

LONDON BOROUGH OF MERTON

REPORT AND RECOMMENDATIONS ARISING FROM

A SCRUTINY REVIEW OF

EMPLOYMENT PATTERNS IN SOCIAL SERVICES

2002/2003

FOREWORD BY PANEL CHAIR

The review was initiated by the former Care Services and Housing Scrutiny Panel. The panel looked at information on the employment of social workers and associated staff in Children's Services during the period from April 2001 to July 2002, the number of employment tribunals held during the same period, and the number of consultants employed, together with the reasons. The development of the Housing and Social Services strategy was also reviewed.

Following the reconfiguration of the scrutiny panel in May 2003, the Life Chances Scrutiny Panel, some of whose Members were from the former Care Services and Housing Scrutiny Panel, concluded the review with consideration of the three months information on the use of social workers across the whole of Social services from May to July 2003.

The review was undertaken in response to concerns about particular problems with recruitment and retention of social workers. These problems could be resulting in negative consequences for the delivery and provision of services. Whilst recognising that this is a national problem, the review made a number of recommendations which it is anticipated will improve this situation. The endorsement of these recommendations by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission and the approval by Cabinet is to be welcomed.

It is anticipated that, following the implementation of the recommendations in an action plan, a progress report be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for further consideration.

Could I extend my appreciation to Members of the Panel for their efforts. And to the officers who serviced the Panel, our special thank you for their hard work.

Councillor David Chung,
Chair, Life Chances Scrutiny Panel

LIFE CHANCES OVERVIEW AND SCRUTINY PANEL

Membership:

Councillor David Chung, Chair
Councillor Samantha George, Vice-Chair
Councillor Jillian Ashton
Councillor Margaret Brierly
Councillor Nick Draper
Councillor Sheila Knight
Councillor Edith Macauley
Councillor Oonagh Moulton
Councillor George Reynolds
Councillor Debbie Shears
Councillor Andrew Shellhorn

Co-opted Representatives:

Mr Andrew Boxall, Parent Governor
Mr Alex Murray, Parent Governor
Revd. David Monteith, Church of England Diocesan Representative
Mr Chris O'Connor, Roman Catholic Diocesan Representative
Ms Val Kenny, Headteacher Representative
Mr Bernard Lyons, Teacher Representative
Mr Henry Macauley, Merton Governors Council Representative

Also from the former Care Services and Housing Management Scrutiny Panel: Councillors Dot Kilsby, Beth Mitchell, Dennis Pearce, Amanda Ramsay and Martin Whelton.

Officers:

Jo Williams, Head of Information & Business, Housing & Social Services.
Linda Nicholas, HR Manager, Housing & Social Services.
Barbara Jarvis, Scrutiny Officer

Acknowledgements:

The Panel would like to express its thanks and appreciation to all those who contributed to this review, through preparing reports and attending meetings to answer questions.

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REPORT SUMMARY

Approval was given for the former Care Services and Housing Management Scrutiny Panel to undertake a scrutiny review of employment patterns in Social Services, focussing on the use of social workers and related staff. This was in response to concerns about particular problems with recruitment and retention of social workers, although it has been acknowledged that this is not unique to Merton, but is a national problem.

Since May 2003, the configuration of scrutiny panels has changed and this review has been taken forward and concluded by the Life Chances Scrutiny Panel, some of the Members of which were also on the Care Services and Housing Management Scrutiny Panel.

During the review, there was extensive consideration of the number of professional social work staff within Social Services, firstly concentrating on Children's Services Division for a period covering April 2001 to July 2002 and then across the whole of Social Services for a 3 month period covering May to July 2003. (See Appendix B). The Panel was advised that the usage of such staff is continuously reviewed by Social Services.

The review also discussed the new Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Housing & Social Services Department, in relation to how this may help to address the problems associated with employing social workers.

Following its review, the Panel has made the following recommendations:-

1. *That the aims of the Recruitment and Retention Strategy should make clear the link between departmental and corporate HR, in that corporate HR managers are located in the departments;*
2. *That the possibility of increasing the number of student social worker placements be investigated, as this often leads to recruitment of the students once they have qualified, if they have had a good experience within a department;*
3. *That the Employee Referral Scheme should be introduced in Social Services, possibly for a trial period;*
4. *That the introduction of service awards be introduced corporately rather than departmentally;*
5. *That the initiative to recognise the value of staff who have retired be welcomed, with the recommendation that the Council reconsiders its insistence on retirement at 65 years for those staff who wish to remain, as this could also particularly benefit Social Services;*

6. *That, rather than spend more money on the Civic Centre, more should be spent on other Social Services offices in the Borough;*
7. *That merit payments to specific groups of social workers should not be supported as it is not good for morale; all social workers should be treated the same as regards incentives;*
8. *That work should continue to build on flexible working options offered to Social Services staff, within the wider Work-Life Balance framework, in order to help attract and retain staff;*
9. *That Social Services should work more closely with other departments, specifically the Education Department, to effect an interchange of ideas in relation to recruitment and retention, in order to learn from each other and share ideas about effective strategies and incentives; and*
10. *That progress made in relation to recruitment and retention of social work staff should be reviewed after a period of one year.*

1. INTRODUCTION

This scrutiny review was approved by the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for inclusion in the Care Services and Housing Management Scrutiny Panel work programme on 24 July 2002. The Panel commenced the review with a Task Group meeting on 30 July 2002, when the scope and terms of reference were discussed. Draft terms of reference were subsequently drawn up. As the Panel was informed that there would be some difficulty in quickly producing the information requested, it was agreed to allow 6 months in which to achieve this. Draft terms of reference were reviewed and discussions on amendments took place, resulting in a delay in progressing the review. The queries raised concerned difficulty with providing some of the specific historical information requested in relation to employment of agency social workers, which was not available due to systems in place at the time. The review was therefore effectively put on hold from September to December, during which time various discussions on supply of information took place. This therefore resulted in the Panel's final report being put back to September 2003.

The review re-commenced with a Task Group meeting on 4 February 2003, when draft terms of reference were again discussed and agreed as originally drawn up. A proviso was included in the report to the Commission, that some of the historical information requested could not readily be provided, due to previous information systems in place at the time. However, new systems subsequently put in place allowed for provision of the necessary information for more recent periods of time. The Commission endorsed the terms of reference on 4 March 2003 (See Appendix A) and also requested that an interim report be presented to the next scheduled Commission in May 2003 on the review's progress.

2. THE PROCEDURE FOR UNDERTAKING THE REVIEW

The Care Services and Housing Management Scrutiny Panel progressed the review at four meetings, (30 July 2002, 19 September 2002, 4 February 2003, 20 March 2003), looking at information on the employment of social workers and associated staff in Children's Services between April 2001 to July 2002, the number of employment tribunals held during the same period, and the number of consultants employed, together with the reason. Members also considered the development of the Housing and Social Services Recruitment and Retention Strategy being worked on at that time.

Following the reconfiguration of scrutiny panels in May 2003, the Life Chances Scrutiny Panel took over the review and progressed it further on 23 September 2003, with consideration of the three months' information on the use of social workers across the whole of Social Services for May to July 2003.

3. KEY ISSUES AND CONSIDERATION OF EVIDENCE

Shortage of Social Workers – A National Problem:

Two key concerns of the Panel Members was the serious national shortage of social workers and how best to address the problem in Merton. Members considered it important to be able to maintain continuity in social worker allocations for clients, who are vulnerable and who gradually build up a good relationship with their social worker over time.

Employment Tribunals in Social Services:

The Panel discussed the possibility of staff disaffection and disciplinary action being necessary in a stressful employment environment such as Social Services and the number of employment tribunals relating to all Social Services staff for the period of April 2001 to July 2002 was requested. There were 10 appeals in total during this period, and many were settled before reaching the formal tribunal stage. Members considered that this was not excessive.

Use of Consultants in Social Services:

A list of consultants used was also considered and general concern was expressed about the use of consultants and the associated cost, in view of the criteria now in place at Merton on the use of consultants which had been corporately agreed. However, it was accepted that there were occasions when the use of consultants was necessary.

Recruitment and Retention Strategy for Housing and Social Services:

Members considered the draft Recruitment and Retention Strategy being developed to address the problems associated with appointing and retaining good quality staff in the department, including social workers and associated social work staff. It was clear to the Panel that the departmental strategy's aims should highlight the clear link with corporate human resources.

Recommendation 1

That the aims of the Recruitment and Retention Strategy should make clear the link between departmental and corporate HR, in that corporate HR managers are located in the departments.

It was confirmed that all interview panels include staff with equal opportunities and recruitment training, which is corporate policy. The Internet was used to advertise vacancies and this resulted in a large number of responses. The national Guardian newspaper and 'Community Care' publication were also used.

Members agreed that contact with colleges providing courses for social work qualifications was a very good channel of communication and for providing employment placements with local authorities including student supervision. However, it was accepted that supervision required Social Services staff to add to an already existing heavy workload, which not everyone is able to undertake. In addition, local authorities do not receive a fee for student placements, unlike voluntary organisations.

Recommendation 2

That the possibility of increasing the number of student social worker placements be investigated, as this often leads to recruitment of the students when they have qualified, if they have had a good experience within a department.

Recruitment and Retention Strategy – Draft Action Plan:

One concern raised was that a very large number of recruitment agencies are used to provide social workers for Merton and varying incentives to attract staff are offered by the different agencies. The proposal to establish focus groups and make use of an employee opinion survey to determine employees' views was considered a good idea.

There was also discussion on the proposal to increase the starting salary for new social workers as a financial incentive. As part of this, the issue was raised as to whether all employees in a social work team, such as the managers, needed to be qualified social workers was raised and this is one of the issues to be addressed by the Strategy. However, the view was expressed that social workers would be anxious if they were managed by somebody without social work experience and senior social work managers do also go out into the field. There are also certain legislative requirements to be complied with, for example, in Children's Services.

With regard to how Merton compares with neighbouring authorities, it was confirmed that other authorities may be offering different employment incentives and some comparative information was available. However, the Panel's view was that, offering incentives such as private health care, was not appropriate.

On the issue of the possible introduction of performance related progression, it was explained that automatic progression might not necessarily be the best approach. Use of the Employee Referral Scheme was also discussed and it was considered that this would be worthwhile.

Recommendation 3

That the Employee Referral Scheme should be introduced in Social Services, possibly for a trial period.

On the proposal to introduce service awards, it was considered that this should be recommended for introduction corporately, rather than

departmentally, to avoid claims that some staff were treated more favourably than others.

Recommendation 4

That the introduction of service awards be introduced corporately rather than departmentally.

The importance of recognising the value of staff who have retired was highlighted and therefore the development of a 'keeping in touch' programme was welcomed as a way to retain the experience of retired or retiring staff.

Recommendation 5

That the initiative to recognise the value of staff who have retired be welcomed, with the recommendation that the Council reconsiders its insistence on retirement at 65 years for those staff who wish to remain across the board, as this could also particularly benefit Social Services.

Members fully supported the proposal to introduce recruitment fairs in Merton, as was the plan to review and improve current procedures and practices, together with attaining/lobbying for key worker status for social workers. Also, the introduction of regular team meetings was welcomed as a way to improve internal communication.

With regard to the working environment, the Panel expressed the view that there should be refurbishment of premises used by Social Services employees outside of the Civic Centre, i.e. Worsfold House, Russell Road, Gifford House and also the Nelson and Wilson hospitals.

Recommendation 6

That, rather than spend more money on the Civic Centre, more should be spent on other Social Services offices in the Borough.

Concern was expressed about the awarding of merit payments to social workers located within Children's Services, which had caused some resentment amongst other social workers. The Panel agreed that this was not an appropriate or helpful action, as it was potentially divisive.

Recommendation 7

That merit payments to specific groups of social workers should not be supported as it was not good for moral; all social workers should be treated the same as regards incentives.

And:-

Recommendation 8

That work should continue to build on flexible working options offered to Social Services staff, within the wider Work-Life Balance framework, in order to help attract and retain staff.

Finally:-

Recommendation 9

That Social Services should work more closely with other departments, specifically the Education Department, to effect an interchange of ideas in relation to recruitment and retention, in order to learn from each other and share ideas about effective strategies and incentives.

And:-

Recommendation 10

That progress made in relation to recruitment and retention of social work staff should be reviewed after a period of one year.

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations agreed by the Panel as outlined in this report will be presented to the Overview and Scrutiny Commission for formal endorsement and then to the Cabinet for final approval and implementation, through the Cabinet Member for Care Services and relevant departmental officers.