Our yearly average annual vacancy rate at the time of writing (projected back 12 months) was 8%, compared with the DfE indicator for the national average of 15%.

In our experience when a social worker is supported through the ASYE and beyond they not only become confident and resilient professionals but want to continue working for us. Ensuring continuity of social worker is fundamental to the outcomes for children – so we give this a high priority and retention supports this. We believe a strength of our ASYE scheme is that it operates as a partnership between Plymouth City Council and Bournemouth University (BU).

The partnership includes acquiring the qualification, The Graduate Certificate in Professional Practice (GCPP). This rewards high standards of learning and aids retention through a continuous vision for development with the authority. In Plymouth Children, Young People and Families Service, candidates can move through grade G, NQSW, grade H qualified worker and grade I, Advanced Practitioner, all within the social worker role, linked to robust on-going CPD. Whilst there are some limitations to becoming an Advanced Practitioner, at a time when many are using this role in a quasi-managerial way, we have retained the Reform Board’s vision for the role.

In creating and developing the ASYE scheme, Plymouth Childrens Services wanted to achieve a number of things. Our vision as a Council is to be pioneering, growing a confident workforce, safer communities and caring services. To achieve this we need to invest in our workforce and newly qualified workers are a key part of this. We encourage individuals from an early stage to identify with our aims and see themselves as part of a stable workforce, rewarded with excellent CPD and career progression and competitive salary rates.

What we wanted to achieve

Our principal aim is to provide excellent safeguarding and support services to vulnerable children and their families within the City. Key objectives therefore are the recruitment of the best quality social workers and retention of those skilled workers who are contributing to our aims and who share our vision.

What we did

Recruitment and retention is managed by a dedicated social work service manager who also has oversight of practice education, including student placements, career progression and the ASYE scheme. The post sits within a
management team that includes the Assistant Director, who personally ensures that recruitment and retention remain at the forefront of thinking and planning. The remit also includes conducting all social worker exit interviews, so that the push and pull factors can be analysed and the learning swiftly incorporated. The devolution of traditional HR and Recruitment functions in this way is central to being able to respond flexibly and innovatively.

Plymouth City Council regards working in Children’s Services as a journey. We interview for student placements, selecting the right candidates for the best fit, enabling us to begin to identify future qualified workers. The majority of our students go on to be successful in interview for posts at ASYE grade and we also have provision to allow less experienced practitioners to start with us as family support workers before moving into the ASYE. This allows them to maximise their chances of achieving the high standards of the new Knowledge and Skills framework expected by the Government. Upon completion of the ASYE year they move to Grade H, qualified worker, and can go on to work towards Grade I, Advanced Practitioner. At all stages there are opportunities for sponsored qualifications as well as a rolling programme of high quality training, commissioned annually to meet practitioner needs. We also encourage workers to undertake Practice Educator qualifications so that they can support the next generation of students and newly qualified workers, in this way re-investing their talent. The Bournemouth University lecturer practitioner arrangements allow us to maximise value for money and together with our reciprocal arrangements with partner local authorities, we are able to be confident that our assessment against the Knowledge and Skills framework is robust and fair.

What we achieved

Plymouth’s ASYE process met the national requirements set out for ASYE including ring fenced time for learning and development activities, protected caseloads and supervision”. “Supervision was recognised by both managers and NQSWs as being the cornerstone of good practice, and the majority of NQSWs rated the support they received as good or excellent”. “The taught programme was effective in building on the NQSWs level of knowledge post-qualification, and NQSWs valued the opportunity it gave to consolidate their knowledge.

M – due to complete this year’s ASYE (2015) noted: “I think most newly qualified workers have some anxieties about starting their first post in Social Work – the ASYE programme at Plymouth has been invaluable for me during this time. Being a frontline children’s social worker has been a challenging and rewarding experience; I have been impressed at the high level of training and development opportunities the ASYE has provided, helping to develop my skills, knowledge and confidence which are required to meet the needs of the children and provide families with the best possible service.”

What we learnt

We realised early on that to be effective, the NQSW probation period needed to be increased from six months to one year, in line with the ASYE. We recognised that some staff wish to move about but not necessarily change councils. We created the Staff Moves Protocol that enables workers to express interest in moving to another service area.

We learned that it is essential to have dedicated and qualified Level 2 practice educators as the sole markers of final portfolios and final knowledge and skills tests. This ensures consistency in assessment by people whose skills in assessing others are high. At 30.10.15 we had undertaken nine final knowledge and skills assessments through direct audit of practice by assessors independent of the line manager relationship. Line Managers assess probation, and offer evidence to support practice educators assessing Professional Capability. The Service Manager for Professional Development quality assures every practice educator final award – important when you remember that a social worker’s job depends upon their passing their probation and ASYE.

Offering significant time from The Professional Development Team to support Team Managers in their roles with NQSW’s has emerged as important. A quality assurance process including monitoring of case-loads and
supervision ensures a fair experience wherever the NQSW is working. We try and get to know our people and motivate them to thrive in a challenging employment context. We use an emotionally intelligent supervision model that starts with the statement “Yes I / we/ you can”. If an NQSW is not where we need them to be yet, we ask ourselves, what can we do or offer to enable them to get there? We don’t relax the standard. Our children and families need the best worker we can develop. So we try to work together as a whole service to respond to any challenges. That may sound rhetorical, but our greatest learning has been that you cannot just place an NQSW in front line social work and not keep a continuous eye on it – and that needs strategic leadership, excellent assessors/mentors and flexible, effective partnerships.

The dual role Level 2 Practice Educators have as Lecturer Practitioners with Bournemouth University (BU) is fundamental to the Council’s ASYE scheme. It enables partner authorities to mark each other’s interim assignments, a BU component of the integral ASYE qualification, the Graduate Certificate in Professional Practice (GCPP).
Skills for Care Recommends

Skills for Care has helped to develop the ASYE process and provides some practical resources and funding potential for employers involved in providing adult social care.

Assessed and Supported Year in Employment

Our special website section provides an overview of the process and includes related examples and guidance to demonstrate how other employers are delivering this process.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/ASYECF

Continuing to develop Social Workers

Skills for Care has produced core principles, resources and guidance to support employers to develop the social work workforce.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/swcpd

Action Learning for Social Workers

Action Learning facilitation as a useful support package for NQSWs undertaking the ASYE. Our resources include a number of videos which provide the views of, managers and facilitators.

www.skillsforcare.org.uk/actionlearning