

Children and Young People Scrutiny Panel

6 March 2024

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| Report title | Children's Social Work and Wider Workforce Health Check 2023 | |
| Cabinet member with lead responsibility | Councillor Chris Burden, Children and Young People Councillor Jacqui Coogan, Jobs, Skills and Education | |
| Wards affected | All | |
| Accountable director | Alison Hinds, Director of Children's Services | |
| Originating service | Children's Services | |
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| Report has been considered by | Children's and Education Leadership Team | 1 February 2024 |
| | Strategic Executive Board | 20 February 2024 |

Recommendation for decision:

The Scrutiny Panel is recommended to:

1. Note and comment on the findings of the Children's Services' social work and wider workforce health checks for 2023
2. Provide comment, feedback, and challenge on the proposed actions to improve practice conditions for, and the health of, social work and the 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 frontline wider social care workforce and this forms part of Children’s Services’ ongoing self-assessment. This report presents an overview of the findings of both surveys and concludes with actions to address the main areas for improvement.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 The National Social Work Task Force in November 2009 recommended the use of a framework to assist employers in assessing the “health” of their social work workforce. There was recognition that the whole system impacts on individual social workers and also on the overall quality of social work practice and regular health checks help organisations identify areas of strength and areas requiring greater focus. It also assists with workforce development planning and supports a culture of continuous improvement.
- 2.2 The City of Wolverhampton Council (CWC) undertakes a health check annually via a survey and a “you said...we did” action plan approach.
- 2.3 CWC extends this survey to Children’s Services’ alternatively qualified staff who work directly with children and young people or manage teams that do, including managers, heads of service, and agency workers. 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.
- 2.4 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, are effective, take place in a timely way and support families to make sustainable change.
- 2.5 The surveys are aligned with the Local Government’s Association (LGA) [Standards for employers of social workers in England](#).
- 2.6 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 Key questions requested by Scrutiny Panel:

- 3.1 How do we compare to other (similar councils)?
- There is a national social work health check survey which some councils opt into while others prefer to carry out their own locally. The last national survey took place in 2022 and according to the public report, which gives an overall picture of performance against the LGA standards, the lowest rated standard nationally and for the West Midlands was continuous professional development, whereas this was a

particularly strong area for CWC in 2022. National findings otherwise generally reflect what was identified locally. The next national survey is taking place in January 2024 so there is no comparable data for 2023.

- 3.2 What areas are of particular concern or challenge?
- Recruitment and retention of children's social workers continues to be a national challenge.
 - No other particular area of concern or challenge to note, however some actions will be longer term so it may take time to see progress on areas for improvement.
- 3.3 What is the improvement plan for those areas and what resources are required?
- An action plan is developed and overseen by Children's and Education Leadership Team to address areas of development highlighted by these surveys. The action plan is updated regularly and reviewed quarterly.
 - There are no additional resources required.
- 3.4 Is the improvement plan proportionate to the challenge?
- Yes, the action plan is realistic and proportionate to what the workforce has told us needs to be developed further.
- 3.5 When can we expect to see results?
- Actions will be tracked throughout the year to ensure progress is being made and the impact of these will be evaluated by the 2024 surveys, although some actions may take longer to embed and start to evidence progress (such as the identified work around trauma and test and learn projects).
- 3.6 Are there any key financial, legal, equalities, other implications for scrutiny to be aware of:
- Nothing further to note other than what is mentioned in sections 6.0-9.0.

4.0 Overview and key findings

- 4.1 The health check was circulated via an online survey between 6 September and 17 October 2023 (the wider workforce survey was extended to 19 October 2023). There was also an option this year to complete it by hand and return it to a drop box at 22 different locations across the city.
- 4.2 Both surveys had a significantly higher response rate this year when compared to last year, which is really positive.
- 4.3 The social work survey was open to all registered social workers at all levels including managers and heads of service, agency workers, social work students and apprentices. The survey received a 53% response rate (132 of 251), compared to 34.7% (93 of 268) last year. The aim is to increase this by at least a further 5% next year.
- 4.4 The wider workforce survey had a 38% response rate (141/374), compared to 27% (78/285) in 2022. In 2024, the aim is to increase this by at least a further 5%.

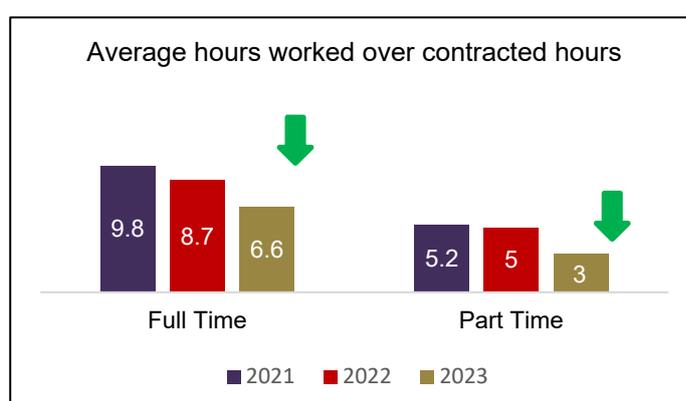
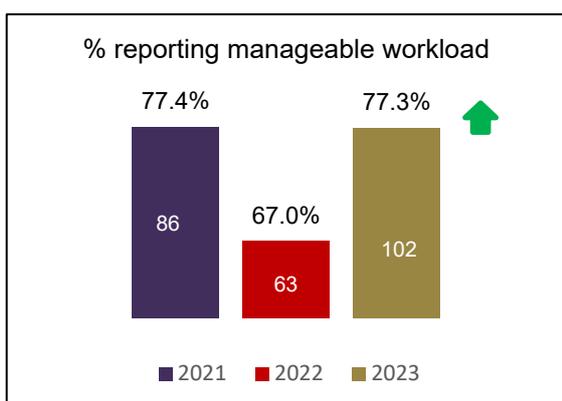
- 4.5 There has been recognition over the past three years that response rates needed to improve to ensure the results are more representative of the social work and wider workforce. To improve uptake of the survey in 2023, there was protected time in a September 2023 social work briefing. Team managers also provided protected time in team meetings for the surveys to be completed.
- 4.6 The Quality and Improvement Advanced Practitioner visited team meetings to promote the survey, share examples with practitioners showing how their views made a difference, and answer any questions, including giving reassurances of the anonymity of the survey.
- 4.7 Additionally, a Teams channel was used to enhance communication and give easy access to the survey link. There were also updates about progress on identified actions in the monthly newsletter using a “you said...we did” approach.
- 4.8 Not every respondent answered every survey question. The percentages referred to therefore reflect the percentage of respondents to each question rather than the whole survey. Actual numbers have also been included to provide transparency and comparisons with previous years findings to show trends or impact. This was also a request from Scrutiny Panel in previous meetings.
- 4.9 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 taken by the service.

Social Work

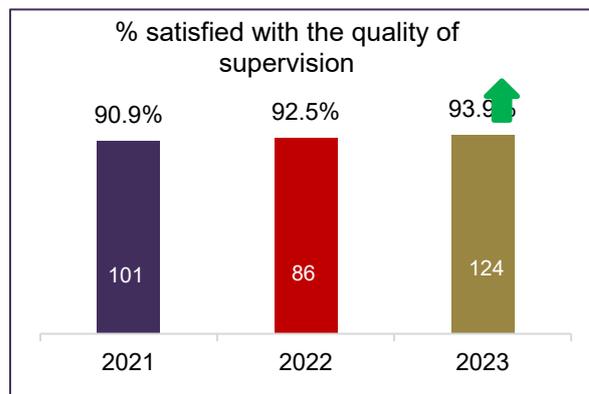
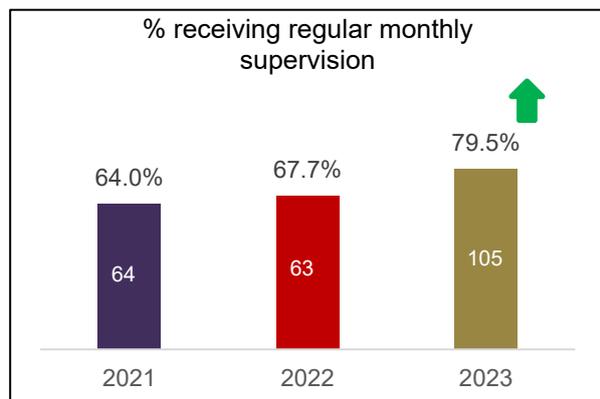
- 4.10 The majority of respondents have worked for CWC as a qualified social worker for between one and six years:
- 4-6 years: 22.9% (30)
 - 1-3 years: 22.1% (29)
 - 7-11 year: 13% (17)
 - More than 11 years: 13.7% (18)
 - 12 months or less: 5.3% (20)
 - The rest did not answer or chose “prefer not to say”
- 4.11 Positively this year social workers are working fewer hours over their contract, and reporting that their workloads are more manageable (77%, 102), which is a significant increase from 67% (63) last year and back in line with 2021 findings.
- 4.12 Stress levels have also reduced, with 69% (91), reporting that they never, rarely or only occasionally experience unmanageable levels of stress due to work, compared to 54% (50) last year, and more said that they are able to discuss stress, well-being and workload with their manager and agree satisfactory ways forward.
- 4.13 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. Effective recruitment and retention activity helps to stabilise teams which in turns creates more manageable workloads and better work / life balance.

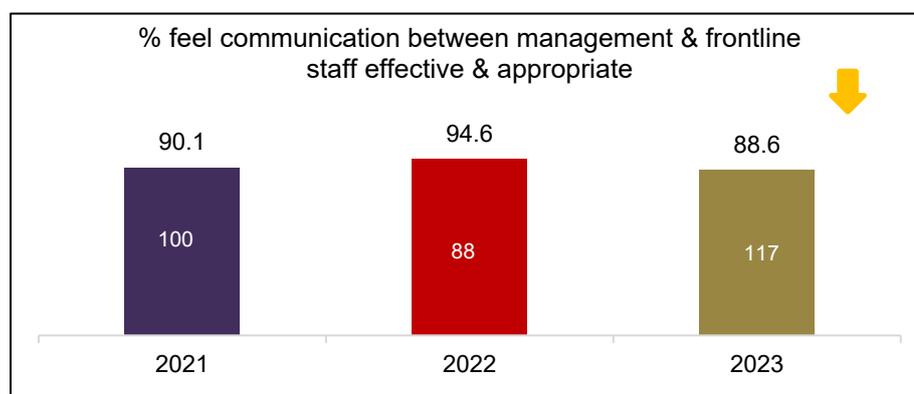
- 4.14 Additional actions are also in progress this year to support this, including developing trauma informed organisational approaches to support staff wellbeing and reduce absence rates, exploring the use of staying put interviews and launching a programme for social workers 2 years post qualified, which is a time when social workers are more likely to leave.



- 4.15 Almost all social workers, 97.7% (129) agree that Wolverhampton has a clear model of Social Work practice that promotes relationship working and a strength-based approach to achieve the best outcomes for individuals and families, which is the same as last year, 97.8% (91).
- 4.16 The frequency and quality of supervision has improved this year, both showing a year-on-year improvement over the past three years, with the majority, 77% (102) reporting that their supervision is generally focussed and uninterrupted. Due to the nature of work, supervisions may sometimes have to be cancelled at the last minute by either the manager or the social worker due to a crisis or unexpected event 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 (20.5%, 27).
- 4.17 Ongoing actions taken since previous health checks have contributed to these improvements, which has included commissioning supervision training for managers (in addition to the recent trauma informed supervision training). Regular audits of supervision records have measured the quality and frequency of supervision and helped to support ongoing improvement. Additionally, senior leaders pledged to have better oversight of supervision within their service areas, which would have also had an impact.
- 4.18 Almost all social workers (95.3%, 121) report that they are happy with the support they receive from their manager when working with high risk or safeguarding concerns, comparable to last year.



- 4.19 This year, almost 91% (120) said that they know where to get help within the council if they were concerned about their wellbeing; this is a significant increase from 81.7% (76) in 2022.
- 4.20 There were fewer social workers who felt that communication between senior managers and frontline teams was effective (88.6%, 117, compared to 94.6%, 88, in 2022). However, there was the option to respond “somewhat” this year, resulting in fewer “no” responses (1.5%, 2, compared to 5.4%, 5, in 2022)

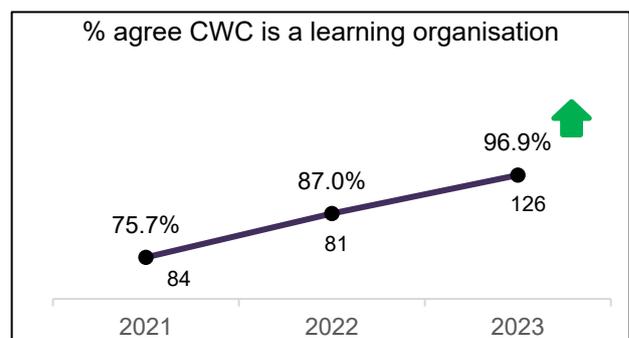
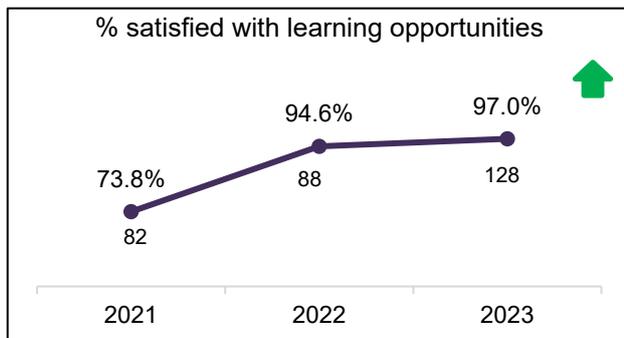


- 4.21 There was also a reduction in the number of social workers who feel they would be, or have been, consulted on changes that would impact their work (53.5%, 70, compared to 94.6%, 88, in 2022). However, the option to respond “somewhat” was added this year, which may have contributed to this decrease as there was also a reduction in “no” responses (13.7%, 18, compared to 28%, 26, in 2022). Comments included:
- “This is a significant area of strength for Wolverhampton. I feel that frontline practitioners are included and consulted. Certainly, I have felt that way”.
 - “I don’t feel I am always consulted with and believe this is something that needs to improve”
- 4.22 The senior leadership team will be taking action to build on their communication and engagement strategy to ensure they are as visible as possible, and teams are involved in changes that affect them. This includes:

- Regular practice weeks where senior managers join teams to discuss and observe practice
- The monthly newsletter continues to keep the workforce informed on any current or expected changes that will impact them
- Regular social work briefings and workforce briefings
- The annual joint Adults and Children's Social Work conference
- Regular briefings to update the workforce on progress of the Families First for Children Programme (FFCP), which is currently being implemented with Children's Social Care
- Exploring dedicated resource to support communication around key transformational activity

4.23 There has been a further 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 throughout the year to improve this and include:

- The Organisational Development team 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 the 2021 health check survey)
- Structured process for advertising and applying for Approved Mental Health Professional (AMHP) opportunities and specific Q&A sessions were held
- The Practice Educator (PE) course was promoted as a career progression opportunity with information sessions held for anyone interested in finding out more
- Face-to-face Restorative Practice Training taking place five times per year



4.24 The majority, 65.6% (86), said that they have opportunities to access resources, such as research articles to inform their practice and professional development. 28.2% (37), responded "somewhat" and 6.1% (8) responded "no". This question was changed this year so is not directly comparable to previous surveys. Time constraints and being too busy during the working day are reasons cited for not always having the opportunity to access these resources.

4.25 Actions to improve this further have been implemented in the past year, with further work around this planned for the coming year. Advanced Practitioners (APs) will continue to identify and share relevant research and resources through monthly "bite sized" learning opportunities to reduce the time social workers need to spend searching for this.

Research Circles will be trialled to help support social workers' access to relevant research with a local university. There is also a link person from Organisational Development who connects with teams around learning needs, with an emphasis on supporting social workers to create Research in Practice accounts and to help them use this resource effectively.

- 4.26 More this year felt that CWC recognises the emotional demands of social work, with 45.8% (60) reporting this compared to 34.4%, (32) in 2022. Fewer (9.9%, 13), said it wasn't recognised at all (14%, 13 in 2022), but some of those who answered "no" reported that time and workload pressures have an impact on this. Some comments included:
- "I like how secondary trauma is being taken seriously".
 - "Supervision can focus on case management rather than the emotional demands of social work".
 - "Will be interesting to see how the new trauma informed training may assist"
- 4.27 Actions taken over the past year has included commissioning trauma informed supervision for managers and, although this did not start until October 2023, comments suggest that social workers are aware of this and are excited about how this may further improve the support that they receive from their managers. This work is expanding further in 2024, starting with a working group being established in February 2024 to develop an action plan to identify way to embed trauma informed approaches within the organisation in recognition of and to address the impact that vicarious and secondary trauma has on frontline staff and their wellbeing.
- 4.28 Positively most, and significantly more than last year, plan to continue working for the council for at least the next 12 months (81.7%, 107, compared to 66.7%, 62, in 2022), with just 6% (8) responding that they do not intend to stay, which is similar to last year (6.4%, 6). Manageable workloads, a supportive manager and pay and other incentives are the top three factors which would encourage social workers to stay with CWC.
- 4.29 When asked what they would change about their job if they could, themes included:
- Less administration
 - More time being spent with families and children
 - More stable teams including addressing workforce challenges
 - More manageable workloads
- 4.30 There continues to be a strong sense of pride amongst social workers and almost all, 90.1% (118) would recommend CWC as an employer to friends and family, an increase from 84%, 78, last year. When asked to comment on what makes them feel positive about working for CWC, comments included:
- "I feel like I'm part of a forward-thinking Local Authority, one that really cares about the children, young people and families who live in the city and want to make positive changes to practice to support them. I feel we are leaps ahead of other LAs in our vision"

- “I feel valued and recognised”
- “City of Wolverhampton value the role of social workers”
- “I have been encouraged and supported to progress...leadership and support is visible”
- “Ambitious; striving for more and better opportunities for all
- “Diverse workforce”
- “Positivity from top-down which values employees”
- “I love my job. I love spending time with young people and trying to support them through their journey”
- “I really enjoy seeing the achievements of our children, young people and staff and how we celebrate this”
- “Wolverhampton is a stable authority with a good reputation”

4.31 For the third year, almost all felt that CWC was actively committed to tackling inequality in some way, with just 3.8% (5) disagreeing. This positive result is likely due to the strong approach taken by Children’s Services 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. Comments about this included:

- “There is a group that deals specifically with this lead by [AP] and we have regular training on Social Graces”
- “We have a real passion in this area. We strive to ensure equalities and that any inequalities or discrimination is addressed”

Wider workforce

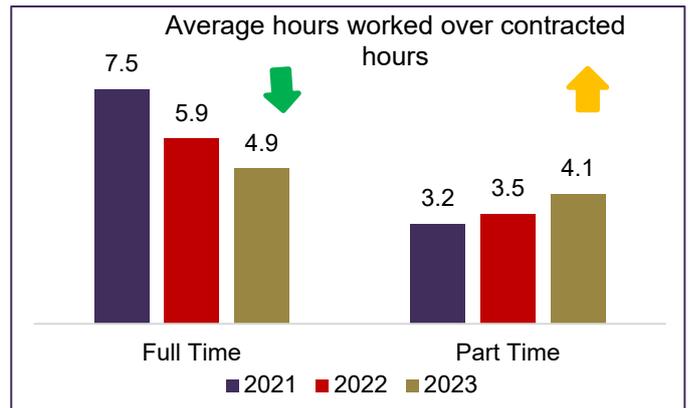
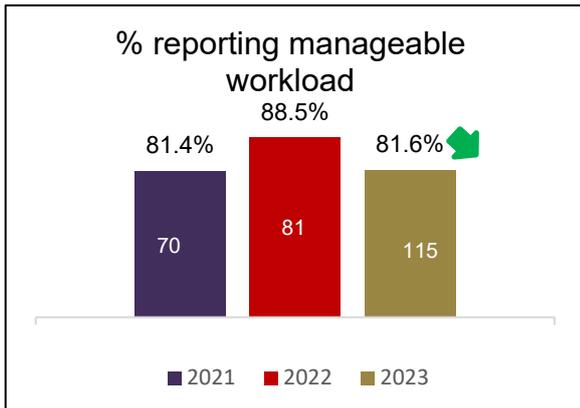
4.32 This is the first year that Education, with the exception of the Educational Psychology service, has been invited to participate in this survey, as they are now fully under Children’s Services. This should be considered when considering how surveys from different years compare.

4.33 When asked how long respondents have worked for CWC, the most common response was more than 11 years—31.2% (44), followed by:

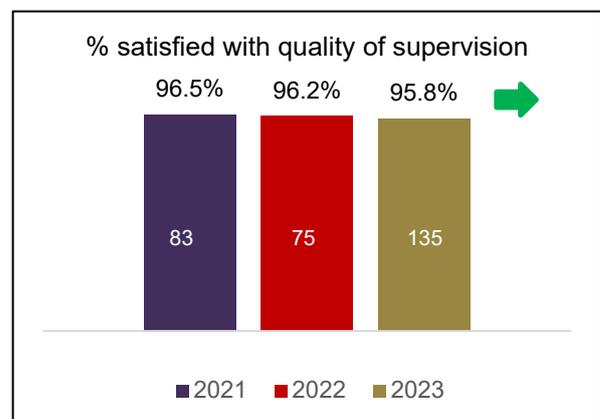
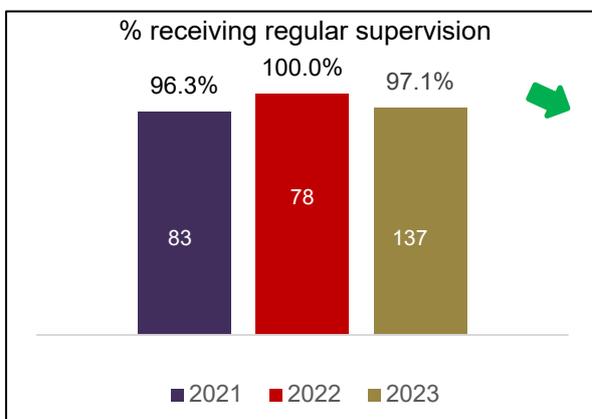
- 1-3 years: 22.7% (32)
- Less than 12 months: 17% (24)
- 4-6 years: 12.8% (18)
- 7-11 years: 10.6% (15)
- The rest responded “prefer not to say”

4.34 This year’s survey suggests that full-time practitioners are working fewer hours over contract when compared to last year whereas part-time workers are working slightly more hours over contract this year.

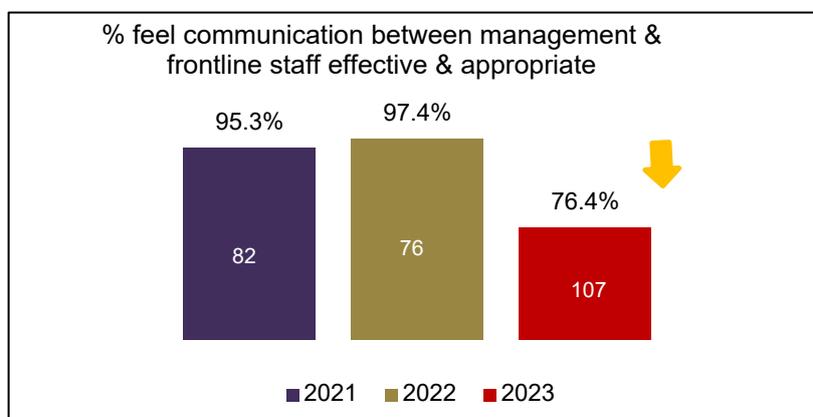
- 4.35 Positively the majority, 81.6% (115) feel that their workloads are manageable, although this is a slight decline from 2022 (88.5%, 81). While the majority said that they never, rarely or only occasionally experience unmanageable levels of stress due to work, this has also slightly declined this year (76.6%, 108, compared to 78.2%, 61, in 2022).
- 4.36 Recruitment and retention activity took place throughout the year to support workload manageability and reduce stress and this will continue through 2024 in an effort to support this further.



- 4.37 Almost all, 93% (131) agree that CWC has a clear model of practice that promotes relationship working and a strengths-based approach to achieve the best outcomes for individuals and families, which is more than last year (91%, 71).
- 4.38 Almost all, 95% (134) feel able to discuss their wellbeing, stressful situations and their workload with their supervisor / manager and agree satisfactory ways forward and 91% (128) know where to get help within the council if concerned about their wellbeing, which is an increase from 81% (63) last year.
- 4.39 About 88% (124) feel encouraged and empowered by CWC to make time for self-care and wellbeing activities, which is a slight increase from 87% (68) in 2022.
- 4.40 The frequency and quality of supervision remains very high, with almost all reporting that they have regular, good quality supervision that is uninterrupted and focussed.



- 4.41 There were fewer this year who felt that communication between senior managers and frontline teams was effective (76%, 107, compared to 97%, 76, in 2022). However, the option to respond “somewhat” was added this year and “no” responses remained consistent with last year (2.9%, 4, compared to 2.6%, 2, in 2022).



- 4.42 There was also fewer who feel they would be, or have been, consulted on changes that would impact their work (53%, 74, compared to 71%, 55, in 2022). However, the option to respond “somewhat” was added this year which may have affected the response rates and, positively, there was a notable decrease in those who responded “no” (16%, 22, compared to 30%, 23, in 2022).

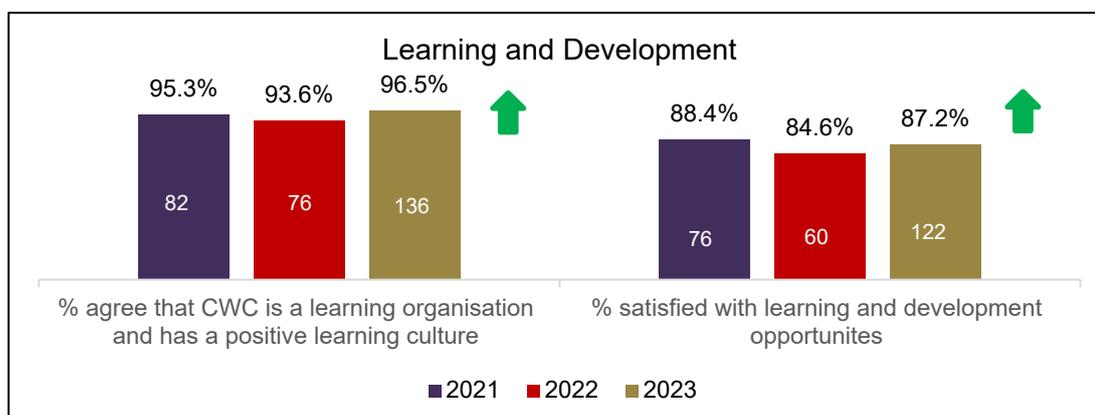
- 4.43 Comments included:

- “I feel that communication from the Council on a whole is excellent—I think I would like clearer communication about aims and values within my department”
- “Would be helpful to have brief highlights from board meetings, etc (such as SEND partnership) summarised in written format so that they can be shared with relevant teams for a quick update and to keep everyone in the loop”

- 4.44 The senior leadership team will be taking action to build on their communication and engagement strategy to ensure they are as visible as possible. This includes:

- The monthly newsletter will continue to keep the workforce informed on any current or expected changes that will impact them
- Regular social work briefings and workforce briefings
- Regular briefings to update the workforce on progress of the Families First for Children Programme (FFCP), which is currently being implemented with Children’s Social Care
- Exploring dedicated resource to support communication around key transformational activity

- 4.45 The vast majority of practitioners remain satisfied with the learning and development opportunities available to them. 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 would have contributed to this improvement.



- 4.46 Almost all, 91% (128), stated that they have opportunities to access resources such as webinars, articles and resources on the learning hub to inform their practice. This question was asked differently this year, meaning responses cannot be directly compared to previous surveys.
- 4.47 Positively, there was an increase in those who feel that that CWC recognises the emotional demands of their roles and provides the supervision, support and tools needed to deal with this, with 62% (87) reporting this compared to 53% (41) last year. More also feel encouraged and empowered to make time for self-care activities. Actions planned over the next year include plans to embed trauma informed practice across the Families Directorate, and the creation of a working group to develop a trauma informed action plan to change how we work as an organisation to ensure it supports the wellbeing of social workers and all frontline practitioners.
- 4.48 Positively, the majority plan to continue working for the council for at least the next 12 months with no respondents reporting that they plan to leave this year (compared to 6%, 5, in 2022). Manageable workloads, pay and other benefits, and training and development opportunities were the top three factors which would encourage practitioners to stay with CWC.
- 4.49 When asked what they would change about their job if they could, themes included:
- Reduced workloads
 - More training/development opportunities, although this was also seen as positive by the majority in the previous question around this
 - More opportunities for progression/secondments

Some comments included:

- “More face-to-face team meetings”

- “Ability to access further education”
- “To have more regular catch-up days to manage feeling of being overwhelmed by so many outstanding tasks”

4.50 There continues to be a strong sense of pride across the workforce and almost all, 91% (128) would recommend CWC as an employer to friends and family (an increase from 78.2%, 61, last year). When asked to comment on what makes them feel positive about working for CWC, comments included:

- “All aspects. It is absolutely fantastic organisation, and I would recommend to anyone who wishes to join us”
- “An inclusive employer that offers a lot of support with the promotion of wellbeing”
- “Being part of a supportive and inclusive team”
- “Opportunities to collaborate within the whole service”
- “Feeling valued”
- “I think we have a great team of directors who are passionate about making a difference and have been supportive of reducing inequalities in CWC”
- “Working directly with children and families and seeing positive outcomes”

4.51 For the third year, almost all felt that CWC was actively committed to tackling inequality in some way, with only 3.5% (5) disagreeing. This positive result is likely due to the strong approach taken by Children’s Services in addressing equality and diversity issues, reflecting the whole council’s approach. However, there is recognition that there is more that can be achieved, and Children’s Services is refreshing their service equality plan to drive this forward. Over the next year, managers will also be supported to facilitate discussions around equality and diversity within supervision, including use of the Social Graces tool.

5.0 Next Steps

5.1 An action plan has been completed as a result of this year’s surveys to address the key areas of development. The Children’s and Education Leadership Team will oversee this. The findings will also inform workforce development plans and 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 additional actions that have been identified:

- Promotion of the 2024 surveys in an effort to increase the response rate further in 2024
- Recruitment and retention strategy and action plan
- The workforce development plan for 2024-2025 will be coproduced with all Heads of Service across Children’s Services to ensure it meets the training and development needs of the service
- Managers will continue to offer flexibility where needed to help people balance their work and home lives to reduce stress levels and working over contracted hours
- Continued offer of stress risk assessments and wellbeing support / resources

- 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
- Continued implementation of trauma informed supervision and trauma informed approaches to reduce the impact of vicarious and secondary trauma and improve practitioner wellbeing
- A dedicated resource is being explored with a focus on workforce engagement, ensuring that the workforce is informed and involved with change
- Supporting managers to facilitate discussions in supervision around equalities and diversity, including use of the Social Graces tool

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 existing approved Children's Services budgets.
[JG/06022024/V]

7.0 Legal implications

7.1 There are no legal implications as a result of this report.
[TC/07012024/A]

8.0 Equalities implications

8.1 Social work and social care is a diverse profession, and the makeup of the frontline teams 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. 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, with the option to print (or have someone else print for you) a copy, complete by hand and return to a drop box in one of many offices throughout the city. 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 2024 and future surveys. Regular reminders and discussions around support required to complete the survey will also take place while the 2024 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 how leaders can work to make improvements where necessary to support the wellbeing of the workforce and ensure they feel supported. Actions identified in the report are intended to support the health and wellbeing of the workforce.