

STOCKTON-ON-TEES BOROUGH COUNCIL

CABINET RECOMMENDATIONS

PROFORMA

Cabinet Meeting11th March 2010

1. Title of Item/Report

Children's Social Care Workload Pressures

2. Record of the Decision

Further to the last update received on 14th January 2010, Cabinet was advised of the latest position with regard to the recent growth in the number of social care referrals being received by the Council.

The number of referrals had risen significantly in November and December, in sharp contrast to what had previously appeared to be the beginning of a levelling off of these pressures. The numbers of initial and core assessments had also substantially increased as a result of the rise in referrals experienced. An initial analysis had been conducted of the nature and source of these referrals and there was no clear observable trend at this stage. This would continue to be monitored closely.

The overall number of children who were subject to a child protection plan had further increased to a peak of 281. The increase in referrals and assessments experienced through November and December had resulted in a corresponding increase in the number of child protection conferences and children becoming subject to a child protection plan, with December being a particularly busy month. The 'conversion rate' ie the percentage of referrals that subsequently led to a child protection plan in November and December was 4.9%, compared with 3.9% in August, September and October. It was noted that the overall conversion rate for the first 3 quarters of 2009/10 was 8.5%, which was significantly lower than the same period for 2008/9 (13.1%).

The overall number of looked after children remained at 245 at the end of December, the same as the end of October. The 'conversion rate' ie the percentage of referrals that subsequently led to a child becoming looked after in November and December was 1.2%, compared with 1.4% in August, September and October. Overall, the conversion rate for the first 3 quarters of 2009/10 was 3.2%, slightly lower than the same period for 2008/09 (5.1%).

Of the management posts previously vacant, the Local Authority

Designated Officer (LADO) post had been appointed to, with the Duty Team Manager and one Independent Reviewing Officer post remained vacant. Following the restructuring of the Operational Management Group (third tier management team) and one manager leaving the Authority, there were two vacancies; Service Manager, Referral and Assessment (this replaces the previously vacant Operational Safeguarding Manager post) and Service Manager, Fieldwork which would be advertised.

In terms of social work posts, the situation had deteriorated further from the 5 vacancies at the end of October to 6 posts, although 2 of these posts were being covered by agency staff. This situation was exacerbated by a further 5 very experienced staff being absent for a variety of reasons such as maternity leave, secondment and sickness. At the end of December, there were 2 children in need and 6 child protection cases which were unallocated.

The relative costs of using agency staff as opposed to substantive post holders was highlighted resulting in a substantial additional cost incurred to the Local Authority

In order to address this, a review of Stockton Borough Council's 'Grow our Own' strategy was underway and proposals would be brought back to a future Cabinet meeting. Given this was a longer term strategy, there was an immediate need to improve our ability to recruit and retain qualified social work staff and both practitioner and management levels. It was therefore proposed to establish retention payments for specific 'hard to fill' posts over a two year period where it could be demonstrated that attempts to recruit at the standard salary level had not been successful due to the particular recruitment market. The retention payments would be applied to key posts where at least two unsuccessful attempts had been made to recruit on an external basis. The amount paid would be calculated on a pro rata basis according to the post salary and would be weighted towards the second year so as to reward the loyalty of staff who remained with Stockton Borough Council. The average payment for year 1 would be £1,500 and year 2 £2,500.

Based on the groups included in the initial assessment the overall financial costs were as follows:-

Year 1	£102,759
Year 2	£196,318
Total	£299,072

The introduction of this scheme was considered crucial in order to fill the key posts identified above, which remained vacant despite having been advertised on a number of occasions.

The above pressures continued to have an impact on the Children, Education and Social Care budget for 2009/10 in a number of key areas. This was being considered as part of the overall Medium Term Financial Plan position.

Firstly the independent fostering agency budget, which was £2,079,874 for 2009/10. The current spend (to 31 December 2009) was £1,749,503. On that basis, the projected expenditure for the year (based on a further 3 placements) was £2,267,612 ie an overspend of £187,738. The second area which could potentially be affected was the children's homes agency placements budget, which was set at £1,776,897 for 2009/10. The current spend (to 31 December 2009) is £1,458,075. On that basis, the projected expenditure for the year (based on no additional placements) was £1,746,385 ie an underspend of £30,512. The third area related to the social work staffing budget, which was £2,614,699 for 2009/10 (adjusted). The current spend (to 31 December 2009) was £2,126,757. On that basis, the projected expenditure for the year was £2,902,814 ie an overspend of £288,115.

Whilst the introduction of the retention payment would result in a further budget pressure in 2010/11, the impact of this would be offset to a significant degree by a reduction in the overspend on the social work staffing budget, although the impact of this would not be realised until 2011/12.

Further to the previous report, an unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements was conducted by Ofsted on 5 and 6 January 2010. A copy of the letter detailing the outcome of the inspection was attached to the report.

Whilst the inspection highlighted a number of strengths in this service area, it also outlined some significant challenges for Stockton-on-Tees Borough Council and partner agencies. A number of these had been previously identified by the mock inspection carried out by external consultants in November 2009 and were already in the process of being addressed, as acknowledged by the inspection letter. A robust and comprehensive action plan had been developed and agreed with partner agencies.

It was noted that the Integrated Service Area (ISA) structure was well intentioned and introduced with a clear rationale to further integrate services in line with Every Child Matters agenda. Whilst it had been successful in terms of bringing staff from a range of different professional backgrounds together, it had also resulted in a lack of clarity in relation to

management accountability. Whilst the primary motivation for a review of this structure stemmed from concerns relating to social care, it was also noted that similar concerns were expressed from a health and youth perspective.

Following a formal consultation period, it had been agreed to move to a new structure based on functional management accountability with effect from 1 April 2010. A copy of the high level structure chart was attached to the report. It was important to stress that the new structure would still be based on the principle of establishing co-located locality based teams and integrated service delivery. Given the previously unsuccessful attempt to recruit to the post of Operational Safeguarding Manager, the approval of the retention payment scheme would be particularly important in order to attract high quality candidates to the posts of Service Manager, Referral and Assessment and Service Manager, Fieldwork which were integral to the success of the new organisational structure.

RESOLVED that:-

1. The continued workload pressures within the social care system and the associated impact this is having on caseloads, performance and budget be noted.
2. Further update reports on a quarterly basis in order to continue to monitor the impact of these workload pressures be received.
3. The introduction of a retention payment in order to recruit and retain staff in 'hard to fill' key social work posts be endorsed.
4. The attached action plan as the response of Stockton Borough Council and partner agencies to the unannounced inspection of contact, referral and assessment arrangements in Stockton which took place on 5 and 6 January 2010 be noted.

3. Reasons for the Decision

There is a significant and continuing rise in social care workload which could potentially impact on the Council's ability to effectively safeguard children, fulfil statutory duties and remain within allocated budget.

4. Alternative Options Considered and Rejected

None

5. Declared (Cabinet Member) Conflicts of Interest

None

6. Details of any Dispensations

N/A

7. Date and Time by which Call In must be executed

Not later than Midnight on Friday, 19th March 2010

Proper Officer
15 March 2010