

Bexley's Children's Social Care Workforce Development Strategy

2020 - 2023

"It's the relationships that make change possible."

Children's Services London Borough of Bexley



Contents

Foreword	3
Children's Services Vision	3
Children's Services Values	4
Children's Services Priorities	6
Signs of Safety Practice Model	7
Outcomes	7
National Context	8
Local Context	9
Workforce Priorities	10
Success measures	11
Appendix – Supporting Documents	12
Action plan	
Career Development Pathways	
Vision and Values	
Leadership Pledge	
Managers Standards	
The standards for employers of Social Workers in England	
Practice Framework	

Foreword

As a council, we recognise that the workforce is our most valuable asset, uniquely placed to help transform the lives of vulnerable children, young people and their families. In order to create the conditions for keeping children and young people safe, promoting their welfare and enabling them to fulfil their potential we need a highly skilled, experienced and stable workforce, committed to making a difference.

This strategy sets out our commitment to and expectations of the Children's Social Care workforce. Providing the strategic framework for workforce development and setting out our immediate priorities. The scope of this strategy covers all staff within Children's Social Care.

Children's Services Vision



Every child and young person in Bexley is safe, healthy and happy with the confidence, skills and opportunities to fully achieve their potential.

Most important to us, is the effectiveness of the work that we do and the difference we make in doing it. In Bexley, we work with the phrase 'what life and education is like for me'. This helps us to focus on the experiences of children, families, carers and other professionals when we are involved in their lives, education and work.

We believe that all children, young people and families should reach their potential. We

will try to support them as they grow up, to be safe, healthy, and able to make the best use of their skills to secure good employment and therefore make the most of their lives.

Our ambition is that all children and young people live or are educated in good or outstanding environments. We will try to meet the needs of children and young people who have a special educational need or disability as locally

as possible. Their education, health and care needs will be regularly reviewed with their best interests at the centre of our thinking.

We believe that strong families are at the heart of our community. All of our work to support families is driven by their strengths that we build upon to help them to be more resilient and more able to support and protect their children. We will try to help families at the earliest opportunity, especially if there are children living with violence, the mental ill health of a parent or carer, the risk of or actual school exclusion or drug and alcohol abuse by an adult or carer in the household.

In our work with families and alongside our partners, we will work to reduce harm to children and young people and we will protect them from abuse and neglect. If the risk remains or intensifies, we will act quickly to protect them from further harm. Where it is not possible for children and young people to remain living with their families, we will provide good permanent alternatives that improve their life chances. They will not be disadvantaged by becoming looked after children.

The feedback that we receive from children, young people, families, carers and colleagues who we are working with, helps us to improve and to learn. We will ask people about their experiences of our work with them and will listen and learn from the mistakes we make.

We believe it is important to provide good information and to use clear and simple processes that everyone can understand and to use those consistently. We want those processes to support the help we provide children, young people, families, carers and learners.

We want to offer services that are high quality and efficient for everyone. We aspire to manage our performance carefully, making sure that we understand our business and hold ourselves properly to account for the quality and delivery of care, education, help and support.

Our leaders and managers are expected to provide good support to staff and to each other and to respond quickly and efficiently to improve things when they are going wrong.

#togetherwithfamilies

Children's Services Values

We have ten core values that guide our practice:

Value 1

We believe that good practice only happens through the relationships we have with the children, young people and adults we are trying to help. We will always be careful to balance the authority we have with empathy and respect for everyone with whom we work.

Value 2

We will always speak plainly and make sure the children, young people and families we are working with, understand what we are saying, what we are doing and why we are doing it, explaining the judgements we make and the actions we take.

Value 3

We will always ask and then listen carefully to children and young people when they share what is happening in their lives, what they are worried about and what they want to happen. Their experiences, past, present and future will always be at the centre of our thinking. We will take every opportunity to help them become confident, independent and resilient individuals.

Value 4

We will be thoughtful and analytical with all the information we have when we are assessing what children and young people need to keep them safe. Our assessments will show clear reasoning and will reach a clear conclusion that everyone can understand.

Value 5

We believe every family has strengths, which we will notice when we are working together. We will help people to identify solutions to their difficulties, making the best use of the good and safe things that already exist in their own network of family, friends and community.

Value 6

We believe that we have a shared responsibility to help families to change so that children and young people live safely with them. We will work with families to make a clear plan about what needs to change and we will describe clearly the help we can offer. Our plans will also clearly explain what will happen if things do not change.

Value 7

When we make professional judgements about 'best next steps' to help a family, we will think together as colleagues and managers, making sure we take time and care to agree decisions that are in the best interests of the children and young people.

Value 8

We believe that the help we offer to families is more effective when we work closely with other professionals, provided we have consent to do so and/or it is in the best interests of the children involved.

Value 9

We will keep clear records about our work with children, young people, families and carers which we will share with them when it is in their best interests. We will keep a detailed history for those children and young people who we look after, so that they can understand their lives, their own stories and the decisions that have been made to keep them safe and happy.

Value 10

We will be reliable and interested in the quality and effectiveness of our work. We will make sure everyone understands what we are doing, why we are doing it and the plans we are making. We will always ask for feedback, and we will learn how to improve what we do and how we do it.



Children's Services Priorities



Eight strategic priority areas inform the Children's Services Improvement Plan, these are:

- ▶ Keeping families safe and well - A: Outstanding help, protection, care and support
- ▶ Strong and Resilient Families - B: Signs of Safety
- ▶ Innovation and Self – Sufficiency - C: Workforce and Quality Assurance
- ▶ Working early with families - D: Helping early
- ▶ Vulnerable Young People - E: Children missing from home, care & education
- ▶ Special Needs and Disability – F: Special Educational Needs and Disability
- ▶ The right skills for today and tomorrow – G: Skills and Employment

- ▶ Strong, strategic role in education – H: Strategic leadership of education
- ▶ Appropriate School Places - I: A school place for every child

To realise our vision and deliver against our priorities we want to attract, recruit, develop and retain the most talented, high performing individuals. Bexley's workforce strategy has been developed with this in mind and demonstrates our commitment to embedding Signs of Safety as our practice model.

A range of national and local drivers, as well as key documents such as the improvement plan 2019-22 and the ILACS self-evaluation 2021 have further informed the strategy.

Signs of Safety Practice Model

A strengths-based, relationship approach is at the heart of our work with children, young people and their families. Signs of Safety provides a framework that sets out how we 'do' social work in Bexley for our workforce, our partners and those we support.

We are fully committed to establishing and embedding Signs of Safety as our practice model, equipping the workforce with the tools, techniques and guiding principles to practice confidently and safely. We will ensure all leaders are utilising Signs of Safety both as an overarching value base and for informing risk sensible decision-making and practice. Through our Signs of Safety practice framework we will drive quality of practice, outlining expectations of and support for managers and practitioners. The model will be employed as a whole systems approach underpinning all aspects of our practice, including our systems and processes.

Outcomes

We have identified four key areas of focus that provide the framework for our workforce development strategy:

- ▶ **1. Strong and Stable Workforce** – Attract and keep high calibre practitioners at all levels, creating the environment for developing and maintaining relationships, which are at the heart of effective practice to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people.

A strong and stable workforce is essential to ensuring high quality, effective and consistent practice. We want to ensure we have a compelling Bexley offer, which attracts and keeps high quality and experienced practitioners. Investing in our workforce with a competitive development programme and benefits package



- ▶ **2. Skilled and Knowledgeable Workforce** – Promote a culture of continuous learning and development, where our staff are professionally curious and innovative in their practice.

We will work to create the conditions that enable and support our staff to develop their practice and careers. We want to encourage people to take responsibility for their own learning and development, ensuring practice remains of a high standard and continues to meet the needs of the children, young people and families we support.

- ▶ **3. Inspiring, Empowering and Effective Leadership and Management** - Empower and develop confident and capable leaders who create the right conditions for effective practice.

We want to empower our leaders, at all levels, to develop the skills they need to enhance their own practice and that of others. Creating opportunities to develop future leaders and supporting existing leaders to fulfil their potential.

- ▶ **4. Creating the conditions for good Social Work to flourish** – having the right environment to be able to do social work well, where practitioners are enabled to focus on direct work with families and practice effectively and safely.

We want to be a learning organisation, reflecting on practice and asking 'what difference are we making?' Listening and responding to feedback from children, families, partners and our staff about what is working well and where we need to do things differently. Through effective support and challenge we will drive practice improvement for all.

National Context

In July 2016 the Department for Education (DfE) published 'Putting children first'¹, setting out its ambition to reform and improve Children's Social Care by 2020. The Department later revising their ambition and timeframe for delivery, to ensuring: "...all vulnerable children, no matter where they live, receive the same high quality of care and support by 2022".

One of the core strands to the Governments transformational reform programme is around having a highly capable and skilled workforce. However, attracting and retaining a sufficiently qualified, experienced and stable workforce is a key challenge facing many Local Authorities (LAs).

Statistics from the DfE on the Children's social work workforce² shows that between September 2017 and September 2018 the number of Social Workers in the profession had increased slightly from 28,500 to 29,470, representing a 3.4% increase. However, over the same period those leaving their current workforce also increased, contributing to a higher turnover rate of 15.2%.

Those starting their employment at a LA also fell during this period. In addition, research has found that the average time spent in the social work profession is less than 8 years (compared to 16 for a nurse and 25 for a doctor).

A recent longitudinal study of local authority child and family social workers³ (August 2019), commissioned by the DfE, found that of the 5,621 people surveyed 61% had been with their current employer for less than 5 years and that 45% had been in their current role with their current employer for up to 1 year.

The report also found that whilst the majority of people had entered the profession for altruistic reasons, those in frontline positions in particular found that pressures of high workloads, the volume of paperwork and the requirements of computer systems often detracted from direct work with families.

The research also considered factors influencing workplace wellbeing and found that just over half felt stressed and the same proportion felt overworked. Respondents reported working an additional seven hours a week on average, with 48% stating excessive workload as a barrier to career progression. Too much paperwork was seen as a cause of stress for two-thirds (68%) of respondents, with 50% citing caseloads more generally and 27% a lack of admin support.

When asked about the working environment, just over half (53%) felt that they had resources or the physical working conditions (54%) adequate for their role. Only half of all respondents felt that IT systems supported them to do their job.

In relation to agency workers, 14% were already working via an agency and a further 11% were planning to move to agency working within the next 12 months. With the report finding agency workers were disproportionately concentrated in London and the South West.

Interestingly, agency workers were less likely to report feeling stressed despite having higher average caseloads compared to directly employed social workers. Half cited better working flexibility as a factor in moving to agency working, however the single biggest reason was better pay, with 29% describing it as the 'main' reason for moving to agency.

However, when asked what would entice social workers to stay in council employment a reduction in overall workload was the single biggest factor, with 21% stating a more manageable caseload could make them reconsider. Higher pay was a main consideration for 11%, as was less paperwork.

Further research is required to gain a better understanding of what combination of factors contribute to social workers being committed to staying or thinking of leaving. Meanwhile, the profession continues to operate within a context of increasing demand and growing funding pressures⁴.

¹Putting Children First: our vision for Children's social care, DfE 2016 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/putting-children-first-our-vision-for-childrens-social-care>)

²Children's social work workforce, DfE, 2019 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/statistics-childrens-social-care-workforce>)

³Longitudinal study of local authority child and family social workers (wave 1), DfE, 2019 (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/longitudinal-study-of-local-authority-social-workers>)

⁴Pressures on children's social care, NAO, 2019 (<https://www.nao.org.uk/report/pressures-on-childrens-social-care>)

Local Context



Permanency of the Workforce

As of 1st January 2020 the percentage of **permanent** qualified social workers was **85%**. There were **23 agency workers** in qualified Social Worker posts.

(Source: HR Services, LB Bexley 2020)

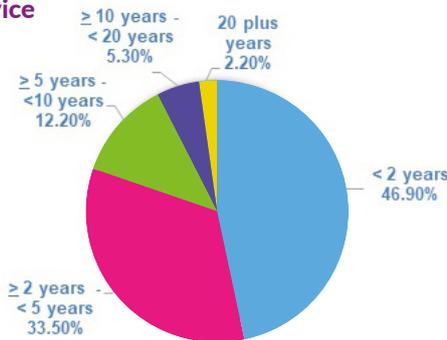


Turnover Rate

As of 30 September 2019, Bexley had a turnover rate of **21.8%**. This is down almost 1% on last year (22.7%) but remains **higher than the National and regional rates** of 15.1% and 17.7%, respectively.

(Sources: Children's Social Work Workforce Return 2017/18 and 18/19)

Length of Service



Almost half the workforce have been in service for **less than 2 years** and approximately **80% less than 5 years**.

This is **higher than the National and London averages** for length of service less than 5 years, at **61% and 67% respectively**. But, more in line with our statistical neighbours of **Thurrock (68%) and Medway (73%)**, and the same as **Havering (80%)**.

(Sources: Children's Social Work Workforce Return 2018/19)



Vacancy Rate

As of 30 September 2019 Bexley had a vacancy rate of **17.3%**, **lower** than the **London average of 24.2%** and **broadly in line** with the **National average of 16.4%**.

Compared to our statistical neighbours, Bexley's vacancy rate was **lower** than **Havering and Medway** and **similar** to **Thurrock** (25%, 20.4% and 17% respectively).

(Sources: Children's Social Work Workforce Return 2018/19)

16

Average Caseload

The average caseload for qualified Social Workers as of 30 September 2019 was **16**. However, there is variation across the service.

We are committed to regularly reviewing caseloads to ensure they are within agreed standards of safe practice. Taking account of complexity, capacity and experience.

(Source: Children's Social Work Workforce Return 2018/19)



Top 5 factors that attract people to work in Bexley are:

- ▶ Staff training and development
- ▶ career progression opportunities
- ▶ Located close to home
- ▶ Flexible working arrangements
- ▶ The employment offer

Source: Workforce Health Check 2019



Top five factors that influences people's decision to stay at Bexley are:

- ▶ Supportive management/service
- ▶ Career progression opportunities
- ▶ Flexible working
- ▶ Manageable case/workload
- ▶ Pay and benefits

Source: Workforce Health Check 2019

NB: Data correct at time of publish.



Workforce Priorities

Our workforce priorities identify key areas of focus under each of our outcomes and includes reference to work already underway and future planned activity. We will review the priorities annually to ensure responsiveness to the changing local and national context (further detail on how we will deliver against our priorities is set out in the supporting action plan):

Strong and Stable Workforce:

- ▶ Retain high quality and experienced practitioners to create a stable, consistent and knowledgeable workforce, which enables the development and maintenance of relationships with children, young people and their families
- ▶ Attract and recruit high calibre practitioners to ensure a fully resourced, qualified and skilled workforce for meeting the current and future needs of children, young people and their families.
- ▶ Be proactive in our workforce analysis and planning, taking into account regional and National trends, to ensure sufficient flow and stability of high quality and experienced practitioners to meet current and future demand for services.
- ▶ Review and benchmark the Bexley Children's Social Care workforce offer, to ensure it is compelling, competitive and effectively marketed to encourage high quality practitioners to apply and stay in Bexley.

Skilled and Knowledgeable Workforce:

- ▶ Create clear pathways for development and progression, aligned with competencies, skills and experience.
- ▶ Provide a comprehensive programme of professional development opportunities for all staff, which equips them with the knowledge and skills they need to safeguard and promote the welfare of children and young people.

- ▶ Develop partnership links to promote innovative practice and contribute to our capacity to provide learning and development opportunities.

Inspiring, Empowering and Effective Leadership and Management:

- ▶ Support succession planning by providing learning and development opportunities for aspiring leaders.
- ▶ Ensure that those undertaking a management or supervisory role are empowered and given the guidance, support and professional development to become great leaders.
- ▶ Sustain management oversight and the effectiveness of frontline practice so our work with families continues to be good or better.

Creating the conditions for good Social Work to flourish:

- ▶ Support the health and wellbeing of practitioners so they are able to practice effectively and sustainably in an emotionally demanding and potentially stressful environment.
- ▶ Create the conditions for good practice, enabling a focus on direct work with children, young people and their families.
- ▶ Be a reflective and learning organisation, driving continuous improvements in practice and outcomes for children, young people and their families.



Success measures

Progress and impact will be monitored and assessed against a range of quantitative and qualitative measures such as:

Strong and Stable Workforce

- ▶ Percentage of permanent staff
- ▶ Retention rate
- ▶ Workforce stability (length of service)
- ▶ Themes from exit and retention interviews

Learning and Development

- ▶ Workforce Health Check
- ▶ Training take up and completion rates
- ▶ Feedback

Leadership and Management

- ▶ Percentage of supervision completed in time
- ▶ Workforce Health Check



Creating the conditions for good social work to flourish

- ▶ Average Caseloads
- ▶ Sickness and absence rates
- ▶ Workforce Health Check
- ▶ Feedback from Children, Young People and their Families

Governance and Accountability

Oversight and challenge will be provided by the workforce strategy group, who will monitor progress against the strategic priorities and the effective and timely delivery of the action plan on a monthly basis. Further scrutiny will be provided through progress updates to the Senior Leadership Team as part of the 10-weekly cycle of Performance Management meetings and bi-annually to the Learning and Improvement Board, as part of the workforce priority area.



Appendix – Supporting Documents

- ▶ Action plan
- ▶ Career Development Pathways
- ▶ Vision and Values
- ▶ Leadership Pledge
- ▶ Managers Standards
- ▶ The standards for employers of Social Workers in England
- ▶ Practice Framework



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