The social work workforce

On behalf of Social Work England

September 2023

YouGov®

Contents

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Background and methodology

Background to this study

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

Social Work England is 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. This work builds on previous understanding of the public perceptions of social work and is intended to support Social Work England's policymaking and communications activity.

Purpose, aims and objectives

This research report provides Social Work England with a snapshot of the social work profession in 2023. In 2020, research was undertaken to develop a baseline of how social workers feel about their profession, their experience of their career, and why social workers choose to leave the profession. This project seeks to build on that previous work, after several years of workforce change as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, economic and other factors.

The study sought to answer the following key research questions:

- **How do people move around the sector?** How long do social workers remain in their first role? What relationship is there between children and families and adults social work in terms of movement between the two?
- **What impact do vacancies have on the existing workforce?** Where are social workers moving to when they leave local authority roles? Why are they leaving these roles?
- **What impact does culture have on the ability to recruit and retain staff?** Do flexible working conditions impact recruitment and retention? Do diversity and inclusion efforts have an impact?

Approach

Quantitative approach

The sample for the quantitative survey was drawn from two sources:

1. Members of the YouGov panel of over 2.5 million individuals who have agreed to take part in surveys, who indicated they were current or former registered social workers in England
2. An open link included in a Social Work England newsletter email to registered social workers.

The survey was conducted online. Fieldwork was conducted from 10th May to 19th June 2023 and a final sample of 1,375 respondents were obtained. There were two key groups for the quantitative survey:

- **Current social workers = 1,260 respondents**
  Those currently in employment as social workers, registered with Social Work England.
- **Former social workers = 115 respondents**
  Those of any employment status, who had been registered social workers within the last five years.

Notes on the quantitative analysis

Unless otherwise stated, figures and data presented are from the online survey. Where two or more groups are discussed, only statistically significant differences to the 95% confidence interval are mentioned. Significance testing is not applied for figures based on fewer than 50 respondents.

Where appropriate, some comparison has been undertaken with the 2020 research. This is provided for illustrative purposes only and caution should be taken when interpreting change across years due to potential impacts from differing sample composition.

Figures in charts/ images may not sum to 100% due to rounding or due to the question allowing multiple selections. Percentages have not been weighted and are not representative of the social work population. Full sample composition can be found in the annex.

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Qualitative approach

As part of the data collection approach of this study, 50 in-depth interviews were conducted with social workers split across different career levels, social worker employers with different levels of managerial responsibility and people with lived experience of accessing social work services in recent years. These were split as below:

- 30 interviews with **registered social workers**, including;
  - Four with newly qualified social workers (less than one year in the profession)
  - Six with early career social workers (one to four years)
  - Seven with mid-career social workers (five to six years)
  - Seven with experienced social workers (seven or more years)
- Six with **former social workers** (no longer registered, who left the profession up to two years ago, excluding those who left due to retirement)
- 10 interviews with **social work employers** (i.e. those with management responsibility)
- 10 interviews with **people who have lived experience of social work** (including two people who have experienced adult social work and 8 individual who have received support from children and families social workers). The breakdown is provided below:
  - Two adults who have received an intervention
  - Four parents/ carers of children receiving interventions
  - Two adults looking to adopt/ foster a child
  - 2 care leavers (now aged 18+)

Interviews lasted up to one hour and covered perceptions of social work as a profession, views on current issues of attracting and retaining staff into the workforce and explored how these could be addressed into the future.

Key findings

Shape of the sector

- A quarter of social workers have high morale (26%), but two-fifths have low morale (41%).
- Social workers remain proud to be part of the profession; most are proud to tell others about their job (83%).
- However, only one in three (29%) would recommend the job to family/ friends. This is closely linked with morale as over half of those with high morale (59%) would recommend being a social worker.
- The qualitative research highlighted that negative perceptions are formed by media and news stories. Where there is personal experience, the negativity is attributed to an individual rather than the profession as a whole.

Starting out

- Most social workers want to make a difference in people's lives – nearly eight in ten give this as a reason to keep working (78%). The next closest answers are having job satisfaction from providing support to service users (44%) or liking colleagues/ their employer (44%)
- Two-fifths of social workers left their first role within three years (42%), with one in ten leaving within the first year (9%).
- The top reasons for leaving their first role are excessive workload (25%) or being promoted out (24%). A fifth of social workers cite not being supported by their manager/ employer (21%).
- Some mentioned relocation or travel time (7%) as a reason to leave their first role and this was echoed in the qualitative interviews. Participants discussed frustrating commutes, especially after long working days or traveling to visit service users.

Workplace practices

- Broadly, social workers describe their organisation as 'process-oriented' (44%), rather than 'dynamic and creative' (12%).
- Overall, social workers feel that their organisation's employees value and respect each other's opinions (83%).
- However, there is a divide by management responsibility for perspectives to reward and recognition – those in upper management agree that reward and recognition is fair, while those with less or no management responsibility disagree.
- Social workers interviewed spoke highly of their core teams and managers but felt dissatisfied with "tick-boxing" and felt that dominated over the "actual" work.
- Interviewees mentioned often having to do a lot of paperwork and record keeping, even though many went into the profession wanting to help people and make a difference. They felt the "tick-box" requirements sometimes interfere with providing quality care.
- They are particularly aware of the impacts of workload, with eight in ten citing burnout as a key challenge (79%) and six in ten are aware of a lack of applicants for vacancies (60%).

Vacancies and recruitment

- Most social workers report their organisation has been recruiting in the past year (88%) and a third (32%) say they are recruiting for more roles than last year.
- The main challenge in recruiting is the lack of applicants (63%), followed by applicants who lack experience (51%) or skills (42%). Less than one in ten report a lack of flexible hours (8%) or remote work being a barrier (6%).
- The qualitative interviews showed that managers agreed burnout and workload were top concerns and contributors to low retention.

Moving around the profession

- Most social workers have done at least one "job-search" activity in the past 12 months (80%). Two-thirds looked at vacancy lists/ job posts (66%) and over half talked to current/ former colleagues about opportunities (58%).
- Social workers tend to look at other roles within their profession, but children and families social workers are more likely to look at adults roles than vice versa.
- The qualitative research reveals a perception that working with children is more stressful and more heavily scrutinized than working with adults. This perception existed among the majority of social workers, including those in adult social care.
- Several adult social workers recognised that children and families social workers tend to have very high caseloads and a fast pace of staff turnover, and they struggle with more negative public perception, such as the assumption that they take children away.

- Social workers also tend to look at roles within their current type of employer – 74% of local authority social workers searching were looking at other local authority roles. However, a third of local authority social workers were also looking at agencies (36%), NHS (34%) or charities (32%).
- A quarter of social workers have taken on extra paid work in the last six months (25%), with most of this work being extra hours with their main employer (53%). A quarter of social workers doing extra work had taken on a second non-social work role (25%).

Leaving the profession

- Two-fifths of social workers (39%) think they will leave the profession within the next five years, rising to half of social workers from an ethnic minority (48%).
- A third of former social workers say they left due to dissatisfaction with the standard of care they could provide (33%), excessive workload (33%), or the impact on their mental health (32%).
- In interviews, people with lived experience of social work felt services have been affected as a result of vacancies in the profession; from delays in cases to not having enough social workers to support those in need/ prevent cases of abuse.
- Most social workers, looking to leave or having left, turn to the health and social care sector; 61% of current social workers who had looked at roles outside the profession looked at health and social care roles.

Improving retention

- Improving workload and staffing are the key ways social workers think recruitment could be improved. Reduction in workload is particularly key for children and families social workers (72% vs 55% adults).
- A third of current and former social workers from ethnic minority backgrounds say improving workplace culture would help retention (32% vs 24% white social workers). They are also particularly keen for remote/ hybrid working (17% vs 7%).

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Shape of the sector

What are social worker's perceptions of the profession?

A quarter of current social workers surveyed would say they currently have high morale (26%), but a third feel neutral, and two-fifths (41%) report their morale being low. This is a marked shift from 2020, when a quarter of social workers (24%) said they had low morale and two-fifths said they had high morale (43%).

Consistent with 2020, morale is substantially higher among men than women; a third of men (32%) report having high morale, compared to a quarter of women (25%). In particular, men are twice as likely to say they have high morale (6% vs 3% women).

Morale is linked with management responsibility. Those with no management responsibility are less likely to report high morale than those from upper management (21% vs 39%). This is not related to tenure as a social worker; those who have been a social worker for less than three years (32%) are more likely to report high morale.

Social workers in the NHS have the highest levels of morale – two-fifths report high morale (41%), followed by a third of agency workers (34%), and only one in five local authority staff (22%).

Figure 1. Morale as a social worker

Base: All current social workers (1260)

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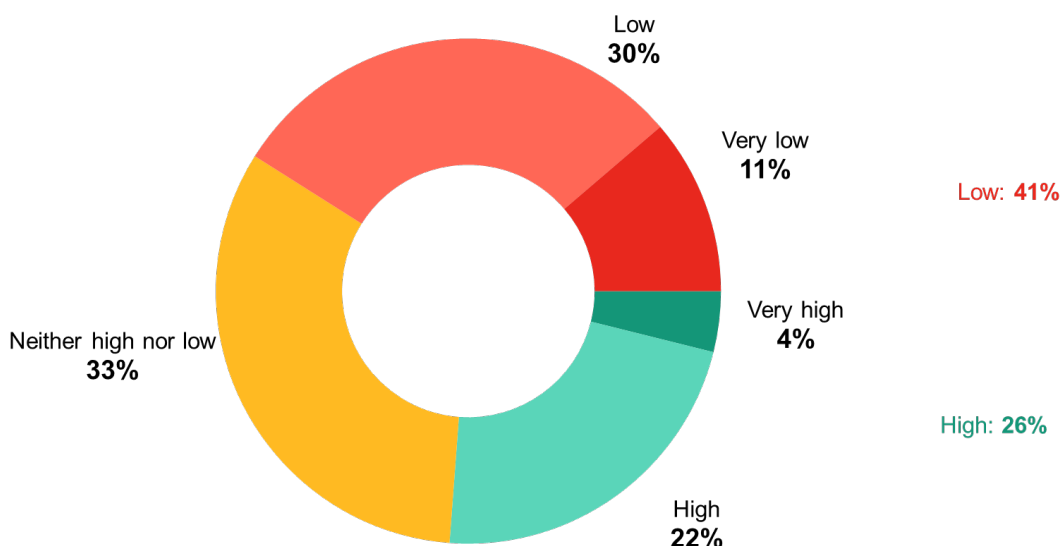
Despite shifts, most social workers surveyed remain proud to be part of the profession. The vast majority of current social workers are very or fairly proud to tell others about their job (83%). Pride in the profession has fallen slightly since 2020 when nine in ten current social workers were proud (89%) but is likely linked to the shifts in morale – those with high morale are more likely to be proud of their job (96% vs 72% with low morale), so as morale falls so does the proportion who feel proud.

As a result of this, the groups with highest morale are also the most emphatic about feeling proud in the profession, with 47% in upper management feeling <u>very</u> proud of being a social worker, compared to 35% with no management responsibility. As with morale, this does not correlate to length of tenure in social work as 43% of those who have been in the profession for less than three years are very proud.

Similarly, fewer social workers would now recommend the profession. In 2020, a quarter of social workers (26%) gave a score of eight or more in terms of their likelihood to recommend the role to family/ friends; now, the figure sits at 16%. Two-fifths of current social workers (40%) would not be likely to recommend the profession to others (a score of three or lower) with a particular increase in the proportion saying they would not recommend the profession at all – jumping from 8% in 2020 to 17% in 2023.

Children and families social workers are particularly unlikely to recommend the profession to others – nearly half would be unlikely to do so (47%), compared to a third of adults social workers who say the same (35%).

Likelihood to recommend the profession is also closely linked to morale, and thus management level and employer type. Over half of those with high morale (59%) would recommend being a social worker to family/ friends, compared to only one in ten (10%) who have low morale. Two-fifths of those in upper management (41%) would recommend being a social worker compared to a quarter (24%) with no management responsibility. NHS workers had the highest morale and they are the most likely to recommend being a social worker to others (42%).

Figure 2. Likelihood to recommend being a social worker to family/ friends

■ 10 – extremely likely ■ 9 ■ 8 ■ 7 ■ 6 ■ 5 ■ 4 ■ 3 ■ 2 ■ 1 ■ 0 – not at all likely
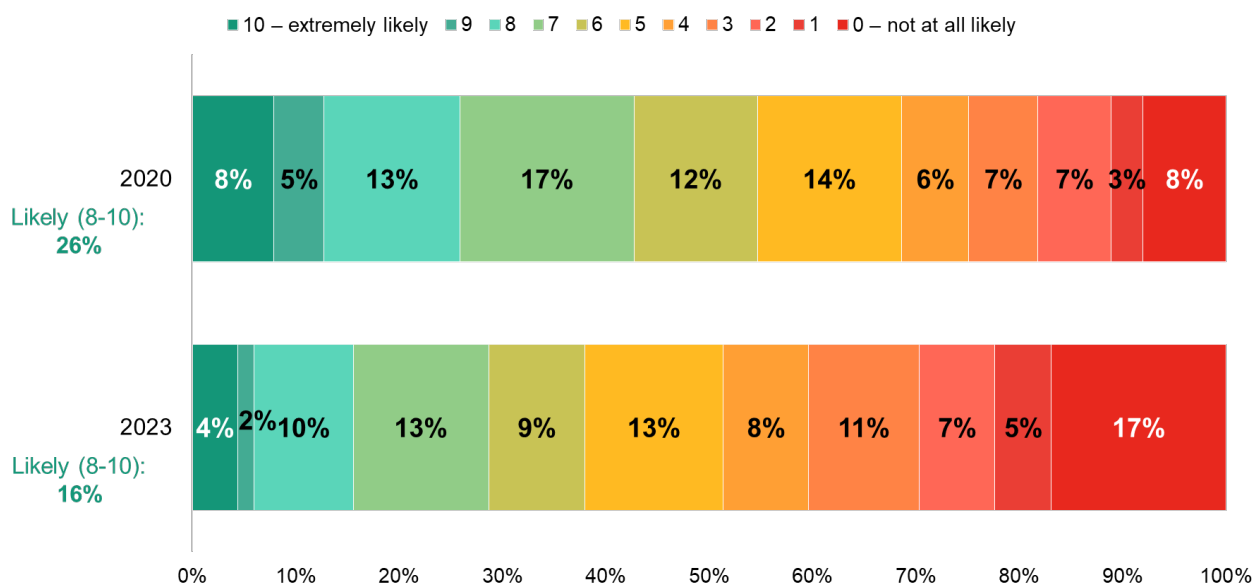
Base: All current social workers: 2020 (494), 2023 (1260)

In the qualitative research with individuals with a lived experience of social work, most had positive perceptions about social workers and felt that social workers have good intentions and make a positive impact. Participants generally attributed any negative experiences to individual social workers, rather than the profession as a whole, and felt that the key reasons behind some negative experiences was either a lack of care on part of a social worker, or a lack of time and resources. A few participants also shared having initially negative perceptions of social workers or a fear that their situation would become worse after having them involved. However, after initial interactions, their views changed and they instead saw them as individuals willing to help, rather than do harm to them or their families.

"Initially, I had negative views … from what we saw on the tv, social workers would intervene and take the children away. But then after getting experience … (I realised) they're only there as a last resort to intervene when somebody can't take care of their own family." – Female, 47, Lived experience (Adult carer)

Many also recognised that the public often have negative perceptions about social workers and a lack of understanding of the profession. Most felt that the public often hear negative stories about social workers and their failings, rather than the positive actions they do and the people they help.

"I think they can help people through some really difficult times. And I think their first instinct is to try and keep a family together, and I think the general public don't believe that. I think generally people, if they hear of social workers involved, it will be [because] they are going to take the children away." – Female, 56, Lived experience (Adult carer)

"I don't think the general public really trust social workers because I think they see them more like the enemies who are trying to interfere in the family business."
– Female, 43, Lived experience (Adult care leaver)

"Without the presence of social workers, it could be catastrophic - people would get abused everywhere." – Female, 37, Lived experience (care leaver)

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Starting out

What motivates people to become social workers?

A majority (78%) of current social workers say that they keep working as a social worker because they want to make a difference in people's lives. This is high for all levels of social worker, but highest among those who are currently direct supervisors (84%) and is lowest among those who have no management responsibility (76%). Social workers aged under 35 are the most likely age group to report that they want to make a difference to people's lives (85%).

In the qualitative research, many social workers say that they had left previous roles for social work for this reason. These previous roles were unfulfilling, with many stating that their work felt "meaningless" even if it provided a higher salary compared to their current role. They wanted to be more than a "cog in the machine" and to have a positive impact on their community in their work.

"[Social work] feels useful. It feels like there's a purpose, a function, to it. I've done so many jobs where you're just like a cog in the machine...I want to feel like what I've done has amounted to something that's tangible for someone."
– Male, 31, Social worker (early career)

"It's the potential of the impact of what it is that we do … Sometimes it's making little changes to the quality of a child's life to their experience of living at home with their parents. Or significant changes, fully removing them from a situation where they're being abused or neglected." – Female, 48, Social worker (experienced)

"I quite like the sense of urgency, that I have to work with people to keep them safe, really, or attempt to make changes in their lives." – Male, 37, Social worker (mid-career)

The next closest answers are having job satisfaction from supporting service users (44%) or liking their colleagues/ employer (44%).

![YouGov]

Those whose main employer is a local authority are more likely than those mainly employed by agencies to report that liking colleagues/ their employer is a motivator to keep working in the industry (46% vs 33% agency social workers) and they are also more likely to state that job security is a motivator (45% vs 18%). On the other hand, agency workers are more likely to state that their salary is a motivator for staying (36% vs 26% local authority workers).

Figure 3. Motivations to keep working as a social worker

Base: All current social workers (1260)
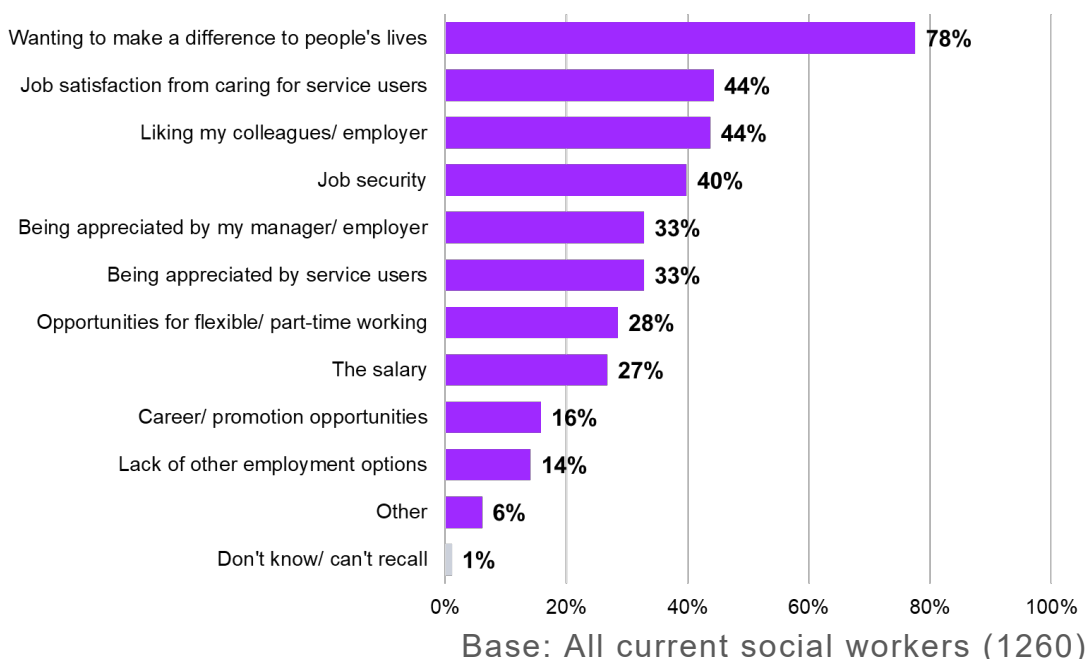
What is the first social work role like?

One in ten current social workers (10%) are still in their first role, but two in five (42%) left within the first three years with around one in ten (9%) leaving within their first year.

Those who work in adults social work are more likely to spend less than one year in their first role as a registered social worker (12% vs 7% children and families). Men are more likely to have left their first role as a registered social worker in their first year compared to women (15% vs 8% women).

Figure 4. Length of time in first social work role

42% left first role in under three years

1 year or more, but less than 3 years
32%

Less than 1 year
9%

Don't know
2%

N/a - still in first role
11%

10 years or more
9%

5 years or more, but less than 10 years
16%

3 years or more, but less than 5 years
21%
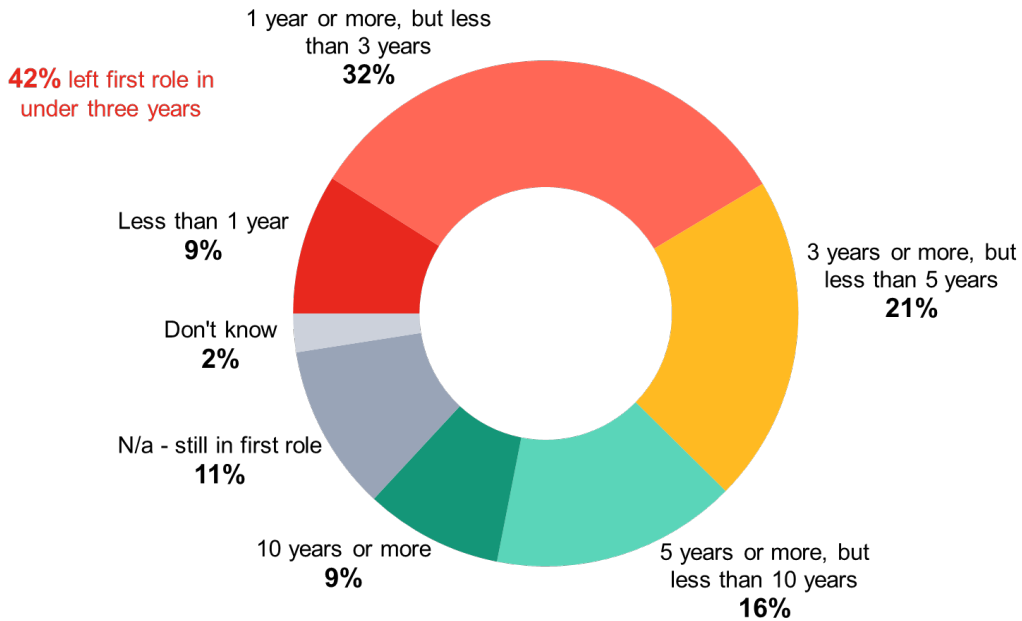
Base: All current social workers (1260)

A quarter of social workers who have left their first role cite excessive workload as a reason for leaving (25%) although an equal proportion report that they were promoted out of the role (24%). Around a fifth of social workers say that not being supported by their manager/ employer was a reason they left their first role (21%). A fifth gave an answer not listed (22%), outlining instead highly personal experiences and reasons for leaving or moving onto another role.

In the survey, 7% mention either relocation or travel time as a reason for moving out of their first role. This is echoed in the qualitative research, which found that a common motivator behind leaving their first role was the desire to work closer to home. Long commutes were frustrating, especially when a role regularly required working more than 8 hours a day to complete critical tasks, or when they would spend hours of their working day commuting long distances to meet with service users before going home.

"I came from another local authority...I'd find it would be really hard because I would drive when I'd be going out to do visits, and then I'd want to go into [a regional] office to work. Cause it would take me longer to go back home. I could never find out the space to work and stuff like that." – Female, 33, Social worker (early career)

![YouGov]

Current agency staff are most likely to have left their first role in social work because of excessive workload (41% vs 23% local authority staff). They are also more likely to report wanting higher pay (32% vs 11% local authority staff), not being supported by their manager (31% vs 20% local authority staff), or because of a lack of career progression (19% vs 10% local authority staff). On the other hand, local authority staff are most likely to have left their first role because of promotion (27% vs 9% agency staff).

Those working with children and families report that they left because of excessive workload (28%), at a higher rate than those who work in adults social work (21%). While those in adults social work are nearly twice as likely to say their first position was only temporary (9% vs 5% children and families).

Figure 5. Reasons social workers left their first role

Base: Current social workers not in their first role (1097)
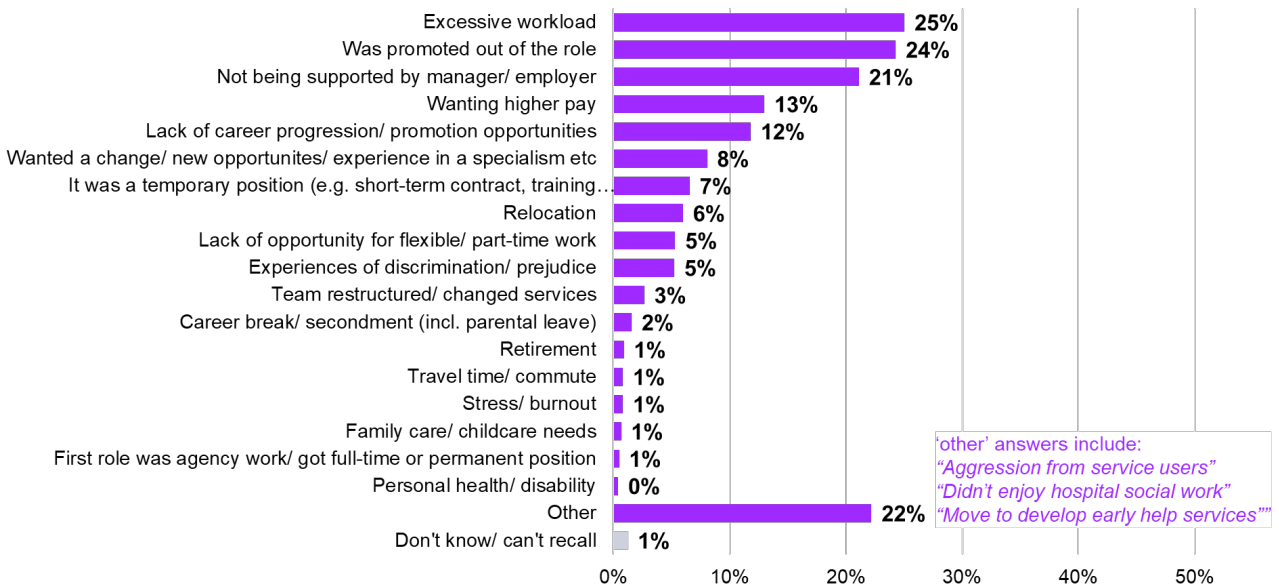
Workplace practices

What kind of organisation do social workers work in?

Overall, current social workers surveyed tend to report working in a process-oriented culture (44%), with just over a third saying their organisation is results-driven and three in ten saying it is collaborative and flexible (29%). Only around one in ten current social workers would describe their organisation as dynamic and creative (12%), although this rises to 18% of those in the NHS.

Those working with children and families are more likely than those in adults social care to report their organisation is "results-driven, with specific targets to reach an overall organisational goal" (40% vs 29% adults). However, the most popular description of organisation culture is "process-oriented, where there is a clear chain of command and defined procedures" (44% vs 48% adults). Social workers in local authorities are the most likely to describe their organisation as "process-oriented" (49%), compared to only 39% of those whose main employer is an agency.

Those in upper management roles are significantly more likely than any other level of management responsibility to describe their organisation culture as being "dynamic and creative, where employees are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and innovative" (26% upper management; 15% direct supervisor; 10% middle management; 9% no management responsibility). Direct supervisors and those with no management responsibility are the most likely to describe their organisation's culture as 'process-oriented' (55%, 45% respectively vs 41% middle management, 32% upper management).

Figure 6. Organisation's culture

Process-oriented, where there is a clear chain of command and defined procedures — **44%**

Results-driven, with specific targets to reach an overall organisational goal — **35%**

Collaborative and flexible, focussed on teamwork, and where managers act as mentors — **29%**

Dynamic and creative, where employees are encouraged to be entrepreneurial and innovative — **12%**

Don't know — **9%**

0%   20%   40%   60%   80%   100%

Base: All current social workers (1260)

In contrast to the survey findings, the qualitative interviews found that many in management feel that they do not have proper supervision, which may contribute to some feeling that their organisations are not "process-oriented."

"Supervision is not at all frequent. I couldn't tell you when I last had it, and I think that's fairly typical...it just is very difficult to schedule it...This is one of the problems, the organisation. I think when you're working in the sector where it's very fast paced, lots of crises, unexpected events happen that have to be responded to. And then the more planned, long-term mapped out meetings tend to be the ones that, maybe have to be rearranged, because they're not as urgent." – Female, 52, Social worker employer

"I've been in post since December … And I've had two, possibly three supervisions. I don't think there's very much of a mentorship going on." – Female, 55, Social worker employer

"People working weekends, people working evenings, you're not getting that break and then they're not getting adequate supervision or support from managers."
– Female, 39, Social worker employer

There is a strong majority of social workers surveyed who feel that, in their organisation, employees respect and value each other's opinions (83%). This is followed by a majority agreeing that they feel like they belong (69%), they can share my opinions freely and without worry (68%), and communication to employees is open and honest (58%). This was reflected in the qualitative interviews, with many social workers stating that they had no issues "speaking their mind" in the organisation.

However, the agreement levels falter when it comes to perceptions that employees are rewarded and recognised fairly. Only 36% of social workers agree that this statement applies to the organisation they work for a great deal/ fair amount.

The difference in management's perceptions of organisational culture is still visible. Those in upper management roles are the only group who are more likely to say they think this statement does apply to their organisation a great deal/ a fair amount (50%), rather than not much/ not at all (47%). Those in lower levels of management are more likely to say not much/ not at all, with those who have no management responsibility the most likely to say this does not apply (66%), followed by direct supervisors (60%), and those in middle management (56%).

Those with a disability are less likely to say that they feel like they belong (63%) compared to those who are not limited day-to-day by a disability (71%).

Those who work for a local authority are less likely than agency workers to feel that employees are rewarded and recognised fairly (31% vs 43% agency). There is also a difference in employer type for those who agree that communication to employees is open and honest, with agency workers being more likely than local authority social workers to say that this applies to their organisation a great deal/ fair amount (66% vs 55%).

Figure 7. Statements about their organisation

Statement	A great deal	A fair amount	Not very much	Not at all	Don't know
Employees respect and value each other's opinions	28%	55%	12%	3%	2%
I feel like I belong	22%	47%	21%	9%	2%
I can share my opinions freely without worry	18%	49%	22%	9%	1%
Communication to employees is open and honest	12%	45%	29%	11%	3%
Employees are rewarded and recognised fairly	6%	30%	38%	23%	3%
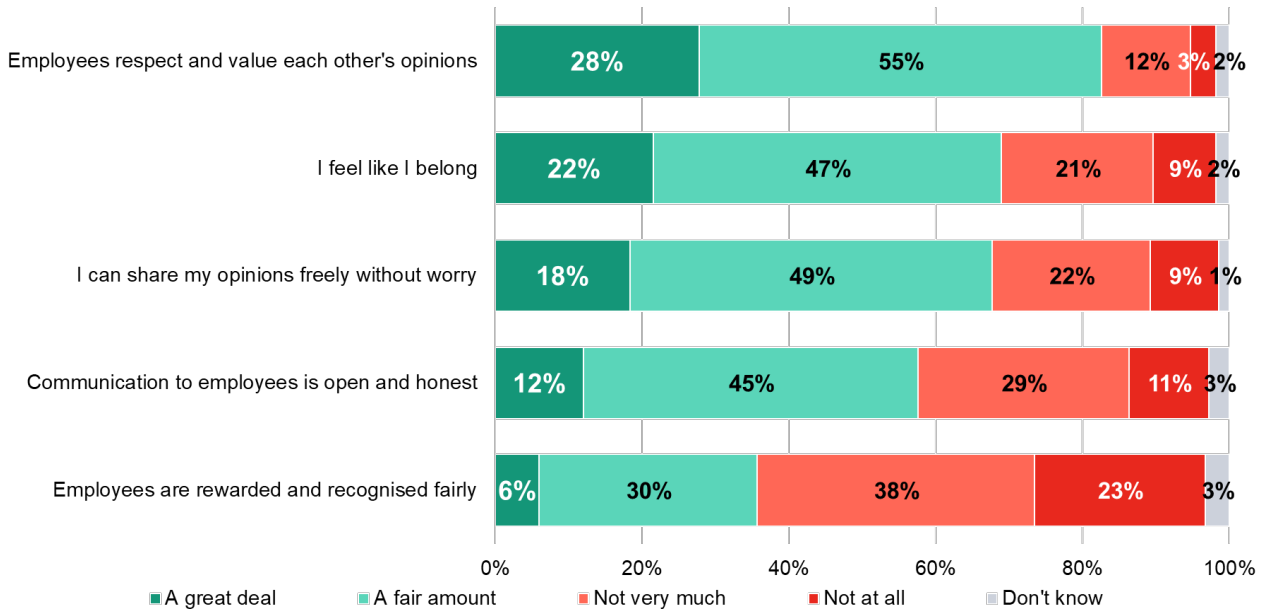
Base: All current social workers (1260)

When survey participants were asked to describe the organisation's culture in their own words, there were a variety of opinions on current workplace culture, ranging from very positive and encouraging, to mixed, to negative. Positive comments use language such as "supportive" and "collaborative" to describe the work environment; with words such as "open", "flexible" and "friendly" being used throughout.

Mixed comments highlight the good aspects of their work, often focusing on colleagues being "respectful" and "supportive", while also pointing out negatives often relating to the "high workload", "isolation", "bureaucratic", with staff feeling "overwhelmed".

Negative comments point out issues with their organisations. There are words such as "bullying" and "racism" throughout, including descriptions of how this affects the staff impacted by these issues. There is also a focus on industry level issues of being "overworked" and "underpaid".

Figure 8. Description of current workplace culture

"We have an open and transparent way of working. The team and organisation are supportive"

"Work place is great, the work load is overwhelming I am looking to change career at 33!"

"Morale is low. Workers feel isolated … there is often change for no clear reason. Caseloads are high. The goalposts keep moving."

"Restorative, fair, child focused"

"Previously it was very supportive and positive with a real bottom up approach, ... In the past 12 months there have been many … changes and financial pressures and it feels chaotic and … they are asking the impossible."

"Bullying if you don't agree with Senior Management"

"Supportive and encouraging, positive feedback given and shared regularly which is recognised by higher management."

"There is still lack of diversity and cultural competence. People are bullied especially overseas Social Workers, but this doesn't get addressed as people are often to scared to speak out. Career growth for people of colour is very limited…"

"Caring and compassionate, promoting openness to speak up. Innovative and priorities are around quality of care, striving to be the best. Very supportive organization"

"Dual culture- below me collaborative innovative a positive vibe. Great teams which care about each other and social work. Strengths based Above me it is negative and critical and micro managing. I find this dichotomy hard to deal with."

"Unable to retain staff, fragmented, broken!"

"It's creative and supportive, with a great value base."

"A supportive learning culture. But with high expectations for the pay"

Base: All current social workers (1260), respondents gave free-text answers which have been grouped into themes

This is supported in the qualitative research. Social workers spoke highly of their teams and their managers, saying they felt comfortable in their organisation and that they could use their co-workers as a resource when they were struggling, had questions, or needed a second opinion. This is particularly true for early career and newly qualified social workers. Social workers struggled to name more official avenues of support, sometimes mentioning workplace benefits like discounts on gym memberships or mental health services as sources of support, but very little in terms of programmes hosted by their employer or local authority.

They are dissatisfied with the bureaucratic, or "tick-box" aspects of social work. Social workers felt that the bureaucratic elements of the job were overwhelming compared to the "actual" work of working with care users. Several social workers expressed frustration with having to follow strict bureaucratic processes and paperwork that take time away from working directly with clients. They feel the tick-box requirements sometimes interfere with providing quality care. Some mentioned the unrealistic expectations for social workers to attend all meetings and be intensively involved in all aspects of a case when their caseloads are too high.

Some would go as far as to call the work useless, and express frustrations over the amount of time they were expected to put into it when they feel that nobody will read it. There was often frustration that social workers have to rigidly follow processes even when they do not seem to fit well, and they have insights that could improve practice.

Social workers had mixed feelings about the extent to which diversity, equity, and inclusion are prioritised in the workplace. All frequently mentioned the presence of forums that highlighted the issues and perspectives of underrepresented people in the workplace, and the diversity in their teams. Other programmes that brought in guest speakers and celebrated holidays from varying cultures are less common, but still present and appreciated by many. However, when reflecting on management, many voiced concerns that their management teams are overwhelmingly white, representing a disconnect between stated organisational values and practice.

"When you look at senior leadership teams across the boroughs, they're not very diverse. So probably [minorities] don't feel like they can move up the chain of command."
– Female, Social worker (early career)
"I suppose the picture I've got … is we are a very diverse group of people and that's always been the case. But I do see that the representation across the management is not reflective of that." – Female, 52, Social worker employer

What challenges do social work employers face?

At the total level among social workers surveyed, the top challenge to their organisation over the next 12 months is high workloads/ burnout, with 79% of social workers citing this as a main challenge. This is followed by a lack of applicants for vacancies (60%) and a skills shortage (42%). Demands for flexible working arrangements (15%) and low productivity (7%) are not seen by the majority of social workers as major challenges for their organisation in the next year.

This was echoed in the qualitative research, with many social workers stating that their chief concern with their work was the burnout among themselves and their colleagues. Many spoke of a potential "spiral" in social services: with burned out social workers leaving the profession, creating more work for those who they leave behind, causing them to become fatigued and leave the profession faster and thus contributing to the same problems they were victims of.

For those working in adults social work, there is a higher proportion saying that pressure to increase wages (40%) and managing a remote/ hybrid workforce (23%) are challenges, than those who work in children and families social work (34% and 15% respectively).

High workloads and burnout are a top issue across different types of social workers, although local authority social workers are more likely than those employed by agencies to say that high workloads/ burnout is a main challenge for their organisation in the next year (87% vs 71%). There is also a difference in the proportion saying that a lack of applicants will be an issue (66% vs 45% of agency staff). In the qualitative interviews, local authority social workers often pointed to the higher wages provided by agencies as an obstacle to their recruitment, with most acknowledging that they could work for an agency themselves and get paid more.

Figure 9. Main challenges for their organisation in terms of its social work staff over the next 12 months

Base: All current social workers (1260)

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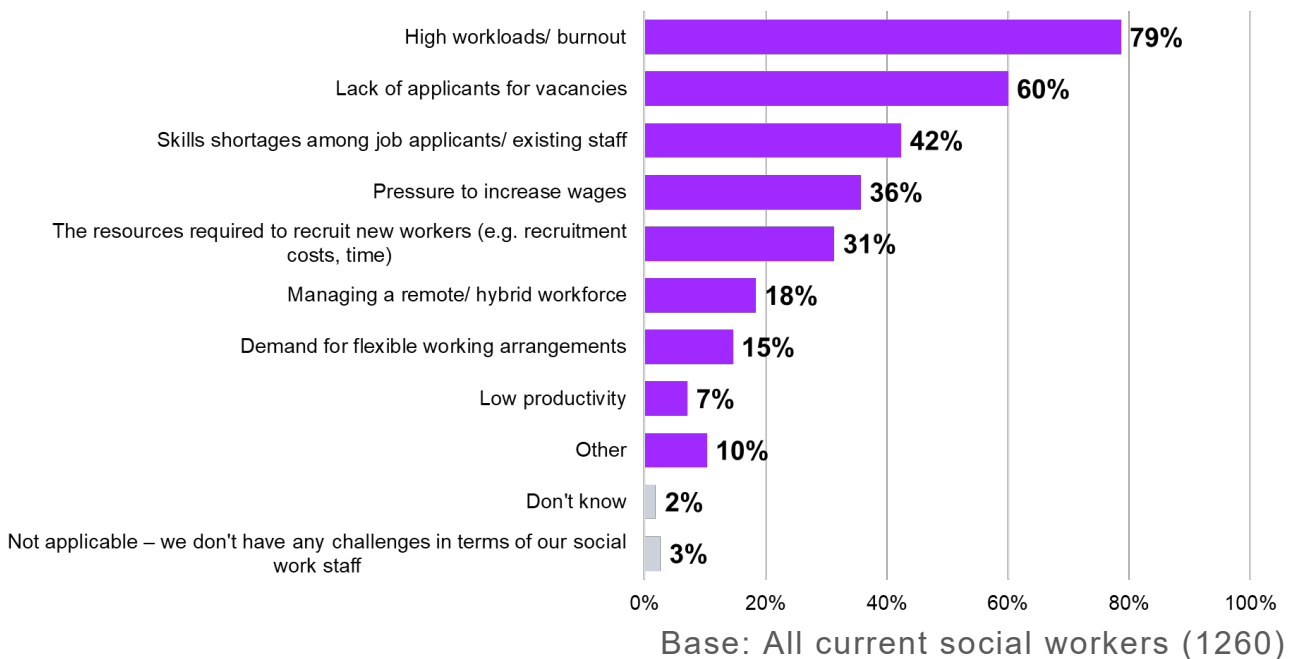
Vacancies and recruitment

What issues are there recruiting people into the profession?

A majority (88%) of social workers surveyed report that their organisation has been recruiting in the past year. This is higher among those who work for a local authority (95%), compared to those are employed by an agency (79%). Those in children and families social work are also more likely than adults social workers to say their organisation is recruiting (92% vs 88%).

Among social workers whose organisations have been recruiting over the past year, the biggest difficulty to recruiting is that there are not enough applicants, with 63% saying this. This is followed by applicants without sufficient experience (51%), and applicants without the necessary skills (42%). Around half of those in adults social work say that applicants do not have the necessary skills (49%), more than report this in children and families social work (38%).

Only 4% of those whose organisation has been recruiting in the last year said that they have not experienced any issues in recruiting.

Figure 10. Difficulties in recruiting over the past 12 months
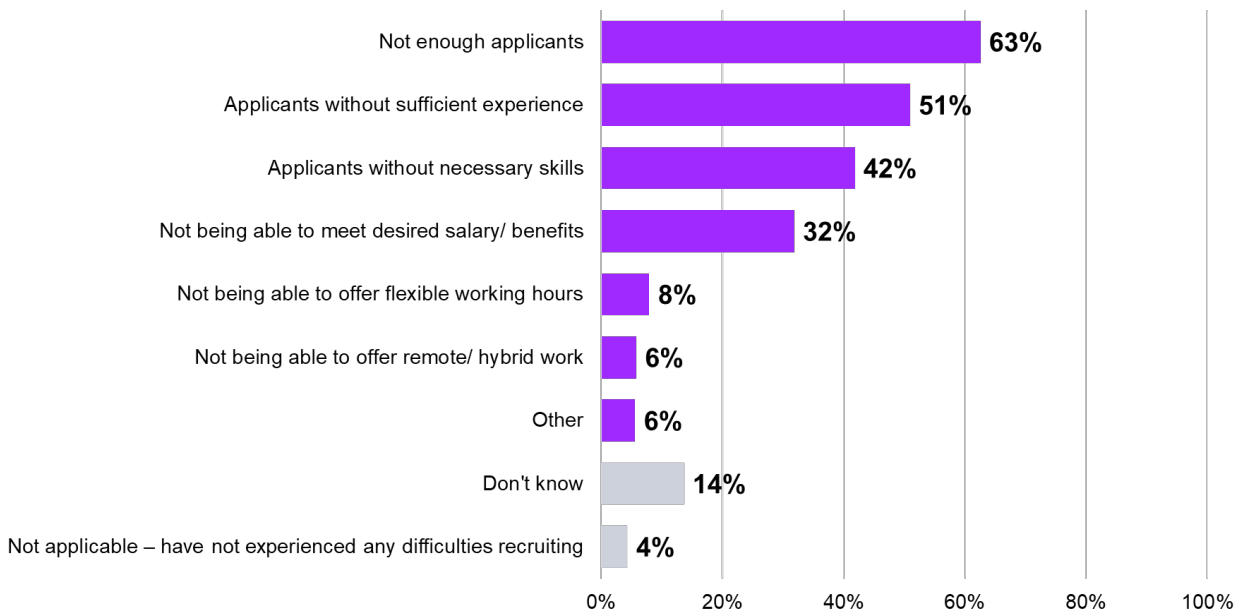
Base: All who have tried to recruit in the past 12 months (1111)

The qualitative interviews revealed conflicting priorities among managers' organisations and the needs of their teams. All had thoughts on a variety of factors that could be negatively impacting recruitment including:

- the profession's negative reputation among the public;
- not being able to meet pay expectations of new applicants;
- a competitive market with more open positions than qualified applicants;
- concerns about burnout among social workers.

Burnout and workload were the top concerns among managers interviewed, who believed that those were the two biggest contributors to low retention among their organisations.

"They find the workload far too excessive. The stress and strains of trying to manage that workload, it becomes too much for them."
– Male, 66, Social worker employer

"I think the number one reason is stress and burnout, which is linked, I suppose just not being able to maintain the level of passion for the job for so long."
– Female, 35, Social worker employer

"I get a lot of social workers telling me how stressed out they are and that they can't see themselves doing this for much longer. And they often feel that the team is under so much strain and stress that the morale is weakened considerably."
– Male, 66, Social worker employer

While around a third of current social workers (32%) say their organisation has been recruiting for more roles now than they were a year ago, the same amount report that they are recruiting around the same amount (32%). This is broadly consistent across the different types of social work – 33% of children and families social workers are recruiting the same as 12 months ago, compared to 30% adults social workers.

Only 8% say that they are recruiting for fewer roles, rising to 11% of adults social workers (vs 7% children and families).

![YouGov]

Figure 11. Is their organisation recruiting for more or fewer social work roles than they were 12 months ago?

Don't know
28%

More roles
32%

Fewer roles
8%

About the same as 12 months ago
32%
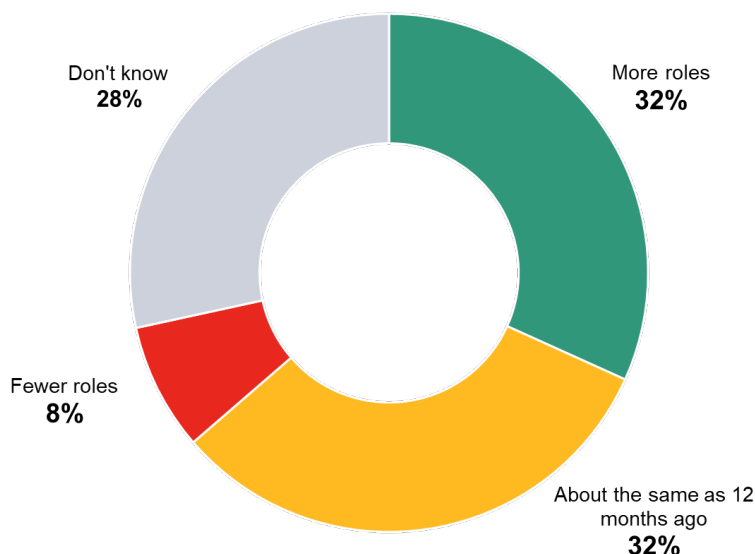
Base: All current social workers (1260)

To understand what efforts social work employers are making to recruit candidates in light of these challenges, social workers surveyed were asked what aspects of recruiting had worked well in the past 12 months. While many responses said that there have been no aspects which worked well to recruit in the past 12 months, one of the top phrases mentioned with positive experiences in mind was "flexible working". As only 8% said that a hiring difficulty has been not being able to offer flexible working hours, and 6% not being able to offer remote/ hybrid work, it does not appear that flexible or hybrid working is a barrier to recruiting social workers.

Many also mentioned the use of agency staff, although were aware of the short-term solution this provided as well as the potential high cost involved. Others looked to recruit international staff or potentially other healthcare professionals if the role allowed. A number of social workers were keen on entry-level schemes such as apprenticeships, Step Up to Social Work and improving the ASYE experience. Some mentioned their organisation being able to offer financial incentives such as retention payments, higher salaries, and perks such as free parking.

Figure 12. Things which have worked well to recruit into social work in the past 12 months

"We have used agencies this year to find social workers and a new registered manager, as merely advertising didn't bring in the right applicants. Using recruitment agencies comes with a hefty price tag. However, these are experienced and skilled practitioners and it is more beneficial for the company to recruit the right person the first time, even if that does mean paying more initially."

"Money, flexible working"

"Offering higher salary"

"Recruiting from outside [the UK]"

"Apprenticeships"

"Flexible working arrangements"

"Nothing has worked well. No one is applying and those that do are newly qualified however there is a lack of experienced workers to support and mentor the newly qualified. Experienced workers are leaving as they are not valued, are over worked and stressed and burnt out"

"Step up to social work and others schemes that are paid during the course of training"

"Word of mouth, free parking, flexible working."

"Supportive culture, training opportunities"

"Internal initiatives such as offering degree apprenticeship alongside step up programs"

"Low caseloads, stable workforce."

"Advertising over and over and allowing people to work part time hours when we have a full time vacancy"

"I works in CAMHS and most roles are open to social workers and other professionals. This ensures a good skills mix. However it is pretty difficult to recruit. I think people just don't want to do this type of work anymore."

"Introduction of retention payment. Improved [ASYE] offer."

Base: All who have tried to recruit in the past 12 months (1111), respondents gave free-text answers and indicative answers are shown

In the interviews, most believed that their organisations' initiatives to recruit more social workers from diverse backgrounds and with diverse experiences within the profession are successful, and did not mention issues around diversity, equity, and inclusion in the profession as a source of their issues with recruitment and retention of new social workers.

Moving around the profession

Are social workers looking to change roles?

Looking ahead to the future, social workers surveyed are split on whether they are likely to change the type of employer they work for. Over two-fifths of social workers (44%) say they would be likely to change employer type within the next five years, but just under half say they would be unlikely to do so (48%).
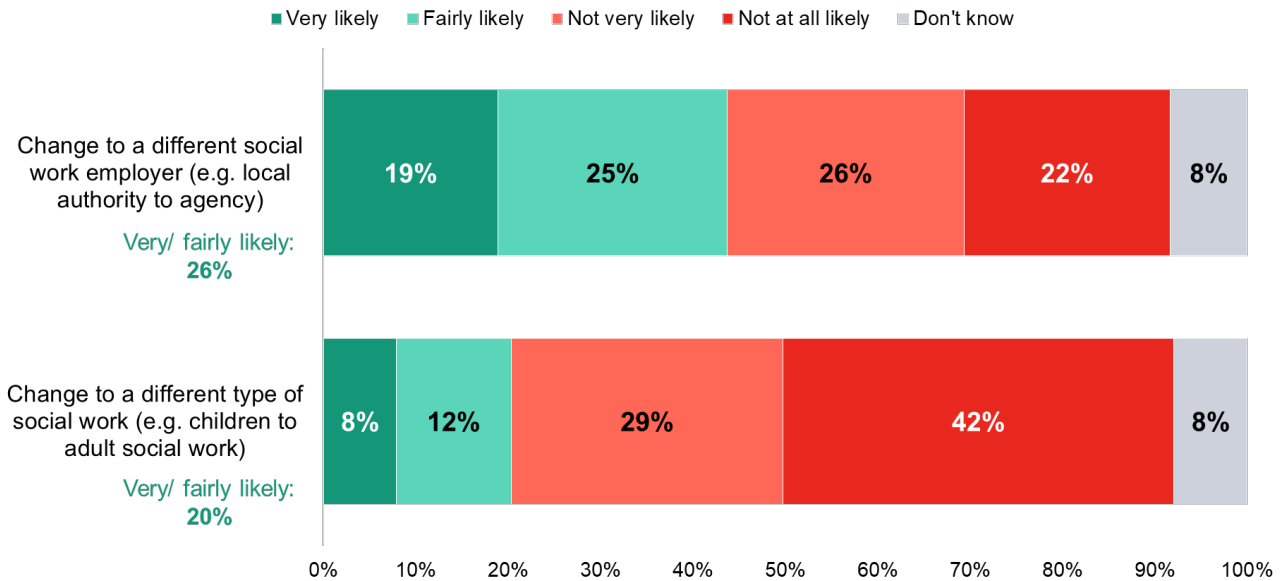
Social workers currently employed by an agency are the most likely to say they will change employer type – two-thirds (65%) say they are likely to do this within the next five years, much higher than the proportion in local authorities who would move (43%). There is a downward trend by overall tenure in the profession with those earliest in their career more likely to shift employer. Over half of those who have been in social work for less than three years are likely to move (57%), compared to three in ten of those who have been in social work for 20 years or more (31%).

Children and families social workers are the most likely to be looking for a change. They are more likely than adults social workers to think they will change employer type in the next five years (49% vs 38%). They are also more than twice as likely to think they will change the type of social work they do – a quarter (25%) report being likely to change social work type, compared to only one in ten adults social workers (11%).

Overall, one in five current social workers (20%) think they are likely to change to a different type of social work within the next five years, whereas 72% do not think they will change. The proportion who think they are likely to change to a different type of social work appears to have fallen since 2020 – then, 28% of social workers said they would be likely to do so within the next five years, compared to 20% now.

There is little difference in likelihood across the type of social work employer – around a fifth of respondents currently in local authorities (21%) say they will be likely to move compared to a quarter of those employed by agencies (25%). Consistent with likelihood to change employer, there is a downward trend by overall tenure in the profession: a third of those who have been in social work for five years or less (33%) are likely to change employer in the near future, compared to only one in ten who have been in social work for more than 20 years (11%).

Figure 13. Likelihood to change employer type or social work type within next five years

Legend: ■ Very likely ■ Fairly likely ■ Not very likely ■ Not at all likely ■ Don't know

| Category	Very likely	Fairly likely	Not very likely	Not at all likely	Don't know
Change to a different social work employer (e.g. local authority to agency) — Very/ fairly likely: 26%	19%	25%	26%	22%	8%
Change to a different type of social work (e.g. children to adult social work) — Very/ fairly likely: 20%	8%	12%	29%	42%	8%

Base: All current social workers (1260)

Away from hypotheticals, most social workers have actively been looking at other roles. Eight in 10 social workers report having done some job searching in the last 12 months (80%), with two-thirds looking at vacancy lists and job posts (66%) and over half of social workers have talked to current/ former colleagues about job opportunities (58%). Over a third have been invited to interview (38%) or submitted applications (36%), while a third have been offered another job (33%).

In terms of job searching overall, there is no significant difference between children and families social workers versus adults social workers. However, children and families social workers are more likely than adults social workers to have spoken to colleagues about job opportunities (61% vs 55%).

Mid-career social workers tend to be the most likely to be searching for a new role. Over half of those who are in their first three years of a social work career (58%) have spoken to colleagues about jobs, but this rises to nearly three-quarters of those who have been in social work for between five to 10 years (73%). Those who have been in social work for five to 10 years are also the most likely to have submitted job applications (50%), been invited to interview (49%), or been offered a job (45%).

Figure 14. Job search activities undertaken in the last 12 months

Any job search activity: **80%**

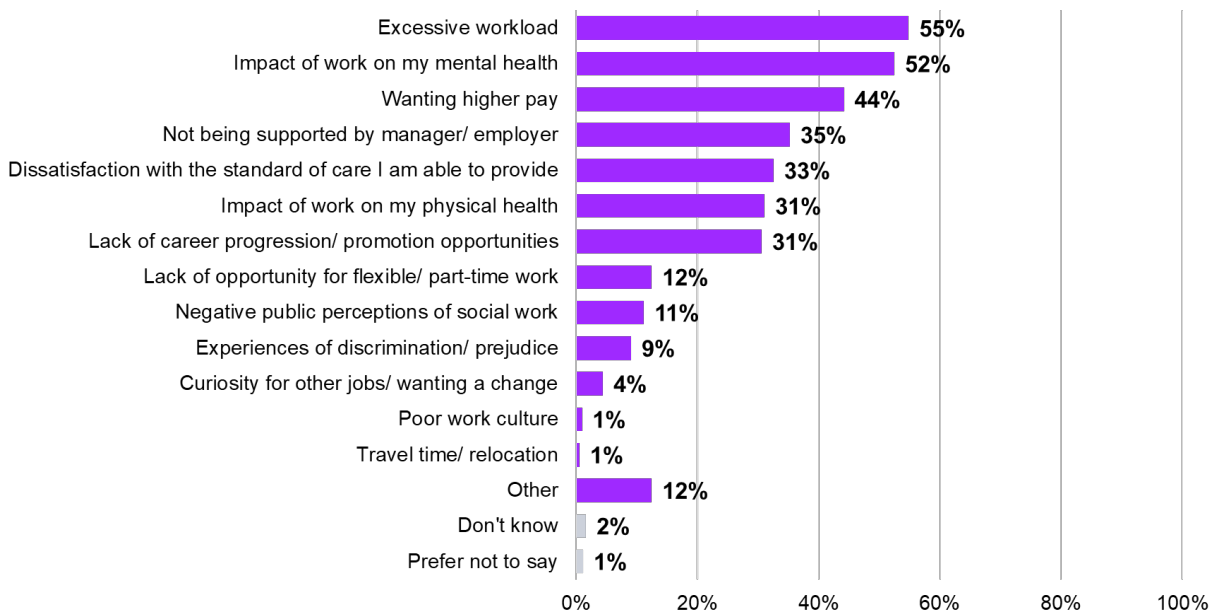Base: All current social workers (1260)
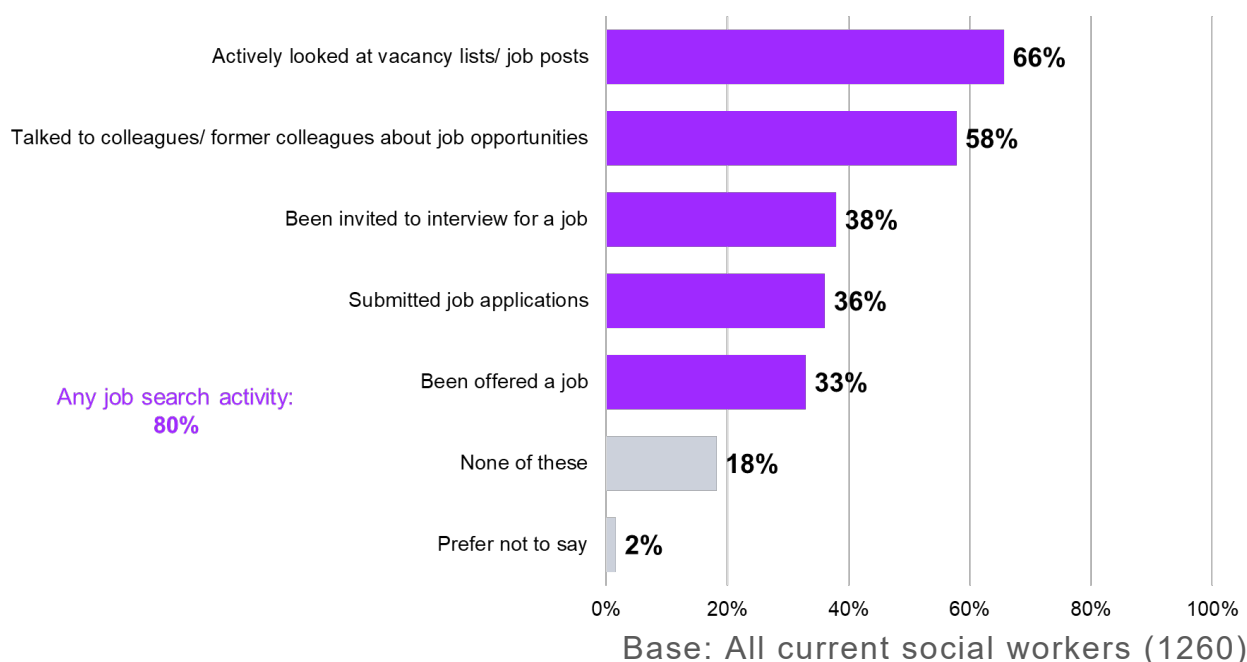
Among those who have been job-searching recently, the main reasons to do so is excessive workload (55%) or impact of work on their mental health (52%). Children and families social workers are particularly likely to cite excessive workload (60% vs 49% adults social workers), although there is no difference by social work type for the impact on mental health (56% children and families, 51% adults).

There is a division in reasons to job-search depending on tenure as a social worker. Those with 10 or more years in the profession cite a lack of career progression (35% vs 25% of those with fewer than 10 years), while those who have not been in social work for as long cite excessive workload (61% vs 51% with more than 10 years' experience), impact on mental health (57% vs 50%), and wanting higher pay (52% vs 39%).

Over half of local authority and agency social workers cite excessive workload as a reason for job-searching (59% local authority, 53% agency). However, local authority social workers are more likely to cite dissatisfaction with the standard of care they are able to provide (35% vs 19% agency). Although those working in the NHS are less likely to cite workload as a reason (36%), they feel dissatisfied with the standard of care possible (37%). Those in the NHS are also the most likely to cite a lack of progression – two-fifths say this is a reason for their search, compared to 31% of agency workers and 29% of local authority staff.

A quarter of social workers with a disability/ health condition that limits their day-to-day a lot (26%) cite experiences of discrimination/ prejudice as a cause for their job search, more than double the proportion who are limited a little (9%) or with no limiting disability (8%). Similarly, a fifth of social workers who belong to a non-Christian religion (21%) cite experiences of discrimination/ prejudice, much higher than the proportion of Christian social workers (11%) or those who identify with no religion (6%).

Figure 15. Reasons for job-searching in the last 12 months

Reason	%
Excessive workload	55%
Impact of work on my mental health	52%
Wanting higher pay	44%
Not being supported by manager/ employer	35%
Dissatisfaction with the standard of care I am able to provide	33%
Impact of work on my physical health	31%
Lack of career progression/ promotion opportunities	31%
Lack of opportunity for flexible/ part-time work	12%
Negative public perceptions of social work	11%
Experiences of discrimination/ prejudice	9%
Curiosity for other jobs/ wanting a change	4%
Poor work culture	1%
Travel time/ relocation	1%
Other	12%
Don't know	2%
Prefer not to say	1%

Base: All who have done any job searching (1010)

Qualitative interviews confirmed the survey findings. Many participants reported having started a new role recently or intending to change their job in the following weeks. It was highlighted that, as challenges within the workforce persist, social workers are quickly able to find new roles among the high number of vacancies available, if they are not satisfied with current conditions. Many were open to new opportunities offering more flexibility, better working conditions and increased pay.

Most were dedicated to the social work profession and considered staying within the field because they found the work rewarding. However, participants indicated the difficulties of maintaining this profession for long periods of time due to the intensity and stress associated with it.

"I don't dread the week after. But if I look for the next 10, 15, 20 years of doing it, could I sustain that? I don't think I could, to be perfectly honest."
– Female, 47, Social worker (experienced)

"I think I'm likely to stay for a while, I'd say the next 10 years. After that, I don't see myself doing it for the rest of my working life … I think that unless I stay in the same team, I'm in now, I think the workload is going to be a challenge. And I think like while that it's fine for a while, I don't want to spend the rest of my working life being that busy and that stressed."
– Female, 32, Social worker (early career)

When looking for other roles, social workers tend to look within the profession. However, a third of job-searchers were looking at roles both within and outside social work (34%) and 15% were only looking at roles outside the profession. This is mostly driven by a fifth of adults social workers (19%) who were only looking at roles outside social work.
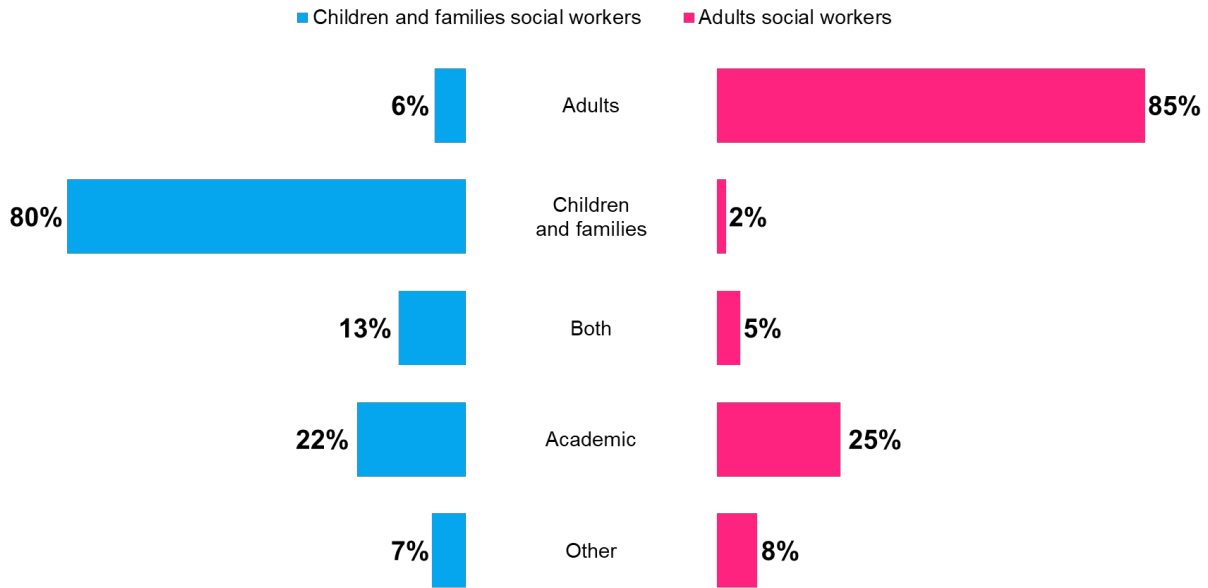
What does movement around the profession look like?

Broadly, those looking at other social work roles are looking within their own specialism (figure 17).

Children and families social workers are slightly more likely to look for a different type of role. For example, 6% of children and families social workers were looking at adults roles and 13% were looking at both types of roles. On the other hand, only 2% of adults social workers were looking at children and families roles and 5% looked at both types. Children and families social workers within statutory organisations (local authorities, NHS, non-departmental public bodies) are more likely to look outside their specialism than non-statutory (7% looked at adults roles vs 2% of non-statutory children and families social workers looking at adults roles).

Social workers outside of children and families or adults roles are also likely to look outside their specialism. Three in ten "other" social workers (e.g. academic) looked at children and families roles (30%), and a quarter looked at adults roles (24%).

Figure 16. Types of social work role looked at

■ Children and families social workers   ■ Adults social workers

Role	Children and families social workers	Adults social workers
Adults	6%	85%
Children and families	80%	2%
Both	13%	5%
Academic	22%	25%
Other	7%	8%

Base: Social workers who have looked at other social work roles in past 12 months (children and families=485; adults=275)

The qualitative research revealed a perception among social workers that working with children is a more time-consuming, stressful, and scrutinised role than working with adults. Some who had started their careers working with children switched to working with adults for these reasons, and many who worked with adults mentioned refusing to work with children to avoid overwork.

"Some of my colleagues [who work with children] said they've like 30 cases each, and the turnover is quite high. You've got court cases, you've got court protection, child protection, and some of the managers expect you to complete those within a week, which is quite impossible if you've got a workload of 30 because anything can pop up with 30 clients."
– Female, 43, Social worker (mid-career)

Social workers do tend to look at roles within their current employer type. For example, three-quarters of local authority social workers job-searching (74%) looked at other local authority roles. However, a sizeable proportion may also be looking elsewhere; around a third of local authority social workers were looking at social work agency roles (36%), NHS roles (34%), or charity roles (32%).

Qualitative interviews also revealed the appeal of social work agencies among social workers, especially those currently employed by local authorities. Despite most agency roles being within local authorities, these roles were thought to offer higher pay and greater flexibility in terms of workload which increased their attractiveness among social workers already looking for other opportunities.

"So, if you sort of see the agency workers that I manage personally, they're getting paid twice as much as what I get paid as a manager (…) and obviously that is quite demoralizing for the permanent workers because the new workers then aspire to go and work for an agency." – Female, 39, Social worker (experienced)

Three-quarters of NHS social workers were looking at other work in the NHS (74%), but over a third looked at local authority work (36%) and a quarter looked at agencies (26%) or charities (26%). Those from a social work agency are the most likely to be looking outside their current employment type – two-thirds (67%) were looking at other agency roles, but nearly half (46%) were looking at local authority roles, and a fifth were looking to the NHS (22%) or charities (22%).

Do social workers take on additional paid work?

A quarter of current social workers surveyed (25%) have taken on extra paid work in addition to their normal role within the last six months, rising to a third of agency workers (33%) and two-fifths of NHS social workers (40%).

Despite the perceived higher workloads in children and families social workers revealed in the interviews above, there is no difference in picking up extra work across social work specialism (24% children and families, 26% adults). There is also little variation across management level or tenure – social workers with no management responsibility are just as likely to be doing extra work as upper managers (25%, 24% respectively).

Most of this additional work was extra hours with their main employer (53%), although a quarter had taken up a second non-social work role (25%), and one in five were doing bank/ agency work alongside their main role (20%). Those in local authorities are the most likely to pick up extra hours with their main employer – 59% of those taking on additional work within local authorities said this. Men taking on additional work were more likely to pick up bank/ agency work (35% vs 16% women).

Figure 17. Types of additional paid work taken on
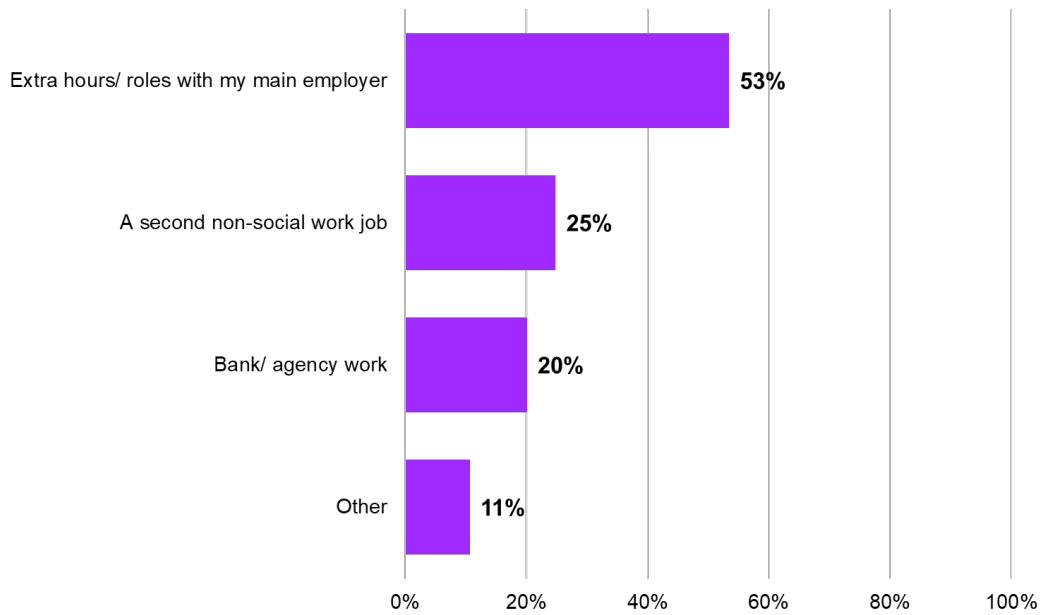
Base: Social workers who have taken on extra paid work in last 6 months (318)

YouGov®

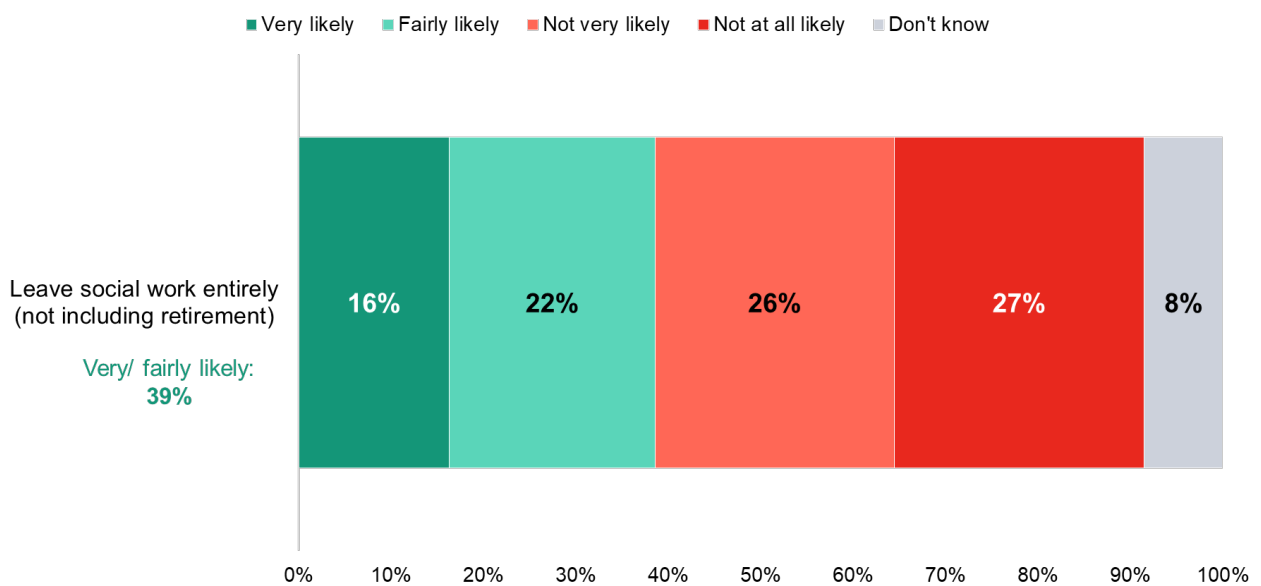## Leaving the profession

Why do people leave social work?

Within the next five years, two-fifths of social workers surveyed think it is likely they will leave the profession entirely (39%). This rises to two-thirds of those employed by a social work agency (66%), with a quarter being very likely to leave within the next five years (26%).

Half of social workers from an ethnic minority say they are likely to leave within the next five years (48%), with a quarter being very likely to do so (26%). A similar proportion of social workers with a disability/ health condition that limits them in day-to-day life are very likely to leave social work in the next five years (23%, vs 14% without a disability).

There is no variation in likelihood to leave by length in the profession, but those in upper management are the most likely to say they may leave within the next five years (45%).

More positively, just over half of social workers (53%) say they are not likely to leave the profession in the next five years and this is highest for staff within the NHS (63%). The proportions found here are also consistent 2020 – there has been no change in social workers' likelihood to leave social work.
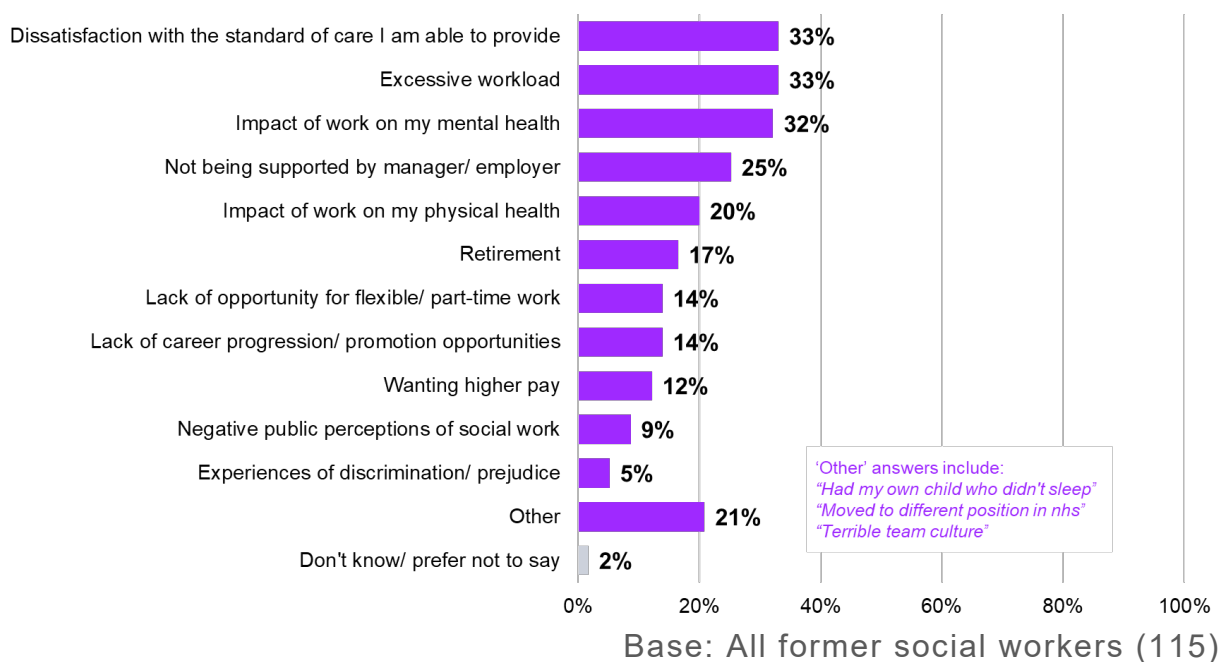
Figure 18. Likelihood to leave social work

Base: All current social workers (1260)

Former social workers, who were in the profession within the last five years, were asked why they left. Many left an answer in the 'other' category, indicating that they moved towards a different position or due to personal circumstances rather than specifically looking to leave social work. Similarly, just under a fifth left due to retirement (17%) rather than moving to another profession.

The most popular listed answers are dissatisfaction with the standard of care they were able to provide, excessive workload, and impact of work on mental health – each chosen by around a third of former social workers. A quarter of former social workers say they left as a result of not being supported by their manager/ employer (25%), and a fifth cite the impact of work on their physical health (20%).

Two-fifths who previously worked in statutory social work (local authority, NHS, non-departmental public bodies) said they left due to dissatisfaction with the care they could provide (41%).

Figure 19. Reasons for leaving social work

Reason	%
Dissatisfaction with the standard of care I am able to provide	33%
Excessive workload	33%
Impact of work on my mental health	32%
Not being supported by manager/ employer	25%
Impact of work on my physical health	20%
Retirement	17%
Lack of opportunity for flexible/ part-time work	14%
Lack of career progression/ promotion opportunities	14%
Wanting higher pay	12%
Negative public perceptions of social work	9%
Experiences of discrimination/ prejudice	5%
Other	21%
Don't know/ prefer not to say	2%

'Other' answers include:
"Had my own child who didn't sleep"
"Moved to different position in nhs"
"Terrible team culture"

Base: All former social workers (115)

![YouGov]

The quantitative findings were echoed in the qualitative interviews. Social workers cited the high turnover within their organisations and resulting unsustainable number of caseloads as one of the main reasons for leaving their profession. The high demands of the role, including the high stress levels and pressure, was seen as negatively impacting the emotional wellbeing of the social workers, driving them out from their roles. The difficulties of maintaining a work life balance and emotional toll of the profession were exacerbated by COVID-19, when social workers felt isolated from their peers and lacking the emotional support of their professional network.

"It's like a vicious cycle, people are leaving the profession, it means the ones who stay behind have a higher workload, which leads them feeling burnt out and that they need to leave" – Female, 29, Social worker (newly qualified)

"You just basically couldn't do your job. You couldn't feel that you were, particularly when I was working in child protection, you didn't feel like you were actually protecting children because you just didn't have the capacity." – Female, 42, Social worker (experienced)

"It was definitely exacerbated through lockdown. I was working from home all of the time, dealing with some really heavy stuff that would often spill over into the evenings. And I found it became incredibly stressful." – Male, 33, Former social worker

The stress and frustrations of having to work long hours overtime to meet the needs of the cases led to burnout and low morale. Many participants reported that due to the high volume of cases and low capacity within their teams, managers have to take on additional work, leaving less time to provide support to their staff.

"Constantly worrying about what's happening at work even when they're not there. It was the same for me. I could not enjoy a Sunday because I was too busy panicking about what I was coming back to the next day. And a lot of the social workers that I know and I spoke to who work in that direct role, they feel the same."
– Female, 26, Social worker (early career)

The burnout experienced by social workers was coupled with the perceived low pay and lack of recognition for the profession. Many felt that the lack of resources within the communities and limited funding available negatively impacted their ability to provide a high standard of care.

"You're constantly working. You don't have time to reflect, you don't have time to do training. You don't even have time to breathe really, and you're more susceptible to doing mistakes too and things like that. And I just want to move away from that."
– Female, 39, Social worker (experienced)

"I don't know a social worker, certainly in children's services, who aren't working into the evening and weekends. That's no work life balance because if you've got deadlines to meet, (..) Working long hours - and not getting that time back on TOIL. And the frustrations of not being able to do your job and the guilt when you can't help somebody who you know desperately needs help because you think this person's going to die."
– Female, 67, Social worker (experienced)

Among the interviewees, a secondary reason for leaving the profession was the lack of flexible working arrangements. Whilst many were open to opportunities offering working from home, this was particularly important for the most experienced staff and those with caring responsibilities.

"I'd love to do exactly what I'm doing right now because I do enjoy the job. I'd be happy to do that in a different organisation that has the flexible working, or one that is a bit closer to where I live. I wouldn't limit myself." – Female, 26, Social worker (early career)

Impact on social work services

Qualitative findings highlight the negative impact that the number of social workers leaving the profession is having on the services provided to the most vulnerable families. Many social workers stressed the increasing risks for people not receiving the support they need, or the quality of care they deserve.

"I suppose if the social workers are stretched, then they're not going to have as much time to spend as they might want to with each individual client."
– Female, 43, Lived experience (adult)

"There's huge waiting lists for early health support because there's simply not enough staff to provide the support that's needed." – Female, 26, Social worker (early career)

"You are sort of rushing to get things done and burn out and stressing. [...] It's too much sometimes and overwhelming and obviously we have to deal with difficult clients and families at times as well." – Male, 55, Social worker (experienced)

![YouGov]

There was also a recognition among individuals with lived experience that social workers are leaving the profession. Participants felt that the reason behind this was that social workers are often overworked and face many challenges when dealing with cases, including abuse from families or individuals towards them. Most felt that there are significant impacts on the social work services as a result of people leaving the profession. This includes not having enough social workers to support people who need them, as well as not having enough social workers to prevent and deal with cases of abuse.

"They are undervalued, underappreciated, and there's probably not enough of them for the amount of work there is to do, so they probably feel under a lot of pressure."
– Female, 44, Lived experience (adult)

"It can be a stressful job, first of all. And again, they are not well paid for all the things they have to do and deal with. And then, I believe that after a while it can be stressful enough that you want to change for a better [job]." – Female, 40, Lived experience (carer)

"I think probably they're overworked … And I think, along with that, they've also got to make some quite tough decisions in the face of people being quite abusive as well."
– Female, 37, Lived experience (care leaver)

Reflecting on their personal experience, only a few participants had experienced delays with social work services. However, those who did felt negatively impacted by it, as they were unable to access the support needed at the time. A few also felt that the delays were not being managed well and there was a sense that the social workers did not put in the effort to manage it.

"Longer waiting times, and probably … less proper support because the few [social workers] that exist are going to be overwhelmed with work and they will probably neglect some of the work because they can't do it all." – Female, 40, Lived experience (carer)
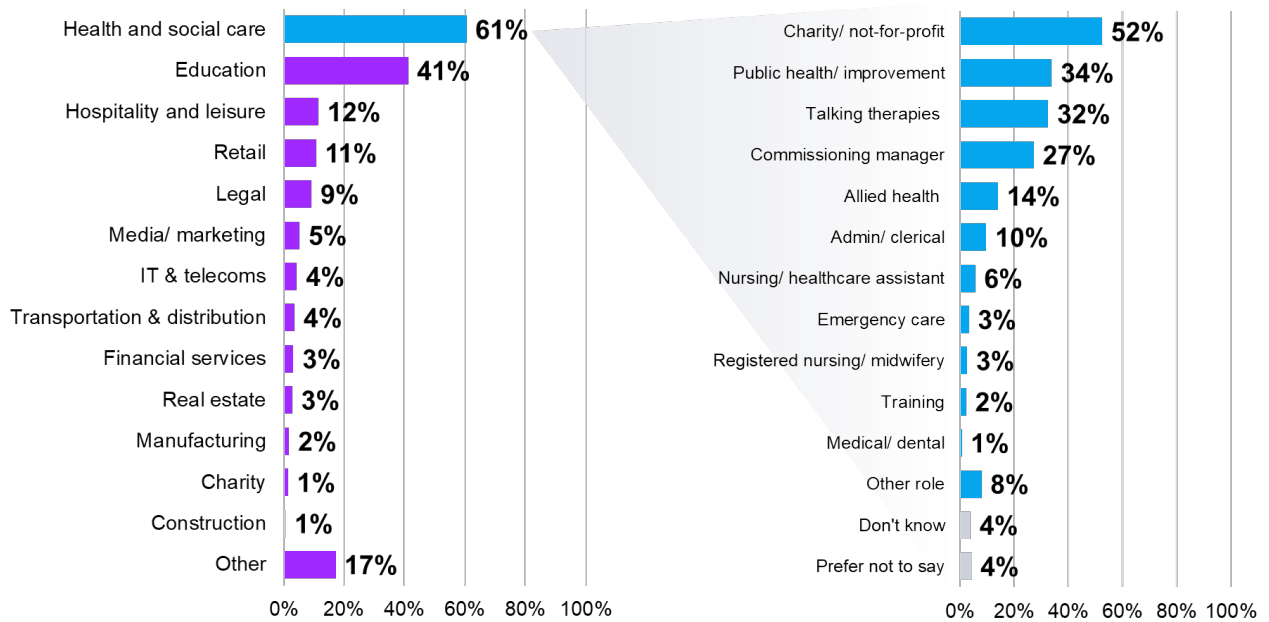

Where do people go when they leave social work, and would they return?

Social workers who leave the profession tend to move into health and social care or education. Amongst former social workers who are in another industry (i.e. excluding retirement/ no further work), the most common industry to move to is health and social care (38%), followed by education (11%). Current social workers who were looking to leave the profession also predominately look towards health and social care roles (61%) although two-fifths looked at education roles (41%).

Among those that looked at health and social care roles, most looked towards charity/ not for profit work (52%). Over a quarter were looking at roles in public health/ improvement (34%), talking therapies (32%), or commissioning manager roles (27%).

Current children and families social workers are more likely than adults social workers to look at roles in education (49% vs 30% adults), while adults were more likely to look directly at charity work (3% vs 0% children and families). Children and families social workers who were looking at health and social care roles were particularly likely to look at talking therapies (41%), compared to only a quarter of adults social workers who looked at health and social care saying they then went on to look at talking therapy roles.

Figure 20. Non-social work industries looked at, and specific areas of health and social care looked at

Health and social care	61%
Education	41%
Hospitality and leisure	12%
Retail	11%
Legal	9%
Media/ marketing	5%
IT & telecoms	4%
Transportation & distribution	4%
Financial services	3%
Real estate	3%
Manufacturing	2%
Charity	1%
Construction	1%
Other	17%

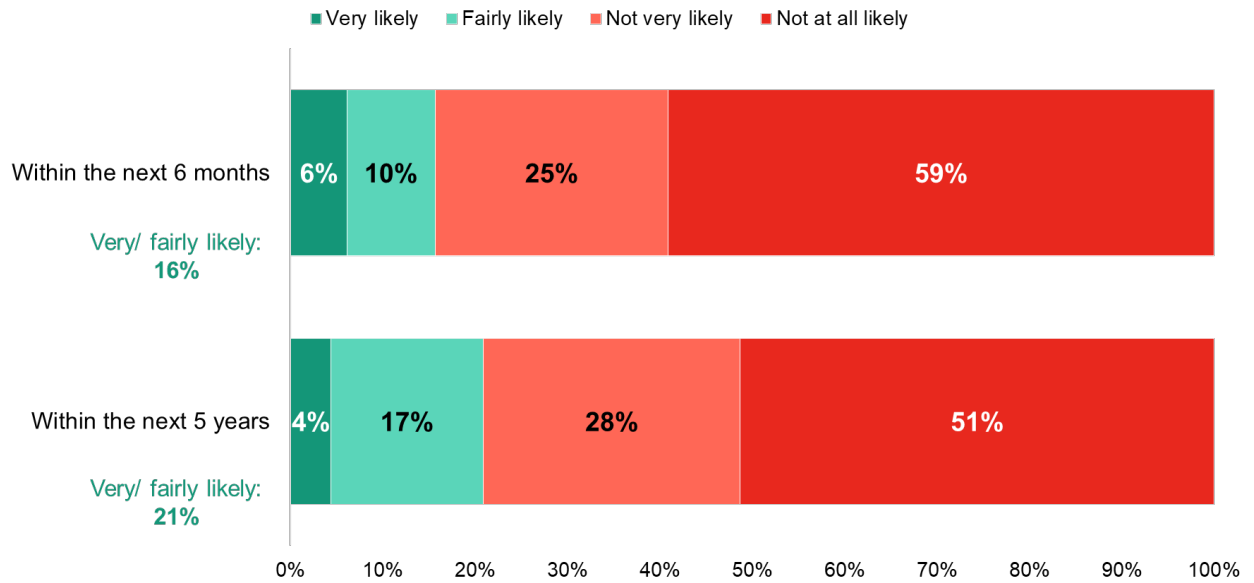| Charity/ not-for-profit | 52% |
Public health/ improvement	34%
Talking therapies	32%
Commissioning manager	27%
Allied health	14%
Admin/ clerical	10%
Nursing/ healthcare assistant	6%
Emergency care	3%
Registered nursing/ midwifery	3%
Training	2%
Medical/ dental	1%
Other role	8%
Don't know	4%
Prefer not to say	4%

Base: Social workers who looked at non-social work roles (499); social workers who looked at health and social care roles (302)

Among former social workers surveyed, a fifth would be likely to return at some point in the next five years (21%) and fewer would return within the next 6 months (16%). Many social workers are emphatic in this view – with half or more saying they are not at all likely to return in the next six months (59%) or next five years (51%).

It appears that former social workers are less likely to return now than when surveyed during the COVID-19 pandemic – in 2020, 28% of former social workers said they would be likely to return in the next five years, and 21% would be likely to return in the next six months.

Former social workers who most recently worked in a local authority are very unlikely to return to the profession; nearly all say they would be unlikely to do so in the next six months (97%) and just under nine in ten (86%) would be unlikely to do so in the next five years.

Figure 21. Likelihood to return to social work

Within the next 6 months
Very/ fairly likely: 16%

| Very likely 6% | Fairly likely 10% | Not very likely 25% | Not at all likely 59% |

Within the next 5 years
Very/ fairly likely: 21%

| Very likely 4% | Fairly likely 17% | Not very likely 28% | Not at all likely 51% |

Legend: ■ Very likely ■ Fairly likely ■ Not very likely ■ Not at all likely

Base: Former social workers (115)
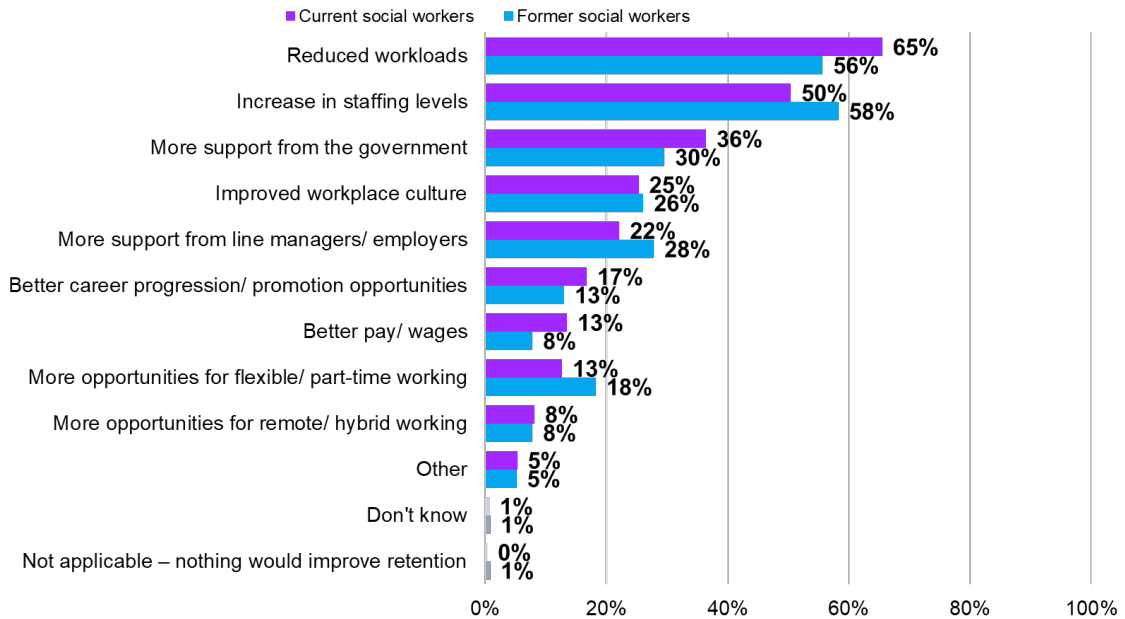
Improving retention

What would encourage social workers to stay in the profession?

Current and former social workers were asked to choose what top three factors would improve retention in social work. Broadly, the top answers chosen echo findings from elsewhere in this report – reducing workloads (65% current, 56% former) and increasing staffing levels (50% current, 58% former). The third most popular answer is increased support from the government, chosen by over a third of current social workers (36%) and three in ten former social workers (30%).

Just under three-quarters of current or former children and families social workers say workloads should be reduced (72%), compared to just over half of current/ former adults social workers who say the same (55%). Social workers from charities are the most likely to say more support from managers/ employers would improve retention (42%), while those from the NHS want better career progression (27%).

Social workers from an ethnic minority background are more likely than white social workers to want changes to the workplace environment, such as improved culture (32% vs 24% white social workers), more opportunities for remote/ hybrid working (17% vs 7%), or more support from managers/ employers (30% vs 21%).

Figure 22. Activities that would improve retention of social workers

Legend: ■ Current social workers ■ Former social workers

Activity	Current social workers	Former social workers
Reduced workloads	65%	56%
Increase in staffing levels	50%	58%
More support from the government	36%	30%
Improved workplace culture	25%	26%
More support from line managers/ employers	22%	28%
Better career progression/ promotion opportunities	17%	13%
Better pay/ wages	13%	8%
More opportunities for flexible/ part-time working	13%	18%
More opportunities for remote/ hybrid working	8%	8%
Other	5%	5%
Don't know	1%	1%
Not applicable – nothing would improve retention	0%	1%

Base: Current social workers (1260); former social workers (115)

The qualitative findings show that the key to retention of social workers is better pay, work-life balance and manageable caseloads in addition to well-resourced teams. Many felt that support is essential for the retention of social workers, which includes the importance of having good managers who can provide support, supervision, and act as mentors. Some mentioned provision of continuous training in order to better equip social workers when dealing with the challenges and pressures they face in their roles. Others also felt that it is important to ensure that social workers are not left alone to deal with complex cases, in order to avoid carrying the responsibility alone, which can significantly increase the pressure they are feeling at work. Many also shared that it is important to ensure that social workers have less paperwork to deal with, which many felt was sometimes unnecessary and did not enable social workers to practise the profession in the way they would like to, leading to dissatisfaction with their role.

"The top goal is [to] increase the salaries and then promote flexible working. Educate your managers to be much nicer and good mentors." – Female 43, Social worker (mid-career)

"In real terms, social worker pay has gone down because of austerity cuts. And workloads, I don't know a social worker certainly in children's services who aren't working into the evening at weekends. There is no work life balance."
– Female, 67, Social worker (experienced)

"Additional training for social workers so that they come into the profession better equipped at dealing with the complexities. Training for managers because … often the quality of the manager really drives whether somebody stays or goes. So, we need to have really good quality managers and we need to pay people on par with the complexities of the job that they're doing." – Female, 48, Social worker (experienced)

"[The profession] needs to be valued and it needs to be recognised in the pay conditions … Social workers are sat at computers, I would say for 78% of the time, tapping away, feeding information into a system, which is completely wrong and bizarre. And that's why then they're not retaining social workers … because it's not the job that they sign up for."
– Female, 47, Social worker (experienced)

Based on the findings from the qualitative interviews, most social workers felt that in order to attract more people into the social work profession, there needs to be more understanding about the profession and what social workers do. Many felt that some people are deterred from entering the profession due to poor reputation and negative associations with social work, particularly due to the messages portrayed in the media, such as social workers taking children away. There was also a sense that the profession lacks recognition, and that social workers are not being rewarded for the work they do.

"Social work has quite a bad name to be honest… there needs to be something to try and improve how social work is seen as a profession and more awareness of what social workers actually do that is not just taking kids away from their parents."
– Female, 33, Social worker (early career)

"When [the social work is] in the press, it's usually critical. I don't think the pay is particularly good for what can be quite a demanding role."
– Female, 62, Former social worker

"Social workers died trying to do visits, seeing families [during Covid], and they get no reward, no privilege, no status. They don't even mention social workers when they're thanking people who worked during lockdown." – Female, 48, Social worker (experienced)

Others also mentioned that social work job descriptions often lack accuracy and do not reflect the actual demands of the role, which could deter the right people from applying for the job.

Conclusions

This research has particularly focussed on experiences of working in the social work profession, and the difficulties social workers are experiencing in their organisations at this time. Including both current and former social workers, as well as people with lived experience of social work intervention gives a holistic understanding of the state of working practices.

Workload and burnout are a prevailing issue across social work – from being a reason people move from their first role, people with lived experience having delays in receiving support, to social workers leaving the field entirely. Social workers are conscious that their organisations are 'process-driven' with a heavy administrative burden of paperwork, and some feel this is to the detriment of the support offered to service users.

This dissatisfaction with the standard of support they are able to provide is also a key morale and retention issue, with a third of former social workers citing it as a reason for leaving the profession. Given that most social workers say that wanting to make a difference in people's lives is a key motivator for them to be in the profession, it makes sense that - without being able to do this, they contemplate leaving.

While social workers have noble aims and remain proud of the profession, they are unlikely to recommend the job to others. Nearly all social workers report their organisation is recruiting social work roles, less than a fifth would encourage a friend or family member to join their profession. A lack of applicants appears to be the key challenge to filling vacancies, and thus a barrier to the increased staffing that half of social workers think would help retention.

Once people enter the profession, they report experiencing overwork almost immediately – a quarter of social workers who have left their first role report leaving due to excessive workload and two-fifths leave their first role within three years.

Most social workers are searching for a new job. They tend to look within their profession, but children and families social workers are more likely to look at adults roles rather than vice versa. This may be due to a perception that working with children is more stressful and 'high risk' than adults with some interview participants ruling out children and families roles on that basis. Caseloads in children's services were described as too high to properly ensure safety and meet all needs. This makes the job impossible to do well. The adult social workers recognised that children's social work involves very emotionally draining work with trauma, abuse, and child deaths that take a severe mental toll. Furthermore, many noted children's social workers lack adequate workplace support and resources to handle the heavy workload and emotional impacts.

Two-fifths of social workers think they will leave the profession entirely within the near future. This rises to half of ethnic minority social workers. Most will turn to the health and social care sector, staying in roles that may need similar skills or have a similar ethos, such as talking therapies or public health and improvement.

Former social workers are unlikely to come back to the profession, whether in the next six months or further into the future. Instead, they recommend reducing workloads and increasing staffing to improve retention among the current workforce.

Annex

Qualitative case studies

YouGov

Case study: Social Worker

Introduction

Kate has been a qualified as a social worker since 2019. Her current role focuses on working with adults with learning disabilities and / or autism, and other complex needs.

"I think that we work with people at some of the worst points of their life. And I think it takes quite a lot of resilience to do that."

Attitudes towards the social work profession

She feels that the general public has a lot of fear and misunderstands the profession. She believes that social work is a challenging profession and not well recognised, but very rewarding when you are in it. People in the profession can also develop close relationships.

"I think it's challenging in terms what society as a whole see as the social worker. I'm not a children social worker, but I think that there is a view of social work as being scapegoated, as being demonized in the media whenever there is a catastrophic incident."

Views on current role

Kate thinks that social work has changed a lot over the last few years and has become very paperwork focus. She believes the works she does is still traditional social work which involves working intensively with people. However, the culture at higher management level can be quite challenging. She believes social workers are not involved in the consultations and decision-making process.

"The other week I was able to facilitate a discharge for a lady who'd been in the hospital since 2019. The feeling I had on that day could eradicate all of the stresses that came to that point. And I genuinely felt in that moment that I had done the best I could at the time to change someone's life. And I think that this is the best opportunity this person will get to live successfully in the community."

Moving around/from the profession

She wants to remain in social work in the future. However, she is looking for more flexibility within her job. If she were to leave her current role, she would consider working for an agency over a local authority because of the significant financial benefits.

YouGov

Case study: Former Social Worker

Introduction

Andy worked as a children and families social worker for a local authority but left the professional two years ago. He developed an interest and passion for working with children and care leavers and wanted to make a difference in the society. However, he thought his former role was very stressful and involved a lot of hard work.

"I don't want to go through that again. I'm happy now.. I wouldn't touch that profession again with a bargepole."

Attitudes towards the social work profession

Some of the key challenges that Andy faced in his previous role were the lack of staffing, unreasonable caseloads, lack of suitable placements for children, overall lack of resourcing in the public sector and long waiting lists for health appointments, ADHD, and autism assessments. The working culture he encountered was also very toxic.

"I think it's full of burnt out to people who are very stressed and have become very used to being stressed. So, the culture is toxic in that it's not a healthy work environment when people are constantly stressed all the time. The way people behave, speak to one another, support each other is very bizarre."

Views on previous role

Andy felt that the pay was generally good, but the main challenge was the poor working conditions. He would always work overtime, and his employer had no clear policy on taking time off in lieu. His mental and physical health started to deteriorate through the lockdown, and he felt isolated working from home whilst handling very difficult cases.

"...it was definitely exacerbated through lockdown. I was working from home all of the time, dealing with some really heavy stuff that would often spill over into the evenings. And I found it became incredibly stressful. I decided that I didn't want to do the job anymore, and so I left."

Leaving the profession

Andy thinks it is very unlikely he would join the social work profession again. He is currently working in higher education, supporting students at university, which requires a similar skillset. His happiness level and work-life balance have improved

YouGov®

Case study: Social Worker Employer

Introduction

Ruth has been a qualified social worker for 23 years. She is the head of social work at a non-profit organisation and has extensive experience working for a private fostering agency as well as local authorities.

"I think the profession, when you compare it to other professions that we should be on a par with, such as police, paramedics, nurses, I think we sit way below that. And I think there's a perception that we're sort of nosy do-gooders, who fumble around not making good decisions about people's lives and, and generally just messing things up. And I don't think the media portrayal of social workers helped that".”

Attitudes towards the social work profession

She feels that social workers are people with a natural caring instinct, who tend to have some experience of social work in their early lives and want to make a difference in the society. Despite the challenges of the profession, Ruth feels that the little "glimmers" of seeing people receiving support and getting better are very rewarding.

"it's the progress that they see with whoever their client group is, whether it's children, adults... I think it's those little glimmers where you see the progress a child makes … Or you see somebody getting better from a mental health crisis.”

Views on current role

Ruth believes that her current organisation has a good work life balance and is providing a lot of support to its social workers. However, recruiting new people can be difficult as the pay is not as good as in local authorities. The organisation is not hierarchical, and decisions are made as a group. Employees are also offered flexible working arrangements. Diversity and inclusion are a priority, and the organisations has policies in place to promote this.

Movement around/from the profession

Ruth thinks social workers within her organisation are happy with their roles and the working conditions and are not intending to switch jobs. She believes providing better working conditions, support and counselling can help retain people into the profession.

"you're dealing with trauma day in day. And therefore, you get traumatized yourself. So, this vicarious trauma and secondary trauma is transferred to you. And if you haven't got really good management access to counselling yourself, you will burn out and become ill ... They're caring types, but they also need to be valued and if you're not getting that then you don't stay."

![YouGov]

Case study: Lived experience of social work

Introduction

Helen is 44 years old and works remotely as a coach. She received support from social workers a few years ago as she was in the hospital. The social worker helped her understand the benefits she was entitled to and provided her support throughout this process.

"I suppose [they can get involved with] supporting parents, new parents to make sure they've got the right benefits, making sure of the safeguarding processes with children and adults and the elderly, getting involved with care and care facilities and if people might have health conditions."

Attitudes towards the social work profession

She feels that social workers are beneficial to everyone in the society. They are people who want to make a different and support others in need. However, Helen feels that the profession is respectable but undervalued and social workers have a mixed reputation among the general public.

"they're up against a lot of challenges which they can often get the blame for things like government funding that aren't there. It's not their fault that they don't have the funds or the capacity to provide the support that they might otherwise want to."

Experience with social workers

Helen received face-to-face support from her social worker for month. She did not experience any delays and the overall communication with the social worker was very positive. She believes, however, that more education and public awareness is needed about social work and the positive impact they have on people's lives.

"they are undervalued, underappreciated, and there's probably not enough of them for the amount of work there is to do, so they probably feel under a lot of pressure…"

Impact on the support received

Helen did not feel that her support was negatively impacted by the issues within the social work profession. She thought that generally social workers are under a lot of pressure due to the increased demands and workload. There are also not enough resources for them to be able to refer people. Due to the heavy workloads, Helen believes social workers might not give sufficient time to every individual in need.

Quantitative sample composition

Below is the unweighted sample composition for each of the audience groups in the quantitative stage of the research.

Current social workers

Total sample	1260
Type of social work	
Children and families	670
Adults	436
Both	66
Academic/ other	88
Main employer	
Local authority	880
Social work agency	89
NHS	88
Other employer (incl. charities, private organisations, universities)	164
Independent social worker	39
Management level	
Upper management	106
Middle management	297
Direct supervisor	185
No management responsibility	664
Gender	
Male	206
Female	1054
Ethnicity	
White	1057
Ethnic minority	147

Former social workers

Total sample	115
Type of social work	
Children and families	49
Adults	36
Both	22
Academic/ other	8
Type of employer	
Local authority	58
Social work agency	11
NHS	7
Other employer (incl. charities, private organisations, universities)	35
Independent social worker	4
Management level	
Upper management	11
Middle management	37
Direct supervisor	21
No management responsibility	43
Gender	
Male	31
Female	84
Ethnicity	
White (including white minorities such as Gypsy, Roma, Irish Traveller groups, and 'other' white backgrounds)	88
Ethnic minority background (including Asian/ Asian British, Black/ Black British/ Caribbean/ African, Mixed/ multiple ethnic groups, and other ethnic backgrounds)	22

Qualitative sample composition

Social workers

Total sample	30
Type of social work	
Children & families	13
Adult	9
Both	1
Other	2
Employer type	
Local authority	20
NHS	2
Other	3
Former social workers	**6**

Social work employers

Total sample	10

Lived experience of social work

Total sample	10
Gender	
Male	1
Female	9
Social grade	
ABC1	6
C2DE	2
Other	2
Region	
North West	3
West Midlands	1
East of England	1
London	2
South East	2
South West	1