

# 80-20 Campaign

How much 'direct' time do social workers spend with children and families?



This work was conducted by BASW England, in partnership with the Children's Commissioner's Office, as part of our attempts to improve working conditions for social workers, and in turn improve outcomes for children.

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*Containing statements and quotes from social workers*

**"If only we could do the job we all came into the profession to do rather than being a slave to the computer and organisation bureaucracy."**

Children and Families Social Worker



# Foreword

All good social work is dependent on relationships – and the strength of social worker’s relationships with service users determines the outcomes.

But evidence shows that relationship based social work is under serious threat from burdensome systems and increasing demand, coupled with limiting resources.

The past 30 years has seen a significant reduction in the opportunities to work therapeutically with families, arguably creating two generations of social workers who have become too dependent on systems and completing tasks.

A watershed moment should have been provided in the Eileen Munro review (2011) which highlighted bureaucratic processes, outdated computer systems and too much red tape and paperwork as obstacles to good practice.

Yet, over the past few years BASW members have repeatedly told us that they are still spending too much time in front of their computers rather than undertaking direct work with children.

Furthermore, the Children’s Commissioner’s Office (CCO) 2018 Stability Index heard directly from children saying they did not see or hear from their social workers enough.

Therefore, BASW England decided to see how widespread the problem was by surveying our members on the time they spent doing direct work versus administrative duties.

Additionally, we set out to find examples of best practice to help shape the environment for children’s social workers across England to spend more direct, relationship-based time with children.

Ultimately, the 80-20 Campaign is an attempt to eventually reverse the current situation which sees social workers spending close to 80 per cent of their time doing admin, while only 20 per cent of their time is spent in direct contact, building relationships with children and families.

**Maris Stratulis**  
BASW England national director



**Andy Gill**  
Chair of BASW England



# Methodology

The research was conducted via an online survey questionnaire and participation was open to all BASW England members.

The questionnaire comprised a series of open and closed questions, collecting quantitative data about how social workers' time is split between direct contact with children and families and on administrative work.

The questionnaire also gathered qualitative data on social workers' experiences of how their time is split, how it affects their work with children and families and their effectiveness as social workers.

350 fully completed responses and six partially completed responses were submitted. To ensure consistency throughout the data analysis process the data set was restricted to the 350 fully completed submissions.

Of these submissions, the respondents were not categorised via job role or employer. The questionnaire was open to all local authority employees, agency workers and independents.

**"The 80-20 Campaign is an important opportunity to look at the impact of the direct time social workers spend with families, and at how we can improve the experiences of children in care"**

**Anne Longfield OBE  
Children's Commissioner**



# Results

The questionnaire asked six questions based on an average working week:

- **How many hours do you work?**
- **How many hours do you spend face-to-face with children, young people, parents or carers?**
- **How many hours do you spend on the phone with children, young people, parents or carers?**
- **How many hours do you spend on reflective practice?**
- **How many hours do you spend on a computer or doing paperwork?**
- **Please provide comments on your current balance between direct relationship based work versus paperwork and admin duties.**

There were 350 fully completed responses. From these, on average, social workers worked **45 hours a week**, of which **11 hours were spent face-to-face** with children, young people, parents and carers. This equates to just over 20%.

29 hours a week were spent on a **computer or doing paperwork** which accounts for 65% of the average working week.

Another highlight from the report is that 32% of respondents said they spent **no time on reflective practice** per week and 42% said they spent **less than an hour**.

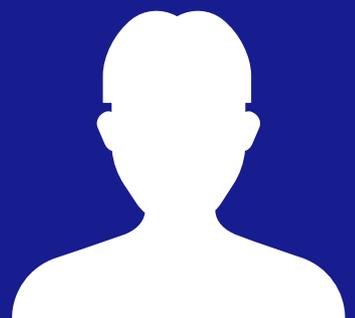
The analysis of these results shows that, from this sample, social workers are spending only around 20% of their working week (11 hours) in direct face-to-face contact with children and families, with a further seven hours of (attempted) contact over the phone.

This is clearly not enough and shows that regarding the division of time between direct work and admin, frontline practice hasn't improved since the Munro review in 2011 – arguably it has got worse.

Meanwhile, there seems to be a complete dearth of reflective practice, something so crucial to the learning of a social worker, the development of their skill-set and the progression of their effectiveness.

**“The most common frustration I hear from the social work staff I supervise is that they do not have enough time to complete direct work with young people”**

**Children and Families Social Worker**





**On Average, 11 hours per week are spent face-to-face with children, young people, parents or carers**



**On average, 29 hours a week are spent on a computer or doing paperwork**



32% of respondents said they spent no time on reflective practice per week and 42% said they spent less than an hour



# Summary

Whether they are among professionals, or with children, families and communities, relationships have been described as the place 'where most of the important things happen, for good or for ill, whether social workers recognise it or not' (Howe, 1998).

Social work is a human service and is most likely to achieve its aims through building collaborative and constructive relationships with people.

However, relationships in social work are particularly complex. Social workers often have a regulatory role that is about enforcing social norms and using authority in an empathetic and respectful way, e.g. safeguarding, youth justice, and mental health.

Furthermore, social work relationships are often with people who are living in challenging social circumstances and experiencing vulnerability, anxiety and depression which is expressed through resistant, hostile or highly unpredictable behaviours.

In response social workers will need to use their warmth, empathy, compassion and authority to engage the full participation of service users in assessment, planning, review and decision making.

Forming and maintaining these relationships can be demanding, so practitioners need to develop emotional resilience and self-awareness as well as maintain appropriate professional boundaries in challenging circumstances.

Relationship-based practice thus requires skilled and reflective use of self, informed by critical reflection and analysis, and augmented by creativity and curiosity. Such relational, reflective practice cannot happen in a vacuum and must be supported by an organisational environment that encourages learning and creates spaces for emotionally-informed and supportive supervision.

The term 'relationship based social work' is not an add on, it is fundamentally about building relationships and that takes time, investment and commitment. More direct contact is what children are telling us they need – and it is what social workers want – so we need to listen to what they are telling us.

The 80-20 Campaign is an opportunity to redress this imbalance. The stakes are high; if we don't coproduce a new definition of what "good" social work looks like then the profession will be further deskilled and narrowed.

Now is the time to stand up and get involved in this campaign, not only for future generations but more importantly for the vulnerable children and adults who depend on our ability to make a lasting difference.

**"I have not been observed in direct work with any family or young person in five years, yet my paperwork is reviewed regularly."**

Children and Families Social Worker



# Recommendations

There are pathways to better practice, actual practical solutions that we have identified which we will be taking to local authorities, service users and the wider sector with the aim of working with them collaboratively to implement. We want to co-produce a better way based on best practice and what works.

1. Investing in better IT systems which don't require duplication. The most common reported IT problems were slow running computers, unreliable photocopiers and case recording systems going offline.
2. Another example is controlling admin through dedicated admin staff. Most social workers agree that they currently do tasks that can be done by an administrator. Examples including minute-taking, typing and scanning.
3. We know admin teams have been cut back, leaving remaining staff stretched or social workers expected to do their own admin. But by cutting down on unnecessary admin and providing team administrators to assist, social workers can be left to do the real relationship building work, thus cutting down the workload and reducing the need for extra, arguably more expensive, agency staff.
4. We'll also be advocating for a change in management thinking, to support managers and supervisors to move away from focusing on process indicators and targets and find ways to highlight that direct work provides better outcomes for children.
5. Leaders and managers should do everything possible to boost staff pride in their work, by supporting them to do what they trained for, by having autonomy to do what matters for their service users, and spending more time engaging in direct work.
6. Self-efficacy is another area BASW keenly feels needs addressing. Self-efficacy in social workers is boosted by opportunities to identify transferable knowledge and skills from other areas of their work.
7. Supervisors who are themselves skilled and confident in face-to-face work are best equipped to support social workers, plan direct work and reflect upon it afterwards, so that any encounter with a family becomes a learning opportunity and something upon which self-efficacy can be built.
8. In parallel, BASW will continue our campaign to lobby government against anti-austerity measures that increase poverty, cause families to break down and thus become one of the drivers behind year-on-year increases in referral rates and child protection measures.

**For further information email:**

**[england@basw.co.uk](mailto:england@basw.co.uk)**

**0121 389 9255**

## Appendices - quotes from survey respondents



*"I am a team manager, so this is not a true indication of frontline social work, yet I know the most common frustration I hear from the social work staff I supervise is that they do not have enough time to complete direct work with young people."*

*"It is incredibly paperwork heavy and unlike the expected outcome from Munro it appears to have gone more that way with the feeling that assessments need to be more thorough and robust, in turn less family friendly."*

*"It is awful, way out of balance and due to the reliance on emails to carry out a lot of the work."*

*"This is totally skewed in favour of administration and is the focus of supervision. This bias is shown in the fact that assessments/reports are scrutinised and send back to me for amending, but I have not been observed in direct work with any family/young person in 5 years, but my paperwork is reviewed regularly."*

*"Far too much of my time is recording because of performance indicators and recording all my conversations."*

*"You have no time to meet with families as your continually bogged down by paperwork. Our admin has been cut so all paperwork is down to us. So, they are basically paying SW double the amount to do admin. In amongst this there is no time for reflection or to keep up to date with the latest SW publications."*

*"Social work is becoming more focused on figures and statistics. Pressure is put on staff to ensure paperwork is completed. In turn this results in less time working with families as you never have enough time to write everything up."*

*"I spend 25 hours a week driving or travelling."*

*"Our computer system always wants more and more information. It's like feeding an animal!"*

*"Too much compliance focussed, too high caseloads; you should also have a section on time spent with professionals, this takes up a few hours a week too."*

*"Unfortunately, paperwork and administrative tasks far outweigh any meaningful direct work with children and families. If only we could do the jobs we all came into the profession to do rather than being a slave to the computer and organisation bureaucracy."*





*"One day per month our team is banned from undertaking visits, and phone calls are frowned upon. Last Thursday of the month is dedicated to online paperwork to try and get the best data figures."*

*"Extremely heavy admin duties with increasing pressure to complete reports and assessments when the same information can be found elsewhere in the child's file. There is so much repetition of information. This puts huge pressure on my time and does not benefit the child whatsoever."*

*"When I am able to I spend time with children on a 1 to 1 basis I am able to remember why I do this job."*

*"I spend the majority of my time writing about children's & family life, as opposed to providing intervention & face to face direct work to inform my understanding."*

*"Failure to complete paperwork results in threats of performance management reviews, which is the reason many colleagues in my team work until the early hours of the morning (like 3am) or all through the night to complete the required paperwork."*

*"There appears to be numerous forms which are required to be completed due to the hoops required to get through to actually secure additional funding or PLO for children."*

*"A task which would take 10-minute conversation ends up taking 30 minutes. For example, sometimes I'll call professionals for information & they'll request its put in writing or request I send the professional an email. This results in me being required to record a telephone call, writing an email request to our administration team on the child's electronic file, as the local authority does not have individual secure email accounts & then recording that its sent on the system."*

*"I try to maintain a balance - for me working in a large rural county it's also the balance between travel time, paperwork and direct time with families. Most of my families are a 50 miles round trip from my office base, and an 80-mile round trip from my home. I am often in the car for 3-4 hours a day."*

*"I really value reflection as social worker and feel I wouldn't be making accurate assessments without it. However, reflecting is time consuming and I often end up doing this outside of working hours."*

*"Sometimes the paperwork can feel unhelpful and overly bureaucratic, but it can be helpful in helping you to gather your thoughts and is important in terms of accurate record keeping for a child's file. Being able to work at home helps in terms of taking some traveling time out of the equation."*





*"Direct work is what it's all about. I do feel supported and encouraged by my authority to do direct work. However, I would say that caseloads and demand often mean we don't do as much as we would like to."*

*"Working in front line CP is far outweighed by paperwork, but we are a front-line service, how can a front-line service work efficiently when 90% of your time is spent completing paper work?"*

*"It's not possible to build relationships from behind a screen, I often work late at night to record case notes to ensure they are in the system! Child seen, seen alone appears to be more important than what the content of the discussion was! It's sad! "*

*"Paperwork is a huge part of my working week. 15 hours is probably the minimum. I work in a rural area, so we spend a considerable number of hours a week driving around. The above hours do not account for meetings, hearings, emails or informal discussions with other professionals. I feel out of control if my paperwork is not kept on top of, for example daily recordings. I then feel immense pressure when I know I have reports due - this is even worse when you have families in need of your support. I would drop paperwork to support families and run the risk of reports being late. You feel like a rubbish social worker and are likely to be miscalled by others but at least you know you've helped the family in time of need. We get very little time to carry out one to one session with children and even less time to do one to one session with parents. It really is a constant battle, but I do love my job."*

*"Process and stats driven. Leaders pay lip service. Stats are more important to leaders and OFSTED."*

*"Too much administrative duties, not enough time for therapeutic interventions."*

*"I feel that Social Workers are highly involved in administration work. This is hindering our work and we are no longer being involved in direct work. Social Work has become a tick box exercise."*

*"Paperwork takes over the time to spend face to face."*

*"As a part time practitioner 18 hours a week it can be difficult to manage admin tasks, direct work, group work and duty alongside my colleagues."*

*"Unrealistic expectations placed on social workers to complete paperwork tasks within given timescales - referrals alone take up a significant amount of time - not to mention minuting the meetings we also chair and ensuring assessments and reports are completed by the deadlines!"*





*"I feel that due to needing to evidence my work, I dedicate more time to my paperwork than spending one to one with families and children, I am forever playing catch up as the caseload exceeds the amount I of paperwork I can cover in a working week. Or I end up giving extra hours to family visits which means I work over my contractual hours every week. This is to avoid me losing time in office hours where I can complete paperwork."*

*"An assessment is due, but I have half the time to complete it. Pay does not reflect the complexities of this job, including admin tasks. Bring back more admin support, so we don't have to take Minutes, type them up and get them sent out ourselves – ridiculous inefficiency."*

*"Paperwork is killing social work. I spend so much time recording and writing reports that I feel like I'm in an admin role rather than a social worker. It's horrible and not what I signed up for. I get reprimanded if I chose to prioritise time with clients over recording. Everyone feels like they are drowning in the paperwork. It makes you feel like you're not doing a good job and that is very demoralising."*

*"It is interesting that you ask about reflective practise, once past the stage of AYSE this is not seen as important as it doesn't relate to a PI."*

*"The state of SW at the moment is poor, I realise there are some LA's who are managing to get good or outstanding, these feel few and far between and not 'usual' in my experience. The state of paper work is complex and ridiculous, it is a multi-layered problem. For starters the people who design the workflow and IT systems, don't use them every day. They are not tested sufficiently and are weak in many areas. They do not prepopulate key information such as the current worker, child / family details etc, they duplicate with some systems creating a child and family assessment and an assessment of needs at the same time, essentially two assessments for the same purpose, but one must be completed to create the workflow of a care plan? This is a waste of time and inflexible, similar is the inflexibility when a worker leaves and work cannot be assigned over or closed by management? The whole system of IT use in SW needs to be coalface led by the people who are using it every day, not by managers who don't have to do this, also more people need involving in this, the type of people putting their hand up are likely to be process / admin minded, but this doesn't mean they produce a workable system. The IT side needs sorting as it is killing SW."*

*"In terms of performance indicators - PI's this is an area that is destroying SW, essentially the fulfilment of this above anything else is undermining, resulting in SW's being told to visit children that aren't their caseload, to meet figures, as a one off this is OK, but as a policy to be compliant, children are getting a different SW each visit, with CP and LAC this means they may not build any relationship with anyone as for the last 5 months they may have only seen their own SW twice, with the other visits being completed by anyone available, no consistency and unlikely to get anything meaningful from the child."*





*"These same indicators have also eroded practise, with management putting that much pressure on them that people have started visiting to their timetable only, so even if something happens for the child if a CP / LAC visit isn't due and the matter isn't one of S47, then it is likely people don't go. Children are being visited for literally only the visits required to meet OFSTEAD requirements in many LA's. This means NQSW's are being brought into this weak practise thinking it is 'normal' to do the minimum and this is it?"*

*"The work we do has become managerial and self-serving, we have distanced ourselves from the people we work with and are now more interested than ever in protecting the organisation, saving money and budgeting. The recent discussion out of remit in removing the role of the IRO is an example of this, instead this role would be better to be set up completely independently with local advocacy services, CAFCASS and to have a wider remit about participation projects, training with the LA and other agencies and life story work."*

*"I have some sympathy for the children and families we work with at the moment as I do not think we are doing a fair and transparent job at this time. We hardly spend time with them have few resources, everyone just wants to signpost to someone else who then just signposts again and so on. It is disconnecting for workers and families."*

*"There's no balance. I complete 'direct work' to satisfy targets, it's not meaningful by any stretch of the imagination. I'm basically a data input clerk."*

*"Far too much time spent on paperwork. If we had administrative staff again we'd have more time for direct work!!! It does not make any sense (including financially) to have SWs slowly tapping away on the system when they could be making a difference in the community & in people's lives. (Also; why do the big bosses have PAs but hardly use them?!?!)"*

*"I am lucky as palliative care social work is based in hospice. I write brief notes but most of work is direct with patients/family member/children. Therapeutic support both pre and post death."*

*"Direct work is often done outside of normal working hours as I try and make sure I see my kids more often/spend quality time doing good direct work. I must prioritise office work often."*

*"I don't feel I have enough direct time with children to build relationships and gain an accurate representation of their voice."*

*"As administrative support, welfare rights and other supports are cut, the ball falls every time at our feet. I spend most of my day at a computer or on the phone. Seeing the families, I work with is becoming a 'luxury'!"*

