

# Business Support Overview and Scrutiny Committee

BRIEFING NOTE – No. 04/2024-2025

Date: July 2024

Briefing paper to: All Members of the Business Support Overview & Scrutiny Committee

## Impact of reduction in Locum Staff on performance in Legal Services

1. Following the request at the end of Q1 2023 for all services to reduce any overspend by at least half by the end of Q2 the difficult decision was made in Legal to reduce Locum staff numbers to try to address the issue. With Legal's budget's being circa 80% staffing costs, this was the only option to realistically address the overspend.
2. In the intervening period Legal services had completed a root and branch review of their structure and taken part in the pilot phase of the MedPay review. This had already started to bear fruit and the first round of recruitment in 2023 had resulted in 11 new permanent staff being recruited and they joined the establishment between December 2023 and March 2024. Whilst this was very much a good news story many of these are at the start of their careers and will take time to fully develop. A second round of recruitment saw a further 2 members of staff being recruited both into the People team.
3. At the end of September 2023, we gave notice to 5 locum lawyers, 3 in childcare (who were supernumerary to the number of established posts) 1 property lawyer and 1 litigation lawyer. CMT were informed of this at the time and asked to prioritise the work they were asking legal services to deliver to assist us in minimising any disruption. The loss of those five individuals resulted in a saving of circa £155,000 to April at the point that they left the organisation and further savings have also been projected for the remainder of the financial year.
4. Notwithstanding the support of the majority of client teams the reduction in staffing had a knock-on effect, the Place team were already operating at below full staffing levels whilst the People team had had to recruit supernumerary posts to support the expansion in children's services, both teams have had to absorb the work formerly carried out by those individuals. The teams were unfortunately taking longer to deal with routine matters and are having to prioritise the allocation of resource to the most urgent and important pieces of work.
5. One of the most noticeable changes we had to implement was that lawyers would no longer routinely attend tracker meetings with Children's Services colleagues, whilst no one doubted the value of these meetings devoting roughly 20 hours of lawyer time per week to them was simply no longer feasible. In order to mitigate the impact of this we agreed with colleagues in children's that we would provide written updates on cases and if there were any concerns, we invited them to contact senior members of the legal team. We also put in place a safety net by approaching several external legal firms who would be able to take on cases if we were unable to do so ensuring that any urgent child protection matters

would not be delayed because of a lack of capacity within the service. This does of course come at a cost so use of this is closely monitored to ensure that we are not replacing the cost of locum staff with the costs of utilising external providers.

6. The other impact of taking this course of action is that a number of our locum staff have begun looking for other positions as the financial situation of the authority caused a level of uncertainty for them. This resulted in one resignation at the time, and we anticipated it may lead to more. We took the decision that we would not be replacing locums who leave with other locum staff as a matter of routine, although if the situation demands it was kept under review.
7. The team generally try to generate income by providing legal services to the Council's LATCOs, academy schools and other related bodies, while this will continue where possible we are not able to accept the same level of instructions as previously due to the reduction in resource. It is envisaged that this will revert to the previous position as roles are filled.
8. The current position of the team is a much brighter one. From a position of circa 80% locum staff at its height the recruitment carried out has seen that figure drop to just 23% of staff being locums, we have also recovered resource levels in all teams apart from the contracts team with the result that we are now able to attend the Children's Services Tracker meetings once again. We have also taken the opportunity to streamline some of our processes to introduce greater efficiency where we are able to do so.

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