

Working conditions and wellbeing of social workers Summary of surveys 2020-22

Over the last two years, there have been several surveys on the working conditions and wellbeing of social workers. All surveys paint a very similar picture. Working conditions have been difficult for some time due to austerity measures implemented over the last decade and the situation has been exacerbated by the pandemic. There is a clear link between working conditions and wellbeing of social workers.

Overall stress scores for social workers were much higher than the UK average. Over a third have suffered an emotional response, either crying or feeling unwell, at their work at least once a week. In Scotland 50% described their current caseload as 'not at all' manageable. Working conditions, higher job demands and fewer resources were reported to be the reasons for a significant increase in burnout in the profession. Almost half expressed being slightly or extremely dissatisfied in their jobs. One third said they wanted to leave the profession completely. In view of Local Authorities in Scotland already finding it difficult to fill their posts this is an alarming situation.

Background

The pandemic has exacerbated and exposed many of the problems experienced by social workers. New working arrangements established by Covid protection measures and problems accessing PPE have contributed to worsening mental health and work conditions. Working from home for social workers leads to blurred boundaries between home and work. This means difficult conversations are happening at home without immediate peer or line manager support at hand. In addition, it creates challenge in terms of privacy due to family members, pets etc sharing the same space.

For people who need support, the required threshold to access assessment of services is so high that social workers are only able to intervene at the point of crisis. Caseloads involving high levels of risk are more complex which leads to less time, higher demands and pressure, fewer opportunities for professional development, little quality ethical supervision and high levels of stress.

In turn, individuals and families are not getting support when they require it, which is escalating problems further. Increased isolation and demand on services during the pandemic has compounded this issue and led to concerns that many people in need of help are falling through the gaps.

This briefing paper collates responses from social workers in Scotland and across the rest of the UK on these matters. The surveys and academic papers can be found in the end notes.

Mental health

Respondents in Scotland:

82% have experienced significant stress because of work and 57% say their mental health has got worse. 32% admitted they have suffered an emotional response, either crying or feeling unwell, at their work at least once a week¹.

The King's College London survey found that social workers were more likely to work from home than other care professions.⁵

70.9% of respondents from Scotland said they had difficulties switching off from work because of remote working arrangements, while 35.71% felt 'not valued at all' as social workers¹.

Work related quality of life and wellbeing reportedly decreased for social workers during the pandemic. Positive coping strategies were used less frequently and there was a higher risk of negative coping strategies (substance use, behavioural disengagement and self-blame).⁶

Respondents from across the UK:

82% said they suffer from stress at work, with 65% saying that their mental health is suffering because of their job.²

24% admitted to finding themselves suffering an emotional response, either crying or feeling unwell, to their work at least once a week, resulting in half of social workers considering leaving their posts³.

19.35% said that the pandemic had a high impact on their morale. Almost 40% experienced high or severe levels of either personal or work-related burnout and 69.4% said they had been overwhelmed by increased pressures.⁵

Pandemic related work responsibilities affected quality of home life, with working from home not enabling a break from work.⁶

Safety at work

Respondents in Scotland:

57% believe they have put their own health at risk because of working in the pandemic and 43% stated that they are considering leaving social work based on their experiences during the pandemic¹.

Respondents from across the UK:

54% of respondents from across the UK felt that PPE was inadequate, with a third having to provide their own face masks. Risk assessments were rated as ineffective by 51% of respondents.⁴

Over 11% experienced explicit or veiled threats with disciplinary action for complaining about unsafe situations.⁵

60% reported facing more moral and ethical dilemmas during the pandemic and 16% felt their rights had been breached.⁶

Communication with employers and managers worsened during the pandemic, particularly in relation to changes to work practices or wellbeing support, with relationships worsening as a result.⁷

Workload pressures

Respondents in Scotland:

68% expect to see an increase in referrals to social services and required assessments in the next year.¹

50% described their current caseload as 'not at all' manageable.¹

96% believe that lighter caseloads would mean that children would be better protected.¹

Respondents from across the UK:

58% their caseloads are unmanageable. 94% expect to see referrals increase in 2022, with 71% saying they expected to be "inundated".³

97% believe that the vulnerable would be better protected if caseloads were lighter.³

Social workers experienced a significant increase in work related and client related burnout during the pandemic brought on by changes in working conditions, higher job demands and fewer resources⁶.

Increased workload pressures led to far greater levels of overtime, with social care workers and social workers the most impacted occupational groups.⁵

Working conditions and safety (pre-pandemic)

Stress scores in the surveys for social workers were much higher than the UK average. Close to half expressed being slightly or extremely dissatisfied in their jobs. Two-thirds reported attending work at least twice over a 12-month period when they were so ill that they should have been on sick leave⁷.

Social workers scored the level of demand at work, the level of control over their workload, relationships with others, changes in conditions and understanding of their role at work as being worse than 95% of the UK national average. Poor scoring in these areas over an extended period is likely to lead to stress and mental health related sickness absence⁷.

A quarter of social workers were exposed to negativity online at least once a month. 40% were exposed to negative behaviours from service users. One third said they wanted to leave the profession completely.⁷

Impact on services

Respondents in Scotland:

36% say that cannot do their job to the standard they would like. ¹

39% said they cannot reach the most vulnerable. ¹

46% have raised concerns about a child where they felt that appropriate action was not taken.¹

Respondents from across the UK:

48% had raised concerns about cases where they did not believe appropriate action was taken. Of these, 29% have highlighted this happening in more than five different cases³.

49% were frightened that the most vulnerable people were not reached through digital interventions⁵.

60% believed that their ability to safeguard children or adults was worse during Covid and 27% reported breaches of rights for people using services⁶.

Social workers were the highest responding occupational group (69.4%) to describe their profession as being “overwhelmed by increased pressures” because of the pandemic⁵.

Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

In addition to the surveys on wellbeing and working conditions, SASW has conducted research with social workers in Scotland about their experiences of racism and prejudice. In July 2021, we published a report highlighting our findings.⁸ Included amongst these is evidence that racism exists within the social work profession. It is experienced by social workers and students in both employment and educational settings, from colleagues, managers and people who use services. Reporting systems often fail those who highlight incidences of racism and consequently discourage reporting. The impact of racism on wellbeing of BAME social workers is significant. It is harmful not only to social workers who experience it, but also to people who use services and to the profession as a whole.

These findings are echoed in recent research in England, which highlighted the prevalence of racist attitudes in social work and reported that 1 in 10 social workers consider leaving their job due to racism.⁹

SASW is taking action to try and improve the experience of social worker from minoritised backgrounds. For these efforts to be effective social work leaders and the Scottish Government must recognise that racism exists and commit to positive anti-racist action, making changes which improve diversity and inclusion, leading to greater equality and wellbeing.

New Research

Professor Jermaine Ravalier from Bath Spa University, the British Association of Social Work (BASW), the Social Worker's Union (SWU) and the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) are jointly carrying out a research study into global working conditions in social work.

The research is investigating how working conditions may be influencing psychological wellbeing and stress levels of social workers. A UK-wide survey, which closes on 31st March 2022, is being used to provide the data.

Details on the research can be found [here](#).

Social Worker Wellbeing & Working Conditions: Good Practice Toolkit

In November 2020, BASW developed a wellbeing and working conditions good practice toolkit aimed at accelerating action to improve the experience of social workers in the workplace. The toolkit is accessible [here](#).

SASW

The Scottish Association of Social Workers (SASW) aims to improve professional support, recognition, and rights at work for social workers, better social work for the benefit of people who need our services, and a fairer society.

Contact SASW at scotland@basw.co.uk

¹ Social Worker's Union/LBC Radio survey of social workers- January 2022- Scotland sample- 28 respondents.

² Social Worker's Union/LBC Radio UK-wide survey of social workers- January 2022- 824 respondents.

³ Social Worker's Union/LBC Radio UK-wide survey of social workers- January 2022- 824 respondents.

⁴ Social Worker's Union UK-wide survey- June 2020- 363 respondents.

⁵ Social Worker's Union UK-wide survey- June 2020- 363 respondents.

⁶ BASW's Social Worker Wellbeing and Working Conditions: Good Practice Toolkit

⁵ King's College London: Health and social care workers' quality of working life and coping while working during the COVID19 pandemic: Findings from a UK Survey Phase 3: 10th May 2021-2nd July 2021

⁶ Ulster University: Decreasing Wellbeing and Increasing Use of Negative Coping Strategies: The Effect of the Covid-19 Pandemic on the UK Health and Social Care Workforce.

⁷ UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing. Bath Spa University. (August 2018)

⁸ Racism in Scottish Social Work: a 2021 snapshot (July 2021)

⁹ Social Work Today: One in ten social workers has considered leaving their job because of racism (March 2022)