

From the front line: alcohol, drugs and social work practice - a national study

This paper presents findings from the first national study of its kind. The study explores the experiences of front line social care practitioners responding to substance problems among their service users. It has built on findings from smaller scale studies in which social workers report being ill prepared for working with substance problems.

After three decades of calls for change, the Social Work Reform Board and the Munro review have, once again, identified substance use as an issue social workers face. This study is therefore timely in that it demonstrates how problematic substance use cuts across all specialist areas of practice and presents social workers' views of the pressures they face and their education needs in relation to substance use.

This year long research project included the completion of an online survey by 826 practitioners from 10 local authorities across England (including 7 Adult Services' directorates and 10 Children's Services' directorates), as well as 12 focus groups and 14 key informant interviews. The aims were to understand the extent and nature of substance use on social work caseloads, the level of joint working with substance specialists, the levels of previous education on substance use as well as current training needs.

This paper will present our key findings, including data on the caseload proportions of a range of service user groups including older people, people with learning disabilities, and children and families. Recommendations for social work education, grounded in the views of social workers, will be offered. These include calls to support front line staff by ensuring qualifying programmes include core training in how to speak to someone about their substance use, how to assess risks relating to substance use, the types of intervention available, how to use screening tools and how to work with someone who minimises their substance use.