

Adult and Safer City Scrutiny Panel

16 March 2021

Report title	Adults Social Work Health Check 2020	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Linda Leach Cabinet Member for Adults	
Wards affected	All	
Accountable director	Emma Bennett, Director of Adult and Children's Services	
Originating service	Adult Social Care	
Accountable employees	Jenny Rogers	Principal Social Worker
	Tel	01902 555704
	Email	Jennifer.rogers@wolverhampton.gov.uk
	Courtney Abbott	Advanced Practitioner for Quality and Improvement
	Email	Courtney.abbott@wolverhampton.gov.uk
Report has been considered by	Adult Leadership Team	25 February 2021
	SEB	25 February 2021

Recommendation for action:

The Scrutiny Panel is recommended to:

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

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 The City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) undertakes a full Social Work Health Check every year to assess the “health” of its social workers and forms part of adult services’ ongoing self-assessment. This report presents an overview of the findings of this year’s survey and concludes with actions to address areas for improvement.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Health checks were a key recommendation of the National Social Work Task Force which was set up by government in the wake of the death of Baby P. The National Social Work Task Force 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. It is recognised that good practice carried out by a “healthy” and motivated workforce can lead to improved outcomes for people and families as well as reduced demand and costs.
- 2.2 City of Wolverhampton Council carry out a Social Work Health Check every year. This year’s Health Check was delayed due to Covid and as such was carried out later than usual.
- 2.3 It is important to note that the country entered the second national lockdown at the time that this Health Check survey was circulated. It is recognised that this year’s responses may have been affected by the unique circumstances experienced this year due to the pandemic. This has included increases in demand and staffing issues in some teams, as well as more general feelings of fatigue, isolation and the ongoing challenges associated with working from home and balancing other commitments.
- 2.4 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
- 2.5 The Health Check was circulated via an online survey between 2 November and 14 December 2020. All registered social workers including student social workers, were invited to complete the online survey.
- 2.6 The survey was distributed to 126 adult social workers. There were 65 respondents to the survey (52%). This is lower than last year’s response rate of 65%, which is likely due to the impact Covid has had this year and the challenges teams have experienced and continue to face.

3.0 Overview and key findings

- 3.1 The findings indicate that average social worker workloads (full and part time) have decreased slightly from 22.4 in 2019 to 21.7 in 2020. It is important to acknowledge however that it is not just the number of people social workers are supporting that is important when considering workloads, but also the complexity of each situation. This is always monitored during supervision and the skills / experience of workers taken into account. The information for this report is based solely on the responses provided by those social workers who completed the survey. However, workload numbers are regularly monitored for all social workers and across all social work teams.
- 3.2 There has been an increase this year in the number of social workers who said that their workloads are not manageable and there has also been a rise in the number saying they are “just about” managing. Covid-19 and the challenges presented during the pandemic is likely to have had an impact on this finding this year.
- 3.3 The survey reveals that full time workers are working an average of 4.2 hours over their contracted hours, compared to 2.4 hours in 2019. However, part time workers are working an average of 2.4 hours over their contracted hours, a significant decrease from 2019 when they worked 10.3 hours over.
- 3.4 Stress levels are slightly higher this year with just over 50% of respondents saying they always or often felt stressed compared to 45% in 2019. Again, the pandemic and the changes and challenges this has posed for frontline social work teams will likely have had an impact on stress levels. A wellbeing survey carried out across Adult Services in July 2020 identified that over half of people felt that there were factors affecting their wellbeing, but 90% said they were getting the help they needed particularly from their team and managers. Supporting wellbeing has been a continual focus throughout the pandemic.
- 3.5 The number of respondents who receive monthly supervision has significantly increased to almost 74% in 2020, from 40.6% in 2019 and 51.3% in 2018. However, those satisfied with the quality of their supervision has decreased from 74.3% in 2019 to 63% in 2020. 74% were happy with the support they receive from their manager with complex pieces of work including risk and / or safeguarding and far more this year said they have sufficient opportunity to reflect on decision making and intervention. It is important to note that supervisions have been completed virtually since the start of the pandemic and this alongside difficulties with childcare, home-schooling, and demands on teams during Covid may have contributed to the decrease in quality of supervisions.
- 3.6 The number of respondents who have received an observation of practice this year has decreased slightly from 24.6% to 23.1%, but senior managers all spend time in Three Conversations© teams observing reflective discussions (huddles) virtually on a regular basis. Observations of practice have been more difficult to carry out due to working virtually but the new supervision policy launched in February 2021 sets out an

expectation on numbers of observation social workers should have a year to help increase numbers.

- 3.7 More social workers have accessed articles and research this year, 80% compared to 70.7% in 2019.
- 3.8 There has been a decrease in the average number of hours social workers are spending working directly with people and families, from 14.2 in 2019 to 11.8 in 2020. However, this is still higher than 2016, 2017, and 2018 when this was 10 hours. It is more difficult to measure this year as the vast majority of social worker's time is spent carrying out work virtually or via other means as face to face visits with people is only taking place if essential to minimise risk of infection.
- 3.9 The majority of social workers (64.6%) said that they spend more than 50% of their time inputting data into systems or completing admin tasks. This is slightly lower than in 2019 when this was 69%.
- 3.10 Communication in the organisation continues to be a key strength. The number who feel that communication between frontline staff and management is effective and appropriate has increased again this year, from 77.6% in 2019 to 84.6% in 2020. More people also knew who the senior managers were and could recognise them. 93.8% of respondents said that team meetings take place monthly, which is similar to last year. Just over 90% said they feel able to contribute to the agenda.
- 3.11 Most respondents, almost 74% compared to 57% in 2019), felt that council is a learning organisation which has a positive learning culture and the majority were satisfied with the learning opportunities available. The majority of social workers reported that their skills are being used effectively in their current role (an increase from 68.8% in 2019 to 78.4% in 2020).
- 3.12 There continues to be a strong sense of pride about working for CWC and more social workers plan to continue working for Wolverhampton for the next 12 months (89.2%) than last year (70.7%).
- 3.13 The things that made respondents feel positive this year included:
- Opportunities for further learning and training.
 - Supportive colleagues and managers.
 - Flexible working arrangements in the current circumstances.
 - "Response to Covid-19 pandemic".
 - "Good quality briefings and conferences, especially the joint social work briefing this year".
- 3.14 12.3% of respondents 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. The findings will also inform the workforce development plans for the coming year.
- 4.2 The findings and actions will be shared with teams as well as being discussed at the next social work briefing in December 2019.
- 4.3 The Health Check action plan will be reviewed quarterly at the Social Work Development Board. Some key actions are noted below.
- 4.4 To address workload manageability and feelings of stress action is being taken to ensure teams experiencing increased demand and / or staffing issues during Covid have access to the resources they need in the short term. A longer-term review of the whole service is planned. Stress risk assessments will be carried out where needed to ensure workers receive the support they need and support for wellbeing will continue. The supervision policy has been revised and relaunched in February 2021. The updated policy is clear about what managers need to consider within supervision which includes robust discussions about workload manageability. Audits of supervisions will also take place regularly to measure quality and frequency of supervisions. This should help improve the quality of supervision and ensure workers feel supported and less stressed.
- 4.5 The implementation of Eclipse later in 2021 should help streamline processes and reduce the amount of time that social workers spend completing forms and administrative tasks.
- 4.6 Some respondents said that they are struggling to work from home and feel isolated by not being with their colleagues and having that face to face support. Heads of Service are currently looking at access to hubs/office spaces to help alleviate this extra pressure where this may be appropriate. There has been a continued focus on wellbeing throughout the pandemic with specific sessions at the workforce and social work briefings in July and September including an “at your desk yoga” session.
- 4.7 Monthly newsletters sent out by the Director includes resources and training to support wellbeing and teams are encouraged to have regular check ins and catch ups. A wellbeing survey was carried out in 2020 across the whole of Adult Services and this identified that access to equipment and aids to better work from home were the main issue teams were experiencing at that time. As a result, they were supported to access the support they needed. Currently there is more of a focus on emotional wellbeing and ensuring teams have the resources they need in the short and long term. There will continue to be a focus on wellbeing this coming year with access to training to support social workers in terms of secondary trauma and rebuilding resilience in the aftermath of Covid.
- 4.8 Ensuring people feel fairly treated is extremely important to the Council and to adult services. To address the issues raised in this year’s survey:

- 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.
- The council is committed to upholding the highest standards of conduct and ethics and has launched a safe space for workers to report any serious concerns about any aspect of the Council's work. This will be actively promoted within teams in adult services.
- Equalities champions will be identified within each social work team this coming year
- Anti-racist practice training was commissioned from the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) in January 2021 and actions identified from this includes ensuring access to Unconscious bias training for all staff and ensuring there are equality questions asked as part of all social work interviews.
- Specific training for social workers on anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive practice will be commissioned in this coming year.
- Equality and Diversity is a standard agenda item at all team meetings and in supervisions

5.0 Update from 2019 survey

- 5.1 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 are noted below.
- 5.2 In 2019, less than half of the respondents said that they had monthly supervision, but the majority were satisfied with the support they received from their line manager. The majority of respondents were however satisfied with the quality of supervision they received. There were questions raised about how frequent supervision needed to be and as a result consultation work was carried out with social workers in December 2019. They said that they wanted this to be every 4-6 weeks instead of monthly, however it should depend on the worker and their individual needs and circumstances and the frequency should be agreed in supervision and reviewed. This is now part of the new supervision policy which was briefed out in February 2021.
- 5.3 In the 2019 Health Check, almost 30% of respondents said that they planned to leave CWC for a new job or career. Action taken to address some of the issues raised around this included:
- Ongoing discussions with social workers to address issues and challenges they faced, specifically around Three Conversations©.
 - Coaching conversation workshops were held for frontline managers to support teams with culture change.
 - There was recognition in the 2019 Health Check report that the embedding of Three Conversations© was a major culture change and a challenge for teams with the faster pace and removal of processes, such as allocation, which traditionally causes waiting lists and delays. Studies show that change in the workplace can be difficult. For this reason, all teams that have been testing out the new approach have received support and coaching. In 2020 further support was provided by re-commissioning Partners4Change who owns the Three Conversations© approach. Some teams have

found this new way of working more difficult to continue to embed this year because of staffing issues exacerbated by Covid. This is currently being addressed.

- Senior managers have been committed to improving communication and have been using the monthly ASC update(newsletter) and twice-yearly social work briefings
- Increased visibility and presence of senior leadership team by Heads of Service being present at weekly team “huddles”
- In this year’s Health Check (2020) there are much fewer numbers of social workers wanting to leave the council in the next 12 months

5.4 Some social workers in 2019 said that they always or often felt stressed and some said that this was because of too many administration tasks, lengthy forms, and processes.

- The further roll out of Three Conversations© aimed to allow social workers to spend more time with people and families and reduce bureaucracy. However, the changes in working due to Covid will have impacted on this.
- It was hoped the introduction of Eclipse would also help, but the roll out has been delayed
- Stress levels have not reduced in this year’s health Check (2020), but it is thought that the main sources for this additional stress could relate to Covid and the challenges this brings.

5.5 In 2019 social workers said that they wanted more face-to-face training and shadowing opportunities.

- Social workers have continued to access training and development opportunities via webinars, teams etc. The Social Work briefing was held virtually in July 2020 and the joint Social Work conference which had been planned for March 2020 took place in October 2020 and was a real success with good attendance
- More social workers this year (2020) said that they felt that CWC is a learning environment and far more are satisfied with the learning opportunities available compared to 2019

6.0 Financial implications

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

6.2 Any costs arising from actions in the workplan and priorities will be funded from within the Adult Services overall budget of £68.2 million. [MK/26022021/R].

7.0 Legal implications

7.1 There are no direct legal implications as a result of this report although it is important to ensure there are practices and procedures in place to ensure the wellbeing of employees in order to avoid potential employment claims. [SB/26022021/C]

8.0 Equalities implications

8.1 The adult social work workforce in Wolverhampton is largely representative of the diversity of the local community and the people currently being supported by adult social care.

9.0 Climate change and environmental implications

9.1 There are no climate change or environmental implications arising from this report.

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 the workforce 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 There are no Human Resource implications arising out of this report.

12.0 Corporate landlord implications

12.1 There are no specific Corporate landlord implications arising out of this report.

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: Adult Social Work Health Check 2020 Dashboard