

A report on the social work profession

For Social Work England

June 2020



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Executive Summary

Background to this study

Social Work England was established under The Children and Social Work Act 2017 and is the specialist regulator for social workers in England. Social Work England officially took over from the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) on Monday 2nd December 2019. They are a non-departmental public body, operating at arm's length from Government.

Social Work England are committed to learning about social work and to gathering data and intelligence about the profession and people's experiences. They aim to make a unique contribution to the evolution of regulation; to inform their work as the new specialist regulator and provide a detailed picture of social work in England. To help fulfil this aim, YouGov was commissioned in January 2020 to conduct a quantitative and qualitative research study on perceptions of social work in England.

Approach

YouGov took a comprehensive, multi-method approach to this study to ensure insight was gathered from a wide range of audiences and to provide a broad perspective of what the social work profession is like today.

Explorative qualitative research formed the cornerstone of the methodology. Through a series of focus groups and depth interviews, we were able to deep-dive into audiences' experiences, attitudes and perceptions to understand who is attracted to social work, the roles that social workers fulfil and why social workers choose to leave the profession. Furthermore, we explored why participants felt the way they do and explored the factors that influence attitudes and beliefs across key question areas.

Following the qualitative research, we conducted a quantitative survey with social workers to quantify the findings and provide a benchmark for measuring the social work landscape against. Insights from the qualitative phase informed the development of the questionnaire, ensuring that we designed a robust and relevant survey.

Research objectives and method

Purpose, aims and objectives

The objective of this study is to provide Social Work England with a snapshot of the social work profession. It aims to produce an evidence base of who is attracted to social work, the roles that social workers fulfil, and why social workers choose to leave the profession. The study also explores the provision of social work education and training.

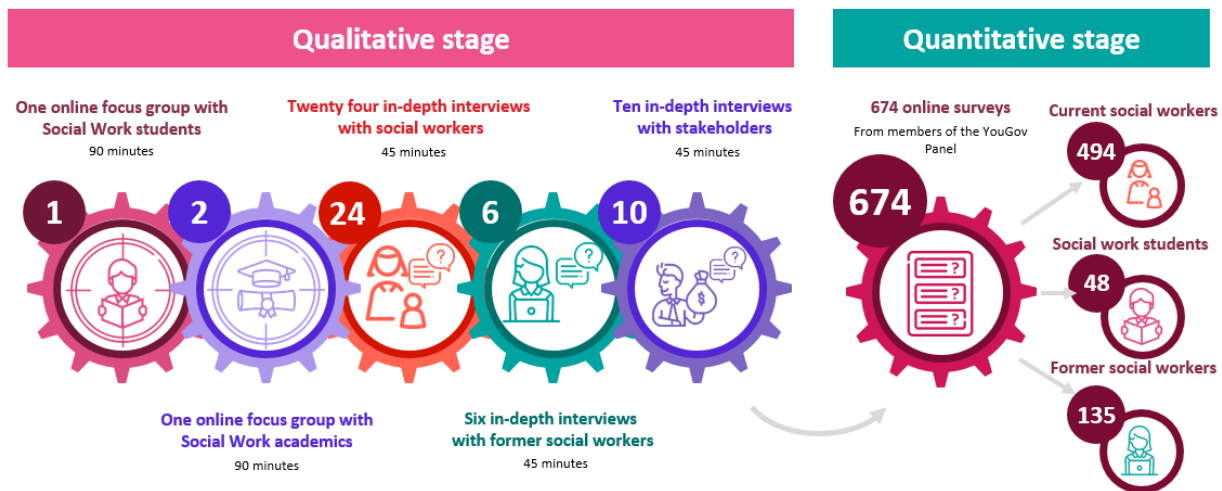
Key research questions

The study sought to answer the following key research questions:

- **Who chooses to train as a social worker?** (What attracted them to social work? What motivates them to stay?)
- **What does the learner/ training journey look like?** (How do social workers discover training opportunities – from whom/ where? What is the training experience like, does it meet expectations? Is anything missing?)
- **What are the experiences of newly qualified social workers?** (Are newly qualified social workers participating in the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment? If not, why not? If so, do they feel that the programme helps them in their transition into employment?)
- **How do social workers feel about working in social work?** (What are they positive about? What makes them proud? What are the main challenges they face? What could be done to encourage others to join?)
- **What factors are involved in social workers deciding to leave the profession and when is this happening?** (What drives some to consider leaving? Are there any potential solutions? Where do those that leave go?)
- **Awareness of and attitudes towards Social Work England** (Are social workers aware of the new regulator? What communication, if any, have they received about them? What are their views of Social Work England, and what it means for the profession?)

Method

Below is a visual summary of the qualitative and quantitative methodology. The qualitative insights directly fed into the design of the survey.



Qualitative approach

Qualitative research was conducted with social workers – current, future and past – as well as sector stakeholders and professionals involved in social workers’ education.

- **One 90-minute online focus group with students currently studying social work** (10 participants)
 - All currently studying either a social work degree or a master’s of social work
 - Mix of social work area that students wish to enter into (i.e. children and families / adults).
- **One 90-minute online focus group with academics delivering social work studies** (10 participants)
 - Both lecturers delivering content on a social work degree/master’s, and those delivering content on a L3 vocational qualification in health and social care
- **Twenty four one-on-one interviews (face to face and telephone) with those currently working in social work, split by the length of time that they have been in the profession**
 - 6 interviews with newly qualified social workers (in the profession less than 2 years)
 - 6 interviews with early career social workers (in the profession 2 or more years but less than 5)
 - 6 interviews with mid-career social workers (in the profession 5 or more years, but less than 8)
 - 6 interviews with experienced social workers – (in the profession 8 or more years)
 - Included a mix of those working with children and families / adults; social work types across adults on a best efforts basis (e.g. those working with mental health / substance abuse; those working with physical disability / the

- elderly; those working in healthcare / palliative care; community social workers etc.)
- A mix of attitudes towards the profession/ levels of satisfaction
- **Six 45-minute one to one interviews (face to face and telephone) with those that have left the profession in the last 5 years**
 - Included a mix of attitudes towards the profession and reasons for leaving the profession
 - Excluded those who retired purely based on age
- **Ten 45-minute telephone interviews with stakeholders**
 - Stakeholders were recruited via Social Work England's database and were not incentivised to take part
 - Stakeholders were from social work, social care and community care organisations, as well as practice leaders and those in the voluntary sector

Across all audiences we recruited a mix of location, including a broad rural / urban mix, gender and ethnicity. Anonymous respondent profiles can be found in the annex.

Quantitative approach

The sample for the quantitative survey was drawn from members of the YouGov panel of over 1 million individuals across the UK who have agreed to take part in surveys.

The fieldwork was carried out online between 3rd April to the 4th of May and a final sample of 674 respondents was obtained. There were three key groups for the quantitative survey:

- **Current social workers = 494 respondents**
 - Those currently in employment as a social workers, registered with Social Work England
- **Social work students = 48 respondents**
 - Those in education, either part-time or full-time, for a social work qualification (e.g. degree in social work, Step Up to Social Work, Frontline programme)
- **Former social workers = 135 respondents**
 - Those of any employment status, who had been social workers within the last 5 years, but were no longer social workers. Those who left due to normal retirement (i.e. were older than 65) were excluded.

Percentages have not been weighted and are not representative of the population. Full sample composition can be found in the annex.

Fieldwork was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown. For many respondents, COVID-19 had no effect or a positive effect on their opinion of the social work profession - 45% saying their view was neither positively nor negatively impacted, and 44% said it had a positive impact. However, among current social workers two fifths felt that their experience of social work had been negatively impacted by the outbreak. A third felt their experience of their job had been positively impacted (32%). Some questions ask about current sentiment and may be affected by current events during the fieldwork. Many other parts of the discussion and report refer to past feeling or more long term perspectives and will be less affected by current events.

Routes into social work

- A University degree is the most common route into social work, with three-fifths (61%) of current social workers beginning their career after studying for an undergraduate or master's degree.
 - Most social workers (81%) and social work students (95%) decided on the career because they wanted to make a difference. Few social workers joined the career because of friends or family in the profession (13%) or for the salary (11%)
 - Social workers consider the training to be of a high quality. Nearly four-fifths (78%) found the training they received either 'very good' or 'fairly good'. Similarly, most social work students are satisfied with their course (67%).
 - Few in the quantitative research had undertaken the Frontline (2%) or Step Up programmes (6%). In the qualitative research there were mixed views towards these programmes; with some believing that trainees specialise too early in adult or children services, and don't have long enough in training before qualifying. However, those who had taken part in either of the programmes were broadly positive.
 - There is no consensus among social workers that their training prepared them for their career: 56% say they felt prepared for the job when they first qualified but 42% felt unprepared.
-

How do people become social workers?

The majority (61%) of current social workers surveyed began their career after studying for an undergraduate or master's degree in social work. Just over a quarter (26%) took a Diploma in Social Work such as DipSw or the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work (CQSW) but only a few went through the Step Up to Social Work (6%) or Frontline route (2%). Similarly, of the students surveyed, most are in either an undergraduate (33%) or a postgraduate (40%) degree programme in social work and only a handful are undertaking the Step Up to Social Work¹ (4%) or Frontline/ Firstline² (4%) programmes. University qualifications therefore still appear to be the main route taken into the Social Work profession.

There is a gender split in which route social workers take into the profession. Among current social workers, women are more likely to go through the University route with

¹ <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/step-up-to-social-work-information-for-applicants> Accessed 11/05/2020

² <https://thefrontline.org.uk/our-programmes/frontline-programme/> Accessed 11/05/2020

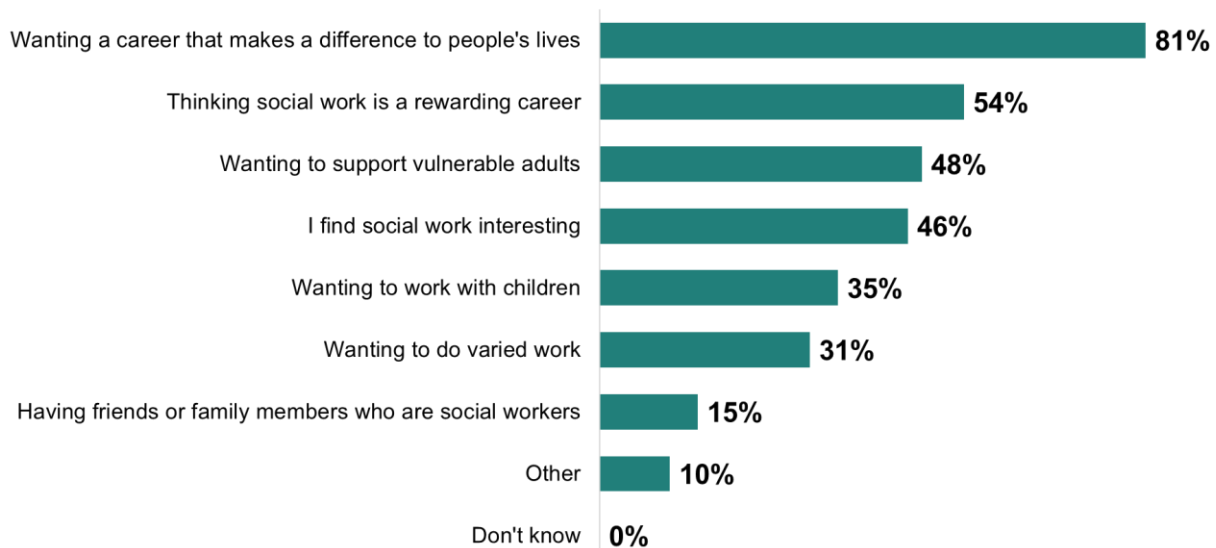
nearly two-thirds (64%) having an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in Social Work (compared to just 51% of men). They are less likely however to have completed a Diploma in Social work (25% vs 30% of men).

Older social workers are more likely to have taken a Diploma in Social Work and much less likely to have gone through the University route. Of those aged 55 to 64 over half (56%) had a Diploma and only a third (33%) had studied for a social work degree. Contrastingly, three-quarters (76%) of those aged 25 to 34 had a social work degree while just 10% of this group had a diploma in social work. This is perhaps a reflection of the changes that have occurred in social work qualifications and in higher education more generally, with overall student numbers in the UK increasing by nearly one million since 1995³.

Why do people decide to be a social worker?

Most social work students surveyed consider the profession to be worthwhile and beneficial to society. Four-fifths (81%) reported that wanting a career that makes a difference to people's lives was a reason to take their course; the most popular reason given. Similarly, over half (54%) took a social work course because they believe it to be a rewarding career with slightly fewer (48%) doing so because they wanted to support vulnerable adults. Only a few (15%) took their course because they had friends or family members who are social workers.

Figure 1. Motivations for taking a social work course

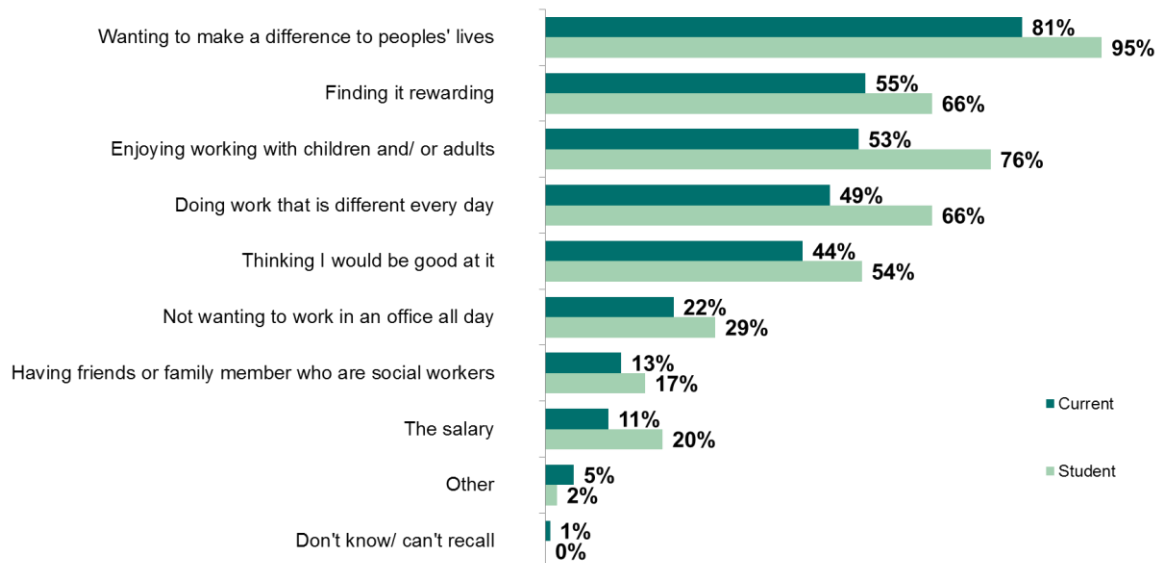


Base: all social work students (48)

³ <https://www.hesa.ac.uk/data-and-analysis/publications/students-1995-96> Accessed 11/05/2020

Similar patterns emerge among current social workers. The majority (81%) of this group joined the profession because they wanted to make a difference to people's lives. This was the most common motivation followed by finding it rewarding (55%), enjoying working with children and adults (53%) and doing work that is different every day (49%). Less important factors include not wanting to work in an office (22%), having friends or family members in the profession (13%) and the salary (11%).

Figure 2. Motivations for becoming a social worker



Base: all current social workers (494); all social work students planning to become a social worker (41)

Insights from the qualitative research with students and social workers mirrored the quantitative findings. Most want to become a social worker to help vulnerable people and to make a difference. These social workers explained that they had observed the difference a 'good' social worker can make and wish to repeat it, or the impact of a 'bad' social worker, and wish to ensure it does not happen to someone else.

"Because I spent a long time doing a job I didn't like, that helped no one, and I wanted a career that made a positive contribution and made me feel I was helping" (Student)

"I wanted to help people. My family are social workers as well. Not the easiest job but it is rewarding when you help someone and clients say thank you. It's an amazing feeling." (Social worker, newly qualified)

Interestingly, some students and social workers in the qualitative sample came to social work after working in related professions, such as care, youth work, health and other voluntary / third sector roles. They saw similarities in the roles; of being able to have a positive impact on someone's life, to contribute to society and support social justice. Having life and work experience outside of social work is highly respected by experienced social workers and stakeholders especially.

“It’s not about the route you take into the job, it’s more about the practical experience you’ve had. I think having experience of being a care worker or support worker are just as valid if not more than having good qualifications.” (Social Worker, early career)

Figure 3. Case study from student

Social Work Student

Case Study: Female, Doctorate of Social Work

Course and experience	Perception of role	Training and support	Perceptions of Social Work England
- Studying for a Doctorate in Social Work - She is motivated to pursue a career as a Social Worker in order to change lives for the better and challenge inequalities - She has worked in children services and thinks stress and hard work are part of the job - Paperwork is a pain and Social Workers are often held solely accountable for when things go wrong	- Perceives social work as meaningful and rewarding – enjoys being able to support children and their families - Recognizes the negative narrative around Social Workers in the press and she thinks the wider society takes no responsibility in tackling the issues within the communities - Thinks the government do not provide enough support. The Chief social worker is ineffective and social care is massively underfunded	- She is in her third year - she previously worked as a chef and felt like she needed a new direction after a major life event - The reputation of the university won her over, as well as the convenient location – her course is fully funded - Thinks the lectures are far removed from practice, relying on information from several years ago without any applied knowledge - A lack of placements is also an issue for her	- She is aware of Social Work England as the new regulator – she found this out through her own research - Knows that it sets the practice standards and approves University courses - Thinks it should be more visible and involved, proactively and not just when things go wrong - They should update University course content and improve training opportunities



I wanted to represent those unable to do it for themselves. To challenge systems and structures that are unequal.



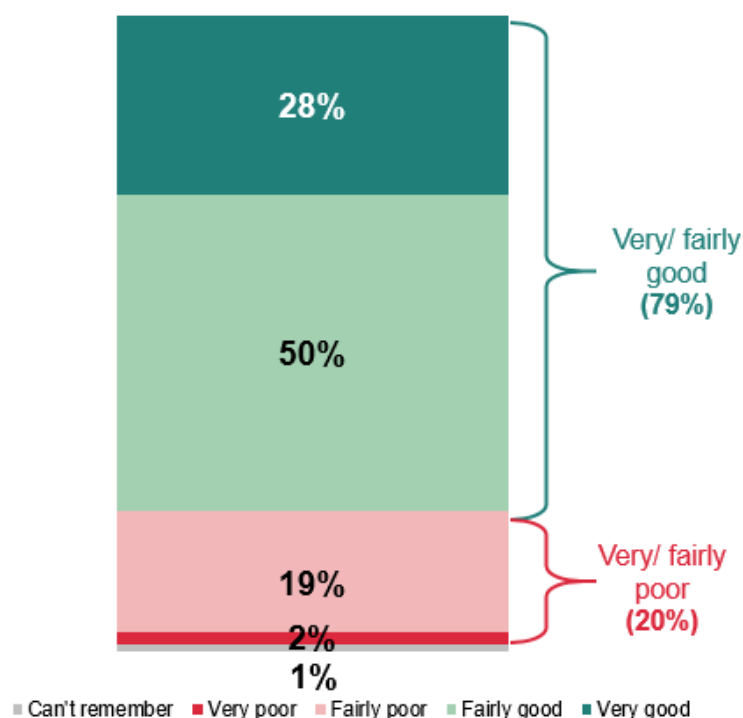
We need more emotional support. I have learnt a lot about myself on this course and it changed how I saw myself and my own life experiences.



Perceptions of the quality of training

Encouragingly, the majority of current social workers consider the training they received to be of a high quality. Half (50%) believe the quality was 'fairly good' with a further 28% rating it 'very good'; one-fifth (19%) thought it was 'fairly poor' but only 2% viewed it as 'very poor'. Social workers in London are more likely to have a positive view of their training: 87% rated it as good compared to 72% in the North of England and 70% in the East.

Figure 4. Rating of training received



Base: all current social workers (494)

Social workers who believe they were well trained are more likely to have a positive view of the social work regulator: four-fifths (81%) of those who received good training said they understand the role of a regulator (81%), compared to two thirds of those who received poor training (66%). Similarly, 81% of those who received good quality training say they value the role of a specialist regulator in social work compared to just 49% of those who received poor quality training. This suggests that better training leads to a greater understanding of what Social Work England does and therefore a greater appreciation of its role.

Most social work students are also happy with their training. Two-thirds (67%) say that they are satisfied with their course, with 29% of students very satisfied, and only 13% are dissatisfied. Most social work students would also recommend their course to family and friends: when asked to rate how likely they are to do so on a scale of 0 to 10, 63% are likely to do so (a score of 8 to 10) and only 8% are unlikely (a score of 0 to 2).

However, in the focus group with students, a few questioned whether the quality of teaching and the low number of teaching hours justified the high cost of the degree.

“I don’t think [the course] is worth £9,250 a year either. We only have 3-6 hours of contact time a week and a lot of the time I feel I am self-teaching.” (Student)

“Some lecturers are more committed than others... The teaching is a bit out of date.” (Student)

Many found the theoretical side of the training to be interesting, but not always easy to translate to the workplace. Placements, especially within Local Authorities, are viewed as essential and many would welcome them starting earlier (within their first year). It is the placements that teach the students how to interact with service users, the courts and other agencies, and how to juggle caseloads.

“Love the placements. Lectures are common sense or read from a Power Point most of the time.” (Student)

“I feel the skills can often not be taught in a lecture room just by reading off Power Points. The placement is where you see the real and raw side of social work.” (Student)

A number of students and social workers are concerned that many lecturers have been out of the workplace for a number of years; that they may not know about the impact of recent legislation changes and their teachings may be out of date (e.g. how to complete court paperwork). Students prefer lecturers who have recent workplace experience, and they welcome guest lecturers who are current social workers or service users. Furthermore, a number of current social workers believe that lecturers should complete a certain amount of days per year on the frontline to ensure their teachings are valid.

“The lecturers are now so far removed from practice, it feels like they are not able to provide a realistic view. It seems they are churning out PowerPoint presentations they have relied on for years without any applied knowledge.” (Student)

“My university brings service users or carers in to lead sessions and I find these more helpful.” (Student)

Other routes into social work include the Frontline and Step Up to Social Work training programmes. These programmes are generally respected by students, social workers and stakeholders as they offer greater choice in how people enter the profession and students can earn as they learn, helping to increase diversity within the profession. They provide practical training in the workplace setting and encourage those who have studied non-social work related subjects previously or have had previous careers to enter the profession.

“I have taught Step Up students and found them the most eager, motivated and engaged group I have ever taught.” (Academic)

“The advent of Frontline has brought people into the profession that may not have been [drawn to social work before] ... It is good that routes are becoming more vocational.”
(Stakeholder)

However, not all agree that the programmes increase diversity. Additionally, some worry that Frontline participants do not have enough training before qualifying and that they specialise too early in either adult or children and families social work. As with the Step Up programme, some worry that having caseloads early on can put unfair pressure on trainees, affecting future attrition rates.

“Not a huge fan of Frontline - they focus training on children or mental health too early. I don't think you should specialise before qualifying... You need a baseline of all social work first.” (Stakeholder)

“The biggest issue is government spending money on Frontline and Step Up. These social workers don't often stay more than 2 years.... [they] are not diverse... They forget things as it is so fast paced and soon move into policy and government roles.” (Stakeholder)

Most of the academics in the focus group did not feel they knew enough to comment and a few were negative towards the two programmes. They argued that the programmes are intense, yet the students are not always adequately trained for the reality of the role.

“I don't think it [Frontline] necessarily supports parents / carers who also have to still hold down these responsibilities, so it narrows the diversity of candidates.” (Academic)

“I think Step Up students are clearly academic and very experienced in some areas, but their experience isn't always useful. The more traditional graduates seem to have more transferable experience.” (Academic)

However, the small number of students and social workers who had participated in the Frontline or Step Up programmes spoke highly of their training.

“I think the Frontline programme is absolutely brilliant, people who can do related degrees who suit the profession really well can come into the profession without having to take a massive loan out to do a Masters. I think this helping to attract new social workers.” (Social worker, early career)

“I really enjoyed it – it fit with me as a person. I liked the theory behind it, but putting it into practice is hard... We were well prepared compared to university students, as we did training on the job.” (Social worker, early career)

In the qualitative interviews, stakeholders outlined that social workers from any entry route need to be trained to a high standard in the following areas;

- Analytical thinking
- Communication / interpersonal skills including listening skills and empathy
- Teamwork
- The impacts of, and how to work with, local and national policies

Stakeholders are also looking for social workers to;

- Have the confidence to challenge / speak out
- Have a passion to want to make a difference
- Have a level of maturity / robustness to be able to deal with the challenges
- Believe in the social work values (e.g. the focus on independence) and social justice.

“You need listening skills, common sense, interpersonal skills, maths, communication skills, analytical skills, you have to be tactful and diplomatic, be calm and controlled and have confidence.” (Stakeholder)

“Empathy, a sense of social justice, a drive to spend your time improving the lives of others - those that do it well and stay are those that are emotionally resilient and self-aware.” (Stakeholder)

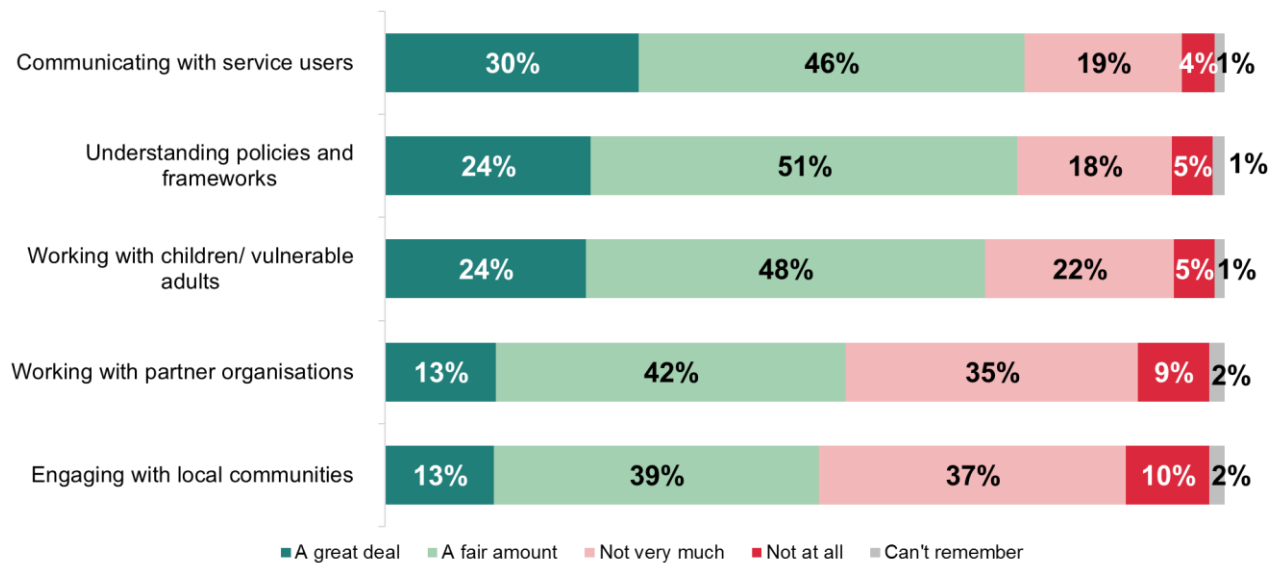
Does training adequately prepare people to be a social worker?

Current social workers are split as to whether their training adequately prepared them for their career. When asked to think back to their first year as a newly qualified social worker, 56% felt prepared for the job while 42% felt unprepared. Only 17% felt very prepared, at the other end one in ten (12%) did not feel prepared at all, for what was ahead of them. How prepared social workers felt is unsurprisingly linked to the quality of their training: two-thirds (67%) of those who rated their training as good say they were prepared compared to just 15% of those rated their training as poor.

Male social workers felt more confident after their training than women. Around half (51%) of female social workers felt their training made them feel prepared compared to 70% of men and over a third (36%) of men felt very prepared after their training. As with their perceptions of the overall quality of their training, social workers in London felt most prepared for beginning their social work careers. Over two-thirds (69%) of those in London say they felt prepared compared to just 53% in the North and Midlands.

Current social workers were asked how prepared their training made them for different aspects of social work. A majority agreed that they were prepared for all of the aspects listed. Social workers found that their training most prepared them for communicating with service users (76%), understanding policies and frameworks (75%) and working with children and vulnerable adults. Fewer agreed that their training prepared them for working with partner organisations (55%) and engaging with local communities (52%) although more still agreed than disagreed.

Figure 5. Extent to which training prepared social workers for different aspects of their role

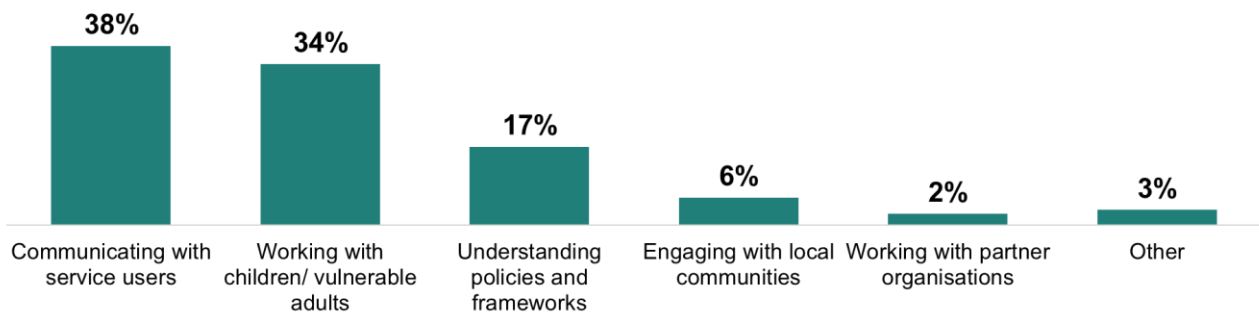


Base: all current social workers (494)

Social work students also feel prepared for what lies ahead of them. Every student surveyed who was planning to become a social worker said that they feel prepared for working with children and vulnerable adults and 98% said that they feel prepared for understanding and applying the law, engaging with people, families and communities, and working with partner organisations. Almost all (95%) feel prepared for making difficult decisions in their social work careers.

Current social workers believe that communicating with service users (38%) and working with children and vulnerable adults (34%) are the most important areas that people entering the profession should be prepared for. Under one-fifth (17%) believe that it is most important to be prepared for understanding policies and frameworks and only a few believe that engaging with local communities (6%) and working with partner organisations are the most important (2%).

Figure 6. Most important areas for people entering the profession to be prepared for



Base: all current social workers (494)

Younger social workers are more likely to say that understanding policies and frameworks is the most important area to be prepared for; over a quarter (27%) of those aged 25-34 rated this as the most important compared to just 12% of those aged 55-64.

Communicating with service users is considered important by older social workers with 44% of those aged 45-54 and 39% of those aged 55-64 seeing this as the most important compared to just 27% of those aged 25-34.

Those who rated their training was good are more likely to agree that understanding policies and frameworks is the most important area to be prepared for (19% vs 7% of those who rated their training was poor). In contrast, those who view their own training as poor believe that communicating with service users (43%) is the most important area that new joiners should be prepared for and it could be an area where they feel their own training was lacking.

In the qualitative research, when questioned, not all students and newly qualified/ early-career social workers felt fully prepared for the role based on their university training. Though the theoretical knowledge was deemed helpful by most, many did not feel sufficiently prepared for the day-to-day realities - such as managing a high level of cases, the emotional impact of the job, building rapport with service users, working with other services and attending court. Those who did not feel fully prepared when qualifying believed it was because the academic teaching was not sufficiently practical or up-to-date enough.

On reflection, many students, social workers and stakeholders believe placements should be available for students from year one of their degree.

*“I think I will have the right skills but not necessarily all the practical knowledge I need.”
(Student)*

“Paperwork is an area that I feel less prepared in. I feel like we should be given case studies and asked to fill in the appropriate details/forms and have them corrected and feedback to be given.” (Student)

“Social work courses don’t fully prepare you.” (Stakeholder)

A few students in the focus group would like more support from their universities to find suitable placements and a job after graduating.

“Assistance is there but the lack of necessary placements is an issue.” (Student)

“I believe my university has links but you are pretty much on your own.” (Student)

“Support with application and interview prep would help.” (Student)

Many newly qualified social workers take part in an Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE). The programme is designed to help newly qualified social workers develop their skills, knowledge and capability, and strengthen their professional confidence. It provides them with access to regular support during their first year of employment, including a protected caseload. In the students’ focus group, most said they would like to do the ASYE as they think they will be better supported and that the protected caseloads will be helpful when first starting. The only downsides students could envisage are less pay than non-ASYE social workers and ‘lots of paperwork hoops to jump through’.

*“I don’t know how ASYE is managed in workplaces but hopefully there is a protected case load and an understanding that time is needed to build confidence and knowledge.”
(Student)*

“It is another paperwork process to go through. If I then have to do an accreditation and then progression it seems like I have to jump through a lot of hoops” (Student)

Generally, those who are currently in the ASYE or have recently participated in it felt supported and better prepared for full time employment, as they were given fewer and less complex cases. However, a few found that over the year their ‘protected caseloads’ became less protected and they started to feel overwhelmed and unsupported. This had an impact on their ability to complete their reflective coursework and on their work/ life balance. A couple also raised concerns over a lack of regular supervision during their first year, as their managers were so busy.

“[The cases] don’t really get protected. They’re thrown in the deep end” (Social worker, mid-career)

“You have a reduced case load of 15 max. You get supervision weekly and then it reduces. You have to do lots of work for it – a written portfolio and need to get feedback from families etc. You have to write essays as well - but how do I get time to do this? Some of the forms feel pointless.” (Social worker, newly qualified)

“I am in the ASYE year – my case load is meant to be capped at 14. I am already at 27. I am no longer protected.” (Social worker, newly qualified)

Figure 7. Case study from academic

Social Work Academic

Case Study: Male, Associate Dean

Role and experience	Perception of role	Training and support	Perceptions of Social Work England
- Teaches BA and MA in Social Work - He's been teaching Social Work for circa 20 years and he's been an academic since 1991 - The popularity of the course remains stable and the students are very similar today to the ones from 10 years ago – male students are a minority	- He sees Social Work as a social justice profession and is very passionate about teaching it - Thinks Social Work can help bring about change to the lives of people and communities - However, he recognizes there are downsides to the profession: difficult and unpleasant situations, lack of resources, high caseloads, risk averse regimes and attempts to reduce and undermine professional discretion	- He believes the Degree and MA programmes prepare students well to enter the profession - Thinks there is danger in narrowing social work training and emphasising abstract “skill training” through fast track courses - Also concerned about government cuts to training expenditure and a bigger piece of the training budget going to other organisations	- Maintains scepticism over Social Work England because of the rate of change in regulators in the past years – he thinks there needs to be stability - He likes that Social Work England has a social work focus, as opposed to HCPC which was too broad and was not advocating for social workers



I'm very passionate about Social Work seeing itself as a social justice profession.



We are the ‘enablers of welfare dependency’. There is a relationship as to how social workers and service users are portrayed and perceived in political discourse.



The public's perceptions of social work

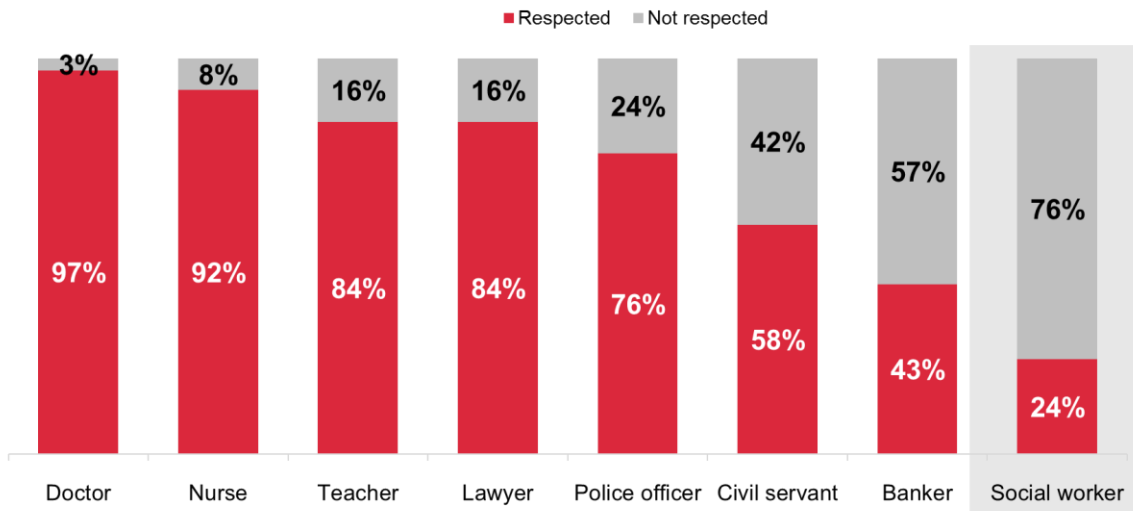
- Current, former and student social workers perceive that social work is not respected by society (76%). The majority of social workers feel that social work is not a respected profession and levels of respect lag well behind the respect they feel other professions have.
 - Eight in ten (82%) of current, former and student social workers feel that the social work profession is portrayed negatively in the media/ news.
 - The profession feel that the media portray them unfairly and this in turn shapes public negativity (and lack of understanding) about their work.
 - Positively, current and former social workers as well as students feel strongly that they provide an essential service (96%) and play a unique role in society (92%), but this is contrasted with the shared view that social workers are not popular (86%).
-

Is social work respected within society?

Current, former, and student social workers surveyed have a low opinion of how the wellbeing of a social worker is respected by society. Three quarters (76%) feel that social work is not respected, a consistent picture across current social workers (76%), former social workers (78%) and those students looking to enter the profession (73%).

Current, former, and student social workers put their own profession as the worst ranked in terms of respect from society. This is well behind the level of respect they feel society has for doctors (97%), nurses (92%), teachers (84%) and lawyers (84%). The impact of these negative perceptions was explored further in the qualitative research.

Figure 8. Comparison of how well respected social workers feel their profession is by society compared with other professions



All current social workers, former social workers, and students (677)

While for the majority there is a feeling that the social work profession is not respected in society, there are pockets of positivity. The following types of current social workers were most likely to agree that the social work profession is respected:

- Those who have worked in the profession for less than two years (47%)
- Male social workers (49%)
- Younger social workers (30% of those aged 25-34)

Those current, former, and student social workers who said that the social work profession is not respected by society were asked in their own words why they thought this was. There was a raft of insightful comments mentioning many different issues. However, to summarise, three main themes emerged:

1. Negative portrayal of the profession in the media/ press

“Media and government give no reason to respect our profession. We are the first to be blamed when a child is killed. No-one does anything to give the public the correct information and blame is always put on the social worker, not other agencies or the courts or the parents.”

“Negative media coverage including in TV dramas. Social workers always get blamed for child abuse rather than the abuser. Viewed as busy bodies or not doing enough. Can’t defend our position due to data protection.”

2. Society doesn’t understand what social workers do or the complexity of the job and little is done to overcome this

“General population tends not to understand the role and often social workers are scapegoated for various problems in society, e.g. struggling to meet social care needs of

ageing population is often seen as social work ineptitude rather than lack of provision by state or lack of community support.”

“General population tends not to understand the role and often social workers are scapegoated for various problems in society, e.g. struggling to meet social care needs of ageing population is often seen as social work ineptitude rather than lack of provision by state or lack of community support.”

3. Society feels that all social workers do is remove children from families

“Due to the rhetoric that we are children snatchers and always appear in negative roles in film and television.”

“People believe that we interfere with family life and removed children from parents.”

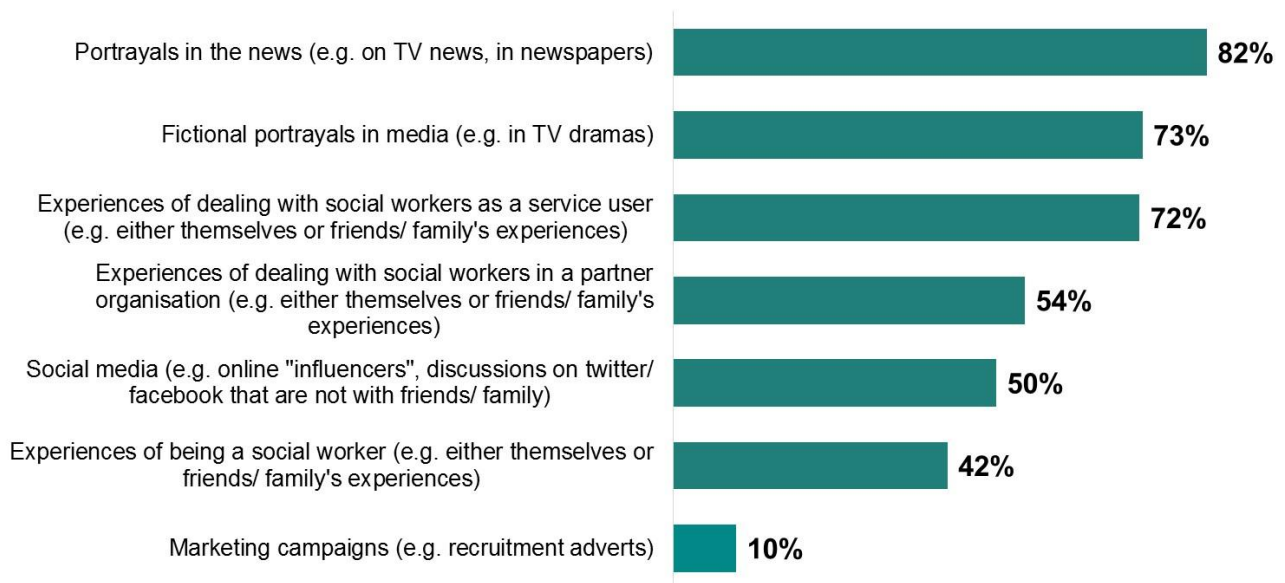
“Many people see Social Workers as being interfering and intrusive. Many believe that they will remove children without warning and not support or involve parents in the decision-making process.”

The media portrayal of social workers is an important issue and an area of concern for the vast majority. Eight in ten (82%) of current, former and student social workers feel that the social work profession is portrayed negatively in the media/ news. This rises to nine out of ten (90%) to student social workers.

The damaging role that current, former and student social workers feel the media plays in the negative perceptions of the social work profession is further borne out through an analysis of where social workers think people get their impression of social work from.

Eight in ten feel that people’s perception of social workers is informed by portrayals in the news and seven in ten feel that it is informed by fictional portrayals in the media. An equal proportion felt that public perceptions were informed by direct experience of dealing with social workers (72%).

Figure 9. Current, former and student social workers' view on what informs people's perceptions of the social work profession



All current social workers, former social workers and students (677)

Insights from the qualitative research reinforced the impact of the negative public perception towards social work. Many social workers described how the profession is reported negatively in the media, how other professionals often don't respect social workers' findings, and - though the government have consistently cut funding - expectations on social workers are still high and feel unattainable.

"I don't think social work is where it should be at, it is not respected in the community or in the media... Government doesn't buy into what we do, they fund it but don't support, that then feeds in to the community" (Stakeholder)

"It makes the work feel difficult, knowing there is a negative representation of us in the media" (Student)

It is, however, felt that social work is generally respected amongst those who do understand the pressures of the role and the aims of the profession. Nevertheless, a few social workers reported not always feeling like other professionals (e.g. the police, GPs, solicitors on the case) take them as seriously in meetings.

"Police and doctors and nurses are seen as saviours. We tend to be nosy, judgemental, there to ruin families and split them up" (Academic)

For example, social workers who are heavily involved in court proceedings can feel that their recommendations are not always respected or 'taken seriously' during the investigation. But that blame is often placed on social workers when cases go poorly and begin to receive increased media attention; social workers can then feel like they have been made into a 'scapegoat'.

“[When] there is loads of media coverage, social workers tend to be hung out to dry... Social workers can be scapegoats” (Social worker, experienced)

Many believe that the lack of respect for social workers in the media has translated into distrust from families who social workers aim to support. This makes their roles more difficult, as the initial interactions are focused on cultivating trust and proving that their intentions are to support families, rather than separate them.

“There’s still like a taboo around social work... I don’t feel any level of society has respect for social workers...I don’t think the families really want to deal with us” (Social worker, early career)

“I think if social work was more understood and respected, it would make our interactions with families more positive for them and less daunting” (Academic)

The stigma against social workers means that many do not share their job title with new friends and strangers, out of fear of criticism and hostility. Though they themselves tend to be proud of the positive impact they can have on both children and adults, the fact that they do not have a sense of pride can have an impact on attrition within the profession.

“It’s not always safe to tell people [you’re a social worker]. Not good as we take children away in their eyes. We are child snatchers... Very few people understand - it is a human job” (Social worker, leaver)

“I am very proud of what I do but portrayed bad in press... I don’t always tell people what I do at a party” (Social worker, current)

It was felt by many that family social workers often have the greatest challenge due to the media portrayal of social workers ‘snatching children’ and destroying families. The Baby P⁴ and Victoria Climbié⁵ cases are cited regularly and are used as examples to prove how social workers get it wrong. These cases also highlight how social workers are often used as ‘scapegoats’ when other services are also involved in the care of vulnerable children.

“We are so vilified in the media, especially when there’s a child death... We’re an easy target and we’re fearful, what we do is not an exact science and everyone else thinks they know better” (Stakeholder)

Social workers, academics and students called for myth busting around what the role of a social worker is, along with the type of impact they can have in cases. Addressing this lack of clarity regarding the profession, along with the ‘culture of blame’ will encourage retention and encourage more talented young people to engage with the profession, and feel like they will be respected and valued in their role.

⁴ <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2017/08/03/ten-years-baby-p-social-works-story/> Accessed 11/05/2020

⁵ <https://www.communitycare.co.uk/2006/10/04/victoria-climbiel/> Accessed 11/05/2020

“We need better media coverage of our profession. I am so proud of my career choice - promote what we do! (Academic)”

“We are aware and prepared to enter a tough and challenging career, but we need support and advocacy, with government and the public perception” (Student)

Figure 10. Case study from current social worker

Current social worker

Case Study: Male, experienced, South East

Role and experience	Perception of role	Training and support	Perceptions of Social Work England
- Qualified in 2000 - In current role since 2006 - A mental health social worker, who often works with those who have committed criminal offences - A typical day is varied, mixing time in an office based environment, with some direct contact with patients and their families	- Felt pessimistic about their role and their future within it - Felt that there is an overriding problem with accountability. Historically, blame has been placed on social workers more than other roles - Workload expectations are high and due to time restraints - most rely on temporary solutions - Negative media attention and public perception means that he does not share his profession with new friends	- Had degrees not related to social work. Received a bursary in order to train - He felt that support tends to come from colleagues, not management - He felt there was little time to access training. Most training / CPD is self directive, with the content feeling too generic - Training should be used to build on and learn new skills. Using internal expertise in training, to make content feel specific and relevant	- Social Work England was known as the new regulator for social workers - There was a perception that its aim is to protect the public and address complaints made by the public - This participant valued the idea of having an organisation that was specific to social workers, and felt there was a need for Social Work England to understand the types of challenges social workers face



I wouldn't advise anybody to do the job unless they felt they had a calling.



I don't tell people I'm a social worker... the media represents us very badly.

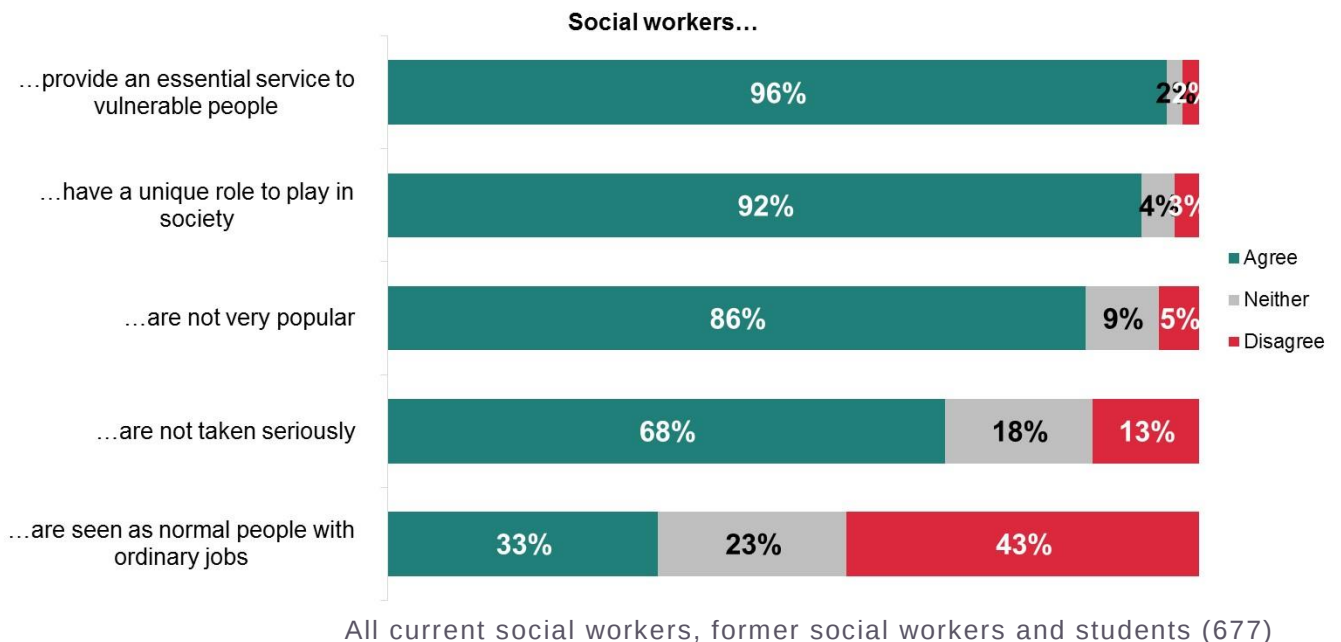


What are social workers' perceptions of their profession?

The perception issues around the social work profession from current, former and student social workers can be seen by the views illustrated in figure 11. The vast majority agree that social workers provide an essential service to vulnerable people (96%) and that social workers have a unique role to play in society (92%).

However, in contrast to those positive sentiments a similar majority agree that social workers are not very popular (86%) and seven in ten (68%) agree that social workers are not taken very seriously. These perceptions are consistent across different types of current social workers, such as gender, length of service and employment setting.

Figure 11. Current, former and student social workers' perceptions of the social work profession



Morale within the profession

- Most social workers are proud of their profession (89%), but only around a quarter (26%) would recommend it to a friend or family member.
 - The qualitative research highlighted that social workers are proud when they feel that they have made an impact on people's lives, however the stress from the number and nature of the cases can make it difficult to feel that they are making a difference.
 - Almost a quarter (24%) of social workers have low morale. For most (47%), morale has not changed over the past year although for 24% it has improved and for 29% it has declined. Morale is affected by the media, with those who believe media perceptions of social work to be negative having significantly worse morale overall than those who consider them positive.
 - Stress is a substantial issue with the majority (85%) of current social workers reporting that the job makes them either very stressed or fairly stressed. The most common cause of stress is a high administrative workload, mentioned as a cause by 62% of social workers. Other causes include a focus on targets rather than user issues (56%), a high caseload (48%), and an inability to refer users (44%). Over three-quarters (76%) report feeling under excessive pressure in their job.
 - However, the vast majority still agree the being a social worker is a great thing to do (87%) and that their profession inspires them to be the best that they can be (81%).
-

How do social workers feel about their job?

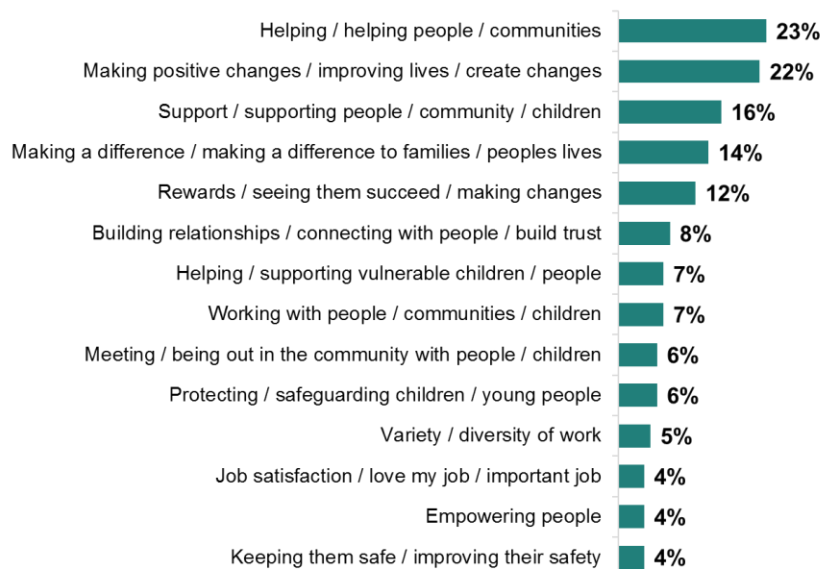
Regardless of public perceptions, most social workers are proud of their profession. The vast majority (89%) are either very proud (48%) or fairly proud (41%) to be doing their job and only 1% say that they are not proud at all to be a social worker. Pride in the role tends to decrease with age: 95% of those aged 25 to 34 are proud to be a social worker but this falls to 89% of those aged 35-44 and 85% of those aged 55 to 64. Pride is linked to morale with those whose morale is high more likely to be proud of their job (98% vs 72% of those with low morale).

Current social workers are more divided, however, on whether they would recommend the profession to others. When asked how likely they would be to recommend becoming a social worker to friends and family on a scale of 0 to 10, the overall mean score was 5.50 with most (56%) neither likely nor unlikely (a score of 3 to 7) to do so. A quarter (26%) are likely to recommend it and just under one-fifth (18%) are unlikely.

Male social workers (36%) are more likely to recommend the profession than their female counterparts (22%); indeed, the mean score for men is 6.16 compared to 5.26 for women.

Social workers were invited to explain in their own words what the best thing about being a social worker is. The most common answers given are helping others (23%) and making positive changes to people's lives (22%). These are followed by supporting people and communities (16%), making a difference to people's lives (14%) and finding it rewarding when others succeed (12%).

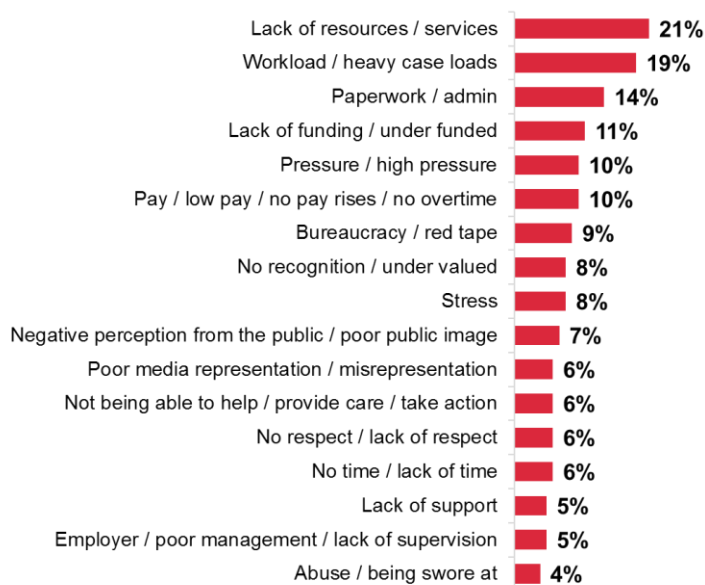
Figure 12. Best thing about being a social worker



Base: all current social workers (494). Answers <4% not shown.

When asked to explain in their own words what the worst thing about being a social worker is, the two most commonly given answers are a lack of resources and services (21%) and too heavy a workload (19%). Other prominent answers included paperwork (14%) and a lack of funding (11%). Poor public image is mentioned by 7% as the worst aspect of social work.

Figure 13. Worst thing about being a social worker



Base: all current social workers (494). Answers <4% not shown.

The qualitative research found that social workers often had a love/ hate relationship with the profession. The majority entered social work to ‘make a difference’, however the ability to actually make a difference can be elusive and is increasingly difficult to achieve given the lack of resources and higher targets.

The caring and passionate nature of social workers is often put to the test through high caseloads and the emotionally demanding nature of the job. Social workers feel most pride in their role through seeing the impact of their work; however many do not have the opportunity to see the long-term outcomes for those they are supporting, therefore work does not feel rewarding.

“I feel proud when I think back on the work I have done and it has helped someone to tap into their own resources and make their own lives better, and support has been put in there for them” (Social worker, mid-career)

“Feel proud? No. I am treading water, doing processes rather than helping people” (Social worker, early career)

Furthermore, issues that they are trying to address tend to repeat amongst families - ‘breaking the cycle’ is felt to be rare. Many felt that the role of social work has become increasingly reactive rather than preventative; addressing the immediate issue rather than the root cause.

“If there were better long-term Government initiatives that looked at the child's welfare from birth to adulthood we could have better early prevention and less problems later on. It needs a long-term approach” (Academic)

Issues with bureaucracy were mentioned as a key frustration; paperwork can be overwhelming, with many staying up into the early hours and over the weekend to complete assessments and reports. These reports are not always respected when they are taken to the courts, leading to many feeling demotivated and frustrated at the time they have invested.

“The negative elements are associated with too much bureaucracy, high caseloads, lack of organisational support, financial imperatives that reduce the time for relationship-based practice and focus too much on targets and procedure. It wears social workers down and leads to burnout” (Academic)

Social workers often take time off sick due to burnout and stress. Managing large caseloads as well as the demanding nature of the cases is emotionally demanding. A few said they were afraid that taking time off would mean adding more pressure onto other social workers in their team, so they carried on at work when unwell. Some spoke of feeling they couldn't take time off and so feared being unwell.

“Pressure put on us by management is high... Stress leads to other health problems, most of my colleagues have illness and physical and mental problems leading from stress” (Social worker, early career)

“Burnout happens when you have a heavy caseloads and little support.” (Stakeholder)

Experienced social workers highlighted flexible working policies (e.g. working from home, part-time working and the option for a sabbatical) as a positive way to reduce the likelihood of burnout. However, some social workers feel that managers don't always trust them to work more flexibly.

Both current and previous social workers highlighted the impact of a good or bad manager. When individuals feel supported, and get recognition for their work, most feel more positive towards their entire role. However, some have experience or have heard of managers bullying staff or / and not showing any understanding or care of their increasing responsibilities and emotional support needs.

“[It's great when] team managers understand you - your training needs and personality. But we lack emotional support generally. A lot depends on [the] relationship with your manager... there can be a lot of leadership and relationship issues” (Social work, experienced)

“I didn't have control over working life. I couldn't take annual leave, there [was] no flexibility, no trust placed in workers, they aren't skiving in social work. Trust and flexibility are needed.” (Social work, leaver)

What are the levels of morale?

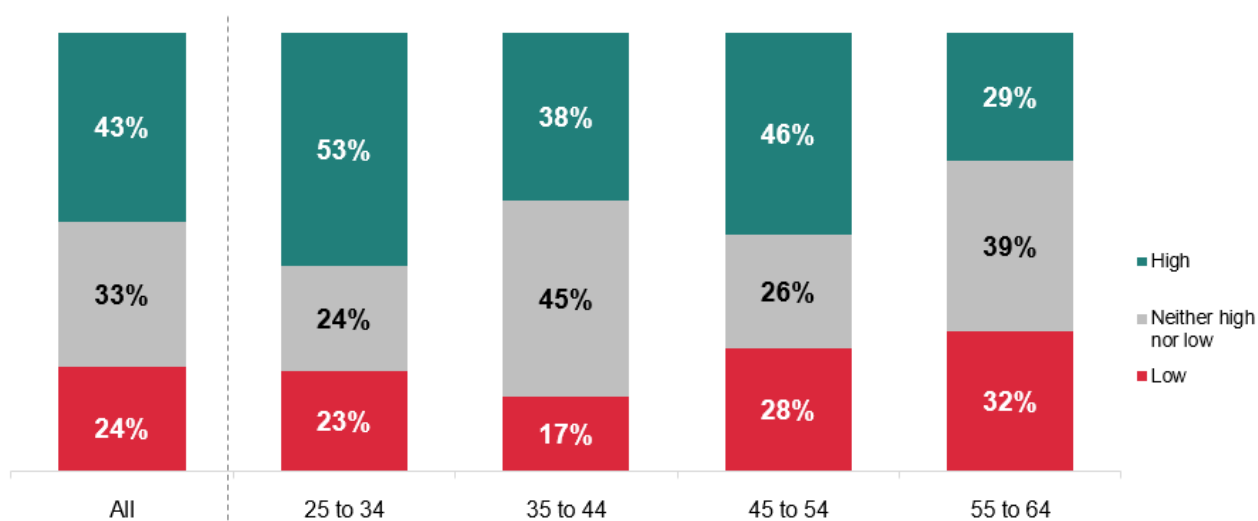
Almost a quarter (24%) of current social workers say they have low morale, with one in twenty (5%) rating their own morale as very low. A third (33%) say their morale is neither high nor low and for 43% it is high. For most (47%) their morale has not changed over the last year but for 24% it has improved and for 29% it has declined.

Morale is substantially higher among men than women: nearly two-thirds (63%) of men say their morale is high compared to 36% of women; similarly, men are more likely than women to say that their morale has improved over the past year (36% vs 20%). Morale tends to decrease with age. As shown in Figure 14, while 53% of those aged 25 to 34 have high morale, only 46% of those aged 45 to 54 and 29% of those aged 55 to 64 say the same. Social workers aged 55 to 64 have the worst morale, being the only age group where more have low morale than high. This age group is also the least likely to say that their morale has improved in the last year: 35% say morale has declined while only 17% say that it has improved.

Regionally, morale is highest in London where three-fifths (60%) report high levels and lowest in the North where only 36% report the same. The Midlands (44%), East of England (41%) and South (41%) have similar levels of morale among social workers.

Unsurprisingly, willingness to recommend the profession is linked to morale and stress. Over two-fifths (41%) of those with low morale would not recommend a career in social work to others compared to 7% of those with high morale. Similarly 20% of those who say they are very or fairly stressed would not recommend social work compared to 11% of those who are not very or not at all stressed.

Figure 14. Morale among social workers



Base: all current social workers (494), 25 to 34 (135), 35 to 44 (123), 45 to 54 (100), 55 to 64 (109). 16 to 24 and over 65s not shown due to prohibitively low base size (fewer than 30 respondents).

Results suggest that views on social work regulation may also affect the morale of social workers. Those who understand what the role of a social work regulator is are more likely to report high morale: those who understand the role a great deal or somewhat are nearly twice as likely to have high morale (48%) than those who understand it only a little or not at all (25%). A positive perception of the regulator is also linked to high morale with 47% of those who value the regulator a great deal or somewhat reporting high morale.

Morale among social workers is also linked to the media. Those who believe that perceptions of social work in the media are positive overwhelmingly report high levels of morale (95%); in stark contrast, only 35% of those who believe media perceptions are negative have high morale. Similarly, most of those who believe that society values and respects their role have high levels of morale (72%) while only 34% of those who do not think they are respected by society report the same. Perceptions of social work in wider society therefore appear to have an impact on how those practicing the profession feel.

In order to investigate how social workers are impacted by the media, during the survey current social workers were shown four examples of newspaper headlines and asked how they made them feel about their morale and confidence, their willingness to remain in the profession, and their relationships with their colleagues and the general public. A mixture of positive and negative headlines were selected to get a full understanding of how social workers react to media attention.

The first article was an interview with cyclist Bradley Wiggins who gave up his sporting career to become a social worker. This article had a positive impact on those surveyed, with 43% saying that it improved their morale and the same proportion reporting it made them more determined to stay in the profession. Over a third (37%) also said that it would increase their confidence in being a good social worker.

Figure 15. Headline one

Bradley Wiggins takes degree to pursue new career as a social worker

2012 Tour winner wants to put sporting success behind him



Bradley Wiggins will combine his degree with television punditry. Photograph: Graeme Robertson/The Guardian

The impact of this headline was particularly significant among men. Three-fifths of male social workers found the article made them more determined to stay in the profession (61%) and improved their morale (60%) compared to 36% and 37% of women respectively. Male social workers are also more likely to say the headline would improve their relationships with other social workers (50% vs 22% of women).

The second headline came from the Community Care website – a specialist website for news and information about the social work community. This article was also an interview, this time with Social Worker of the Year winner Louise Pashley about her work in South Yorkshire.

Figure 16. Headline two

Social worker of the year on the transformation of once embattled Rotherham

On World Social Work Day, we ask Social Worker of the Year overall winner Louise Pashley about how her devotion to her town and to care leavers drives her practice



Louise Pashley, overall winner at the Social Worker of the Year Awards (centre), with (from left) chair of trustees Peter Hay, awards founder Beverly Williams, awards patron and presenter Lorraine Pascale and James Rook, chief executive of headline sponsor Sanctuary Personnel

The article was received more warmly with just over three-fifths (61%) finding it improved their morale and over half saying it made them more determined to stay (56%) and increased their confidence in being a good social worker (55%). Few were negatively affected in this way: only 6% said it reduced their confidence and their morale. The impact on how social workers relate to their peers and to the general public was also broadly positive with almost half (45%) saying it would improve their relationships with other social workers and 30% saying it would improve their relationships with the public.

The third headline related to the ongoing Coronavirus pandemic and commented on social workers having to do their jobs in challenging conditions and without proper personal protective equipment. The impact on current social workers was negative with three-fifths (60%) saying it reduced their morale and 37% saying it reduced their confidence in being a social worker.

Figure 17. Headline three

Frontline Social Workers Visiting Vulnerable And Elderly Face Lack Of Equipment And Guidance

Coronavirus has left low-paid staff choosing between caring for their clients or keeping them safe from infection.

For a third (33%) the headline made them want to leave the profession and it was also felt that the headline would worsen rapport with the general public; almost a third (32%) believed it had a negative effect. Women were more negatively affected by the headline than men. Two-thirds (67%) of women found the headline reduced their morale compared to 37% of men. Similarly, 40% of women felt it reduced their confidence while only 29% of men felt the same; it appears male social workers found the headline galvanising with 44% reporting it made them more determined to stay in the profession (compared to 28% of women).

The final headline was negative, reporting on a court case where a social worker was jailed for an inappropriate relationship with a service user in their care. This headline reduced the morale of nearly half (47%) of social workers but appeared to motivate them as well. Over two-fifths (42%) were more determined to stay in the profession as a result of the headline and for 31% it improved their confidence in being a good social worker. However, it was felt that the headline would worsen rapport with members of the public by over three-fifths (62%).

Figure 18. Headline 4

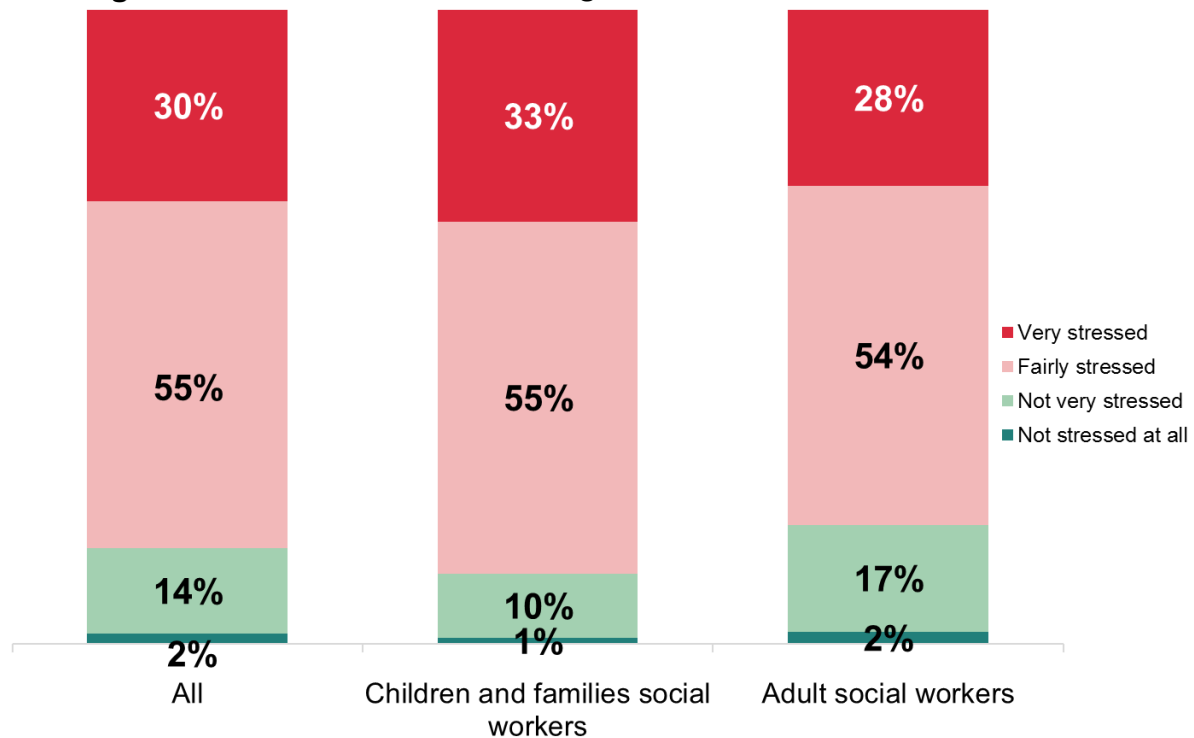
Herefordshire social worker jailed over sexual relationship



What are the levels of stress?

Social work is a stressful job and the majority (85%) report that their current levels of stress from their work as high. Over half (55%) say they are fairly stressed with a further 30% very stressed. Only 2% are not stressed at all. Children and families social workers (89%) are more stressed than adult social workers (82%), although both groups find the demands of their job stressful.

Figure 19. Levels of stress among social workers

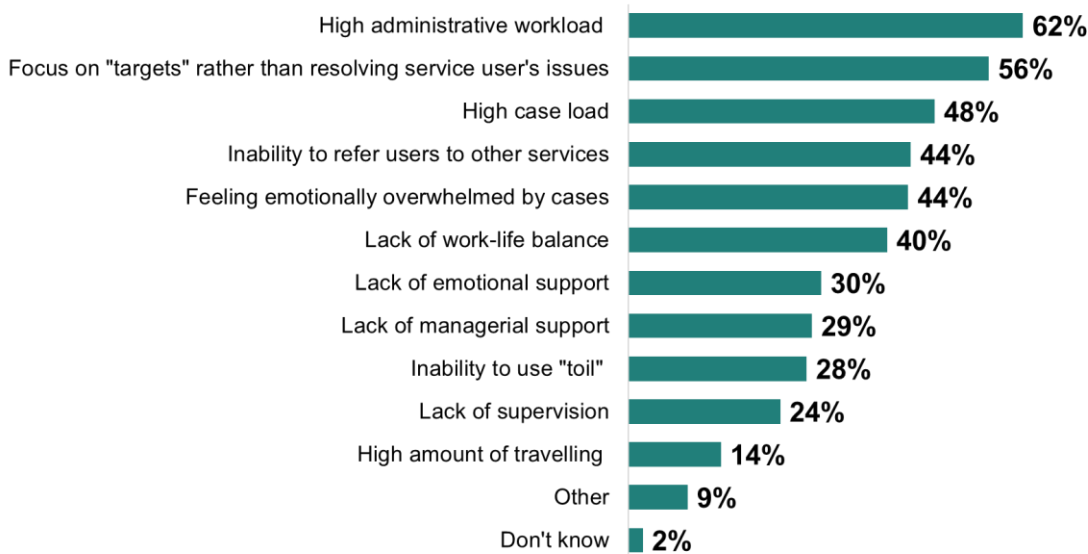


Base: all social workers (494), children and families (273), adult (192).

There are no significant differences in self-reported stress by age or gender, with over four-fifths of both men (82%) and women (86%) reporting being very or fairly stressed as a result of their jobs. Stress is affected by seniority however, with those with no line management responsibility less stressed than those with some responsibility are. However, the majority (79%) of those with no management responsibility still report being very or fairly stressed because of their job.

The most common cause of stress is a high administrative workload, such as spending time preparing for court or writing up assessments, cited by 62% as being behind their stress. This is followed by a focus on targets rather than resolving user issues (56%), a high case load (48%), an inability to refer users to other services and feeling overwhelmed by cases (both 44%). Less common causes include a lack of supervision (24%) and a high amount of travelling (14%).

Figure 20. Causes of stress



Base: all registered social workers who feel stressed (486)

The administrative burden of social work affects women more significantly than men. Nearly two-thirds (65%) of female social workers cite this as a cause of stress compared to 53% of their male counterparts. Female social workers are also more likely to report feeling emotionally overwhelmed by cases; nearly half (48%) say this is a cause of stress compared to a third (33%) of men. This is also more of a problem for younger social workers with 53% of those aged 25 to 34 finding this a problem compared to only 33% of those aged 55 to 64.

Children and families social workers are more likely than adult social workers to report that a high case load (55%), lack of work-life balance (49%), inability to use toil (39%) and high amount of travelling (20%) are causes of their stress.

Insights from the qualitative research found that a common cause of stress was workload, as well as the emotional and challenging nature of the role. The number and intensity of cases means that many felt they could not dedicate enough time to service users; this caused stress and the feeling that they were 'firefighting', rather than addressing the root cause of issues.

"Workload expectations are a problem... That means doing less deep work and doing more superficial work - temporary solutions that work on that day rather than time sensitive intervention" (Social worker, experienced)

Admin (e.g. notes, court preparation) and training is often done in the evenings and weekends, as social workers worry about taking time away from service users and feel pressure to meet their targets. Many spoke of not being able to take their toil in the time limit (often 2 weeks) due to their high caseloads, which leads them to feel even more tired and in some cases resentful.

“Hard to get work life balance. There is a pressure to do a number of visits, it’s not focused on quality... You can’t get work done in set hours and it’s hard to use toil” (Social worker, newly qualified)

Spending time out in the field, travelling to and from homes or different centres can also make social work feel like a ‘lonely’ profession where there is little interaction with their teams and managers; this can make pressures feel more acute.

“Other people have left the role because they find it so lonely... I haven’t met some people in the team, though we have a WhatsApp group, we are split across different areas” (Social worker, early career)

Additionally, the nature of cases can create emotional distress for social workers. Though they are trained to support vulnerable people, seeing abuse and neglect first-hand is distressing, those without support from a close team or manager tend to struggle most. Some social workers reported having a therapist or alternative form of support can help to build their emotional resilience, but that this support can be hard to access when so busy.

“Retaining is the main issue I think... People burn out because it’s hard to take time off and get emotional support” (Social worker, newly qualified)

Lack of work-life balance and an increase in caseloads is reported by nearly all, meaning that many social workers commented that their remuneration did not feel sufficient and did not reflect the real time and effort they had put in to the role.

“Pay is really poor for what we do and the risks. Agencies offer twice as much as a Local Authorities. I don’t want to move to an agency but they pay more. They don’t do enough to retain social workers” (Social worker, mid-career)

Figure 21. Case study from social worker

Current social worker

Case Study: Female, newly qualified, West Midlands

Role and experience	Perception of role	Training and support	Perceptions of Social Work England
- Registered in 2018, a children and family social worker - Day to day responsibilities tend to be varied, from writing assessments to working in children's homes and dealing with serious situations - Works with unborn babies (e.g. concerns from the midwife) all the way until they turn 18: gang issues, child sexual exploitation, domestic violence issues, neglect, abuse	- Although she prides herself in being a social worker and cherishes the impact of her work (e.g. saving a child from a bad situation), she perceives the role to be stressful and she thinks all social workers are overworked - Some of her pain points with the role include high caseloads, lack of staff, and issues with recruitment	- Completed a ASYE programme and has a Social Work masters - She really enjoyed the ASYE programme – good training and good support and useful practice court days - Her main support comes from her team; they can access counselling and physio-therapy, but their managers have to refer them and most SWs feel guilty about accessing the support - When it comes to CPD, they receive e-mails for in-house and external trainings	- She is aware of Social Work England being the new regulator for social workers - She thinks Social Work England should be more proactive; they should encourage authorities to make better decisions, be more involved in decisions, and provide CPD on their website

“A lot of blame is placed on the social worker. Other professionals will shy away from having an input into decisions, so when things go wrong you're the bad guy to the families.”

“There are things you can access, like counselling, but people feel guilty about accessing them, because comments are made and you feel like you aren't pulling your weight.”



Many students in the focus group had already experienced high workloads – juggling coursework, lectures and caseloads (if completing a placement), and most anticipated that their future roles would be demanding. Some ASYE respondents had already experienced their caseloads slowly increasing and no longer being protected (as discussed earlier).

“I am concerned about the culture in social work organisations that have expectations of long hours, no breaks, weekend working, no work-life balance - students are often being inducted into this way of working whilst still on placement. It's no wonder the average number of years before burnout for social workers is 7 years” (Academic)

“I think the greatest challenges for newly qualified social workers are receiving adequate support; finding time to reflect; managing the emotional aspect of the job” (Academic)

To give an indication of where social workers are spending their time, current social workers were asked to give an estimate of what proportion of a typical working week they spent on different tasks. Administration does place a significant burden on time, as shown in Figure 22, with social workers spending an average of 40% of their time on this each week. Frontline work takes up around a fifth of their time and attending both internal and external meetings around a quarter. Typically, a social worker will spend a tenth of their week travelling.

Figure 22. Estimated time spent on tasks in a typical week

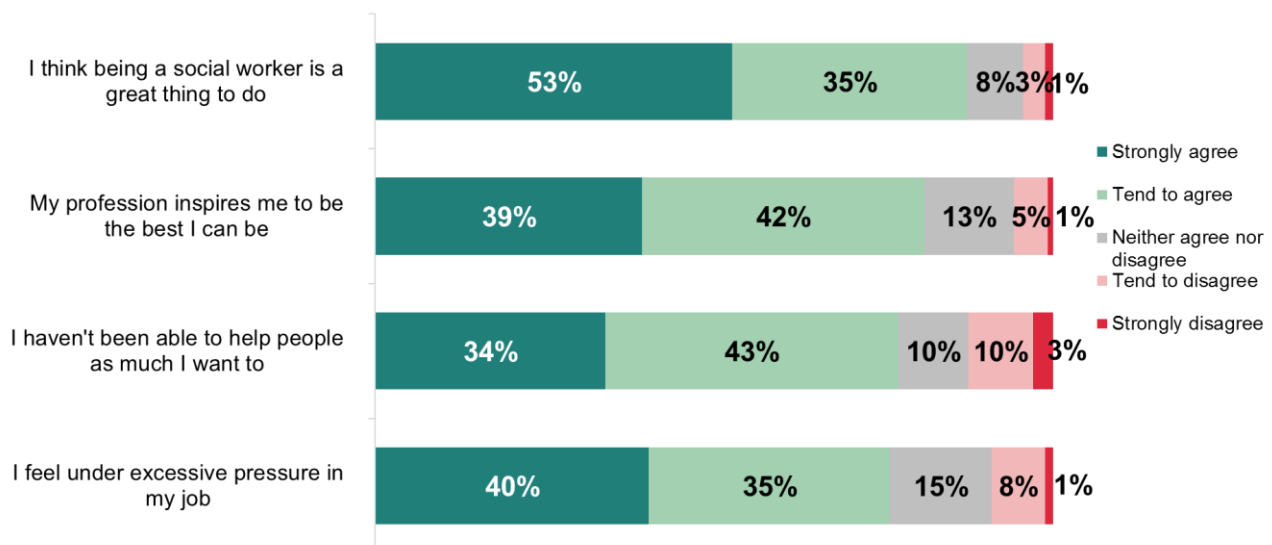
	0 to 25%	26 to 50%	51 to 75%	76 to 100%	Mean	Median
Administration	29%	47%	20%	5%	39.55	40
Frontline work	74%	23%	2%	0%	19.17	20
Attending meetings within own organisation	87%	11%	1%	1%	14.90	10
Attending meetings with partner organisations	92%	7%	1%	1%	12.39	10
Travelling	96%	3%	0%	1%	10.28	10
At court	97%	2%	0%	0%	3.71	0

Base: all current social workers (494)

As shown in Figure 23, social work can feel like a difficult job. Three-quarters (76%) of social workers report experiencing excessive pressure and a similar proportion (77%) say that they haven't been able to help people as much as they had hoped. Female social workers tend to report feeling under excessive pressure more than men (78% vs 69%) – a trend seen in similar results elsewhere.

Nevertheless, the majority of social workers also agree that being a social worker is a great thing to do (87%) and that their profession inspires them to be the best that they can be (81%). Agreement with these statements decreases with age: 91% of those aged 25 to 34 believe being a social worker is a great thing to do but this falls to 86% of those aged 45 to 54. Similarly, 85% of those aged 25 to 34 agree that being a social worker inspires them to be the best they can be but this falls to 78% of those aged 55 to 64. A majority of all age groups agree with the statements.

Figure 23. Extent to which social workers agree or disagree with the statements



Base: all registered social workers (494)

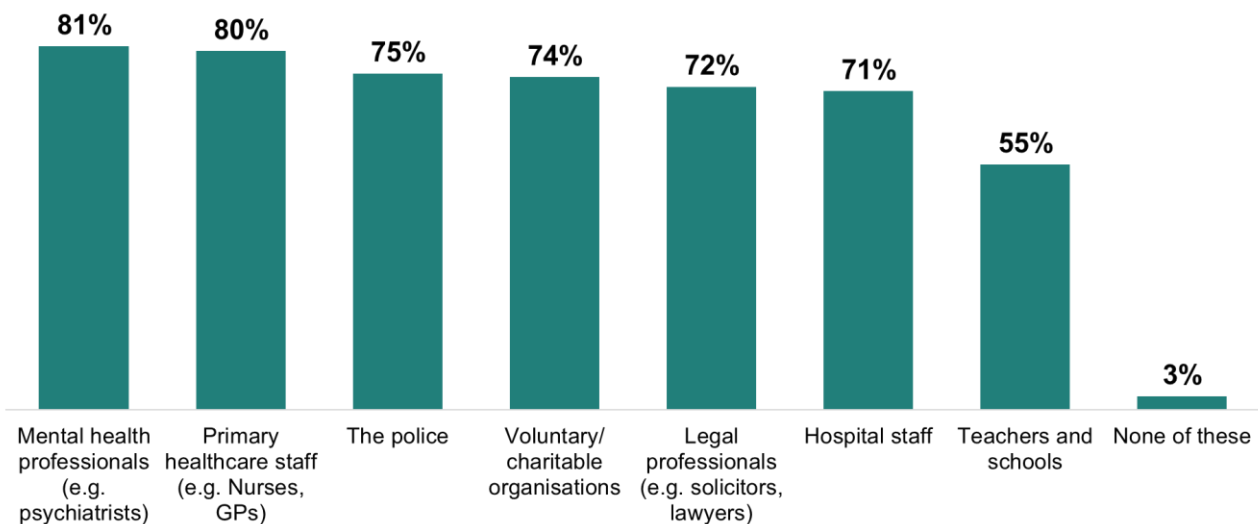
Working practices within the profession

- Social workers interact with organisations in a variety of different ways, with the most common interaction being with mental health professionals (81%) and primary healthcare staff (80%). Most rated their working relationships with other organisations as a positive one, but relationships with mental health professionals were the weakest
 - In the qualitative interviews, many social workers and stakeholders spoke of multi-agency working becoming increasingly challenging as resources are cut. It can be difficult to find the time to build up effective relationships and it can be hard to refer service users, as organisations have longer waiting times and in some case, reduced services.
 - Most social workers meet with their line managers frequently (55% weekly or more) and the majority think their line manager respects them as a person (77%). However, practical support can suffer if the line manager is not a social worker themselves.
 - In the qualitative interviews, social workers were generally satisfied with their line management support, especially if their manager is a frontline social worker and can therefore relate to the daily realities of the role. Social workers often directed their frustrations at the senior management team; feeling like they were 'out of touch' and too focused on targets.
 - The majority of social workers are also receiving frequent regulatory supervision (17% weekly or more, 49% fortnightly/ monthly), but some of the qualitative respondents reported a lack of support in this area.
 - Continuing professional development is widely available, with the most common types being online learning (69%), in-house programmes (60%), and external conferences (52%). Social workers are particularly keen for interactive forms of professional development such as on-the-job training (42%), job rotations (35%) and peer coaching (33%).
-

What are relationships with other organisations like?

The most common professionals that social workers liaise with are those in health settings, either in mental healthcare (81%) or in primary care such as GPs (80%). Only 71% of respondents work with hospital staff as part of their job. The type of interactions social workers have do vary across the different healthcare staff – half say primary care staff directly refer individuals to them (52%) while only a fifth refer individuals to primary care (19%). The relationship with mental health staff is mutual, with a third saying individuals are being referred to them (32%) and two fifths saying they refer their cases to mental health staff (40%).

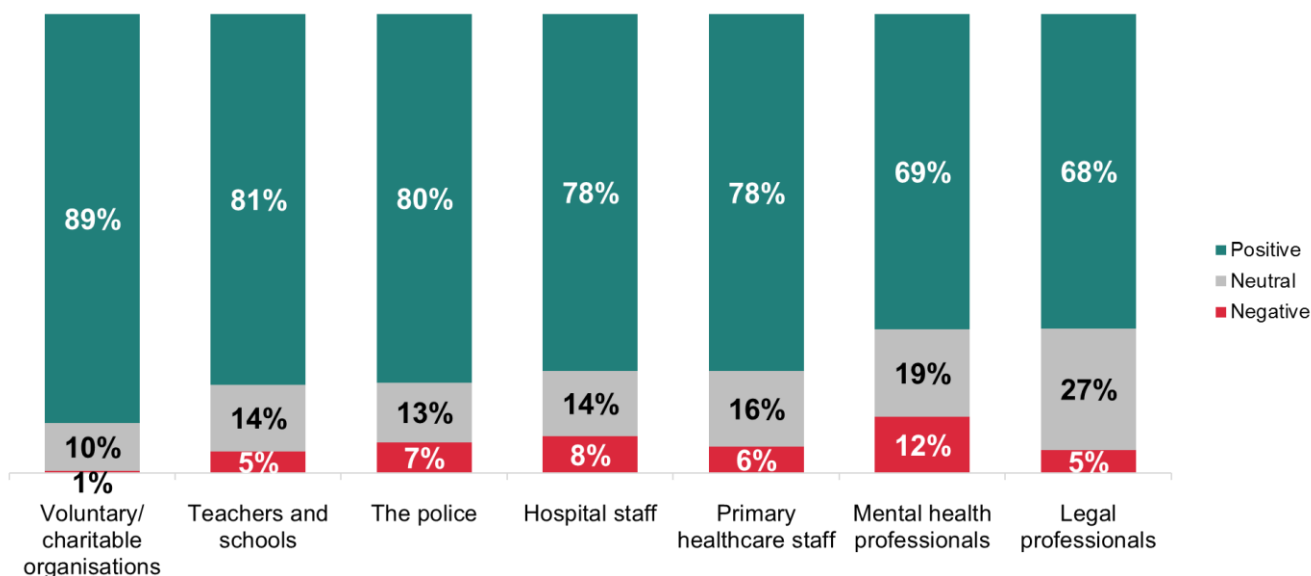
Figure 24. Proportion of social workers who liaise with each organisation as part of their job



All current social workers (494)

However, this mutual referral of individuals between social workers and mental health workers does not lead to a more positive working relationship. Just over two thirds said their relationship with mental health professionals is positive (69%), the lowest of the organisations listed except for legal professionals. Those working with mental health professionals are the most likely to say the relationship with the other organisation is negative (12%). Over three quarters of those who work with primary care staff said their working relationship is good (78%).

Figure 25. Positive or negative working relationship with each organisation



Social workers who liaise with; voluntary/ charitable organisations (367), teachers and schools (270), the police (370), hospital staff (349), primary healthcare staff (396), mental health professionals (399), legal professionals (358)

Relationships with teachers are strong, with over four fifths of children and families social workers saying they have a positive relationship (85%). Their working relationships with legal professionals is slightly weaker at under three quarters (72%), but – consistent with the overall picture, the working relationship is weakest for those who liaise with mental health professionals (67% positive, 12% negative).

Insights from the qualitative research with stakeholders and social workers illustrated that working with other organisations can be challenging in an era of austerity; where cuts in resources can mean there is less time to build up effective relationships, fewer local services to refer to and longer waiting times. A number of social workers spoke of the importance of multi-agency working but how it is becoming increasingly difficult, which can negatively impact service users (e.g. delays in court and gaps in support) and lead to the social worker feeling frustrated and stressed. A couple of social workers shared a sense of powerlessness when they could not refer a family or individual to a local service, as it no longer existed.

“Access to resources is such a big issue; my previous authority was struggling financially and didn’t have enough staff. We couldn’t work as closely with people as I wanted; referring people to services which aren’t there... It is not as rewarding as we didn’t have the impact” (Social worker, experienced)

“There used to be more multi-agency working, more support. It now feels worthless – it is all about the Local Authority trying to not spend money” (Social worker, leaver)

“There are less community resources that social workers can tap into. There is a squeeze on the voluntary sector and ability to work with statutory services – it is less flexibility now. Multi agency working is challenging, less flexible and there is less sensible thinking as all under pressure” (Stakeholder)

A number of social workers also spoke of the negative impact of admin and legal support cuts within their local authority. They argue that having to now do their own printing and photocopying etc. is eating into their time with service users.

“So much admin / PC work. I wish we could go and visit families more. My colleagues said there used to be admin teams to support you - now we do it all. It gets harder... another brick on top of my role” (Social worker, newly qualified)

“There is too much and repetitive paperwork, and we’re working on IT systems that aren’t fit for purpose most of the time. We spend too much time in the office and impacts on how much time we can spend working with people.” (Social worker, early career)

Do social workers receive support from their managers?

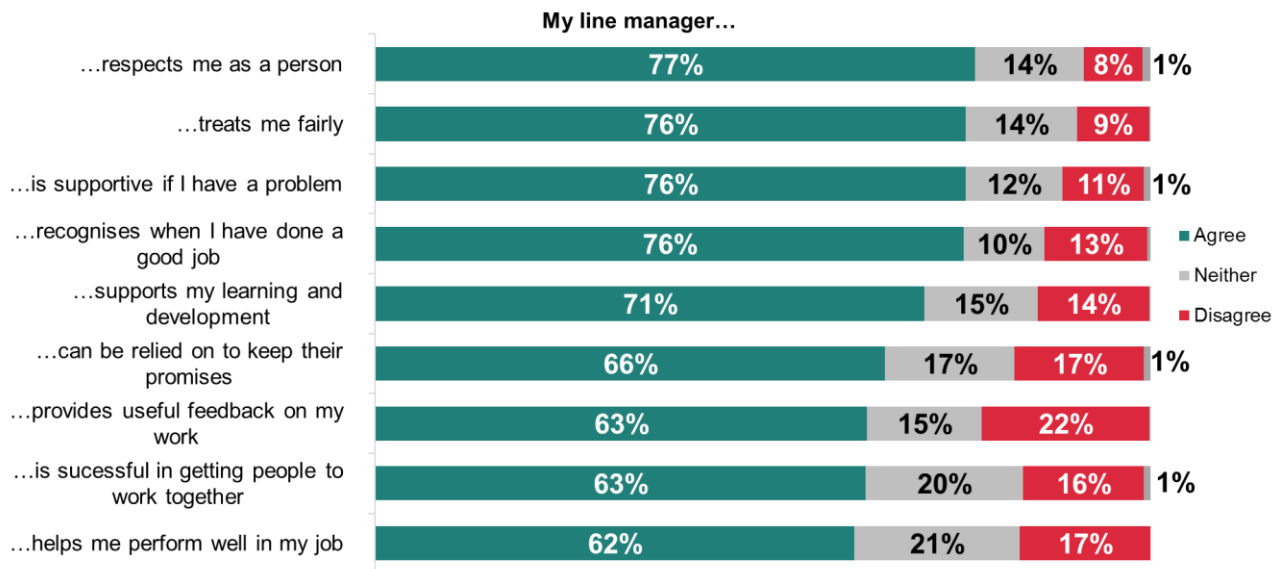
Line managers are a key source of support and advice for social workers, with two fifths of newly qualified social workers meeting with their line manager every day (42%). Half of respondents meet with their line manager weekly or more (55%) - children and families social workers are more likely than adult social workers to meet with their line manager this frequently (60% vs 51%). A quarter of social workers only meet with their line managers once a fortnight or once a month (26%), one in seven see their managers less than once a month (14%), and 1% never meet with their managers at all. A small proportion of respondents said they did not have a line manager (4%).

Of respondents with a line manager, a third are managed by a frontline social worker who has face-to-face contact with service users as part of their role (33%). Newly qualified social workers are the most likely to have a frontline social worker as their manager (42%). Over half of respondents have a non-frontline social worker as their manager (55%) – with children and families social workers more likely to have this than adult social workers (59% vs 50%). One in eight respondents have a manager who is not a social worker at all (12%).

Respondents are broadly positive about their relationship with their line manager. Three quarters say their line manager respects them as a person (77%), treats them fairly (76%), is supportive when they have problems (76%), and recognises when they have done a good job (76%). Respondents are less emphatic but still positive about their manager’s skills in supporting their work – under two thirds think their manager gives useful feedback (63%) or helps the respondent perform well in their job (62%).

Those with frontline social workers as their manager are more likely to say they provide useful feedback (76%) or help them perform better at their job (75%).

Figure 26. Perception of their line manager's support



Social workers with a line manager (473)

When those who had recently left social work were asked to rate the support they had received from their managers, respondents were split – half said the emotional support received was good and half said it was poor (50% vs 50%). A similar pattern is seen when thinking about practical support – just over half said it was good compared to just under half saying it was poor (55% vs 45%). Respondents who had formerly been children and families social workers are more likely than former adult social workers to say the support was poor – both emotionally (53% vs 44%) and practically (52% vs 39%).

In the telephone interviews with social workers, many said that they do feel supported by their line manager, as they are regularly asked how they are, both formally and informally. Social workers are especially positive about managers who care for their emotional wellbeing and those who refer them to counselling services (if needed). Social workers also spoke highly of managers who support team bonding activities and training opportunities.

“Offering a half day away doing an activity makes all the difference. It shows they do value us” (Social worker, early career)

“They [managers] always call me or I call them. We have good catch ups. We have a WhatsApp group and another one for new starters” (Social worker, newly qualified)

However, some do not feel supported leading them to rely on support from their peers instead. The main reasons for feeling unsupported include;

- Meetings with their manager feeling rushed or regularly cancelled

- Not feeling comfortable to open up to their manager for fear of repercussions, including their manager being defensive and blaming them
- Not feeling that their manager acts on their concerns (i.e. does not decrease their caseload)
- Lack of career progression
- Not feeling they are proactively encouraged to take their time in lieu or attend training when busy
- Lack of useful and practical feedback
- Their manager not being a social worker anymore or ever – meaning they may not understand the day-to-day realities as well.
- High turnover in managers making it hard to build up trusted relationships.

Social workers want line managers who are visible, long-term, accessible, approachable, and focused on the outcomes for the services users, as well as the emotional wellbeing of the social worker.

“I have had six managers in 7 months! No emotional support really. Managers are not always approachable - they say leave if you don't like it. They just pressure you to do X, Y, and Z. I don't feel cared for.” (Social worker, newly qualified)

“I had an issue with a harmed child, I felt hung out to dry by this manager. I'd asked for support, but I was ignored. This was seven weeks of absolute hell! I got offered counselling by a helpline but nothing from the Authority. I ended up going off sick” (Social worker, mid-career)

If social workers feel that their manager or / and senior management team is target driven to the detriment of the social workers' emotional wellbeing, then they can feel devalued and unsupported.

“They were more concerned about targets...No one's really concerned when you're working late, they don't tell you to go home. If you don't meet deadlines, they put it back on you, it's your fault you've not done.” (Social worker, leaver)

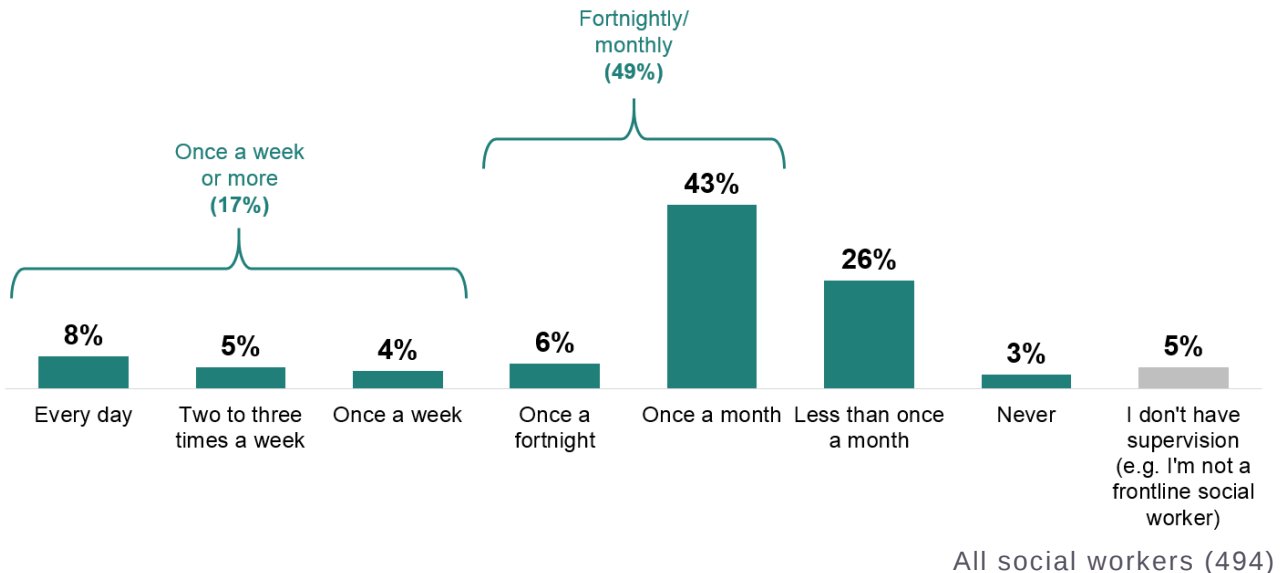
“We've got an Assistant Director who's not a qualified social worker, they're powerful but don't understand the pressures and procedures of social work. They seem to be driving the target culture and I don't think its right” (Social worker, experienced)

Are social workers receiving formal supervision?

Social workers should have regular formal supervision sessions in order to critically reflect on and improve their practice with the support and guidance of their line manager or another colleague. Under a fifth of social workers have supervision once a week or more (17%); rising to two fifths of newly qualified social workers (39%). Half of all social workers say they have supervision on a fortnightly or monthly basis (49%). A quarter of social workers have supervision less than once a month (26%) and this rises to over a third of

adult social workers (34%). A minority of respondents either never have supervision (3%) or are not frontline social workers in need of supervision (5%).

Figure 27. Frequency of regulatory supervision



The qualitative findings mirrored the quantitative findings; many social workers have regular formal supervision but a lack of regular supervision can lead the social worker to feel unsupported and at a greater risk of cases being deemed as ‘having gone wrong’.

“People leave the profession because of a lack of support and supervision...Caseloads, paperwork, the politics and lack of support and supervision drive them away and, if anything ever goes wrong, you’re the one who’s held responsible and gets it in the neck”
(Social worker, mid-career)

A few social workers reflected that supervision meetings can often feel rushed as both parties are stretched for time and stressed, meaning the meetings are not as productive as they should be.

“[There is] supposed to be 6-weekly supervision but a lot of the time it either got put off or delayed. Because of how busy you were it was hard to prepare for these...The manager is unprepared as well, so you feel like they want to get it out of the way. There is not enough time to do things properly” (Social worker, leaver)

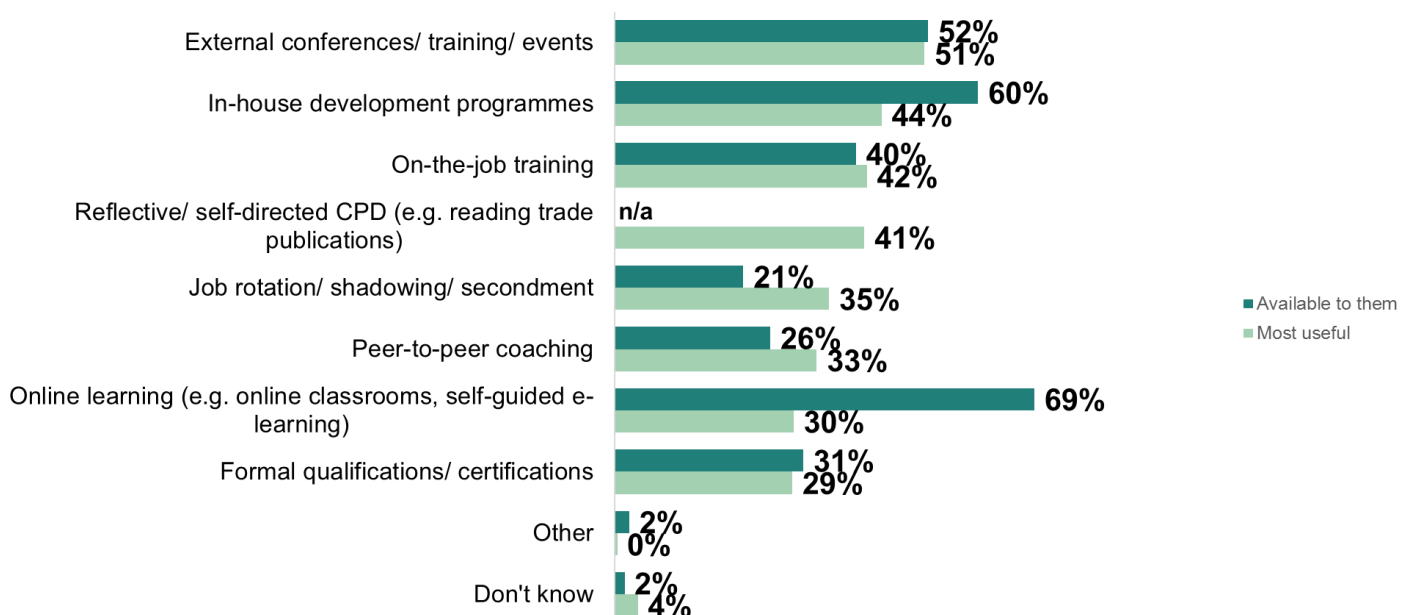
Are social workers receiving adequate professional development opportunities?

Social workers have a duty to undertake continuing professional development, with a record of regular professional development forming one of the requirements for registration with Social Work England. While there are no specific forms or quantities of continuing professional development required, developing knowledge and reflecting on learning activities forms one of the core professional standards for social workers.

Over nine in ten respondents report at least one form of active continuing professional development being available to them in their organisation (96%). The most common form of active continuing professional development available is online learning, such as online classrooms or self-guided e-learning (69%), followed by in-house development programmes (60%). Social workers working within local authorities are more likely to have active continuing professional development available to them (99%) and much more likely to have in-house development programmes available to them (66%).

Around half say that external conferences/ training are available to them (52%) and this is the most popular answer when asked what types of continuing professional development are useful to their jobs (51%). Over two fifths think that the widely available in-house development programmes are useful to them (44%) but less than a third think online learning is helpful (30%).

Figure 28. Continuing professional development available and continuing professional development considered most useful



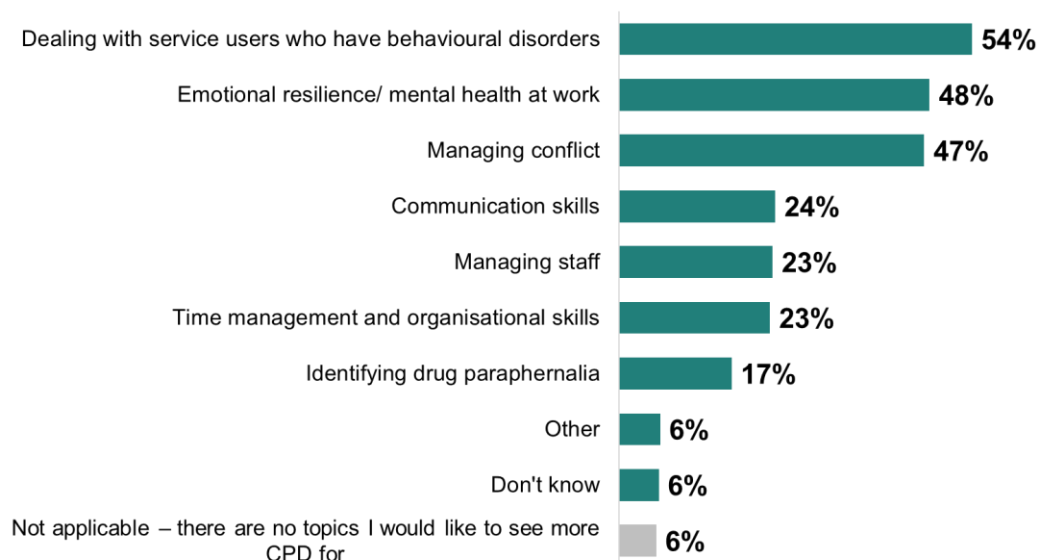
All social workers (494)

There are three forms of active continuing professional development where demand outstrips supply; on-the-job training (42% consider it useful vs 40% with access to it), job rotations and shadowing (35% vs 21%), and peer-to-peer coaching (33% vs 26%). Adult social workers are the most likely to want on-the-job training (47% consider it useful vs 39% with access to it) and peer-to-peer coaching (34% vs 25%). Newly qualified social workers are most likely to request job rotations or shadowing (45% consider it useful vs 25% with access to it).

In addition to active continuing professional development, there is reflective or self-directed development which does not require interaction and a participant can complete unaccompanied. Two fifths of respondents considered forms of reflective/ self-directed development such as reading trade publications or journals useful to them in their job (41%).

In terms of what topics they would like to see covered more in continuing professional development, over half would like to have more information on dealing with service users who have behavioural disorders (54%). Three fifths of local authority social workers would like more training on this (59%). Almost half of all respondents would like more training on emotional resilience/ mental health at work (48%) or managing conflict (47%). Children and families social workers are the most likely to want support for mental health at work (51%) while Adult social workers are the most likely to want help with managing conflict (50%).

Figure 29. Topics would like to see more continuing professional development on



All social workers (494)

The qualitative research with social workers revealed that valuable training is often measured according to its relevance to their current cases / issues they are working on.

Training needs to be specific and not generalist, addressing current challenges within local areas or specific audiences.

“Our local authority recently offered training on personality disorders, a lot of people are diagnosed in our area, so it was particularly helpful.” (Social worker, mid-career)

“I’m interested in a training if it’s something I don’t know a lot about, something that would make things easier for myself, something you might come across. For example, rise in asylum seeking children, you don’t learn about that in training.” (Social worker, newly qualified)

Generally, social workers reported that the training offered is of a high quality. The topics covered are relevant and varied. Those in local authorities especially feel that there is many internal and external training courses on offer, which they can opt into themselves if deemed relevant. However, many highlighted the need for more emotional resilience / wellbeing training and support in order to manage day-to-day stresses. Practical tips / coping mechanisms would be welcomed.

“There is no emotional support really. I do have an outside practice person, but often we just moan to her. It’s all rushed. I don’t feel I have the time to cover my issues and emotions.” (Social worker, early career)

“There should be more informal support when there is a problem, reactive not preventative.” (Social worker, newly qualified)

Some suggested that more knowledge sharing between experts across teams and authorities could be invaluable and a more cost-effective solution compared to hiring external providers.

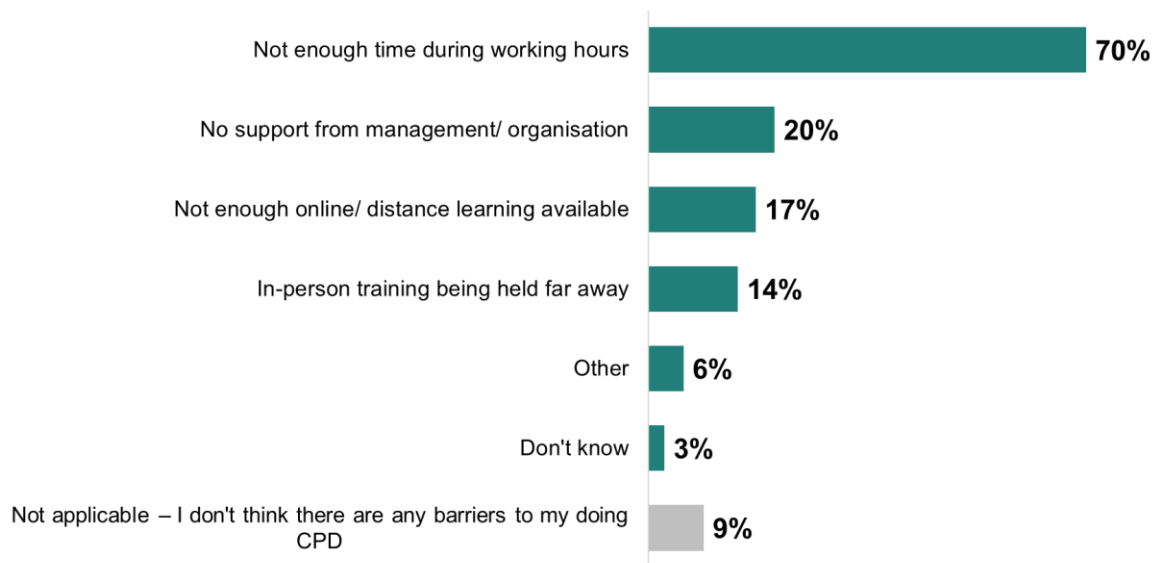
“It’s hard for people with experience to help the new people. The person who is supposed to be looking at your CPD or giving you an appraisal is often really pushed themselves. You feel in their way and you feel a bit like a burden. The expertise is there and the experience is there. They should be able to properly support rather than do a tick box exercise” (Social worker, leaver)

The quantitative survey found that while there is an appetite for continuing professional development, respondents can find it challenging to actually undertake the activities – nine in ten say there are barriers to their continuing professional development (91%).

Over two thirds say there is simply not enough time during working hours to carry out their development activities (70%). As discussed earlier, over two thirds of respondents say their direct line manager supports their learning and development (71%) – and here, a fifth say that there is a lack of support for continuing professional development from management or their organisation (20%).

Just under a fifth of respondents cited the lack of online/ distance learning (17%), rising to a quarter of respondents in London (24%). Londoners are also the most likely to mention in-person training being held far away (24%), suggesting that social workers in the city experience travel and distance issues in a way that respondents in smaller cities or rural areas do not. The qualitative research confirmed that in-person training held far away can be a barrier for attendance. More webinars and short online videos would be welcomed by most.

Figure 30. Barriers to continuing professional development



All social workers (494)

Insights from the qualitative research reinforced the point that training is felt to be a luxury for some time-poor social workers. Many end up using their annual leave to ensure they are able to attend courses, or complete CPD after hours. There is a perception from some that non-mandatory training is not prioritised by managers, but is valued by social workers.

“I had an email about mental capacity training, but I simply don't have time to attend...Sometimes we have to write 500 words assessments and I don't have time for that.” (Social worker, mid-career)

“Time can be a limiting factor to what training you can do...The management don't really give us any spare time for CPD. You have to do it, but you're not encouraged or supported to do it, you have to do it in your own time.” (Social worker, mid-career)

“Most CPD has been great but employers don't always want you doing it so end up doing it in own time.” (Social worker, leaver)

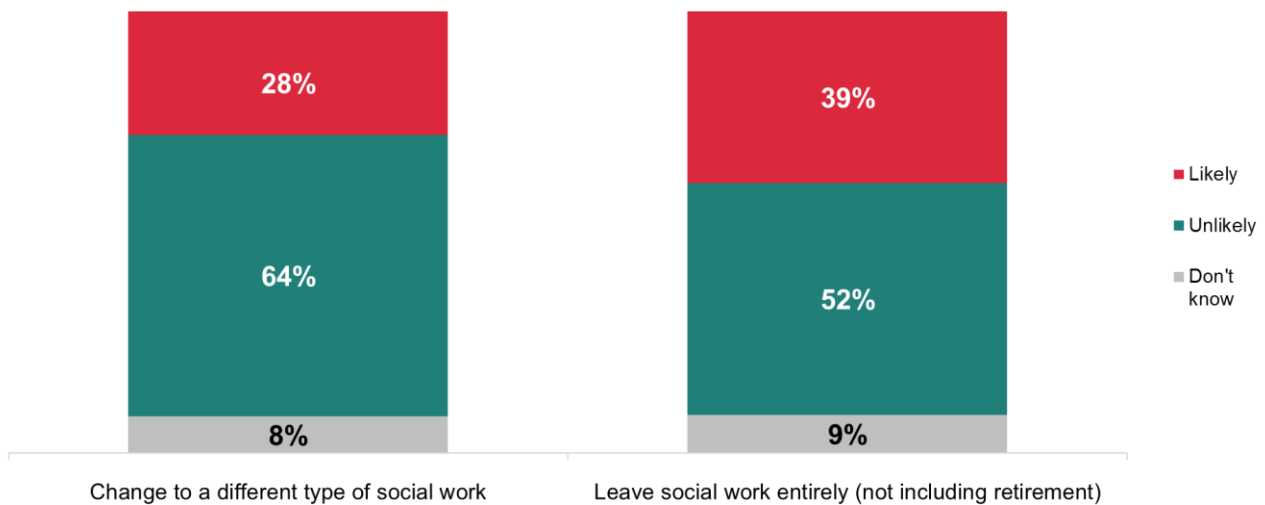
Leaving the profession

- Some social workers do not see a future in the profession - two fifths expect to leave within the next 5 years (39%). Children and families social workers are the most likely to plan to leave or change their career – with a strong perception that children and families social work is more stressful and leads to higher rates of burnout.
 - The most common reason for people to leave social work is the high workload (39%), followed by poor health (32%) and poor work/ life balance (29%).
 - Unmanageable workloads, high level of stress and a negative work environment all contribute to social workers leaving the profession.
 - Alternative third sector roles and freelancing in social or health care are some of the career alternatives for those who leave the profession, while others retire or take extended leave.
 - Respondents think Social Work England could improve retention by improving the public profile of social work, greater direct support to lower caseloads, and providing more training
-

Do social workers make plans to leave?

Over a quarter of current social workers plan to change the type of social work they do within the next five years (28%), such as shifting from children and families to adult social work or vice versa. Two fifths think they will leave the profession entirely within the next five years, excluding leaving for retirement (39%).

Figure 31. Likelihood to change type of social work or leave entirely



All current social workers (494)

Children and families social workers are more likely than adult social workers to say they will either change the type of work they do (34% vs 21%) or leave social work entirely (41% vs 37%). Newly qualified social workers are the group most likely to say they are likely to change their work or leave within the next 5 years – over half say they will change what type of social work they do (58%) and almost half say they will stop working within social work entirely within the next 5 years (48%).

This lack of desire to stay in social work is also seen within students who are currently studying for social work qualifications. Among students surveyed, 6% actively do not plan to be a social worker when they finish their studies. Of those who do, over a quarter plan to change the type of social work they do during their career (29%).

Insights from qualitative research confirmed that many current social workers intend to leave the profession for a 'less stressful role' (e.g. in the voluntary sector) within the next 5 to 10 years. Those in children and families social work were most likely to say they will leave the profession within ten years, or move into adult social work. There is a strong perception that children and families social work is more stressful than adult, leading to higher rates of burnout.

"People say to me it is not worth it, but I feel I need to do this. I will stay for at least another 1 or 2 years. I don't think anyone can stay for years and years due to work loads. Especially if you don't have good supervision or management." (Social worker, early career)

"After this, I could teach social work, could become self-employed, something other than frontline. In my last job, I felt burnt out, there was too much to handle, I needed to make the change." (Social worker, mid-career)

Why do people leave social work?

The most common reason for leaving social work within the last 5 years were the demands of a high workload/ caseload (39%), followed by poor mental or physical health (32%) and poor work/ life balance (29%).

Figure 32. Reasons for leaving social work



All former social workers (135)

As discussed elsewhere in this report, social workers are conscious of the pressure they are under and the specific mental health impacts their job has on them. A quarter of former social workers left due to how emotionally taxing they found the work (27%) and this rises to a third of former children and families social workers (33%). These respondents are also more likely than former adult social workers to cite the lack of support from their organisation as a driving reason to leave the profession (33% vs 25%).

Those who had left the profession highlighted the emotional pressures of the job and the lack of emotional support as the key reasons for their decision. Some employers facilitated access to mental health support services, such as counselling, but not all. Most former social workers revealed that their distress was not always taken seriously by employers and taking time off to access mental health services projected an image of them being a 'slacker', with both managers and colleagues thinking they were not pulling their weight and that they 'just couldn't cope'. Many reported turning up to work when they were ill – citing managerial demands as a key influence behind their decision to work through illness, alongside negative comments from colleagues or service users.

"The job deteriorated, I just couldn't do what I needed to do to make me sleep at night- that's why I left." (Social worker, leaver)

"The pressure I was under as a manager was unbearable...I could be on 24hr call for 7-day blocks and I wouldn't get any extra pay for that." (Social worker, leaver)

Where do people go after leaving social work and would they return?

Many former social workers choose to stay in a related industry after leaving the profession, with over two fifths of former social workers in employment saying they still work in the health and social services industry (43%). The next most common industry for former social workers is education (15%)

“My job role is now Social Care Lead Officer. My role now doesn’t include frontline social work.” (Social worker, leaver)

“I left in 2016 and started working with [a charity]. Complete change, it’s a charity, I really enjoyed it actually.” (Social worker, leaver)

Only a few would choose to return to the social work profession. When asked in April 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, only a fifth would consider returning to the profession within the next 6 months (21%). Over a quarter would consider returning at some point in the next 5 years (28%). As mentioned earlier, children and families social workers are more likely to plan leaving the profession, but they are also more likely to return. A quarter of former children and families social workers said they might return within the next 6 months (26% vs 16% former adult social workers) and three in ten may return within the next 5 years (30% vs 26%).

Figure 33. Case study of a social worker who has left the profession

Social Worker, Leaver

Case Study: Female, experienced, left the profession

Role and experience	Perception of role	Training and support	Perceptions of Social Work England
- Qualified in 2005, left in 2015. In this time, she moved between different locations and teams - Role involved doing initial assessments for children, and working alongside the police - Towards the end of her experience, she was struggling and had taken a month off due to burn out - Now works for a charity, where the skills she learnt as a social worker are highly valuable	- Overall she had a love / hate relationship with the profession - Some key challenges included dynamics with management, lack of time on cases and too much paperwork - These issues lead to both physical and mental exhaustion - The negative public perception of social work also had a negative impact on her feelings towards the role	- She had completed a degree in social work, as well as receiving a diploma She stated that her managers' interpersonal skills were poor - Though training tended to work well, there were gaps, largely around resilience and decision making. Overall it was felt to be more important to have the practice than the theory	- No awareness of Social Work England - Had knowledge of HCPC and assumed that is was being replaced - Heard that you needed to re register with the new regulator which sounded 'like a nuisance'

“It was a stressful environment, I didn’t get on with my manager and I would be threatened by families.. I had a month off to stop me burning out.

“Leaving was partly down to workload and the complexity of cases, as well as the travel time between the office / home / in home visits.



What could Social Work England do to encourage people to stay?

Current, former and student social workers were asked what more Social Work England could do to encourage job retention in the sector. Respondents to the quantitative survey provided a range of ideas around actions that the regulator could take.

Figure 34. What Social Work England could do to increase retention (word size correlates to frequency of mentions)



Broadly the suggestions were most commonly grouped within the following themes:

1. Campaigns to raise public profile

“Continue to raise the profile with government and politicians to help them better understand the SW role to bring positive changes from government policy.”

“More public campaigns to raise the profile of the profession and championing the profession with partner agencies.”

2. Greater direct support to lower caseloads

“Push for greater respect within the profession i.e. that caseloads are safe; that supervision is regular; that management are supportive rather than punitive with their rationing of resources.”

“Reduce caseloads and admin, value skills and experience and enable social workers to spend the time they need with their client group to provide a high quality intervention.”

3. Provide training and support

“Help provide emotional support, quality training and support.”

“Ensure relevant training, peer and management supervision is available.”

“Ensure that there is much better quality supervision and emotional support.”

“Invest in more training and CPD; engage in nationwide conferences and professional opportunities with social workers, students, communities and service users.”

From the qualitative interviews, it is clear that implementing a strong retention strategy is key, especially for those working in children and families social work. While aspects of this include listening to employees and respecting their opinions, rewarding performance and experience is at the centre, alongside a willingness to accommodate flexible working arrangements and movements into other types of social work (i.e. children and families into adult). Clearer career progression pathways and an extensive learning and development programme including sessions on wellbeing / coping mechanisms can also help retention rates.

Perceptions of regulation and Social Work England

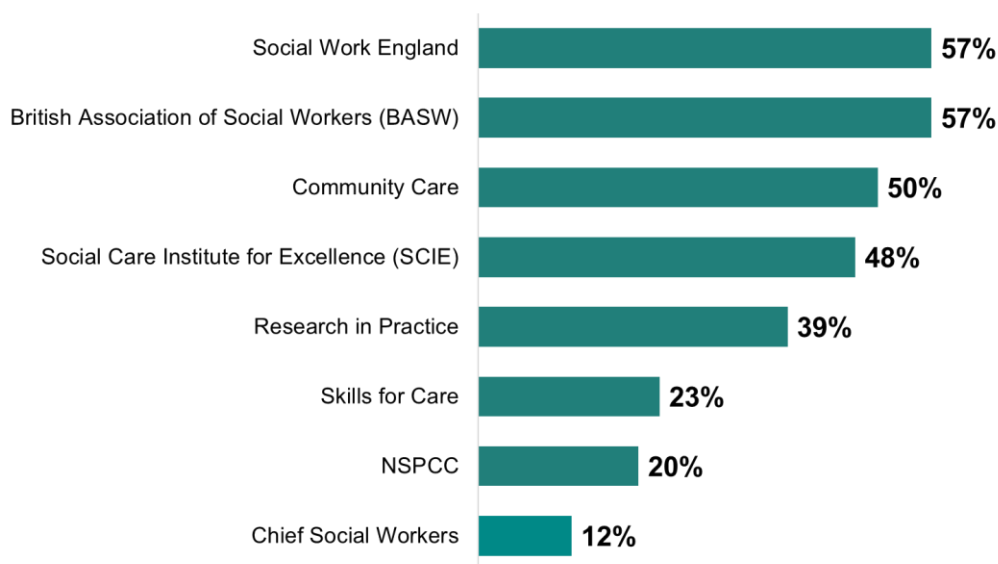
- Overall, there is a strong level of understanding of the role of the social work regulator across current, former and student social workers.
- Positively, a sizeable majority of current, former and student social workers do value the role of a specialist regulator in social work, with 77% reporting they value it.
- In the qualitative research, many social workers hope that Social Work England will be a voice of social workers and help counteract any negative rhetoric from the media.

Where do social workers get regulatory information?

The most common organisations that current, former and student social workers would go to for information is the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) and Social Work England (57%). Student social workers seemed more likely than current social workers to go to BASW (75%) or the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) (63%).

Within those current social workers surveyed, those working with adults were more likely to go to SCIE for information (65%) and those working with children and families more likely to go to Research in Practice (50%).

Figure 35. Where current, former and student social workers would go for information about the social work profession

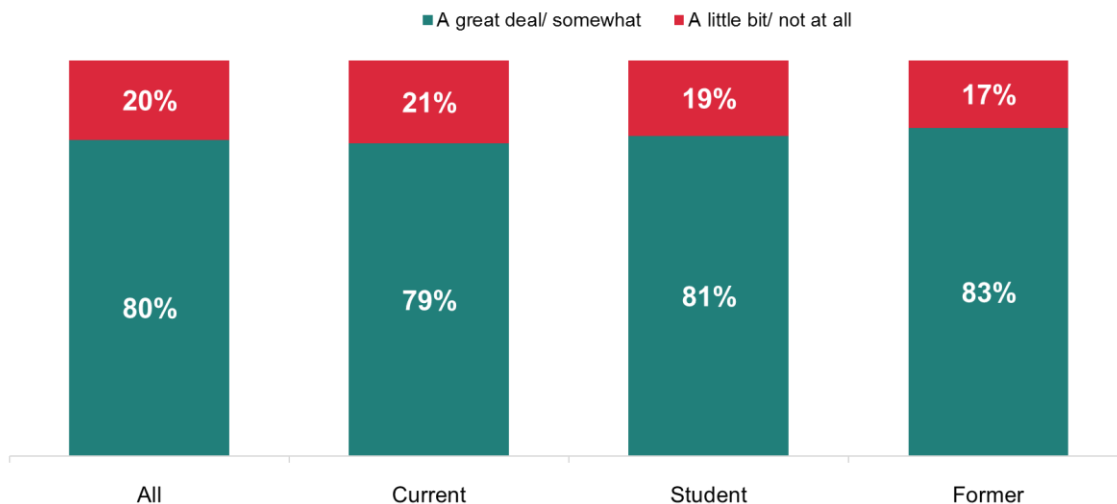


All current social workers, former social workers and students (677)

Do social workers understand and value regulation?

Overall there was a strong level of understanding of the role of the social work regulator across current, former and student social workers. Within current social workers this level of understanding was broadly consistent across the different types of social worker, demographics and employment settings.

Figure 36. Level of understanding of the role of a social work regulator



All current social workers (494), former social workers (135) and students (48)

A majority of current, former and student social workers surveyed understood that Social Work England investigates concerns raised about the conduct of social workers (70%), ensures public protection through registering qualified professionals (66%) and that Social Work England develops social work specific regulatory standards that will improve standards in social work education, training and practice (66%).

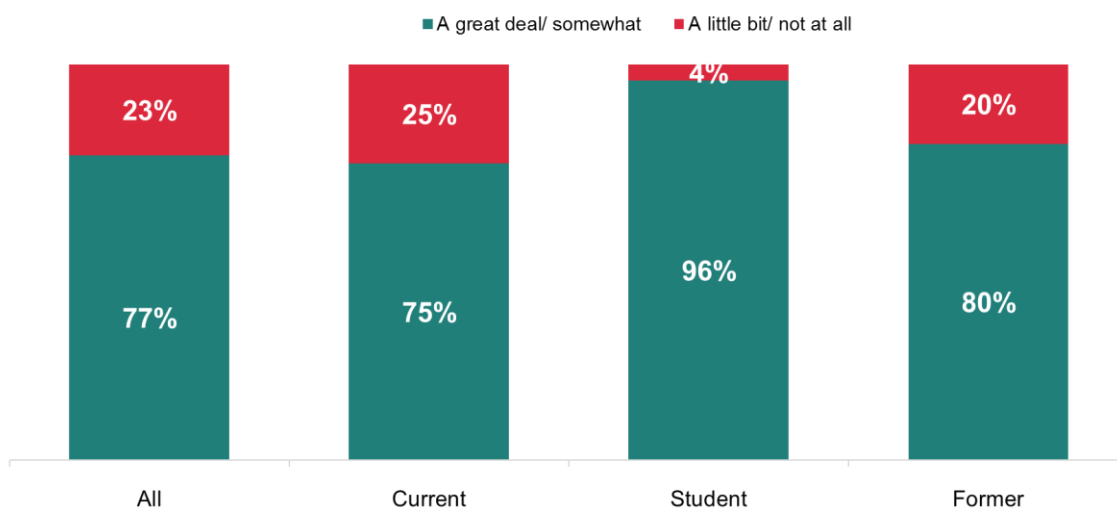
Figure 37. Understanding of what Social England does



All current social workers, former social workers and students (677)

Overall, a sizeable majority of current, former and student social workers do value the role of a specialist regulator in social work, with 77% reporting they value it. Students surveyed were more likely to value the role of a specialist regulator; overall 96% said they valued the role – with 60% saying they valued it a great deal.

Figure 38. Value of the role of a specialist regulator in social work



All current social workers (494), former social workers (135) and students (48)

In the qualitative phase of this research, most current social workers understand that Social Work England as a regulator will set standards for training and practice, and that

they will lead on any investigations. They want the organisation to be fair, objective and transparent in any investigations.

The students in the focus group are aware of Social Work England from their study, organisation or own research. They understand that it is the new regulator and replaced HCPC. Most understand that social workers need to register with Social Work England and that it will set and monitor standards, but the majority know very little else about its role and values.

HCPC was felt by many to be too generalist to address the specific problems of social workers; having a dedicated regulator is welcomed. Social workers want Social Work England to reach out to them and ask what their challenges are via surveys, interviews, events, national conferences and visits.

Generally, students and academics are also positive about having ‘their own’ regulator. They hope they will be listened to more and be better understood as a profession. However, a few doubt there will be much change. A few said that they would like the new regulator to be more visible and proactive than HCPC.

*“I would like them to be more visible and involved, not just when things go wrong”
(Student)*

“I don’t know much regarding the regulator. Hopefully, this will mean that social workers are supported, protected and helped in every aspect necessary” (Student)

Across the audiences interviewed, many would like Social Work England to also be an advocator and promoter of social workers, challenging the negative press and perceptions from other sectors e.g. legal professionals. The challenges faced by social workers often feel like theirs alone to bear – Social Work England was felt to be in the best position to address some of these.

*“Hopefully a greater understanding of the challenges and unique role of social work”
(Student)*

“HCPC was generic, I guess Social Work England has the potential to be a voice for social workers again, and understand the needs of the profession” (Social worker, leaver)

“I don’t know what support they can offer us, it can be seen as more pressure and admin, more hoops to jump through” (Social worker, mid-career)

For current social workers, interactions with Social Work England so far has mainly consisted of an email about registering and the CPD portal; they have not yet formed a real impression beyond that. A small number (at time of interview) had started to register their CPD with Social Work England; generally, this is seen as a ‘bit of a nuisance’ and has not been prioritised by many yet.

As communication for most with Social Work England has been limited, many would like to receive another email to understand the organisation's role, values and next steps. Most would prefer Social Work England to communicate with them via email – they see it as the most convenient and effective means of communication. Many also suggested in-person seminars for key issues. Those who had been visited by a regional engagement lead were impressed and would welcome future visits.

Figure 39. Case study from a stakeholder

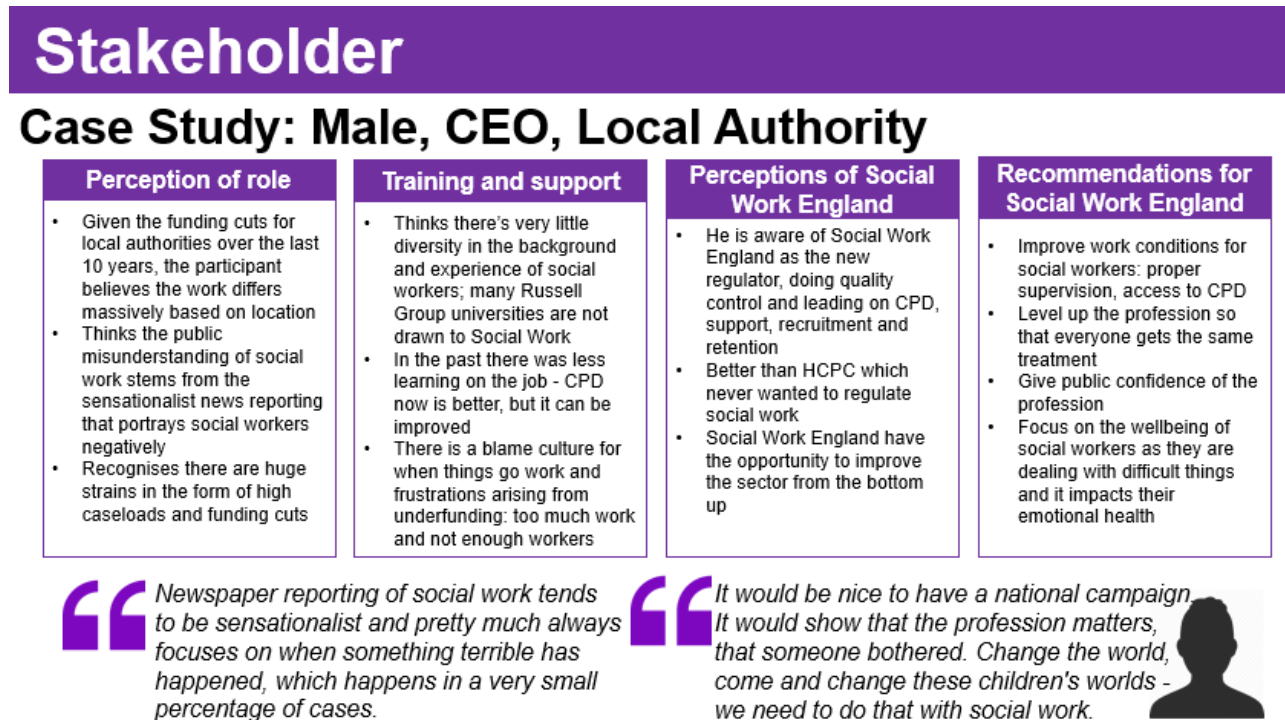


Figure 40. Case study from a stakeholder

Stakeholder

Case Study: Female, Chair

Perception of role	Training and support	Perceptions of Social Work England	Recommendations for Social Work England
• She highly values Social Work; sees it as a caring profession that offers crucial support • Has met brilliant newly qualified social workers, thinks they are in the right job but under immense pressure, being undervalued and dealing with high case loads • Thinks current working conditions are unfair on young professionals who need time to grow and develops	• Thinks the government is not interested in listening to the sector • High case loads make it difficult to book in training and reflection time • The profession is often attacked in the media and social workers don't get recognition – freeze on pay, cuts in hours to undertake an assessment • Burn out is caused by high case loads and little support • Social work courses don't fully prepare you for the work and CPD has been diluted	• Aware that Social Work England is the new regulatory body – she believes that the name gives the impression that it is advocating for social workers • She believes Social Work England should make efforts to change public perception of social workers for the better by working with other organisations and highlighting success stories	• She believes Social Work England's role is to set up standards that are clear, achievable, accountable and reviewable • Evaluations must be fair and balanced in order to identify the need of the workforce • She would like Social Work England to highlight success stories in order to raise the public profile of social workers



There's a huge outcry. Nobody in the government is interested in listening to this sector.



There is an expectation for Social Work England to raise the profile for social workers. Who else do we have to do that?



Conclusions

This research has explored the views of a range of audiences related to social work, from students and academics, to current and former social workers, as well as stakeholders within the sector. This provides a comprehensive look at social work as a profession, both at its status within society and the state of working practices.

One of the key findings is the impact of social work on those that work in the profession and how people need to be supported in all areas, from structural support in their organisations through to emotional support for mental resilience.

The research has highlighted that those who choose to become social workers have a strong sense of community and social justice – but that this drive to help people can be undermined once in the role if they do not feel they are making an impact. This is compounded by the perceived negative public perception of social workers. Many point towards negative portrayals of social workers in the media as “child snatchers” or high profile cases like Baby P. Negative headlines directly affect the morale of social workers and they also mention that these stories affect their rapport with the public and the communities they serve.

Engaging with local communities is one of the areas social workers feel their training did not prepare them for. While social workers do feel their training was of good quality in general, they are less conclusive on whether it prepared them for the day-to-day job. In the qualitative research, respondents raise concerns about a lack of practical knowledge in their training but juxtapose this with concerns of unprotected caseloads and high burnout during placements and the Assessed Year in Employment.

The concern about high workloads and burnout is evident at every stage of the research, from the unprotected caseloads for newly qualified social workers to high administrative workloads. Current social workers also cite a target-focussed system as a key source of stress as they do not feel they can resolve a service user’s issues within this framework. Given that many social workers join the profession in order to make a difference or because they thought they would find it rewarding, an inability to enact real change is particularly demoralising and takes an emotional toll.

Most current social workers have good relationships with their managers and feel they are supportive if they have problems, but former social workers are evenly split on the support provided by their managers. The qualitative research revealed that sometimes the support offered is superficial and respondents may feel unable to confide in their managers for a variety of reasons - from high turnover of managers leading to a lack of rapport, to managers being defensive about issues or not acting on concerns.

Social workers are aware of the importance of supporting their own mental health, with emotional resilience one of the key areas for further professional development. Most

service users have continuing professional development activities available within their organisation, with the most common being online learning such as digital classrooms or self-guided e-learning. Social workers would also like more professional development which involves learning directly from their peers such as job rotations and secondments.

A lack of support is cited by some former social workers as one of their reasons for leaving the profession. The most common answer is the workload being too high but the qualitative research highlights how these two reasons are linked – when a high caseload cannot be met and managers are not supportive, the issues can spiral. As mentioned earlier, all audiences were aware of the challenges of a high workload and risks of burnout. This may go some way to explaining why some social workers think they will leave the profession within the next five years, and why some social work students do not actually plan to become social workers.

Former social workers do remain strongly committed to the principles of the work - and in the importance of helping vulnerable people - with many leaving for adjacent roles in the health and social care sector. A number of former social workers would consider returning to the profession at some point in the next five years.

Most of the respondents to the quantitative research understand the role of a social work regulator and valued having a specialist regulator. The specialist focus of Social Work England was welcomed, as HCPC had felt too generalist and distant from social workers lived experiences. Respondents also welcomed “outreach” work where Social Work England engaged directly with social workers or stakeholders to understand the lived experiences within the profession.

A minority of respondents thought that Social Work England works to make the profession more prestigious or improves recruitment through marketing campaigns. Conscious of the detrimental impact of negative news on social workers, some thought that Social Work England should act as the “voice” of social workers and work to raise a more positive profile of the profession.

Annex

Respondent profiles for the qualitative methods

Below are the profiles of respondents from YouGov's panel who took part in the focus groups and interviews.

Social Work students online focus group Thursday 6th February, 6:15pm-7:45pm

Region	Qualification	Gender
West Midlands	Master's in Social Work	Male
West Midlands	Master's in Social Work	Female
North West	Undergraduate degree in Social Work	Female
East of England	Undergraduate degree in Social Work	Female
London	Frontline Programme	Male
North East	Doctorate of Social Work	Female
South West	Master's in Social Work	Female
London	Undergraduate degree in Social Work	Female
East of England	Masters in Social Work	Male
East of England	Undergraduate degree in Social Work	Female

Academics online focus group Thursday 6th February, 8:00pm-9:30pm

Gender	Region	Job role
Male	London	University Lecturer
Female	South East	University Lecturer
Male	London	Senior University Lecturer
Male	South West	Senior University Lecturer
Male	London	Senior University Lecturer
Female	South West	University Lecturer
Female	East Anglia	Senior University Lecturer
Male	North West	University Professor
Female	London	Teacher / lecturer
Female	East Anglia	University Professor

Social workers depth interviews

Type	Interview type	Age	Route	Gender	Region
Early career	Face-to-face interview	27	University route	Female	London
Experienced	Face-to-face interview	59	University route	Female	South East
Experienced	Face-to-face interview	47	University route	Female	London
Left role	Face-to-face interview	56	Not asked	Female	South East
Experienced	Face-to-face interview	49	University route	Male	South East

Newly Qualified	Face-to-face interview	38	Not asked	Male	London
Early career	Telephone interview	30	Step-up route	Female	South East
Early career	Telephone interview	25	University route	Female	South West
Early career	Telephone interview	38	University route	Female	North East
Early career	Telephone interview	25	University route	Female	West Midlands
Experienced	Telephone interview	57	University route	Female	North East
Experienced	Telephone interview	59	University route	Female	North West
Experienced	Telephone interview	48	University route	Female	West Midlands
Left role	Telephone interview	53	Not Asked	Female	East Midlands
Left role	Telephone interview	40	Not Asked	Female	East of England
Left role	Telephone interview	49	Not Asked	Female	North East
Left role	Telephone interview	41	Not Asked	Female	North East
Left role	Telephone interview	54	Not Asked	Female	East Midlands
Mid-career	Telephone interview	60	University route	Female	North West
Mid-career	Telephone interview	29	University route	Female	West Midlands
Mid-career	Telephone interview	45	University route	Female	West Midlands
Mid-career	Telephone interview	27	University route	Female	West Midlands
Newly Qualified	Telephone interview	32	University route	Female	West Midlands
Newly Qualified	Telephone interview	33	University route	Female	East Midlands
Newly Qualified	Telephone interview	44	Frontline route	Female	West Midlands
Newly Qualified	Telephone interview	32	University route	Female	South East
Newly Qualified	Telephone interview	29	Step-up route	Female	West Midlands
Newly Qualified	Telephone interview	38	Step-up route	Female	East Midlands
Newly Qualified	Telephone interview	36	University route	Male	London
Newly Qualified	Telephone interview	25	Apprenticeship	Male	West Midlands

Sample composition for the quantitative method

Below is the sample composition of respondents from YouGov's panel who took part in the online quantitative survey

Group	Current social worker	494
	Social work student	48
	Former social worker	135
Age	16-24	21
	25-34	173

	35-44	165
	45-54	130
	55-64	172
	65+	16
Gender	Male	187
	Female	490