focus social workers need to bring to cases. Workloads and pressures have also been affected by the introduction of LCS which has been difficult for staff to learn and means the utilisation of 3 IT systems.

The recommended level of work for staff which would increase work/life balance and thus improve retention is as follows:

- NQSW            15
- 1-3 years       20

- 3 years plus 23

However, although it is imperative and a core issue to improve work life balance we also need to be aware that retention will continue to be of significant concern with the workforce because of the following factors:

- More competitive salaries from neighbouring authorities i.e. Blackpool and Blackburn.
- Lower caseloads and higher ratio of management support.

At the time of writing our average caseloads are:

- NWSQ 24 / 26
- 1-3 years 26 / 30
- 3 years plus 30 / 33
- Update at month end

If we do not take action to improve work life balance within frontline safeguarding teams we project that the retention issues will accelerate.

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

It is important that we stabilise the frontline children's social care workforce further and increase our ability to be competitive in a very challenging recruitment market. We feel that the work undertaken within these teams would improve if we could retain the experience of staff. The costs of constant recruitment are high and it is the purpose of this paper to highlight how that money could potentially be spent in a more productive way improving outcomes for children and young people. Our aspiration over the next 3 years is to reduce our turnover, attract experienced applicants for posts and reduce our NQSW ratio to 15%.

Our strategy to achieve this has a focus on 3 key strands:

- Building on our strengths to become the employer of choice in the North West region.
- Training, developing and incentivising our staffing profile to ensure long term stability.
- Facilitating the allocation of manageable caseloads.

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

To become an employer of choice for this group of staff will require an improvement on what we offer today. Our staff tell us that they like working in LCC because of the strong commitment to protecting vulnerable children, the open, supportive 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 LCC in our recruitment message. LCC has many

strengths that if clearly communicated will become a powerful recruitment and retention message.

The strategy is based around three key elements:

- Attracting, developing and retaining the best staff by improving work life balance
- 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 add in the child protection focus and this reduces to 3. (Reforming Social Work 2013). Key to this short duration is burn out, working day in day out with children experiencing distress and trauma that takes its toll on individuals. 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.

However this can be mitigated by understanding and realising this as an issue and by investing in a work life balance looking at caseloads, extra annual leave and bonus payments. This ensures that this gruelling but rewarding work is recognised as important and treated accordingly.

Work life balance in our front facing child protection teams is the foremost concern of all recent health checks and exit interviews

### **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 in both Reforming Social Work 2013 and the 2013 All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Work, locally our own staff identified it as a pivotal factor in the career decisions in focus groups. Staff are very positive about the supervision provided, but indicated they were concerned about the implications of a reduction in management roles and that this has impacted upon frequency and quality of supervision.

### **5.1.2 Role of the Principal Social Worker, Children and Families**

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

- Developing relationships with universities to recruit newly qualified SWs and influence academic agenda.
- Holding recruitment fairs.

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 LCC staff.

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.

### **5.1.3 Promoting Relocation**

We will introduce a mobility / transfer policy across the children's workforce as a whole with an expectation that all qualified social workers will spend time working in frontline child protection teams. This has been informally in place since April 15 in CSC but needs strengthening across children's workforce.

### **5.1.4 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 (2013) All Party Parliamentary Group Report on Social Work identified the damaging effect of hot desking and makes a recommendation to end the practice for social work staff. There is also an increasing body of academic research supporting this view (Re-imagining SW).

Consequently we will carefully consider hot desking arrangements for frontline workers social care, in the context of the transformation accommodation strategy. We need to find a balance between the best use of technology to support practice and safe secure environments.

### **5.1.5 The Role of Advanced Practitioner**

A career grade progression scheme linked to evidencing good quality practice is in place and has been for some years.

Qualified social workers start at grade 8 on our SCP and then progress to grade 9 through career grade assessment.

The grade assessment whilst attracting a small increase in salary, does not recognise the achievements of the progression in any other way.

We intend to introduce a new title linked to the grade 9 QSW post that of advanced practitioner. The role of the advanced practitioner is under development.

## 6. Recruitment and Retention Plan

Please see attached.



Recruitment and  
Retention Plan.doc

## 7. Managing Demand

As a result of the impact of PLO and workload linked to DV, HBV etc, children's social care had to introduce a generic approach to allocation of work in order to meet statutory requirements.

Some qualified social workers tell us that this way of working is 'not for them' and they are seeking alternative employment.

We will keep under review generic allocation, are willing to change if demand allows and have developed 'specialist' roles to allow workers to have a more heavily weighed caseload in their area of interest.

Our vision is one of flexibility that supports meeting demand but an urgent review is required to consider ongoing impact.

### **Risk averse micro management**

A recent research in practice strategic briefing highlighted the risk associated with micro management and low job satisfaction.

We have and will continue to provide forums for managers and senior leaders to audit via our quality assurance framework our approach to flexible support whilst promoting autonomy. We will keep under review our scheme of delegation in line with developing levels of experience, we will offer relevant training to managers, but risk averse micro management is a risk in the current climate.

## 8 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. (Attached are our practice standards proposals)

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

## 9. 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 via our established health check by the principal social worker.

In summary the following additional proposals are under consideration to support recruitment and retention in CSC.

1. Consider re-organising some additional services to create some specialisms and reduce breadth of role in CSC (i.e. post 16 support).
2. Investing in an increase in QSWs and practice managers.
3. Consideration of EDT assuming mainstream responsibility from lunch time every Friday.
4. Lowering thresholds for access to services in CWD teams.
5. Developing a central recruitment system to include a robust marketing approach.
6. Firming up our ASYE strategy.
7. Launch of our practice standards.
8. Introduce across children's services a mobility / transfer policy.
9. Development of a recruitment and retention score card.
10. Development of advanced practitioner role.
11. Back to basic training to be provided to workers and managers
12. Review impact of generic working and reduction in management oversight