



**List of Requests to Improve the Staffing Crisis in Joint Union Request to Improve the Staffing Crisis in Sandwell’s Children’s Services**

For the last twelve months the number of agency staff in Children’s Services has been increasing and at the time of writing approximately a third of all qualified social workers in the service are agency workers. Agency workers cost double of directly employed staff. Our guess is that the Agency bill for Children’s Services will be around £5million for the year.

Since the announcement of the staff needing to TUPE transfer into the Children’s Trust staff turnover has been significantly higher than previous.

Demand on the service has also increased significantly resulting in the service failing to reduce the excessive caseloads on social workers, even though the number of workers in the service has been increased.

The continuation of excessive caseloads, which management reports acknowledge has increased again, means that some staff experience ‘burnout’. Others simply leave due to the demands being placed upon them.

Our members are reporting to the trade unions their concerns that they are being put in a position where they are practising unsafely. This is the first time this has been reported to the trade unions and reflects the serious problems the service is experiencing.

This situation is not good for providing a good service to children, nor a basis to meet the expectation of improving the quality of the service given to children. It appears that Sandwell may be stuck in a deteriorating cycle, where excessive workloads mean more permanent staff keep leaving, to be replaced by ever increasing numbers of expensive agency workers.

We believe that there needs to be some radical improvements in the working environment, including terms and conditions, if Sandwell is to recruit and retain sufficient workers in Children’s Services to be able to establish the environment where the focus can be on improving the quality of practice, rather than reacting to the panics of today.

Whilst we welcome the recognition of the problems facing the service by senior management we request the following improvements to the working environment and terms and conditions for all staff in the service.

1. To continue the inclusive work with staff and trade unions around the new office accommodation so that it is suitable and appropriate for the needs of staff and children. For this to begin a new culture where management are open to staff suggestions, even if they are critical in nature.
2. To cease all ‘blind’ allocations of children to workers without their knowledge.
3. To uphold a guarantee on caseloads that no social worker will be expected to carry more than 21 open cases at any one time. If necessary, safely not allocating certain work for a short period, rather than hiding the pressure on the service by overburdening staff.
4. To uphold the government guidance around caseloads for Independent Reviewing Officers.
5. To conduct, with the trade unions, a review of Business Support, workloads and responsibilities. To agree a way forward on appropriate remuneration that ceases threats of ‘downgrades’ and constant sudden moving of staff.
6. To aim to eliminate the need to hire any agency staff by management seeking to slightly overstaff on establishment at any one time. This should be cheaper than constantly relying on a minimum of 30 agency staff across the service. It should also provide a small pool of staff that could be used to meet sudden peaks of demand in any particular part of the service.
7. To continually review the staffing requirements given demand on the service and future demographic changes in Sandwell.
8. To implement a market supplement of £4,000 per annum for E, F and G grade and social workers, plus IRO’s, to be paid for five years. This will aid recruitment and retention. Evidence for the need for the market supplement to be the high numbers of agency staff. The cost of this market supplement would be far cheaper than paying for agency staff. If 200 staff receive an additional £4,000 then the total annual cost is £800,000 compared to approximately £5million for agency staff. The market supplement to be paid in monthly salaries.
9. To agree a collective approach to quality assurance with the trade unions that, if at all possible, avoids individual recriminations but promotes organisational learning.
10. For management to ensure staff do not work excessive hours and applies the Councils approach under the flexi time scheme where workers shouldn’t work more than 42 hours each week.
11. That if staff are expected to work over 42 hours during the week, because of excessive workload, then any hours worked beyond 42 to be rewarded with the appropriate overtime payment.
12. For the trade unions to play an active part in recruiting and attracting social workers to Sandwell.

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