



Children, Young People and Families Scrutiny Panel

24 March 2022

Report title	Children's Social Work and Workforce Health Check 2021	
Cabinet member with lead responsibility	Councillor Beverley Momenabadi, Children and Young People	
Wards affected	All	
Accountable director	Emma Bennett, Executive Director for Families	
Originating service	Children's Service	
Accountable employee(s)	Jennifer Rogers	Principal Social Worker
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Report to be/has been considered by	Social Work Development Board	11 January 2022
	Leadership Team	20 January 2022
	Strategic Executive Board	10 February

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 2021.
2. Provide comment, feedback, and challenge on the proposed actions to improve the health of the social work and wider workforce and conditions for practice.

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. For the last three years a survey has also been 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 on the overall quality of social work practice and 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. The success of this can be seen by the reduction over a number of years of the number of children receiving statutory support in the city, particularly those children subject to child protection planning and children and young people in care.
- 2.3 The surveys have been refreshed this year and aligned with the Local Government’s Association (LGA) Standards for employers of social workers in England and has also taken into account the questions asked in the national health check survey.
- 2.4 This report provides a summary of the main findings, including areas which have progressed as a result of actions taken over the last 12 months, 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

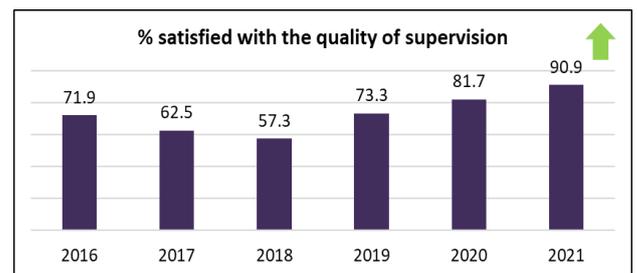
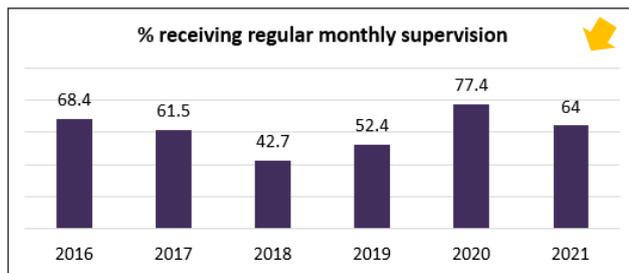
- 3.1 The health check was circulated via an online survey between 14 September to 1 November 2021. The link was sent to 255 social workers and 250 non-social work qualified employees at grade five and above who work directly with children and young people or who manage those teams. The wider workforce 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 44% response rate for social workers (compared to 55% in 2020) and 34% in the workforce (39% in 2020). However, it is important to recognise that this may reflect the challenges teams are facing and pandemic fatigue. To improve take up and ensure responses reflect the views of the workforce more reliably next year, there will be protected time at a briefing to ensure workers can complete the survey if they wish to, as well as continued protected time in team meetings. There will also be a revised approach based on the “you said...we did” format which will help to show the difference the survey has made to the workforce.
- 3.3 The findings of this year’s health checks are mostly positive, with improvement evident in a number of key areas as a result of actions being taken by the service.

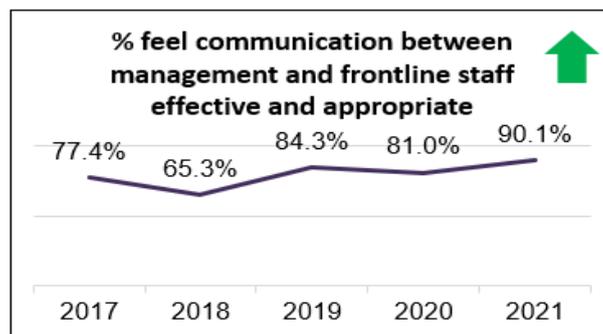
Social Work

- 3.4 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 well-established and effective recruitment and retention strategy which includes, amongst a number of other key actions, the 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, which this year has included PhD sponsorship opportunities. An additional action identified in the last three months to support social work retention is the creation of a new peripatetic team, which will have eight additional permanent social workers to provide support when social work vacancies arise across the service. This will help to stabilise teams, limit reliance on agency staff, reduce workloads and hours worked over contract and should consequently support social worker wellbeing and further improve stress levels and retention rates.
- 3.5 In this year’s social work health check three quarters of social workers (full and part time) are reporting that their workloads are manageable. Although slightly less than last year, this is still much higher than in 2019 when only around 59% (full time) and 57% (part time) of social workers were reporting manageable workloads. There has also been a small increase in the number of hours social workers work over their contracted hours. Covid will have affected this, but it is also recognised that staffing challenges, some of which are due to secondments which are a great way for staff to develop and progress, are impacting on workloads across the service. The new peripatetic team is a keyway in which this will be addressed, and recruitment is well under way. To further reduce the impact of vacancies there will also be a streamlined recruitment approach piloted so that social work posts can be filled more quickly.
- 3.6 However, positively the number of those who always and often feel stress due to work has decreased since last year and the vast majority report they are able to discuss their stress, wellbeing and their workload with their manager and agree satisfactory ways forward.

- 3.7 Although frequency of supervision has reduced slightly this year, it is still higher than in 2019 and 2018. The majority (96%) said that they were satisfied with the informal support they receive from their manager, which suggests that there is readily available support when social workers need it most. There has also been a significant increase in those reporting that their supervision is of a high quality with 91% reporting this compared to 82% in 2020, and 73% in 2019. This positive upwards trend has been due to the actions taken since the last health check which has included commissioning training for managers in supervision and leadership skills, as well as a whole service commitment to restorative approaches led from the top down.

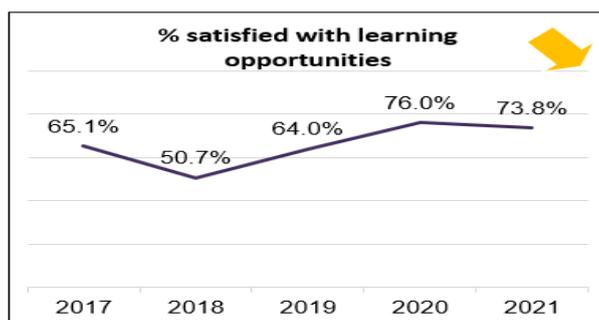


- 3.8 There has been continued improvement in communication between senior managers and frontline teams which is largely due to the actions taken by the senior leadership team to build on their communication and engagement strategy over the last 12 months following the last health check. This has ensured the service has continued to be as visible as possible despite the challenges of virtual working. Regular communication such as the monthly newsletter and practice weeks (where social work leaders meet directly with workers as part of audits) have made a difference in this regard as well as regular social work briefings.



- 3.9 Almost all, 90%, 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 12 months by the dedicated Senior Restorative Practice Lead who has further embedded Restorative Practice into everyday practice and has also worked with multi-agency partners to start to share this approach more widely.

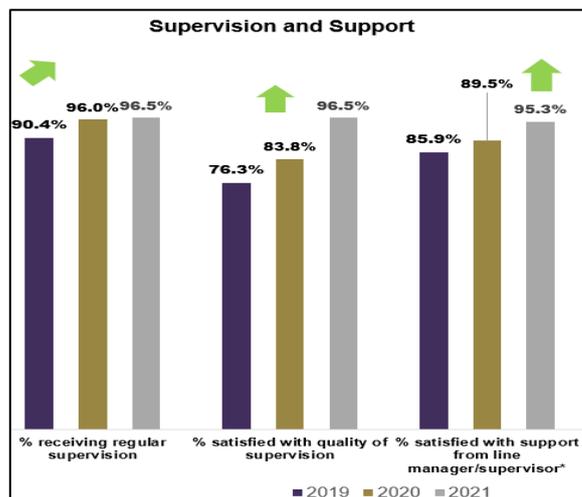
- 3.10 The majority of social workers report they are satisfied with learning and development opportunities and believe CWC is a learning organisation with a positive learning culture. There were some who felt additional training could be considered and this included more opportunities for career progression and alternatives to the traditional management progression offer. This is currently being explored by Children's Services and two social workers have already been sponsored to complete a PhD part time whilst still in employment as a way of progressing their skills and career outside of current pathways.



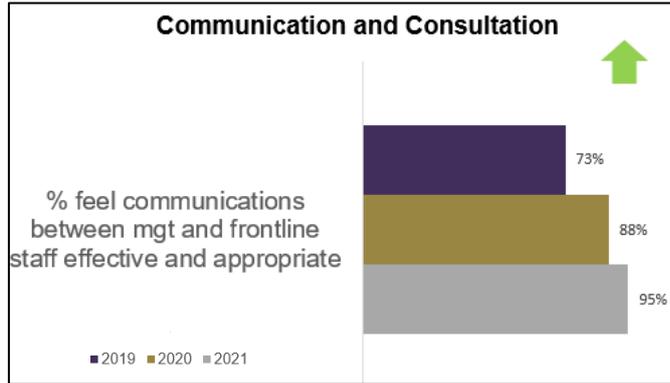
- 3.11 Positively most social workers plan to continue working for the council for at least the next 12 months, but more manageable workloads would influence those who are unsure about staying. Just over 75% would definitely recommend CWC as an employer to friends. Some comments included: "this is a listening organisation...I am keen to stay here for some time"; "I am proud of the restorative approach"; "We know where we are, where we are going and how to get there, employer and employees together"; "I feel that we are local leaders for other authorities...I am proud that our leaders know our children and families"; "there is a real commitment to learning and development."
- 3.12 The majority, over 88%, of social workers said CWC makes them feel encouraged and empowered to make time for self-care and wellbeing activities and there has been a real commitment over the past 12 months to supporting wellbeing across Children's Services and this was an action from last year's health check. Wellbeing has been a standard feature at briefings, in the monthly newsletter, in inductions and in team meetings. A wellbeing framework is also being developed and this year's joint social work conference will feature workshops related to this topic.
- 3.13 Almost all felt that CWC was actively committed to tackling inequality, which is likely due to the strong approach taken by Children's Services this year in addressing equality and diversity issues, reflecting the whole council's approach. This includes the creation of a cultural competency champion role, cultural competency workshops for staff as well as managers and also a joint social work conference in October 2021 which focussed on the theme of celebrating diversity; challenging inequality which featured a variety of speakers with lived experience of discrimination and oppression.

Workforce

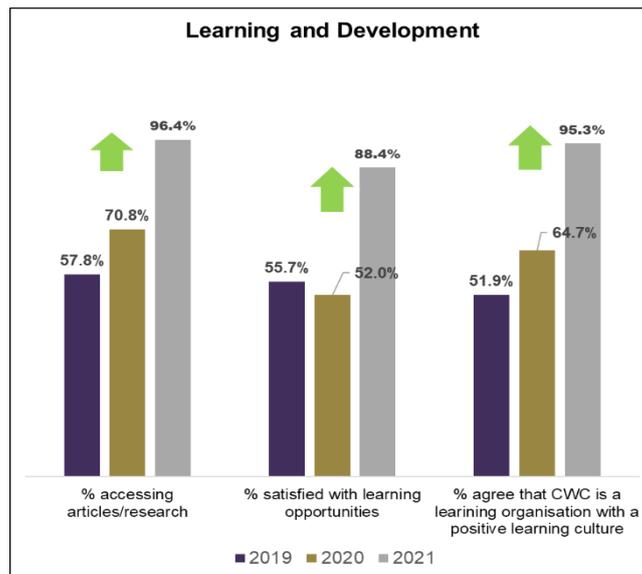
- 3.14 The wider workforce is very diverse and is made up a variety of roles such as educational psychologists, family support workers, the virtual school team and strengthening families workers so workloads will vary across the service. The vast majority, over 82%, feel that their workloads are manageable. This is slightly lower than last year (92%) although still high. Children's Services will be taking this opportunity to review workloads with teams and explore with them where the pressures points are so that specific actions can be put in place where needed.
- 3.15 Slightly more hours are being worked over contracted hours than last year, but part time workers are reporting working slightly less. It may be that continuous home working has created some 'work creep' with some feeling the need to always be 'on' answering calls or emails well after work hours compared to previous years. However, those reporting they always or often feel stress due to work has reduced this year.
- 3.16 It is clear that the continued challenges of Covid are having more of an impact this year. This year a common theme is that the workforce would welcome more of a balance between working from home and in the office. A service operating model is currently being consulted on so that when it is safe to do so Children's teams can start to use offices more. This may include for example for supervision, collaboration time, team meetings and to support those workers who may be feeling isolated and struggling with their wellbeing, or who are new in post. The wellbeing framework that is being developed will also support workers and managers who are struggling with working from home and may find it difficult to "switch off".
- 3.17 However almost 90% know where to get help within the council if concerned about their wellbeing and around the same number stated that they felt encouraged and empowered by CWC to make time for self-care and wellbeing activities. Over 80% said they could discuss their wellbeing, stressful situations and their workload with their supervisor / manager and agree satisfactory ways forward, with only 4.7% of respondents saying this wasn't the case.
- 3.18 The frequency and quality of supervision has also improved year on year, with 97% this year receiving regular supervision and 97% happy with the quality.



3.19 As with social workers, the wider workforce reported that there is effective communication between senior managers and frontline staff with 95% agreeing with this, which has increased over the last three years. There has been a significant increase in those who feel involved in or consulted about any proposed changes, with 73% agreeing this was the case compared to just 28% last year. Again, the leadership’s team commitment to visibility and a communication and engagement strategy which includes workforce briefings twice a year and a monthly newsletter have been key to improving this over the last 12 months since the last health check in 2020.



3.20 There has also been a significant improvement in the number of workers who are satisfied with the learning opportunities available to them with 88% saying this compared to 52% last year. An action from the last health check was for a renewed focus on training and development opportunities for the wider workforce which has included a continued commitment to offering three Social Work apprenticeships a year, which generates a lot of interest. This year some are missing face to face training, and this will be supported for a proportion of briefings / courses when safe to do so.



3.21 Over 85% said that they would recommend CWC as an employer to a friend and more (over 74%) this year plan to continue to work for CWC over the next 12 months.

Some comments included: “I feel valued”; CWC is forward thinking and willing to make changes to improve services”; “I am trusted”; “recognition of equality and diversity has increased.”

3.22 As with the social work survey, the vast majority of respondents felt that CWC is actively committed to tackling inequality and discrimination. Only 2.3% said this was not the case.

4.0 Other notable progress and actions since the 2020 survey

4.1 As well as the progress and actions taken since the last health check that are noted above, there was acknowledgement last year 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. Workshops have been offered this year and also support has been provided by Advanced Practitioners to improve practice in this area and audits have shown an increase in the quality of recordings rated good or above during 2021. In this year’s health check the amount of time social workers say they spend working directly with children has increased slightly, but overall, this is an area that will continue to be focussed on this year.

4.2 Proportionate recording is now part of the newly developed Aiming for Excellence Plan which aims to improve consistency of practice in six key areas to ensure a skilled and confident workforce and there will be more activity to support this area over the coming year. The six areas are: meaningful direct work and life journey work; purposeful and succinct recording; reflection on practice; succinct, analytical, and timely assessments, meaningful plans that evidence progress and building relationships with parents and carers.

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. This will be overseen by the Social Work Development Board and Joint 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 are summarised below, along with other notable actions:

- Continuation of robust recruitment and retention strategy including investment in social work and wider workforce training and development offer and a mixed economy of routes into social work
- Creation of a peripatetic social work team to support teams across the Children’s and Young People’s Service, which will help reduce workloads and working hours
- Pilot a more streamlined recruitment process so that social work and social care posts can be filled more quickly

- Finalise post Covid operating models to support a hybrid approach and provide more flexibility for teams to enable them to have a better balance between home and office working
- Managers will ensure that monthly supervision takes place
- 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 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.
- Stress risk assessments to be continued to be offered when needed
- Every supervision should include a robust discussion around workload and workload management to ensure social workers can be supported before their workload becomes unmanageable

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 workplan, and priorities will be funded from within the Children's Services overall budget.
[JG/01022022/S]

7.0 Legal implications

7.1 There are no legal implications as a result of this report.
[SB/27012022/U]

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 support the wellbeing of the workforce and ensure they feel supported.

11.0 Human resources implications

11.1 Senior managers are working closely with Human Resources 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 arising from this report or the recommendations.

13.0 Covid Implications

13.1 Covid has had an impact on the overall health of the workforce over the last two years. At present this survey suggests that there is now a real desire to have a better balance between home and office working. Sickness absence related to Covid, or due to the requirements to self-isolate, has created even more challenges for Children's Services. Contingency plans are being implemented as and when needed and longer-term actions being taken. As previously stated, this is a national issue and social work is on the national occupational shortage list. Senior managers are aware of the impact Covid continues to have and are prioritising employee wellbeing and offering support in helping them balance their work and personal circumstances.