

DUNDEE CITY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: SOCIAL WORK COMMITTEE – 15 DECEMBER 2003

**REPORT ON: CHILD CARE FIELDWORK SERVICES:
CARE AND ASSESSMENT TEAMS**

REPORT BY: DIRECTOR OF SOCIAL WORK

REPORT NO: 811-2003

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 This report provides members with an operational position statement on the work of the care and assessment teams which are part of the Social Work Department's child care services. The report highlights the continuing difficulties that are being experienced in recruiting and retaining social workers for these teams and the consequent impact on service delivery arising from this shortage of staff.

The actions that have been taken to date to address this issue and the next steps that are planned to ensure that the department can meet its statutory responsibilities towards children in need and vulnerable families are outlined.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Social Work Committee:

- 2.1 Note and approve the contents of this report and in particular acknowledge and give public recognition to social work staff in the care and assessment teams who carry out important work with children in need and their families on behalf of the local authority.
- 2.2 Instruct the Director of Social Work to bring further reports to committee which will seek approval for proposals to introduce a senior practitioner grade; to develop Child and Family Centre services by setting up family support teams; to extend flexible working practices throughout Children's Services and to re-organise child care fieldwork services as an outcome of plans developed from a review of the Social Work Department's structure.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 There are no financial implications arising directly from this report.

4.0 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 There are no direct agenda 21 implications arising from this report.

5.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The equal opportunities implications of changing the type of work, job role and conditions of service of fieldwork child care staff will be taken into account in developing proposals for change to the operational arrangements for this service.

6.0 BACKGROUND

- 6.1 Dundee Children's Services has eight fieldwork care and assessment teams. Operationally, the teams take referrals from four localities, with two teams each covering a quadrant of the city, namely North West, North East, South West and South East. These organisational divisions are not co-terminous with school catchment areas, and are not based on recognised neighbourhoods or the council's decentralisation areas. In recent years, shifts in population between localities have changed the volume of referrals received from different areas of the city. Taking this into account, there may be some scope to re-draw service boundaries to promote joint working and to rationalise and re-direct resources to better match service demands.

The staffing establishment of the care and assessment teams consists of 8 FTE senior social worker posts, 45 FTE social worker posts and 7.5 FTE social work assistant posts. There are at present 10.25 FTE social worker vacancies; that is a 23% vacancy level.

This staffing vacancy position has had impact on service delivery. It should be noted that about 15% of referrals have not been able to be allocated to a social worker over the past 3 months.

Children and young people on the child protection register and looked after children are prioritised for allocation. All such children in Dundee have a case-holding social worker. However reports to the Scottish Children's Reporter's Administration are not being completed on time (ie the Time Intervals standard is not being met) and family support cases may not receive a service in good time.

There has been increasing difficulty over the last two years in recruiting and retaining professional social work staff. Over the last six months the vacancy position has varied from 24% to 30% of establishment. These recruitment and retention problems are not unique to Dundee. There is a recognised national shortfall of qualified social workers, particularly those willing to work in child care posts.

6.2 Principal Social Work Tasks of the Care and Assessment Teams

Referrals to the care and assessment teams are prioritised according to an Eligibility Criteria which was approved by Committee in May 2002 (report no 459-2002 refers) and this assists senior social workers in deciding upon the allocation of work. Care and protection cases are considered for example as a high priority need when there is serious concern about the safety or welfare of a child. This would include circumstances where a child was abandoned or rejected or where a child was beyond parental control.

Social workers in care and assessment teams have case-holding responsibility for a number of children and young people. The expected caseload norm is 20 individual children or young people per worker. At times of staff shortage, as at present, workloads can be higher than this and can lack balance. In other words

the individual caseloads of social workers can contain too many of the high priority of needs category of cases.

The main types of work of the care and assessment teams are as follows:

6.2.1 Children And Young People On The Child Protection Register

These cases are transferred from the child protection team for follow up work once the initial investigation, assessment and short-term intervention phase has been completed. Whilst the number of children on the child protection register has gone both up and down over recent years, there has been steady increase in children placed on the register under the category of physical neglect arising out of concern about the care provided by substance misusing parents.

Substance misuse, previously centring more on alcohol, but now concerning those on methadone programmes and tranquiliser users who also supplement their drug habit illegally has always been an issue but is becoming a dominating theme of much of the work of the care and assessment teams which has increased the pressure on social workers. Parental substance misuse is extremely difficult to combat, with a major sub-culture of dealing, crime, and distorted relationships, whose influence can often be more immediate to those involved in it than the exhortations and advice of outsiders. This also creates a population whose parenting can be difficult to predict as parents can present as co-operative, well intentioned towards their children and generally bonded with them during positive times, but highly prone to other priorities intruding at times of stress or when misusing drugs.

6.2.2 The Responsibilities Of Corporate Parenting: The Care Of Children And Young People Looked After And Accommodated By The Local Authority

A major part of a social worker's caseload in the care and assessment teams will consist of children and young people who are either looked after by the local authority whilst remaining at home (home supervision in terms of Section 70 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995) or accommodated by the local authority in either foster care or residential units (including residential schools and secure accommodation) either through orders made by the Children's Panel or Sheriffs (eg child protection orders, places of safety, supervision with conditions of residence) or through voluntary accommodation under Section 25 of the Children (Scotland) Act 1995.

Ensuring that all looked after and accommodated children and young people have care plans and that these are being implemented is a very high priority for care and assessment social workers. The local authority exercises its responsibility as corporate parent through these professional staff.

6.2.3 Reports Requested By Scottish Children's Reporters Administration

SCRA are the main source of new referrals to the care and assessment teams. When the Reporter to the Children's Panel requests an initial assessment or social background report from the Social Work Department, this work is allocated to the care and assessment teams. The number of referrals has increased in recent years, particularly referrals related to the care and protection of children as opposed to referrals that arise from children offending.

Notwithstanding this, offending referrals are a significant area of service for the care and assessment teams who work alongside specialist projects such as the CHOICE team.

6.2.4 Court Reports And Work Around Family Re-configuration

High rates of divorce and relationship breakdown has significant impact on the upbringing of children. The impact on family life of new partnerships between adults, new relationships between step-parents and step-children and the behavioural reactions of children to change can create issues requiring a social work service.

Specifically, care and assessment social workers are required to provide reports to Court regarding parental residence and contact issues and step-parent adoption.

As well as this, care and assessment social workers are increasingly involved in supporting extended family members who are caring for children through residence orders, link carer and private fostering arrangements.

6.2.5 Support To Children In Need And Vulnerable Families

The Access social work team screens all initial requests for social work intervention made directly by members of the public or other agencies except SCRA. Dundee's excellent network of Child and Family centres also take direct referrals from families and other agencies. The Access team and Child and Family centres will attempt to meet and resolve the needs of the families directly and through referral to other agencies. However, a proportion of referrals will be assessed as requiring service from a child care social worker.

Responsibility for the provision of this service falls to the care and assessment teams. The Access team operates to the Eligibility Criteria in considering whether to refer on to the care and assessment teams. Only cases presenting the most persistent or chronic difficulties (eg a parent/child relationship where the parent is demanding that their child be accommodated by the local authority) are referred on for a service.

In a situation of staff shortage, the transfer of such complex and intractable cases, requiring urgent allocation, puts pressure on the care and assessment teams and offers very limited scope for working and engaging with families in terms of the "no order" principle underpinning the Children (Scotland) Act 1995. Early intervention and preventative work cannot at present be undertaken by the care and assessment teams.

6.3 Competing Priorities And Work Pressures On The Care And Assessment Teams

Care and assessment teams have skilled, professional staff who are able to tackle a wide range of complex tasks on behalf of the local authority within their broad remit of promoting the welfare of children in need. Their strengths lie in their knowledge of their local area, their strong team identity, their skills in practical problem solving and their willingness to adopt flexible work patterns. However, lack of control over the level of demand for service, being subject to the decision making of others, limited recognition of the value of their role, the attractiveness of specialisms, and restricted opportunities for direct practice and professional development has led to an inability to recruit and retain social worker staff to the care and assessment teams.

This is, in other words, a high risk and high pressure job. Social workers in the care and assessment teams have less ability to control the volume and nature of work demanded of them. One result of this can be high sickness absence rates.

One consequence of this has also been a high turn-over of social worker staff. The competition for qualified social workers is very strong and there are many more local job opportunities available than in past years. These include work with the Scottish Commission for the Regulation of Care, in the voluntary sector, in other council departments and in other services within the Social Work Department. Many new jobs have been created as a result of a Scottish Executive funded initiatives.

From October 2002 to October 2003, twenty five staff left their social worker posts in the care and assessment teams to take up such posts. Exit interviews with these staff have suggested that the critical factors that led workers to seek jobs elsewhere were high caseloads and work pressures. This high turnover of staff within the care and assessment teams increases the pressure on the remaining workers and reduces the experience level within teams. The inexperience of social worker staff is of concern. This affects the ability of senior social workers to allocate work and compromises our ability to meet service demands.

7.0 ACTIONS TO DATE

Management action in relation to the above operational issues has been taken in five areas, namely the Recruitment and Retention of Social Work Staff, Remuneration, Team Support and Professional Development and Sharing the Workload.

7.1 Recruitment

Enquiries from prospective staff willing to work in the care and assessment teams have been responded to at all times and not just in response to a current advert. In recent months, four new staff members have been recruited in this way.

Great importance has been placed on recruiting newly qualified staff. Dundee social work staff attended a Recruitment Fair for social work students in January 2003 and introduced a process of interviewing students, and making a conditional job offer subject to confirmation of their qualification status. Three new staff members have been recruited in this way, with the period between completing their course and receiving their qualification being used as an active induction period within the care and assessment teams in which they will be working.

The adoption of a "Grow Your Own" policy has become a vital part of our recruitment strategy, attracting as it does workers who have already social care

experience and wish to stay in Dundee. Through this, positive encouragement is given to staff within the department who wish to train as social workers by providing funding support and giving placement priority to those who undertake the Open University's Diploma in Social Work qualification.

A Fast Track Graduate Recruitment Scheme has been introduced by the Scottish Executive. Dundee has employed four fast track students as trainee social workers and when qualified in February 2005, they will take up social worker posts in the care and assessment teams.

7.2 Retention

The approach to recruitment and retention of staff in Dundee has been to focus attention on making Dundee a better working environment and therefore a more attractive place to work rather than on short-term financial incentives. Social Work Committee approved the commissioning of external consultants in August 2002 (report no 622-2002 refers) with the aim of looking at issues of flexible and effective working practices and of promoting a work/life balance.

Initial research by the consultants indicated that a key driver for recruitment and in particular for retention of staff was the attractiveness of the department as a place of work - for new starts and - for existing staff. These findings led to the piloting of new working practices which aimed to deliver a better service to users and the best possible working environment for staff. Four pilot teams were set up to investigate flexible working based on working from home; four pilot teams investigated flexible working based on variable hours; and one pilot team looked at process improvement.

An evaluation based on six months operation of these pilot teams has now been completed. It concluded that flexible working improves the effectiveness and satisfaction of staff. The results of the pilots show that improvements can be made in operational effectiveness and job satisfaction. There was a positive impact on customer service and resource utilisation. Staff also reported reduced stress levels with a feeling of being trusted and being more in control of their workload. Flexible working did not directly tackle under-staffing but it does help individuals in teams to cope with the added pressure.

The overall conclusion was that there was great potential for a roll out of flexible working practices throughout the Social Work Department.

7.3 Remuneration

Personnel and Management Services Committee approval was given on 8 December 2003 (report no 738-2003 refers) for the regrading of the senior social workers supervising care and assessment teams and to make interim payments to staff carrying out key duties and responsibilities in the areas of mental health, child protection and practice teaching. This will assist the Social Work Department in retaining qualified and experienced staff and should be seen as part of the range of initiatives to improve support to front line staff in the longer term.

7.4 Team Support and Professional Development

During 2003, all care and assessment teams received financial support to have individually chosen team development days. This was very well received by staff and it is planned to repeat this in 2004. A programme of core training requirements for new social workers to the care and assessment teams has been

drawn up and will be made available by the staff development service in 2004. The Social Work Department has also purchased 8 places on the University of Dundee's Certificate in Child Care and Protection which has an intake in February 2004. Priority will be given to care and assessment team social workers for these places.

7.5 Sharing the Workload

The social work tasks undertaken by the care and assessment teams are key statutory duties. It is not however prescribed that they have to be the sole responsibility of these teams. Management action has been taken to share the workload.

This has meant that Children's Services social workers outwith the care and assessment teams have taken a place on the back-up rota to the Access team, sessional social workers have been recruited with the primary role of completing reports to SCRA and social workers in the family placement team are playing a greater role in assessing link carers and in preparing residence order reports. Caseholding responsibility for certain Fast Track children's hearing cases has been assumed by the CHOICE Project. In addition, the family support role of Child and Family centre staff has been called on to a greater extent in relation to cases where there are children in need under the age of 12.

8.0 THE NEXT STEPS

The present organisational arrangements need to change. The operational issues facing the child care fieldwork service require strategic and long-term solutions. The management and staffing structure of the care and assessment teams should be revised. The role of senior social worker as first line team manager and supervisor of professional practice needs examination.

Consideration needs to be given to the skills mix of staff and to how experienced staff can be appropriately rewarded to stay longer in practice. This might mean for example the introduction of a senior practitioner grade. More defensible service boundaries should be created and these should be better aligned with other services to promote joint working and integrated service delivery.

In other words, a major re-configuration of the way in which childcare fieldwork services are delivered is required. This new model of service needs to take into account other developments. This includes the setting up of family support teams arising from the Child and Family Centre Working Group. The success of the Support for Young People (BNSF) Project in promoting good corporate working and in having school-attached social workers with professional line management from within the Social Work Department also needs to be taken into account as does the related roll-out of Community Schools.

- 8.1 Proposals for organisational change of child care fieldwork services will be developed as part of a broader review of the Social Work Department's management and staffing structure. A review team, chaired by the Director of Social Work will prepare re-organisation plans and bring a report back to Social Work Committee for approval.

9.0 CONSULTATION

- 9.1 The Chief Executive, the Depute Chief Executive (Finance), Depute Chief Executive (Support Services) and the Assistant Chief Executive (Management) have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

10.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

- 10.1 No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information), were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

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Date: 5 December 2003