

Central Bedfordshire Council

CORPORATE PARENTING PANEL

20 December 2018

Looked After Children Social Worker Stability

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Purpose of this report

1. The purpose of this report is to provide further detail regarding social work stability for looked after children.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Corporate Parenting Panel is asked to:

1. Note the content of the report
2. Comment on the report

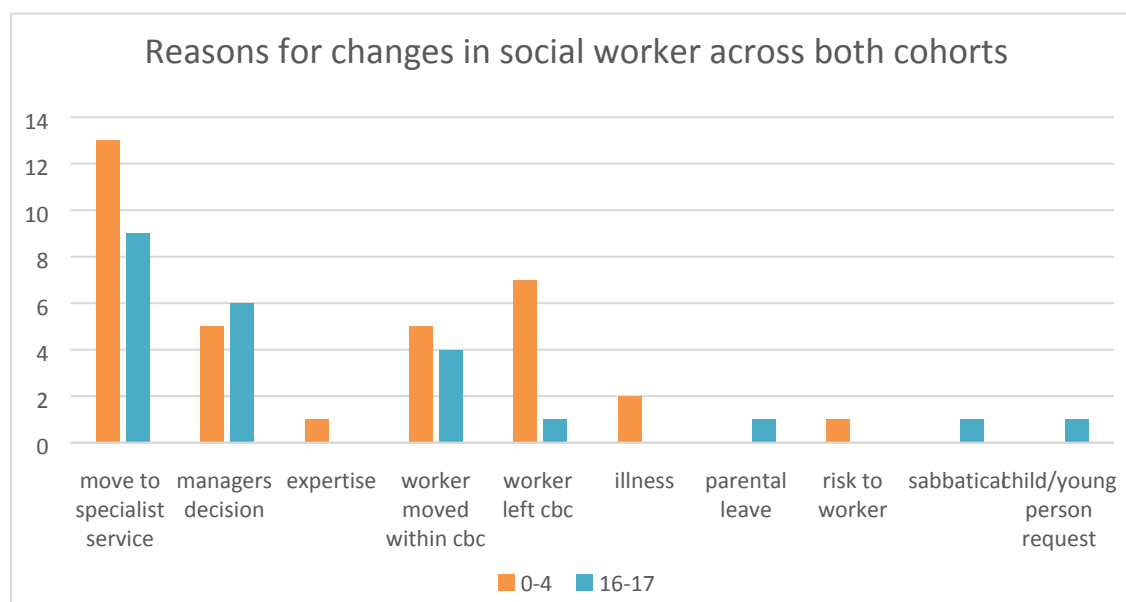
Introduction

2. At Corporate Parenting Panel on 25 October 2018, members were advised on the benchmarking data provided by the Children's Commissioner in respect of social work stability. Members heard that whilst Central Bedfordshire Children's Services has overall good performance compared to other local authorities in the Eastern Region and nationally, performance was below average for looked after children aged 0-4 years and 16+.
3. Members requested detail on the reasons for the change of social worker in Central Bedfordshire aged 0-4 years and 16+ over the last three years, examining the reasons for changes of social worker for the 10 children in each age group who had the most changes of social worker in this period.
4. This task was addressed by identifying the children in these age groups who had experienced the most changes of social worker ending in July 2018, considering only children who had been looked after for three or more years.

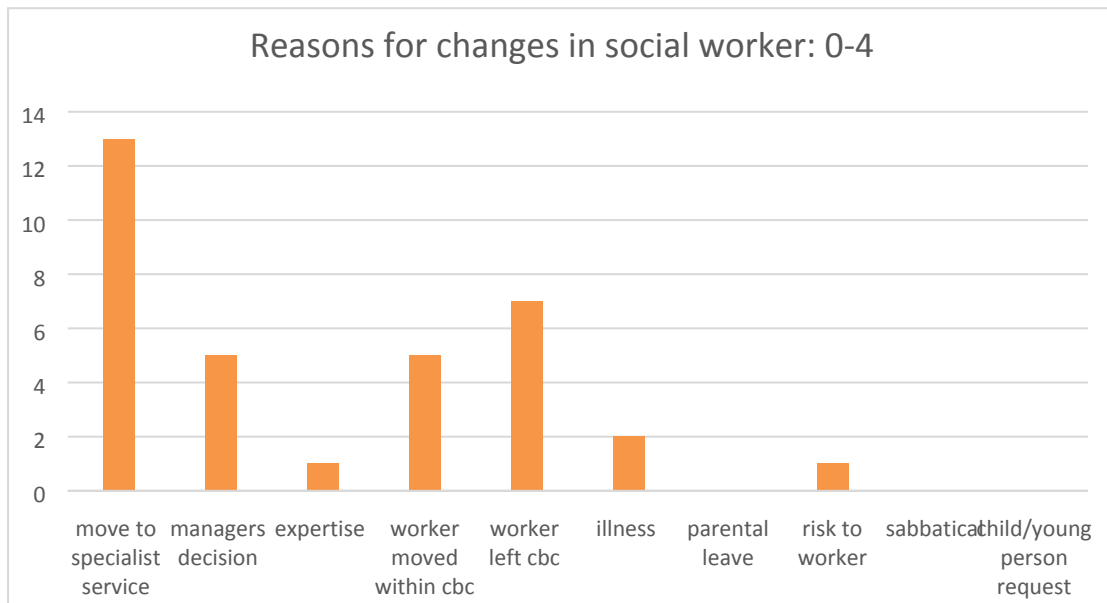
The Corporate Parenting Panel has asked to be advised on the social work stability for looked after children in Central Bedfordshire.

Findings

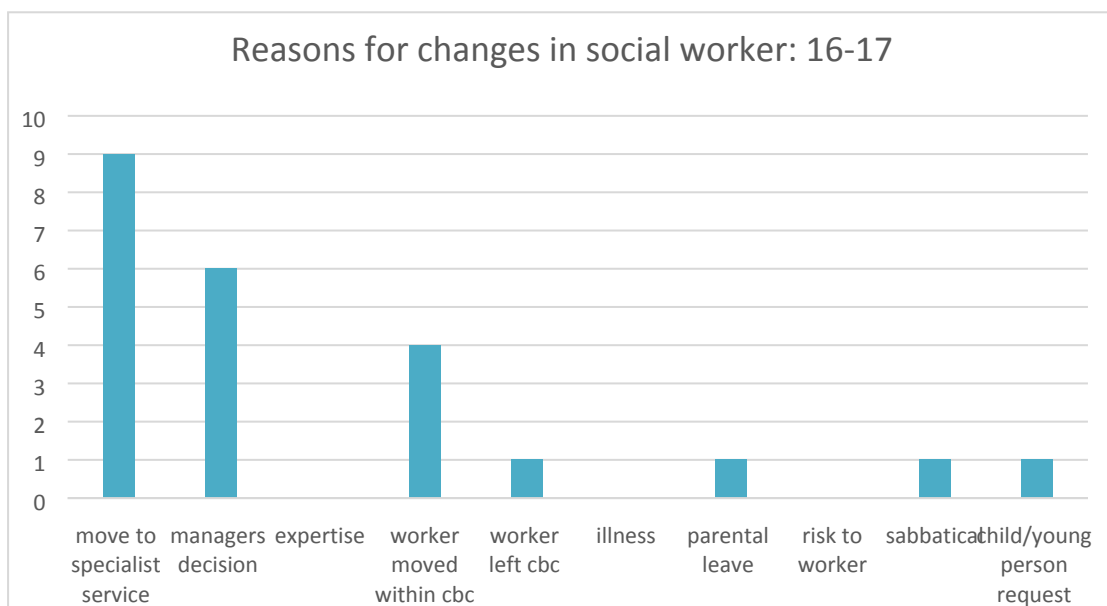
5. In terms of age group proportions, 16% of our looked after children are aged 0-4 years. 24% are aged 16-17 years. The 10 children with the most social worker changes accounted for 21% of 0-4 year olds and 14% of 16-17 year olds.
6. The primary reason for social work change across both cohorts was children moving between services as their circumstances and plan developed therefore requiring a more specialist social work response. This accounted for 22 changes of social worker. Management decisions within a service resulted in 11 changes of social worker. The social worker moving jobs within Central Bedfordshire accounted for nine changes, and the social worker leaving the employment of Central Bedfordshire accounted for eight changes of social workers. This includes agency social workers who have left.
7. Other, less frequently occurring reasons for change were expertise issues, illness, parental leave, risk to worker and at the request of the child. The change at the request of the child involved a social worker who had returned from sabbatical. Whilst this meant a further change for the child, it was a positive decision informed by the child's wishes and meant that a long-term working relationship – the social worker had been the child's social worker for three years prior to the sabbatical – was resumed. The combined 0-4 and 16-17 cohorts are detailed in the graph below.



8. In terms of looked after children aged 0-4 years, the primary reason for changes of social worker was children moving between services as their circumstances and plan changed, as for the combined cohorts and for the 16-17-year-old cohort. However, the social worker leaving the employment of Central Bedfordshire was a more frequent reason for the 0-4 cohort followed by managers' decision and change of job within Central Bedfordshire Council Children's Services. Parental leave, child request and sabbatical were not factors for the 0-4 cohort. Details are provided in the graph below.



9. In terms of the 16-17 year old cohort, similar issues primary issues were apparent as for the combined age cohorts. This is detailed in the graph below.



Conclusions

10. For our looked after children with the largest number of social work changes, the primary reason is case responsibility moving between service so a more specialist response can be provided according to the child's needs. Moves between service in Central Bedfordshire take place so that children receive a specialist social work service dependent on their circumstances.
11. We also know that children are clear that having a change of social worker is difficult as social workers form close and meaningful relationships with them. This is particularly the case for older children. It is less of an issue for infants in terms of the social worker child relationship. Our Children in Care Council members have told us that it is essential that changes of social worker are done in a planned way whenever possible as this provides an opportunity to say goodbye and to get to know the new social worker. Carefully planned changes of social worker were acknowledged as evident by Ofsted during the 2017 inspection. It should be noted that the Independent Reviewing Officer for a looked after child does not change, thus providing continuity.
12. It is inevitable and healthy for there to be some employment turnover amongst social workers so that new colleagues join the service. It is also positive that social workers take up other opportunities within Central Bedfordshire Council Children's Service so that knowledge and skills are shared and developed. The service is committed to ensure that role changes within the service are not excessive.
13. Management decisions have had a bearing in social work changes for children. This primarily involves shorter term allocation of children to social workers during temporary episodes of position vacancies. The steady reduction in vacancy rates, including the reduced use of short-term agency staff, will contribute to this issue lessening.
14. The less frequently occurring issues for social work change, including sickness and risk to the social worker, are not readily preventable. Whilst sick levels for children's social workers in Central Bedfordshire have been low over the previous 12 months, with an average of 4.2 days of sick leave per social worker, it is on occasions necessary for children to have a change of social worker if the sick leave is extended. It is essential that staff wellbeing continues to be a high priority for the service to prevent sick leave whenever possible.

Council Priorities

- Protecting the vulnerable
- Improving wellbeing
- Creating stronger communities
- A more efficient and responsive Council

Corporate Implications

- None

Legal Implications

The report does not have specific legal implications. However, the Council has a statutory obligation towards its looked after children and this report provides information as to how some of those obligations are being met.

Financial and Risk Implications

- This report does not have specific financial implications. However, recruitment and retention of social workers costs less than use of agency so contributes to good budget management.

Equalities Implications

- Central Bedfordshire Council has a statutory duty to promote equality of opportunity, eliminate unlawful discrimination, harassment and victimisation and foster good relations in respect of nine protected characteristics; age disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex and sexual orientation. Ensuring that looked after children are provided with stable relationships with their social workers enables Central Bedfordshire Council to achieve better outcomes for children and young people who are additionally vulnerable.

Recommendations

- Continued focus on work force welfare and retention, through the completion of the revised Workforce Retention Strategy
- Regular good quality supervision
- Prompt recruitment to vacant posts
- Ensuring that changes of social worker for looked after children continue to be planned and considered

Appendices

- None

Background Papers

- None