

Agenda Item	11
Report No	HCW/11/23

## THE HIGHLAND COUNCIL

**Committee:** Health, Social Care and Wellbeing Committee

**Date:** 18 May 2023

**Report Title:** Health and Social Care Staff Vacancies and Associated Risks

**Report By:** Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care

### 1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 The purpose of this report is to make the Committee aware of recruitment challenges in terms of staffing of the Health and Social Care Service. Whilst these challenges are being experienced nationally, there are additional geographical pressures for the Highlands. The shortage particularly relates to social work vacancies in Children's Services but there are also significant issues in terms of Mental Health Officer provision and to a lesser extent Justice services.
- 1.2 It is important to recognise that the level of vacancies being experienced contributes to a significant risk in terms of ongoing service delivery. That risk is such that the next meeting of the Audit & Scrutiny Committee will be asked to consider the inclusion of this risk on the Corporate Risk Register.

### 2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:
- i. **Note** the contents of this report and support the inclusion on the risk register of issues in relation to vacancies set out in this report.

### 3. Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** – The implications for staff resources are significant and are explained in greater detail in the body of the report. There are no direct financial resource implications arising from the contents of this Report. Were there to be proposals in the future to make employment opportunities more attractive it might be that they would have a financial impact, but any such proposals would have to be considered in the appropriate forum in

terms of the job evaluation process, staff terms and conditions, etc. It should also be noted that the impact of vacancies is such that the Service does require to employ agency staff at increased cost to ensure ongoing service provision.

- 3.2 **Legal** - There are no legal implications arising from this report albeit there is considered to be an ongoing risk in terms of the service's ability to fulfil statutory duties.
- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)** – There are some community implications arising from the contents of this report. Generally speaking, recruitment is more challenging out with the immediate Inner Moray Firth area and as such the consequences of vacancies can be more significant out with that area. It ought to be noted that the Service does make use of agency staff to ensure ongoing service at safe levels.
- 3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** – There are no such implications.
- 3.5 **Risk** – There are significant risks arising from the circumstances described in this report. Vacancy levels are such that there is a risk to the Council being able to fulfil statutory duties. Those statutory duties include corporate parenting responsibilities and the care and protection of children who are at risk of significant harm. The risk in terms of the Council failing in those duties is considered to be high to very high in terms of the Council's risk matrix and the impact could be described as critical to catastrophic in terms of risk to people and the associated risk to the Council's reputation.
- 3.6 **Gaelic** – There are no such implications.

#### **4. Background**

- 4.1 There are over 1000 posts (c880 FTE) within the Health & Social Care Directorate. This figure includes 230 FTE Child Health posts, with a vacancy rate of 8%. This is as a result of the really successful Advanced Training Programme for nurses. In terms of the number of social work and social care staff within the establishment, there are 295 posts (254.78 FTE).
- 4.2 There are **78** (FTE) Children's Services Social Worker posts in the establishment. As of 24 of March 2023, there are **32** vacancies across Highland, which equates to a **41%** vacancy rate. Those vacancies are principally within the Families Teams who have lead responsibility for Care and Protection concerns in relation to children. When teams are understaffed, retention of existing staff also becomes more challenging.
- 4.3 The vacancies are a cause of significant concern and inevitably contribute to difficulties in fulfilling statutory functions. These functions are crucial and relate to the health and safety of some of Highland's most vulnerable children and young people. These mandatory functions are such that it is not generally possible to limit or restrict the service which requires to be provided nor it is possible for such functions to be carried out by non-professional staff.
- 4.4 The challenges associated with recruitment are not unique to Highland Council. However, there are geographical challenges, specifically in rural areas, which add a more complex dimension to recruitment and retention of social workers. There is recognition nationally that the social work profession, particularly in terms of the delivery of children's services, is in crisis and that unprecedented recruitment and retention

challenges exist across Scotland and are being experienced in all local authority areas with particular concerns in remote and rural areas.

- 4.5 In terms of the Mental Health Officer Service the current vacancy rate is in the region of 35%. That too is significant and notwithstanding the fact that the Service have taken steps to introduce a Trainee programme which has received national recognition, recruitment remains very challenging. Recent job advertisements for qualified staff did not receive any applications. Similar challenges exist within the Justice Service albeit at lesser levels.

## **5. Mitigating Actions**

- 5.1 The Service has been obliged to have recourse to the use of Agency staff over the years and that has been particularly necessary in what are generally considered to be “hard to fill” vacancies which are generally situated out with the Inner Moray Firth area. In 2022/23 agency spend amounted to £ 1,029,141.29, which is in line with previous years. As a rule of thumb, it should be noted that a vacancy which is filled on an agency basis amount to a cost which is over twice that which it would be where the post to be filled on a permanent basis.
- 5.2 Over the course of the last year the Service’s agency cost has decreased. Initially, this was linked to greater scrutiny and a concentrated effort by managers to reduce the use of agency social workers. However, whilst Highland has a long experience of utilising agency social workers, our recent experience is that the quality and standards of practice is variable and generally not in keeping with the standards we expect in Highland. As such, whilst there has been a decrease in the use of agency staff (which is to be welcomed) that decrease has not been because of being able to successfully fill vacancies. Rather, this has arisen from not being able to successfully recruit suitable agency staff.
- 5.3 In terms of other actions being taken by the service it is important to note that Recruitment and Retention is a key workstream in the Service Workforce plan. This includes actions around:
- an improved recruitment strategy
  - the ‘Grow our own’ policy
  - refreshing our current job descriptions
  - development of career paths
  - reviewing longstanding vacancies to determine if work can be divided differently
  - accessing the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) website for return to work Social Work Scheme
  - assessing if the Shortage Occupation list (UK Government) is appropriate for our use
  - using promoted advertising for key posts

We are also utilising the revised exit interview process to analyse the reasons for leaving and resolve any issues where possible.

- 5.4 Work is ongoing with the Council’s Talent Team in terms of how employment opportunities can be made attractive, and it will be necessary to consider if there are any incentives which can be used to make recruitment more effective. We are also working with the Council’s Comms Team on the creation of a recruitment video, explaining all of the attractions and benefits of working in Highland. All staff and managers also continue

to ensure that recruitment processes are followed expeditiously in terms of making sure that the recruitment process is as quick as it can be as it is apparent that vacancies across the country are such that we need to ensure that applications are pursued effectively.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care

Date: 27 April 2023

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Background Papers: None