South West Social Work Recruitment and Retention Project

Report to South West Childrens RIEP

This is a short report detailing work undertaken in the first 2 quarters of 2011 together with some recommendations as to future actions.

Work Undertaken April to May 2011

Initially a literature and web based review was carried out, this brought to light the existence of two pilots funded by the Childrens Workforce Development Council (CWDC);

- the West London Partnership, this involved;
  - Partnership with higher education institutions
    This project aimed to establish a partnership between the eight boroughs and a selected group of higher education institutions to create mechanisms for sharing responsibility of social work learning and education.
  - First line leadership and management
    This project aimed to develop the leadership and staff development skills and abilities of team managers and equivalent first line practice management posts in each of the eight boroughs.
  - Development framework for induction of newly qualified social workers (NQSW)
    This project, intended to complement CWDC's Newly Qualified Social Worker programme, provided a shared programme of training and development during the probation period for newly qualified staff in all boroughs.
  - Social work career pathway
    This project aimed to create an explicit career pathway for social workers to help them develop complex casework skills, or specialist expertise, within a structured framework linked to salary scales
  - Enabling the social work role
    This project provided mechanisms to reduce the constraints on social workers, promote professional autonomy and minimise the bureaucratic processes which take social workers away from direct contact with families.
• The project was led by London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham with eight London boroughs taking part:
  
  Brent  
  Ealing  
  Hammersmith and Fulham  
  Harrow  
  Hillingdon  
  Hounslow  
  Kensington and Chelsea  
  Westminster  

• The West Midlands Partnership, this involved the following;
  
  • Social worker career pathway  
    This project aimed to provide an explicit career pathway for children's social workers to enable them to benefit from a transparent career development path that has clear incentives to remain on the front line of children's social work.
  
  • Action learning sets for first line managers  
    This project aimed to improve the quality of supervision and support to social workers through the creation and implementation of an action learning framework for their first line managers.
  
  • Project managers to support public law proceedings  
    This project aimed to reduce bureaucracy and stress for social workers by finding better ways of managing public law proceedings through a project management approach. The project produced a training pack to develop social workers’ skills and improve their confidence in preparing evidence and going to court.
  
  • Regional data survey  
    This project collected information and data regarding qualifications, roles, responsibilities and experience, from children's social workers in the region.
  
  • Improving the procurement of agency children's social workers  
    This project aimed to provide a range of possible options for how to improve the processes and procedures for the supply of agency social workers across the region.
  
• The project was led by Coventry City Council with 14 local authorities taking part:
  
  Birmingham City Council  
  Coventry City Council  
  Stoke-on Trent City Council  
  Wolverhampton City Council  
  Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council
Herefordshire Council
Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council
Shropshire County Council
Solihull Metropolitan Borough Council
Staffordshire County Council
Telford & Wrekin Council
Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council
Warwickshire County Council
Worcestershire County Council.

Both of these projects, details of which had not been made available to SWADCS or GOSW via the Regional CWDC lead existed for 2 years and were supported by full time project managers. Learning from both projects has now been published and is available from the CWDC website (http://www.cwdcouncil.org.uk/recruitment-and-retention).

A key learning point most clearly shown by the West London Partnership was the leadership and drive shown by the local ADCS working in conjunction with the Heads of Social Care from the 8 Borough’s involved. In this scenario a lead DCS was identified and then each of the Heads of Social Care took a lead role in terms of part of the project.

In addition to the CWDC projects it became apparent that a regional workforce tool had already been developed by Skills for Care funded by the Department of Health and involving CWDC nationally. This tool, the National Minimum Data Set – Social Care (NMDS-SC) was being utilised by the Department of Health via Skills for Care to audit the social care workforce in Adult Services with an expectation that all Local Authorities complete data returns, including the mapping of the private and voluntary sector workforce within this sector. The existence of the NMDS – SC and its utility for use within the children’s sector had not been ‘flagged up’ with SWADCS or GOSW although three Local Authorities were discovered to be using the tool to map the Local Authority children’s workforce (Bournemouth, Dorset and Swindon).

The existence of the two CWDC projects asking and answering many of the questions posed in the original PID together with the development and use of a workforce tool meant that part of the project as originally envisaged was redundant other than to publicise the existence of the NMDS – SC tool and the findings of the CWDC projects. At this point during a meeting with the South West Heads of Social Care it also became apparent that one of the unexpected effects of wider economy issues, budget reductions and restructuring had been to reduce vacancy rates to minimums within almost all South West Local Authorities. The Heads of Service indicated that recruitment and retention difficulties were believed to occur in only 3 Local Authorities; Cornwall, Gloucestershire and Torbay. They also expressed bemusement and concern that the original PID and brief had not been discussed with them as a group during 2010 and the early part of 2011. This lack of engagement was partly responsible for the unfortunate effect of minimising their interest and commitment in this project although more significant reasons lay in their
workload regarding restructuring, budget management and the publication of Professor Munro’s review at or about the same time.

Work undertaken May – August 2011

Following discussion with the chair of the South West Children’s RIEP and the project manager from South West Councils it was agreed that the project would be refocused on;

- utilising existing methods of information gathering to share information between Authorities on social worker workforce data;
- initiating meetings between social work workforce development representatives across the region, to promote information sharing, recruitment campaign planning, and increase awareness of regional issues;
- scoping the potential of engaging with Social Work education providers to influence course curricula, understand student numbers and the demand for statutory placements and enhance the student experience;
- exploring what has worked nationally in recruitment and retention;
- scoping whether there are opportunities across region for peer to peer support between Local Authorities.

To understand more the issues facing the 3 Local Authorities identified as having recruitment and retention problems it was agreed that interviews would be carried out with key managers within each LA together with managers in Plymouth and Somerset who had been identified by their Heads of Service as having particular regional interests. It was also agreed that interviews should be conducted with the Social Work course leaders of the Higher Education Institutes providing Social Work training within the South West.

At this juncture Professor Eileen Munro’s Review of Child Protection was published, this contains amongst a number of recommendations a key set of suggestions in the context of this project;

‘Recommendation 12: Employers and higher education institutions (HEIs) should work together so that social work students are prepared for the challenges of child protection work. In particular, the review considers that HEIs and employing agencies should work together so that:

- practice placements are of the highest quality and – in time – only in designated Approved Practice Settings;
- employers are able to apply for special ‘teaching organisation’ status, awarded by the College of Social Work;
- the merits of ‘student units’, which are headed up by a senior social worker are considered; and
- placements are of sufficiently high quality, and both employers and HEIs consider if their relationship is working well.’

In addition to this it was announced by the Department for Education in June that Local Authorities would be expected to use on a voluntary basis the
NMDS – SC as the return in respect of the children’s social services workforce between 12 September and 7 October 2011. The SSDS001 collection for the children’s workforce would no longer be required. In preparation for this return Skills for Care were contracted on a regional basis to provide training and support to Local Authorities to enable them to undertake the exercise thus meeting one of the revised objectives. It is intended that the Department will produce a report in March 2012 that will analyse NMDS-SC data received from local authorities from their children’s social services in 2011/12. The report will cover the size and structure of children’s social services and the associated workforce. In line with Professor Munro’s final report to the Government, key areas of analysis will include vacancy and turnover rates, workforce demographics, pay rates, nationality, levels of qualifications, use of agency staff with a key section dedicated to Social Workers.

Discussions with the Local Authorities

At the meeting of the Heads of Social Care three Local Authorities were identified who were believed to be having difficulties in recruitment and retention, these were Cornwall, Gloucestershire and Torbay, all shared recent experience of being judged by OfSted as being ‘Inadequate’ in Safeguarding children and young people. The Head of Social Care and/or other senior managers identified by the Director of Childrens Service in each Authority were interviewed to ascertain the particular recruitment issues, briefly these can be identified as;

Cornwall:

- concerns over the quality of newly qualified Social Workers (NQSW);
- over reliance on NQSW within workforce in general;
- preponderance of NQSW in frontline services.

Gloucestershire:

- recruitment issue is as a result of additional posts being authorised by LA, not as a result of difficulty in recruiting per se.

Torbay:

- recruitment issue is more evident at Team Manager level, the quality of frontline staff was felt to be adequate.

Given the variety of issues of the three Local Authorities it has proved difficult to identify any unifying element other than the self evident issue of recruitment difficulties linked to ‘Inadequate’ OfSted judgements. Though whether these recruitment issues pre or post date the OfSted inspection maybe worthy of further investigation.

As noted above the other Local Authorities reported little difficulty in recruitment at present with vacancies at a minimum and applicants judged to
be of good quality. Heads of Service were however generally more vague when questioned about the make up of their workforce in terms of age, retention, retirement and future staffing requirements, depending on the thoroughness of the NMDS – SC return these issues should be able to be identified on an individual authority and collectively on a regional basis.

**Discussions with Higher Education Institutes**

There are currently six Universities situated in the South West that offer undergraduate or post graduate qualifications in Social Work, these are;

- Bournemouth University
- Bristol University
- Plymouth University
- University of Bath
- University of Gloucestershire
- University of the West of England

in addition there are two Colleges who offer undergraduate courses validated by South West Universities;

- Cornwall College (validated by Plymouth University)
- Wiltshire College (validated by University of Bath)

Letters were sent to the Deans, Heads of School or Course at the Schools and Faculties delivering Social Work courses within each of the Universities asking to arrange a meeting or booked telephone call to discuss the project, these were later followed up with emails. To date five face to face interviews of between one and one and a half hours have been carried out with those academics identified by each University as the most appropriate contact.

**Course Numbers 2011/12**

<table>
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<th>Post Graduate (cohort)</th>
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1) and 2) Undergraduate courses last 3 years, Post Graduate 2 years, the number in each cohort refers to those starting the course. Multiplying the cohort by the number of years in each course will give a theoretical maximum of those qualifying at the end of the course, the true number will almost certainly be less depending on those who drop out or who fail to complete the course for various reasons.
Both the Bournemouth University and the University of Gloucestershire intend to vary their courses over time by developing a Post Graduate offer alongside the undergraduate course whilst remaining at or about the total number of students they currently teach.

Key Findings

The Universities interviewed appear to split into two distinct groups of 4 +1, firstly there is a self-defined group centred around pre and post 1992 institutions with the University of Bath placing itself in the pre 1992 grouping and defining both it’s student intake (in their view they recruit nationally) and research ethos as being different from the other 4. Two key issues coming out of the interview with the University of Bath are a) the potential for new students in the near future to require AAB at ‘A’ Level to be even considered for the course and b) the small but potential threat that space currently provided for the teaching of the Social Work course may be utilised to enable other significantly oversubscribed courses to be enlarged. This possibility should not be discounted, with Universities seeking to maximise income in coming years the opportunity to achieve an ‘easy win’ may prove irresistible. The group of 4 post 1992 Universities appear to recruit closer to home and did not appear to wish to increase grade requirements or feel that the course could be at risk.

The second issue where the Universities could be grouped 4 + 1 is in the area of strategic engagement. In this case the University of Plymouth appears to stand out as being an outlier. The other 4 Universities describe relationships with Local Authorities that range from very close to close with engagement being at a senior level with the Local Authority (Director of Childrens Services, Assistant Director/Head of Social Care) and Head of Course/School for the University. Opportunities described included wide ranging discussions involving a number of University departments, research and evaluation, links to continuing professional development for staff and invitations from Local Safeguarding Childrens Boards for the University to become a member. In addition there was a feeling where issues had been identified for example via an OfSted inspection that those issues were shared and that the University wished to support their Local Authority partners (most clearly identified by the University of Gloucestershire). A common feature of the strategic engagements with each of these Universities is that they are carried out on an individual Local Authority basis, none of the Universities see the utility of developing a regional or sub regional approach to strategic engagement save for perhaps an annual meeting between all and SWADCS.

At the University of Plymouth the strategic engagement appears less well developed, there are a number of concerns with this situation; Plymouth currently has the largest cohort of under and post graduates in the South West; many (but by no means all) students are local and will seek jobs in close proximity to Plymouth; two of the nearest Local Authorities have recruitment issues (albeit at differing levels) and have been rated by OfSted as inadequate under the category of Safeguarding. It is not appropriate (or
even possible) to assign fault as to why this situation has arisen but the Local Authorities in the far South West should consider how a strategic engagement could or should occur as a matter of some urgency. There is perhaps more opportunity with the University of Plymouth for a sub regional approach to strategic engagement on some shared issues given the geography of the far South West but individual Local Authorities should also aim establish their own links.

Conclusion

This project was devised in 2010 and initiated in 2011 and can be said to be both too late and too early. By the time the project started most Local Authorities were not reporting problems with Social Work vacancies conversely when details of the NMDS-SC return are available other workforce issues may come to the fore. In addition the lack of awareness of the CWDC projects in West London and the West Midlands meant there was duplication, delaying the project would have allowed the learning to be fully digested. The project governance has proved problematic; the lack of early engagement with the Heads of Social Care prior to commencing the project sidelined this key group of managers who could and should have proactively influenced and led the process, the resignation of the Chair of the Children’s JIP who was also the driving light behind the project together with slow run down of South West Councils meant that key decision makers were absent. Having said that some progress can be seen against a couple of the revised PID outcomes as delineated below;

- utilising existing methods of information gathering to share information between Authorities on social worker workforce data;

  The NMDS – SC is being utilised by Local Authorities to map social worker workforce data this autumn, by March 2012 a national picture will be developed in the meantime it should be possible for South West Local Authorities to share between themselves their returns to enable a regional picture to be developed

- initiating meetings between social work workforce development representatives across the region, to promote information sharing, recruitment campaign planning, and increase awareness of regional issues;

  The view developed from the NMDS – SC returns will reset the agenda for regional meetings of the social care workforce development representatives. In the meantime the majority view across Heads of Social Care appears to be one where recruitment and retention is not currently viewed as a major issue.

- scoping the potential of engaging with Social Work education providers to influence course curricula, understand student numbers and the demand for statutory placements and enhance the student experience;
The Universities that responded to requests for interviews are all interested in developing stronger strategic links with Local Authorities.

- exploring what has worked nationally in recruitment and retention;

There is appears to be little evidence based best practice on recruitment and retention, many authorities have a rolling programme of advertising and recruitment especially for Social Work staff and opportunistically pick up ideas from each other when recruitment programmes appear to fail. At present however most Local Authorities in the South West appear content with their recruitment practice and the quality of applicants. Those who are not have the added complication of ‘Inadequate’ judgements from OfSted which on the face of it may both indicate wider issues within the Authority whilst also putting off the best candidates.

- scoping whether there are opportunities across region for peer to peer support between Local Authorities.

There appears little scope or enthusiasm for peer to peer support between Authorities at this time.

Given the above there appears little demand or appetite at present to continue with this project and as such I recommend that work is put on hold now. This does leave an issue however regarding the budget for the project, due to the existence of the workforce tool, the lack of demand for regional meetings and a healthy contingency fund there is an underspend of some £18,000 which South West Councils need to agree the use of.

**Recommendations**

1) SW Councils should discuss as a matter of urgency with SWADCS in light of the current findings the following issues; whether the project should cease now, if not what revisions to the PID are necessary and the use of the underspend on this project.

2) Any new project should have a clear line of governance to the SWADCS and the SW Heads of Social Care. At a minimum there should be a sponsoring DCS supported by a Head of Service from another Local Authority. Progress should be reported in to the Heads of Service meeting with a final report and recommendations to SWADCS.

3) There is considerable scope over the next few months in utilising the data from the NMDS – SC to provide a greater focus for social care workforce development in children services in the South West at a Local Authority and Regional level. Given the need to continue to rationalise services and increase efficiency it would be prudent for the output from this return to be considered in conjunction with the existing returns for the adult workforce to ensure Local Authorities and training providers have an overall picture of workforce development needs.
4) As a result of 3) above SWADCS should consider meeting as a group with the 6 HEI’s providing social work training in the region to discuss regional recruitment and retention issues.

5) Notwithstanding 4) above Local Authorities should on an individual basis make contact with the local HEI’s in order to develop appropriate strategic relationships. This should be led as a minimum at Head of Social Care/Assistant Director level.