Adult Health and Social Care, Calderdale Council

Newly Qualified Social Workers

Cultural Change Programme

Background

Five years ago the adult social work service in Calderdale took a ‘traditional’ approach to recruiting social workers. Managers generally aimed to recruit experienced social workers with at least three to five years’ on-the-job experience.

As a local authority, social work practice was heavily care management which resulted in high levels of care home placements, over-commissioning of home care and emergency respite, which quickly converted into long-term care. There was very little understanding of rights-based approaches and advocacy.

Recruitment had been slowing down for some time, leading to a protracted recruitment period where managers were unable to recruit social workers. Applicants would meet the shortlisting requirements but they were not evidencing that they held values which were congruent with the profession and reflected where we wanted adult social work in Calderdale to go.

The tipping point was the introduction of a stock question at interview which asked the candidates about the five principles of the Mental Capacity Act. The responses from experienced Social Workers who had been in practice pre-dating the introduction of the Assessed Supported Year in Employment, were extremely disheartening.

Very few knew the five statutory principles. More importantly, even fewer could apply them to practice. As a result, we were building up a bank of vacancies that we just couldn’t fill with quality applicants. This led to overuse of agency staff and mounting pressure on caseloads.

What we wanted to achieve

We made a decision as a management team that we needed to take action to foster and invest in a new culture for adult social work - a culture which defined social work steeped in values of user participation and upholding human rights.

The evidence was overwhelming that, in order to achieve our ambition of providing support which upheld the values of social workers being servants not masters, we needed to take a brave step in the face of our recruitment issues.

We decided to abandon the practice of recruiting experienced social workers, and instead ring-fenced all vacancies for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs).

We particularly wanted to see changes in social work practice where people’s lives and liberty are impacted on by professional decision making involving the Mental Health Act (1983) and Mental Capacity Act (2005).

We were worried that people with a learning disability and/or people who need support to recover from a period of mental ill health are the most at risk of their human rights being infringed. Having successfully improved practice through...
recruiting good NQSWs within older people social work teams, we deliberately ring fenced new roles in learning and mental health for NQSWs who could evidence at interview, that they had the right values to uphold human rights through every decision they made in practice.

To ensure that the NQSWs were supported in making an effective transition from student to fully autonomous professional, we put together a package of support which included:

- an induction programme, delivered by the Principal Social Worker in partnership with the lead commissioner, about assessment and sufficient supply of support options in Calderdale
- a peer mentor
- Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE) commissioned from a local University with a programme built around principles of peer support, action-learning and applied critical thinking
- a protected caseload with carefully selected cases to meet assessed learning outcomes from the ASYE
- bespoke learning events which were designed around the principles of the Mental Capacity Act to explore the principles in practice to encourage their development as experts of ECHR, HRA, MCA
- dedicated open sessions with the Director of Adult Social Services
- a personalised professional development pathway at the end of the AYSE onto Best Interest Assessor, Practice Educator and Approved Mental Health Professional.

What we achieved

Through this approach, we’ve raised the status and professional standing of adult social work in Calderdale.

NQSWs are increasingly recognised as crucial members of the team with their professional unique contribution and their responsibilities are better understood and respected.

Through a professional practice Social Work Forum, NQSWs and their experienced colleagues have reported they feel they’ve a much greater say in their practice and are being empowered to work creatively, engage in community development and not just individual case work, and truly involve people who receive support in the running of services.

We’ve improved arrangements to ensure that Social Workers are professionally accountable across all adult settings. We ensure that people are supported to make decisions within a model that is truly positive in terms of risk-taking and upholds the fundamental rights of individuals to remain in control of their lives wherever possible, making choices and decisions that are right for them.

We’ve introduced weekly Mental Capacity Clinics and a fortnightly Risk Enablement Panel to support front NQSWs. These are chaired by the Principal Social Worker, supported by the Mental Capacity Act Lead.

These developments focus on developing NQSWs professional social work practice to ensure it’s truly based on values of anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice.

The developments ensure that people have the right level of professional support, protection from harm and have the strength to regain the balance of power away from the state.

We’ve begun to understand what it would mean to be a Named Social Worker supporting a person with a learning disability (as originally proposed in No Voice Unheard, No Right Ignored).

We’ve been one of seven local authorities who’ve contributed to the Department of Health Social Work for Better Mental Health early adopters programme which supports step change in the culture of social work practice from a rights and strengths-based approach.
“NQSWs are on another level in terms of their innate understanding of human rights and personalisation. They really get the observations made by Lord Justice Munby that the local authority should be a servant not a master, working in genuine co-production with people.”
Principal Social Worker

What we learnt

Our approach ensures that professional social work is proportionate in its response, and that it builds on existing and new networks of support to re-engage individuals with their community and with family and friends, wherever feasible.

We’ve learnt that if we trust and invest in front-line practice we can deliver significant improved outcomes for people, at the same time as improved efficiencies for the Local Authority.

This is showing in the Calderdale performance returns. Our Local Authority shows as the most improved in Yorkshire Humber against the 2015/16 ASCOF returns, and all Council budget savings having been met.

The success of NQSWs is underpinned by the quality of the ASYE partnership with the University.

It’s therefore critical as an employer that the partnership is carefully selected to ensure that there is congruence between the taught elements of the ASYE programme and the practice values of the social work employer who commissions the programme.

“The impact that NQSWs have had on the shape of the Directorate, our operating model and outcomes is phenomenal. They’ve influenced practice from the frontline and been at the heart of a truly transformational cultural change programme which defines social work practice as being about human rights. The NQSWs see themselves as public servants whose role is to uphold human rights for all, regardless of condition or circumstance.”
Director, Adult Social Services

Contact us

To speak to the team at Calderdale about their experiences please contact:

Rob.Mitchell@calderdale.gov.uk
Elaine.James@calderdale.gov.uk

www.calderdale.gov.uk