
Impact of Recruitment and Retention Activity

Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Commission

Decision to be taken on/Date of meeting: 27th October 26

Lead director/officer: Laurence Mackie-Jones

Useful information

- Ward(s) affected: All
- Report author: Rachel Heggs, Human Resources Business Partner
- Author contact details: Rachel.heggs@leicester.gov.uk
- Report version number: 1

1. Summary

- 1.1. This report provides an overview of the recruitment and retention challenges affecting the Council's Children's and Education workforce and the action being taken to address these pressures. It reflects the wider national context of skills shortages in specialist and statutory roles, alongside increasing complexity of need and national reform.
- 1.2. The Council is taking a range of actions to strengthen workforce capacity and reduce longer-term reliance on temporary staffing. These include targeted recruitment activity, apprenticeship and development pathways, international recruitment, dedicated resourcing support for Children's Social Care and initiatives to improve the retention and progression of existing employees.
- 1.3. Early indications from targeted recruitment activity are positive. The dedicated Children's Social Care resourcing pilot is improving recruitment outcomes, LinkedIn Recruiter has increased the reach of hard-to-fill vacancies, and all 35 internationally recruited social workers have been retained to date. Work is also progressing to establish a Social Work Academy to provide an integrated approach to learning, professional development and career progression.
- 1.4. Alongside immediate recruitment activity, there is an increased focus on strategic workforce planning. A Children's Workforce Strategy has been developed. This provides a framework for developing sustainable recruitment pipelines, strengthening retention and career pathways, and preparing the workforce for future service requirements.
- 1.5. Looking ahead, workforce planning will need to respond to the implementation of the Families First and SEND reforms, changes to roles and ways of working, and continued recruitment pressures in specialist areas. The Council will continue to use workforce data and evaluation of recruitment and retention initiatives to assess impact, identify emerging workforce risks and inform future priorities.

2. Recommended actions/decision

- 2.1. The Committee are asked to note and make comments on the report.

3. Scrutiny / stakeholder engagement

- 3.1 This report is to be reviewed by Children, Young People and Education Scrutiny Commission

4. Background Information

- 4.1. A number of workforce and resourcing related questions arose from an earlier budget monitoring report shared at the 19th of March 2025 Overview select committee meeting and at subsequent meetings thereafter. In response a report was presented to Overview Select Committee on 2nd February 2026.

4.2. This OSC report highlights ongoing recruitment and retention challenges in specialist and statutory roles, driven by national skills shortages, competition for talent and rising salary expectations. The Council is responding through targeted recruitment, apprenticeships and graduate pathways, career development, international recruitment and agency-to-permanent conversions. While staffing remains a challenge in some hard to fill areas the longer-term focus is on reducing reliance on temporary workers and building a sustainable, skilled permanent workforce through improved recruitment, retention and workforce planning.

4.3. This report is intended to focus on our Children's and Education workforce and actions that are taking place within this sector, including:

- Provide a broad outline of the workforce challenges within the Children's and Education workforce that Local Authorities, including Leicester are facing.
- Give some context regarding our current workforce profile.
- Explain what we are doing in our People Service to support effective resourcing.
- Set out some of the other activities in place to address known workforce challenges.
- Provide information about resourcing initiatives that have had success.
- Briefly outline some future focused challenges and opportunities.

5. Workforce challenges and the national Labour Market context

5.1. Recruitment and retention pressures within Children's Social Care and Education continue to present challenges nationally. These services rely on skilled and experienced professionals in areas where labour supply is constrained, while increasing complexity of need places additional demands on workforce capacity.

5.2. Within Children's Social Care, the recruitment and retention of experienced social workers remains a strategic priority. Workforce stability is a key factor in enabling practitioners to build effective relationships with children and families, maintain continuity of support, and deliver consistently high standards of practice. While agency workers continue to provide valuable short-term capacity, sustained reliance on temporary staffing can impact service continuity and increase workforce costs.

5.3. The introduction of the Department for Education's statutory regulations governing the use of agency child and family social workers has reinforced the importance of maintaining a sustainable permanent workforce. These reforms place greater emphasis on reducing dependency on agency staffing and strengthening workforce stability through effective recruitment, retention, professional development, and career progression. Continued investment in newly qualified social workers, high-quality supervision, and development opportunities for experienced practitioners will be essential to supporting service resilience and long-term workforce sustainability.

5.4. The Government's Families First Partnership programme represents a significant reform of children's social care, with greater emphasis on early intervention, integrated Family Help and multi-agency child protection. The Department for Education requires closer working across social care, education, health and police services, with multidisciplinary teams central to the new model.

5.5. In terms of retention nationally, turnover also remains a major issue:

- The national turnover rate for children's social workers was 13.8% in 2024.
- Around 61% of those leaving local authority roles exited the sector entirely, rather than moving between councils.

- 4.6 High turnover has been a sustained challenge across the sector for more than a decade, with the LGA reporting over 70% of local authorities reporting difficulties retaining social workers.
- 4.7 Retention beyond the first two years in role is critical to workforce stability. DFE national workforce data shows the largest proportion of social workers in local authorities have less than two years' service with their employer.
- 4.8 Education services are operating within similarly challenging labour market conditions. National evidence points to continuing teacher recruitment and retention pressures. Workload, working conditions and access to flexible working have also been identified as factors affecting retention, demonstrating that workforce challenges cannot be addressed through recruitment activity alone.
- 4.9 The Government's SEND reform programme, to improve inclusion and reform the SEND system, will place increased emphasis on early identification, inclusive mainstream provision and access to specialist support.
- 4.10 These workforce pressures need to be considered alongside increasing complexity of need among children and young people. Ofsted's 2024/25 Annual Report highlights the cumulative impact of disadvantage and vulnerability, including the interaction between absence from education, special educational needs and social care involvement. Maintaining appropriate workforce capacity and capability across both Education and Children's Social Care is therefore important to effective service delivery and outcomes.
- 4.11 Recruitment is only one element of addressing these pressures. The CIPD's 2025 Analysis of the Public Sector Workforce identifies leadership, people management and working conditions as important factors in workforce retention, morale, wellbeing and productivity. It concludes that improving leadership and people management should form an important part of the response to public sector workforce challenges.
- 4.12 The Council's approach within Children's Social Care and Education should therefore continue to focus on securing the immediate capacity required to deliver services while developing a sustainable workforce over the longer term. This includes attracting appropriately qualified employees, strengthening routes into professions, developing internal talent, supporting career progression and improving retention, alongside proportionate use of temporary staffing where this is necessary to maintain safe and effective services.

6. Our workforce profile – a snapshot

6.1. Based on the latest Children's and Education workforce data, we know that:

- We employ approximately 971 FTEs across Children's and Education services.
- Our Children's and Education workforce has grown from 850 FTEs in 2016 to 971 FTEs in 25/26, an increase of approximately 14%.
- Across all grades, the average length of service is 10.5 years.
- Within Children's Social Care, we employ 639 FTEs across all grades.
- Within SEND and Education, we employ 332 FTEs across all grades.
- 75% of employees are employed in Grade 9 or below roles.
- 90% of vacancies advertised in 2025/26 were for Grade 9 or below roles.
- 42% of employees are aged 50 or over.

- The largest age groups are 35-49 years (39%) and 50-64 years (37%).
- Turnover is 9.3% across the authority, Children's Social Care is 7.3%
- Leicester has an economically active population of approximately 157,000 people, from which the Council recruits its workforce.

6.2. We currently make use of several levers to address the challenges we face when it comes to attracting and retaining staff at all levels. These include the use of targeted strategies that enable us to grow our own talent from within. Some these are outlined below.

7. 'Grow your own' strategies

7.1. Where the external market is highly competitive or there is a shortage of skilled professionals, one of the most effective long-term strategies is to grow our own talent. We have an internal first recruitment model that enables the progression of staff within the authority.

7.2. Also, by investing in structured apprenticeship, trainee, and graduate pathways, we can develop a strong internal pipeline for hard-to-fill and specialist roles. This approach not only secures the skills we need for the future but also strengthens retention by providing clear progression and development opportunities.

7.3. We have 29 apprenticeship placements across Children and Education services.

7.4. Twenty-one are completing the Children, young people and families practitioner apprenticeship in placement and commissioning. These will progress into residential practitioner roles and help in growing our own staffing to align with the increasing number of provisions.

7.5. Seven are part of our successful degree qualification pathway this supports non-qualified staff to progress to fully qualified Social Workers, building capability and future staffing resilience from within. There is a with a clear progression plan in place for each of them which focus on retaining them in the workforce after the programme has concluded.

8. Temporary Workforce Position

8.1. In high-pressure areas, agency staffing has been effective in reducing immediate and more critical operational risk and has allowed us to maintain workforce levels close to establishment. That said, we are very aware that agency staffing is a more costly arrangement and have strict controls around its use.

8.2. Areas such as educational psychology have increased reliance on agency staffing. This is primarily due to the specialised nature of the role with increase qualifications and a low staffing pool to recruit from.

8.3. Eight agency Social Workers are currently deployed in CIN teams to mitigate the known service pressures and maintain safe and effective caseload management. This number has decreased from 18 in May 2025.

8.4. Since October 2025 and under the new Department for education rules, all agency workers must have worked directly for a local authority for three years before becoming an agency worker. This has led to a number of conversions from agency workers to employees.

9. People Services - Strategic Workforce Planning

- 9.1. A strategic approach to workforce planning is proven to enable organisations to identify potential skills gaps, succession risks, and hard-to-recruit roles early, allowing time to invest in training, apprenticeships, and alternative talent pipelines. These targeted initiatives reduce the reliance on agency staff, supports continuity of service delivery, and improves value for money.
- 9.2. In practice, strategic workforce planning involves understanding the current workforce - such as workforce size, skills, demographics, and costs – and considering how this relates to what will be needed in future. This involves looking at trends like service demand, funding pressures, technological change, and policy reform. By doing so, organisations can identify gaps, surpluses, and risks, and develop targeted actions such as recruitment plans, training and development, succession planning, and create an evidence based and planned approach to new ways of working.
- 9.3. In the long term, Councils with a strategic approach to workforce planning are better positioned to deliver high-quality services, manage risk, and respond effectively to future challenges while making the best use of public resources.
- 9.4. Recognising the value of this activity, we are co-producing a corporate people plan and drafted a children's workforce strategy the final version is with the division for approval in October.
- 9.5. Ensuring employee voice shaped priorities in our plans we undertook a series of structured listening sessions with a cross section of staff. This involved senior leaders, managers and staff from across the workforce facilitated by our internal HR business partners and independently by Inclusive Employers. In addition, we overlayed the findings with those of our 2026 Healthy Workplace Engagement Survey. HR MI information was analysed and diagnose and discovery sessions on HR service delivery undertaken.
- 9.6. The themes identified through this engagement activity directly shaped our five workforce pillars: Attract, Retain, Wellbeing & Resilience, Grow & Develop, Change Readiness.

10. Focus on Children's Social Care

- 10.1. The five workforce pillars were reviewed in line with Children's services priorities, creating 'We will' statements to show our commitment to children's workforce specifically with our priorities outlined and details what are employees can expect.
- 10.2. Under the Attract pillar, HR business partner analysis identified the need for a specified Resourcing consultant for children's social care. This pilot role started in May 2026. Increasing capacity to focus on attraction campaigns for children's services which are notoriously hard to fill and business critical. The increased support is showing promising results with a resourcing action plan created as part of the workforce strategy. Manager feedback from this additional support is very positive and proving to both decrease time to hire and vacancy rates but also improve applicant quality.
- 10.3. Vacancy numbers in hard to fill areas are reducing with teams such as Children in need social work now being at establishment.
- 10.4. Additional marketing activities are being completed by the Resourcing Consultant to attract more applicants and widen the audience to our roles. This includes attending local jobs fairs,

creating interactive social media videos. Working across the region as part of part of the regional residential workforce network to showcase the sector and Leicester City.

- 10.5. Starting in April 2026 a pilot of using LinkedIn Recruiter commenced. LinkedIn Recruiter is a talent acquisition platform that helps employers and recruiters find, engage, and manage potential candidates using LinkedIn's professional network. To date, our job adverts have achieved 45,000 views on this platform, with hard to fill roles such as Advanced Practitioner having substantially increased outreach. Early signs show using LinkedIn Recruiter is resulting in increased application numbers.
- 10.6. Our international recruitment approach helps to expand the talent pool particularly when domestic shortages exist. Through this programme 35 international Social Workers have been recruited, with the majority deployed to Children In Need teams. We've managed to retain all of the cohort to date. This programme has strengthened workforce stability and demonstrated strong onboarding and support structures. All of the first cohort are expected to have achieved their Level 3 (senior social worker) status within the next 6 months.
- 10.7. The strategy of international recruitment as a long-term initiative is to be evaluated as the proposed changes within home office legislation will impact upon this recruitment methodology.
- 10.8. The 'Families First' agenda presents many changes and opportunities for the children's workforce. One major change is the capacity for those "differently qualified" staff to hold cases of children on "Child in Need" plans with the support and oversight of a Qualified Social Worker on some cases. These changes do not include the possibility of these staff holding cases involving looked after children or those on a child protection plan.
- 10.9. The agenda also introduces a Lead Child Protection Practitioner, a specialist social work role within a Multi-Agency Child Protection Team (MACPT). We are working through the implementation of this role.
- 10.10. Retention trends of high turnover and workers leaving before 2 year's service are evidenced in our Children In Need teams. Therefore, a retention initiative was introduced in April 2026. A one-off retention payment was introduced for eligible Children In Need Social workers. The aim of this retention initiative is to deliver both service quality improvements and financial savings. This trial will be reviewed as it progresses.

11. Social Care Academy

- 11.1. The Academy will provide a single, integrated offer for workforce learning, development and career progression across Children's and Adult Social Care. Bringing together the Learning and Development functions from both service areas under one Academy structure will create a coordinated approach to workforce development, ensuring consistency, quality and accessibility of learning opportunities across the organisation.
- 11.2. The Academy will act as the hub for professional development, leadership programmes, apprenticeships, workforce planning and continuous learning. By aligning learning and development provision across Children's and Adult Social Care, the Academy will strengthen career pathways, support workforce retention and progression, and enable the development of a skilled, confident and future-ready workforce capable of meeting the evolving needs of our communities.

11.3. We are also delivering a programme to develop a performance culture across the divisions. Our “Leading Performance” programme across 2026 will set the foundation for future work in the department. This includes a series of in person workshops including change management, Values and ethical leadership.

12. Areas of emerging interest

- 12.1. The key emerging workforce priority is developing a sustainable and resilient Children’s and Education workforce that can respond to changing service requirements and national reform.
- 12.2. This will include preparing for new ways of working arising from SEND reforms and Families First, strengthening recruitment pipelines into hard-to-fill and specialist roles, and increasing the focus on retaining experienced staff through career development, professional support and effective management.
- 12.3. Alongside this, continued attention will be given to reducing longer-term reliance on agency staffing and strengthening the use of workforce data to identify future skills and capacity requirements and evaluate the impact of recruitment and retention initiatives.

13. Financial, legal, equalities, climate emergency and other implications

13.1 Financial implications

This report provides an update on the recruitment and retention challenges within Children’s Services and Education. Where posts are vacant, it gives rise to an underspend against the allocated budget which is included in the budget monitoring reports. Although savings are generated, this must be seen in the context of reduced capacity and/or increased costs elsewhere for example if those posts are filled by agency staff at a higher rate. This report sets out the actions being taken to address these workforce challenges and these actions will have a positive impact on the budget by removing excess costs and providing staffing resources to support children who are in receipt of care or education services.

The strategic approach to workforce planning is welcome as this will ensure that longer term solutions are put in place to keep workforce costs within budget.

Signed: Mohammed Irfan, Head of Finance
Dated: 14 October 2026

13.2 Legal implications

There are no legal implications arising from the recommendations sought in the report.

Signed: Julia Slipper
Dated: 15 October 2026

13.3 Equalities implications

Our Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) requires us to eliminate unlawful discrimination, advance equality of opportunity and foster good relations between those who share a protected characteristic as defined by the Equality Act 2010 (sex, sexual orientation, gender reassignment, disability, race, religion or belief, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, age) and those who do not. The Council also has an obligation to treat people in accordance with their Convention rights under The Human Rights Act, 1998.

This report provides an update on recruitment and retention within Children's and Education services and does not propose a new policy or service change. The equalities implications relate mainly to the Council as an employer and the indirect impact of workforce stability on children, young people and families.

A stable, skilled workforce can support continuity of care and education, with potential positive impacts for disabled children, children with SEND and families from diverse communities. Recruitment, apprenticeship and development pathways may also improve access to employment and career progression, particularly for younger and lower-paid employees.

International recruitment and retention payments may support workforce stability, provided that employees receive appropriate support and that any eligibility criteria are applied fairly and consistently. No significant adverse equalities implications have been identified. The Council should continue to monitor workforce data by relevant protected characteristics, where available and proportionate, to identify any emerging disparities.

Signed: Equalities Officer, Surinder Singh, Ext 37 4148
Dated: 14 October 2026

13.4 Climate Emergency implications

Signed:
Dated:

13.5 Other implications (You will need to have considered other implications in preparing this report. Please indicate which ones apply?)

14. Background information and other papers:

Budget monitoring report shared at the 19th of March 2025 Overview Select Committee

Workforce and Resourcing report shared at the 2nd February 2026. Overview Select Committee

15. Summary of appendices: None

16. Is this a private report (If so, please indicate the reasons and state why it is not in the public interest to be dealt with publicly)? No

17. Is this a "key decision"? If so, why? No