

Report to:	Cabinet	Date: 13 December 2023
Subject:	Extension of contract for Childrens Safeguarding Equinox Project Team	
Report of	Deputy Leader and Cabinet Member for Children and Young People	

Summary

A request is being made to Cabinet to seek approval for an extension of the Equinox Project Team, currently commissioned to support core statutory safeguarding services, to enable Bury Council to protect vulnerable children and young people from harm, in accordance of the principles outlined within the CA 1989.

Recommendation(s)

1. That members approve the extension of the Equinox Project Team until 31st March 2024

Reasons for recommendation(s)

2. If the project team is not extended this will significantly impact upon the council's ability to carry out its statutory functions in order to keep children and young people safe from harm. It would be better for the project team to be reduced in a gradual and managed way to reduce the impact of the service losing a full team of very experienced child protection social workers who are currently holding 140 cases. The sudden exit of the team would result in these cases having to be absorbed within the 4 Family Safeguarding Teams which are insufficiently staffed at present.

Alternative options considered and rejected

3. Other options have been considered such as exiting the project team more imminently and back filling these positions with agency social workers. Currently, the number of agency applications has reduced and there is insufficient availability to back fill the project team. It is also important to note that the project team have been in place since January 2022 and have gained vast experience and knowledge in relation to Bury and its children. The loss of these Social Workers would impact on the children and families opened to the service. It is also important to ensure good transition of families is in place. The project team will reduce from 6 to 4 social workers by the end of January, 4 to 2 SW's in February and the final 2 leaving by the end of March.

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Background

4. In November 2021 Bury's Children Services were judged to be inadequate by Ofsted, across most areas of service delivery including safeguarding. This was due to significant failures identified across the services at a systemic and operational level. Since that time much progress has been made in order to rectify the areas of concern with many changes brought in, to improve services. Initially 5 project teams were implemented to ensure service delivery was able to keep children safe and ensure that their needs were met throughout the Borough. This came at a significant financial cost to Bury Council and it is positive that the use of project teams has now reduced to one team. However, we recognise to need to end the use of project teams.
5. Over the past two years there have been good work to stabilise the workforce, to improve effectiveness to fulfil the statutory duties of the Local Authority. These have included recruitment campaigns, more manageable caseloads for workers, increased management support, a high focus on learning and on staff retention. The Family Safeguarding Model has also been implemented, which is a model of practice which has been evidenced to improve outcomes for children and families, reduce the number of children needing to enter the care of the Local Authority and retain a highly motivated and committed workforce. Bury Council is still in the process of successfully implementing and embedding the model though it is expected that Bury will begin to see the full benefits of this model within the next 12 months.
6. Managed or Project teams were commissioned initially post ILACs inspection, when Ofsted judged Bury services to be inadequate, for social workers holding too high caseloads, in combination with other more strategic and systemic failures. Whilst excellent progress has been made in reducing the commissioned four project teams to a final one, it is disappointing that one project team remains. However, the remaining project team comprises a cohort of highly experienced social workers, currently handling some of the more complex cases open to the service and has been a source of stability in the service regarding maintaining practice standards. It is of no doubt however, that a more cost-efficient system of maintaining standards is now critical.
7. The proposed recommendation is the most cost effective way of exiting the project team without impacting on service delivery across the family safeguarding teams. It was hoped that the project team would no longer be required by this point in the implementation however there have been a number of factors as detailed above which were unforeseen. An integral part of the recruitment strategy has been in relation to recruiting internationally. There has been some success with this programme and 5 Social Workers are

now in post and employed by Bury council. There are another 18 international social workers that are due to join the workforce though unfortunately they have been delays with Social Work England registering these workers which has delayed their employment commencing. Social Work England have still not confirmed when this issue will be resolved however is likely to be early in the New year. It is recognised that when these Social Workers arrive they will need an in depth induction programme in order to adjust to UK Social Work practice before they can be safely allocated work. They should be in a position to case hold by the end of March.

8. The Family Safeguarding Service is currently composed of 4 Safeguarding Teams which should compromise of 1 Team Manager, 1 Advanced Practitioner and 5 additional social workers. In addition to the operational functioning is the project team which has been in place since January 2022. At this present time the 4 substantive teams all have permanent Team Managers though the makeup of the social work practitioners within these teams are made up of employed staff and agency social workers. Our configuration has been arrived at through extensive review of our services and data and recommended by the expert advisors and partners in this model (Family Safeguarding Centre) and the DfE. 5 teams are necessary to provide effective service delivery.
9. The initial size of the Project Team to be extended is 1 x FTE Team Manager and 6 x FTE Social Workers and the department will endeavour to reduce and replace the experience incrementally. Realistically, this should be a reduction of project team social workers through the next few months of the extension. This experience will be replaced with experienced social workers recruited to permanently, or through our agency framework. Based on the last 12 months recruitment, the accurate forecast is that the team will be replaced by on-framework agency staff which will be at a significant saving to the local authority. It is accepted this the market is volatile and challenging, given the national social work recruitment crisis, but there is optimism that these targets are realistic and can be achieved. It is further anticipated that should our international recruitments arrive as expected, this will further reduce the cost of replacing the final project team.
10. This extension will be through the awarding of a new Statement of Works through the Councils existing contract with Constellia. Constellia is a vendor neutral solution for the efficient procurement and sourcing of consultancy and professional services, and the overarching contract was awarded under the AEC framework agreement, under which Constellia were the sole supplier. Each commission under the contract results in a Statement of Works to the 3rd party to undertake the work. The contract is with Constellia, with them sub-contracting to the most appropriate party to deliver the required services. There is no limit on the value of any individual or aggregate value of Statement of Works that may be placed with Constellia.

11. The expected forecasting is as below, based on a worst-case scenario of replacing project team staff with experienced on-framework agency staff:

12. The costs of this extension are projected to be: £379,728

	Oct (£)	Nov (£)	Dec (£)	Jan (£)	Feb (£)	Mar (£)	Total (£)
Project Team	62,988	60,956	62,988	62,988	42,583	45,520	338,021
REED Agency Costs	-	-	-	-	13,902	27,804	41,706
Total	62,988	60,956	62,988	62,988	56,485	73,324	379,728

13. These costs can be offset by £188,259 in savings by the substantive posts in Safeguarding Team.

Action taken to increase permanent workforce

14. A key initiative has been the recruitment of a large cohort of qualified social workers from South Africa in early 2023. This successful exercise resulted on offers of employment being made to 23 individuals, with it being initially envisaged that almost all would have completed necessary processes to enable them to commence work before the end of summer 2023.

15. Unfortunately, due to significant delays with Social Work England in processing registrations, only 5 of the Social Workers have been able to commence employment to date, and there are no definitive timescales for the others to follow, although it is anticipated they will be in place early in 2024.

Permanent Recruitment

16. Further work is underway to drive permanent social work recruitment, with the establishment of a Workforce Board. This Board will be chaired by the Director of Social Care Practice and will include senior officers from HR and Communications, Engagement and Marketing. The Board will prioritise actions to reduce the use of agency social workers and improving the offer to new and existing social workers. A new social media campaign will go live in January 2024, to showcase the offer to social workers who choose to join Bury, using voices of existing workers in the service.

17. Agency staff will also continue to be recruited via Reed to back fill the project team as this team is gradually reduced. The recruitment of agency staff has slowed recently due to the introduction of the Greater Manchester pledge which is in place to reduce the movement of agency social workers across Greater Manchester. As envisaged, this has resulted in reduced agency applications and the time of year has also had an impact due to people not wanting to change jobs so close to Christmas, it is predicted that there will be an increase of agency applications in the New Year.

Links with the Corporate Priorities:

1. Improved quality of life - The outlined recommendations will ensure that children and families are provided with safeguarding services which ensure their safety and offer support to prevent families from reaching crisis. The Family Safeguarding Model's principles are based on supporting children to remain within their families where it is safe to do so. To work 'with' families and not 'do' to them. There is a high focus on building positive relationships with families to support them to resolve their own difficulties. In order to achieve this case loads need to remain at a manageable level to enable Social Workers and our adult practitioners to work intensively with families.
2. Improved early years development- A well-functioning safeguarding service ensures that children are meeting their development needs. Family Safeguarding works with parents through any difficulties they are facing which in turn impacts on their parenting capacity and children's development needs. The service also works closely with partner agencies to ensure that any support required is implemented within a timely manner. The Family Safeguarding Service is integral to understanding and assessing the needs of children and families to ensure that all children meet their developmental milestones and access any additional support.
3. Improved educational attainment - There is a well-known link between children who are in need or who are in need of protection who are at increased risk of not achieving their full potential within an educational setting. This is often linked to the home environment and parenting difficulties which impact on a child's ability to attend school or concentrate fully when they are in school. Within Family safeguarding there is a high emphasis on the need for children to be fully engaged with education to improve their life chances. The service utilises trauma informed approaches as well using motivational interviewing techniques to work with individual family members.
4. Increased adult skill levels and employability. Family Safeguarding recognises that the importance of early years and the impact of adverse childhood experiences which can impact on young people successful transition into adulthood. The whole family approach of the Family Safeguarding, with support from Adult workers, should improve prospect for parents, as they become for stable.

Equality Impact and Considerations:

5. Bury Council's Equality and Impact policy and guidance has been considered and are adhered to within recruitment procedures.

Environmental Impact and Considerations:

6. Children's Service is alive to Bury Council carbon management programme and abides by any new measures that are brought in. All staff are trained within this area as part of their induction programme.

Assessment and Mitigation of Risk:

Risk / opportunity	Mitigation
<p>The loss of the project team would impact significantly on service delivery within Family Safeguarding. This would reduce the capacity of SW's within the 4 substantive teams from undertaking their statutory duties. Should case loads increase their will be increased risk of staff sickness and in retaining permanent staff. This will impact on the quality of social work practice that is delivered to children and families who may escalate further into crisis and increase need of children needed ing to be accommodated by the Local Authority and or made subject to care proceedings.</p>	<p>This risk can be mitigated by the project team remaining in place till the end of March. This will allow for plans t be outlined within this report to resolve some of the current staffing difficulties that the service is currently experiencing. This additional time will also for more agency staff to be recruited which are more cost effective than the project team and also for our international recruits to be in post having completed an in depth induction period.</p> <p>This will also support to sustain caseloads at a manageable level and in being able to retain staff that are in post.</p>

Legal Implications:

7. The Constellia neutral vendor framework has been used successfully by the Council in a number of areas. It is an appropriate procurement route here and is compliant with the Council's Contract Procedure Rules.

Financial Implications:

8. The net unbudgeted cost of extending the managed team for the duration of six months (Oct23-Mar24) is £191,469 which comprises the cost of the managed team £379,728 less establishment savings of £188,259. The importance of moving away from expensive managed teams and on-contract agency cannot be over emphasised. To put this into some kind of context – the cost of the managed team over one financial year is approximately £740,000; on-contract agency £610,000; recruitment to fill permanent positions £376,000. So, it becomes clear when analysing these figures that recruitment to established posts is the way forward and key to reducing costs across the Social Care and Safeguarding service.

Appendices:

None.

Background papers:

None.

Please include a glossary of terms, abbreviations and acronyms used in this report.

Term	Meaning