

Perceptions of Social Work

**Research among the general
public and those with lived
experience of social work**

Conducted for Social Work England



Cragg Ross Dawson
May 2020

	Contents	Page
A	Management summary	3
B	Background and objectives	6
C	Methodology and sample	7
D	Conclusions and recommendations	9
E	Findings in detail - general public	11
E.1	Awareness and understanding of social work	11
E.2	Attitudes to social work	17
E.3	Views and expectations around social work support	20
E.4	Perceptions of social workers	22
E.5	Social Work England	25
E.6	Communicating about social work and Social Work England	28
F	Findings in detail - those with lived experience	30
F.1	Overall	30
F.2	Circumstances leading to interventions	30
F.3	Initial responses to interventions	31
F.4	Experiences of interventions	32
F.5	Perceptions of social workers	38
F.6	Social Work England	40
G	Case Studies	42
	Appendices	45

A. Management Summary

I. Objectives and methodology

Social Work England commissioned research to explore knowledge, attitudes and experience around social work among the general public and people with lived experience of social work interventions.

The research comprised:

- 5 **focus groups** with members of the public
- An **online omnibus survey** (administered by YouGov) with 1751 members of the public including 142 who had experience of social work interventions
- 23 **depth interviews** conducted face-to-face with people who had experience of social work interventions in the last three years

2. The general public perspective

Social work was **generally well regarded** among the public, but was **not high profile** in comparison with other public services.

It was thought to be undervalued, under-resourced and deserving of more favourable media coverage.

Social work was believed to be **primarily for the vulnerable, especially children and families**, but also older people and those with disabilities.

Other users were less recognised but were still seen as needing support. This was largely reflected in the omnibus survey, in which, when asked who social work supports, 41% said children, 27% vulnerable people, 27% older people and 26% families/parents.

The **perceived aim** of social work was primarily around helping or safe-guarding, providing support for those who lacked it through their families or from other sources, and offering advice and guidance. Ultimately social work was believed to have the capability to improve people’s lives and wellbeing.

Perceptions of social work among the general public were largely positive. In the omnibus survey 88% of participants agreed that it is important in helping vulnerable people, 77% agreed that it helps ensure children come to no harm and 74% agreed that the value of social work is not fully appreciated.

A minority had a more critical perspective and saw social work as an authority role, intended to control and penalise, and to impose values which were not always in keeping with those of the population. This discouraged engagement with social work.

Direct **experience of social work was not widespread** (8% of the omnibus sample) but awareness of others who had had interventions was quite common (27%). Figures differed markedly by socio-economic grade: experience was 11% among C2DE participants and 6% among ABC1s.

The general assumption was that receiving social work support would be positive – getting help and improving your life - but a minority saw it as a sign of inability to cope and felt there is a stigma around it.

Social workers themselves were generally well regarded, and attracted praise for their dedication and commitment in a role which was believed to be demanding, stressful and largely unrecognised. They were perceived as professionals, but were much less visible than those in other public service roles - healthcare professionals, teachers and police officers.

In the omnibus survey, 78% agreed that social workers want the best for the people they work with and 70% agreed that social workers make a big difference in improving people's lives. Many felt that social workers face significant demands in their work: 76% agreed that social workers could do a better job if there were more of them.

The **more critical minority had a less favourable impression** of social workers and saw them as judgmental, unconcerned about those who needed their services and only in the role for the sake of having a job. In the omnibus survey 28% disagreed that Social workers are objective and neutral; and 19% agreed that Social workers tend not to believe the people they work with.

Little was known about regulation of social work. Most respondents assumed social work is regulated, simply because they thought all public services are regulated in some way, but had no idea how it was done or by whom.

Attitudes to **Social Work England**, based on an outline of its role and responsibilities, were largely positive. In principle its role was seen as about maintaining standards, ensuring a high level of training for social workers, and protecting service users.

Social Work England's five main responsibilities were all regarded as valuable. In the focus groups the fact that its role encompasses these responsibilities was applauded. This generally positive perception was echoed among omnibus survey respondents: 87% or 88% of the omnibus sample perceived each of the five as important.

3. Those with lived experience

People who had received social work interventions often had **complex circumstances**. In most cases there had been more than one issue which had prompted the need for an intervention, or the initial intervention had uncovered other issues which required addressing. Few cases seemed straight-forward.

Experiences of social work among these people were **largely positive**, though perceptions varied according to individual circumstances. Generally, parents were happy with the intervention they had received, especially if they had requested it; some felt it had made a significant and positive difference to their and their children's lives. Others, with different needs, felt that social work had not helped them.

Experiences were generally **better than expected**. Before their first encounter with a social worker many had been worried about being judged or, at the extreme, having a child taken away and put into care. However in most cases they had found social workers understanding, kind, and constructive in dealing with them.

At best, they had received emotional and practical support which had made material improvements to their lives; some felt that the intervention had turned things round and had had long term impact.

Three groups were dissatisfied with social work: people who felt they were in a low priority group and received little help (e.g. adults with disabilities); those who believed social workers had been inefficient or ineffective in handling their case; and

those who thought social workers had been judgmental and hostile – typically men in domestic abuse cases whose partners had instigated the intervention.

Knowledge of the scope and aims of social work among those with lived experience was reasonably good, though some found it easier to focus on their own cases than to consider its other roles. Most of those with experience of a social work intervention, including some who had been dissatisfied, believed that in principle it is well-intentioned. Response to **information about Social Work England** was generally favourable. Most welcomed the idea of a named body responsible for overseeing social work and liked the fact that it would deal with concerns and complaints.

Some suggested unprompted that information should be given to people at the outset of interventions so they would know what they might expect and where to turn if they were not happy with the way their case was handled.

B. Background & Objectives

Social Work England is the new regulatory body for social work in England and launched on 2nd December 2019. Its creation was announced by the Department for Education, as part of reforms covered by the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Social Work England regulates the social work profession by:

- Setting standards of practice and conduct in social work
- Assuring the quality of social work education
- Registering qualified social workers
- Ensuring social workers keep skills and knowledge up to date
- Investigating concerns about social workers

The aim of the reforms and the creation of Social Work England is to improve confidence in social work and raise standards, especially in social work education, training and practice.

In order to inform its work and its approach to regulation, Social Work England places emphasis on the value of research among the public, users of social work services and social work practitioners.

This research was commissioned to explore and understand knowledge, experiences and perceptions of social work among

those who have used its services and the general public. The specific objectives were to...

- **Examine knowledge and perceptions of social work and of social workers among the general public:**

- The role and purpose of social work
- Trust in social work to achieve its aim of supporting the vulnerable
- How social workers are regarded – their approach to their work, their effectiveness and professionalism compared with other public service providers

- **Understand expectations and experiences of people who have received support from social workers:**

- The circumstances that led to them receiving support
- The outcome of their receiving support
- Their experience of the process
- Their subsequent perceptions of social work and social workers

- **Examine awareness and perceptions around regulation and Social Work England:**

- Understand what people know about regulation in social work
- Gauge response to the creation of Social Work England

C. Methodology

I. Overall

We conducted a mix of qualitative and quantitative research in three stages among members of the general public and people with lived experience of social work. The research took place between January and March 2020.

2. Stage I

This first stage involved five focus groups with the general public lasting approximately 90 minutes, structured by age, socio-economic grade and region, as follows (all included a mix of genders and some from BAME backgrounds):

- BC1* 18-24 London
- BC1* 25-45 Leeds
- C2DE* 25-45 London ++
- C2DE* 46+ Birmingham

++ In this group attendance was a little low (6 respondents) and there were questions over the accuracy of the recruitment of two people. In light of this we ran an *additional small group* with 4 respondents with a similar age and socio-economic profile.

* Socio-economic grades BC1: managerial, professional, administrative occupations

* Socio-economic grades C2DE: skilled and unskilled manual occupations or unemployed

3. Stage 2

Following the focus groups an online omnibus survey was conducted, administered by YouGov among 1751 adults in England, drawn from their UK panel. The sample was representative of the adult population in England:

- 1094 were BC1* social class, 657 C2DE*
- 148 were aged 18-24, 296 aged 25-34, 317 aged 35-44, 277 aged 45-64, 713 aged 55+
- 1544 were white, 207 from BAME groups

* Socio-economic grades as above.

Of the 1751 respondents 142 had experienced a social work intervention themselves at some time in their lives; another 453 knew one or more other people who had ever experienced a social work intervention (a friend, family member or someone else). This gave a total of 595 respondents (34% of the total) with direct or indirect experience of social work interventions.

Respondents’ social class, age, ethnicity and experience of social work have been used to explore and analyse the quantitative data from the omnibus survey.

4. Stage 3

In the final stage of the research we conducted 23 face-to-face depth interviews with people who had current or recent experience of social work, as follows:

- 13 parents of children under 18 with difficulties requiring social work support
- 8 adults with disabilities or in other circumstances requiring social work support
- 2 adult care leavers

Interviews lasted around one hour. They took place in London, Manchester and Birmingham.

5. Notes on the methodology

As noted, this research used a combination of qualitative and quantitative methods. Briefly, **qualitative** research involves small samples and is intended to explore knowledge, attitudes, experiences and behaviours in depth. It focuses on uncovering

insights and does not seek to establish definitive findings from a large sample of people. **Quantitative** research seeks answers on a small number of questions from samples which are large enough to be statistically reliable, and identifies differences by sub-group.

In the qualitative face-to-face interviews with people who had lived experience of social work, we ensured that all were happy to discuss the circumstances of their interaction with social workers, in confidence. We made it clear that they could stop the interview at any time, and/or could ask for their input to be withdrawn from the research (this has not happened). Verbatim quotes from these interviews have not been attributed, unlike those from the focus groups, to ensure anonymity.

D. Conclusions

I. The landscape

Social work is less visible and less readily praised than other public service roles. If it comes to public attention it is usually when something has gone wrong. It is believed to be under-resourced and probably struggling to recruit.

When members of the public are prompted to consider what social work offers it attracts much favourable comment. Though the specifics of what it does are not widely known, it is regarded as having an important role in helping and supporting vulnerable people.

The general public are receptive to information about social work, particularly what it aims to do and what it doesn’t, the nature of the support it provides, and the outcomes.

Among those with lived experience, initial wariness of social work tends to dissipate in the light of good experiences. The reality of receiving a social work intervention and support is often a revelation, and overcomes negative perceptions.

These experiences are not widely known or disseminated, because people tend not to talk about social workers becoming involved in their lives, but they could have a significant effect on

the image of social work.

Dissatisfactions with service delivery seem to be more about individual working styles and sometimes ineffectiveness than about systematic weaknesses in social work as a whole. They might be mitigated by improved training, better communication, or different management approaches, but this would need to be explored at a local level.

2. Social Work England

Regulation of social work is largely unknown but the principle of it is welcomed. Though the detail of what it involves is rarely thought through, in general it is regarded as a way of ensuring that social work procedures are followed correctly and consistently, and practices are monitored.

When the role of Social Work England is spelled out it provides reassurance that social work is carried out in a responsible way, that there is accountability in the way it is practised and that it safeguards the interests of service users. The fact that it offers a means of expressing any concerns could enhance confidence in social work.

There are some areas where the public could benefit from more information and clarity about the role of Social Work England.

First, there are points to make about the organisation itself:

- It is there to regulate the profession, uphold standards and ensure that social work is done in the right way, with the right outcomes, for the benefit of those who need its services
- It is an independent resource in case of concerns about interventions – it will investigate problems objectively and issue sanctions if appropriate
- Its rules and standards are robust and evidence-based
- It sets and assesses the education and training social workers in England receive

Second, there is something to say about social work generally:

- What it provides and who it can provide for – it is a resource to meet needs, for anyone with a need
- What people can expect from an intervention - its aim, the manner in which it is provided, its likely trajectory and the hoped-for outcome
- That social workers have an important role, are highly qualified but also have hands-on experience

In more specific terms there is potential in positive stories, case studies and testimonials from those who have received social work support; and an explanation of the training – what it consists of, and the balance between learning the theory and getting hands-on experience.

E. Findings in detail: general public

I. Awareness and understanding of social work

1.1 A note on the sampling

Participants in the **focus groups** were recruited as not having had direct experience of social work interventions, nor having close family members with experience of it. A number of those in the groups of people from C2DE socio-economic classes knew of others who had experience of social work interventions.

In the **omnibus survey** sample there were no exclusions on experience of social work. 8% of this sample said they had received a social work intervention (at any point in their lives), and in total 34% had received an intervention themselves or said a family member or friend/acquaintance had received an intervention. Experience of social work interventions had some impact on awareness, knowledge and perceptions of social work.

1.2 What is social work?

In the **focus groups** with members of the public it was clear that most people knew something about social work, at least enough to have a view on it, though knowledge tended to be partial and varied significantly between groups.

Those over 25 tended to be better informed than 18-24s and had a broad idea of what social work is. Generally those in C2DE social classes (those in manual occupations or unemployed) were clearer about what social work involves than BC1s (people in managerial and professional roles), perhaps because they were more likely to know people with experience of social work interventions: it was closer to their lives and their world.

In general terms social work was seen as focused on helping vulnerable people, those in need, and anyone who is unable to cope or who lacks support in certain aspects of their lives. Some respondents, generally over 25s, had a reasonably good idea of the process involved in a social work intervention, or could guess at it, for example in a typical case concerning welfare of a child. Beyond this most were vague about the detail of what a social worker does.

We prompted focus group respondents with words that might be used to describe social work to help them express their views. Words which were most often picked out were **helping, supporting, protecting, looking after, advising and guiding.**

This choice of terms reflected the perception of social work as intended to provide help for people in difficult circumstances. A minority saw it also as about facilitating and organising.

“When you need help and you’re desperate and vulnerable.”
25-45 C2DE London

“I have a vision of people holding hands, catching people who are falling through the net.”
46+ C2DE Birmingham

“Helping people with problems.”
“Helping families.”
46+ C2DE Birmingham

“It is an advocate really. To facilitate and support and see what is needed. To assess and see what is needed in whatever capacity so whether it is mental health, disability... I would imagine they would assess and facilitate.”
25-45 C2DE London

Other positive associations with social work were about getting involved and intervening in people’s difficulties: **telling, watching, preventing, mediating.**

Those with the most favourable views saw it specifically as providing support for those without the family networks that most people have, either directly or by signposting to other service providers. They saw a typical social work case as a journey, from identifying someone in difficulty, finding what support they needed and applying this, to achieving a resolution.

“They are giving people a second chance if they are stuck in a bad place or a bad family or bad neighbourhood.”
25-45 BC1 Leeds

“Not everyone has family support networks or neighbours network of support so I see that organisation or charity or whatever it is replacing or supporting people who haven’t got that structure or haven’t got the experience or knowledge of how to do things, or who to contact.”
25-45 BC1 Leeds

“A point of contact for support where they wouldn’t be able to get support elsewhere.”
18-24 BC1 London

“I am imagining that... when they think that person has reached the right destination there is maybe like a review later to see how they are doing... I presume it is a journey with the social worker.”
25-45 BC1 Leeds

The least well informed were those in the group of 18-24 year olds, BC1 socio-economic class. They had no experience of social work, direct or indirect, and it appeared to be barely on their radar. Some assumed it was a general catch-all term that referred to all public-facing services, including the police.

Others saw it more as counselling/therapy type work or even a school service provided by pastoral care teachers, which they might have had themselves when they were at school.

“Are social workers anyone within the public service? Could it be anyone, can anyone within the public sector service be a social worker?”

“Could the police be social workers because they are helping society?”

“Are social services like branches of... like doctors, nurses, policemen, firemen?”

All 18-24 BC1 London

Even those who had better knowledge than others acknowledged that they knew little about the nature of social work on a day to day basis. Some respondents initially confused social

work with social care; this was unhelpful in that it could suggest that social work is a relatively low-skill and low-status role. Others, mainly BC1s, were unsure how an intervention is instigated or whether it is a free or paid-for service.

“We all know what a nurse, doctor, teacher etc does, but how many people know what a social worker does?”
46+ C2DE Birmingham

“Is the social service a free service?”
25-45 BC1 Leeds

In the **omnibus survey** respondents were asked what they thought the aims of social work are; they were invited to choose any number of options from seven that were listed.

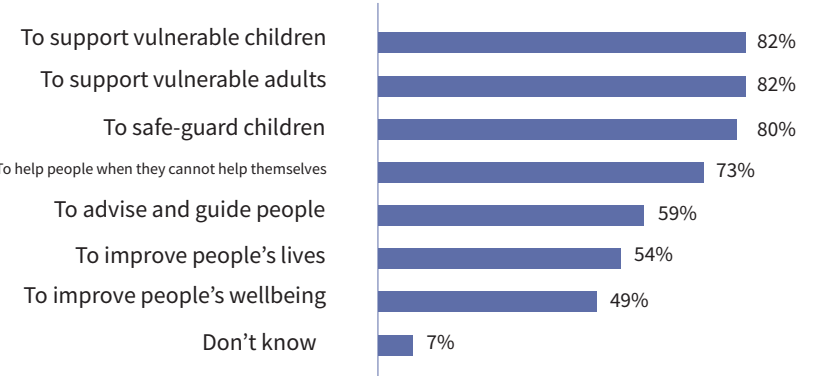
Helping and safeguarding stood out. The majority focussed on children, either supporting vulnerable children (82%) or safe-guarding children (80%). A similar proportion (82%) believed that supporting vulnerable adults is a goal of social work. Nearly three quarters (73%) characterised social work as being there to help people when they can’t help themselves.

Away from helping and safeguarding, around half the sample thought the goals of social work are to advise and guide (59%), to generally improve lives (54%) or to help maintain health or wellbeing (49%).

Given that so many respondents thought many of the goals listed applied to social work, there was relatively little variation of interest between the key sub-groups (social class, age,

ethnicity and experience).

Question: in general, which, if any, of the following do you think are the aims of social work?



1.3 Who is social work for?

Perceptions of who receives social work support tended to be narrow, and few respondents had a clear impression of the full range of client groups. Almost everyone assumed that social work supports families and children, and many believed it is only or primarily for these groups. Some were also aware of its role in supporting older people.

“It’s for children in need.”

“Troubled kids”

25-45 C2DE London

“If you think of social workers you think children.”

46+ C2DE Birmingham

Only a minority knew or believed that social work also provides for other vulnerable groups – the homeless, people with mental health troubles, women experiencing domestic abuse, those with disabilities, young offenders, and those with addiction problems. Information shown to focus group respondents which included mention of these other groups often generated surprise for the range and variety of people social work supports.

“Homeless people, vulnerable people, people who have just come out of prison.”

46+ C2DE Birmingham

“People... that get beat up by their partners... need support from social services for their children, or people who have drinking problems.”

25-45 BC1 Leeds

A few focus group participants knew that social workers can be involved in cases concerning adoption and custody disputes, and that people on probation are supported by social work. 18-24s, who were the least well informed of the focus group sample, wondered if social workers work with young people at youth centres, school pastoral teams and children who truant.

“I think if you are trying to adopt a child you are assigned a social worker, and then you make sure the child would be going into a safe home. They look at what you are doing and see if you are in a healthy environment.”

18-24 BC1 London

“I remember at school we had a special team that actually deals with it and they used to call it the pastoral team.”

18-24 BC1 London

Information about social work in the outline description shown to respondents in the focus groups (see Appendices) listed the range of people supported by social workers. This generated surprise: some of the sectors – homeless people and young offenders – showed that social work provides for a much wider range of client groups than they had expected.

Some participants initially had the impression that social workers deal with people across all the groups listed; on consideration they assumed that social workers probably specialise in one or two fields (e.g. families, older people, those on probation).

Respondents in two focus groups were briefly shown examples of social work case studies (see Appendices). These were useful in providing a glimpse of the range of people social work supports and the type of intervention they provide, including individual, hands-on help and coordination of other services.

Findings from the **omnibus survey** largely reflected the views of focus group respondents. In answer to the question *“In general, which groups of people do you think social workers typically support?”*, respondents were encouraged to enter details of as many groups as they were aware of; there was an average of around two groups mentioned by each.

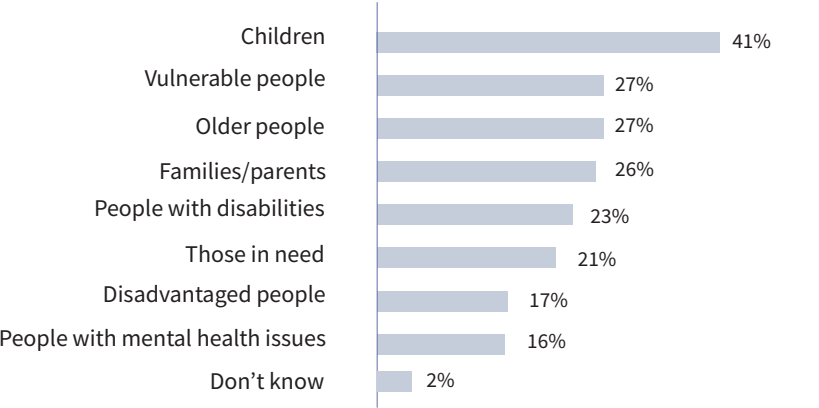
Most commonly, social workers were seen as working with children (mentioned by 41%); around a quarter referred to the ‘vulnerable’ (27%), ‘older’ (27%) or ‘families/parents’ (26%). Slightly fewer mentioned those with ‘disabilities’ (23%) or more generally ‘those in need’ (21%) or the ‘disadvantaged’ (17%). Perhaps reflecting media coverage of the issue, one in six (16%) mentioned those with ‘mental health issues’.

As might be expected, younger respondents were more likely to think about children being supported by social workers.

Those who had received support from a social worker (or knew someone who had) gave more answers, perhaps indicating higher levels of knowledge among this group.

Question: in general, which groups do you think social workers typically support?

(Please type your answer(s) in the box below, giving as much detail as you can)



1.4 Provision of social work

Social work was generally assumed to be a public sector service, provided primarily by public bodies, but not everyone was sure who is responsible for delivering it.

In the **focus groups** many respondents believed that local authorities were the main organisations offering social work services, but there was a broader perception that ‘the government’ in some form is the provider. A few also said they thought the NHS and certain charities provide social work; and some, mainly BC1s, wondered whether there are private sector social workers operating through businesses or working freelance.

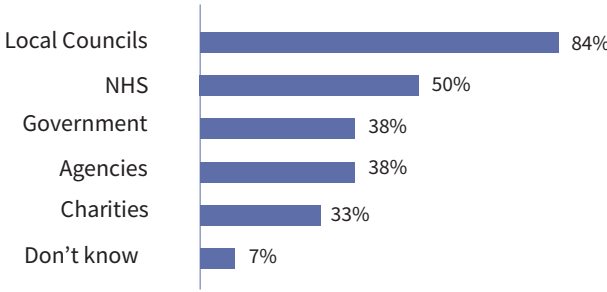
The **omnibus survey** established awareness of bodies and organisations that employ social workers using a prompted question, with respondents given a list of five different bodies.

While the majority of the sample (84%) identified Local Councils or Local Authorities as an employing body (reflecting findings from the focus groups) many also felt that others employed social workers: the NHS (50%), Government (38%), agencies (38%) and charities (33%). Very few, just 7%, said they didn’t know who employs social workers.

There was little variation across the key sub-groups though older respondents had greater awareness of the role of Local Authorities – two thirds of those aged 18-24 (67%) thought they employed social workers compared with virtually all (93%) of those aged 55 or over.

Though greater proportions of younger respondents thought the Government employs social workers (54% of those aged 18-24) it was still the case that across all age groups the most commonly selected employing organisation was Local Authorities.

Question: Which, if any, of the following bodies do you think employ social workers?
(Please select all that apply. If your answer(s) doesn’t appear in the box below, please type this into the open “Other” box)



This general belief that social work is a public service had some influence on the way it was perceived. For the most part respondents in the **focus groups** regarded it as a service probably provided by local or national government in some form, alongside health services, the police and education. In this case, assuming it is publicly funded, they seemed to feel that it was open to comment and criticism but also that it is likely to be vulnerable to reductions in funding. Many believed that, like other services, it has probably suffered in recent years as resources have become scarce.

2. Attitudes to social work

Overall perceptions of social work were broadly favourable across the qualitative and quantitative samples but there were pockets of negative opinion that were especially apparent in the focus groups.

In the **focus groups**, the majority regarded social work as a good thing in principle. They believed that if, as they conceived it, social work sets out to help people who are vulnerable, it is well intentioned and an important part of the country’s public services. At best they saw social work as a vital but unsung service which is not given the recognition it deserves.

“It is a public service like doctors and it is needed. Like the NHS and prison staff.”
25-45 C2DE London

Attitudes varied a little by age and socio-economic class. Those over 25 had generally favourable views; BC1s tended to be more positive than C2DEs. Those in the 18-24 focus group were unsure how to regard social work because they knew little about it, but none expressed any serious concerns. To a large extent respondents in the groups expressed trust in social work to achieve its aims of helping the people it is intended to help, and providing the support for them that they lack.

The generally favourable stance on the value of social work was reflected in a belief that it is so important that without social work we/society would be much worse off. When we asked respondents in the groups to consider, hypothetically, what life in this country would be like if social work didn’t exist, the general feeling was that it would be much worse for those in

need: people would suffer and some might die, particularly children.

“I think we would have more abuse and we would have more deaths like Baby P... there would be more and no-one to step in and prevent it.”
25-45 BC1 Leeds

“[Without social work] There would be carnage.”
“Chaos.”
46+ C2DE Birmingham

Perceptions of social work were not entirely favourable. There was some feeling that social workers occasionally make serious mistakes. The Baby P case was mentioned several times, though this may have been partly because there had been a story about his mother in the media not long before the research took place.

There were also references to social workers being accused of failing to intervene in instances of grooming of sexual abuse victims in Telford and Rochdale.

For the most part these cases were regarded as very much the exception, and as a consequence of social workers being over-stretched because staff numbers are low followin reductions in funding. There was a widespread feeling that social workers do much good work which goes unnoticed.

“I think they get blamed quite a lot for things that they just couldn’t stop themselves.”

25-45 BC1 Leeds

“We don’t celebrate all the great stuff that they do.”

25-45 BC1 Leeds

“You only hear when things go wrong and you rarely hear that someone has saved three children.”

46+ C2DE Birmingham

More negatively a minority, mainly in C2DE socio-economic classes, were more critical and more cynical about social work, especially in response to the information material we showed.

They saw the role of social workers as not so much about providing support and protection, more about controlling and interfering in people’s lives, and believed that social workers are prone to making poor judgements. Their concerns about social work intruding into what goes on within families may be part of a societal change: what might have been seen as reasonable discipline in the past is now regarded as bordering on abuse.

“They are prosecutors, not defenders. They are there to help but they are not [helping]. They are antagonising, demanding, as soon as they get a sniff of something.”

C2DE 25-45 London

“What we are hearing more of in today’s society is social workers getting involved in maybe incidents that years ago would have been dealt with by families... i.e. ‘my mum swore at me’ and all of a sudden social workers are involved, and they go round to people’s houses and then look into their private life, and that is where they also get very negative feedback from people.”

C2DE 46+ Birmingham

“A child goes to school and says ‘my mum slapped me’, you then worry that it will be ‘ding dong’ at the door.”

C2DE 25-45 London

Some respondents equated social work with the police, the courts and with authority figures in general, and regarded them as part of ‘the system’, which they found hard to trust. At worst they regarded social work as dictatorial, authoritarian, and used to impose certain values and ways of behaviour on society.

They also believed that bureaucracy in social work has had a negative impact: social workers stick to strict guidelines and targets, perhaps imposed to improve procedures after highly publicised failures, and overlook individual circumstances.

“Rules, regulations... Lots of red tape... it probably stops them doing their job a lot and they are probably not allowed to use common sense as much as they should be.”

C2DE 25-45 London

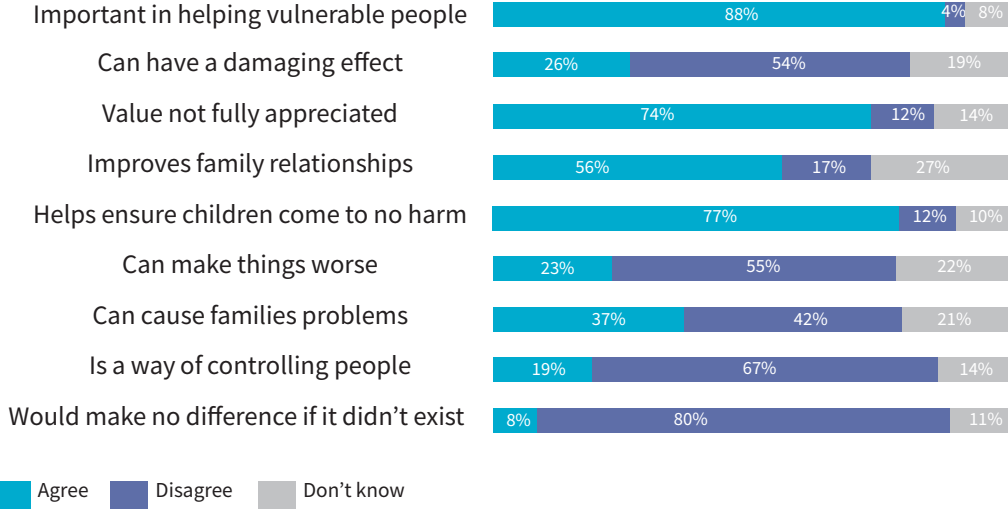
“I think it has created a lot of man hours in terms of paperwork as well to cover themselves and process the people they are helping.”

C2DE 25-45 London

It is worth noting that comments about the effectiveness of social work in the focus groups were often qualified by the notion that this depends on the competence and capability of each individual social worker. Both the more positive majority and the more critical minority believed that this varies, and that individual performance probably affects the effectiveness of social work as a whole.

In the **omnibus survey** respondents were presented with a series of statements about social work, some positive and some negative, and asked to what extent they agreed or disagreed with each; a 4-point response scale was used, from ‘strongly agree’ to ‘strongly disagree’.

The table is a summary of the results for all the statements, showing the proportions who agreed (blue), disagreed (purple) or who didn’t know (grey).



As with the focus groups a generally positive picture of social work emerged, given that most agreed with the positive statements as follows (% for those with experience of social work is given in brackets):

- Social work is important in helping vulnerable people – 88% (92%) ‘strongly agree’ or ‘tend to agree’
- Helps ensure children don’t come to harm – 77% (81%)
- The value of social work is not fully appreciated – 74% (78%)
- Social work improves family relationships – 56% (64%)

And most **disagreed with the negative statements:**

- If social work didn’t exist, it would make no difference to the

- lives of people – 80% (85%)
- Social work is a way of controlling people – 67% (70%)
- Social work can make things worse for people in difficulty – 55% (58%)
- Social work can have a damaging effect on people’s lives – 54% (55%)
- Social work can cause problems for families – 42% (43%)

Those with social work experience (direct or indirect) were consistently more positive and less negative about social work than those without experience. By example, 88% of all respondents agreed with the first statement (Social work is important in helping vulnerable people) a figure that increased to 92% among those with experience of social work.

Likewise, 80% of all respondents disagreed with the negative sentiment If social work didn’t exist, it would make no difference to the lives of people, a proportion that increased to 85% of those with experience. The same pattern held across all statements, whether positive or negative.

3.Views and expectations around receiving social work support

As noted, participants in the focus groups were recruited as not having had direct experience of social work, nor having close family members with experience of it.

In the **omnibus survey** sample, there were no exclusions on experience of social work. 8% of this sample said they had received a social work intervention, 10% said a family member

had and 15% said a friend had. Added to this were 11% of the sample who knew someone else who had received support.

There was overlap between these groups, such that a respondent could have had direct experience themselves and know of someone else who had received support. Allowing for this overlap, just over one in three omnibus survey respondents (34%) had received support themselves or knew of one or more others who had done so.

There was slightly more experience of social workers (themselves or someone they knew) with increasing age, although differences were not marked. Experience varied little by socio-economic class: 34% of ABCI respondents had experience (themselves or someone they knew) compared with 38% of those from the C2DE social groups. However, more C2DEs had personal experience of social work (11%) than ABC1s (6%).

Feelings about the impact of receiving social work intervention/ support varied by socio-economic grade and age.

In the **focus groups** some respondents, though generally supportive of the principle of social work, could not identify needing social work intervention themselves. They felt there was a stigma attached to it revolving around an ability to cope: anyone needing social work support was, in their terms, incapable of looking after themselves and their family. If they were to receive a social work intervention they would feel embarrassment, even shame.

“I’d see it as a last resort.”
25-45 BC1 Leeds

“I feel I would have failed. If a social worker was coming into my home, regardless of what it was for, I would feel inadequate I think.”
46+ C2DE Birmingham

The 18-24 age group were less conscious of a stigma, in part because they were unsure what social work is. When they had heard more about the kinds of people that social work helps, they were more accepting that there might be a situation in the future when they needed support from a social worker.

Those in C2DE socio-economic classes were more likely to accept that they might experience a social work intervention than BC1s. Some knew of people who had seen social workers and had no concerns about this. They did not see failure in this and instead felt it expressed a *need* – for help to deal with a temporary difficulty – akin to claiming benefits if made redundant.

“If someone I knew asked for social work, I’d think he was getting the help he needed. I wouldn’t think badly of him...”
25-45 C2DE London

“I actually think the fact that they have asked for help means they know and it is a positive thing.”
25-45 C2DE London

Others, who knew of people who had experienced social work interventions, believed that social work had had a negative impact and said they would be keen to avoid it if they could.

They felt that people who were put in touch with social workers worried about not being believed, especially in the event of a concern about their child (i.e. the child is believed, not the parents).

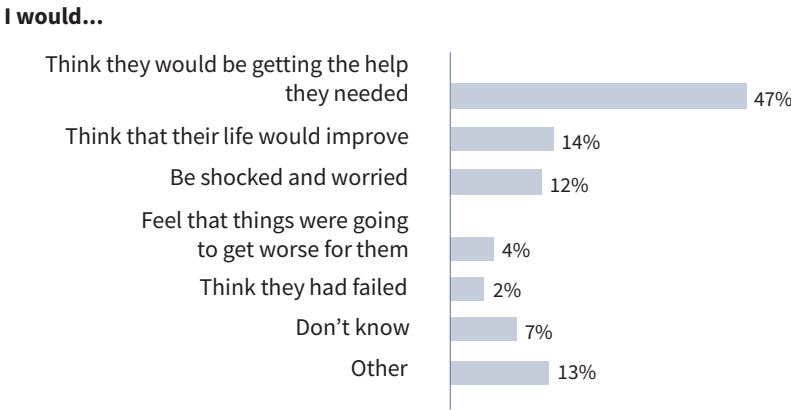
Sources of information and influence on perceptions seemed to be a mix of news media (especially around major stories about claimed ‘failings’ of social workers), TV fiction (e.g. EastEnders, Casualty, Holby City, Tracey Beaker); and local hearsay, especially among those with more negative views. All these disparate sources tended to be regarded as reliable in their way, and people appeared to be prepared to believe what they heard.

In the **omnibus survey** the most common feeling about needing/receiving a social work intervention was that the person concerned would get the help needed (mentioned by 47% in this group as compared with 64% of those who had had experience). Next came the belief that the person’s life would improve (14% compared with 28%), with a similar proportion thinking they would be shocked and worried (12% compared with 9%). The fact that those with experience were more positive (or less worried) about the impact of receiving support is again encouraging.

Very few in this group felt that the person’s life would get worse (4% compared with 9% with experience of social work) or that they had failed (2% compared with 5%).

Question: Which, if any, of the following ways explain how you would feel if you found out that someone you know had been receiving support from a social worker?

(Please select all that apply. If your answer(s) doesn't appear in the list below, please type this in the "Other" box provided.)



4. Perceptions of social workers

4.1 Perceived characteristics, strengths and weaknesses

In relation to social workers as people and their approach to their work, in the **focus groups** social workers were characterised as caring, keen to help, ‘people people’ but also able to gain insights and make sound, fair judgements.

The perception was that in what are often likely to be difficult circumstances they have to work in a way that is neutral and

non-judgemental, and that they have to be good at establishing the truth of situations where they are called in and at finding out what is really going on in a household, in a family, in a life. Some assumed that social workers have had problems in their own lives and do the job to give something back.

Those in the focus groups who had less positive perspective (typically C2DE 25-45s) believed, largely on the basis of hearsay and indirect experience, that social workers are motivated more by a need to get the job done than to carry out their work conscientiously, that they are prone to making poor judgements, and probably overly reliant on rules and box-ticking.

Across the focus group sample there was a general sense that social work is demanding, busy and probably highly stressful, that social workers are only human, trying to do what they can, and struggle because they operate in an under-funded system. They were often believed to be under-appreciated for what they do, particularly in providing support for children and other vulnerable people.

“You hear about it every now and then in the news but that is usually when something bad has happened and then they automatically talk about cuts to funding if something is missed and things slip through the cracks. Then you hear a horror story and you hear their social worker had a massive workload and that is why this person ended up getting hurt.”

BC1 25-45 Leeds

This added up to an impression that social work is not a particularly desirable job and that there is probably a shortage of social workers, which adds to the pressure that social workers are under. Even the more negative acknowledged that some of the failings they attributed to social workers are robably a consequence of over-work and high levels of stress.

“I don’t think I could do this myself.”
“They must be stressed and emotional.”
BC1 25-45 Leeds

“I think it’s demanding for them, and I don’t think they can spread themselves as much as they’d like to.”
C2DE 25-45

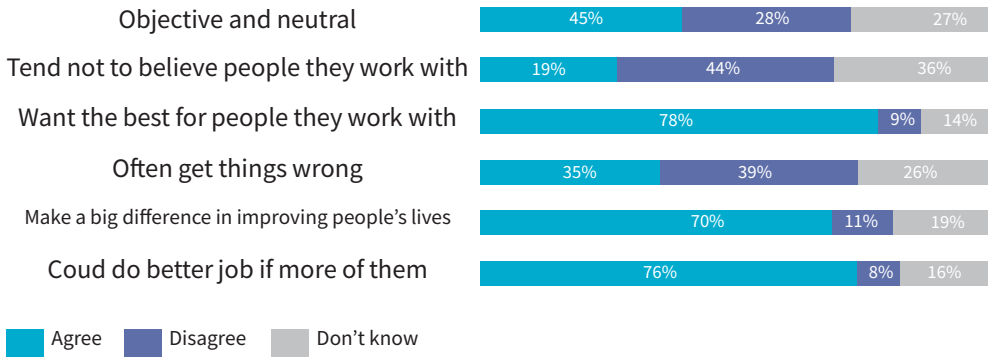
Participants in the **omnibus survey** were asked how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about social workers and their work. On these specific measures social workers were generally seen in a favourable light. Most respondents agreed with the positive statements, and those with experience of social work interventions were slightly more likely to agree (%) for those with experience in brackets):

- 78% (81% of those with experience) said they ‘strongly agree’ or ‘tend to agree’ that *Social workers want the best for the people they work with*
- 76% (83%) strongly agreed or tended to agree that *Social workers could do a better job if there were more of them*
- 70% (76%) agreed strongly or tended to agree that *Social*

workers make a big difference in improving people’s lives
The three other statements about social workers that the omnibus respondents were shown attracted a more ambiva-lent response:

- 35% (40%) strongly agreed or tended to agree that Social workers often get things wrong – while 39% (45%) disagreed with this statement
- 28% (35%) strongly disagreed or tended to disagree that Social workers are objective and neutral and under half (45%) (49%) agreed with this
- 19% (23%) strongly agreed or tended to agree that Social workers tend not to believe the people they work with and 44% (49%) disagreed with this

Question: To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social workers?



4.2 Comparisons with other occupations

In the **focus groups** we explored perceptions of social workers in comparison with those in other public service occupations: police officers, GPs, nurses, teachers, probation officers and care workers.

Views differed between groups but the overall feeling was that in terms of their effectiveness in meeting the aims of their work, their understanding of the people they work with and their overall professionalism, social workers are somewhere in the middle of these occupations. The widespread feeling was that they are professionals in the sense that they have formal training and qualifications.

In terms of how they are regarded by the general public, initially the view was that social workers are not as highly respected as nurses and teachers and, for some respondents, GPs; and that they are on a par with police officers, probation officers and above care workers. On consideration there was some sense that social workers should be regarded in a similar light to teachers, nurses, GPs and police officers because their work is demanding, requires a multitude of skills and involves dealing with people’s problems.

Discussion of social workers and the work they do indicated that they are not highly visible, nor well understood. The impression was that they have a low profile, that their day to day work and responsibilities are not familiar to most people, and that the range of powers they have is not fully known (and probably exaggerated).

4.3 Social workers’ qualifications and training

A minority of **focus group** participants were aware that social workers now have to have a degree to practice; this prompted mixed feelings. Positively, it suggested that social workers are highly qualified and trained, more so than expected, and implied a degree of professionalism. Some participants were curious about what the degree covered; they guessed that it might include sociology, psychology and psychiatry.

Against this, others, more often C2DE respondents who had indirect experience of social work, were not convinced that having a degree would prepare anyone for practising social work. They envisaged studying for a degree as entirely or largely learning theory and as lacking any practical element. They believed that life experience and an ability to identify with or understand the lives of the people they support was more important.

“We don’t want to know that you’ve read six books and then did an exam. We want to know that you were in the midst of it. You went to a kid’s home and you spoke to kids...”

C2DE 25-45 London

“They are not trained in life though.”
“Training and life skills is two different things”

C2DE 46+ Birmingham

If any information about social workers’ qualifications and training is in the public domain, it is important to make the point that this incorporates a large element of practical, real-world training in addition to learning the theory.

5. Social Work England

In the **focus groups** there was no awareness of Social Work England. However, 16% of the sample in the **omnibus survey** said they were aware of it. This is an unexpected and potentially unlikely figure given that the organisation launched only in December and there has been limited public promotion of its work. Part of the explanation for this claimed awareness may lie in the question format necessitated by the omnibus survey, in that respondents were asked a prompted question:

Before taking this survey, had you ever heard of Social Work England?

Yes I had

No I hadn’t

Such prompted questions can result in awareness being over-stated. It is undoubtedly the case that if a spontaneous version of the question had been used (e.g. *What organisations do you know of that are responsible for regulating social work in England?*) far fewer would have been able to recall Social Work England.

Our belief is that respondents who said they were aware of Social Work England mistakenly said so because they had spent some time answering questions about social work and assumed that they had heard of it. It may also be the case that others assumed there would be a body with such a generic sounding name, given the need to regulate the profession.

In the **focus groups**, awareness of and confidence in the principle of regulation of a public body or its staff varied widely.

Some knew that professions and some industries are regulated, to ensure that work is done as it should be, responsibilities are fulfilled and complaints are investigated. Others, more often 18-24s and some C2DEs, had little knowledge of it and had not heard of regulatory bodies such as the GMC. A few with more negative views did not believe that regulation of a profession necessarily makes it more accountable.

Respondents in the **focus groups** and the **omnibus survey** were shown information outlining the role of Social Work England (see Appendices). This generally worked well to communicate that social work is regulated and that regulation can have a positive effect on the profession. All five of the specific responsibilities listed were regarded as important and as playing a significant part in upholding standards in social work.

In the **focus groups** the outline description told respondents that there is a body responsible for monitoring social work and keeping a check on the way it is carried out, that social workers are registered and have to keep up with new learning, and that there are standards which social workers have to meet in their work. All this suggested to respondents that social work is conducted in a systematic way, that there are checks on the quality of the service, to the benefit of people who need it.

“I think it’s a positive.”

“It’s a step forward.”

BC1 18-24 London

“It shows that individuals are doing the best possible job.”
BC1 25-45 Leeds

“It requires them to keep up their skills and knowledge.”
C2DE 46+ Birmingham

“I think everything they are monitoring here though would filter down to the person that they are helping so the social worker would feel confident and fully up to date with their training to be able to make the right decision or feel that they are making the right decision and work at a certain level that is being set by Social Work England.”
BC1 25-45 Leeds

The outline description also communicated that there is a place to turn to for anyone who has a complaint about social work. The information did not explicitly state that this is an independent body, and some respondents were interested in knowing this, especially those with reservations about social work. They felt that since some social work users are by definition vulnerable or, for example, struggle with addiction, they might not be believed in the event of a dispute. They wanted reassurance that complaints would be investigated and dealt with by someone who was not directly connected with the social workers involved.

“These are vulnerable people. For them to stand up and prove their case against somebody in authority it’s not going to be easy.”
C2DE 25-45 London

“I think ultimately when somebody comes into your life you want to know that even though they are going to judge you and make an opinion on you, you are allowed to challenge that.”
C2DE 25-45 London

The fact that social work is regulated to ensure that any intervention is done for the right reasons provided reassurance. The belief was that this helps to ensure that those who need social work have their interests protected, and that if mistakes have been made in the past there is less chance of these being repeated. Against this there was some scepticism among the more negative about whether vulnerable people would be believed if a complaint was made, and how easy it would be to prove a problem.

The information in the outline prompted discussion about the nature of social work and went some way to shifting attitudes to social work among those in the **focus groups**. For the BC1 18-24s, who were by some way the least well informed it made social work seem more professional; this was reassuring, though it could also suggest that social work is more structured and less focused on nurturing/caring.

“[The information is saying] That it’s more regulated than I thought. That’s a really good thing.”
BC1 18-24 London

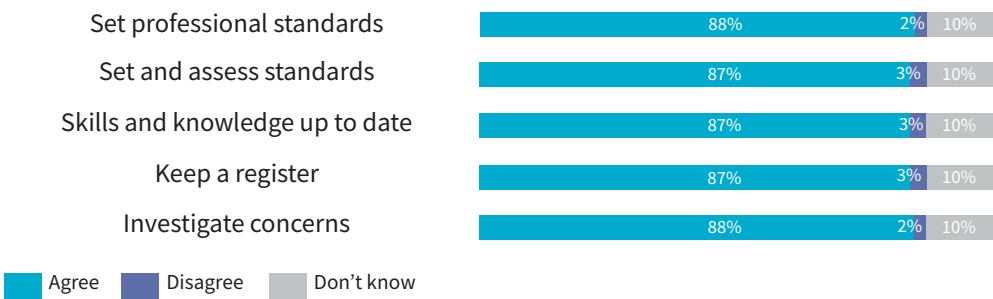
C2DE 25-45s, who were more cynical about social work than others, were unsure whether Social Work England would be able to restore trust in social work, and felt that there should be greater transparency around it.

They wanted information to acknowledge past mistakes, and they believed that anyone receiving a social work intervention should be given material about Social Work England, setting out the social worker’s role, the individual’s rights, and what they could do in the event of a complaint. They felt that this would help to raise standards in social work by making social workers more accountable.

In the **omnibus survey**, respondents were asked to rate the importance of each of the five individual responsibilities. A four-point response scale was used, from ‘very important’ to ‘not at all important’. The chart is a summary of the results for all the statements, showing the proportions that thought the role important (very or fairly) or not (not very or not at all).

Almost all respondents thought every role equally important, only 2-3% felt they weren’t important and one in ten (10%) didn’t have an opinion. Across all roles, those with direct or indirect experience of social work thought every role even more important.

Question: How important, if at all, do you think the following roles and responsibilities are for Social Work England? (Please select one option on each row).



Respondents were then asked to select one or more statements that applied to them in response to the roles of Social Work England in order to explore their feelings towards the organisation.

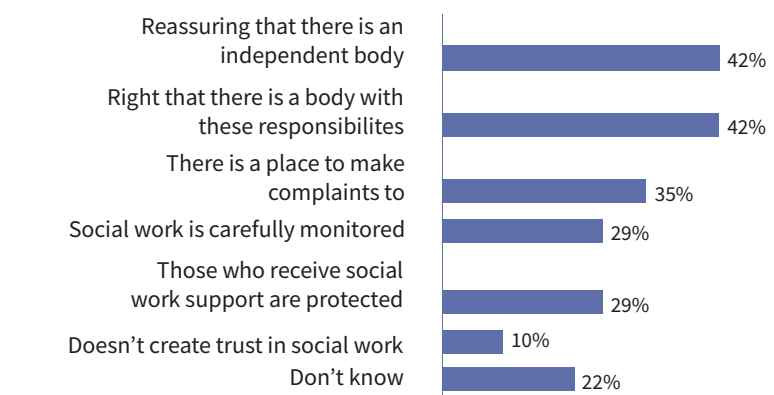
One in five (22%) felt unable to answer the question. The remainder picked an average of two options, most commonly that they felt reassured there was an independent body overseeing social work (42%) and that it is only right that there is a body with these responsibilities (42%).

One in three (35%) felt that if something went wrong in a social work case there was an organisation to complain to. Slightly fewer (29% in both cases) believed that social work is carefully monitored and that those that receive help from social workers are protected.

Encouragingly, only one in ten (10%) felt that Social Work England did not make them feel they could not trust social work to work as it should.

Question: Thinking about the roles and responsibilities of Social Work England that you have just seen, which, if any, of the following statements apply to you?

(Please select all that apply. If your answer(s) doesn't appear in the list below, please type this in the "Other" box provided)



Across all aspects, a greater proportion of those with social work experience selected the various options, reflecting their generally more positive view of the profession as seen across all other questions in the omnibus survey.

6. Communicating about social work and Social Work England

We did not intentionally explore the notion of communicating to the public about social work, its role and benefits but this often came up spontaneously in the focus groups. Many, especially the better disposed, felt that there is a case for letting the public know more about what social work is, what it does, and its benefits.

When respondents in the groups were shown the outline description of social work (see Appendices) they generally reacted positively, though some were less keen.

The more accepting majority – BC1 25-45s and some of the C2DEs – generally took on board the information with no significant questions. It fitted with their impressions of social work as providing help to people with difficulties in their lives and trying to improve things for them. A few queried social work's support around human rights – they were not clear what this would be.

The description was useful for the less well informed 18-24s and explained to them who social work is intended to help, that it provides specific, practical support, and aims to empower people to help themselves. It made clear where social work sits in relation to other services and that it helps people to make contact with and access these. It also made them aware that social workers require higher levels of knowledge than they had assumed, and that social work is more important than they had thought.

The information was less well received by some of the more negative C2DE 25-45s, who believed that it presented an unrealistically positive picture of social work. In particular they felt that the suggestion that social work could improve someone's chances in life or wellbeing did not ring true. They wanted communications about social work to acknowledge that social workers do not always get things right, and that social work is not always the perfect solution to people's difficulties.

Nevertheless, the majority view was that there is a case for doing more to let the public know that social work does much to help vulnerable people, and that most of its good work goes unnoticed. Many respondents in the groups spontaneously suggested a publicity campaign of some kind to communicate this and put the case for social work.

“[It would be] Good to let people know that they are to help. Especially to do with children and once they get involved there is a lot of care available.”
C2DE 46+ Birmingham

“People need to see the good that they are doing and not the bad things all the time in newspapers.”
C2DE 46+ Birmingham

“Show good stories that you have done. Stuff that you've done to prevent it from happening.”
C2DE 25-45 London

Several respondents suggested the idea of a fly-on-the-wall TV series featuring social workers. They thought this could be an eye-opening way of helping people better understand social work – the range of people it helps, the difficulties it faces, how decisions are made, and the day-to-day work of social workers. Given that fly-on-the-wall series have been made on the police, GPs, hospital doctors and others, they imagined that something similar on social workers could be valuable in helping the general public understand their world.

F: Findings in detail - those with lived experience of social work

1. Overall

Experiences of social work among those with lived experience were mixed but more favourable than critical, and in many cases were more positive than they had expected.

Among those we interviewed face to face, parents were largely (though not entirely) the most positive; young adults were generally more negative, especially care leavers and those with disabilities. Many felt that the social work intervention and support they had received had made a significant improvement to their lives, in some cases with lasting effect.

A minority in the **qualitative** sample were not satisfied with the way their case had been handled. They tended to be people with disabilities who felt they were not prioritised by the system, especially if they received support from family members; or those with family problems that seemed too complex or too subtle for social workers to grasp fully.

The generally favourable view from the face-to-face interviews was reflected in the findings from the omnibus survey. Of the

total omnibus sample of 1751 people, 595 said they had direct or indirect experience of social work interventions. Of these 595...

- 81% agreed that social workers want the best for the people they work with
- 76% agreed that social workers make a big difference in improving people's lives

2. Circumstances leading to interventions

Our sample of those with lived experience of social work support and interventions covered a wide range of circumstances. Often these were complex and included a number of overlapping factors.

Parents of children who had had/were currently having interventions included cases where the child had begun to display difficult and disruptive behaviour at home and at school, often following events such as abuse or neglect by one

or more parent. In most instances they also involved one or more of family break-up, abandonment by a parent, or domestic abuse. In two cases there had been sexual grooming by a step-parent or someone outside the family. One family had had a social work intervention because one of their children had Down's syndrome.

Adults who had received interventions included: some with disabilities such as cerebral palsy or learning disabilities; a woman caring for her grandson with highly disruptive behaviour who herself had asked for social work support to help her cope; a woman with difficulties with her mental health who had attempted suicide; a man who had until recently been homeless; two men who had struggled with mental health and addiction, in one case gambling and in the other case drugs.

Care leavers who had been in care homes since childhood included one with a history of parental abuse and neglect, and arrests for theft and other charges; and another who at the age of 21 had three children, all subjects of custody disputes with ex-partners.

Overlaying specific concerns there were often other factors which contributed to these people's difficulties, such as debt, housing problems, relationship breakdown and family disputes.

3. Initial responses to interventions

Initial responses to a social work intervention had depended much on how and by whom the intervention had been instigated. Generally if the intervention had come about following an incident involving the police, school or part of the NHS, or had been prompted by a neighbour or one of the parents, the person had been apprehensive at the least and often highly anxious; they had expected the worst.

The fact that the first meetings tended to take place in their home seemed to make them more worried, as though they envisaged being under scrutiny.

Like the general public sample, those with lived experience had tended to associate social work interventions as indicative of problems. The parents among them had often had in mind the image of social workers 'taking my children away'. In a few cases these impressions had come from, or were reinforced by, family members or friends and acquaintances with negative experience of social work.

At worst, people had been extremely anxious before their first encounter with social workers. This was especially the case where a child was involved and where the intervention had been prompted by the police, their child's school, a neighbour or a concerned relative, or a partner if there was a domestic dispute going on. The language which some used when talking about their expectations of the intervention demonstrated their degree of anxiety.

“I was terrified. Even though I knew I hadn’t done anything wrong, I was like ‘oh no, social services are going to be involved in our life’ and I didn’t want that....I made sure my flat was completely pristine, I was scrubbing every corner.”

“Initially I was like ‘Oh my God, they’re going to take my kids off me.’”

“I was really scared... I thought they were going to take the baby and I started panicking and he [GP] reassured me that they are not going to do that. He said ‘speak to them and tell them your problem and there’s very little chance they will do that.’”

“All of my friends were saying you should never call the social services....They were like ‘they’ll do that and make life hell for you for no reason, and the school will know about that and you will look silly.’”

“I was paranoid. I thought ‘Oh God I’m going to have to prove that I’m a fit parent and they’re coming to take away my child...from what I’ve seen in the media, on telly.’”

Where interventions had been requested by people themselves expectations tended to be more positive. These people hoped that social workers would be able to give them help in coping with their difficulties/their child’s difficulties, in getting access to services which would provide them with material support or simply in giving them some relief from their day to day problems. They appeared to have been cautiously optimistic about interventions, and had not experienced the fears that other people had.

“I was hoping they’d get me into supported living or my own place, get me standing on my own two feet.”

“I was ok about it because I was really struggling back then, I was in a relationship that wasn’t particularly good and I wasn’t mentally in a great place. My gambling addictions really begun to take over my life and I was thankful that I could have someone to help me, and I thought of it as a positive and not a negative, an opportunity to hopefully move forward.”

4. Experiences of interventions

4.1 *Satisfactions*

Experiences of social work interventions were more positive than negative; many were satisfied with the service they had

received, often in contrast with their expectations. The sorts of favourable terms most people used to describe their encounters were *helpful, kind, supportive, friendly, caring, and understanding*. It was clear that interactions with social workers had **challenged many people’ existing beliefs and exposed myths** about the aim of social work, especially around its intervention in families. Having expected their first meeting to be awkward or worse, many were pleasantly surprised at the attitude and approach of the social worker(s) they saw, and at the discovery that the social workers’ primary aim seemed to be not to punish them but to offer help.

“There was always negative connotations, would they scrutinise everything about you, and take your child away? ...And also interfering and picking up on things that weren’t perhaps always there. But now, having them attached to us I realise that... one of the social workers we had earlier on, she said to me ‘we work very hard to keep families together.’”

“I had this mad old school idea in my mind like kids just get taken away so to hear social services, the way my mind works was my kids are going to get took off me... actually I couldn’t be further from the truth, their aim is to keep families together.”

“I think people think social workers are going to come and take your child away. I would think that

would be the last thing they would want to do.”

It was clear that many felt that the social worker(s) they had seen had shown **understanding** of their circumstances, difficulties and needs. In addition, they had expressed this understanding without judging the client, and instead had offered emotional support. This was valuable: people in difficult situations, fearful of what might happen as a result of a social work intervention in their lives, had instead found it a source of help, even comfort.

“Everything I was saying to her was making sense. She understood what I was saying... It gave me that comfort.”

“She was very caring and very supportive. She wasn’t judgmental at all. She was quite sympathetic with what I had been through, and I suppose she was very sympathetic as to what I had to say and she understood my mental health.”

“It’s an avenue of support for me, I do open up fully about how I am feeling about the situation and I know I can ring [the social worker] up and she will listen and [I can] rant at her....”

Another aspect of social workers’ approach was the way in which people felt that the social workers they saw had **listened** to their account of what had happened, and made an effort to

grasp the situation. People felt that social workers had taken them and their difficulty seriously and had involved themselves in trying to deal with it. For some this was unexpected and novel: someone was making an effort to help them.

“The ones who have dealt with me have always been fine with me and had an understanding of the situation and struggles that we are up against. I think they have tried to be just there to listen.”

“She seemed concerned about me too and wanted to be sure that I was going to be ok which was very reassuring and nice because I didn’t expect that.”

The manner in which social workers had interacted with people was also significant in making experiences feel positive. These people had found their social workers **warm, friendly and approachable**. Again, this contrasted with their expectations, which had often been that social workers would be in some way intimidating, even threatening.

“The most important thing for me was the way this social worker came across to me. I think the way she introduced herself and what she was here for and the way she was with me made me feel really comfortable. Before she knocked on the door I was extremely nervous and then when she left I was absolutely calm.”

Alongside the emotional support social workers had provided, in many cases they had also offered **practical help**: facilitating next steps in addressing their situation, sign-posting them to support services, and/or in a more general way motivating providers of services and getting things done. Some felt that they would not have received services without the intervention and help of social workers.

“As soon as we started engaging with social services things have really moved forward in terms of getting referrals, assessments, my son engaging in children’s mental health services...I’m ever so grateful for having them in my life.”

“They were extremely helpful. They got me to move house and everything. They did so much in such a short amount of time.”

“I had a really good one. She was like a hot knife through butter. She was going to do this and she did it, and she was accountable and she was there... She instigated some funding through the adoption support fund and so got the ball rolling on that, and was just really proactive. She was great.”

Where emotional and practical support had come together, people felt that the social work intervention they had received had had **long term benefits** in helping them re-build lives, help

repair family relationships and create structure where there had been none before. At best the intervention had turned lives round and set people on a different and much more positive course.

“I’ve had so much support from them and I’m getting so much out of it...They are building the foundation for me and my son, so they are building me up, which is helping my relationship with him.”

“If they hadn’t have got involved my life would be very different now. I would probably be in jail or an addict to be honest.”

“They are a backbone for people that are finding it difficult and don’t know where to go and need support. And they are there to step in when you’ve tried whatever you can and it’s not working and you want to go the positive way and in order to do that you need help from the outside.”

These positive impressions and experiences were especially (though not exclusively) evident among women, and particularly those whose interventions had come about following family problems/domestic disputes. Like those in the general public focus groups, they believed that without a system of social work vulnerable people would suffer, more than at present.

“There would be people who are in desperate need. Vulnerable people.”

“[There would be] A lot of people falling through that safety net...Ending up homeless. Ending up staying in dangerous situations. Children being exposed to things that they shouldn’t be exposed to. Abused in ways that shouldn’t be happening.”

“I think a lot of children would slip through the net...being malnourished and abused...A lot of people would suffer in silence I guess and life would be harder for a lot of people.”

4.2 Dissatisfactions

Not everyone was happy with the actions or approach of social workers and there were a number of complaints and concerns about interventions. A few of these concerned individual social workers and came from people who were otherwise happy with how their case had been approached and managed. In contrast with the more positive majority, they used terms such as **judgmental, interfering, controlling and failed** in accounts of their interventions.

Some felt that social workers had **made mistakes** in completing forms and following procedures. They had apparently not known the correct steps to take, for example when applying for access to services; or had input the wrong information about a

client; or mislaid files which had resulted in long delays. Several people said their social worker had been poor at communicating with them, and left them wondering what was going on in relation to their case.

“Another social worker came in and this other social worker messed up my whole case and part of my case went missing and it was all a massive show at court because this social worker has lost everything, she didn’t know half of the things about us...”

“I see [the social worker] once in a blue moon. Once every year maybe. They’re supposed to do a care plan but if you want to see them you’ve got to contact them, they won’t contact you...You try and contact them and they never get back to you.”

“Last year I contacted them saying we need help, they called and said they’d come out and do an assessment and said it would be in about six weeks’ time, and we’ve not heard anything since.”

There were also concerns about a **lack of consistency** in the way cases were handled. In part this was a sense that different social workers had taken different approaches when dealing with a case, focusing on different features of their situation. In part it was a consequence of a turnover of social workers involved in their case, and having to explain their story again each time a new one started.

“I had God knows how many different people, I can’t remember how many. And every time you have to go through it all again.”

“Because we hadn’t accessed any services they closed the case. If we want any help they start all over again.”

Others had more emotional concerns. Some felt the social workers they saw had been **judgmental**: they had pre-judged the client and the circumstances that had led to their becoming involved, to the extent that they had assumed the worst. This stance was more likely among men whose intervention had been prompted by family or domestic issues, and where it had been instigated by a third party such as school, teachers or the police.

“They were trying to say I was the aggressor. They were trying to find a reason so they could act...It was like they painted a picture before they came in. They didn’t make me feel at ease.”

Some parents believed that the social worker(s) involved in their case/their child’s case had been **too strongly focused** on the behaviour and welfare of **their child** and had paid little attention to their own wellbeing. Their perception was that the social workers prioritised the child’s need to such an extent that others in the family or household were neglected.

Though they, as parents, wanted what was best for their child, they also expected some acknowledgement and understanding of how difficult the child’s behaviour was making life for the family as a whole.

“I just think she was all for [my daughter] and it didn’t matter that [my daughter] was blacking her mum’s eyes...it didn’t matter that [my daughter] was punching her stepdad in the face and cutting his lip...Yes she is here for the protection of [my daughter] but where is the protection for the other two boys?”

Even where people were broadly happy with at least some of the social work service they had received, they might feel that their own welfare was being ignored.

A few parents felt that social workers had simply been **ineffective in handling** their case/their child’s case because they were out of their depth and lacked the experience, intuition or know-how to tackle it. An unsuccessful intervention of this sort did not reflect on these people’s views of social work as a whole, and they accepted that some social workers were more effective, but it had not been helpful.

“Absolute waste of time. I know you can’t pick and choose but I think the fit between [my grandson] and the social worker just wasn’t there and [my grandson] was running rings round him. I felt as though he hadn’t got the gist of what this child was actually like.”

Several of those with lived experience complained that the social work system appears to **prioritise certain groups**, especially families, and disregard others.

There were two aspects to this. One was that social work providers, i.e. local authorities, made it clear that their attention was focused on children and families, and that they had less time and resources to spend on other groups including vulnerable adults.

Two adults with disabilities, and their parents, were unhappy about this. They and their parents made the point that because their families provided help for them social workers tended to leave them to their own devices and not offer as much support as they might have done. Another parent felt that lack of disadvantage meant her family had not received the support they needed.

“They only focus on more severe disabilities. They should give everyone a chance.”

“Because we get on with it they don’t ring us up and check that [her son] is alright. Because... we support him, they probably think he’s ok and you’re left on your own.”

“It’s like a tick box exercise to assess how vulnerable they are. Obviously they have their criteria which they score them on...”

“They have got all the advice... for disadvantaged families but normal working class families that go to work and the kid brings it into the house they haven’t got many answers.”

The other concern around perceived prioritising of cases was that if children were not regarded by the system as directly under threat, they would receive little support even if things within the family or the household were not good.

In one case a woman whose ex-partner had caused significant disruption and harm to the family complained that though she was struggling to deal with the consequences, she was not receiving the help she needed because social workers now regarded her children as safe. A father who had been seen by social workers following his part in a domestic disturbance complained that when he asked for social work support on a separate occasion - because his daughter was being bullied at school - he did not get it.

“If nothing’s wrong with your children you won’t get help. I would have to start beating them for the social workers to come.”

“When we made this complaint we made a statement to the police, we made a statement to social services and we just got the run-around.”

There was some sense of people falling through the net: a belief that social work support will be provided for, and will help,

those with the more serious problems, especially where these concern children; but will pay less attention to any who it feels are in less urgent need and/or who demonstrate that they can help themselves.

5. Perceptions of social workers

Feelings about social workers depended very much on individual experiences. Given that most of those with lived experience had been satisfied overall with the way their case had been handled, the general view of social workers was favourable.

Most people regarded them as caring, dedicated, knowledgeable and motivated, and imagined that their work is demanding. Some believed that social workers had probably been through bad times themselves, and these had both prompted them to become social workers to give something back and had given them an understanding of the difficulties people can face.

“They are amazing individuals. I do think they are very overworked. They have high caseloads. I don’t think they get the recognition they deserve.”

“Maybe somebody that had been through something like that. Maybe people that liked to care for people, maybe they had been through something similar when they were younger. Maybe they went into care or had a difficult childhood and

that’s maybe why they want to help people.”

“Who would make a good social worker is someone who has already had dealings with a social worker themselves. Life experience.”

“You’d definitely have to have the people skills of understanding that people are so vulnerable and they are really on the edge when they meet a social worker, so you could say we’ve got your back on this, but we’re here to keep things in the right place as well. You need people who are highly compassionate.”

A few people who had learned that social workers now require degrees to begin social work were impressed by this. In their eyes it leant social workers a sense of professionalism that they had not expected, and created a feeling that social workers follow a process in dealing with cases.

“If I’d have known she’s qualified, she’s got this degree or that degree, I would have thought she knows her stuff. I did get the impression by the way she was speaking that she did but it’s that extra reassurance, this is her CV, this is what she’s about. So it’s like that professional way of looking at someone.”

Some felt that differences in social workers’ way of dealing with people had a significant impact on their experiences. Several said that one or more social workers who had seen them had been helpful, but another had not. They attributed this partly to differences in personality and partly to local variations in resourcing. On this point people with lived experience, like members of the public, acknowledged that what social workers can do, and the services they can provide for people, are probably hampered by things beyond their control, particularly around funding.

“They have to make a call sometimes in terms of what can we do and what resources do we have, and I completely understand that sometimes they don’t have the resources. Even as much as they would want to, they can’t just magic them up can they?”

6. Social Work England

None of those with lived experience had heard of Social Work England.

When they were given the outline description of Social Work England most welcomed the existence of the organisation. They assumed that social work is regulated but had no knowledge of who does it or how it is done. Like the general public sample, they believed that regulation is about maintaining minimum standards and using established procedures.

“I assume regulated means they are accountable and they are held up to a set of standards.”

“To make sure they are setting a certain standard and sticking to those guidelines and everyone is on the same page, everyone is treated fairly, they’ve done the right amount of training they need... everyone is doing what they are supposed to.”

People with lived experience generally responded well to the existence and role of Social Work England as set out in the description. They applauded the idea of an overseeing body with overall control of social work and the way in which it is provided, and they liked the fact of there being a named organisation to which they could turn in the event of a complaint. This was empowering because it made them feel

they were not subservient to the social work system and that they had some agency in the social work process. It enhanced trust in social work: the assumption was that if the overseeing organisation made itself available to investigate concerns, it must be confident in social work.

“If I didn’t think they were doing their job properly then I’d know who to go to.”

“It would be nice to know if you are not happy then it is not just the social worker’s immediate boss that you are complaining to, that there is someone higher...A bit like an ombudsman, a separate body.”

“It would nice to think that there is somebody making sure that they are doing their job to the full capacity, that they are informed about everything and everything is up to date. It would be reassuring to know that as I didn’t know that there was anybody above them who made sure that they were doing.”

More specifically the information on Social Work England suggested that there are established procedures for interventions, which meant that each intervention, or type of intervention, is managed in the same way. The impression was also that there would be clear standards for the social work process, and that these are monitored and maintained to ensure consistency of service provision. And the role of

investigating concerns raised about social workers created a sense of accountability.

“That’s probably what people would want to hear, make you feel more trusted. Definitely. They are being assessed....”

“[It means] they go through the same procedure with everybody so that they don’t miss anything.”

“It says [it] sets professional standards for social workers and then it requires social workers to keep their skills and knowledge up to date.”

Some of those who were happy with the social work interventions they had received felt that this outline fitted in with their own experiences. They believed that the service had been provided in a way that had appeared to follow a pattern of delivery and that the social worker(s) involved had used a standardised approach, while also taking account of their particular circumstances.

Those with lived experience, like the general public, considered all five responsibilities listed in the outline equally all important. They tended to focus particularly on standards of service delivery and training; and on investigating concerns about social workers. A few queried the keeping of a register of qualified social workers; they wondered how this was done and what it achieved.

G: Case Studies

The following is a small selection of case studies from the interviews we conducted among people with lived experience of social work. Names have been changed.

1 Parent, suffered domestic abuse

- AAAA is in her 20s and has a young daughter; her partner began abusing her violently and she told her GP about it after breaking down during a consultation
- Her GP recommended that she ask for social work support; she was reluctant because she was worried that it might mean her child being taken away and was concerned about how her partner would respond, but she wanted support and she wanted information about her partner’s access to their child
- Some of her negative perceptions of social work came from friends and family, some from the media, including a recent EastEnders storyline

- Her GP reassured her that social work support would be helpful but she wasn’t convinced; she didn’t tell her partner or her family, and she delayed the initial appointment and asked for it to be in a cafe
- Her partner used to threaten her with getting their daughter taken away because she has mental health problems, but the social worker corrected and reassured her on that
- She didn’t fully trust the social worker until their second meeting; she was surprised at how young and how approachable the social worker was and felt the social worker understood her
- Social workers have been accommodating and she appreciates this; she has been seeing a social worker for 5 months; she has been told she can contact her social worker at any time and she feels more confident about doing so now; the experience has been much better than she expected

2 Parent, young daughter needed intervention

- BBBB is in his early 40s and in work; he has two children, one with his wife and one with his ex-wife
- The daughter he had with his ex-wife (aged 6) used to live with her but now lives with him and his second wife
- His child’s school alerted him to problems after his daughter began falling behind and sometimes arrived at school looking as though she wasn’t being cared for properly; he had been unaware of this
- He contacted his ex-wife and she acknowledged that she had drug problems and was becoming incapable of looking after their daughter
- The school contacted social workers and they visited him; they recommended that the daughter come to live with him and his second wife and child, and instituted regular meetings to monitor the situation
- He has now had 4 or 5 meetings with one social worker; he was initially uncertain and apprehensive because he thought of social work as something only people in very difficult situations needed
- His experience so far has been very positive; the social worker is friendly, approachable, caring, supportive, has a low key style but is clearly very involved and keen to check daughter is ok; he tells his daughter the social worker is a friend coming to visit and his daughter seems to feel confident in the social worker

3 Parent with mental health issues

- CCCC is 45, single, and has two children at home aged 11 and 17
- CCCC has poor mental health; a year ago she walked out of her house and checked into a hotel intending to take her own life; she cut her wrists but was found alive, and was then detained by the police and hospitalised in a psychiatric unit
- She came home some weeks later after treatment, in a much more stable state and is now in better health, though heavily reliant on medication to keep her well; her children then came home too, having been with a relative in her absence
- Not long after she came home she was called by a social worker who said they had to see her; she had no warning of this and was very worried that the social worker(s) would take her children away
- The social worker spent 90+ minutes with her and was unexpectedly pleasant, sympathetic, understanding and willing to listen; she left saying she was ‘satisfied’ with CCCC’s account, and accepted that her children were now safe
- The experience was much better than she had anticipated: she had a negative view of social work before (partly based on her sister’s experience of an unsolicited social work intervention) but now feels positive and believes that social workers are there to help

- She was surprised that the social worker was as concerned for her own welfare as that of her children; she had assumed that the main reason for the social worker getting involved was to check on her children’s safety, and did not include her
 - She now feels she can trust the social worker she saw and the social work system as a whole, having not trusted it in the past
- 4** *DDDD, care leaver*
- DDDD is 18 years old, not in work, and in supported living
 - She was put into care at 7 because she was being abused at home, but was abused in a carer’s home and was placed with her mother again, then put back into care when problems at home re-surfaced
 - Her mother suffers from substance misuse and her dad is in jail; her younger brother is also in care; several other family members have social workers
 - She was in trouble with the police several times in her younger teens, mainly for theft offences, but she hasn’t been arrested for two years
 - She feels she can’t trust social workers; they have made mistakes, and many have been too inexperienced to manage her case; at worst she has had to explain to social workers what they should be doing because they don’t seem to understand the procedures
 - Her second social worker caused problems after losing most of

- her case information and she is currently in difficulty because social services haven’t paid her rent; she feels that other social workers have handled her and her brother’s cases badly
- She is not happy that some social workers live and work in the same borough; this can mean they get to deal with people they already know socially or know through the school they went to, as has happened with her
 - But she acknowledges that her social workers have done some good for her, and that without their help she would be in a much worse position than she is now; they have helped her and protected her from harm

5 *EEEE, disabled adult*

- EEEE is aged 26 and has been disabled since birth with cerebral palsy; he lives with his parents and is heavily dependent on them; he is not able to live on his own
- He has done some voluntary work through a local support group but has no history of sustained paid employment
- He would very much like to be independent - in work and in supported living - but neither of these is possible at the moment because he has no means of getting into them
- He has had social workers since he was a child and his case is still open but he has not seen his current social worker for several years; he is unhappy about this and about the way it has left him without the support he needs to become more independent and make something of his life

- He feels let down; he blames individual social workers for this and regards them as having been inefficient, poor at communicating with him (they don’t return calls and emails), and behaving as though they don’t care about him
- His mother (also present at the interview) is critical too but blames the system and lack of funding; she believes social workers are spread too thinly and don’t have enough time to deal with all their people; she also feels bureaucracy in social work is getting more demanding – people are being made to jump through more hoops, perhaps to discourage them from applying for support
- EEEE and his mother believe that people in his sort of situation are a low priority for the social work system: they are not children, are not in danger, and get support from their parents, so are regarded as less important than other people and less in need of help, even though life is very difficult for them

Appendices

- Focus group topic guide – general public
- Depth interview topic guide – those with lived experience
- Omnibus survey questionnaire
- Outline description of social work
- Outline description of Social Work England

Topic guide - general public

Aims

- Establish and explore knowledge, understanding and perceptions of social work, unprompted, including its purpose, its value and those it is intended to help
- Gauge response to information about social work and the effect of information on attitudes and perceptions
- Examine awareness and perceptions of Social Work England and its role in regulating social work

Introductory points

- Let respondents know that the research is intended to help SWE understand what people know about social work and how they regard it
- Explain that we are able to provide more information about social work and SWE if respondents would like it

Background

- Name, household circumstances, occupation where relevant
- Views on what is good and not so good about life in the UK today

Social work - generally

- What does the term social work mean to them – what first comes to mind, what associations does it have, what words and phrases does it conjure up
- What do they know about social work – what does it involve, who is it provided for, what kinds of people
- Do they see it as for anyone and everyone, or only for certain groups in society; is it for people like them or for others
- In what sorts of situations do they believe social workers are asked to get involved with an individual or a family – what examples can they think of, what is a typical scenario in which a social worker might get involved

- Who do they believe social workers work with – which other organisations (Probe if necessary – schools, the police, the NHS, probation officers)
- What do they see as the aims and purpose of social work – what is it for, why do we have a system of social work
- What benefit does social work bring to our society – what would happen if social workers didn’t exist, what difference, if any, would it make to their lives
- Which of these words do they believe fit with social work (*show Stim 1 prompt words*): *support, protect, safeguard, care, advise, teach, inform, stop, prevent, tell, control, interfere, kind, judge, accountable*
- At best, what do they believe social work is for, what is it trying to achieve
- Where do their ideas and views on social work come from (Probe – experiences of people they know, news stories, fiction in film or TV, other)

Trust in and effectiveness of social work

- To what extent do they believe that social work is effective in meeting its aims
- Can they think of situations where social work has been effective in providing support or protection for people who need it
- If part of the aim of social is to help and protect people do

they feel that we can trust it to do this; what influences their views on this

- How would they feel if someone they knew had been approached by social workers about an aspect of their life or their children’s lives

Perceptions of social workers

- Who do they believe are social workers – typically what sorts of people, from what sorts of background, what ages
- Who do they think employs social workers work (Probe – local authorities, the NHS, ‘the government’, other)
- What do they believe is social workers’ approach to the people they see
- What do they imagine is a typical day in the life of a social worker like

Where do their impressions come from/ what influences them

- (*Show Stim 2 Occupations*) Thinking of different occupations – GPs, hospital doctors, nurses, police officers, probation officers, care workers, teachers, social workers – how do they compare in terms of...
 - how well qualified they are
 - how good they are at understanding the needs of people they deal with
 - how likely they are to do their work correctly and

- effectively, without getting it wrong
- how professional they are
- how well they are regarded by the general public

Response to information about social work (show Stim 3 social work outline)

- How do they respond to this information
- Is there anything that is new or surprising
- Did they know that social work covers the range of different types of people and different circumstances shown here
- Which of the different types and circumstances do they feel are the most important, and the most in need of help from social work
- What does this information make them feel about social workers, particularly in terms of...
 - their role and responsibilities
 - the knowledge they need to have to do their work
 - their day-to-day working lives
 - their professionalism
- Are there any words or phrases that they particularly like or dislike
- What inspires trust or says positive things about social work

Regulation of social work

- What do they understand by the term regulation
- If a profession is regulated, what is the reason for it; how does it affect the way they feel about it; does it provide reassurance about that profession
- Of the professions discussed above which do they assume are regulated
- Do they imagine that social work is regulated in some way – that someone oversees social work
- If so, what do they imagine this involves – how do they believe social work and social workers are regulated
- Why do they think there is a need for social work to be regulated

Social Work England

- Have they heard of Social Work England
- If so, what do they know about it
- *Show Stim 4 Social Work England outline:*
 - what do they feel about this, how credible is it
 - what do they see as the most important parts of what Social Work England does
 - how do they believe Social Work England provides for the interests of people who receive social work support

- what about the fact that it is a new body – what is the significance of this
- what else would they want to know about Social Work England

- What does Social Work England need to do to demonstrate to us that it is effective and is trustworthy

- Does it reassure them to know that social work is regulated

Considered views of social work

- If they were asked to describe social work to someone they had just met, what would they say now; what would be the main aspects of it in their minds
- Do they feel their views of social work are more or less positive now than at the start of the discussion; what has changed (refer back to words and phrases used at the beginning)
- What about social workers – have their views of them changed; what kind of people do they now think become social workers
- To what extent do they feel social work can be trusted to meet its aims and objectives
- Do they feel social work needs to win back the trust of the public; if so, what would give them greater trust in it

Summing up

- What is their main take-out from the discussion
- Next time there’s a story about social work in the media, how do they think they might respond to it
- What else would they say about social work
- What would they want to say to the new Social Work England body? What should Social Work England be saying to the public about social work?
- Now they know more about social work, can they envisage a time or occasion when they might deal with a social worker? How would they feel about that?

Topic guide - people with lived experience

Aims

- Explore experience and perceptions of receiving social work support
- Examine feelings about the outcome of receiving social work support
- Establish attitudes to and understanding of the role of social workers
- Examine awareness and perceptions of Social Work England and its role in regulating social work

Introductory points

- Let respondents know that the research is intended to help Social Work England understand what people know about social work and how they regard it
- Explain that we are able to provide more information about

social work and Social Work England if respondents would like it

- Explain that if they are uncomfortable with any question they don't have to answer, and that they can stop the interview at any time if they would like to
- Explain that we would like to audio-record the interview if they are happy with this and remind them that everything discussed is treated in confidence

Background

- Name, household circumstances, occupation where relevant
- Views on what is good and not so good about their lives

Their own experience of social work

- What contact have they had with social workers

- *Prompt* – how did their involvement with social workers come about
- Was the situation to do with themselves or another family member (e.g. parent, child, partner)
- What was their first contact with a social worker:
 - when and where did it take place
 - who was there
 - how long did it last
 - what happened, what was discussed
 - what was agreed, if anything

- Were any other people involved (*Prompt if necessary:* teachers, doctors, police, probation service)
- After that first contact, what happened next; were there further meetings with that social worker or with other social workers
- Are they still seeing a social worker or has their contact now finished

- If finished, what was the outcome

Their feelings about the social work support/intervention they had

- How did they feel when they were first told that a social worker would be seeing them; what went through their mind
- How did they feel before their first meeting with a social worker

- Do they now feel it was it better or worse than they had expected
- How do they feel the social workers they saw treated them – what words come to mind
- Which of these words/phrases do they believe fit with their experience of social work (*show Stim A prompt words*): *helpful; kind; informative; interfering; judgmental; controlling; difficult; caring; protective, supportive*
- How has their experience of social work left them feeling

The outcome of their social work support/intervention

- How helpful do they feel the support/intervention was; what difference did it make to their situation at the time
- What have been the good things that came out of the experience
- And what, if anything, has not been so good about it
- Supposing they had not received support/an intervention from social workers, how do they believe thing would have turned out
- Did they feel they could trust the social worker(s) they dealt with

Social work generally

- What do they see as the purpose of social work – why do we have a system of social work
- Apart from their own situation, in what other sorts of circumstances do they believe social workers are asked to get involved with an individual or a family
- What benefit does social work bring to society – what would happen if social workers didn’t exist, what difference, if any, would it make to their lives
- At best, what do they believe social work is for, what is it trying to achieve
- Apart from their own experience, where do their views on social work come from (Probe –people they know, news stories, film or TV, other)

Perceptions of social workers

- Who do they believe are social workers – typically what sorts of people, from what sorts of background, what ages
- Who do they think employs social workers work (Probe – local authorities, the NHS, ‘the government’, other)
- (*Show Stim 2 Occupations*) Thinking of different occupation - GPs, hospital doctors, nurses, police officers, probation officers, care workers, teachers, social workers – how do they compare in terms of... - how well qualified they are

- how good they are at understanding the needs of people they deal with
- how likely they are to do their work correctly and effectively, without getting it wrong
- how professional they are
- how well they are regarded by the general public

Response to information about social work (show Stim 3 social work outline)

- How do they respond to this information
- How much does it match their own experience of receiving support/interventions from social workers
- Did they know that social work covers the range of different types of people and different circumstances shown here
- What does this information make them feel about social workers, particularly in terms of... - their role and responsibilities - the knowledge they need to have to do their work - their day-to-day working lives - their professionalism
- Are there any words or phrases that they particularly like or dislike

Regulation of social work

- What do they understand by the term regulation

- If a profession is regulated, what is the reason for it; how does it affect the way they feel about it; does it provide reassurance about that profession
- Do they imagine that social work is regulated in some way – that someone oversees social work
- If so, what do they imagine this involves – how do they believe social work and social workers are regulated
- Why do they think there is a need for social work to be regulated

Social Work England

- Have they heard of Social Work England
- If so, what do they know about it
- *Show Stim 4 Social Work England outline:* - what do they feel about this - what do they see as the most important parts of what Social Work England does - how do they believe Social Work England provides for the interests of people who receive social work support - what about the fact that it is a new body – what is the significance of this - what else would they want to know about Social Work England
- How do they feel about there being an organisation that they could contact if they weren’t happy with the way their case was being handled

- Does it reassure them to know that social work is regulated
- What does Social Work England need to do to demonstrate to them that it is effective and is trustworthy

Considered views of social work

- If they were asked to describe social work to someone they had just met, what would they say now; what would be the main aspects of it in their minds
- Do they feel their views of social work are more or less positive now than before their experience of receiving social work support/intervention; what has changed, if anything

Summing up

- What else would they say about social work and their experience of it
- What would they want to say to Social Work England

Omnibus survey questionnaire

A. [profile_GOR] Which area of the UK do you live in?				<1>	The government
				<2>	Local councils/ authorities
				<3>	Charities
<1>	North East	<8>	South East	<4>	The NHS
<2>	North West	<9>	South West	<5>	Agencies
<3>	Yorkshire and the Humber	<10>	Wales	<955 fixed>	Other [open] please specify
<4>	East Midlands	<11>	Scotland	<966 fixed xor>	Don't know
<5>	West Midlands	<12>	Northern Ireland		
<6>	East of England	<13 if 0>	Non UK & Invalid	F.	Base: All England adults
<7>	London				Question type: Open
					#any
					[Varlabel - Groups of people supported by social workers]
B.				G.	[CRS_Q2] For the following question, please think about ALL social workers (i.e. in any sector).
C. #Question display logic: if profile_GOR in [1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9]				H.	In general, which groups of people do you think social workers typically support? (Please type your answer(s) in the box below, giving as much detail as possible)
				I.	Not Sure
D. Base: All England adults Question type: Multiple #row order: randomize [Varlabel - Who employs social workers]				J.	Base: All England adults
E. [CRS_Q1] Which, if any, of the following bodies do you think employ social workers? (Please select all that apply. If your answer(s) doesn't appear in the box below, please type this into the open "Other" box))					Question type: Multiple
					#row order: randomize
					[Varlabel - Social work aims]

K.	[CRS_Q3] In general, which, if any, of the following do you think are the aims of social work? (Please select all that apply. If your answer(s) doesn't appear in the list below, please type this in the open "Other" box provided)	<1>	Yes, I have personally received support from a social worker
		<2>	Yes, a family member has received support from a social worker
		<3>	Yes, a friend has received support from a social worker
		<4>	Yes, someone else I know (i.e. excluding friends, family, etc.) has received support from a social worker
		<7 fixed xor>	No, I have never personally received support from a social worker, and I don't know anyone who has
		<944 fixed>	Other
		<966 fixed xor>	Don't know/ can't recall
		<933 fixed xor>	Prefer not to say
		O.	Base: All England adults who know someone who has received support from a social worker Question type: Multiple #row order: randomize #Question display logic: if CRS_Q4.has_any([2,3,4]) [Varlabel - Feelings if a friend/ family member received support from a social worker]
		P.	[CRS_Q5] As a reminder, your answers are always treated confidentially and are never analysed individually. We have provided you with a "Prefer not to say" option if you would rather not share your experiences.
L.	Base: All England adults Question type: Multiple #row order: randomize [Varlabel - Statements about social work]	Q.	You previously said that you know someone who has received support from a social worker.
M.	[CRS_Q4] For the following question, please remember that your answers are always treated confidentially and are never analysed individually. We have provided you with a "Prefer not to say" option if you would rather not share your experiences.	N.	Have you, or anyone you know EVER received support from a social worker?(Please select all that apply)

R.	Thinking back to when this last happened...		support from a social worker...
S.	How did you feel when you found out that someone you knew had received support from a social worker? (Please select all that apply. If your answer(s) doesn't appear in the list below, please type this in the "Other" box provided.)	Y. Z.	Which, if any, of the following ways explain how you would feel if you found out that someone you know had been receiving support from a social worker? (Please select all that apply, If your answer(s) doesn't appear in the list below, please type this in the "Other" box provided.)
<1>	I was shocked and worried		
<2>	I thought they would be getting the help they need	AA.	
<3>	I felt that they had failed	<1>	I would be shocked and worried
<4>	I felt that their life was going to improve	<2>	I would think that they would be getting the help they need
<5>	I thought that things were going to get worse for them	<3>	I would feel that they had failed
<955 fixed>	Other [open] please specify	<4>	I would feel that their life was going to improve
<966 fixed xor>	Don't know	<5>	I would feel that things were going to get worse for them
T.			
U.	<i>Base: All England adults who have never received support from a social worker/ don't know anyone else who has</i> Question type: Single #Question display logic: If [CRS_Q4] - No, I have never personally received support from a social worker, and I don't know anyone who has is selected [if 7 in CRS_Q4] [Variable - How you would feel if you found out that someone you know had been receiving support from a social worker]	<955 fixed> <966 fixed xor>	Other [open] please specify Don't know
V.	[CRS_Q5b] You previously said that you don't know anyone who has received support from a social worker.	BB. CC.	<i>Base: All England adults</i> Question type: Grid #row order: randomize #max number of choices per page: 3 [variable - Overall feelings about social work]
W.		DD.	[CRS_Q6] To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social work? (Please select one option on each row)
X.	For the following question, please imagine that you found out that someone you know had been receiving	-[CRS_Q6_1] -[CRS_Q6_2]	Social work is important in helping vulnerable people Social work can have a damaging effect

	on people's lives	-[CRS_Q7_4]	Social workers often get things wrong
-[CRS_Q6_3]	The value of social work is not fully appreciated	-[CRS_Q7_5]	Social workers make a big difference in improving people's lives
-[CRS_Q6_4] -[CRS_Q6_5]	Social work improves family relationships Social work helps ensure children don't come to harm	-[CRS_Q7_6]	Social workers could do a better job if there were more of them
-[CRS_Q6_6]	Social work can make things worse for people in difficulty	<1> <2> <3>	Strongly agree Tend to agree Tend to disagree
-[CRS_Q6_7]	Social work can cause problems for families	<4> <955>	Strongly disagree Don't know
-[CRS_Q6_8] -[CRS_Q6_9]	Social work is a way of controlling people If social work didn't exist, it would make no difference to the lives of people	GG. HH.	<i>Base: All England adults</i> Question type: Single [variable - Awareness of Social Work England]
<1> <2> <3> <4> <955>	Strongly agree Tend to agree Tend to disagree Strongly disagree Don't know	II.	[CRS_Q8] Before taking this survey, had you ever heard of Social Work England?
		<1> <2>	Yes, I had No, I hadn't
EE.	<i>Base: All England adults</i> Question type: Grid #row order: randomize #max number of choices per page: 3 [variable - Overall feelings about social workers]	JJ.	<i>Base: All England adults</i> Question type: Grid #row order: randomize [variable - Importance of the roles of Social Work England]
FF.	[CRS_Q7] To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements about social workers?	KK.	[CRS_Q9] 'Social Work England' are a specialist body who are taking a new approach to regulating social workers in their vital roles. Its purpose is to protect the public and raise standards across social work in England, so that people receive the best possible support whenever they might need it in life.
-[CRS_Q7_1] -[CRS_Q7_2]	Social workers are objective and neutral Social workers tend not to believe the people they work with		
-[CRS_Q7_3]	Social workers want the best for the people they work with	LL.	How important, if at all, do you think the following roles and responsibilities are for Social Work England? (Please

select one option on each row)		Social Work England that you have just seen...	
-[CRS_Q9_1]	To set professional standards for social workers	PP.	Which, if any, of the following statements apply to you? (Please select all that apply. If your answer(s) doesn't appear in the list below, please type this in the "Other" box provided)
-[CRS_Q9_2]	To set and assesses standards for the training and education for social workers		
-[CRS_Q9_3]	To require social workers to keep their skills and knowledge up to date		
-[CRS_Q9_4]	To keeps a register of qualified social workers	<1>	
-[CRS_Q9_5]	To investigate concerns raised about social workers	<2>	
<1>	Very important		They make me feel reassured that ther is an independent body overseeing social work in England
<2>	Fairly important	<3>	They make me believe that social work is carefully monitored
<3>	Not very important		It's only right that there is an organisation with these responsibilities
<4>	Not at all important	<4>	They make me feel that people who receive support from social work are protected
<955>	Don't know		
MM.	Question type: Text	<5>	They make me feel that if something goes wrong in a social work case, people can make a complaint about it
NN.	Base: All England adults Question type: Multiple #row order: randomize [variable - Feelings about Social Work England's roles and responsibilities]	<6 fixed xor>	They don't make me feel I can trust social work to do its work as it should
		<955 fixed xor>	Other [open] please specify
		<966 fixed xor>	Don't know
OO.	[CRS_Q10] Thinking about the roles and responsibilities [Hover: It sets professional standards for social workers. It sets and assesses standards for the training and education for social workers. It requires social workers to keep their skills and knowledge up to date. It keeps a register of qualified social workers. It investigates concerns raised about social workers.] of		

What is social work?

Social workers support people to improve their chances in life.

The people they provide support to are typically any of the following:

- families and children facing disadvantage
- people with mental health problems
- people who are homeless
- people with disabilities
- young offenders
- people with drug or alcohol problems
- elderly people

They tend to work with:

- healthcare professionals including doctors, nurses and psychiatrists
- schools
- charities involved in providing care
- in some cases, probation officers and the police

Social workers aim to improve people's lives by helping with social and interpersonal difficulties, promoting human rights and wellbeing. They aim to improve and maintain people's health, social care, family relationships and overall wellbeing.

On a day-to-day basis this means assessing people's needs, strengths and wishes, working with them to support them to make changes in their lives and solve problems, organising

support, making recommendations or referrals to other services, and keeping detailed records.

Social Work England

Social work, and social workers, are regulated.

In England the regulator is Social Work England

Social Work England's purpose is to protect the public and raise standards across social work in England, so that people receive the best possible support whenever they might need it in life.

It has five specific responsibilities:

- It sets professional standards for social workers
- It sets and assesses standards for the training and education for social workers
- It requires social workers to keep their skills and knowledge up to date
- It keeps a register of qualified social workers
- It investigates concerns raised about social workers

Margaret

- Margaret is in her mid-fifties and is divorced with a grown-up family. She has a diagnosis of paranoid schizophrenia and has spent a lot of time in hospital. Margaret has been receiving support from a social worker for about three years. He and Margaret have worked together to develop a care plan to help Margaret to manage her illness on a day to day basis.
- Margaret's social worker helps Margaret to set goals about maintaining and growing positive relationships with her friends and family. He has also arranged for Margaret to access a local peer support group run by a mental health charity.
- Margaret's social worker meets with her regularly and has built a good relationship with her. Margaret sometimes finds it difficult to trust other people involved in her care, and can find meetings with her psychiatrist and doctor distressing. Her social worker supports her to attend these meetings and to make informed decisions about her own care.

Jack

- Jack is 17 years old and has been drinking alcohol for the last three years. Having been suspended from school at 15, Jack did not return to education and has been unemployed since 'officially' leaving school. Recently Jack has become bored and has started hanging around with a group of older youths who are involved in offending and who drink every day. Jack has been charged with shoplifting, breach of the

peace and possession of cannabis.

- Jack's parents have become increasingly concerned about him. The police have made a referral to their local authority children's services team, who have appointed a social worker to explore the referral in more detail and make a decision about the type of response that is required. This will include an assessment of any concerns about Jack's health and development, or actual and/or potential harm, which justify further enquiries, assessments and / or interventions.

Jenny

- The duty senior social worker is contacted by the police who have received information from Mrs Thomas, the grandmother of a six-year old girl, Jenny. Mrs Thomas told them that she cares for Jenny every weekend and at bedtime she noticed severe bruising to Jenny's foot. She asked Jenny how this had occurred and Jenny said that her father, William, did it to her. Jenny had had a bruise to her face several weeks previously and Jenny had explained that she had fallen over.
- A strategy meeting took place between a police inspector, a senior social worker and a community paediatrician to confirm the threshold has been met for a section 47 (Child Protection Enquiries). A decision was made that the social worker and police officer should jointly interview Jenny.

- The social worker contacted Jenny's mother, Shona, to tell her that a Child Protection Investigation was taking place, what it would involve, and to obtain consent for medical examination. After the medical examination, Jenny was interviewed at the social work centre as part of an ABEI (achieve best evidence interview)...
- Possible resolution: - a view was sought from health about whether the bruising is consistent with Jenny's account. William was then interviewed and Shona spoken to. Police then made a decision about whether to charge William. A child protection meeting was called to consider how a social worker could support the family and ensure that Jenny is not at further risk. It was agreed a multi-agency approach would be taken. William admitted harming Jenny and demonstrated remorse.
- A further assessment was completed at a family group conference and a safety plan agreed with the family, taking account of questions like, is it safe for Jenny to return home? Should father be in the family home? Was mother aware that the father was physically abusing Jenny? How can we ensure that father will not harm Jenny again? Are there triggers? What else is going on at home?



Cragg Ross Dawson
May 2020