

REPORT TO: Health Policy and Performance Board

DATE: 23 November 2021

REPORTING OFFICER: Sue Wallace-Bonner, Director of Adult Social Services

PORTFOLIO: Health and Wellbeing

SUBJECT: The Standards for Employers of Social Workers and the Social Work Health Check

WARD(S) Borough-wide

1.0 **PURPOSE OF THE REPORT**

1.1 The purpose of this report is to provide PPB with information on work that has taken place within Adult Social Care in relation to The Standards for Employers of Social Workers in England, which are published by the Local Government Association (LGA).

1.2 A self-assessment exercise has been undertaken locally to establish Halton's performance in relation to the Standards and staff have also taken part in the Social Work Health Check survey, which is required under one of the employer standards. This report provides PPB with further information on the outcome of the Health Check survey as well as some brief information on the Standards self-assessment exercise.

2.0 **RECOMMENDATION: That:**

i) **PPB note the contents of the report.**

3.0 **SUPPORTING INFORMATION**

Background

3.1 In Autumn 2020, the Local Government Association (LGA) launched the refreshed Standards for Employers of Social Workers. According to the LGA:

“These are standards, which set out the shared core expectations of employers which will enable social workers in all employment settings to work effectively and safely. These expectations can be used within self-regulation and improvement frameworks for public services and by service regulators. All employers providing a social work service should establish a monitoring system by which they can assess their organisation's performance against this framework, set a process for review and, where necessary, outline their plans for improvement.”

3.2 There are eight standards (listed below) and under each standard there is a list of things that employers should do in order to meet that standard. Full details can be found on the LGA's website: <https://www.local.gov.uk/standards-employers-social-workers-england-0>

1. Strong and clear social work framework
2. Effective workforce planning systems
3. Safe workloads and case allocation
4. Wellbeing
5. Supervision
6. Continuing professional development
7. Professional registration
8. Strategic partnerships

3.3 One of the requirements under Standard 1 is for employers to *“ensure that mechanisms are in place to listen to and respond to the views of practitioners on a regular basis, including undertaking an annual health check to ensure the organisation remains a place where the right environment and conditions exist to support best social work practice”*.

Social Work Health Check 2020

3.4 The Health Check survey has been co-ordinated at a national level by the LGA with national, regional and local reports being produced. Halton social workers took part in the survey in December 2020 and the headline local report was received in January 2021 (see appendix 1) with a more detailed local report being received in May 2021 (see appendix 2).

3.5 Social Workers were invited to complete the survey to answer questions about how well their employer is meeting the Standards. In Halton, there were 22 respondents, which represents an estimated 40%* of the total social workers employed within Adult Social Services in Halton. **Based on 55 social workers on the Social Work Matters Forum distribution list, which was used to publicise the survey. However, managers were asked to ensure that all current employees (social workers only) received the survey so there may have been more potential respondents*

3.6 At a national level, 133 councils and 10 non-councils took part and there were 9,095 survey responses in total. Further information on the national health check survey can be found online: <https://www.local.gov.uk/new-social-work-health-check-2020>

3.7 The Health Check survey asked social workers about the eight standards and five other areas – COVID, employee contribution, tensions, overall satisfaction and desire to stay. Responses were translated into a mean score falling under one of the following:

- Green (sustain);
- Amber (monitor);

- Red (improve).

3.8 Halton's initial report (see appendix 1) revealed a green rating for all standards/areas except:

- CPD – amber;
- Tensions ('I am often required to do more with less resources') – red;
- Overall Satisfaction ('Overall, I am satisfied with my employment 'deal' – what my employer provides for me and what I am expected to provide in return') – amber.

It is worth noting that amber and red ratings were reported for CPD and Tensions on a regional and national level also. However, Overall Satisfaction was green regionally and nationally.

3.9 The detailed report (appendix 2) examines the following questions about the experiences of social workers:

- How well do employers deliver the refreshed standards?
- How do employees perceive their working environment?
- What factors influence them to remain engaged with their work and minded to stay with their organisations?

3.10 In relation to the first question, the highest rated standard was strategic partnerships and the lowest was CPD.

3.11 In relation to the second question, the survey responses indicated that Halton social workers perceive that they are cared for by managers, there is a well-defined approach to social work and they are clear about their role and they are supported to work safely and effectively.

3.12 In relation to the third question, supervision was identified as a key factor influencing the desire to stay.

3.13 On the whole, the survey results present an overwhelmingly positive picture for Halton. Indeed, Halton's national ranking based on the mean scores for each standard was 24 (out of 143) and, regionally, Halton ranked 5 (out of 23).

3.14 It's clear from the responses to the survey that staff feel supported in their roles and that support has continued to be felt throughout the challenging times of the pandemic. A range of mental health and wellbeing support is provided to staff, including:

- An open door system whereby staff can call on managers for discussion at any time;
- Mindfulness training and dedicated sessions within teams;
- Occupational health referrals for staff who would benefit from individual counselling sessions;

- Supervision sessions during which staff can discuss their personal issues confidentially
- Team meetings and action learning sets where staff can discuss learning and be supported with work and complex cases;
- Corporate training for managers on dealing with bereavement following the sad passing of a member of staff and dedicated team support.

Self-Assessment against the Standards

3.15 Following the launch of the refreshed standards, and prior to the Health Check survey, a local working group was established comprising Principal and Practice Managers from across the Adult Social Care Social Work Teams. The group met on a regular basis and separated off in order to review each standard in further detail to determine whether Halton is fully, partially or not at all meeting each element of each standard.

3.16 In summary, the self-assessment exercise revealed that the working group felt that Halton's performance was generally good in relation to the Standards with most areas being identified as 'fully met'. The key areas for improvement (i.e. those areas identified as 'partially met' or 'not at all met') are as follows:

- Standard 1: Strong and clear social work framework – this standard states that “Employers should have in place a strong and clear social work accountability and assurance framework that promotes reflection and learning from experience, evidence and research of outcome-focused social work practice and from the voices of children, adults and families.” This is something that is not currently in place in Halton and needs to be developed. Additionally, this standard references gathering and acting on the views of service users and their families, which is an area that the group felt we could improve as well as promoting the role of social work to politicians, partners and the public.
- Standard 4: Wellbeing – learning and development opportunities (including secondments), making better use of digital technology to support service users, provision of admin support to maximise the time social workers have to spend working with service users and access to fellow professionals (e.g. legal advisors) were areas that the group felt Halton wasn't fully meeting the standard.
- Standard 6: CPD – one of the elements of this standard is to have a performance review system that includes feedback from people with lived experience of the social worker's practice; more could be done around this in Halton.

Next steps

3.17 The Health Check survey is being run on an annual basis and the next survey round is due to start in September 2021. At the time of

writing, Halton has registered interest in taking part and is awaiting further information.

3.18 The working group continues to meet on a regular basis to ensure that action is taken to address the areas for improvement identified via the self-assessment exercise and the results from the Health Check survey.

3.19 The current priority is the development of a Social Work Accountability & Assurance Framework, as per Standard 1. As part of developing this framework, we are considering how to strengthen CPD opportunities for staff, which was an area that appears to need improving from the Health Check survey.

4.0 **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

4.1 Development of the Social Work Accountability & Assurance Framework is a key priority.

5.0 **OTHER/FINANCIAL IMPLICATIONS**

5.1 None identified.

6.0 **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE COUNCIL'S PRIORITIES**

6.1 **Children & Young People in Halton**
None identified.

6.2 **Employment, Learning & Skills in Halton**
See point 6.3 below.

6.3 **A Healthy Halton**

As stated by the LGA:

“Good social work can transform people’s lives and protect them from harm. In order to achieve consistently high-quality outcomes for service users and their carers, social workers must have and maintain the skills and knowledge to establish effective relationships with children, adults, families, and professionals in a range of agencies and settings, and be the key connectors in communities.

Employers should implement a whole systems approach to supporting the social work profession. These Standards set out the key components of whole systems approaches, and employers can use them to enhance their reputation as a service provider and employer by helping to develop a working environment where social work practice and social workers can flourish, in turn supporting recruitment and retention.”

6.4 **A Safer Halton**
None identified.

6.5 **Halton's Urban Renewal**
None identified.

7.0 **RISK ANALYSIS**

7.1 Continued work to address gaps and areas for improvement identified through our work relating to the Standards and the Health Check is reliant upon the availability of social work practitioners to engage in this work. As the challenges resulting from the pandemic continue to be felt across social care, there is a risk that staff do not always have the time required to dedicate to service improvement activities.

8.0 **EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY ISSUES**

8.1 None identified.

9.0 **LIST OF BACKGROUND PAPERS UNDER SECTION 100D OF THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT ACT 1972**

Not applicable.

Appendix 1: Halton initial report

Attached

Appendix 2: Halton detailed report

Attached