

ABERDEEN CITY COUNCIL

COMMITTEE	Education & Children's Services
DATE	1 June 2017
REPORT TITLE	Allocation of Work in Children's Social Work
REPORT NUMBER	ECS/17/031
DIRECTOR	Gayle Gorman
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1. PURPOSE OF REPORT:-

At the 26 January 2017, meeting of the Education & Children's Services Committee the Service was asked to report to committee on the allocation of work to individual social workers and on the challenges faced by the service to delivery on its statutory obligations.

2. RECOMMENDATION(S)

It is recommended that the Committee -

- (i) note how the allocation of work is being managed by the social work service; and
- (ii) Instruct the Head of Children's Services to submit a Service Update on the Implementation of Reclaiming Social Work by the end of 2017.

3. BACKGROUND

- 3.1 In 2015 the Council agreed to the implementation of the Reclaiming Social Work (RSW) model for Children's Social Work. This model moved away from the traditional structure where each social worker in a team was allocated a number of cases (usually between 15-20+) which they worked, more often than not, on their own. Under this model individual social workers were responsible for assessing risk which ultimately contributed to decisions around whether it was safe for children to remain at home or not. Experience of this model would suggest that staff at times felt isolated and burdened by a fear of getting it wrong. As a consequence practice was more risk adverse, contributing to increasing numbers of children in local authority care. Additionally if a worker left or was on leave, while other members of the team would oversee their cases and respond to crises, cases would not be worked. This resulted in drift in the plans for children being advanced.
- 3.2 The move to RSW sees cases being allocated to a Unit. (A unit consists of 4.5 staff – 1 x Consultant Social Worker; 0.5 x Clinical Practitioner; 1 x Social Worker; 1 x Children's Practitioner and 1 x Unit Coordinator.) The Consultant Social worker has responsibility for managing the work, delegating tasks to other members of the Unit according to their skills and experience. As a result all members of the Unit contribute

to the assessment of risk. Even if one member of the Unit is on leave the other members of the Unit still ensure plans for children are advanced.

- 3.3 The experience of other local authorities who have implemented RSW mirrors an emerging picture locally whereby staff feel supported and better able to manage situations of risk and support families to affect change without the need for the child to be accommodated. (This acknowledges that there will still be a need for children to be accommodated in situations where unacceptable levels of risk exist.) These decisions draw on the perspectives of all Unit members not simply on one staff member.
- 3.4 The professional supervision of staff is fundamental to ensuring safe service delivery. Social work staff are supervised minimally monthly. For staff working in a team model supervision has more of a case management dynamic to it whereby staff update the team manager on case developments and together they plan future intervention. Within the Unit model, given the Consultant Social Worker is actively involved in the service delivery, this more naturally lends itself to discussions within supervision which focus directly on the workers practice and professional development.

CURRENT WORKLOAD MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

- 3.5 Children's Social Work is a targeted statutory service. Consequently there must be a clear legal basis for the service to intervene in the lives of children and families. The main referring agencies to the Social Work service are Police Scotland; Health; Education Services and the Scottish Children's Reporters Association.
- 3.6 For the past 3 years, in the lead up to and following the implementation of RSW, the service has carried out twice yearly Case File Audits. This has enabled the service to accurately determine the number of open cases as well as the complexity of the workload. These audits have enabled a growing understanding of the workload of each team/Unit as well as the whole service. It has also assisted in identifying where potential pressure points exist. While there will always be limitations to the data, the growing richness of it, is allowing for more informed service planning as to how Aberdeen City Council is choosing to implement RSW to fit its own needs.
- 3.7 The last case file audit carried out in December 2016 evidenced that Children's Social Work were working with approximately 1800 children/1250 families. The "weight" of this work is determined by the complexity of the case as well as other key factors such as travel implications and the volume of additional pieces of work associated with each case.
- 3.8 There is a growing body of research including Inspection Reports which highlight that social work intervention is most effective when social workers have manageable caseloads. Given that the time demands of cases vary significantly in accordance with their complexity, the allocation of work cannot be based purely on numbers. It is for this reason we have planned for each Unit to hold approximately 450 points of work. Feedback from staff in the Units would suggest that this level of work is manageable.
- 3.9 For staff still to transition into Units, work is allocated in accordance with the experience of each staff member and would vary between 150 – 200 points. The regular audits allow the management team to monitor this allocation.
- 3.10 Performance reports submitted to Committee over the past two years have evidenced that in all but 2 quarters 100% of children on the Child Protection Register had an allocated social worker. In the two other quarters the figure was 97% and 98%.) In January 2017 95% of looked after and accommodated children had an

allocated social worker, this figure rose to 97% in February 2017. This data highlights very favourably on the services ability to manage high profile cases.

- 3.11 Children's Social Work will always have a small number of cases which are not allocated to a specific worker. This reflects the time taken to fill staff vacancies; long term absences as well as operational demands. Where cases cannot be allocated to a specific Unit/worker these cases are still worked on a duty basis and overseen by the Team Manager/Consultant Social Worker. This ensures that the welfare of children is always given paramount consideration and decisions around allocation take account of emerging priority.
- 3.12 Recruitment of new Consultant Social Workers to the RSW structure has been challenging. This has determined the pace at which new Units have been able to go live. As a consequence services to children and families are being delivered by staff working in Unit and Teams. Over the course of the coming year it is anticipated that the number of teams will slowly diminish as more Units go live.
- 3.13 At present there are 16 operational Units. Once full implementation has been achieved there will initially be 26 Units rising to 34. (Full implementation of this model is based on a five year plan.)
- 3.14 To ensure the safety of service delivery it has been necessary to engage a number of agency social work staff to cover critical vacancies. (At present the service has engaged 3.5 agency team managers and 11 agency social workers.) Efforts to fill these vacancies are actively being progressed. In addition, along with HR colleagues, a workforce development plan is being taken forward to support existing staff who are interested and identified as having potential to take on the role of Consultant Social Worker. This will further assist the implementation of more Units and reduce our need to engage agency staff.

4. FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The cost pressure of engaging agency social work staff is off-set by the vacant Consultant social workers posts while being actively managed. In addition ongoing recruitment activities will lessen the need for agency staff. Recent recruitment activities have resulted in a small number of agency staff applying for and being appointed to permanent positions with the Council. Without the use of agency staff at this time the ability of the service to ensure a high quality and safe service would be seriously compromised.

5. LEGAL IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 There are no direct legal implications arising from the recommendations of this report.

6. MANAGEMENT OF RISK

- 6.1 Financial – As noted in order to ensure a safe service, Children's Social Work has had to engage a number of agency staff to offset vacancies which have been hard to fill. Agency staff are more expensive to engage than permanent employees and consequently efforts to fill these vacancies through recruitment and workforce development are actively being progressed. Level of risk - medium.
- 6.2 Employee – For staff who have been matched and are now working in their new Unit or Team there is a real sense of purpose and positivity to their role. It is however recognised that the difficulties in being able to roll out all Units has left some staff

feeling frustrated and uncertain about when they will move. Evidence of caseload management activity highlights that the work is effectively being managed and our staffing resources are being deployed effectively. Level of risk medium.

- 6.3 Customer / citizen – Social work intervention is most effective when staff have manageable caseloads. Feedback from service users has to date been positive and encouraging. The Service has engaged external evaluators to report on the impact of the implementation. In their final year they will engage directly with a number of service users to independently assess the impact of Reclaiming Social Work. Level of risk low.
- 6.4 Environmental – There are not environmental risks associated with this report.
- 6.5 Technological – The service is continuing to explore ways in which technology can assist in freeing social workers time to allow for direct work with children and families. Level of risk low.
- 6.6 Legal – There are no legal risk associated with this report.
- 6.7 Reputational – Aberdeen City Council is the first authority in Scotland to implement the RSW model. Considerable interest has been shown in the model by the Scottish Government and other local authorities. In addition service users and local stakeholders are also interested in the impact this model has to service delivery. Success of the model will enhance the City's reputation. Level of risk low.

7. IMPACT SECTION

7.1 Economy

- 7.1.1 Effective management of the work across Children's Social Work is critical to ensuring that resources are being deployed to greatest effect. The successful implementation of RSW is a stated objective of the Councils' Strategic Business Plan and will deliver a transformational change as to how Children's Social Work engages with and delivers services ensuring children are safe and responsible. This vision is fully consistent with "children are our future" priority of Local Authority Outcome Improvement Plan.
- 7.1.2 The model is intended to be cost neutral by the end of the five year implementation period. Achieving this cost neutral position is contingent on recommissioning services from Third Sector partners as well as reducing the numbers of children placed in out of authority residential placements. Work is well underway to deliver on the first of these priorities however our ability to deliver on the second element has been affected by the recruitment challenges. With increasing Units and a new model of Intensive Support services it is anticipated delivery on the second element will be significantly advanced in the coming year.

7.2 People

- 7.2.1 The Council's decision to support the implementation of RSW model is aimed at delivering improved outcomes for those children, and their families, assessed as being at risk of harm and in need of statutory intervention. The model seeks to free social work staff up from bureaucratic processes to deploy their knowledge and skills in direct work with children and families. In addition the model is intended to support more children to remain in their families resulting in a rebalancing the profile of the

population of looked after children. An EHRIA was completed in respect of this report and additional measures were identified.

7.2.2 Evidence and direct feedback from children and families who have experienced this new model of delivery is encouraging and highlights that families feel more empowered to contribute to finding solutions to their own difficulties. These changes will diminish the reliance for some families on social work intervention and reduce the instances of children and families being re-referred. The impact of these changes will be incremental as more and more Units go live.

7.3 Place

7.3.1 The vast majority of social work services are delivered to families who experience economic deprivation. By supporting families to find solutions to their own difficulties and enhancing their resilience the effective delivery of social work services has an important role to play to positively improving the experience of living in Aberdeen.

7.4 Technology

7.4.1 A key driver within the RSW model is to free social work staff up from unnecessary bureaucratic processes. Modern technology has a valuable contribution to play and while some significant progress has been made there is still more to be achieved. Working with colleagues in ICT we are continuing to look at how professional social work time can be maximised to direct work with families.

8. BACKGROUND PAPERS

None

9. APPENDICES (if applicable)

None

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