


Portfolio Holder Decision

Commission Social Work Recruitment

Portfolio Holder	Leader of the Council
Date of decision	26 April 2022
	Signed  pp

1. Decision taken

That the Leader of the Council:

1. approves an appropriate procurement process to access an existing framework, "Provision of Clinical and Healthcare Staffing (RM6161)", for the provision of temporary social workers.
2. authorises the Strategic Director for People to enter into all relevant contracts for the provision of temporary social workers in consultation with the Portfolio Holder for Children, Families and Education and on terms and conditions acceptable to the Strategic Director for Resources.

Reasons for decisions

- 2.1 Warwickshire requires sufficient social workers to fulfil our statutory duties to safeguard and support children in need of help, protection, and care. Our primary approach is through WCC recruitment for permanent social workers. If this is not achievable then we recruit through agencies. The preferred provider is the corporate Pertemps agency who are a supplier and a broker through other agencies. However, this arrangement does not meet our requirements and so we need to commission a dedicated social worker provider with a national presence.
- 2.2 We have identified an appropriate agency as being able to meet this requirement and are seeking to engage this organisation via a framework that was put in place by the Crown Commercial Service and the NHS Procurement in Partnership (under their joint banner of Workforce Alliance). This framework provides a free and compliant route for temporary staffing resource for the NHS and other public sector bodies. Approval is required, to enable a two year contract to be put in place, which will be at a cost of over £1m.

Background information

Summary of the context of Children and Families social work:

- 3.1 There is a national shortage of social workers who are experienced in working within children and families. This shortage is across the market, for temporary and permanent contracts, within both local authorities and recruitment agencies. The DfE data reports a national increase in the number of vacancies, to 7%, which is the highest in at least five years. There is also a 3% increase in agency usage this year. Nationally, this is the fourth consecutive yearly increase of agency social workers, with just over three quarters covering vacancies.
- 3.2 Warwickshire current establishment is 366 FTE social workers, we currently have about 7% vacancies and 9.5% agency social workers. This establishment is overseen by the Assistant Director and Finance Officer on a weekly basis. Our agency requirements fluctuate over time, in response to demand pressures, staff turnover and absence cover. Our primary recruitment strategy is through direct recruitment of permanent social workers. If this not achievable then we seek recruitment from agencies.
- 3.3 Caseload levels for social workers are reported nationally. The DfE recently reported that the caseloads had reduced and plateaued at 16.6 per FTE social worker. Our average caseload for an FTE social worker in October 2021 had reduced to 13.8. This was recognised in our Ofsted Inspection:
Workloads are manageable, enabling social workers to have the time to work effectively with children and families. Caseloads have reduced, despite increased demand for services, in part by increasing the number of social workers above those within the authority's structure to ensure that children receive good services. Inspection dates: 22 November to 3 December 2021
However, since November 2021, our average caseloads have continued to increase each month, this is now 17.4 across the children's teams and 14.8 in the fostering teams. There is a high risk that will continue to rise if we do not continue to access multiple recruitment streams.
- 3.4 Nationally, the sickness levels have remained consistent, average of 3.1%, despite the pandemic. In Warwickshire, our sickness absence is 10.8 days per FTE, with about a third reported to be related to stress and mental health issues. A national survey reported that over the past 2 years, over half of social workers are considering leaving the profession, due to unmanageable caseloads, rising pressures and a lack of resources. Turnover in the West Midlands region is the highest at 21%. Our strategic focus on retention has sustained this at 12.9%. This turnover has an impact upon relationship based social work and impacts upon improvements for children.

Overview of our social work recruitment process:

- 3.5 Our corporate recruitment contractor is currently providing 37 agency social workers and have secured 50 social workers over the last year. This has become much leaner in the last 6 months, with only 17 social workers placed (7 direct and 10 brokered from 7 different recruitment agencies). We hold quarterly review meetings with Pertemps to support meeting our requirements. They now have a dedicated positions for improving marketing of WCC conditions/culture and their supply chain management. There are ongoing challenges with rates and other authorities recruiting for completing specific discrete tasks rather than to be the allocated social worker for children.

- 3.6 In December 2020 there were exceptional circumstances due to the covid pandemic which impacted upon the needs of families, the accessibility of other support and increased pressures within our own social worker workforce. To maintain our workforce levels, we procured services from Service Care Solutions Ltd (SCS) to support social worker recruitment not met by the Pertemps contract. The quality assurance of these exemptions is overseen by the Assistant Director. SCS have been able to supply high quality candidates that other agencies have not been able to do.
- 3.7 We also commenced a single year contract with Liquid Personnel in August 2021, under the ESPO Framework 3S_18 – Strategic HR Services. This contract is to seek 40 experienced social workers who are then employed as permanent Warwickshire staff. This is to attract talent nationally towards Warwickshire, with additional relocation and settling in support. This is achieving some success, currently meeting 50% of the target despite extensive efforts overseen in monthly contract management meetings.
- 3.8 Our goal is to continue to maximise the direct recruitment of WCC social workers. Operational Leads proactively recruit to agreed vacancies to reduce the requirement for agency social workers. The utilisation of agency is reported to our Senior Leadership on a bimonthly basis to oversee the exit planning within each Service.
- 3.9 We continue to make extensive efforts to implement our Children and Families Workforce strategy which commenced in May 2021, focusing on both social worker retention and recruitment. We will review this in May 2022 to ensure prioritisation of key drivers. Our ambition is to continue to improve the stability of our workforce and provide outstanding services for the children and families of Warwickshire.

Decision required to commence new contract under existing framework:

- 3.10 We are now seeking approval to initiate procurement for the supply of temporary social workers through an agency. This would be under the NHS Workforce Alliance Provision of Clinical and Healthcare Staffing Framework (RM6161) under Lot 5 Social Care Staffing. We need this approval to enable a longer-term contract to be put in place, which will be at a cost of over £1m. This agreement will enable us to continue to fulfil the statutory duties of Children's services, to retain a safe and manageable case load and to provide stability within our workforce. This supports a higher quality service for the families of Warwickshire.

Financial implications

There is a risk that any reduced use of Pertemps will have an impact on the County Council's contract, due to the fee and rebate that the Council receives from Pertemps. Pertemps will remain our primary provider and this framework will only be used when Pertemps have not secured social workers. This presents a risk to the Council as a proportion of the income/savings from the Pertemps contract is included in the MTFS. This was considered on 14/02/2022 by Procurement and Contract Management Board who agreed that they would accept this risk, as it was balanced against a high and immediate risk of insufficient social workers to safeguard children.

6. Environmental implications

None.

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Portfolio Holder	Leader of the Council

Urgent matter?	No
Confidential or exempt?	No
Is the decision contrary to the budget and policy framework?	No

List of background papers

[Workforce Strategy Review 2021](#)

Members and officers consulted and informed

- Portfolio Holder – Cllr Jeff Morgan, Portfolio Holder for Children and Education
- Legal –Nicola Vine/Paul Fairweather, Strategy & Commissioning Manager
- Commissioning - Oliver Cooper/John Hopper, Procurement, CSU
- Finance – Brian Smith
- Equality – Keira Rounsley
- Democratic Services – Isabelle Moorhouse
- Corporate Board – Nigel Minns