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| Agenda Item | 8 |
| Report No | HCW/21/23 |

The Highland Council

Committee: Health Social Care & Wellbeing Committee

Date: 15 November 2023

Report Title: Workforce Strategy Update Report

Report By: Executive Chief Officer Health and Social Care & CSWO

1. Purpose/Executive Summary

- 1.1 Members will recall a report went to the Audit & Scrutiny Committee on (June 2023). The Audit & Scrutiny Committee recognised that the workforce challenges were not only a service risk but also a corporate risk to Highland Council. This report seeks to provide an update on the staffing situation since this time (June 2023).

This previous report noted the challenges in recruiting and retaining professional social workers across the Highlands. While these challenges are across all social work disciplines, the situation is particularly serious in children's social work services, with significant vacancies within the Family Teams.

This report articulates the work done to date with regard recruitment and retention. This has helped reduce our social work vacancies from 41% to 34%. At the heart of this is our Workforce Strategy that will enable us to mitigate risks and reduce turnover, thus helping to stabilise and strengthen the social work workforce and child health professionals across the Highlands.

2. Recommendations

- 2.1 Members are asked to:

- i. **Scrutinise** and note the on-going recruitment and retention challenge across all social work services, whilst acknowledging the significant impact this is having on the delivery of 'front-line' children's services.
- ii. **Note** the positive shift in recruitment and reduction in Children's Services vacancies from Q1 (41%) to Q3 (34%)
- iii. **Scrutinise** and note the actions and overall workforce strategy to tackle the recruitment and retention challenges.

3. Implications

- 3.1 **Resource** - The HSCW Directorate continues to have a significant underspend of over £2million. This underspend is mainly linked to social work front line vacancies, including social work managers. 3.5 notes the serious risk in delivering statutory services within this context.
- 3.2 **Legal** - Social work services are delivered through qualified social workers and social work managers, who must be registered with the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and comply with the SSSC professional Code of Practice. Only registered social workers can fulfil the functions of social work, which are strongly interconnected, but uniquely different from social care.
- Highland Council have statutory duties to deliver high quality social work services to children, adults and families in Highland.
- Social work operates within a complex framework of legislative duties, regulations and guidance to provide a range of services to promote social welfare in partnership with other agencies. Local authorities have a statutory responsibility, exercised through social work services, to promote social welfare and justice. There are clear duties of public protection in the promotion of the wellbeing of children and adults at risk of harm. Statutory powers may be exercised to address very serious, complex social issues. This requires balancing competing needs, risks and rights. In these circumstances, given the far-reaching significance of the powers social work have, it is important that accountability for the exercise of these functions should rest with a registered social worker.
- 3.3 **Community (Equality, Poverty, Rural and Island)** - Social workers support some of the most vulnerable children, adults, families and communities within our society. As noted above in 3.2. the role operates within a complex legal framework but fundamental to the social work role are the strong professional values of social work to promote human rights, justice, equality and empowerment of individuals, families and communities. Respecting and protecting the cultural, linguistic, religious and ethnicity of individuals and communities is an ethical and statutory duty contained within relevant legislation.
- 3.4 **Climate Change / Carbon Clever** – No implications
- 3.5 **Risk** - Highland Council have statutory duties to ensure strategic planning and commissioning of local services to meets the needs of the local population, particularly to some of our most vulnerable citizens. High turnover of social workers, and managers, resulting in recruitment and retention pressures, inherently carries considerable risk in the delivery of local services. That risk is set out in the Council's corporate risk register.
- 3.6 **Health and Safety (risks arising from changes to plant, equipment, process, or people)** – No implications.
- 3.7 **Gaelic** – No implications

4. The National Picture

- 4.1 The Office of the Chief Social Worker Advisor and the professional social work body, Social Work Scotland, acknowledge that the profession is in crisis due to the significant recruitment and retention challenges across the country. Social Work Scotland research report, ***Setting the Bar towards an indicative maximum caseload for Scotland's public sector social workers*** (May 2022) highlighted the seriousness of the situation with a call to action, now. The report identified an *ageing workforce* and a staff group who are struggling with *administrative burdens*, *fearful of making mistakes*, and living with the *moral distress* of having to work in a way that doesn't align with their professional values. The report found it striking the *moral distress* experienced by frontline social workers was echoed by Scotland's Chief Social Work Officers (CSWO). The annual CSWO survey found concerns about:

'Reconciling the need for significant budget savings with the continued delivery of safe, accessible services, in line with social work's professional values.'

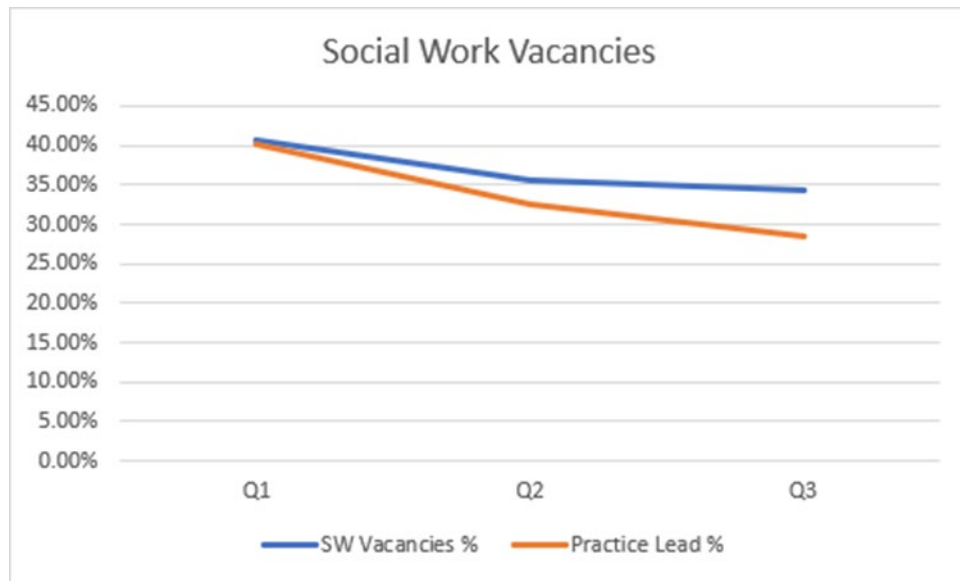
- 4.2 More broadly, Audit Scotland's recent report highlights that workforce capacity is the biggest risk to the recovery of the NHS and Social Care Services in Scotland. Research shows that both Brexit and Covid-19 have impacted on the adult social care workforce, and in 2020 there was a **43%** vacancy rate across the social care sector (NHS in Scotland 2022, Audit Scotland, February 2023).

5. Highland Social Work Workforce

- 5.1 The turnover, recruitment and retention of social workers and social work managers remains concerning in Highland. On a more positive note, we have seen a slight increase in the recruitment of children's social workers since the last report (June 2023). Our total vacancy rates in Q1 were **41%** Q2 **36%** and Q3 **34%**.

In Children's Services from April 2023 to September 2023 we have recruited **14** mainly newly qualified social workers and 3.84 practice leaders (team managers).

The graph below identifies the trends over the last 3 quarters in Children's Services.



5.2 Whilst the recruitment of additional workers is positive, it brings challenges. For example, the increase in workers within the Family Teams:

* Q2 - 5 SW & 2.84 PL

* Q3 - 9 SW & 1 PL

brings additional pressure around the need for greater supervision of newly appointed staff. Further, newly qualified staff cannot take on certain cases so capacity within teams is reduced even though staff numbers have increased.

5.3 The vacancy rate for social workers in Justice is **19%** (6.3FTE) and **27%** for team managers (2 FTE).

5.4 The Mental Health Officer Service has 2.75 MHO posts vacant and 0.5 FTE practice lead. Members will recall that the MHO Service have a traineeship scheme in place which has received a national award. That scheme continues to operate such that this year a further 2 members of staff have qualified and are employed within the team. The team continue to seek to recruit trainees and at the current time there are a further two trainees in place pursuing their qualification.

5.5 The Emergency Social Work Service is fully staffed.

5.6 Highland is a large diverse region with workforce shortages across the region. However, it is particularly difficult to recruit in our more rural and remote areas in which small teams with 1, 2 or 3 people leaving, can result in a vacancy rate of **50-70%+** and the associated high-level risk which comes with vacancies at that level.

5.7 Front line team managers (practice leads) are responsible for ensuring workload prioritisation and allocation of work across locality teams, supported by service managers. Our managers are carefully screening and prioritising requests for assistance, where there are concerns, predominantly from partner agencies in Police, Health and Education into our Family Teams. All protection work remains our highest priority.

- 5.8 When faced with the scale of vacancies in Highland, priority is given to child protection work. As a result, this can be detrimental to other parts of service delivery whether it be early help from services in Family Teams or focus on permanency work. Consequently, universal services in Child Health and Education are now dealing with increasing complexity of need. Vacancies in social work have an impact across the entire children's system.

6. Child Health Professionals

- 6.1 There are **240** registered health professionals and additional clinical support staff working to a social and public health model to reduce inequalities and improve outcomes for Highland's families within Health and Social Care. Health staff work as part of the whole system of support for families in Highland, working to the Getting it Right Practice Model and undertaking the role of named person in early years and the role of lead professional in non-statutory complex plans, within the role of the health visitor.
- 6.2 Through implementing the five pillars of the national workforce strategy (Plan, Attract, Train, Employ and Nurture) and through working with Higher Education and implementing a successful advanced nurse training programme for health visitors and school nurses, the mean vacancy rate for Health Visitors and School Nurses has fallen from **30%** in 2019 to **8%** in 2023. Pressures continue to be evident across small specialist nursing and Allied Health Professional Teams, where there is national shortage of staff with the specific specialist core health qualification. In 2023, the vacancy rate has risen to around a mean of **10%** however this rate does not wholly reflect the significant impact to service delivery from the small specialist teams.

7. Balance of Teams

- 7.1 The balance of the team is critical to functioning of teams. Healthy teams usually have a mixture of newly qualified social workers, trainee social workers, student social workers, mixed with a core of experienced social workers. Teams are line managed by frontline practice leaders and operational service managers. Given turnover in the management role, many of our practice leaders are also newly appointed into promoted posts.
- 7.2 Healthy teams also have minimum sickness, minimum turnover, and no use of agency staff. Achieving this optimum team balance is our greatest challenge in the delivery of services.
- 7.3 As a directorate, we are doing everything possible to stabilise our workforce locally as detailed in the Next Steps section. However, the national challenge and the crucial role of the Scottish Government cannot be ignored, both in terms of helping to elevate the profession within society, as well as aligning terms and conditions of social workers across Scotland. The proposal to develop a National Social Work Agency, is welcomed by the social work profession and we remain hopeful that this will be forthcoming in the near future.
- 7.4 As the previous report highlighted, several social workers and managers – particularly in children's services - are moving to NHS Adult Services. This is due to different terms

and conditions with some positions receiving higher remuneration. There is also a *perception* that workloads are more manageable and less stressful. The salary being different is not new, but the salary in the same local authority region, being different, under a Lead Agency model, is totally unique to Highland.

7.5 The importance of a stable workforce was highlighted in the report findings of the Joint Services Inspection for Children at Risk of Harm. One of the key messages of the Care Inspectorate was:

Frontline staff were aware that relationship-based practice with children and their families had been negatively impacted by staffing changes and vacancies, particularly but not exclusively, within social work. This was frustrating for staff who wanted to build positive relationships with children and young people but were restricted in their capacity to do so because of workload and demand pressures.

Agency Social Workers

8. Highland has traditionally relied heavily on agency social workers for many years to fill hard to recruit social work posts, including front line management positions. Figures for 8.1 2019/20 to 22/23, indicate an average annual spend of around £1m each financial year.

8.2 The use of agency social workers should be a short-term strategy. Consequently, we need to build and develop a stable workforce, as this is key to forming relationships with our clients, families and partner agencies. All staff have been extremely focused on reducing our reliance on agency staff and while progress was being made, the scale of vacancies in front line social work and team manager posts, is compromising our ambition to have no agency social workers or managers in Highland.

Workforce Planning

9. Workforce planning is facilitated by Human Resources (HR). The workforce planning 9.1 report, with input from the extended senior management team, was approved at Strategic Committee on 9 February 2023: [here](#).

9.2 The main workforce planning actions are:

- Recruitment and retention strategies
- Development of strategies to mitigate the aging workforce (41% of all H&SC is 51 years or older)
- Review of the social care worker support roles
- Designing learning and development and training options for all the workforce
- Staff wellbeing

9.3 Workforce planning, an enabling and learning culture, safe manageable caseloads, a strong sense of team purpose, leadership, and particularly for social workers, working in an organisation that supports their values, are some of the key reasons why people commit to a career in social work and remain invested in social work in their locality.

Workforce Strategy

10.

A summary of some of the important strategies and approaches we are adopting are detailed below:

10.1

- HR led **Workforce Planning** with a focus on staff welfare.
- Applying a 'marketing' approach to recruitment with the help of corporate communications and the talent team. A video has been developed for Highland Council website, You Tube and social media capturing why being a social worker in Highland is a rewarding and exciting career opportunity.
- Expanded our **Trainee Scheme - Grow Your Own** - enabling staff within Highland Council who have a passion and commitment to support children, families and adults in communities, to train on the job, as part of a team, while studying to become a qualified social worker. There are plans to further expand the Trainee Scheme again in 2024/25. Trainee retention is a strength in Highland. Many other Local Authorities across Scotland have contacted our team to learn about our model.
- Created a new **Practice Development & Educator** role to support student placements, the growth of the Trainee Scheme, Practice Educators (previously known as Practice Teaching) and practice development of social workers on-going professional development. There is also work with UHI in terms of exploring possibilities for young people to achieve social work and social care qualifications locally.
- A new **Post Qualification Framework (PQF)** is currently being developed showcasing the broad range of post qualification study opportunities available to support professional development of social workers and managers.
- Highland is a pilot area supporting the **Newly Qualified Social Work protected first year of practice**, noting how important the first year is to the retention of social workers as they develop strong professional foundations.
- The **Child Protection Committee's Learning & Development Framework** of multi-agency in person and e modules across the Highland Public Protection Partnership. This with the **PQF** evidences a strong commitment that Highland will support professional development and is a learning organisation.
- The service undertook a significant piece of work to review the establishment (with the support of a Business Intelligence Officer) to ensure **safe caseloads**, analysis of numbers of looked after children, child protection registrations, weighted with analysis of SIMD, geography, local schools, and population, enabled a maximum indicative caseload. (This was before the publication of Social Work Scotland's seminal report – **Setting the Bar** as detailed above.)
- Understanding what brings people into social work and why they stay – their values, strong sense of social justice, promotion of human rights, the power of relationships. Thus, building our vision of **Family 1st**, restorative strengths-based approaches, for example, implementation of **Family Group Decision Making, Scottish Child Interview Model, Safe & Together** a strengths-based approach to domestic abuse, and in the pipeline, our exciting new **Children's Rights & Participation** posts, about to go out to advert, as part of our commitment to **Keep the Promise**.
- Our **Whole Family Wellbeing Team**, recently launched to provide meaningful community connections, support and building local assets with a focus on poverty, employability, prevention and early intervention to stop crises

escalating. Staff and leaders are clear that early intervention is a priority in Highland.

- The final phase of our **redesign and restructure** by focusing on the biggest part of our workforce – our support workers - working alongside social workers, health visitors and school nurses, as the ‘engine room’ of the service. This workforce consisting of several different grades, built up historically over the years will be simplified, streamlined, harmonized with one overarching **vision of family support** across the spectrum from universal early help, more targeted support and intensive family support.
- To **reduce the administrative burden** in teams, raised by our staff locally, and detailed in ‘*Setting the Bar*’, as one of the highest concerns, reported by **78%** of social workers, we have ring-fenced 4 new business support posts to directly assist social work managers across the family teams.

It must be acknowledged that there is much more to do, but we are committed to doing everything we can to ensure the welfare of our workforce, that we retain our frontline social workers and managers, and in doing so, this stability will strengthen and improve the delivery of services for children, adults, families and communities across the Highland.

Designation: Executive Chief Officer, Health and Social Care

Date: 27 October 2023

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Appendix: Background Papers: Setting the Bar towards an indicative maximum caseload for Scotland’s public sector social workers. Briefing Report Social Work Scotland (May 2022)