

DUNDEE CITY COUNCIL

REPORT TO: Social Work Committee - 15th December 2003

REPORT ON: Recruitment and Retention of Staff (Flexible Working Initiative)

REPORT BY: Director of Social Work

REPORT NO: 813 - 2003

1.0 PURPOSE OF THE REPORT

- 1.1 To inform the Social Work Committee of the contents of the final report, on the recruitment and retention pilots carried out within the Department, produced by Scott-Gardner Consultants. The report also informs committee members of proposed future developments.

2.0 RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that the Social Work Committee:-

- 2.1 note the contents of this report;
- 2.2 approve further developments proposed by the Director of Social Work as detailed in 7.2;
- 2.3 acknowledge receipt of £5000 from the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) and approve £5000 from existing budgets as match- funding.

3.0 FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS

- 3.1 The £5,000 match funding agreed with the DTI will be met from within existing resources.

4.0 LOCAL AGENDA 21 IMPLICATIONS

- 4.1 The actions proposed by the Director of Social Work will assist the Social Work Department recruit and retain key staff.

5.0 EQUAL OPPORTUNITIES IMPLICATIONS

- 5.1 The recommendations regarding flexible working will have a positive impact on the quality of service delivery by encouraging key staff to enter the Dundee City Council workforce.

6.0 BACKGROUND

6.1 On 19th August 2002, the Director of Social Work was granted approval by the Social Work Committee to commission an external consultant for the purpose of researching a number of key staffing issues (622-2002). Scott-Gardner Consulting was commissioned to undertake this research against a limited number of specific project objectives (154-2003). The projects included setting up and evaluating pilots into flexible working practices including:

- flexible working based on elements of home working
- flexible working based on greater flexibility of hours
- process improvement

6.2 The work of the pilots is now completed and Scott-Gardner Consulting has issued a final report to The Director of Social Work. (See Appendix 1 for summary)

7.0 MAIN TEXT

7.1 Report Main Findings.

The reports main findings are reported below.

- In a national climate of acute staff shortage of Social Workers, and widespread use of short-term financial incentives to recruitment, Dundee City's decision not to follow the incentive route but to focus attention on making Dundee a more attractive place to work is vindicated.
- The overwhelming response from all the teams involved in the pilot has been positive.
- The quantitative evidence from some of the performance measures used in the Department backs up qualitative evidence from interviews and focus groups held with those involved. For example, a reduction in absence can be tracked in the pilot teams, both by comparing the pilot period with previous team experience, and in comparison with service averages.
- Staff have responded positively to the opportunity, have taken responsibility for themselves, and have improved the quantity and quality of work. Staff reported reduced stress levels – feeling that they are getting greater quality and quantity of work even when working in an environment of high workload and under-staffing.
- The results show that improvements can be made in operational effectiveness and job satisfaction, even when there is limited flexibility. This was the case with care workers, who need to provide cover on a shift basis, in one of the pilots, and with administrative staff who were included in other pilots.
- A key finding, common to all the pilots was the feeling of being trusted. The individual choice and the feeling of "being in control" were positive drivers in

job satisfaction terms. This was true even where the flexibility was not used – for example, one Social Work Assistant, in a team did not take part in the pilot, but appreciated the fact that she had a choice.

- There is evidence of increased ownership and self-management in teams – more decisions being taken at worker level, more team decision making. This is empowering for the worker and also delivers better use of resources at senior and manager levels.
- There is great potential for even more positive progress. More work is needed on process improvement issues. One of the pilots concentrated on reducing bureaucracy in a Childcare Team and their work should be extended to other services.

In summary, the report states that “Dundee has elected to explore and pilot a differentiation strategy, rather than be drawn in to simply increasing service costs. The early indications are that staff involved in the pilots are more fulfilled, better motivated and more effective than previously. This strongly suggests that the strategies examined in the pilots have the potential for roll out throughout the Social Work Department.

Further positive support for the concept of flexible working in the department is provided by the demand from all of the pilot teams to continue working in the way they had established in the pilot, or indeed to widen the scope of working to incorporate elements of other pilots.

It was an underlying principle of all the projects that service users should not experience any form of service detriment as a result of the changes in working patterns. Although further longer-term work is required to collect direct evidence of the impact of the pilots on service users, the fact that more reports have been completed on time, workload backlogs addressed and staff absences reduced means that service users should have been impacted upon positively.

7.2 Future Development

The Social Work Department wishes to build on the success of these pilots and to offer teams the opportunity to develop more flexible working wherever appropriate.

In July, 2003 the Director of Social Work made an application to the Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) for a grant of £5000. This was to assist the Department develop work life balance policies. The application was successful, provided the department match funded the £5000.

The DTI appointed Deloitte Touche MCS as work-life balance consultants to Dundee City Council Social Work Department. Deloitte Touche have produced a project plan which will help the Department achieve it's objectives of improving the recruitment and retention of key staff by becoming an employer of first choice.

It is expected that this project, which will involve the roll out of flexible working and contracted hours working across the Department, will run over the next 9 months and will continue to involve key staff from Personnel and Management Services.

8.0 CONSULTATION

- 8.1 The Chief Executive, the Depute Chief Executives (Support Services and Finance), the Assistant Chief Executive (Management) and Trade Union representatives have been consulted in the preparation of this report.

The Assistant Chief Executive (Management) supports the flexible working pilots in Social Work and in particular the evaluation which demonstrates that flexible working arrangements, managed appropriately, can have a positive impact on staff morale whilst also increase the quality and quantity of work.

The Assistant Chief Executive (Management) will continue to assist the Director of Social Work develop policies and procedures in conjunction with the consultants to extend flexible working throughout the Social Work department.

The Director of Social Work will continue to consult with the trade unions on a regular basis.

In addition the Assistant Chief Executive (Management) is carrying out a Best Value review on Homeworking.

9.0 BACKGROUND PAPERS

No background papers, as defined by Section 50D of the Local Government (Scotland) Act 1973 (other than any containing confidential or exempt information), were relied on to any material extent in preparing the above report.

9.0 SIGNATURE

Alan G Baird
Director of Social Work

Date: 5 December 2003

Appendix 1

Summary

A research project into the recruitment and retention of Qualified Social Workers indicated that a key driver was the attractiveness of the Department as a place of work - both to attract new starts and to keep existing staff. To investigate options further, pilots of a number of initiatives were designed to test different flexible working practices.

The purpose of the pilot teams was to investigate ways to:

- Deliver a better service to service users and the public
- Deliver improved resource utilisation to the department/council as well as to ...
- Deliver a better working environment for all staff

Pilot teams were given maximum flexibility to design their own systems and to test out options unhindered by Departmental or Council procedures and rules. Four teams investigated flexible working based on working from home; four teams investigated flexible working based on variable hours; and one team looked at process improvement.

This evaluation is based on six months' operation of these pilot teams, and was conducted by Scott-Gardner Consulting. The evaluation is based on a combination of summary reports by the team leaders; one-to-one and small group interviews with staff involved directly in the pilots, and other key managers and staff; and quantitative data on customer performance. Quantitative data was provided by participating social work teams and includes performance to key customer groups (identified as being reports submitted to courts, Reporters and Children's Panels); operational efficiency (length of time to complete reports) and staff absence data.

The overall assessment is that, in a national climate of acute shortage of Social Workers and widespread use of short term financial incentives to recruitment, Dundee City's decision not to follow the incentive route but to focus attention on making Dundee a better working environment and therefore a more attractive place to work is vindicated. The overwhelming response from all of the pilot teams has been positive. The quantitative evidence that can be extracted backs up qualitative evidence from the interviews and focus groups from some of the measures of performance in the Department.

In terms of productivity, the measured performance of the pilot teams are no worse than the rest of the service, and in many cases show improvement - both over their previous performance levels and those for the service as a whole. Fears of abuse of the system have, to date, been unfounded. Indeed, the evidence is that staff have responded positively to the opportunity, have taken responsibility for themselves, and have improved the quantity and quality of work. Interviews identified a number of stories of improved individual and team performance - reports completed on time, to a higher standard with less corrections needed by Seniors, more cases closed and workload backlogs being eliminated.

At the same time it is clear that flexible working improves the effectiveness and satisfaction of all staff. The results of the pilots also show that improvements can be made in operational effectiveness and job satisfaction, even where there is limited flexibility - as was the case with care workers who need to provide cover on a shift basis in one of the pilot project and admin staff who were included in other pilots.

There is a strong indication that flexible working does provide the greater employee satisfaction and improvement to the working environment that was one key objective, whilst also having a positive impact on customer service and resource utilisation. Staff reported reduced stress levels – feeling that they are getting greater quality and quantity of work even when working in the same environment of high workload and under-staffing.

A reduction in absence can be tracked in the pilot teams, both by comparing the pilot period with previous team experience, and in comparison with the service averages. However, and even more significantly, situations occurred where the flexibility allowed the management of staffing crises – in coping with shortage of resource with less impact on team members or in allowing team members to contribute from home when suffering with minor illness or emergency childcare or other responsibilities. Flexible working does not replace a lack of resources but it does help individuals and teams to cope with the added pressure

A key finding, common to all pilots, was the feeling of being trusted or being treated as “grown ups”. This was associated with the removal of feelings of guilt from not having to be in the office “on-time” and not having to ask permission to work in a ‘protected’ environment. These were constant comments in all pilot teams. The individual choice and the feeling of being “in control” were positive drivers in job satisfaction terms, even where the flexibility was not used – for example, one Social Work Assistant did not take part in the pilot, but appreciated the fact that she had the choice.

The voluntary nature of the flexible working was important, as was the ability to tailor the flexibility to specific team and service user needs. One size will not fit all and any coercion into home working/hot-desking is likely to cause resistance where there is currently support. Some degree of mixing of the models of flexible hours/home working/process improvement would be appropriate in most cases rather than a single model.

There is evidence of increased ownership and self-management in teams – more decisions being taken at worker level, more team decision making. This is empowering for the worker and also delivers better resource utilisation at senior and manager level.

IT and communications technology facilitate flexibility, though more training and resources are needed to enable maximum benefits to be realised. It has become clear that laptops are not the only answer, as not all ‘home work’ activities need interactive system access. GPRS access may be an answer to some of the technology issues in terms of access, data security and cost. Mobile phones have been shown to be a “must”, and team based admin support is essential to the effective operation of flexible systems to enable effective communications and work continuity.

Training is required to help managers move from measurement of input to measurement of output and outcome. It is recommended that future training should build on the Behaviour Model developed by the expanded Management Team and endorsed by the department’s first line managers.

There is great potential for the continuation of positive progress and much more work is needed on process improvement issues. Paperwork and bureaucracy are major inhibitors to job satisfaction and often cited as reasons for leaving. Pilot 3 concentrated on forms used in Child Care and their work should arguably be extended to other services, where the opportunity for significant referral and reporting systems simplification undoubtedly exists. There is also an opportunity to investigate process improvements highlighted in the initial report on Recruitment and Retention such as the ‘taxi service’ which would enable qualified workers to concentrate where they added most value, rather than being relatively highly paid drivers.

Whilst local recruitment issues are not resolved, and the current national scene suggests they will not be resolved for some years, some form of flexible working arrangement is now seen as an expectation by Dundee's staff. The majority of local authorities in Scotland now offer financial inducements, yet there is no evidence of their effectiveness in either recruiting or retaining staff. The effect of financial inducements is simply to drive up service costs nationally, yet there is no evidence that authorities involved in the "bidding market" are focussing on service quality, staff welfare or the work-life balance.

To summarise, Dundee has elected to explore and pilot a differentiation strategy, rather than to be drawn in to simply increasing service costs. The early indications are that staff involved in the pilots are more fulfilled, better motivated and more effective than previously. This strongly suggests that the strategies examined in the pilots have the potential for a roll out throughout the Social Work Department.