

A report on Social Workers in England – executive summary

Routes into social work

- Most social workers begin their career after completing a University degree; for three-fifths (61%) of current social workers an undergraduate or master's degree was how they started out.
- For most social workers (81%) and social work students (95%), wanting to make a difference is the main reason for becoming a social worker. Fewer say they joined the profession because of friends or family who are social workers (13%) or for the salary (11%).
- Social workers are positive about the training they received. 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%).
- A 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; but those who had taken part in either of the programmes were broadly positive.
- Just over half (56%) of current social workers agree that their training prepared them for the job when they first qualified, while a substantial proportion say they felt unprepared (42%)

The public's perceptions of social work

- Most respondents (current, former, and student social workers) do not think that social work is respected by society (76%) and that levels of respect are far worse than for similar frontline services such as nurses and teachers.
- Respondents feel that negative media around social workers fuel this perception. Eight in ten (82%) think that the social work profession is portrayed negatively in the media/ news.
- However, the vast majority of respondents feel strongly that social workers are providing an essential service (96%) and play a unique role in society (92%).

Morale within the profession

- The majority of 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 they have made an impact on people's lives, but the stress from the number and nature of cases can make it difficult to feel that they are making a difference.
- Almost a quarter (24%) of social workers have low morale. For nearly half (47%) morale has not changed over the past year, but it is affected by the media.
- The majority of current social workers report stress (85%) as a result of their job. The most common causes of stress are a high administrative workload (62%), a focus on targets rather than user issues (56%), and a high caseload (48%).
- The vast majority of current social workers do think that the profession inspires them to be the best that they can be (81%) and that being a social worker is a great thing to do (87%)

Working practices within the profession

- Social workers frequently interact with other organisations, with mental health professionals (81%) and primary healthcare staff (80%) being the most common.
- Generally, these relationships are perceived to be positive with both parties working well together. In the qualitative interviews, social workers spoke of multi-agency working becoming increasingly challenging as resources are cut.
- Line manager support is common, with most social workers meeting with their line managers frequently (55% weekly or more).
- Most also believe that their line manager respects them as a person (77%). However, those whose line manager is not a social worker were less likely to rate the practical support as useful.
- Qualitative interviews support this, with social workers generally satisfied with the support they receive from their line manager. Social workers directed frustrations at the senior management team; feeling like they were "out of touch" and too focused on targets.
- Most 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%).

Leaving the profession

- Two-fifths (39%) of social workers expect to leave the profession within the next 5 years, with children and family social workers the most likely to plan to leave.
- 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%).
- Some social workers leaving the profession go to in alternative third sector roles or go freelance in social/ health care.
- Suggestions for steps that Social Work England could take to improve retention include improving the public profile of social work, greater direct support to lower caseloads, and providing more training.

Perceptions of regulation and Social Work England

- Overall, all respondents (current social workers, former social workers, and students) have a strong level of understanding of the role of the social work regulator (80%)
- The role of a specialist regulator is also valued by most respondents, with 77% reporting that 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 negative rhetoric from the media.