



Strong Families, Children, Young People Scrutiny Panel

15 March 2023

Report title	Children's Social Work and Workforce Health Check 2022	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Beverley Momenabadi, Children and Young People	
Wards affected	All	
Accountable director	Emma Bennett, Executive Director of Families	
Originating service	Children's Services	
Accountable employee(s)	Jennifer Rogers	Principal Social Worker
	Tel	01902 553209
	Email	Jennifer.Rogers@wolverhampton.gov.uk
	Courtney Abbott	Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner
	Tel	01902 554485
	Email	Courtney.Abbott@wolverhampton.gov.uk
Report has been considered by	Children's Services Leadership Team	16 February 2023
	Children's Education Leadership Team	16 February 2023
	Strategic Executive Board	28 February 2023

Recommendations for decision:

The Scrutiny Panel is recommended to:

1. Note and comment on the findings of the Children and Young People's Service's social work and wider workforce health check for 2022.
2. Provide comment, feedback and challenge on the proposed actions to improve practice conditions for and the health of social work and wider workforce.

1.0 Purpose

- 1.1 The City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) carries out a survey each year to check the “health” of its social workers and this forms part of Children’s Services ongoing self-assessment. A survey is also circulated more widely to include all the frontline children’s workforce within the council. This report presents an overview of the findings of both surveys, progress since last year and concludes with actions to address the main 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 after the death of Baby P. There was recognition that the whole system impacts on individual social workers and also on the overall quality of social work practice. Regular health checks help organisations identify areas of strength and areas requiring greater focus as well as assisting with workforce development planning and supporting the continuous improvement of social work and wider support for children, young people and families.
- 2.2 Good 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 services and teams across Children’s Services have continued to ensure that statutory social work and wider support services for children and families are delivered at the right level, effective, take place in a timely way and support families to make sustainable change.
- 2.3 The surveys were refreshed in 2021 and aligned with the Local Government’s Association (LGA) standards for employers of social workers in England and have also taken into account the questions asked in the national health check survey.
- 2.4 This report provides a summary of the main findings and also any actions that are planned or in progress to address the key areas for improvement.

3.0 Overview, key findings and key actions

- 3.1 The health check was circulated via an online survey between 12 September to 21 October 2022. The link was sent to 268 social workers and 285 non-social work qualified employees at grade five and above, including managers. The wider workforce is very diverse and is made up a variety of roles such as educational psychologists, family support workers, the virtual school team and strengthening families workers.
- 3.2 Response rates for both surveys were lower than in previous years with a 35% response rate for social workers (compared to 44% in 2021 and 55% in 2020) and 27% in the workforce (34% in 2021 and 39% in 2020). However, it is important to recognise that this may reflect the challenges teams are facing. To improve take up and ensure responses better reflect the views of the workforce next year, there will be protected time at the

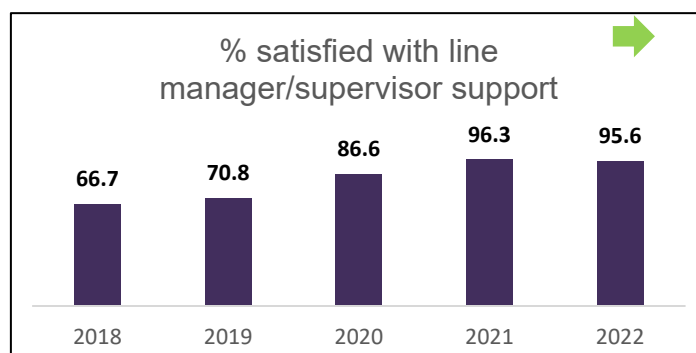
September 2023 social work briefing to ensure workers can complete the survey, as well as dedicated time in wider team meetings.

- 3.3 Feedback from social workers and the wider workforce will be gathered during briefings this year to identify what would encourage them to complete the survey so changes can be made. Additionally, a team's channel will be established to enhance communication, promote the survey, allow for discussion and give easy access to the survey link. There will be more updates provided to the workforce this year to tell them about progress on identified actions, for instance utilising the monthly newsletter as well as workforce briefings, and a continued "you said...we did" approach will help to demonstrate how the survey can make a positive difference for practitioners.
- 3.4 The findings of this year's health checks are mostly positive, but there is a recognition that improvements in some areas can be made.

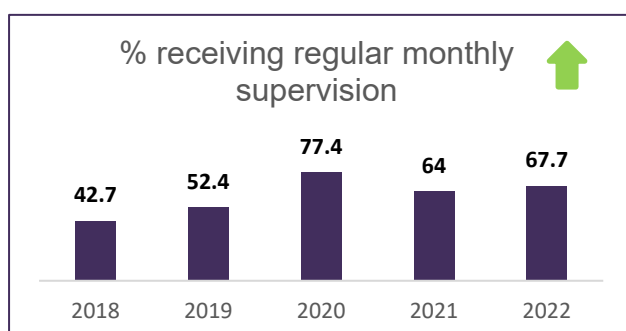
Social Work

- 3.5 Nationally social work recruitment and retention continues to be a significant challenge and social work is on the national occupational shortage list. Wolverhampton's Children's Services has a robust recruitment and retention plan which includes, amongst a number of other key actions, attendance at recruitment fairs, investment in a mixed economy of routes into social work including Frontline, Step Up and apprenticeships and a strong social work training and development offer. Additional actions are also in progress, including rebranding to attract social workers to CWC as an employer of choice, creating a new opportunity to support progression for those social workers who do not want traditional management roles and reviewing the pay and incentives for social workers across the region/nationally.
- 3.6 CWC is part of regional work to support the recruitment and retention challenges and CWC is committed to a regional memorandum of understanding to help reduce the "churn" being experienced with agency social work. These actions should help to stabilise teams, limit reliance on agency staff, reduce hours worked over contract and should consequently support social worker wellbeing and improve stress levels and retention rates.
- 3.7 The Government has recently provided a response to a number of reviews of children's social care and has set out its national long term strategy, which includes actions to support workforce challenges and a number of consultations on key areas. CWC is currently reviewing the proposals and providing responses to the consultations as appropriate.
- 3.8 In the 2022 Health Check survey, for the second year, almost all social workers are happy with the support they receive from their manager, which has greatly improved over the past few years. This has been due to the actions taken to invest in social work leadership training, for instance CWC has developed a first year management portfolio programme to support new managers across the workforce, and practitioners who want to develop their leadership skills have been put forward for the national Social Work

Leadership Pathways Programme during 2022. CWC has also been part of commissioning a regional leadership course for women of colour which will be starting in Spring 2023.

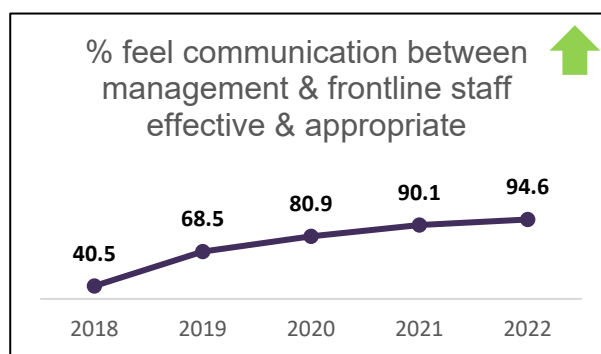


- 3.9 Both frequency and quality of supervision has improved this year, with frequency being higher than any year other than 2020 and quality showing a year on year improvement. Due to the nature of work, supervisions may sometimes have to be cancelled at last minute by either the manager or the social worker due to crisis or unexpected events for the children, young people and families they support. This would be reflected in workers who responded that they receive supervision “most months” instead of monthly (29%).
- 3.10 Ongoing actions taken since previous health checks have contributed to these improvements, which has included commissioning supervision training for managers. Regular audits of supervision records to measure quality and frequency have also supported ongoing improvement. Additionally, senior leaders pledged to have better oversight of frequency and quality of supervision within their service areas, which would have also had an impact.



- 3.11 The 2022 health check survey suggests that overall, social workers are working either fewer or the same number of hours over their contract than last year. The majority of social workers (67%) are reporting that their workloads are manageable and while this is a decline from 2021 (78%), it is still better than 2019 when less than 60% said that they had manageable workloads. It is recognised that staffing challenges, some of which are due to secondments which are a great way for staff to develop and progress, are having an impact on workloads across particular teams / service areas.

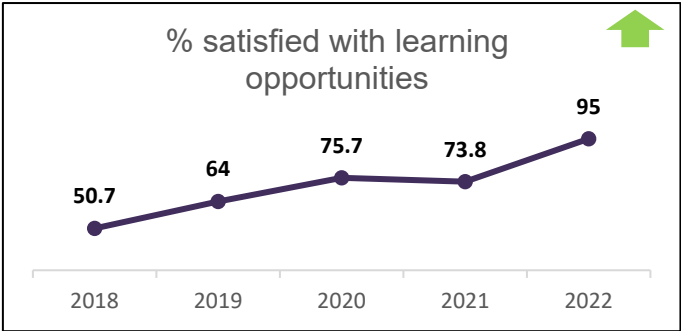
- 3.12 Most social workers reported that they never, rarely or only occasionally feel unmanageable levels of stress due to work. However, this has decreased by around 12% since last year. Positively most said that they are able to discuss stress, well-being and workload with their manager and agree satisfactory ways forward, but where this was not the case, staffing challenges were a factor. The activity around recruitment outlined in paragraph 3.5 and 3.6, will help stabilise teams and create more manageable workloads, which in turn should help reduce stress levels.
- 3.13 There has been continued improvement in communication between senior managers and frontline teams as well as those who feel they would be, or have been, consulted on changes that would impact their work (72% compared to 61% in 2021). Actions taken by the senior leadership team to build on their communication and engagement strategy has ensured the service has continued to be as visible as possible despite the challenges of virtual working. This has included:
- Regular practice weeks where senior managers meet directly with social workers on a 1:1 basis to discuss and observe practice. From September 2022 these have started to take place face to face again
 - The monthly newsletter continues to keep the workforce informed on any current or expected changes that will impact them
 - Regular social work / workforce briefings
 - The annual joint Adults and Children's Social Work conference in November 2022 was face to face – the first time since covid
 - A renewed commitment to consultation/engagement this year—for example there are currently discussions underway with the workforce to review the principles of hybrid working



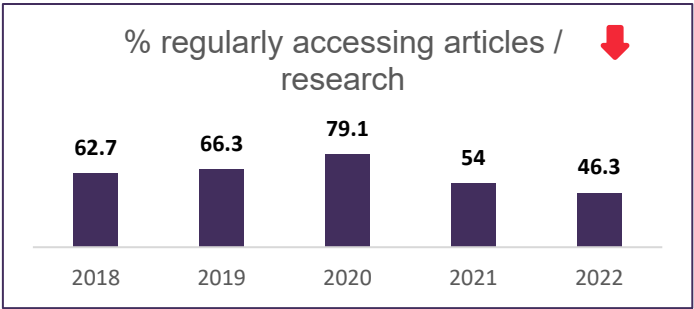
- 3.14 Almost all, 98%, said that CWC has a clear model of social work practice which promotes relationship working and a strengths-based approach to achieve the best outcomes for individuals and families. This high response rate is due to a number of factors, but mostly because of the work carried out over the last year by the dedicated Senior Restorative Practice Lead who has further embedded Restorative Practice into everyday practice and worked with multi-agency partners to start to share this approach more widely, including the return of multi-agency Restorative Practice training in 2022.
- 3.15 There has been a significant increase in the number of social workers who said that they are satisfied with learning and development opportunities and believe CWC is a learning

organisation with a positive learning culture. Actions were taken following last year’s health check to improve this, which included:

- Organisational Development now circulates a monthly newsletter which outlines upcoming training and development opportunities – this helps practitioners plan their time and means they are more likely to be able to schedule in training (this was a key theme from last year’s health check survey)
- In January 2022, two social workers were sponsored to do a part time PhD with the University of Wolverhampton
- A more structured process for advertising and applying for Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) opportunities was established and specific Q&A sessions set up
- The application and selection process for Practice Education was revised and shared with the workforce (this was another suggestion which came directly from the 2021 health check survey)
- Examples of training this year, some of which were identified by social workers themselves: professional curiosity with Professor David Shemmings, motivational interviewing, child on parent violence, Mental Capacity Act, relationship building and supporting young people who identify as LGBT+



3.16 There has been a decrease in the number of social workers who are regularly accessing research with 46% reporting this in 2022 compared to 54% in 2021. A common theme is that they do not have the time to do this on a regular basis. Social workers’ time is limited and so actions have been identified that will help them find and access relevant research quickly and effectively. One way to do this will be by collaborating with the University of Wolverhampton to create “research circles” where social workers and academics will come together to explore research on a particular area that will help support practice.



3.17 Positively most social workers plan to continue working for the council for at least the next 12 months and fewer, 6.5% compared to 10.8% in 2021, said they planned to leave. There continues to be a strong sense of pride amongst social workers and the vast

majority (84% compared to 75% in 2021) would definitely recommend CWC as an employer to friends and family. Comments include:

- “I feel very valued”
- “Everyone works well together and there is a feeling of comradery”
- “Workers generally care that they are doing a good job looking after young people, and that feeling becomes infectious throughout the whole workforce”
- “Heads of services are welcoming and open to discussion”
- “There is such a comradery within the Council, and it is wonderful. People give up their time to volunteer and promote training or get a venture for young people off the ground. I have never known this before!”
- “CWC actively promotes cultural competence and diversity. It promotes an all-encompassing workforce which is excellent in its consideration of minority groups and making all members of the community feel included”

3.18 The majority, just over 80%, of social workers said CWC makes them feel encouraged and empowered to make time for self-care activities. There has been a real commitment over the past 2 years to supporting wellbeing across Children’s Services. For example, wellbeing has been a standard feature at briefings, in the monthly newsletter, in inductions and team meetings. Also, there is a commitment to explore the impact and use of clinical supervision and / or consider the use of trauma informed supervision training to support social worker’s wellbeing in the context of reducing the impact of secondary trauma / compassion fatigue and better supporting the emotional demands of the role.

3.19 Almost all felt that CWC was actively committed to tackling inequality in some way, which is likely due to the strong approach taken by Children’s Services over the last two years in addressing equality and diversity issues, reflecting the whole council’s approach. This includes the continued support of the cultural competency champion role and cultural competency workshops for staff as well as managers. This will continue to be a key focus and priority for Children’s Services this coming year and will be driven forward by the Service’s equality action plans.

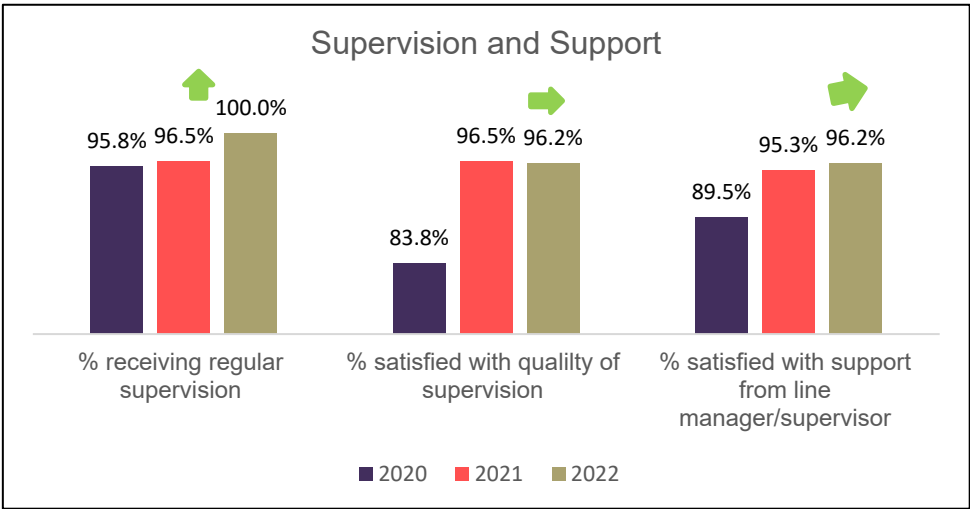
Workforce

3.20 The wider workforce is very diverse and is made up a variety of roles such as educational psychologists, family support workers, the virtual school team and strengthening families workers, so workloads will vary across the service. The 2022 health check survey suggests that overall, practitioners are working either fewer or the same number of hours over their contract than last year. The vast majority, 89%, feel that their workloads are manageable. This is higher than last year (almost 82%) and moving back closer to 2020 results (92%).

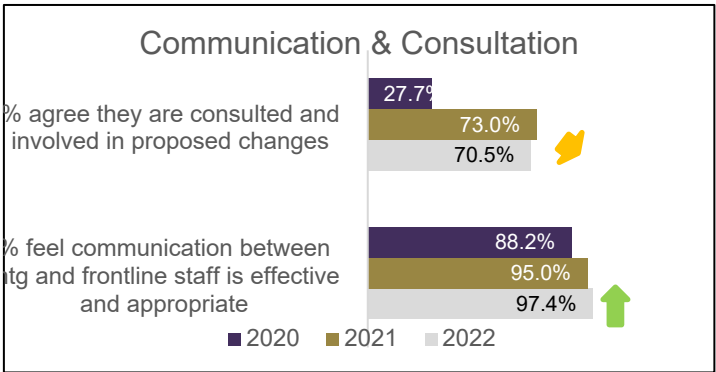
3.21 Over 95% of respondents feel able to discuss their wellbeing, stressful situations and their workload with their supervisor / manager and agree satisfactory ways forward and 81% know where to get help within the council if concerned about their wellbeing. About 87% stated that they felt encouraged and empowered by CWC to make time for self-care

and wellbeing activities. The vast majority report that they never or rarely experience unmanageable levels of stress, and this has increased since 2019 and 2020, which suggests that actions being taken is having a positive impact on the wellbeing of the workforce.

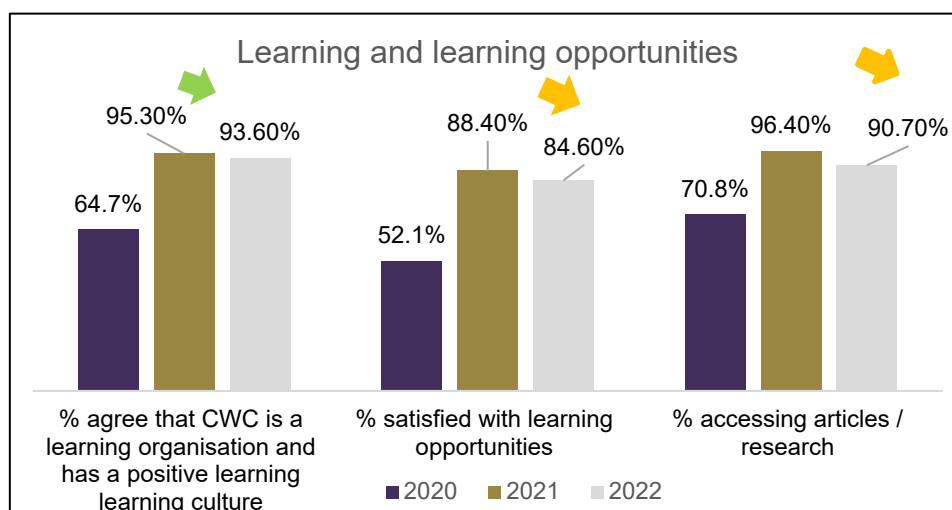
3.22 The frequency of supervision has improved year on year, with 100% this year receiving regular supervision and 96% saying that they are happy with the quality of their supervision. As with the social work response, ongoing actions taken since the 2020 health check have contributed to these improvements, which has included commissioning training for managers in supervision and leadership skills, a whole service commitment to restorative approaches led from the top down and regular audits on supervision records to support ongoing improvement.



3.23 As with social workers, the wider workforce reported that there is effective communication between senior managers and frontline staff with 97% agreeing with this, which has increased over the last four years. Slightly fewer (70.5% compared to 73% in 2021) felt involved in or consulted about any proposed changes this year, but this remains a significant improvement over 2020 when this was 28%.



- 3.24 The majority of practitioners remain satisfied with the learning and development opportunities available to them. While this is a slight decrease from 2021, it remains positive. The development of a formal career pathway for social work apprenticeships as well as returning to more face to face training opportunities and continued promotion of the Aspire to Leadership programme should contribute to improving this further in 2023.



- 3.25 Almost 90% of the workforce report that they are regularly accessing research and articles in order to support their practice. While this has declined slightly since 2021 (when this was 96%), it is still extremely high. In order to continue to support this, there will be information on Research in Practice in an upcoming social care workforce briefing in order to ensure that the workforce is aware that this is a resource available to them. Within Education, research is disseminated monthly which will continue.
- 3.26 78% said that they would recommend CWC as an employer to a friend, which is lower than 2021 when this was 86%. However, only two respondents answered “no.” There continues to be a strong sense of pride and more, over 77%, this year plan to continue to work for CWC over the next 12 months. Comments included:
- “My department and team are exceptional”
 - “CWC is a good organisation to work for”
 - “Having the opportunity to take on a secondment gave me new challenges and made me feel that I had a better future with CWC”
 - “I enjoy hearing of colleagues’ achievements on City People and the CYP Roundup”
 - “I enjoy supporting families and helping them to achieve better outcomes”
 - “I love aspects of my job, the people I support and my colleagues (the ones I know) so I wouldn’t want to leave or change”
- 3.27 As with the social work survey, the vast majority (almost 99%) of respondents felt that CWC is actively committed to tackling inequality and discrimination in some way.

4.0 Other notable progress and actions since the 2021 survey

- 4.1 As well as the progress and actions taken since the last health check that are noted above, there was acknowledgement that more needed to be done to reduce the amount of time social workers spend recording or completing paperwork. A key action was to develop training which would support social workers develop skills of recording in a succinct and proportionate way and help social workers to make better use of their time.
- 4.2 Workshops were offered throughout 2022 and Advanced Practitioners (APs) have provided support to improve practice in this area, including how to make better use of technology. Audits have shown an increase in the quality of recordings rated good or above during 2022. In this year's health check the amount of time social workers say they spend working directly with children has increased once again. While this is all positive, Children's Services still see this as a key area of work so this will continue to be a focus.
- 4.3 This year, significantly more social workers said that they were aware of the Aiming for Excellence Plan (74% compared to 60% in 2021). The Aiming for Excellence Plan is the Improvement Plan for Children's Social Work services within CWC. It focuses on key areas where social work practice is inconsistent and identifies key actions and measures to track progress. Since September 2021, the Aiming for Excellence Plan has been shared at social work briefings, at managers' meetings, and as part of the newly developed practice newsletter that is sent out after each practice week. The Excellence Plan was also a standing item on team meeting agendas and workshops took place between November 2021 and March 2022. This has helped to ensure that social workers were aware of the service's priorities and how these would be met. It also enabled them to have team discussions around these areas for improvement and an opportunity to contribute to the service's improvement journey.
- 4.4 For both social workers and the wider workforce, results show that colleagues are more satisfied with the communication between senior managers and frontline staff than they were last year. Actions which have supported this include regular updates from senior managers, newsletters, and regular workforce briefings.

5.0 Next Steps

- 5.1 An action plan has been completed as a result of these surveys to address the key areas of improvement which has been mentioned in the report. This will be overseen by the Social Work Development Board, Children's Services Leadership team and Children's Education Leadership team. The findings will also inform the workforce development plans for the coming year and will be shared with teams. Progress on identified actions will be shared with the workforce during the year.
- 5.2 Key actions are highlighted within the report, and some are summarised below, along with other notable actions:

- There will be an opportunity during the next social work and wider workforce briefings to get feedback about what practitioners think about the surveys and what would motivate them to complete it in the future
- Continuation of a robust recruitment and retention strategy and action plan
- Review interview processes to ensure speedy recruitment and review some of the learning from past recruitment to improve the experience
- The promotion of a formal social work career pathway for social work apprenticeships to “grow our own” which will offer more progression / development opportunities for the wider workforce as well as helping to build sufficiency in social work teams
- Managers will continue to offer flexibility where needed to help people balance their work and home lives to reduce stress levels, including offering stress risk assessments where appropriate and identifying any relevant support
- The nature of social work and frontline social care generally 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 and practitioners 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 to reduce the time worked over contract
- The Principal Social Worker will explore the impact and use regionally of clinical supervision and consider trauma informed supervision training to support practitioner wellbeing in the context of reducing the impact of secondary trauma / compassion fatigue and better supporting the emotional demands of the role

6.0 Financial implications

- 6.1 There are no direct financial implications as a result of this report.
- 6.2 Any costs arising from actions in the work plan and priorities will be funded from within the Children’s Services overall budget.
[JG/15022023/Y]

7.0 Legal implications

- 7.1 There are no legal implications as a result of this report.
[SB/05022023/I]

8.0 Equalities implications

- 8.1 Social work and social care is a diverse profession, and the makeup of the frontline Children’s and Young People’s Service in Wolverhampton is largely representative of the local community. The Council’s approach to fair recruitment is followed robustly for the recruitment of all posts within the Children and Young People’s Directorate. This includes anonymous application forms, progression of people with disabilities to interview and diverse recruitment panels. The health check survey asks practitioner’s views on the council’s approach to equality and diversity, and this has been mentioned in the report.

- 8.2 This survey was sent via e-mail and completed via an electronic device. While attempts are always made to ensure that all members of staff have access to and are able to complete the survey, when feedback from the workforce is gathered they will be asked if there are any barriers which prevents them from being able to do so in order to ensure support can be provided in 2023 and future surveys. Regular reminders and discussions around support required to complete the survey will also take place while the 2023 survey is open in order to support better access to all who require it.

9.0 Health and Wellbeing Implications

- 9.1 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 what can be done differently or in addition to better support the wellbeing of the workforce.

10.0 Appendices

- 10.1 Appendix 1: List of Survey Questions