

# The Social Work Survey 2014-2015

*“Priorities need to shift away from processes and towards actively helping individuals and families who need a social worker”*

*Liquid Personnel & Professor Eileen Munro*

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# Foreword

## Professor Eileen Munro

I have worked with Liquid Personnel in developing the 2014-2015 Social Work Survey because I was keen to learn whether the recommendations of my review of child protection had led to any improvement in social work services. There have been significant advances: growing understanding of the high level of expertise needed in social work, appreciation that the work cannot be reduced to case processing but is a human service offering help to those in need, and increasing local and professional autonomy as central prescription has been radically cut. But, however skilled the social workers, it is difficult to do good work in a non-supportive environment and work conditions have undoubtedly got tougher; funding cuts, rising referral rates and continued public criticism creating a fearful culture.

My review showed that, for too many people, 'good' social work had come to mean 'complied with procedures and kept records up to date'; we were not looking enough at whether those receiving the service had benefited from their contact. Although the focus of my review was child protection, I was aware that managerialism had had similar effects in other areas of social work. Breaking out of the straitjacket of targets and performance indicators requires radical reforms. It needs social workers to regain confidence in their expertise, to assert that time spent with users is central to good practice, not something to be fitted in if all managerial tasks have been completed. It needs seniors to provide professional supervision, not just administrative checks. And we need to pay more attention to feedback from those who have received a social work service.

So what picture do we get from these survey results? There are a few positive findings: despite all the difficulties, a quarter of respondents rate their morale as high or very high and only a third rate it as low or very low; many newly qualified workers appear to be given the extra support they need as they start their career. However, there is plenty here to depress the reader. While direct cuts to front line social work have been limited, there have been significant cuts that hamper social workers' ability to provide a good service. Cuts to managers reduce the capacity of the organisation to provide a good level of supervision. Cuts to administrative staff increase the bureaucratic demands on social workers. Despite the removal of many nationally prescribed timescales and targets allowing more local flexibility, time with families still seems a low priority in many offices.

What needs to change to counter the negative findings? Realistically, funding is not going to increase in the near future, so politicians and senior managers should take responsibility for advising how cuts can be handled and not leave it to front line workers to juggle unmanageable workloads with the ever-present fear that something will go wrong and they will be blamed for cutting corners.

Priorities need to shift away from processes and towards actively helping individuals and families who need a social worker. One major under-used resource at present is the expertise in the workforce that cannot be fully utilised because of the dysfunctional conditions in which practitioners are working. Rectifying this will be the most productive line of action.

# About the survey

**The 2014-2015 Social Work Survey is the latest in a series of annual surveys by Liquid Personnel, the specialist social work recruitment consultancy. We have been conducting detailed opinion polls of social work practitioners for several years, looking at their views, the challenges they face, and the forces which impact upon their daily work.**

The first Social Work Survey was launched in 2010, looking at a range of elements including morale, working hours, and how to attract more people into the profession. Over the last 4 years, the survey has grown significantly both in terms of its scale and scope. We have looked in increasing depth at the working lives of the UK's social workers, each year seeking to understand more about the profession, and also to highlight the key challenges arising. This has included assessing the manageability of caseloads, looking at a social worker's typical day, and canvassing opinion on topical news stories from the closure of the GSCC to the introduction of the Frontline fast track social work training initiative.

There have also been significant increases in the level of response. Whilst the 2010 survey generated a little under 300 responses, the 2014-2015 Social Work Survey was answered by 1,571 social work practitioners of various levels, from newly qualified social workers through to directors, making it one of the largest ever independent surveys of UK social workers.

For 2014-2015, we wanted to take another significant step forward, and teamed up with Professor Eileen Munro of the London School of Economics and Political Science. In June 2010, Professor Munro was commissioned by the government to conduct a review of child protection, with her final report published in 2011. This report made a number of recommendations to improve the system, with significant emphasis on shifting the focus away from targets and compliance, and towards the safety and welfare of children and young people.

We worked together to create an accessible survey which would provide informative and insightful results. Consequently, this year's survey looks at the extent to which Professor Munro's original proposals have been brought into practice effectively, and how the challenges identified in the report affect not just child protection, but social workers across all disciplines.

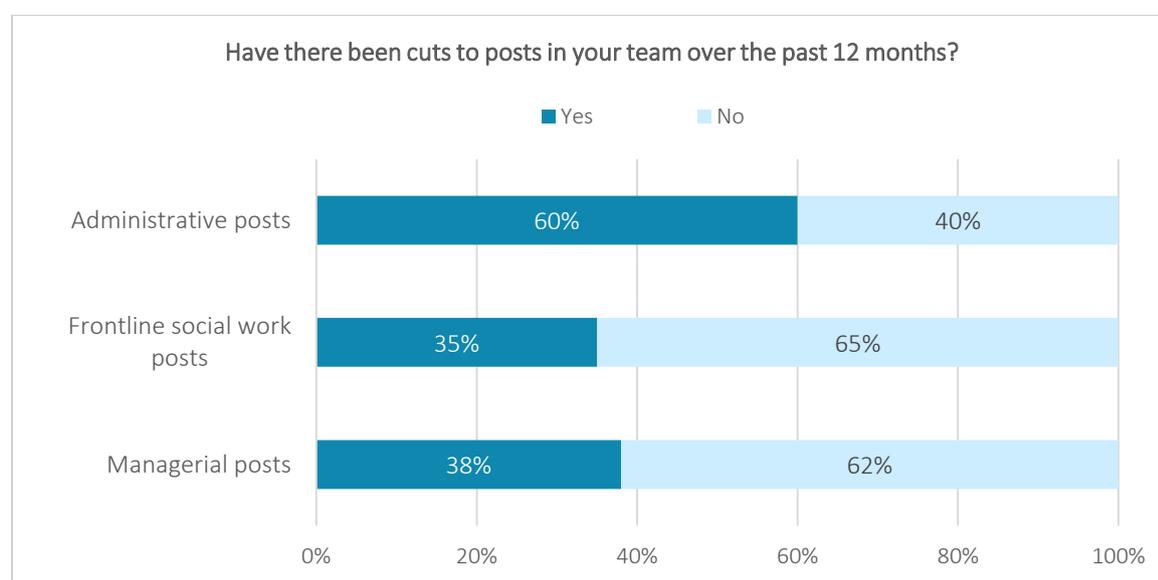
# The impact of funding cuts

The concept of “austerity measures” has been prominent throughout the UK in recent years, and public sector cuts have been a key talking point. Local authorities have faced swingeing budget cuts, and have been left with difficult decisions to make in an effort to reduce their costs. Social work may be a crucial public service, but in many cases councils have found it necessary to make staffing cuts in their children’s services and adults’ services departments.

Although many of the most significant cuts came in 2010-2012, council budgets have continued to be affected each year. In the 2014-2015 Social Work Survey, we were keen to explore the extent to which social work staffing was still facing cuts, and most importantly, how much of an impact this has had.

We asked respondents about cuts to 3 key staffing areas:

- Managerial posts
- Frontline social work posts
- Administrative and support posts

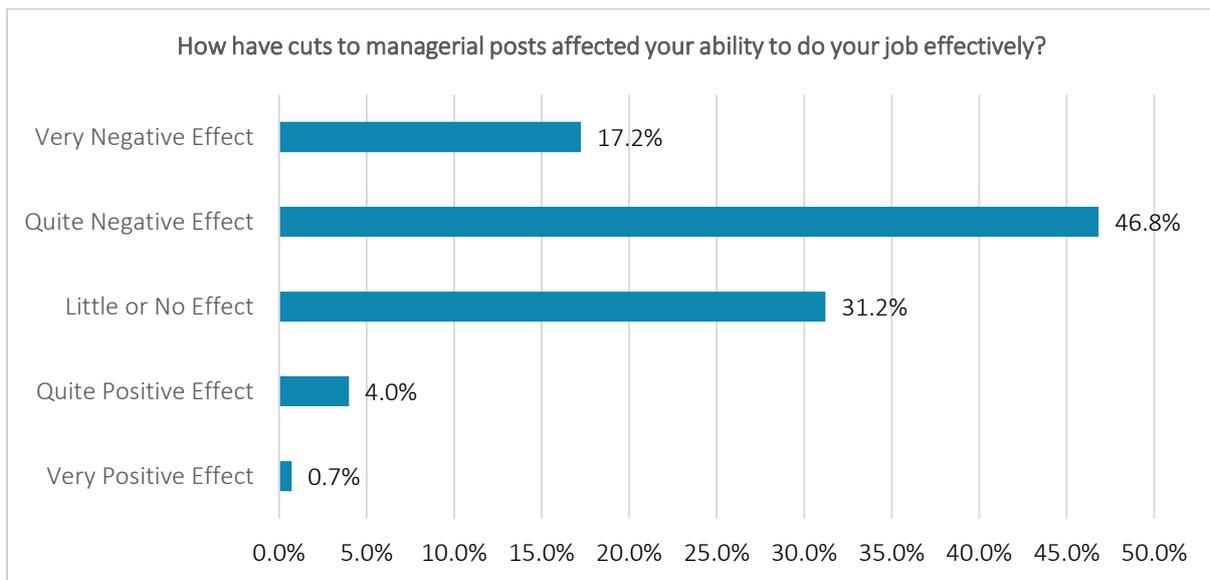


38% of respondents told us they had seen cuts to managerial posts in the last 12 months. 35% said they had seen cuts to frontline social work posts in the same time period, and 60% had seen cuts to administrative and support posts.

Based on these figures alone, staffing cuts have been felt across all levels of social work. However there is clearly a feeling among social workers that they are still expected to deliver the same outcomes for their service users. One respondent stated that the biggest challenge they faced in their role right now was “*the expectation that services will continue to be provided*” despite cuts. A key issue when considering cuts therefore is the impact they have had on the ability of social workers to work with service users.

In each instance where a respondent said their team had experience cuts, we asked how those cuts had affected their ability to do their job effectively:

### Cuts to managerial posts:

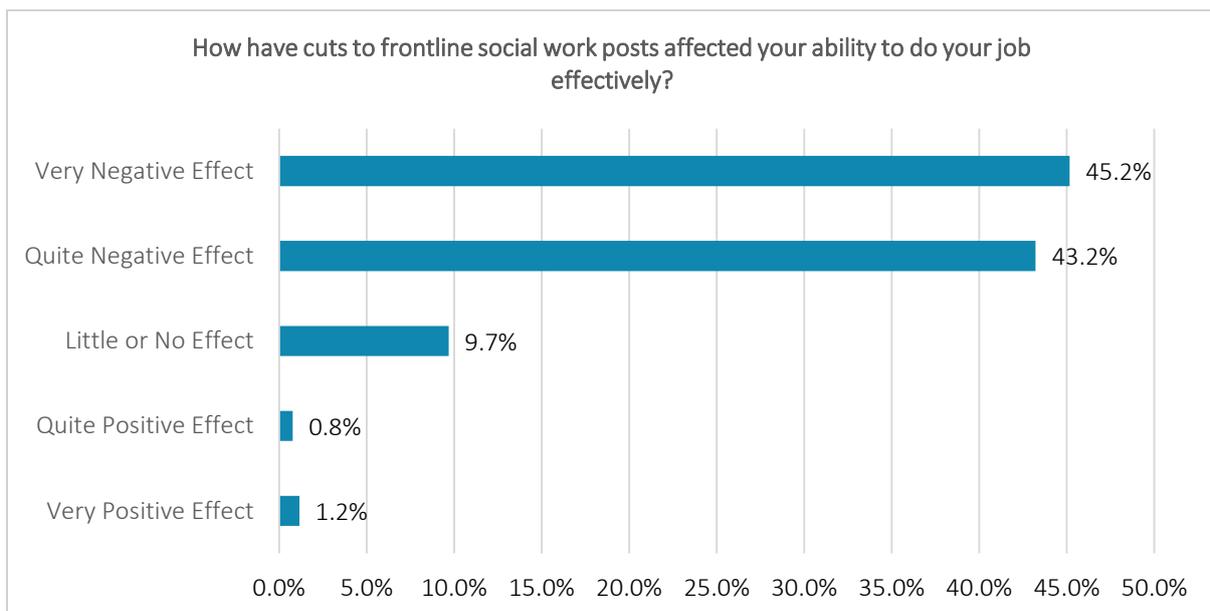


Of all those respondents who had seen cuts to managerial posts in the last 12 months, 64% stated that those cuts have had a negative effect on their ability to do their job effectively. Almost one third (31%) had felt little or no impact, and just under 5% actually felt the effect had been positive. Reductions in managerial posts can create problems with the leadership and support provided to frontline workers, and can also mean that staff struggle to get enough quality supervision.

One respondent explained:

“...there used to be a team manager and assistant team manager in each team. Due to cuts, assistant team managers were taken away. This led to more demands on team managers and less support for case workers.” (Children and Families’ Social Worker, South East)

### Cuts to frontline social work posts:



Cuts to frontline posts have had an even more significant impact upon social work practitioners. Of all those who said they had seen cuts to frontline posts in their team in the last 12 months, more than 88% stated that this had a negative effect on their ability to do their job effectively. This includes 45% who say it had a “very negative effect”.

With many social work teams already facing extremely high demand for services, cuts to frontline social work posts have only exacerbated an already problematic situation. The following quotes from respondents illustrate some of the key challenges:

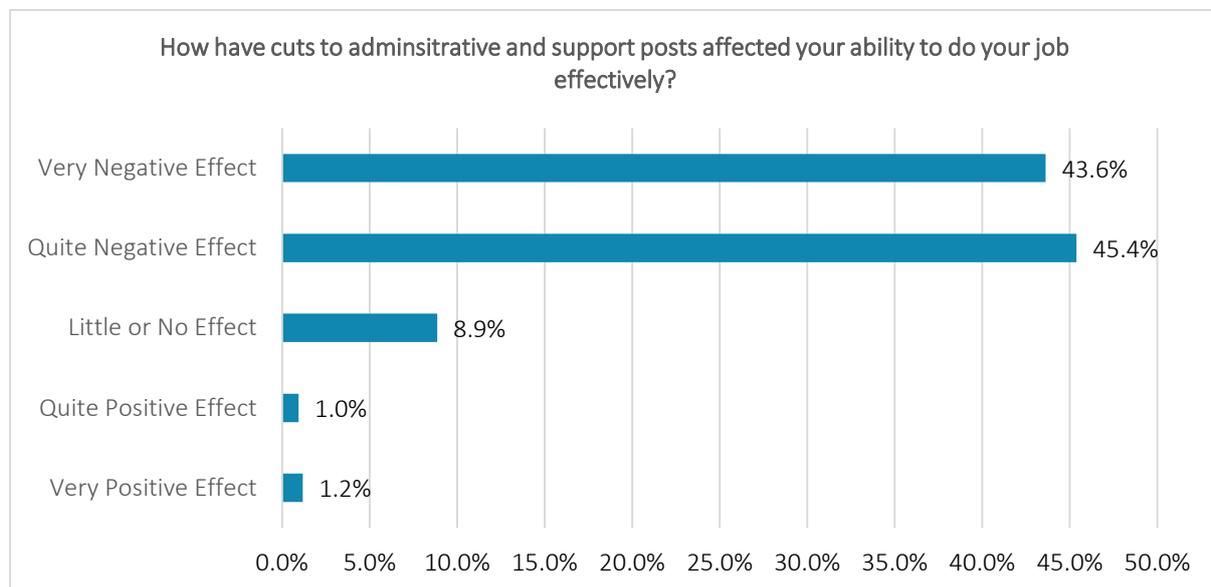
“Service cuts mean that existing roles are meant to take on the work from roles that have been deleted on top of their usual work.” (*Children and Families’ Social Worker, Midlands*)

“The front line staffing has been cut enormously having an impact on my team. We are always on duty and never have time to attend competently to individual cases.” (*Adults’ Services Senior Social Worker, East Anglia*)

“Due to significant cuts and staff shortages which effects all key front line services, partnership / collaborative working is worse than ever with every service defending and deflecting work away”. (*Approved Mental Health Practitioner, Midlands*)

“Budget cuts in front line services will have a detrimental impact on service delivery. The current demand on front line services is extremely high - we cannot meet service demand alongside cuts being made. Local government seem to have no idea about the pressures in front line children’s services.” (*Head of Service, East Anglia*)

### Cuts to administrative and support staff:



Of all respondents who reported cuts to administrative and support posts within the last 12 months, 89% stated that this had a negative impact. A significant number of councils appear to have sought to reduce spending by making cuts to administrative and support roles, whilst protecting frontline services as much as possible. However, our results show that the impact of this has been just as damaging as cutting frontline social work posts.

Cutting support roles appears to be a false economy, as it results in social workers performing more administrative duties, with less time to use their expertise in working with service users. Many of our respondents highlighted this in their comments:

“Cuts to administration means no messages are taken for us and it’s difficult to get minute takers. I have to complete a form to get our admin team to do pieces of work.” *(Children & Families’ Social Worker, South East)*

“Internal cuts have had a detrimental effect on our service as we no longer have support workers/social care workers.” *(Mental Health Social Worker, Midlands)*

“Social workers are doing a lot of their own admin which is taking away from the direct work they're meant to be doing.” *(Children and Families’ Social Worker South East)*

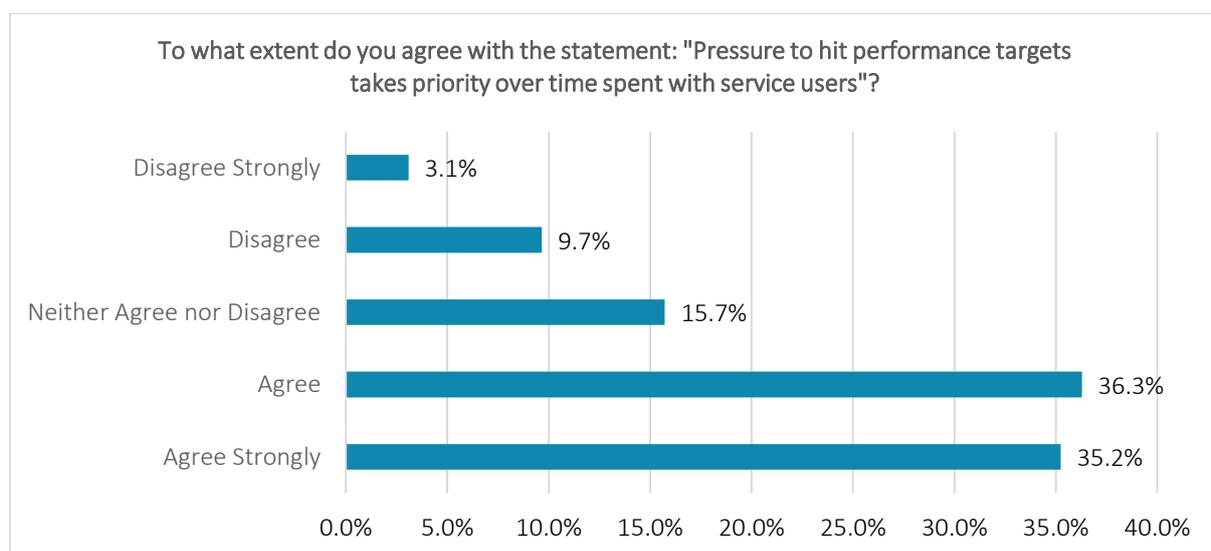
“The cuts in support staff and to outside agencies leads to delays in actually putting the support into families to prevent further breakdown.” *(Children and Families’ Senior Social Worker, Midlands)*

# Procedure or service user driven?

Professor Eileen Munro's review of child protection culminated in a final report which set out a number of proposals for reform. As stated by the Department for Education, *"This involves moving from a system that has become over-bureaucratised and focused on compliance to one that values and develops professional expertise and is focused on the safety and welfare of children and young people."*

(Source: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/munro-review-of-child-protection-final-report-a-child-centred-system>)

In the 2014-2015 Social Work Survey, we looked at the extent to which Professor Munro's proposals had been brought into practice effectively. We wanted to understand whether teams were still using a bureaucracy-heavy model, characterised by targets and measurement, or moving towards a more constructive service-user focus. Were social work services procedure driven, or service user driven?



Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: "Pressure to hit performance targets takes priority over time with service users". 72% of all social work practitioners either agreed or strongly agreed. When looking solely at the view of just frontline social workers, this figure rose to 76%.

This conflict of priorities was highlighted by a significant number of respondents in their comments:

*"Too much time spent on the computer, not enough time spent in face-to-face contact with children."* (Children and Families' Senior Social Worker, South East)

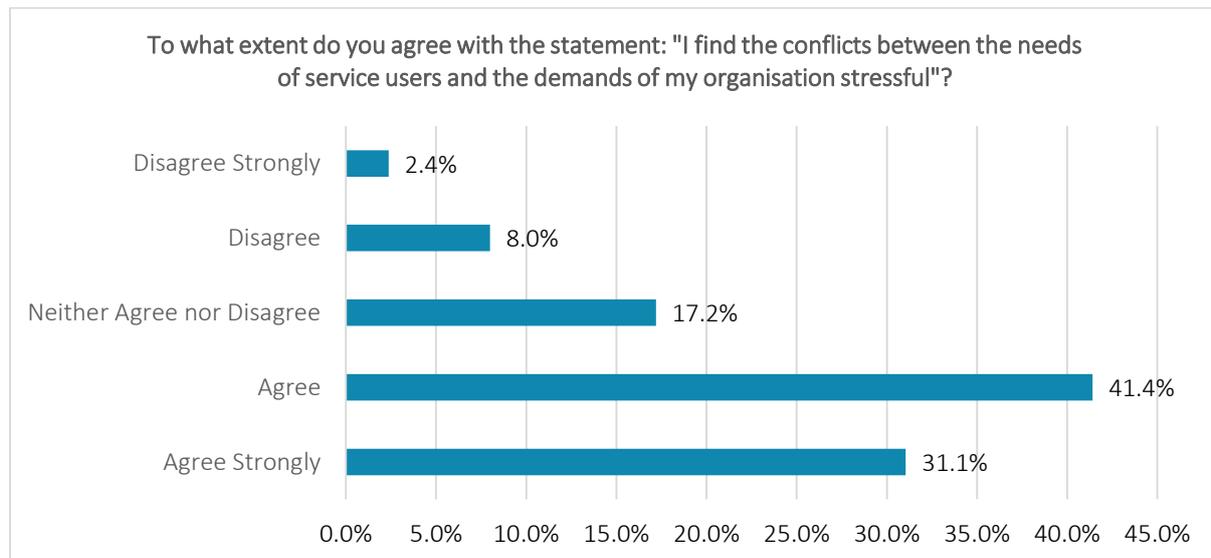
*"The job these days is target led and not what real social work is about... every service user is different and has to be treated so. There is a real conflict when targets are involved."* (Adults' Social Worker, Midlands)

*"...endless targets and paperwork over face to face work with families."* (Children and Families' Senior Social Worker, London)

*"Financial implications/statistics seem to take over your social work values. It is all about saving money and putting in services adequately and working on the next case. There is no real attention to the quality of social work instead it is all about quantity."* (Adults' Social Worker, Midlands)

These figures illustrate that despite Professor Munro's proposals, few councils have been able to bring about effective change, and performance targets are still taking priority in the majority of cases. However, it is important to emphasise that 13% of our respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly and felt that time with

service users was their main priority. This shows that some councils are creating a more supportive professional environment, although unfortunately this only a small minority as yet.



It's important to consider the impact of these conflicting priorities on social workers. We asked our respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement: "I find the conflicts between the needs of service users and the demands of my organisation stressful". 72% either agreed or agreed strongly. This shows that not only are the needs of service users coming second to performance targets, but this conflict of interests is having a negative impact on social workers themselves. The quotes from respondents below explain how targets and timescales can detract from the positive outcome of a case and create challenges in departments:

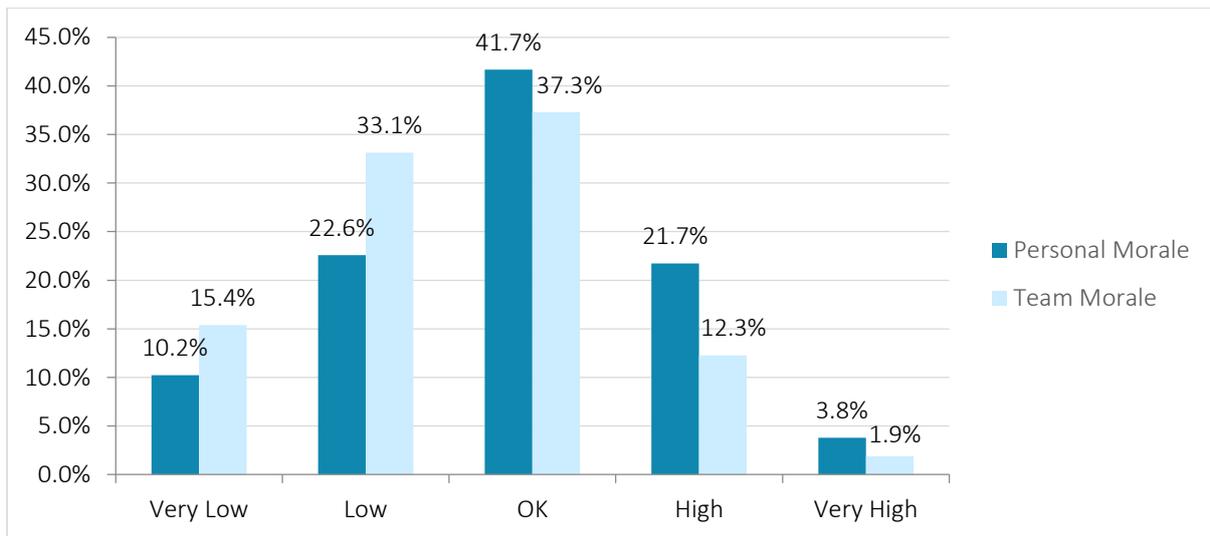
"I was criticised for a placement taking too long to find and for showing joy and pride when I heard that my match had been approved. There is too much emphasis on timescales! ...I care for the individual children and if the child I am family finding for manages to secure a forever family I will celebrate this even if I am out of timescales." (*Adoption Social Worker, North West*)

"Senior managers... are absolutely clinging to the old ways of doing things and it seems that they are desperate to continue to count things and measure it any possible way. It is as if they are completely unable to move away and just look at the quality of engagement with service users and at the depth of work completed. I find that it is even more difficult to retain social workers now because they are expected to do 'proper old fashioned client centred social work with in-depth contact' but they still have to chase the timescales!" (*Team Manager, South East*)

# Morale

Morale is a very individual phenomenon, and is determined by a wide range of personal and professional factors. However the vast majority of social work practitioners are also part of a team, and in these situations, an individual can be quite significantly affected by the morale and attitude of those around them.

In the 2014-2015 Social Work Survey we asked practitioners to rate both their personal morale and morale in their team from 1 to 5, with 1 being “very low”, and 5 being “very high”.



25% rated their personal morale as high or very high, compared with just 14% who rated morale in their team as high or very high. At the opposite end of the scale, 33% rated their personal morale as low or very low, and almost half (49%) rated morale in their team as low or very low. The most popular response when rating both personal and team morale was “OK”.

The average score for personal morale was 2.86 out of 5. The average score for team morale was slightly lower, at 2.52 out of 5. Across all demographic groups, respondents reported their personal morale to be higher than team morale. This is an interesting trend and could be interpreted in a number of ways:

- Social workers are accustomed to looking at the emotional needs of others, and as a result could be more sensitive to the emotional state of their colleagues, causing them to rate morale in their team as lower than their own.
- It could also be a desire to appear resilient, and to be seen to be coping well with the emotional challenges of the role, that causes personal morale to be rated higher than team morale.

There are a number of other possible interpretations of this situation, and it is certainly interesting to consider.

## Morale on the front line:

Frontline social workers on average rated their team’s morale at 2.44, whereas senior managers (service manager and above) rated their team’s morale higher on average, at 3.01. This illustrates a possible disconnect between the views of senior managers and their frontline staff.

53% of frontline workers said morale in their team was “low” or “very low”. Only 12% said it was “high” or “very high” and the remaining 35% said it was “OK”. These statistics will not be surprising to many, but they emphasise how many social work practitioners are facing tough conditions and a negative outlook.

One respondent, who said their personal morale and that of their team were both “very low”, offered a stark summary of the situation in their department:

*“Many of my colleagues and staff feel that we are a Baby P or Daniel Pelka waiting to happen!”  
(Children and Families Social Worker, Midlands)*

### **Resilience:**

Whilst it is widely recognised that social workers are operating in a high pressure environment and faced with a number of challenges, the results for personal morale actually have some encouraging aspects. With 25% of social workers rating their own personal morale as either high or very high, it is clear that there are a significant number of social workers with a great capacity for resilience and positivity.

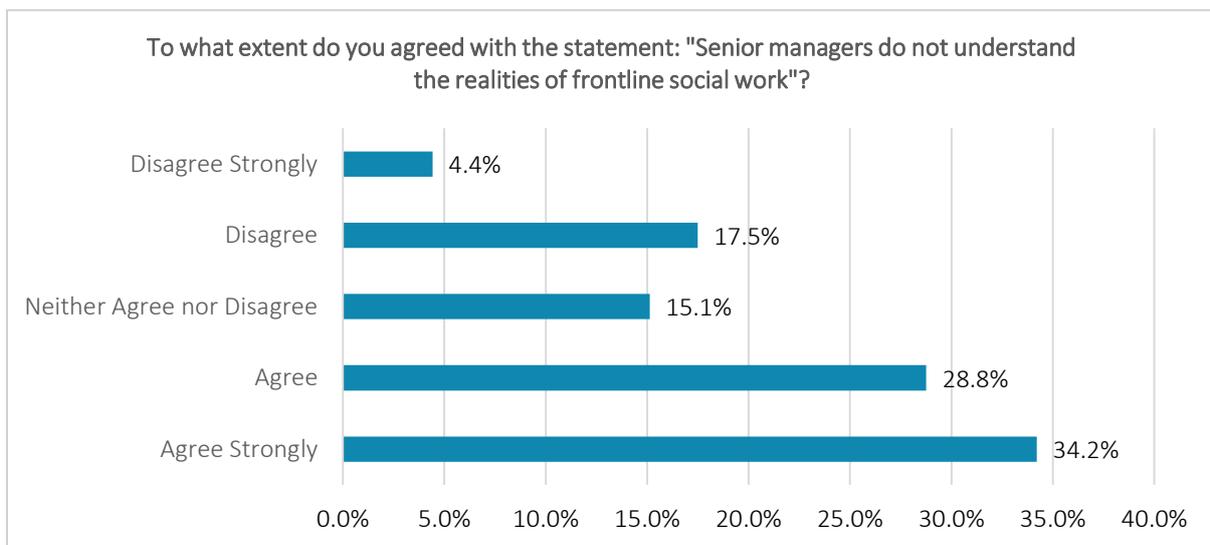
Morale can be influenced by a wide number of factors, and it is important for team managers to understand the individuals on their team and address any issues of personal morale. However it is arguably even more crucial that issues of low morale at a team or department level are first of all understood by senior managers, and then addressed in a constructive way.

# Management & Support

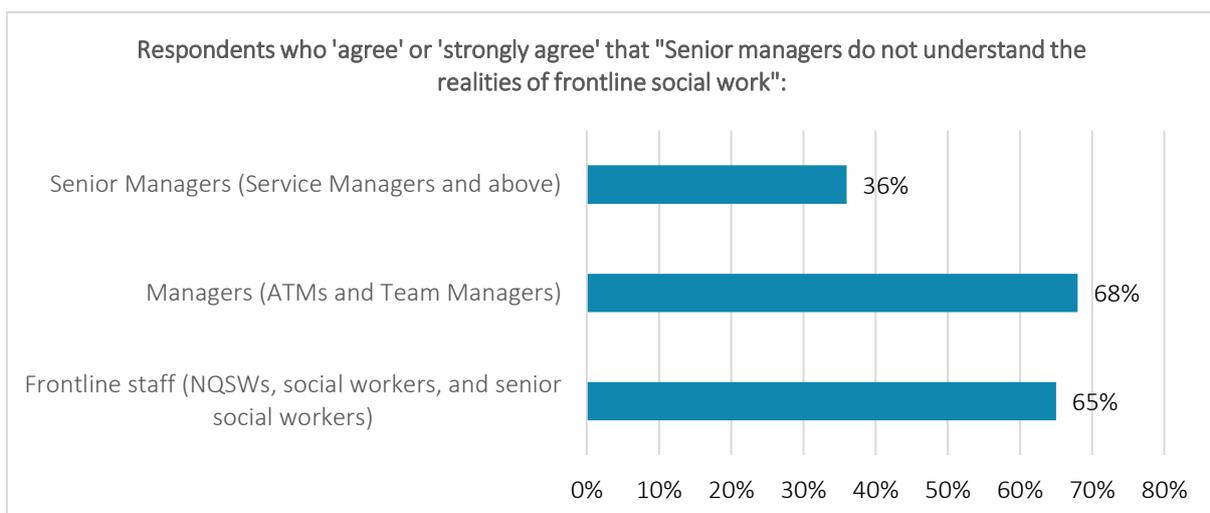
Effective leadership is crucial to giving social work teams a framework in which to operate effectively. Professor Munro’s review of the child protection system explained that leaders in local authorities had a key role in supporting effective social work practice.

In the 2014-2015 Social Work Survey, we asked respondents at all levels about a series of key management issues:

## Understanding the realities of frontline social work:



Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: "Senior managers do not understand the realities of frontline social work". A total of 63% either agreed or agreed strongly, indicating a widely held belief that senior managers indeed do not understand frontline work, which is a significant issue. However, the results are most prominent when the respondents are broken down by seniority, as in the table below:



Among frontline staff, 65% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. For team managers and assistant team managers, this figure was slightly higher, at 68%. However the figure was a great deal lower among senior managers themselves (categorised as Service Manager level and above), with only 36% agreeing or strongly agreeing.

There is a significant divide in opinion on this issue. Despite a large majority of frontline and junior managerial staff believing that senior managers don't understand the realities of frontline social work, only 1 in 3 of those senior managers themselves agree. This suggests that either:

- (a) Senior managers indeed do not understand the realities their frontline practitioners face, OR
- (b) If they do have a clear understanding, they are not demonstrating this understanding effectively to social workers in their organisations

The comments below illustrate this issue:

*"The directors of the council have not got a background in children's services, it shows." (Service Manager, North West)*

*"My managers do not understand many of the issues that confront us." (Mental Health Team Manager, Midlands)*

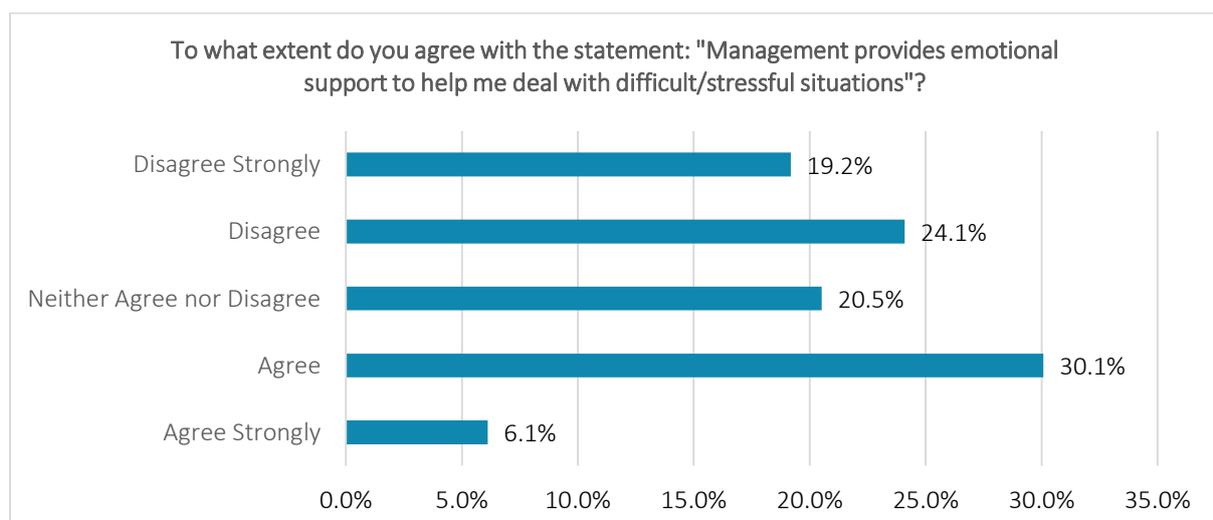
*"There's a lack of understanding from senior managers about the realities or operational aspects of social work." (Children's Services Manager, East Anglia)*

Although it is not necessarily a pre-requisite for successful senior managers to have actual direct social work experience, it is important that they do understand the realities of the work frontline practitioners are doing. Even more so, it is essential that frontline social workers believe that their work is understood. Perhaps senior managers need to be more proactive in actually demonstrating their knowledge and understanding of this work to their social workers.

### Emotional Support:

Daily social work practice in adults' services or children's services can often involve dealing with upsetting and distressing situations. Emotional support is therefore a crucial tool for practitioners to cope with their work, and learn from their experiences.

Our survey asked respondents to what extent they agreed with the statement: "Management provides emotional support to help me deal with difficult/stressful situations".



Results for this question were significantly split. 43% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed, and 36% agreed or strongly agreed. First and foremost, there are around 1 in 3 social workers who are receiving the emotional support they need to deal with the daily emotional pressures of their work, which is an encouraging start. However, a higher proportion of respondents are not receiving this support. This should be a concern for

managers, as emotionally draining work can lead to staff experiencing burnout, and ultimately to poorer quality of practice.

*“I don't receive the emotional support from my management and it almost feels like you just have to deal with it.” (Adults' Social Worker, Midlands)*

*“The emotional stress the job entails is not recognised and the welfare of staff is not a priority.” (Children and Families Social Worker, North West)*

### Recognising & Reinforcing:

The nature of social work means that practitioners are often placed under intense scrutiny. The consequences of mistakes or poor practice can be severe, and so it is important that they are identified and rectified wherever possible. However, it is just as important to recognise good work, and reinforce examples of best practice.

Our respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: “Evidence of good casework is recognised and reinforced”.

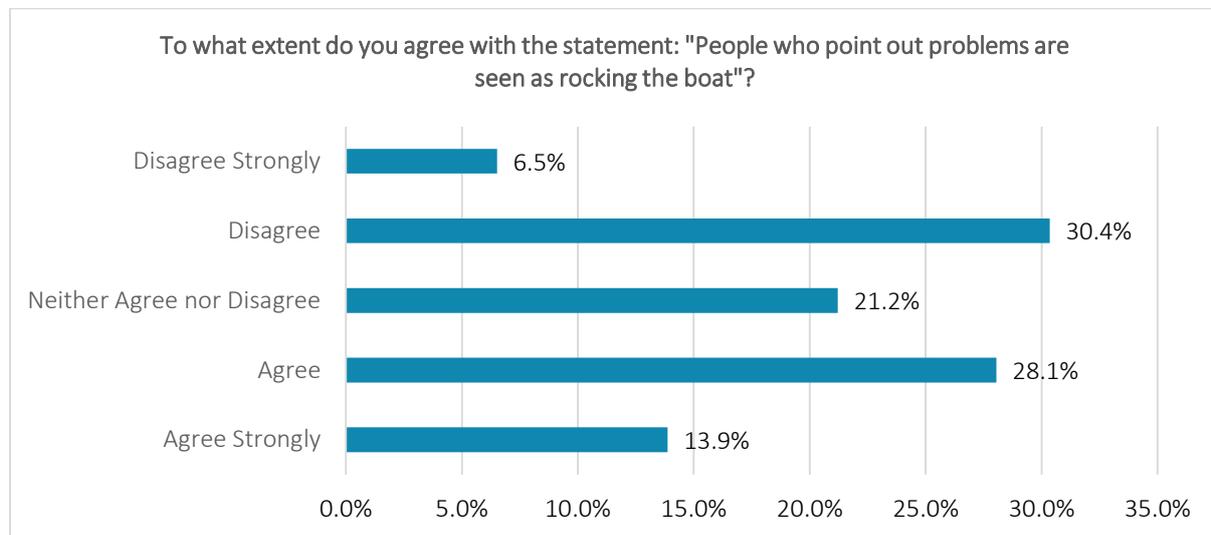


Almost half of the respondents (48%) said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. 24% said they neither agreed nor disagreed, leaving 28% who said they disagreed or strongly disagreed. Although there is significant room for improvement in these figures, the fact that such a large number of social work practitioners feel good practice is being actively recognised and reinforced in their teams is very encouraging.

Interestingly, in teams where evidence of good casework is recognised, staff morale is also higher. Respondents who agreed or strongly agreed with the statement had an average morale rating of 3.22 out of 5, whereas those who disagreed or strongly disagreed had a substantially lower average morale rating of 2.36 out of 5. This suggests that by actively recognising and encouraging good casework, managers could have a real positive impact on the morale of their team.

## Identifying Problems:

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: "People who point out problems are seen as rocking the boat".



Responses to this question were relatively evenly split again. 42% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed, and 37% disagreed or strongly disagreed. It is encouraging that more than 1 in 3 social workers disagrees, and feels comfortable to voice concerns or raise issues in their department. However, with 42% of respondents saying they agree, it is clear that there are many teams where the attitude towards those who point out problems is not constructive.

Social workers must be able to voice concerns or highlight issues with cases or practice, so long as this is done in a constructive way. By creating a working atmosphere where raising issues is effectively discouraged, there is an increased risk of mistakes being made and poor practice going unchecked.

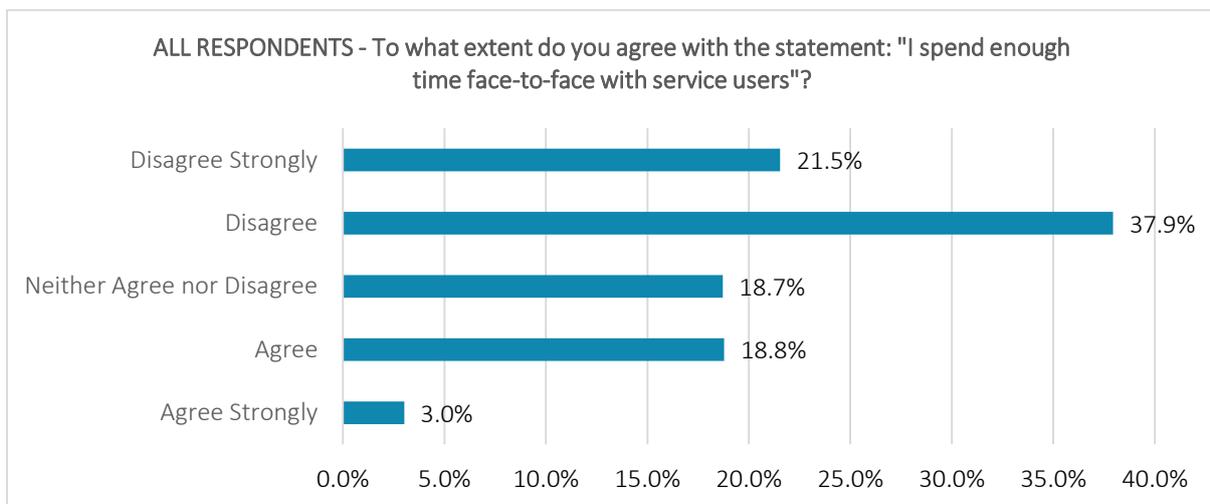
The role of senior managers and local authorities as a whole is critical in enabling practitioners to do good social work. The systems, targets, and frameworks they put in place will determine how able and supported their social workers are to do their job effectively. Demonstrating a strong understanding of the realities of social work, recognising good casework, and providing emotional support are key elements of this.

# Pressure & Time

Among the most widely documented issues facing social work practitioners are increasing or unmanageable caseloads, and a focus on targets and paperwork rather than the needs of service users. The 2014-2015 Social Work Survey delved deeper into each of these issues to explore their true impact:

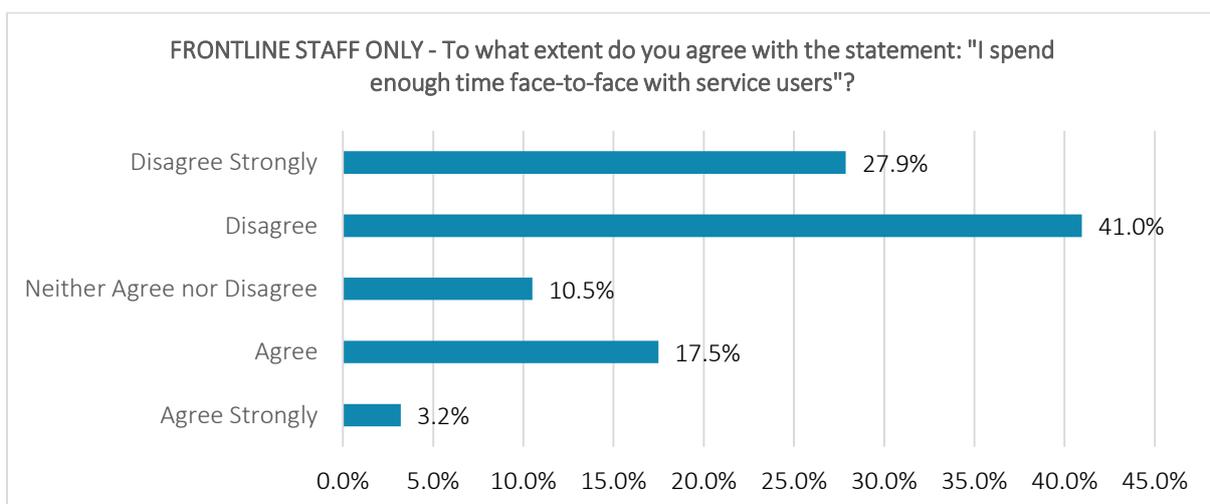
## Service Users:

Respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: "I spend enough time face-to-face with service users".



59% of all respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, indicating that they did not spend enough time with service users. 22% said they agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.

In social services departments, it is primarily the frontline staff whose roles involve face-to-face contact with service users. We considered the responses to the same question from only frontline staff (social workers, senior social workers and newly qualified social workers):



In this case, the results are even more significant; more than 2 in 3 (69%) disagreed or disagreed strongly with the statement. This indicates that a very substantial majority of frontline workers feel they are not spending enough time in direct contact with the vulnerable children and adults they are charged with protecting.

This is one of the key motivations for practitioners to enter the profession in the first place, and should be a fundamental part of the role. However, as the quotes below also emphasise, this is not the currently the case:

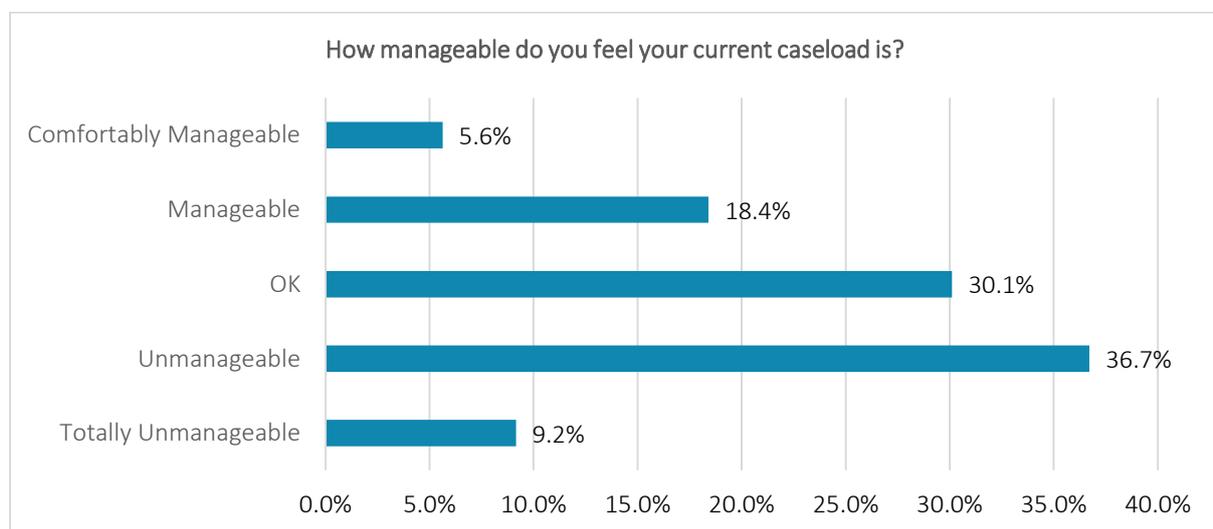
*“The majority of my time is spent doing paperwork rather than supporting children and families, which is disheartening.” (Children’s Newly Qualified Social Worker, North West)*

*“I came into social work to work alongside service users in a therapeutic manner, not to meet business targets.” (Mental Health Social Worker, North West)*

## Caseloads:

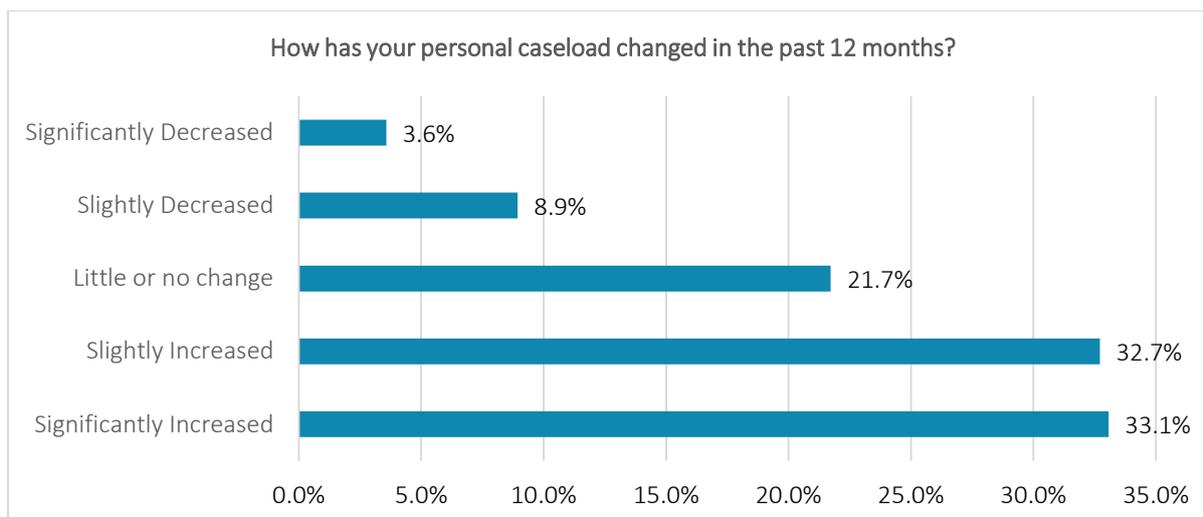
The issue of excessive caseloads is a well-documented one which has been affecting social workers for several years. We wanted to understand their impact on practitioners’ working lives, but comparing the relative size of caseloads in quantitative terms isn’t an effective method of analysis, as it ignores the complexity of cases, as well as the capacity and capabilities of each individual social worker.

Instead, we asked respondents to make a judgement on how ‘manageable’ they felt their current caseload was. This gives a reflection of whether they are able to cope and work effectively with it:



Of all respondents who held a caseload, 37% said their caseload was “unmanageable” and a further 9% said it was “totally unmanageable”. This means that in total, almost half of social workers (46%) have a caseload with which they find it difficult to cope.

It is also important to consider whether or not the situation is improving, and whether measures are being taken to remedy the situation. All respondents with a caseload were also asked how theirs had changed in the past 12 months:



In total, 66% of caseload-holding respondents said theirs had increased, with 33% saying it had slightly increased and a further 33% saying it had significantly increased. This means 2 in every 3 social workers are having to deal with more cases than they had 12 months ago, suggesting that the issue of unmanageable caseloads will continue to be exacerbated if these trends continue.

Our respondents' comments included:

*"The team is really struggling to do everything that is required. It means that less serious cases are not being dealt with properly and a lot of our interventions are when there is a crisis. Working in these conditions is difficult and heart-breaking for our team who want to have the time to help each child to the best of our abilities but unfortunately time does not allow."* (Children's Social Worker, South East)

*"The caseloads can be overwhelming and I feel the service users do not get the quality time when I go out to assess. There is always that feeling of rushing through to meet the deadlines and this is a big challenge."* (Adults' Social Worker, Midlands)

### Working Hours & Overtime:

**With caseloads often at unmanageable levels, there is significant anecdotal evidence of social workers putting in extra hours in order to get their job done. We sought to quantify this overtime, and asked respondents two key questions:**

- "How many hours are you contracted to work each week?"
- "How many hours do you actually work in a week?"

The average number contracted of hours was 35. However the average hours actually worked was 44. This means that a significant amount of overtime is being put in by social workers; an average of 9 hours per person per week. Over a typical working year of 48 weeks, that's equivalent to 432 hours, or 18 whole days.

The average social worker is working 1.26 times their contracted hours. This means that a group of 4 practitioners would actually be doing the work of 5 people. To put that into context, a social work department of 200 staff doing this level of overtime each week would actually be doing the work of 250 people. If social workers were only able to work for their contracted hours, the department would need to take on an additional 50 members of staff to cover the work currently being done in overtime.

The fact that so much overtime is being worked each week suggests that many teams are understaffed, and have become reliant on staff 'going the extra mile' in order to function. The figures also emphasise the real dedication that so many social work practitioners, from newly qualified level through to director level, have to

the cause. One respondent summarised this attitude, saying that they often worked extra hours to spend time with their service users because:

*“Families’ problems don’t just happen or require support between the hours of 9 – 5”. (Consultant Social Worker, East Anglia)*

However, social services departments should not have to rely on the dedication and commitment of their staff, working many hours of overtime each week, to help services cope with the challenge of tighter budgets, staffing cuts and increased referrals. These conditions could make it increasingly difficult for social work practitioners to do their best work, and are unsustainable in the long term.

Many of our respondents’ comments highlight the pressure that staff are under to deal with excessive caseloads, and the necessity to work extra hours in order to get their job done properly:

*“There’s an expectation that we will work all hours to get the job done - this forgets that we all have our own lives and families!” (Children and Families’ Social Worker, North West)*

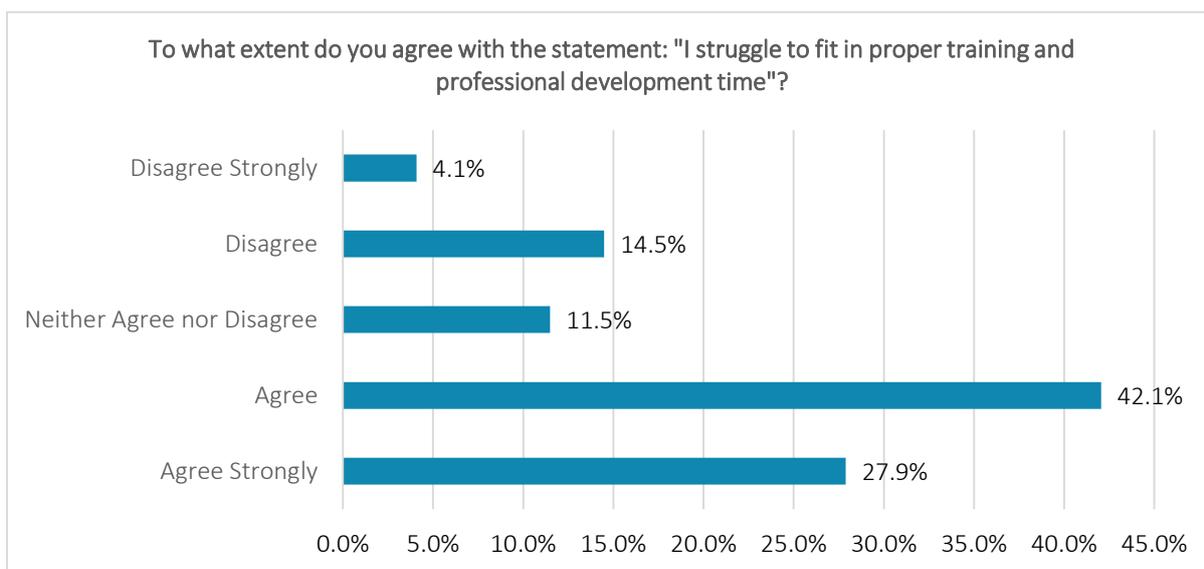
*“I want to be able to build relationships with service users and support them to appointments and to carry out tasks which will help them be more independent (shopping/bank etc.) but this is discouraged due to time restraints; there is not enough time for each service user.” (Mental Health Social Worker, Midlands)*

*“I was very pleased when Munro's recommendations were agreed but I feel that since this time paperwork has continued to increase meaning that direct work with children is sadly decreasing or leading to workers working very long hours which is impacting on stress levels and has led to many workers leaving the team.” (Children and Families’ Social Worker, South East)*

# Development & Training

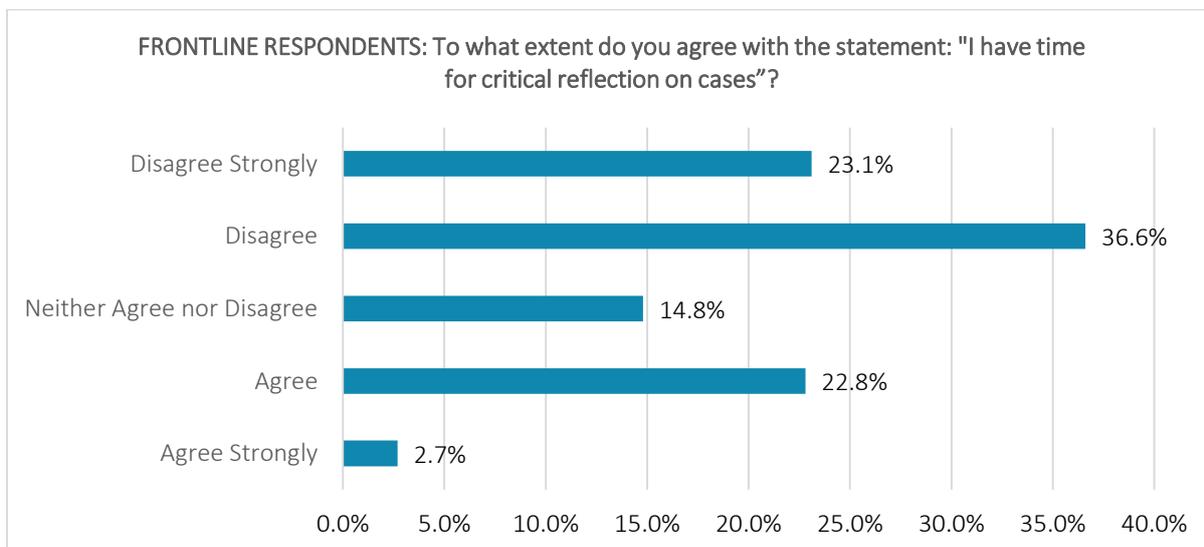
The Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) summarises continuous professional development as “the way professionals continue to learn and develop throughout their careers so they keep their skills and knowledge up to date and are able to work safely, legally and effectively.” Training and continuous professional development activities should be an essential element of work for social work practitioners of all levels.

The 2014-2015 Social Work Survey incorporated a number of questions on development and training, focusing on whether adequate time is available for practitioners to fit in training, critical reflection, and supervision. Firstly, all respondents were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: “I struggle to fit in proper training and professional development time”:



A significant majority (70%) said they agreed or agreed strongly with the statement, whereas only 19% disagreed or disagreed strongly. More than 2 in 3 social workers are struggling to find quality time for training and development, which is a real concern.

Respondents working in frontline roles were also asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: “I have time for critical reflection on cases”:

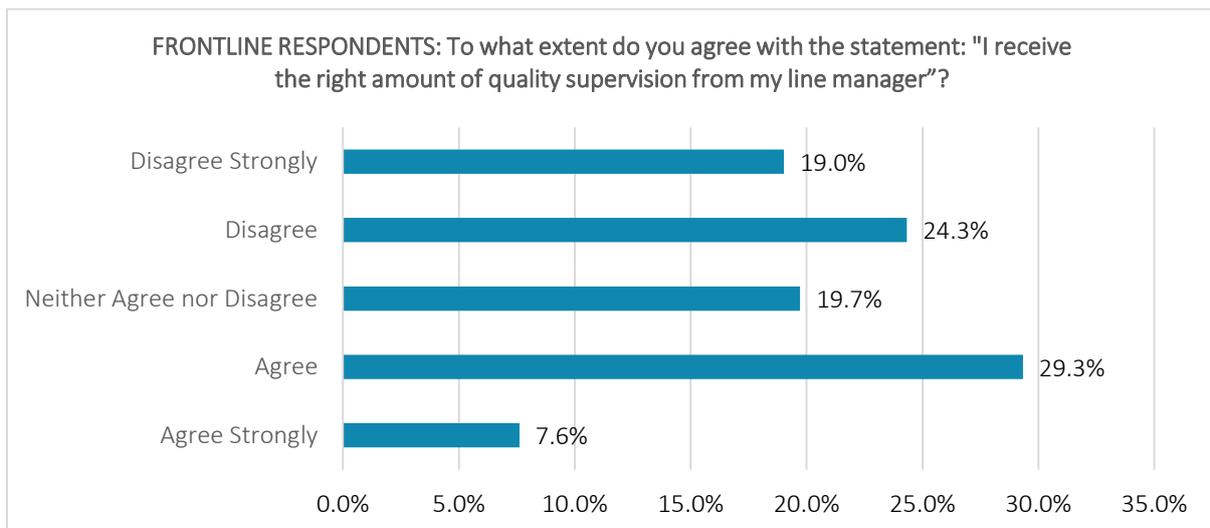


60% of respondents disagreed or disagreed strongly with this statement, and only 26% said they agreed or agreed strongly.

One children and families social worker in the North East explained the struggle they faced trying to find time for training and critical reflection:

*“Sometimes, I feel like all I do is spend time on catch up, moving from one priority task to another with no rest and time for reflection. It's like I don't have time to even take a breath. When I do get a break, in my own time, then the last thing I want to do is think about work or read something that's work related.” (Children’s Team Manager, North East)*

Finally, respondents working in frontline roles were asked to what extent they agreed with the statement: “I receive the right amount of supervision from my manager”:



Responses for this question were split significantly. 43% of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement, yet a further 37% either agreed or agreed strongly. It should be seen as a major positive that more than 1 in 3 social workers feel they are receiving the right amount of quality supervision from their line manager.

However, the fact that 43% of social workers do not feel they are receiving enough quality supervision is a concern. Together with the findings on critical reflection above, this presents a worrying picture of many workers operating in a reactive way and not stopping to think through with their supervisor whether they are doing what is best for the child or young person.

The following responses emphasise that when managers face time pressures, providing supervision to their staff is one of the first aspects to suffer:

*“Managers struggle with fitting in supervision ...they are more focused on performance indicators” (Adults’ Senior Social Worker, Yorkshire)*

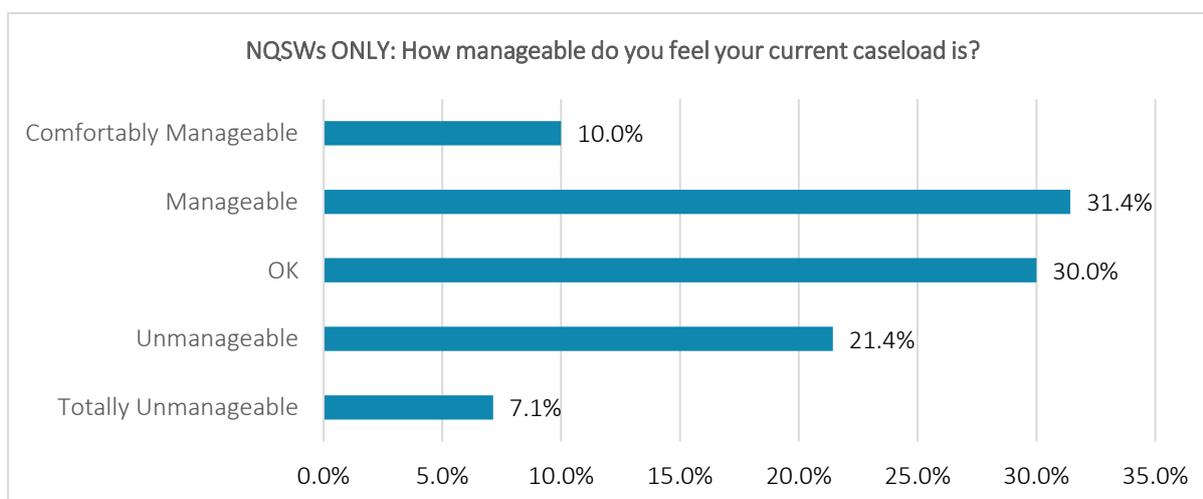
*“In the community mental health team where I was, management had been cut to a dangerous level. Social workers were not receiving adequate (sometimes no) supervision and were carrying very high caseloads. One of the reasons I left the team was because I was fearful of something happening.” (Children’s Social Worker, London)*

# Future of the workforce

The successful recruitment and retention of talented new staff will be one of the most influential factors in the long-term effectiveness of the UK's social work teams. For this reason, it is particularly important to consider the views of newly qualified social workers. The following results look solely at the responses of newly qualified social workers (NQSWS) to several of our key questions:

## Caseload:

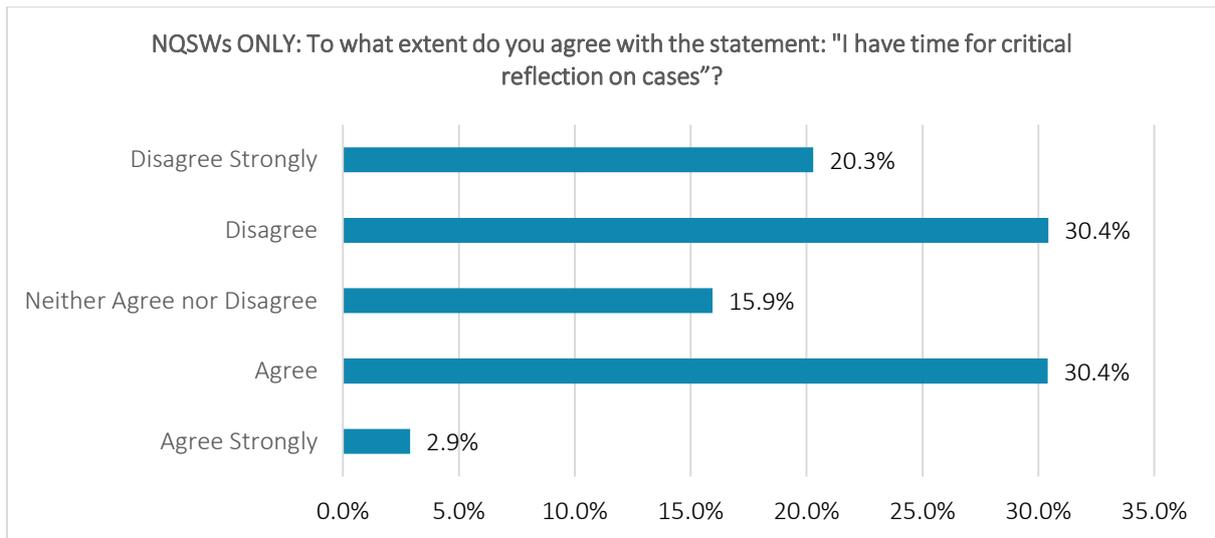
In order for NQSWS to succeed and progress in their formative years in the profession, it is essential that they are not overburdened with an excessive caseload.



Although 29% of NQSWS described their caseload as 'unmanageable' or 'totally unmanageable', it should be taken as a positive sign that 71% feel that their current caseload is "OK" or better. It is vitally important that workloads are manageable at this stage in a social worker's career, allowing them to focus upon professional development and reflective learning.

## Training & Development:





54% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I struggle to fit in proper training and professional development time”. When asked to what extent they agreed with the statement “I have time for critical reflection on cases”, 51% of respondents either disagreed or disagreed strongly. Training and critical reflection are important for social workers of all levels, but absolutely crucial for NQSWs.

In order for the next generation of skilled social work practitioners to develop effectively, more focus must be given to proper training and critical reflection. These quotes from newly qualified social workers illustrate that many are already facing time pressures:

“The majority of my time is spent doing paperwork rather than supporting children and families, which is disheartening” (*Children’s Newly Qualified Social Worker, North West*)

“I am struggling to complete all tasks in 7 and half hours (per day) and working around 10 hours with work still outstanding. However the management in the team has been supportive and helps you manage and prioritise.” (*Children’s Newly Qualified Social Worker, Yorkshire*)

# Motivation & Positivity

The results of the 2014-2015 Social Work Survey have highlighted a number of challenges facing practitioners across the UK. However, they also show that there is still a great deal of positivity in the workforce, even in the face of those challenges.

At the end of the survey, we offered all respondents the chance to share an example of a piece of work with service users that they were proud of. In total, more than 62% of frontline social workers took the opportunity to do so. Here is just a small sample of the positive stories that were shared:

- “One of my service users with a 15-year history of poly-substance abuse has nearly completed methadone detox and has been drug free for the last 15 months.” (*Adults’ Senior Social Worker, South West*)
- “My work with a gay Muslim teen, with very low self-esteem and self-worth and has seen him successfully gain part-time employment in retail, refocus on his education, and improve his attendance, such that the confidence with which he approaches his work and failed to display in school, is now showing signs of accompanying him through the school gate. Initially sporadic in his attendance and engagement in our sessions, this young man now seeks me out and self-regulates our sessions.” (*School Social Worker, Midlands*)
- “An older couple who had no support in place had both developed dementia and wanted to remain living together. The home was heavily cluttered and needed clearing out for better access and placement of a hospital bed for the husband as he was sleeping on the floor in the living room next to his wife. I developed a positive relationship with the couple as they had been independent all their lives. I had to be careful I was not being too intrusive but listening to them and respecting their wishes. Other professionals wanted the couple to be placed in a care home but this isn’t what the couple wanted. I however managed to stabilise the couple’s support package and arrange for them to spend their remaining years with a quality of life in their own home.” (*Senior Adult Services Social Worker, East Anglia*)
- “I have had the opportunity to support victims of child sexual exploitation through the daunting trial process, so that they could have their voice heard. I have also supported parents to have their voice heard due to their child being sexually exploited. I am proud of promoting working together within a multi-agency remit when working with child sexual exploitation. I now specialise in Child Sexual Exploitation and am very victim focused.” (*Child Sexual Exploitation Social Worker, London*)
- “A service user had lived in residential care for thirty years and I helped support the individual to move into the community. I found suitable accommodation and presented this case to panel. I secured a big package of care and worked with the service user and other professionals in the transition.” (*Adult Services Social Worker, North West*)
- “I changed one parent’s perceptions of social workers for a Child In Need case. She thought I was there to remove her children and was positively shocked when I could help her children receive free childcare, move house, provide help with accessing support groups for domestic abuse and children’s centre programmes.” (*Children’s Social Worker, North West*)
- “I dealt with a young service user with learning disabilities. She was socially isolated and was aggressive at home with her mother who was her main carer. I visited the service user and mother, did an assessment and established that service user was bored at home and mum needed a break as a carer. I arranged for the service user to go to a group within the local community 3 days a week where she made new friends, learned new tasks like using the computer and gardening. She now enjoys going to

the group and is less aggressive at home and mum also gets a break whilst she is at the activity centre. They have a better relationship now and the whole family is less stressed. Mum could not thank us enough because she was thinking of sending her daughter into supported living when she first came to us because of the stress level at home.” (*Social Worker, Midlands*)

- “I worked with a young child whose parents had mental health issues, substance misuse and issues around domestic abuse. The case escalated to a PLO meeting, however, with multi-agency working and utilising services to address these risks, the parents are now providing good care for their child whose outcomes have improved. The case is due to close.” (*Children’s Social Worker, North West*)
- “I was working with a five year old boy and unborn sibling whose mother was subjected to violence from the father. I worked with interpreters to help the mother have her voice heard as she did not speak English, was socially isolated and did not know how to bring about change in her situation. I was able to make a plan with both parents to ensure the care and protection of both children.” (*Children & Families’ Social Worker, London*)

**These stories, and the hundreds of others which haven’t been repeated here, give clear evidence that despite many challenges, there is still great work being done by practitioners throughout the UK.**

They show that many social workers are resilient, able to do positive work, and still motivated by the intrinsic value of helping others. There is significant expertise in social work departments that is not being used to its full effect due to dysfunctional working conditions. Rectifying this, and capitalising upon the workforce’s natural motivation to make a difference in people’s lives, will undoubtedly go a long way in helping their potential to be fully realised.

# About the authors

The 2014-2015 Social Work Survey and this results report were designed, written and produced by Liquid Personnel in partnership with Professor Eileen Munro of the London School of Economics.

## Professor Eileen Munro

Eileen Munro is Professor of Social Policy at the London School of Economics. She was a social worker for many years before taking up an academic career. She has studied philosophy, in particular the philosophy of science, and this has fuelled her interest in the reasoning skills needed in social work. Her current research interests include how best to combine intuitive and analytic reasoning in risk assessment and decision making in child protection, and the role of the wider organisational system in promoting or hindering good critical thinking. At the request of the Secretary of State for Education, she undertook a review of child protection in England and published the final report in April 2011, followed by a progress report in May 2012.

## Liquid Personnel

Liquid Personnel are a specialist social work recruitment consultancy, and one of the UK's leading suppliers of contract social work practitioners. Since 2010, Liquid have run the annual Social Work Survey initiative as a means of understanding, and raising awareness of, the opinions of the UK's social work workforce and the challenges they face.

## Jonathan Coxon

Jonathan Coxon is the co-founder and Managing Director of Liquid Personnel. He has more than 10 years' experience in the social work sector.

## Paul Cellini

Paul Cellini is Liquid Personnel's Communications Manager. He studied Marketing at Lancaster University and has several years of experience in qualitative and quantitative market research. He has worked for the company since 2010, leading the design and publishing of the Social Work Survey since its creation.

# Further information

If you would like to find out more about the survey, this results report, or any of the findings you have read about here, please feel free to contact us:

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