

CYNGOR SIR CEREDIGION COUNTY COUNCIL

Report to: Overview and Scrutiny Coordinating Committee

Date of meeting: 27 March 2025

Title: Recruitment and Retention

Purpose of the report:

To inform Overview and Scrutiny Coordinating Committee of the current position regarding recruitment, retention and the use of agency social workers, care workers and occupational therapists.

Reason Scrutiny have requested the information:

For information and to determine the level of agency professional workers who are actively employed in Through Age Wellbeing services.

Background

The engagement of agency professionals has become more prevalent within social care over the last ten years for all local authorities in Wales.

In recent years Ceredigion County Council has seen an increase in the need to engage qualified social workers, occupational therapists and care workers.

In response to this situation Ceredigion County Council has been creative in identifying a range of solutions to ensure a safe service is delivered.

Current Situation

There has been an encouraging increase in applications received for permanent roles in the local authority over recent months. However, we remain reliant on expensive agency provision to deliver social care services in Ceredigion.

Context

The Council has a legal duty to provide safe statutory services for those most in need in Ceredigion. Whilst responsibility for this ultimately lies with the Council's Statutory Director of Social Services (SDSS), there is an organisational responsibility to support the SDSS to ensure these responsibilities are discharged effectively and in a manner that results in a safe service.

The risk of not having a safe service would, at worst, present a risk to life in terms of service users, but also significant financial risk, and toll on staff & capacity should the Council be placed into special measures.

Where recruitment is challenging across social care structures agency staff are used. The cost of doing so represents a necessary spend given the safe service that they are critical to maintaining.

Our utilisation of agency staff ensures the needs of the Council and those of our service users are met. As you will see from the information throughout the report, the challenge to recruitment in social care is a national one, and one which is likely to remain without a significant focus on the issues from Welsh Government.

The recruitment and retention of an appropriately sized workforce is one of the most significant challenges facing local government and the public sector in general, with increasing vacancy rates across all areas. As well as explaining the challenges, this report also captures the ways in which the Council is attempting to respond to them.

The ability to attract and retain talent is critical to maintaining a skilled workforce capable of delivering quality services to our communities. The Council employs a workforce of around 3,500 employees, to a full-time equivalent workforce of around 2,550 employees, largely female based at approximately 66 percent.

Recruitment and retention in our Through Age Wellbeing (TAW) social care services has continued to be challenging post Covid19, especially in the statutory field and has required innovative local solutions and investment.

Nevertheless, TAW services now employ a workforce of around 840 employees, having expanded to include new services such as Hafan y Waun, Wellbeing Centres, Children's Safe Accommodation and Occupational Therapy, and of a full-time equivalent workforce of c.570 there is now a female workforce higher-than-the-corporate-average at 76%.

Of these roles 240 are supporting statutory services and vacancies in these roles currently stands at 57 (24%), noting 39 of these are occupied by agency staff leaving 18 unfilled.

Of the remaining 600 roles, vacancies are 122 (21%) but only 8 of these are occupied by agency staff, wholly within our residential homes team.

The agency staff covering statutory services until recently included an eight-member managed team arrangement through *Innovate Services*. The appointment of this managed team was made in September 2022 and was stood down in December 2024. This solution has enabled the children's social care services to stabilise and achieve a consistent and responsive service.

Following a review of risk, in February 2023 the recruitment and retention of qualified social workers was identified as a corporate risk and included on the Corporate Risk Register. Since this time, quarterly updates have been provided on the progress against mitigating actions designed to reduce the risk to an acceptable level.

The purpose of this report is to provide an overview of the ongoing recruitment and retention issues facing TAW services, progress on the corporate risk mitigating actions as well as outlining the work currently being undertaken to address these challenges.

Financial Considerations

There are several areas within Social Care where external resources have been needed to supplement core staff employed directly by the Council.

These remaining areas are Professional Social Worker and Occupational Therapy posts covered by agency resource and Care & Support worker posts within the Local Authority Care Homes. Most data sets are from a snapshot in February 2025.

Professional Social Worker Posts

On the Social Work qualified roles, there are currently 33 agency workers covering statutory posts plus 3 agency workers within the Fostering service. The hourly rates being paid varied from £41.00 to £57.00 per hour with one outlier at £65 per hour for a Team Manager role. There is clearly an additional cost to using agency workers, however there is a partial offset from the saving from the associated vacant post as well as an agency staff member not incurring Employer Pension contributions nor any additional cost being incurred for hours / days not worked (e.g. Sickness / annual leave). There is a typical additional cost on an annualised basis of c.£15k to c.£35kpa for using an agency Social Worker:

	Social Worker £'000	Senior Practitioner £'000
Cost as an Employee (with oncosts)	51.5	57.2
Cost with Agency (based on 44 weeks)	67	92.8
Difference	15.5	35.6

Professional Occupational Therapy (OT) Posts

Despite active ongoing recruitment campaigns, opportunities for permanent qualified appointments have been very limited. However, a recent campaign for Occupational Therapy Assistants (OTAs) had several exceptional candidates. The service took the opportunity to create additional OTA posts reworking vacancies in the system and these will be fully operational from 1st April 2025.

The OT operational service redesign is incorporating these OTAs across the Targeted Care and Enablement Service to improve therapeutic input and approaches, supporting the prevention and early help ethos of Through Age, Wellbeing services. OTAs are supported to consider and participate in the 'Grow your Own' Therapist approach, and this will support the development of qualified OTs going forward.

The service has also been successful in securing additional grant funding to enable agency qualified Locum OTs to both support the ongoing development of the service redesign and to ensure statutory duties are being met along the way. There are currently 5 agency workers working within the OT service

	Occupational Therapist £'000	Senior Occupational Therapist £'000
Cost as an Employee (with oncosts)	51.5	57.2
Cost with Agency (based on 44 weeks)	73	83
Difference	21.5	25.8

Care & Support Worker Posts

Within Local Authority Care Homes, it is the operational side of 24/7 shifts that need to be filled. This is exacerbated at present by the onboarding of Hafan y Waun from the MHA Group who deployed large numbers of agency workers. A wide-ranging recruitment campaign is in place and Agency use has reduced by c50% in the last six months.

The current typical level of usage is now a net cost of c. £20k per week (equating to just under 700 hours of care per week), although this varies from week to week depending on operational requirements. Agency Hourly rates being paid for Care & Support Worker roles and Senior Care & Support Worker roles vary from £25.99 to £47.00. The reason for the large differential is the higher end hourly rates cover Saturdays, Sundays and Bank Holiday working.

	Care Assistant £'000	Senior Care Assistant £'000
Cost as an Employee (with oncosts)	32	38
Cost with Agency (based on 44 weeks)	42	76
Difference	10	38

In this area, whilst there is a partial financial offset already included within the net cost per week (as the base budget provides for the core operational hours required to run each Home), it is not as significant as there is no wider vacancy run rate position that assists, because each shift is required to be filled to maintain adequate staffing ratios.

The agency cost premium also varies depending on the type of shift being covered – it is at its highest for a basic weekday daytime shift - an 85% premium (£14.03 including oncosts v £25.99 agency), but this reduces to only 11% for a Bank holiday night.

Therefore, there is a significant net cost to using agency staff in Local Authority Care Homes and this is only being mitigated at present through underspends in other parts of Porth Gofal, namely Day Services and Targeted Care & Enablement Services.

Impact on 24/25 Budget

The Quarter 3 revenue monitoring report considered by Cabinet on 11/03/25 references the financial impact of agency costs within the TAW Services. Across the Pwrths a projected outturn position of an £808k overspend is being forecast for 24/25, which is a significant improvement over Q2 (when a £1.4m overspend was forecast). The financial position is being managed corporately with an overall expected breakeven position bottom line. The improved Q3 TAW position includes the impact of the reducing level agency related spend. A net cost of £1.540m (after allowing for vacancy elements and specific funding for the Innovate team) was included in the Q3 projections across all TAW agency spend, against which £500k has been factored in from reserves to partially mitigate down to just over £1m.

Recruitment and retention issues in Social Care

The recruitment and retention issues affecting social care in Wales have previously been reported and the key challenges noted in July 2023 remain today. These include:

- *Workforce shortages*: The demand for social care services has been increasing due to an aging population, rising complex care needs, and legislative changes. However, the number of people entering the profession has not kept pace with the demand.
- *Lower pay and poor working conditions*: Social care roles are often associated with low pay and challenging working conditions. Social workers in Wales often face lower pay compared to other professions requiring similar qualifications and responsibilities.
- *Lack of career progression and development opportunities*: Limited career progression and professional development opportunities within the social care sector can discourage individuals from pursuing long-term careers in this field.
- *Negative perception of the sector*: The social care sector has often been undervalued and stigmatised, leading to a negative perception of the profession. This can discourage individuals from considering social care as a viable career option, contributing to the recruitment challenges.
- *Geographical disparities*: Recruitment issues may be more pronounced in rural and remote regions.
- *Work-life balance and stress*: Social work can be emotionally demanding and stressful. The nature of the work, dealing with challenging situations and providing support to vulnerable individuals and families, can impact the work-life balance of social workers.

Local Government Pay

One of the most significant challenges is salary levels in local government. All local authorities are tied into national pay bargaining arrangements, that are not automatically linked to funding from central government. There are also job evaluation scheme considerations across local government which make it difficult to offer more competitive salaries and benefits packages in specific roles. This can lead to a higher turnover as employees seek better-paying positions elsewhere, often in the private sector, or in comparable paying roles but with less work demands. There is a project currently being managed by the Association of Directors of Social Services (Cymru) to work towards reducing reliance on agency social workers across children's social care. It is envisaged that there will be scope to look at the same approach with adult social workers in the future; the project having produced the All-Wales Pledge to reduce the number of agency social workers employed by local authorities. The steps to be taken within the Pledge include not employing social workers who have left local authority employment to join an agency, reducing the hourly pay rate offered to agency social workers to be more aligned with local authority pay rates and to re-negotiate pay rates of existing agency employees to lower amounts.

ADSS (Cymru) recognise that change has to be incremental and there is a need to give local authorities alternatives to using expensive agency solutions. To date there are no obvious solutions coming forward from the project.

However, to sign up to the All-Wales Pledge is an undertaking to stop using agency workers

therefore creating is a risk that agency staff will move on to maintain their income. This would place local authorities in a position where there was insufficient qualified social worker capacity to fulfil statutory duties to the community.

The basic salaries paid for social worker roles vary across all local authorities in Wales as each authority will have individual pay policies and banding in place. The differences can be up to £4k for a qualified social worker, when comparing Ceredigion salaries to that of larger authorities. Furthermore, as a recruitment and/or retention tool, local authorities have introduced market forces supplements which has exacerbated these differences with authorities paying between £2k and £6k per annum. Having a national pay spine for qualified social workers would remove the internal market influences currently in place between neighbouring authorities.

Regional picture overview

The most recent Mid and West Wales Safeguarding Board Workforce Report (2022-23) highlights some key messages which are consistent and compelling. The issues set out below persist across Ceredigion, Carmarthenshire, Pembrokeshire and Powys. There remain serious workforce risk factors found across the four local authorities in a wide range of areas, including:

- high vacancy levels and difficulties in recruiting to posts such as safeguarding work, in part because of increased workloads arising from issues such as more complex case management processes.
- problems in securing a sufficient supply of social workers at all stages of their careers but especially in roles which involve specialist skills.
- dependence on destabilising levels of agency staffing.
- a high proportion of staff in the upper age range.
- high turnover levels when social workers have completed their post-qualifying period.
- sickness absences often attributed to stress, anxiety, fatigue, or mental health concerns.
- fears about worker burn out and other challenges to their well-being.
- significant upheaval caused by changes in working conditions, especially those which have occurred because of the pandemic.
- increasing demand for services and rising workload levels.
- remuneration concerns.

The review concluded that it was crucial that any improvement plans take into account the work being done at a national level through the Social Care Wales *Social Work Workforce Plan 2022 to 2025*. The plan contains five principles.

“We want to have a social work workforce that:

- *feels valued and is valued.*
- *has the right values, behaviours, knowledge, skills, and confidence to assess care and support needs and provide support when needed.*
- *is sustainable and has enough people to provide responsive health and social care that*

meets the needs of the people of Wales.

- *works in an environment where supporting employee well-being is essential so that people and organisations can thrive.*
- *reflects the population’s diversity, Welsh language, and cultural identity.”*

Increasing use of agency workers

On a national scale, the number of social work graduates and experienced professionals entering the field has not kept pace with the demand and therefore the use of agency social worker staff is increasing across the sector. This is reflected in Mid and West Wales.

Over the last six months, and in response to the increasing instability in the recruitment market, local authorities in Wales have been working together to develop a joint approach to the use of agency social workers in children’s services.

There is a project currently being managed by the Association of Directors of Social Services (Cymru) to work towards reducing reliance on agency social workers across children’s social care with scope to look at the same approach with adult social care.

ADSS (Cymru) recognise that this change must be incremental and give local authorities alternatives to using expensive agency solutions. Of 22 local authorities in Wales there are 20 signed up to an agreement to support the project. The premise of the agreement is to develop and to manage the agency supply chain, improve the quality of staff and regulate pay rates within agency Children’s Social Work. The key stakeholders are social care and finance managers, human resources teams, trade unions, agency providers and agency social workers.

Current Position in Ceredigion

The review produced for the Mid and West Wales Safeguarding Board, mentioned above, included reference to evidence-based research undertaken by the Local Government Association on two relevant areas: (a) when Social Workers would stay in local authority employment, and (b) when Social Workers would leave local authority employment. These have been set out in the first column of the two tables below. The second column records the response in place in Ceredigion to either promote the relevant area (in the first table) or to address the issue (in the second table).

<i>There is research that states that Social Workers stay in Council employment when they:</i>	The situation in Ceredigion County Council:
<i>feel valued and supported with good management, good supervision, good initial and post qualifying training</i>	Ceredigion achieves this through a robust Through Age Wellbeing management structure, which ensures that supervision, reflective practice and training opportunities are available for all social care staff
<i>have a supportive team and colleagues providing advice, expertise, and emotional support</i>	We achieve this through a programme of regular team meetings, team social activities, access to a wellbeing support service and counselling service

<i>have good work-life balance and career progression</i>	The Through Age Wellbeing services have developed team structures and training opportunities that support career progression as well as flexible working opportunities in line with our local policies and procedures
<i>have clear priorities and appropriate caseloads</i>	We achieve this through the Signs of Safety supervision policy focusing on strengths and positive outcomes, regular supervision enables the worker to prioritise and identify clear goals and techniques to manage caseloads
<i>operate in an environment where reflective practice is the norm</i>	Our teams and managers achieve this through individual and group supervision, action learning opportunities and case reviews
<i>have effective administrative back up and IT systems</i>	Corporate systems have been developed to enable access and support from all corporate services including IT and business support
<i>have job security</i>	The Team Ceredigion ethos is promoted across all the services and through regular communications to all staff the aim is to create a 'family' approach reinforcing the importance of job security and being part of the Ceredigion community
<i>have access to flexible working</i>	New ways of working post pandemic has enabled further flexibility for staff working for the Council, in addition to existing relevant policies and procedures.

<i>There is research that states that Social Workers leave Council employment when:</i>	The situation in Ceredigion County Council:
<i>referral rates rise</i>	Post pandemic we have seen the number of referrals rise and complexity of cases increase, this is managed through regular monitoring of data and performance and re directing individual staff and teams to support in those areas of greatest need.
<i>individual caseloads increase</i>	we manage this through supervision and case allocation, supporting staff to manage their caseloads effectively and where appropriate providing additional staffing resource

<i>the support they've previously received diminishes</i>	Support is consistent and delivered as per previous comments above
<i>the control which they believe they should have over their working lives is reduced</i>	Flexible working has been key in supporting staff in maintaining a positive work life balance
<i>they cannot use their own professional judgement</i>	Staff are supported to work autonomously and use their professional judgement; this is a key requirement within social care practice and is supported through good supervision and management
<i>local policy changes result in reduced allowances</i>	This has not been applicable in Ceredigion
<i>local pay rates are uncompetitive compared with those available nearby</i>	This is an area of concern and is addressed further within the report.

Recruitment and retention initiatives

With the aim of making Ceredigion self-sufficient with a regular supply of qualified social workers the following actions are being taken:

- Social work trainees have been recruited to enrol on the Open University (OU) course, sponsored by the local authority. The 'grow your own social worker' (GYO) scheme has successfully recruited cohorts for several years' worth of qualifiers. Grants have been secured for external candidates' salaries, plus several internal colleagues joined the scheme 'on the job' with grants covering their tuition.
 - 2022/3: 3 trainees – 2 external / 1 internal (all qualified and placed in Ceredigion)
 - 2023/4: 3 trainees – 1 external / 2 internal (all qualified and placed in Ceredigion)
 - 2024/5: 6 trainees – 5 external / 1 internal
 - 2025/6: 6 trainees – 2 external / 4 internal
 - 2026/7: 3 trainees – all external
 - 2027/8: 6 trainees expected - 3 external / 3 internal– recruitment underway now
 - 2028/9: 4 trainees expected – 2 external / 2 internal – recruitment Feb 2026
- For the eight years prior, early versions of the GYO Programme resulted in the following:
 - 12 external Trainee Social Workers recruited - 5 other employees sponsored on an independent route to qualify as Social Workers. As a result, 16 employed as Social Workers by Ceredigion County Council.
 - 5 Swansea University Social Work students completed hosted placements and were employed as Ceredigion County Council Social Workers.
 - 80 student Social Work placements were provided.
- In addition - 22 employees were supported to undertake a Certification in Higher Education, out of which 9 continued onto the Social Work degree in the cohorts outlined

above. Ceredigion also host practice placements to students from other universities to support the qualifying program and expose students the benefits of working for the local authority. There is strong evidence to suggest that student social workers take up employment with the host local authority in which they had a positive experience whilst qualifying.

- Work in partnership with Aberystwyth University to develop a Mid and West Wales Social Work Master's Degree program reached an advanced stage before the university had to shelve proposals due to funding priorities. Ceredigion County Council and the University will resume discussions and jointly explore this development with oversight from Social Care Wales. The Local Authority remains optimistic that progress can be made at the right time for all partners.
- Develop in-house and implement a senior practitioner training programme to support the progression pathway for qualified social workers in the absence of a national training programme.

As a part of its employment offer, we promote the following benefits to recruit, retain and support the whole workforce:

Functional/Fiscal

- Relocation package of up to £8k for hard-to-fill roles
- Market forces supplement to qualified social workers and now to qualified Occupational Therapists
- Hybrid and flexible working opportunities
- Car leasing and cycle to work schemes
- Lifestyle savings card

Pastoral / Developmental

- Access to employee health and wellbeing support
- A clear and robust supervision policy
- Annual appraisals
- Access to a wide range of mandatory and specialist training
- Care First – Employee Assistance Package

Outreach

- We've attended careers fairs, job centre days, and supported We Care Wales campaigns - both regionally and nationally
- Promoted employment opportunities across the Through Age Wellbeing services to Aberystwyth University Students
- Virtual information sessions held with Swansea University students

- Sponsored and hosted the 2024 Regional Safeguarding Conference to showcase practice and innovation in Ceredigion

Current recruitment campaigns

We have revised our candidate attraction material to improve the marketing of our brand and employment offer which has seen the following developments:

- Developed 3 'showcase videos' for the purpose of sharing on our socials, careers site, info sessions etc:
 - (i) Lifestyle
 - (ii) Mixed testimonials
 - (iii) Case Study.
- These have been shared as part of sponsored campaigns on our social media channels achieving a reach of over 100,000. In addition, there are weekly 'non-sponsored' awareness raiser posts shared on our social media platforms.
- We have shared a range of content on our social media channels (Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn) to showcase our employment offer
- Staff testimonial quotes shared on our social media platforms
- Introduced a relocation package scheme for qualified social worker vacancies
- Attended careers fairs in schools and job centres. Promoted employment opportunities across the Through Age Wellbeing services to Aberystwyth University students
- Introduced a reduced/CV application form and currently reviewing key job descriptions with a view to making them more appealing
- Sponsored and hosted the 2024 Regional Safeguarding Conference to showcase practice and innovation in Ceredigion
- Held virtual information sessions for those interested in careers with Ceredigion – explaining benefits, opportunities and provided application advice
- Supported and shared national sector campaigns such as We Care Wales Social Work Week, Carer week

Conclusion

There are indications that the initiatives outlined above are beginning to have a positive impact on the recruitment and retention of qualified social workers. As a snapshot of vacancies, the following indicates the considerable improvement at social worker level but also that focus needs to continue in the higher graded roles:

Qualified social worker roles	Feb 2022	Feb 2025
Team Manager	2	3
Senior Practitioner	9	9
Social Worker	24	12
Independent Reviewing Officer	3	3

Addressing recruitment and retention issues requires a multi-faceted approach. It includes improving pay and working conditions, investing in professional development and training, promoting the value and importance of social care roles, focusing on improving job satisfaction, employee wellbeing, promoting a positive and supportive work culture, and implementing targeted recruitment strategies to attract and retain social care professionals in Wales.

Collaborative efforts between the government, social care providers, educational institutions, and professional associations are crucial in finding sustainable solutions to these challenges. Additionally, addressing the underlying recruitment challenges and improving the overall perception of social care as a valued and rewarding profession can also contribute to better retention rates.

Wellbeing of Future Generations:

Has an Integrated Impact Assessment been completed? If not, please state why.

No

This is a report that has been compiled in response to a request from the Overview and Scrutiny Coordinating Committee. For information only.

Summary of Integrated Impact Assessment:

Long term: N/A

Collaboration: N/A

Involvement: N/A

Prevention: N/A

Integration: N/A

Recommendation(s):

The Overview and Scrutiny Coordinating Committee take note of the content of the report.

Reason for recommendation(s):

None.

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Date of Report: 4 March 2025

Acronyms: Definitions contained in the report.