

# Analysis of the Adult Social Work Practice Review Programme

Report for the West Midlands Association of  
Directors of Adult Social Services  
(WMADASS)

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## **Introduction**

In 2010, the election of the Coalition Government and the implementation of austerity in public spending led to a step back from using the regulator to assess social work practice in adult social care and a move to “sector-led improvement.”

The West Midlands region strongly supported its programme of regional adult care peer reviews alongside those offered by the LGA. The region added Practice Reviews to the regional peer review programme ten years ago.

The development of Practice Reviews aimed to ground peer evaluation in the experiences of those who draw upon services. At its inception, there was a marked disparity between the widespread use of practice audits in children’s services and the scarcity of similar work within adults. The regional programme has supported PSWs in councils to develop their tools for practice audits. This is one of several examples of how the benefits of the Practice Audits extend beyond the programme. The programme enjoys significant support, with the region discovering ways to sustain it through the pandemic and adapting it to include more online elements.

After ten years and fifty practice reviews, WMADASS requested an independent programme evaluation. It aims to assess the programme’s impact over the decade of reviews, address key issues such as equality, diversity, and inclusion in the review, and consider the future role of practice reviews, particularly concerning CQC assurance. To fulfil this brief, two workshops have been conducted with the PSWs, along with interviews of staff and individuals who utilise care services across councils in the region and a review of the audits for key themes.

This review sits alongside the research published by the University of Birmingham (2023), which found that:

“When implemented robustly, a peer challenge process can provide valuable insights into practice conditions and outline the main opportunities for improvement within the political, social and financial context.”

This review supplements the research by collecting the views of individuals in the region regarding the evolution of capabilities over the past decade and their thoughts on future development.

The region is to be applauded for its commitment to learning and sharing that learning. The UoB research and this product are among the few published reviews of peer evaluation. Given the importance of ensuring the quality of social work in enabling people to live “gloriously ordinary lives,” the sector needs to consider this methodology and provide for more research.

## Language and abbreviations

I have used the terminology “people who draw upon social work” and “lived or living experience” for the people at the centre of Practice Reviews and their co-production.

I have tried avoiding terminology such as “cases” or “case-work” and hope these terms don’t appear. Having been a social worker for forty years, I know old language is hard-wired, even with more recent awareness of the stigma it carries.

I have used just five abbreviations:

1. PSW – Principal Social Worker; the practice lead in each council;
2. DASS – Director of Adult Social Services – the statutory lead for adult social care in each council (often known by other titles);
3. WMADASS – West Midlands Association of Director of Adult Social Services, one of nine regions supporting the member councils of the national association (ADASS);
4. EDI - Equality, Diversity and Inclusion;
5. CQC – Care Quality Commission – the regulator of adult social care.

## What is Practice Review?

A Practice Review encompasses file audits, discussions with social workers, and conversations with individuals receiving care, building upon a council’s self-assessment and examining key themes established by the host council. The review team is composed of Principal Social Workers supported by individuals with lived experience, and the social work staff within the council under review. The process is led by a WMADASS Associate who oversees the programme's delivery and applies this to each audit.

The key elements are:

- The council’s self-assessment ( and increasingly their ambition for the review and the progress made from previous reviews)
- Meetings with staff and frontline managers (mainly held virtually) as facilitated conversations about practice
- An examination of at least fifteen records related to work with people drawing upon social work support
- Facilitated conversations with people with lived experience whose records have been read and who want to be interviewed (and/or identified supporter)

## **Part One: The fundamental building blocks of Practice Review**

### **The Conditions for Assuring Good Social Work Practice**

*“It’s more than about meeting statutory duties; it’s about how you exist in relation to the rest of the world.”*

Working as a region has created a shared ambition that good practice is about meeting the aspirations of the Care Act (2014). This lifts the work of the PSWs in their council and collectively out of the resource debates and into how they are succeeding in meeting needs and securing well-being. Assurance based on ambition has a momentum about continual improvement, which is distinctly different from a compliance approach. The region is ambitious and wants to lead practice development - it sees assurance as more than a static snapshot.

The PSWs discussed “being brave” in preparing to confront complex issues and how to open their organisations to address them. Bravery was sometimes illustrated by the choice of audit topics and the subsequent work to develop improvement plans. PSWs valued the flexibility they are afforded in selecting topics, which enables them to identify areas of practice for review, and they managed to secure the support of the DASS in this regard. Recognising this relationship between PSWs and the DASS at the programme and local levels has been instrumental in the practice reviews, which are beginning to confront sensitive issues with increased confidence.

Bravery also applies at the regional level in responding to councils that appear to close down an issue or where recurrent themes emerge without action over time. The region has responded by initiating “support and challenge conversations” with each council. These conversations can address the research finding that the impact of the Practice Review fades over time. A regional approach is also emerging to review findings, so there is evidence of thinking not only about the context of the council that has been reviewed but also about a broader discussion about what the review tells all councils.

The programme works best when firmly integrated with frontline social work, which was frequently underestimated in its early stages. Some participants felt that they observed a lack of safe spaces for social workers to reflect on their practice. Increasingly, the audits promote reflective social work practice and supervision within the approach, which has focused on practice and outcomes.

WMADASS has stayed with this programme over time, making it part of how “things are done around here”. It has learnt from and adapted the programme, but this review has also highlighted emerging benefits from the growth of trust and maturity.

The programme has developed using a set of values it has brought to the fore. These include trust (especially in the DASS and PSW networks), bravery, and person-centred and strengths-based approaches. Participants described how recent work has been driven by values, especially by exploring some of the emerging questions about approaches to equality, diversity, and inclusion. Sometimes, the values referred to were “social work values” from a professional standpoint, and it might be worth some reflection on the specific values within this approach that the region wishes to nurture for the further success of this programme.

What helps create the right conditions for assuring good social work practice?

- Setting the sights upon the ambition to meet people’s needs and secure their wellbeing
- Attention to the relationship that PSW’s have with the DASS and how this links to practice improvement
- A willingness to be brave and confront complexity whilst also starting to address early on how to manage change
- A focus upon social work practice, the importance of reflective practice and supervision
- Shifting from ‘process’ to practice and outcomes.
- Sticking with and developing the methodology over time
- A clear and consistent underpinning set of values: comprising of professional values (such as human rights-based approaches) and some of the ways of working together (trust, bravery)

## A regional culture of curiosity and development

The region has a serious commitment to research, which it has now embedded in its regional support offer. The region is keen on practice based on evidence but also makes good use of applying and developing research. WMADASS has demonstrated that it is committed to developing research by reviewing this programme. The region has subscribed to the British Journal of Social Work for every practitioner, and the PSWs have a Research Action Plan.

The review approach is based on appreciative inquiry; some individuals were initially sceptical, with one person describing it as “looking far too kind.” However, as the programme has matured, there is growing confidence that this method presents a more typical picture than other methods with a greater performative aspect. Discussions with social workers about EDI have broadened, and there is less “fear and panic.” Credit also goes to PSWs and DASSs, who are noticeably at ease about practice reviews and now

have “finding us as we are” as their foundation. Despite a considerable churn in senior leaders, this ease has accumulated over the years.

The programme's success hinges on how feedback is given, received, and implemented. The involvement of people with lived experience is perceived as having “elevated the feedback’ while fostering greater honesty. Principal Social Workers (PSWs) lead the feedback process within the council and connect this to practice. Sharing feedback while avoiding defensiveness is crucial for enhancing the programme's impact on social work practice. Individuals with lived experience appreciated the Coaching Skills framework from National Voices and felt that the skills they developed through this programme facilitated constructive conversations.

There is clear evidence of how trust has built up through the programme. There has been no challenge to any of the last twelve reports, with confidence about the precision of the feedback. There is also a growing sense that the reviews work best when they are “as we are” rather than performative.

#### What’s helping to build curiosity?

- The region has a deep commitment to the development of research and how this is applied within social work practice and lived experience
- WMADASS promotes this to social workers: the subscription for every social worker to The British Journal of Social Work is a statement of intent and interest
- As the programme has matured, councils are entering the Practice Review with more confidence about showing practice “as is” and are picking topics where they know they face serious challenges. This is engaging more staff in real conversations
- There is curiosity about how findings are applied across all councils: Practice Reviews are resource heavy and the region is showing how it can identify and work with common themes

## Lived Experience and Peer Participation

The programme is alert to the danger that, at times, a focus on social work and practice can be at the expense of the lived experience of people who use the services. Therefore, it seeks to orient itself to people’s experiences of the service.

WMADASS has adopted a Logic Model based on the “Making It Real” framework that Think Local Act Personal (TLAP) devised. This orientates the region to ensure that all its activities contribute to outcomes for people in communities in the West Midlands.



The Practice Review programme has increasingly become defined by the experiences that social work supports in a person's life. It promotes a strengths-based approach and looks for social work that is person-centred. This has been enhanced by involving people with lived experience as reviewers who speak with people who draw upon the council's social work services. People with lived experience valued their participation in the programme. They all felt part of a team where the range of perspectives is vital to a successful practice review.

There are a range of views about peer access to records, which has been challenging to sit with GDPR. In one council, the direct employment of lived experience experts has allowed full access to records. Peers had some experiences of meeting people drawing upon social care where they had no advance knowledge about issues, including communication needs. They felt disadvantaged by this. However, there was also a strong view that meeting people as peers with no prior knowledge created a genuine space for a robust and more independent review. The peer reviewers with lived experience felt that they were solely looking through the lens of the experience of the social work service and the impact it had on a person's life and outcomes.

The review report examines people's experiences of social work and compares this to the records. This brings to life the tensions that can exist between practice and people.

There is an understanding that the focus on lived experience frays when looking at social work with people with complex needs (s117, continuing health care, etc). Councils talked about struggling with risk assessment, commissioning, and decision-making in these areas and are unsure whether all of these are producing the proper outcomes.

The focus of the review is on social work with adults, although perhaps inevitably, the role of broader social care came into some of the scope of this review. There was praise for some of the work seen in one review of how social work assessment was linked to community resources through the work of a specific team. Substantial person-centred social work should lead to plans that strengthen or reinvigorate people's connections to others and their communities. The key to exploring this further might be looking at how social work plans are implemented and how the social worker engages with a wide range of systems and resources.

## Equality, Diversity and Improvement

*"We don't talk about the things that make us uncomfortable."*

It's worth noting how the programme developed its focus on EDI by prioritising person-centred work. One individual remarked, "It (EDI) felt absent." PSWS recognised through discussion that EDI must be integrated into the programme as central to understanding a person's identity. The emphasis on EDI in the practice reviews has emerged from a regional approach: the shared awareness that everyone must engage in conversations

about EDI and become more focused has sparked dialogues that contribute to the region's strategy and highlight the importance placed on EDI.

The review programme has highlighted social workers' discomfort at asking questions and exploring a person's identity and their sense of how that supports their lives. Participants felt that questions about EDI have sometimes become formulaic rather than being seen as aiding the social worker in getting a rounded understanding of how people interact with others and the systems in their lives. The purpose of exploring issues about equality and diversity isn't an end in itself; instead, it's essential to understand fully how to support people well.

When people reflected on their experience as reviewers considering EDI, they commented on low confidence in social work practitioners. Social workers were acutely aware of issues related to EDI but were not self-assured about their practice. Building confident practitioners is still seen as a challenge because it also requires embracing an element of discomfort. As one person with lived experience said, "If you can ask the toilet questions, surely you can ask me anything?"

The region needs to remain focused on the priority it is affording to EDI: reflecting on (and possibly regretting?) why it has taken time during the programme's life to come to the fore. Participants articulated the challenges that lie ahead with confidence and ease, and the region must build upon the levels of trust it has to hold its feet to the fire regarding the significant inequalities that are far too prevalent in the lives of those who rely on social work.

It's interesting to observe that the region has a rounded perspective on the scale of development needed to embed EDI into social work practice. This perspective comes from how the region uses the reports to debate common issues. The region might want to consider how it can support thematic work across common social work themes and how the practice review findings might feed into other WMADASS activities.

The review has highlighted some challenging questions about EDI within social work practice:

- Gender, identity and sexuality are not given enough consideration
- People with lived experience have observed that outside specialist teams, there is little exploration of people's mental health in assessments
- Everyone felt that the impact of neurodiversity needs more development
- Making progress on EDI will need to address the confidence of social work practitioners: it needs to be rooted in getting a rounded picture of a person's life, identity and the barriers they can face within communities

## Power

Many participants talked about the high levels of trust that support insightful reviews. This trust is shown in how topics are chosen and then enhanced through deep listening to experiences and working with some discomfort from findings. At times, people also reflected upon bravery. These narratives centre around how power is exercised and shared. Effective Peer and Practice Reviews require a collaborative approach and a willingness to share power.

## **Part Two: Reviews and their Impact**

### Impact of being a reviewer

The UoB research identified the impact of participating in the programme as a reviewer. When focusing on these benefits in this work, an unexpected effect was the extent to which PSWs, in particular, emphasized the growth of their relationships with their peers. They could demonstrate how their peers influenced their roles, contributed to their induction, and assisted them in reflecting on and developing a highly tailored role.

The experience of being a reviewer magnified this impact: Many people felt that they gained as much, if not more, from stepping out of their usual roles and environments and observing practices elsewhere. PSWs could cite instances where seeing practice in different settings changed their authority: one council adopted new methods of working with Occupational Therapists, while another introduced a practice model that CQC has praised. PSWs reflected on how being a reviewer compelled them to confront their perceptions of practice standards.

PSWs also reported that the programme made them feel part of something bigger. They value the importance the DASSs attach to the work and their support with time release and making reviews happen. They also appreciate the resources WMADASS has invested in the programme by investing in support and aligning associates with the activity to bring capacity and expertise. There was a sense of regional identity for everyone; they valued being connected and contributing to WMADASS.

People with living experience also talked about the sense of “team” they get from joining reviews and working on the programme. Individuals with lived experience remarked on how much they had learned from being part of a review team; it is part of a journey from direct experience to observing and reflecting on broader trends.

Finally, people with lived experience and staff involved in reviews spoke about the “exhilaration” they derived from witnessing excellent practice as a reviewer, which fostered sustained motivation.

Councils might not necessarily be fully maximising the benefits of involvement: the spread of PSWs supporting reviews totalled ten in one authority and three in the lowest. Whilst this might reflect turnover and other factors, the region has an opportunity to address the value attached to participation.

#### Impact of Being a Reviewer:

- Participants reported a range of benefits that can be categorised as
- Their own learning and development from seeing how another council and similar roles operate
- Service learning – seeing the ways somethings work elsewhere and taking that back to develop within their own council
- Audit skills: working with others on the evaluation of practice and taking these tools back into practice audits
- “Calibration” – PSWs valued the chance to assess what makes for good practice and reflecting on their approach to ratings. PSWs described taking a different approach within their own practice audits as a result
- Everyone valued the sense of “team” work and being part of meaningful coproduction
- The impact of feeling part of a region and the connection to WMADASS

There were tensions related to time release by the PSW’s host council and with the review largely taking place through digital systems, it tends to be incorporated into the day job, which has contributed to lengthening the time taken in some reviews.

There are opportunities arising from this review to consider how the impact of review could be more explicitly valued both at the host council and within the further development of the capacity of the region’s learning.

## Impact of being Reviewed

There are clear examples of the impact that the reviews have made:

- Greater clarity about what makes for good practice has led to greater confidence in internal audits. Host councils generally benefited from checking their understanding with peers
- On occasion, the difference between peer evaluation and the host council’s views led to the realisation that the council needed to refocus and overhaul its internal audit system

- Reassurance about the use of strengths-based practice: Many councils had assumed this dipped during the pandemic, but the reviews have found the reverse
- More thinking about a practice model and how this assists social work
- One council worked to coproduce a range of practice materials and collated them into one place
- A sharper focus on EDI in recording and linking this to practice (which has been well-received by social workers)
- Quotes from social workers that were put into the CQC self-assessment
- For one council, the review galvanised thinking about support from other related professions, and it then appointed a Principal Occupational Therapist

There were a few examples of where the practice with the person reviewed had changed due to the evaluation. The view on impact could be strengthened if it also included what changed with people as a result and whether this was picked up in further learning. The region should consider ways of gathering this information.

There was a consensus that the programme's new, more explicit question for councils, “What do you want from the review?” has strengthened its delivery and focus. It may also be worthwhile to explore what would support the DASS and PSW in driving change so that the connection between the review and improvement is more explicit.

## Impact of being part of the Practice Review Programme

This review took place as CQC started its local authority assessment programme. Consequently, it focused on how the Practice Review programme fits into this context.

WMADASS's Practice Review programme was developed through sector-led improvement initiatives that followed the Coalition Government's decision not to regulate or performance assess councils through CQC. The region is to be commended for having a programme that all councils had brought into, albeit with some variation in the number of practice reviews each council has supported.

The introduction of the CQC assessment of each local authority from April 2023 has inevitably refocused attention on how councils inform their assurance. Here, the region has a distinct advantage through:

- A system of peer review, with a focus on the experience of receiving care
- The way that the WMADASS and PSW networks can support each PSW and council with their assurance

During the workshops in this review, the discussion was developed using the Three Lines of Defence/Assurance Model, a widely recognised framework used for risk management

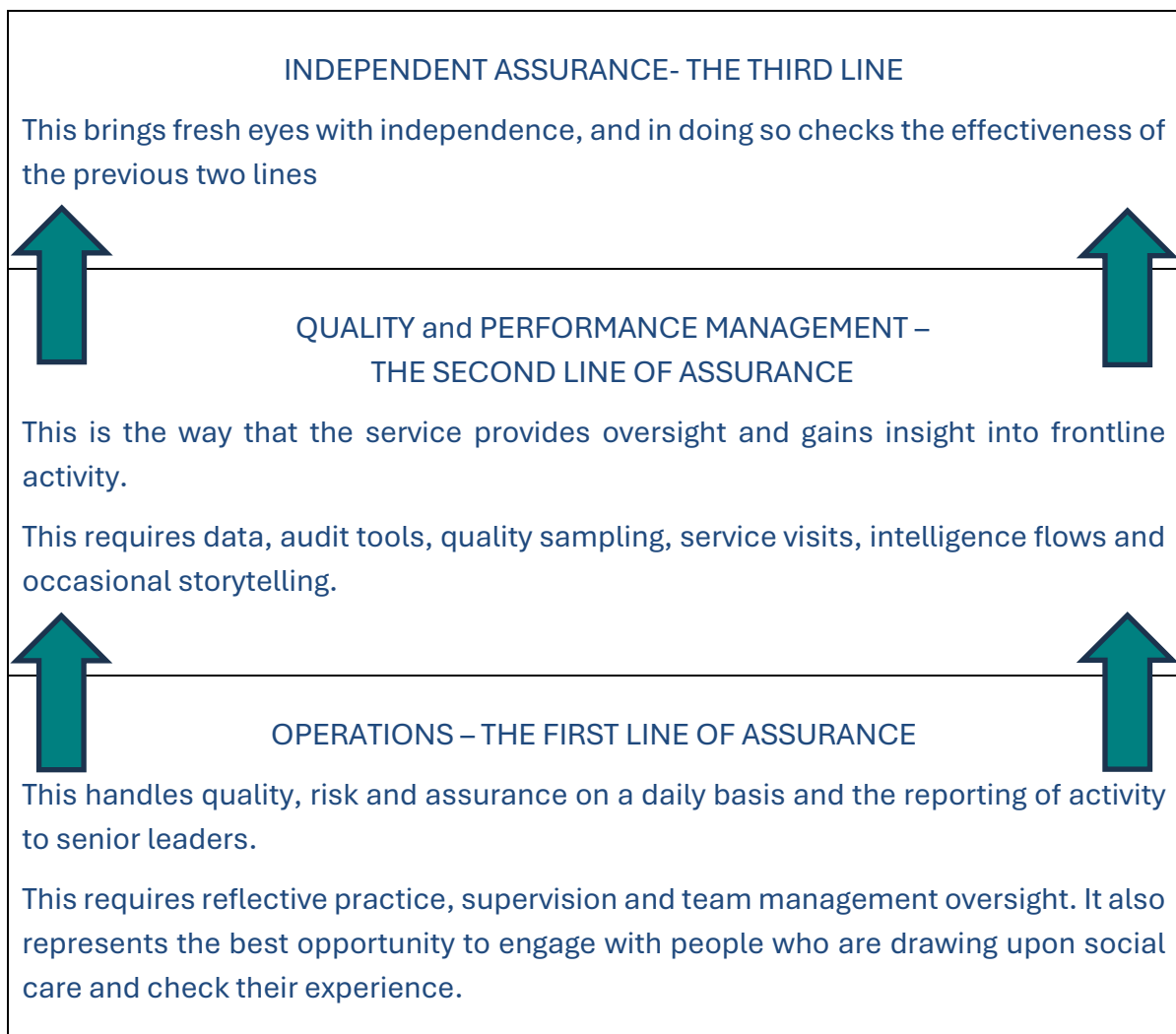
and internal control in organisations. It provides a clear structure for governance and assurance by defining the roles and responsibilities across different levels of defence.

Some councils were familiar with this framework, but others were unfamiliar with it. This indicates the usefulness of taking some time to think about approaches to assurance more generally rather than solely through the lens of “CQC compliance.”

By thinking about the model, the workshops identified:

- The best assurance will be built around the individual to support the ambition for person-centred care. PSWs welcomed some of the tools emerging through the Partners in Care and Health Programme, which support social workers in engaging in reflective practice or checking with people with lived experience
- The CQC assessment model focuses attention on this approach. The council's confidence in its view of itself is crucial to improvement and to the regulator's assessment approach

Here's a summary of each level and the way information moves applied to adult social care:



The region is aware of the debate regarding the future of CQC assessment once the current programme has completed its reports on all councils. WMADASS is well-placed to inform this discussion, using its experience and research on Practice Reviews. Some areas where it might like to reflect are:

- There are models which place more emphasis on self-assessment and related good governance (e.g. The Housing Regulator)
- Once power was assigned to CQC for local authority assessment, a noticeable gear change occurred. Councils' levels of engagement with the programme have been historically variable. Honesty is needed regarding the disciplines required for any sector-led model. It's a reasonable assumption that more confident local authorities will have made more use of Practice Review, although it has yet to be seen how this might translate into CQC scores. The region is to be commended for getting all councils to engage with the programme, and there is now an opportunity to consider the future pattern of engagement
- There has to be a space to adequately respond to the wishes of people with lived experience and deepen our knowledge of their journey. The role of Practice Reviews in connecting with people, social workers, and the practice itself is underrated. There is a danger that the sector will focus on looking toward a regulatory system and not outwards to developing "practice wisdom."
- While writing this review, it has become clear how little research exists to inform the debate about how to assure ourselves of the quality of social care. This was accompanied by generally low levels of knowledge about assurance or how other sectors approach the topic.

It may be time to reconsider the impact the region wants from the programme and how this could be expressed as its future ambition for the programme and, more importantly, what it wants people to experience in social work. The initial drivers linked to sector-led improvement have diminished, and establishing a deliberate, intentional direction for the future could sharpen the focus on how to realise the benefits from the programme's delivery and track record.

## Assurance and CQC

People with lived experience consistently expressed the view that "CQC isn't working for people." This may have been a point in time, with CQC in a particular crisis, but it also reflects a desire that councils and regulators address the quality of lived experience. People who draw upon care expressed anxiety that adult care would become like schools, where the regulatory judgement expresses quality. People in the West Midlands with lived experience wanted more than this and welcome Practice Review as a part of the system.



There was concern about how Practice Reviews and self-assessments maintain integrity if they are shared with CQC. However, most PSWs recognised that Practice Reviews made preparing for CQC assurance visits easier. People believed that CQC provided councils with greater clarity and motivation to define the improvement journey stemming from Practice Audits. One council had shared its practice review and action plan with CQC as part of the assurance process.

At the time of this report, CQC had completed their assessments on several councils but only published one report. This made several positive comments about the link between the council and WMADASS.

“Staff and leaders engaged with external work, including research, and embedded evidence-based practice in the local authority. For example, the PSW annual report highlighted ways in which the local authority kept up to date with changes in practice and learning, as well as sharing good practices through regional and national work. This included involvement in the West Midlands ADASS PSW and POTs networks, representing PSWs and POTs on the national ADASS workforce, continued involvement with the West Midlands teaching partnership, and implementation of ADASS research posts within Adult Social Care.

The local authority actively participated in peer review and sector-led improvement activity. The local authority drew on external support to improve when necessary. For example, Telford and Wrekin had previously invited external challenge from the Local Government Association (LGA), ADASS peer reviews, and the department of health and social care, as well as being part of the Society for Innovation Technology and Modernisation (Socitm) advisory community of practice, which helped support information and advice service improvements. Staff told us they participated in regional best practice sharing forums.”

This sample is too small to draw conclusions from, but it bodes well for councils with strong engagement with the sector and their peers. It also affirms the importance of the three tiers of assurance working well as the foundation for approaching external regulators.

## **Part Three: Reporting, Improving and Assuring**

The way people get assured

The benefits of assurance have a broader impact than the importance of giving the named director and politician oversight. People who had lived experience and participated in the programme felt more could be done to communicate with people and communities. Some emerging models include annual accounts and a council with a public-facing PSW yearly report. Some councils have used the findings as a “can-



opener” to explore key issues with staff and people with lived experience and provide a clear action plan.

People with lived experience looked beyond the immediate findings and valued transparency, learning and involvement much more than ratings. How the improvement process was felt and experienced by people who drew upon care mattered far more than a score. Understanding and using this could be essential to working in coproduction when services are in serious difficulty: it unlocks the additional capacity skills and talents that come from experience.

The region does not currently provide feedback to the people whose records and experience are at the centre of the Practice Audit framework. Developing a system whereby councils are asked to ensure that the participants understand how their involvement is making a difference would be good practice.

The full report is helpful as a record, although experience suggests that the report is best used to stimulate further questions. Some are available in public, and others have just been held internally. Most people (outside of the PSW and DASS) were clear that a forty-page report wasn’t something they would necessarily read. A concern for transparency was outweighed by a focus on how the report facilitated improvement. Transparency was less of an issue where the report’s purpose was clear: some reports had been used to open debates about corporate support. Others had explicitly publicly reported, using the report to position the issues.

The report works for people in different ways:

- Some people value and go straight to the summary or the scores
- The PSWs value the full report: many of them are valuable resources over time and PSWs find that they go back to them
- The pie charts get praise and have found their way into some self-assessments.

To use the report to full advantage, people identified that it is necessary to:

- Separate observations from conclusions and pay attention to the intelligence gathered from the various views taken into the reviews.
- recognise that the audit is a small sample and that converting this into broader conclusions is a considered process and best done collaboratively
- Sometimes, tiny sample sizes can have broad relevance, just as sometimes some issues are specific and individual

The way councils respond to the report is the critical element for people with lived experience to feel assured. This also opens insights into how coproduction might play a vital role in service improvement.

## Reporting and Rating

Each council receives a full report, which follows a consistent format:

- Previous Practice Review
- Areas discussed and recurrent themes arising from the meetings held with practitioners and frontline managers
- Data analysis from the completion of the case records audit tool
- Principal Social Workers analysis of the examination of records and of their conversations, and those of a person with lived experience, with people, or their family members
- Observations of the Practice Review Team
- Key strengths
- Recommendations for practice development

The reports are well written, with a strong triangulation of findings from the on-site work.

The reports are 25-40 pages long. Most of the content is a narrative of the findings from the meetings with staff, the record review, the views of people drawing upon social work and the team's observations.

The narrative sections are written peer-to-peer. PSWs found this valuable, and they would refer back to the report over time. The content is also a valuable conduit for the views of staff and people with lived experience. We have debated the report's format in light of considerations about transparency but couldn't balance that with the value of frank peer-to-peer exchanges.

There is clear evidence within the narrative of "hard" messages; recording describes "poor" and "completely unacceptable" standards. There is a considerable challenge on key topics, with one report evidencing racist language and negativity towards inclusive practice. It is encouraging that DASSs and PSWs are willing to hear these messages and have accepted reports as written. This confirms the skills they have developed in the giving and receiving of feedback. The interests of people with living experience are less about the report's content but about seeing action, and for this reason, WMADSS should sustain a focus on improvement planning and ensuring that there is traction on making a difference. This requires DASSs and PSWs to maintain a frank assessment in the Practice Review and find ways of being frank about the improvement needed within service development.

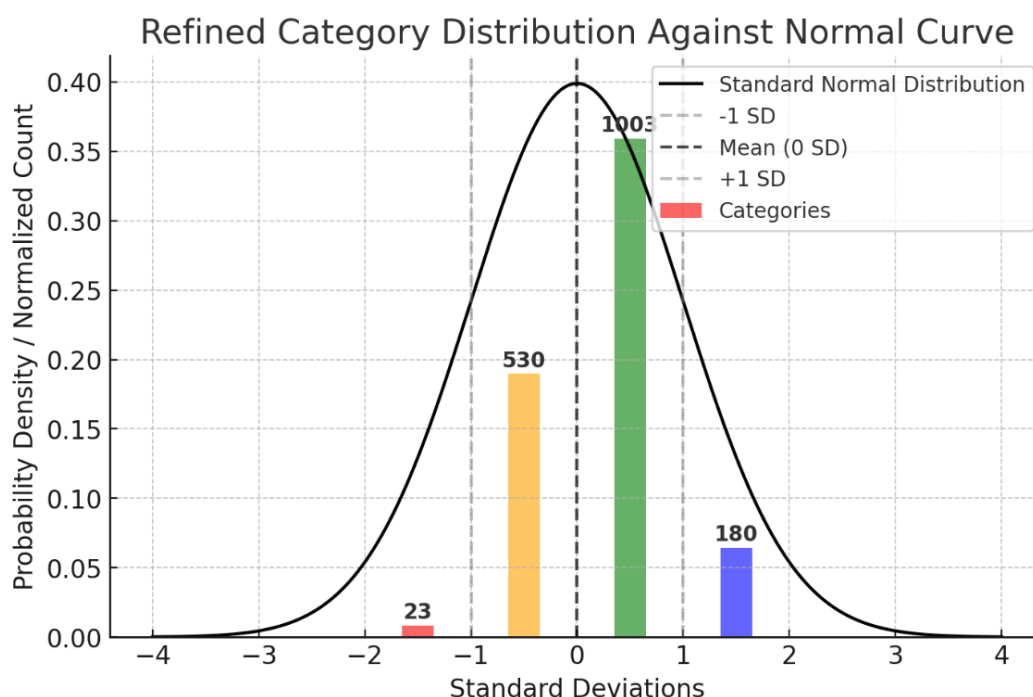
## The Application of Ratings

Based on CQC's system, the Practice Review currently uses one-word ratings to indicate the quality of observed work. It provides this for each record/discussion with people who draw upon social work and then for the twelve identified sub-themes.

However, this approach presents several challenges. First, there is no clear, standardised definition of terms like “good” or “inadequate,” and CQC does not even provide explicit descriptors. Second, discrepancies have emerged between a well-executed process and the experience of the individual receiving support. Lastly, the quality of the relationship between the social worker and the person drawing on support is challenging to quantify despite the individual potentially placing immense value on it.

It is problematic to use one-word ratings (“Good,” “inadequate,” etc.) from inspection regimes. ADASS is closely aligned with the Local Government Association and the Association for Directors of Children’s Services. Both advocate for more nuanced and detailed inspection reporting methods and emphasise the limitations and potential drawbacks of single-word judgements.

Statistically, an analysis of the ratings awarded for the whole of the work found a marked tendency to use the middle two grades, with a slight skewing to the right of the chart (the higher grades). Despite this, there was a challenge within the PSW discussion about whether the current bar is set high enough. In essence, a scoring system close to standard deviations is potentially encouraging the average. It may not be fine-tuned sufficiently to assist the region in isolating elements of excellent and poor practice.



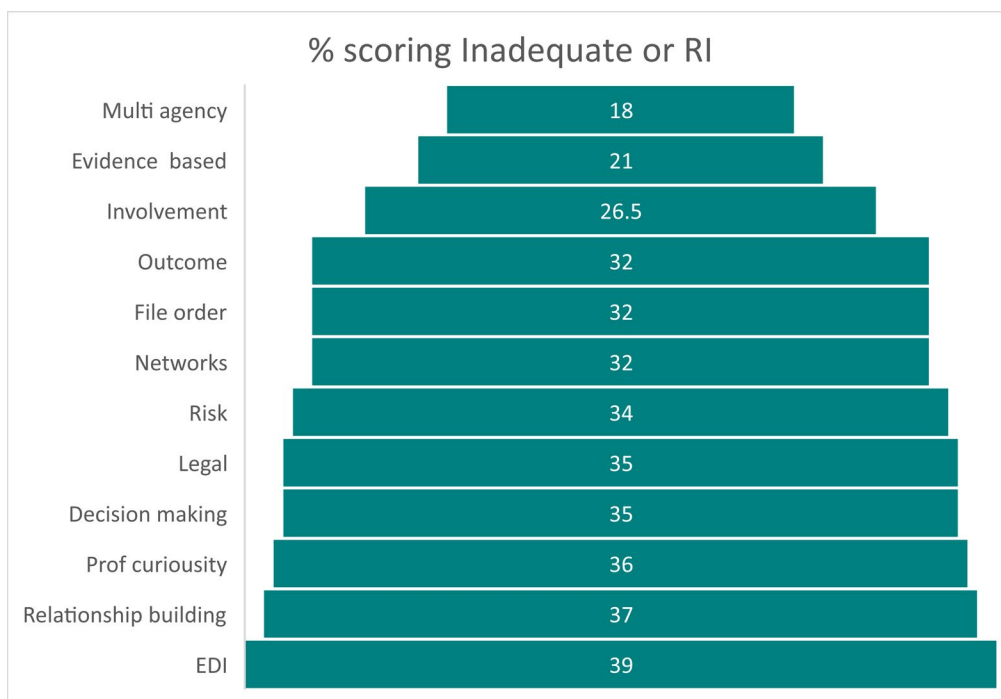
Key: **Inadequate**; **Requires Improvement**; **Good**; **Outstanding**

Some challenging questions might be worth exploring:

- Is “average” the way that the region wishes to articulate its ambition?
- Do people with lived experience think most social work is good or better?
- Does this calibration help us clarify how we see our practice?

In addition to rating the work completed with everyone, the region has enhanced the application of ratings across several dimensions within the audit framework. This approach is significantly more nuanced. Developed throughout the region, it provides a more precise overview of common themes for development. It also emphasises the advantages of adopting a multi-dimensional approach to rating. While the overall work may be adequate, there can still be areas of concern and attention beneath the surface.

Using a consistent framework of subheadings for key themes, the distribution pattern of grades shows greater range.



PSWs felt that variation in scoring was inevitable when interpreting their findings, but the extent of this variation sometimes raised concerns. Differing conclusions about strengths-based practice were highlighted as an example of where evaluation could quickly become subjective. Some of the learning from this is to clarify where the report references conversations and debates rather than citing definitive conclusions.

Ratings have not helped identify serious issues because they lack definition. In one review, serious concerns were raised about how a married couple had been separated due to costs and that “although the paperwork was excellent, the plan fell short.” The review employed a human rights perspective, focusing on the couple’s wishes and feelings. Although rated low, the key determinant was social work values.

These are about the application of values and may be worth making explicit with the observation of the report and some specific comments from the review team on how they see values being applied in practice.

#### The rating of social work

Ratings can be helpful in setting a clear baseline for self-assessment and improvement: being part of a regional approach is allowing PSWs to calibrate how they see practice within their own council. PSWs were finding real value in the contribution of Practice Reviews to this internal self-knowledge, much more so than the external presentation.

There are no consistent and clear definitions to each of the definitions.

Ratings form part of how a council presents itself to CQC. The quality of insight has matured with examining themes alongside the overall score.

There needs to be clarity about what the region sees as poor practice. PSWs referenced examples where a social work assessment met the process requirements for administration but was neither strengths-based nor person-centred. People with living experience who reviewed were particularly troubled when social work staff failed to describe how they work.

There was considerable support for the format of the report using six strengths and six areas for development. This managed expectations consistently and sets out that everyone has areas for continuous improvement, rather than this somehow being linked to the scoring.

#### The future of ratings

The region has been moving to a more multi-layered approach alongside the one-word ratings. The elements of this include:

- Multi-dimensional ratings (the twelve subheadings etc.).
- Narrative-based feedback (explaining strengths & areas for improvement).
- Progress tracking (to reflect improvements., captured by the update in each review but also in the support and challenge process).
- The use of feedback from people with lived experience and their supporters (giving a complete picture).
- Peer-review & support-based inspections (and the encouragement for growth).
- There are thoughts about Traffic light/dashboard systems (for clearer public understanding.)

Research suggests that a broader approach promotes learning and gives a fairer picture of adult social care services. The region should think about how it wants to present information to its members and possibly to the public using the breadth of these approaches.

Practice Reviews show that they do what they say on the tin and influence practice! A key component of excellent social work is that it challenges the casual use of labels and the associated stigma. WMADASS could consider how it wants to change this and address some of the tensions between “good” administration, the quality of the relationship with the social worker, and the plan's impact on outcomes and enjoying a “gloriously ordinary life.”

## The coordinator role

Participants valued the region's investment in associate support to provide the coordination that underpinned the first fifty reviews. They also appreciated Mark's skills and focus as coordinator, which has been captured so the region has a record of the skills base needed for such support.

- People value the consistency of having one report writer and the central support
- Keeping a complete set of notes and producing a narrative report was considered a valuable peer-to-peer record containing much learning
- Making it happen – the value of someone driving the programme and making sure it happens
- Upholding the process consistently and having some expertise: examples were given where Mark had skilfully highlighted variation
- The sensitivity of the review team (both who is on the team and how they interact)
- “Mark makes things happen that we alone wouldn't have done”
- Mark's membership of the co-production network makes it easy for people with lived experience to open up and share. It also makes him easy to access. One person said that with lived experience, “You're used to being pushy, but here you don't have to be”
- The coproduction network gets updated every quarter and engages new members well
- Mark has excellent facilitation skills
- The skills of giving feedback so that it can be heard
- People value the expertise acquired, from developing good questions to writing reports. They also appreciate how the programme has developed links with research

## **Part Four: The Future of Practice Reviews**

WMADASS's use of research and evidence is impressive, and its approach to Practice Reviews is consistent with its ambition to be research-informed. Taking this approach, the findings from the University of Birmingham's work are used to inform this analysis and suggest how it might be developed.

### **A line of development from Research**

<b>Aspect</b>	<b>Stakeholders' Perspectives (From Survey &amp; Interviews)</b>	<b>The UoB Report Authors' Analysis &amp; Interpretation</b>	<b>This Report's Analysis &amp; Interpretation</b>
<b>Effectiveness of Peer Challenges (Short-term)</b>	80% of survey respondents found peer challenges "extremely" or "very" useful in improving short-term practice outcomes.  Participants valued the opportunity for reflection and receiving practical recommendations.	The research agreed on the short-term benefits but emphasized that effectiveness varies depending on the host authority's preparedness and transparency.	The audit process now includes much sharper focus on identifying the host authority's aims and areas where it wants to focus.  <b>Next step:</b> WMADASS might want to link the council's aims to a theory of change, to support the council to implement change.
<b>Effectiveness of Peer Challenges (Long-term)</b>	Only 58% found them useful for long-term improvements.  Respondents cited a lack of follow-up processes and unclear indicators for success.	The absence of formal follow-up mechanisms and baseline indicators hinders long-term impact assessment.	The region has now introduced tracking mechanisms with each council and some long-term ambitions for the region.  <b>Next step:</b> WMADASS could consider a balanced scorecard overview.
<b>Role of People with Lived Experience (Experts by Experience)</b>	Participants appreciated the contributions of people with lived experience, noting that their involvement created more honest and balanced conversations.  However, some people felt marginalized and unclear about their authority.	Whilst inclusion fosters richer discussions, there are issues of power imbalance and tokenism, which could be addressed by clearer role definitions and training for participants.	People with lived experience could identify clear gains from the training and talk about how they had applied this in practice.  <b>Next step:</b> There remain issues of power (e.g. in GDPR) which could perhaps be explicitly codified into the role definition.

Aspect	Stakeholders' Perspectives (From Survey & Interviews)	The UoB Report Authors' Analysis & Interpretation	This Report's Analysis & Interpretation
<b>Value for Peer Challenge Team Members</b>	<p>93% of team members reported personal learning and professional growth.</p> <p>Peer challenges were seen as reciprocal, offering insights applicable to their organizations.</p>	<p>The report emphasizes that peer challenges benefit both the host and review teams, fostering regional learning networks.</p>	<p>This report has detailed some examples to illustrate impact.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b></p> <p>It might be worth considering how to build up the influence of the learning network within the region. The region might also want to think about how it values participation more.</p> <p>The region has taken a series of steps as part of "preparedness" for CQC assurance.</p>
<b>Preparedness and Commitment of Host Authorities</b>	<p>Participants reported variability in host authorities' engagement. Some displayed poor preparation and limited stakeholder involvement, which reduced the value of the peer challenge.</p>	<p>The report stresses that successful peer challenges require the host authority's commitment, proper briefing of participants, and willingness for honest reflection.</p>	<p>The region has taken a series of steps as part of "preparedness" for CQC assurance.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b></p> <p>The future role of CQC in local authority assurance is unclear beyond the current programme. WMADASS need to consider how it maintains the values and disciplines it now has in place as it reviews the future of the programme.</p>
<b>Methodology for Evaluation</b>	<p>Participants felt that the mixed-methods approach (interviews and surveys) captured their experiences well, though some questioned whether digital interviews limited rapport.</p>	<p>The report acknowledges that digital methods during COVID-19 may have limited data richness and recommend incorporating direct observation in future studies.</p>	<p>There was no anxiety about digital methods during this review. Many participants felt that digital supported the process.</p> <p>The "downside" was that reviewers tended to work this into their role rather than take two days to visit a council.</p> <p><b>Next step:</b></p> <p>There is some work to be done on making sure that reviewers are aware of the communication styles and preferences of people with lived experience who are the subject of the review. Some consideration is needed to capturing views from people who communicate without using words.</p>



Aspect	Stakeholders' Perspectives (From Survey & Interviews)	The UoB Report Authors' Analysis & Interpretation	This Report's Analysis & Interpretation
<b>Involvement of Experts Experience in the Evaluation Process</b>	Survey respondents were divided on the extent of meaningful involvement of experts by experience, with only about 50% rating their inclusion as "very meaningful."	The authors call for co-production principles to be better embedded in practice, ensuring that experts by experience are treated as equal contributors with clear roles and responsibilities.	There remains a lack of clarity about roles linked to access to records. However, the focus on peer lived experience and relationship is clearly differentiated and adding value.  <b>Next steps:</b> It's worth taking some time to formally set out the value brought to the process by people with lived experience.
<b>Impact of COVID-19 on Peer Challenge Focus</b>	Participants noted that the pandemic brought new challenges, such as workforce stress and service disruptions, which peer challenges began to address.	The authors recognize that peer challenges evolved during COVID-19 to address emerging issues but stress the need for further adaptation to future crises.	This was not explored further.

## Some questions for the future

One of the focus areas for this review was to assist the region in thinking about the programme's future. This will follow on for the receipt of this report, but some prompts for the thinking are set out.

There are three broad areas for those discussions:

1. What is the role of the programme with WMADASS
2. What does WMADASS need to improve the support to that programme?
3. How does WMADASS support and inform the debate about assurance and practice review
  - through clarity about how the region sees assurance
  - through promoting more expansive learning

## **1. The role of the programme**

### Ambition

Practice Reviews are part of a system where WMADASS maintains and develops the connection between practice and people's outcomes.

It would be interesting to frame the region's future ambition around this: where are you trying to aim for; what would the best possible practice look like, and how would this look in the lives of people and communities in the West Midlands?

### Focus

The region's commitment to outcomes based on its logic model could be made more explicit to show the importance of living a life that matters and has value for the person at the centre of the plan.

### EDI

Staying with the importance of working through the issues you have started to tackle together. There is ambition to do more about equality, diversity and inclusion. There's a need to think about developing new tools that don't require more infrastructure - what might some practice review tools look like?

### Practice conditions and values

How do you codify when things aren't so good? What happens if a PSW feels that a topic can't be raised/discussed? Particularly when considering the evaluation of change within councils, the application of power has significance, and the sharing of power has been part of the success of this programme. ADASS is a membership organisation, but its members are not required to be registered social workers.

The review has identified the importance of values, especially trust, human rights, and curiosity. These values provide indicators of key behaviours required for success within individual councils and regions. How might WMADASS embed these values?

### Practical considerations

A forward plan might yield some benefits. It would be beneficial if it were linked to councils' thinking through their programme needs. The plan should also be framed in terms of how the council wants to develop staff through participation in reviewing.

## **2. Future support for the programme**

### Scale

There is some ambition to capture the experience of people who draw upon social work support in the reviews. There is a tension between breadth (the number) and depth (the

work done, mainly to listen to people). This has moved beyond seeking to establish a “representative” sample to something about the value and credibility of each review.

### Scope

There is anxiety and uncertainty about how peer review could be taken into other settings, especially mental health, where social workers are likely to be in the NHS. How might you reflect a Practice Review/Peer evaluation requirement in partnership or commissioning arrangements?

How might the programme evolve to consider people with complex needs in ways that focus on lived experience and outcomes rather than the noise of risk, resources, and process?

Opportunity to do more work across children and adults - one practice review is on preparation for adulthood.

### Learning

What tools can WMADASS develop to support practitioners and supervisors further in self-assuring their practice (and involve people with living experience at the key point)? What skills and resources might you need to develop this?

## **3a. The future: Clarity about how the region sees assurance**

### A framework

Practice review across councils is a resource-intensive activity, but it strengthens the region's capacity and skills and enhances the work of each member council.

There is a growing variety of scoring and rating techniques, presenting an opportunity to consolidate these into a comprehensive approach. It is essential to put into practice the importance of demonstrating improvement for individuals who depend on social care.

## **3b. The future: promoting wider learning**

WMADASS will want to think about how it can use this report in discussions about assurance.

WMADASS may want to consider how it further develops research into assurance, where the paucity of research is a concern (other than WMADASS). Ultimately, confident social work practice needs people who draw upon it to know that the frameworks put around practice for assurance are the best they can be.