

# Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

10 March 2021

<b>Report title</b>	Children's Social Work Health Check 2020	
<b>Cabinet member with lead responsibility</b>	Councillor John Reynolds Children and Young People	
<b>Wards affected</b>	All	
<b>Accountable director</b>	Emma Bennett, Director of Children's and Adult Services	
<b>Originating service</b>	Children's Social Care	
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<b>Report to be/has been considered by</b>	Children and Young People Leadership Team Strategic Executive Board	4 February 2021  25 February 2021

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## Recommendation(s) for action or decision:

The Scrutiny Panel is recommended to:

1. Note and comment on the findings of the Children's Social Work Health Check for 2020.
2. Provide comment and challenge on proposed actions to improve the health of the social work workforce.

## **Purpose**

- 1.1 The City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) carries out a survey each year to check the “health” of its social workers. This is part of our ongoing self-assessment in order to inform our improvement journey. This report presents an overview of the findings of this year’s survey.

## **2.0 Background**

- 2.1 Good social work practice carried out by a “healthy”, motivated workforce can lead to improved outcomes for people and families as well as reduced demand and costs. This year a range of work has been undertaken to ensure that statutory social work services for children is delivered at the right level, is effective, takes place in a timely way and supports families to make sustainable change. The success of this work is evidenced in the reduction of demand across the Children and Young people service. Children in need numbers have reduced from 1,037 in 2017-2018 to 821 in 2018-2019, the number of children subject to a Child Protection plan have reduced from 379 to 330 and the number of children in care has reduced from 648 to 624.
- 2.2 The national Social Work Task Force final report, published in November 2009, recommended a framework to assist employers and practitioners to assess the “health” of their organisation on a range of issues affecting the workload of social workers and to support the implementation of a set of national Standards for Employers and Supervision Framework.
- 2.3 The framework identifies five key topics to support organisations to undertake a self-assessment to identify current strengths and areas that require improvement. The five key topics are:
  - Effective workload management
  - Pro-active workflow management
  - Having the right tools for the job
  - A healthy workplace
  - Effective service delivery
- 2.4 The key findings are presented from each of the five topics and concludes with areas identified for improvement and to improve social work practice in the city.

## **3.0 Overview and key findings**

- 3.1 The Health Check was circulated to 210 social workers via an online survey between 2 November 2020 and 14 December 2020. A total of 115 responses (55%) were received, although not every respondent answered every survey question. The response rate in 2019 was 60%.
- 3.2 The findings of this year’s Children’s Social Work Health Check is mostly positive, with progress evident in a number of key areas.

- 3.3 Average workloads have slightly increased from 20 in 2019 to 21.6 in 2020. However, this is still really positive and remains below the average in 2017 and 2018.
- 3.4 80% of full-time workers and 90% of part time workers feel that their workload is manageable; this is really positive and an improvement from 2019 when 59% of full-time workers and 5% of part time workers felt this way. However, while the majority of Independent Reviewing officers said their workload was manageable, more respondents from this area said that their workload is unmanageable this year.
- 3.5 In 2020, full time workers said that they worked 9.6 hours over their contracted hours, slightly more than in 2019 when they worked 8.8 hours over. Part time workers said that they worked fewer hours over in 2020, 4.4 hours over compared to 11.7 hours over in 2019. Social work is a notoriously demanding profession which often requires workers to work over their contracted hours. However, managers and workers should be discussing this within supervision to ensure that social workers are taking this time back through additional time off.
- 3.6 More social workers are receiving monthly supervision (77% in 2020 compared to 52% in 2019), are satisfied with the quality of their supervision (82% in 2020 compared to 73% in 2019) and are satisfied with the support they receive from their line manager (84% in 2020 compared to 71% in 2019).
- 3.7 More social workers than ever are regularly accessing research articles. 79% of social workers said that they are accessing research articles, compared to 66% in 2019, 63% in 2018 and 38% in 2017. This is a real positive and will help ensure that children and families in Wolverhampton receive a good quality social work service.
- 3.8 More social workers this year think that CWC is a learning organisation with a positive learning culture and 76% said that they are satisfied with the learning opportunities available, which is an improvement from 2019 when this was 64%.
- 3.9 Most social workers (73%) plan to continue to work for CWC over the next 12 months and 79% feel proud to work for Wolverhampton.
- 3.10 There has been a slight increase in social workers who regularly feel stressed (50% in 2020 compared to 45% in 2019), however fewer social workers have taken sick leave due to work stress. Also, as more social workers feel that their workload is manageable this stress is likely caused by the Covid-19 pandemic and the requirement for workers to balance personal responsibilities and working from home.
- 3.11 Fewer social workers have had an observation of practice in 2020, 55% compared to 59% in 2019. While practice weeks have continued, remote working has had an impact on the ability for observations to take place as regularly as usual.

- 3.12 Social workers reported that they spent less time working directly with children, young people and families this year which, again, is understandable due to restrictions in place due to Covid-19. As restrictions are reduced, there should be an increase in the hours that social workers spend working directly with children, young people and families.
- 3.13 Just under 8% of social workers said that they felt that they had been treated unfairly in the previous 12 months on the grounds of protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010.

#### **4.0 Recommendations and actions**

4.1 An action plan has been completed as a result of this survey to address the key areas of improvement. This will be overseen by the Social Work Development Board. The findings will also inform the workforce development plans for the coming year and will be shared with teams.

4.2 Actions include:

- To help reduce the time social workers spend completing admin tasks, teams will have training to support workers around expectations in regard to documenting work and how to use different tools available in Eclipse (such as embedding photos, voice recordings, etc.). There will also continue to be robust workload discussions in supervision.
- Training around positive, proportionate and concise recording will take place in 2021 which should help to increase the amount of time social workers have to work with children, young people, and families and improve the manageability of workloads.
- In order to help improve communication between managers and staff, including ensuring that workers feel that they are consulted and involved in proposed changes, the Engagement Plan is being revisited in light of restrictions imposed through Covid-19 in order to establish how leaders can reengage with the workforce. Regular social work briefings will also continue as will practice weeks, although these will need to remain virtual until it is safe to do this in person.
- Champions are still not being utilised as expected and this role is continuing to be developed. An Advanced Practitioner for Restorative Practice has been appointed and the Champion role in other areas will continued to be developed.
- Stress is higher this year, which is understandable considering how everyone has been impacted by Covid-19. The Leadership Team is committed to ensuring the wellbeing of the workforce as championed by the Chief Executive.
- Managers will ensure that monthly supervision as well as regular team meetings allow people to talk about their stress levels and seek out support in reducing stress, this includes managing time when a social worker has been required to work over their hours.
- Managers will continue to offer flexibility where needed to help people balance their work and home lives to reduce stress levels.
- The nature of social work means that there is sometimes a requirement to work out of hours or longer hours than usual. When this occurs, managers will ensure that social

workers have the opportunity to take that time back by leaving work early or coming in late another day or, if more time has been accumulated, taking an extra day off.

- Stress risk assessments are offered when needed.
- Some social workers and independent reviewing officers still feel that their workload is unmanageable. Managers are working to fill all vacant post and sickness cover and almost all have been recruited to. If any of these posts continue to be vacant, agency staff will be used until permanent staff can be appointed.
- Every supervision should include a robust discussion around workload and workload management to ensure social workers can be supported before their workload becomes unmanageable.
- Just under 8% of workers felt that there had been times in the past 12 months when they have been unfairly treated on the grounds of protected characteristics under the Equality Act 2010. This year, the Council will be commissioning training to support managers to facilitate good conversations around Equalities, Diversity and Inclusion and creating safe spaces within supervisions or individual discussions.
- Equalities champions will be identified throughout Children's services in order to help embed good practice both in working with children, young people, and families, but also within teams.
- Anti-racist practice training was commissioned from the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in January 2021. Actions from this included:
  - Unconscious Bias training for all employees, not just managers, will be offered.
  - Managers are working to ensure that all interviews include questions around Equalities
- Equality and Diversity is a standard agenda item at all team meetings and has been a feature of social work briefings this year.
- The council is committed to upholding the highest standards of conduct and ethics and has launched a safe space for social workers to report any serious concerns about any aspect of the Council's work. The Council have appointed SeeHearSpeakUp to provide an external and independent confidential reporting service for all colleagues.
- It is important for Panel to note that as Covid restrictions start to relax, the workforce will start to move back toward working in a more "normal" way, including office working at least part of the week. The Council want to assure Panel that the health and wellbeing of the workforce will continue to be a priority and support will continue to be in place to help workers manage workloads, stress and different working and personal responsibilities.

## **5.0 Update from 2019 survey**

When the 2019 survey was presented, Panel requested an update on what the Council did to ensure action was taken around areas that needed to be improved. The main areas for improvement included:

- A number of social workers said that their workload was unmanageable and that they were not having regular supervision. Both of these areas have significantly improved in the 2020 survey. Actions taken by Children's Social Care to improve these areas included:

- A workload dashboard was developed and reviewed regularly and managers made sure to discuss workloads during regular supervision.
- The frequency and quality of supervision was monitored through audit several times throughout the year and feedback was given to workers and managers.
- In 2019, team champions were not being utilised to help promote the expertise in teams. Although work was done to promote champions, this remains an area for improvement from the 2020 survey.
- In 2019, social workers said that they spent too much time completing paperwork and admin tasks. This continues to be an area for improvement. Work that started after the 2019 survey will continue into 2021-2022.
  - Eclipse was expected to reduce this but was only launched in September 2020, just one month prior to this survey being circulated. It is thought that once practitioners get used to the new system this will improve.
  - Workers will have support to fully access the tools available in Eclipse which are intended to save time and reduce duplication.
  - Further training will be provided to support social workers to capture the child's story/journey in a concise and proportionate way which evidences defensible decision making.
- In 2019, some respondents felt that communication from management could be improved and 15% felt that they were not consulted or involved in proposed changes. These areas continue to be an area for development in the 2020 survey so steps taken to improve this will continue.
  - Regular social work briefings were held and continued throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. These became virtual instead of face-to-face which increased capacity for attendance.
  - Prior to the Covid restrictions, senior managers, including the Director of Children's Services, held regular "coffee and conversation" mornings and regularly attended team meetings to engage with staff in different teams.
  - Practice weeks, where senior managers spent time in teams auditing and attending visits and meetings with workers continued but became virtual after the Covid-19 restrictions came into place.
  - The CYP Round-Up, which is an opportunity for recognition of excellent practice as well as to share information, continued to be circulated regularly.
  - The engagement plan is being revisited in light of restrictions imposed through Covid-19 in order to establish how leaders can reengage with the workforce.

## **6.0 Financial implications**

6.0 There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report.

6.1 Any costs arising from actions in the workplan and priorities will be funded from within the Children's Services overall budget of £52.2 million.  
[JB/17022021/C]

## **7.0 Legal implications**

7.1 There are no legal implications as a result of this report.  
[SB/14022021/V]

## **8.0 Equalities implications**

8.1 Social Work is a diverse profession and the makeup of the social work teams in Wolverhampton is largely representative of the local community. The diversity of the children that are supported by Child in Need / Child Protection and Children and Young People in Care teams are also largely representative of the diversity of the city as a whole.

## **9.0 Climate change and environmental implications**

9.1 There are no climate or environmental implications.

## **10.0 Health and Wellbeing Implications**

10.1 The health and wellbeing of our workforce is a priority for the City of Wolverhampton Council. The purpose of this health check is to get feedback from social workers about how they feel about working for Wolverhampton and how we can work to make improvements where necessary to ensure that the workforce feels that they are happy and supported at work.

## **11.0 Human resources implications**

11.1 Senior managers are working to fill vacancies as soon as they are able, even if with agency workers, in order to help keep workloads manageable for social worker.

## **12.0 Corporate landlord implications**

12.1 There are no corporate landlord implications.

## **13.0 Covid Implications**

13.1 Covid has had an impact on the overall health of the workforce, as evidenced by stress levels reported. Senior managers are aware of the impact this has on workers and continue to support the wellbeing of the workforce in balancing their work and personal circumstances.

## **14.0 Appendices**

## 14.1 Appendix 1: 2020 Social Work Health Check Dashboard