

# Executive Summary for the Independent Evaluation of the CPEL Framework: Year 3 Report

September 2017



## 1 Introduction

This is the year 3 report of the independent evaluation of the Continuing Professional Education and Learning (CPEL) Framework for social workers. It forms part of a five-year longitudinal evaluation, which was commissioned by Social Care Wales (formerly the Care Council for Wales) and is being conducted by Cordis Bright. The evaluation considers: (a) how the CPEL Framework helps to improve the quality of social work practice, (b) how it helps to improve career progression and career development, (c) how it improves retention of social workers, (d) how it helps to improve outcomes for service users and carers, and (e) the level of take-up, attendance and completion of the CPEL Framework programmes.

## 2 Methodology

As agreed with Social Care Wales, the methodology for the year 3 evaluation was relatively light-touch. It consisted of:

- Evidence of 'distance travelled' by social workers, through analysis of 754 impact measurement tools completed during the three years of evaluation.
- Evidence of impact from qualitative consultation 16 stakeholders who have a strategic and/or operational interest in the CPEL Framework.
- Evidence from wider outcome indicators and strategic documentation relating to the CPEL Framework.

Given the nature of the evidence collected the report comments on the CPEL Framework as a whole and individual programmes within it, i.e.

- Consortium Y De Consolidation Programme (CYD Programme).
- Porth Agored Consolidation Programme (PA Programme).
- Experienced Practice in Social Work Programme (EP Programme).
- Senior Practice in Social Work Programme (SP Programme).
- Consultant Social Work Programme (CSW Programme).

## 3 Key Findings

### 3.1 Level of uptake & engagement with CPEL Programmes

- The evaluation highlighted mixed messages in relation to take-up and engagement.
- Take-up of places across the CPEL Framework is healthy. Since the inception of the CPEL Framework and up to August 2016, 868 social workers had registered for a CPEL programme. This partly reflects the recent decision to make the Consolidation Programme compulsory as part of ongoing registration. In relation to the other programmes, in 2015-16 nearly three quarters of local authorities took-up their allocated places and half purchased additional places. These figures have increased compared to previous years.
- That said, the evaluation highlights concerns about attrition. For instance, for the Consolidation Programmes, attrition is about 20%. For the EP Programme, both cohorts of social workers who registered to undertake the programme had an attrition rate of about two-thirds. For the SP Programme, the attrition rate was over a half for the first cohort and over a quarter for the second cohort. For the CSW Programme, so far nearly a third of social workers who registered to undertake the Programme in full have withdrawn.
- The high level of attrition, particularly for the EP, SP and CSW programmes is a concern for Social Care Wales. However, work is underway to address this.

### 3.2 Distance travelled over time

For the CYD Consolidation Programme:

- Social workers report that, on average, their understanding and skill and their confidence levels in almost all domains have improved over the course of their involvement in the programme.
- For most domains, this improvement in understanding and skill and in confidence levels is sustained or improves further one year after their involvement in the programme has ended.
- That said, there is a general dip in views about career retention, career progression and career satisfaction over the immediate course of their involvement in the CYD programme. However, this appears to 'bounce-back' one year after their involvement.
- The likelihood of undertaking the next programme or recommending the CPEL Framework to others dips slightly over time, though it averages at 'mainly agree'.

For the EP Programme:

- Social workers also report that, on average, their understanding and skill and their levels of confidence in almost all domains has improved over the course of their involvement in the programme.

- Views on retention, progression and career satisfaction are more variable and mainly more positive for this group of social workers compared to CYD respondents.
- The likelihood of undertaking the next programme or recommending the CPEL Framework to others dips slightly over time, though it averages at 'mainly agree'.

For the Framework as a whole:

- Stakeholders in senior strategic roles and in operational roles were broadly positive about the levels of awareness of the CPEL Framework across Wales. The newly introduced compulsory nature of the Consolidation Programme was highlighted as a particularly positive development.
- Views on the Framework are relatively localised, and dependent on the experiences of social workers within each local area.

### **3.3 Key findings on relative contribution of the CPEL Framework**

- The majority of evidence collected so far relates to the CYD Consolidation Programme and suggests that social workers agree that the CPEL Framework makes 'a little' or 'moderate' contribution to improvements in their understanding, skills and confidence. Social worker managers tend to be more positive reporting that the Framework makes a 'moderate' or 'high' contribution.
- This was mirrored in relation to the Framework's contributions to retention, career progression and career satisfaction where social workers who had participated in a CYD Programme reported that it made 'a little' or 'moderate' contribution. Again, social worker managers were more positive, reporting on average a 'moderate' contribution.
- For the Framework as a whole, strategic and operational stakeholder were generally positive about the contribution of the CPEL Framework to understanding, skills and confidence. These stakeholders were more cautious about commenting on the contribution of the CPEL Framework to outcomes for services users and carers, highlighting that these were affected by a wide range of other factors.
- Strategic and operational stakeholders noted that the CPEL Framework offered social workers a clear avenue to develop their skills and access promotion. A small number suggested that, in the future, completion of CPEL Programmes may become a requirement for promotion.

### **3.4 Key findings on strengths, areas for improvement & value for money**

Key strengths of the CPEL Framework were perceived to be (1) relevant, high quality programme content; (2) quality of teaching; (3) inclusion of an element of professional reflection; (4) focus on independent practice-based research; (5) workshops to support social workers participating in programmes; and (6) specifically in relation to the Consolidation Programme, its timeliness in a social worker's career.

The main area for improvement was the level of attrition from EP, SP and Consultant Social Work Programmes. Factors that were highlighted as contributing to this were workload and style of teaching and learning.

the total cost of providing both Consolidation Programmes up to August 2016 was £292,430 for 720 students who registered to undertake programmes. This is the equivalent of £406 per head. The total cost represented by withdrawals in this period was £25,150 for 70 students, 9% of the total cost. Social Care Wales funds 100 EP, SP and CSW Programme places per year at a cost of £300,000 per year. In the two academic years 2014-15 and 2015-16, 149 social workers started the programmes. As a result, surplus funding has been used by Social Care Wales to commission additional support from Cardiff University on aspects of the CPEL Framework. Total withdrawals over the 2014-15 and 2015-16 period were 44 resulting in withdrawal costs of £180,271, 30% of the total cost of the EP, SP and CSW Programmes.

There was no clear consensus on whether the CPEL Framework offered value for money. A number of stakeholders were positive about the value for money offered by the Framework. However, others suggested that the high attrition rate for EP, SP and Consultant Social Work Programmes undermined the value for money that the programmes could offer, particularly when compared with other programmes available to social workers to undertake continuing professional development.

## 4 Conclusions

There is evidence that the CPEL Framework is having a positive impact on the quality of social work practice and that in the longer term this may contribute to improved outcomes for service users and carers. Quantitative and qualitative analysis shows improvements in social workers' understanding and skills and confidence in the time since engaging with the CPEL Framework. There is also evidence suggesting that the CPEL Framework is a contributing factor in bringing about this development.

The relationship between CPEL Programmes and the wider context in which they are operating is complex. A number of external factors which may be inhibiting the positive impact of the CPEL Framework, and in particular contributing to high attrition rates, have emerged, the most commonly highlighted being the difficulties of managing the expectations of the programmes with high workload and the method of distance learning. This was closely tied to the high attrition rate on EP, SP and CSW Programmes.

However, stakeholders also identified a number of external factors which positively impact on social workers' development, particularly relating to the range of other training and professional development opportunities which are available.

## 5 Recommendations

Two new recommendations arise from the findings in year 3. These are designed to complement the activities that Social Care Wales is undertaking – in partnership with employers and providers – to address the levels of attrition. The new recommendations are:

- Introduce more robust and consistent mechanisms across CPEL Programmes to monitor key data relating to applications, acceptance, take-up, completion, withdrawal, and deferment. Data should be collected and analysed in a way which enables Social Care Wales to easily track each cohort through their engagement with CPEL Programmes.
- Develop clear communications with employers regarding the cost of offering places on CPEL Programmes. This would enable employers to more effectively judge the value for money offered.

A number of recommendations from the year 2 evaluation are retained. These are:

- Promote stronger partnerships between CPEL Programme providers and employers to explore possible solutions to issues raised by social workers about workload, balancing CPEL and case work, and obtaining adequate study time and support.
- Review communication about the CPEL Framework and programmes by both providers and Social Care Wales. This communication should aim to promote a more in-depth understanding of the Framework, its purpose, how employers and managers can support it, and what might be expected of social workers, managers and employers who engage with it. As part of this, consider the introduction of learning contracts.
- Consider whether additional taught or contact time can be built into the programmes, or whether peer learning opportunities can be better promoted, to prevent some social workers from feeling overwhelmed by the amount of independent study required.