



Wiltshire Council: developing a 'whole council' approach to children's services recruitment

A 'whole council' approach to improving recruitment and retention has transformed children's services at Wiltshire Council within just two years.

Back in 2013 there were high vacancy and staff turnover rates, a significant agency spend, little succession planning and a "job for life" culture leading to stagnation and a lack of progressive practice. Terence Herbert, who became Associate Director for Operational Children's Services that year, recognised that the council needed to do three things:

- attract quality staff at all levels through improved recruitment practices
- improve working conditions, support and opportunities for existing staff (caseload and supervision levels were key issues)
- change the service culture, for example through improved management capabilities.

Previously, individual service areas within Wiltshire Council would handle recruitment issues. In children's social care, a strong focus on advertising vacancies had not been successful. With one of the council's three business plan priorities being "to protect the most vulnerable in Wiltshire's communities," taking a whole council approach made sense. The first step was to highlight the impact of the recruitment challenge, and the resulting drain on resources, across the council. Terence Herbert explains it using a social work analogy: "If the primary presenting problem was recruitment and retention, we needed a 'team around the child' – or in this case an 'organisation around the service'."

A strong business case was presented to Cabinet highlighting the need to invest in a new approach to recruitment and retention. This involved accessing significant strategic and operational support from HR and finance. By developing a new approach the service would be able to respond to the immediate recruitment issues and also build capacity for the future. Politicians and officers rose to the challenge.

One of the first steps was to rebrand Wiltshire's 'social care matters' website, a one-stop shop for anyone interested in working in social care. A key element of the rebranding was to integrate Wiltshire's newly developed 'employer value proposition' which conveys key messages around innovation, collaboration and staff empowerment. It was also important to highlight the council's 'USPs' (unique selling points). The rebranding featured children and young people in care in Wiltshire and

the council's own staff. This provided an authenticity and has resonated with candidates in the interview process. Some targeted media advertising has continued, but with a new focus on Wiltshire's USPs.

A service manager was identified who, with support from HR, is now the link for all new applicants, returning their calls and outlining Wiltshire's offer. While this personal contact is time-intensive, candidates have said it was key to their acceptance of an offer. There has been a 70 per cent reduction in the length of process from interview to offer. The service has improved its presence on social media and attends some of the key careers fairs.

A market supplement of 10-15 per cent was applied to some hard-to-fill posts in safeguarding and assessment to reflect the particular challenges around these roles. This made a difference in recruitment but it created some tensions with other staff. The issue had to be carefully managed with a clear message that the move is about shared ownership of service improvement.

An '18 caseload promise' was launched in November 2014 and has been warmly welcomed by prospective social workers. While Wiltshire was not the first local authority to introduce this, it was the first in this region. It currently applies only to newly recruited social workers, but the aim is to extend it to all staff as soon as possible.

With a focus on retention, a systems thinking review was conducted in 2014. This led to a push to reduce the amount of bureaucracy experienced by qualified social workers. A major initiative has been a pilot project to push 4G-enabled notebooks for all social workers in one area. This has reduced paperwork and the need to travel, enabling staff to spend more time with children and families. The pilot is being rolled out to safeguarding and assessment teams across the county.

Better support systems are being put in place such as consistent supervision, opportunities to work in other parts of the service, mentoring and bespoke training. Wiltshire is launching an Institute for Health and Social Care which will set out clear career pathways and a range of development opportunities. These will include a 'grow your own' programme aimed at training council staff as qualified social workers. Links have been made with the University of the West of England, where a new bursary has been launched to encourage students to complete their assessed year of supported employment (AYSE) in Wiltshire.

An 'aspiring manager' role is being created, opening up opportunities for qualified and experienced social workers who want to develop their managerial skills through supervising a group of four AYSE social workers. Performance management has been improved and there are new, clearer pathways for succession, along with plans to gradually reduce the reliance on agency staff.

In a relatively short space of time, the children's services vacancy rate has dropped to less than four per cent. All head of service and service manager posts have been appointed to, along with the majority of original vacancies (although the headcount within safeguarding and assessment has risen by 27 to enable the recruitment of

experienced social workers – this will help to support the '18 caseload promise' and the reduction in caseload for all staff).

Feedback from interviews has shown that the 18 caseload promise is key. Experienced social workers are applying for roles with Wiltshire after hearing positive experiences from existing staff regarding support and manageable caseloads. 'Word of mouth' is a very important factor in recruitment and retention.

Ongoing challenges include the recruitment of experienced social workers, reducing the reliance on agency workers in the longer term and maintaining momentum.

Terence Herbert says: "We are not saying we've got it cracked or that what we are suggesting hasn't been tried by anyone else, but the key has been taking a whole council approach. We have tried new things and taken risks, and it is paying off."

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