

# Perceptions of Social Work: Summary Report

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

Conducted for Social Work England



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# A. Background

## 1. The aims and objectives of research

Social Work England is the regulatory body for social work in England. Its creation was announced by the Department for Education as part of reforms covered by the Children and Social Work Act 2017.

Social Work England regulates the social work profession by:

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

Social Work England commissioned CRD to conduct a programme of research exploring knowledge, attitudes and experience around social work.

We looked in depth at what people understand and believe about social work, and at the experiences and feelings of those who have received social work support.

## 2. How we did it

We ran three stages of research:

- **5 focus groups with members of the public** – in-depth work with a small number of people to drill down into what they knew and felt
- **An online omnibus survey with 1751 members of the public** (administered by YouGov) to check key findings among a large, statistically valid sample
- **23 face to face depth interviews with people who had experience** of social work interventions in the last three years, to hear at first-hand how they felt about it

The work took place between January and March 2020.

# B. What we found

## I. What do the general public understand and believe about social work?

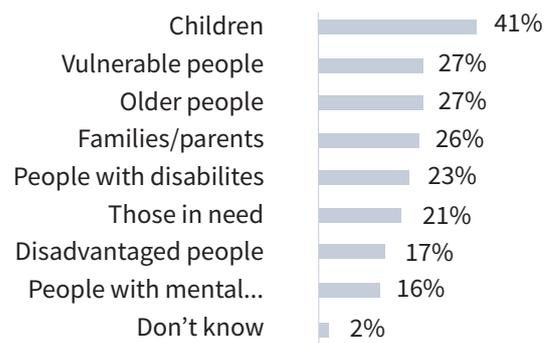
Social work was generally well regarded among the public but was not high profile in comparison with other public services. It was thought to be undervalued, under-resourced and deserving of more favourable media coverage.

**“We don’t celebrate all the great stuff that they do.”**  
Member of public

Social work was believed to be primarily for the vulnerable, especially children and families, but also older people and those with disabilities. Other users were less recognised but were still seen as needing support. We asked **focus group respondents** to tell us who came to mind when they thought of social work clients; their answers generated these responses.



This was largely reflected in the **omnibus survey**, in which, when asked who social work supports, 41% said children, 27% vulnerable people, 27% older people and 26% families/parents.



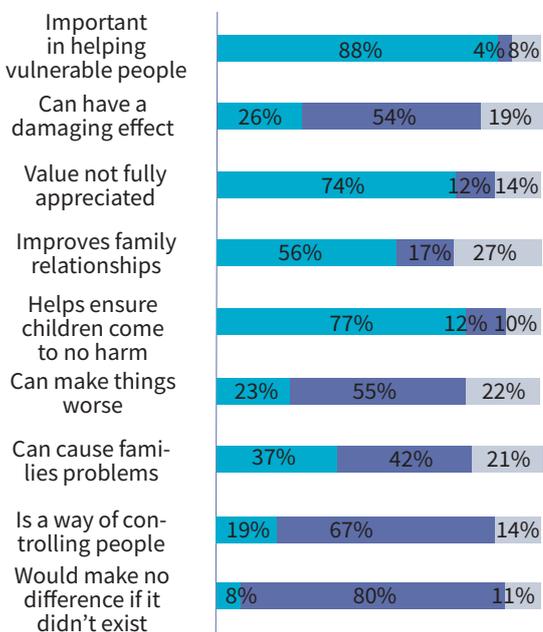
The perceived aim of social work was primarily around helping or safeguarding, providing support for those who lacked it through their families or from other sources, and offering advice and guidance.

Ultimately social work was believed to have the capability to improve people’s lives and wellbeing.

**“When you need help and you’re desperate and vulnerable.”**  
Member of public

**Perceptions of social work** among the general public were largely positive. In the **omnibus survey** 88% of participants agreed that social work

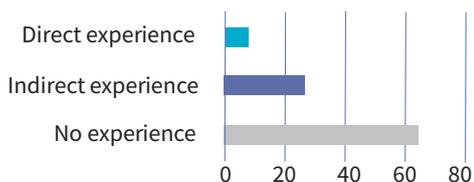
is important in helping vulnerable people, 77% agreed that it helps ensure children come to no harm and 74% agreed that the value of social work is not fully appreciated.



Agree Disagree Don't know

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

Direct **experience of social work** was not widespread (8% of the omnibus sample) but awareness of others who had had interventions was quite common (27%).



Personal experience of social work intervention differed markedly by socio-economic grade: experience was 11% among C2DE participants and 6% among ABC1s.

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

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

**“They’re caring people.”**  
**“People who want to do good and help others.”**

Members of public

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

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

Little was known about **regulation of social work**. Most respondents assumed social work is regulated, simply because they thought all public services are regulated in some way,

but had no idea how it was done or by whom.

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

Social Work England's five main responsibilities were all regarded as valuable. In the **focus groups**, the fact that its role encompasses these responsibilities was applauded.

**“It’s a step forward.”**

**“It shows that individuals are doing the best possible job.”**

Member of public

This generally positive perception was echoed among omnibus survey respondents: 87% or 88% of the omnibus sample perceived each of the five as important.

## 2. People with lived experience

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

**Experiences of social work** among these people were **largely positive**. Perceptions varied according to individual circumstances, and not everyone had been satisfied by their experience.

Generally, parents were happy with the

intervention they had received, especially if they had requested it, and some felt that it had made a significant and positive difference to their and their children's lives. Others, with different needs, felt that social work had not helped them.

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

The following word cloud is drawn from the way those with lived experience described their involvement with social work.



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

**Dissatisfactions with social work** fell into three categories: clients who felt they were in a **low priority group** (e.g. adults with disabilities) and received

little help; those who believed individual social workers had been **inefficient or ineffective** in dealing with their case; and those who thought social workers had been judgmental and hostile – typically men in domestic abuse cases whose female partners had instigated the intervention.

Knowledge of the **scope and aims** of social work among those with lived experience was reasonably good, though some found it easier to focus on their own cases than to consider its other roles. Most of those with experience of a social work intervention, including some who had been dissatisfied, believed that in principle it is well-intentioned.

Clients' response to information about **Social Work England** was generally **favourable**. Most welcomed the idea

of a named body responsible for overseeing social work and liked the fact that it would deal with concerns and complaints.

**“It would be nice to think that there is somebody making sure they are doing their job to the full capacity, that they are informed about everything and everything is up to date. It would be reassuring....”**

Person with lived experience of social work

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

# C. What we concluded from the research

## I. The landscape

Social work is less visible and less readily praised than other public service roles. It attracts attention for rare failings, but otherwise is under the radar for most members of the public. This tends to be regarded as unfair; there is a belief that if there are problems in social work this is because it is under-resourced and probably struggling to recruit staff.

When members of the public are

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

The general public are receptive to information about social work, particularly what it aims to do and what it doesn't, the nature of the

support it provides, and the outcomes it achieves.

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

These experiences are not widely known or disseminated because people tend not to talk about social workers' involvement in their lives, but they could have a significant effect on the image of social work.

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

## 2. Social Work England

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

When the role of Social Work England is spelled out it provides reassurance that social work is carried out in a responsible way, that there is accountability in its practices and that it safeguards the interests of service users. The fact that it investigates concerns could be seen to enhance confidence in social work.

## 3. Informing people about social work and Social Work England

There are some areas where the public could benefit from more information and clarity about the role of Social Work England. First, there are points to make about **the organisation itself**:

- It is there to regulate the profession, uphold standards and ensure that social work has a positive impact on people's lives
- It is an independent resource in case of concerns about interventions – it will investigate problems objectively and apply sanctions if appropriate
- Its rules and standards are robust and evidence-based
- It sets and assesses the education and training social workers in England receive

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

- What it provides and who it can provide for – it is a means of getting help and support, for anyone with a need
- What people can expect from an intervention - its aim, the manner in which it is provided, its likely trajectory and the hoped-for outcome
- That social workers have an important role, are highly qualified and experienced

In more specific terms there is potential in positive stories, **case studies and testimonials** from those who have received social work support. It would also be useful to outline what the training involves, particularly the practical component.