



UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing

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This work was conducted as an independent study into social worker wellbeing. Neither researcher is employed by either the SWU or BASW, and the findings are completely independent of these organisations. They have had no influence on what is reported here.

The views expressed are those of the authors alone.

About the Researchers

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Executive Summary and Aims

BACKGROUND

The 2017 'Working Conditions and Stress' report demonstrated that, compared to the national average, UK social workers are exposed to chronically poor working conditions. These working conditions were subsequently influencing numerous outcomes including high levels of dissatisfaction in the role, high levels of presenteeism (i.e. attending work while ill enough that they should be taking sick leave), and high levels of turnover intentions.

It is widely accepted that chronic exposure to stress in the workplace can have significant and serious impacts on employee health. For example, researchers have demonstrated that chronic stress can impact physiological (1), psychological (2), and behavioural health (3). Stress and mental health are therefore the number one cause of long-term sickness absence (i.e. that which lasts 4 weeks or more) in the UK, and number two behind colds/flu for shorter-term absences (4). Stress therefore not only affects individual employees, but subsequently their employing organisations. For example, stress accounted for over 11 million working days lost in 2016, accounting for 24 days per employee per episode. Other individual/organisational impacts of stress include poorer job satisfaction, higher intentions to leave the job, and increased levels of presenteeism (5).

OBJECTIVES

The main objective of this report is to identify what working conditions are like for UK social workers in 2018, and the influence that these have on stress. Furthermore – and perhaps most importantly – we will look at what social workers believe need to be done in order to improve working conditions, and subsequently reduce stress and related outcomes.

METHODOLOGY

An email containing a link to the online survey was sent to all members of the British Association of Social Work (BASW) and Social Workers Union (SWU) in August 2018. There was also a concerted social media push on Twitter and Facebook. The survey included a number of different measures. Working conditions was measured using the 'Management Standards Indicator Tool', which measures levels of seven working conditions (demands, control, managerial support, peer support, relationships, control, and change) which are likely to lead to stress-related sickness absence if left in chronically poor levels. We also measured stress using the Perceived Stress Scale, job satisfaction, presenteeism, and both migration turnover intentions (i.e. intentions to leave current job, but stay in the social work profession) and attrition turnover intentions (i.e. intentions to leave the social work profession altogether). Furthermore, in one open-ended question we asked how respondents would make the role less stressful.

FINDINGS

Concurrent with 2017 findings, we demonstrated that working conditions (irrespective of job role within social work) are still chronically poor – worse than the UK national average. The only slight exception to this is the amount of support received from peers, which was relatively positive. However, in comparison to 2017 figures, 2018 working conditions are even worse – it would appear that over the past 12 months, working conditions have consistently worsened. Similarly, we found that levels of job dissatisfaction were high, as well turnover intentions (although migration was much higher than attrition), presenteeism, and stress. In fact, each of these measures were higher than the 2017 figures, again demonstrating that each are progressively worsening (*note: 'migration' figures were not obtained for 2017. Once again, the demands associated in social work was the one consistent working condition which had the biggest influence on the outcome measures included in the study (stress, job satisfaction, presenteeism, and turnover intentions).

IMPROVEMENTS

Importantly, a number of ways to improve working conditions were suggested in thousands of feedback comments from social workers. Firstly, caseload was the number of source of workload in social workers. We suggest therefore that social workers should have a protected caseload, and that cases should be co-allocated when particularly difficult. Additionally, managerial pressures are acknowledged, and managers should only line manage a protected number of employees at any one time. Relatedly, repetitive administrative tasks should be removed and IT used to help reduce the administrative burden. Indeed, while it is acknowledged in this report that the key would be to employ both more trained and untrained social services staff, it is also acknowledged that this may not be possible. Again, similar to 2017 we suggest improvements in the provision of reflective supervision. Finally work practices need improvement. Greater physical provision in terms of hot desking is suggested, as is the need for a space away from the work desk for non-work activities (lunch; reflection). A more widely implemented flexible working policy would also be advantageous, as would the necessary IT resources to support this.

CONCLUSION

To conclude therefore, working conditions of social workers are still operating at poor levels and adding to high levels of stress, presenteeism, job dissatisfaction, and intentions both to leave the current job and the social work profession as a whole. Indeed, each of these measures when compared to 2017 levels where possible are worse in 2018. However, we have seen that social workers are dedicated to their service users and clearly want greater resources available for them, and we have demonstrated a number of improvements which can be implemented at a political, professional organisation, employing organisation, and managerial level which would improve on these outcomes. This would thus improve outcomes for both social workers and their service users.

1. Introduction and Background

Here, we will outline the previous research, rationale, and aims of the project.

1. Introduction and Background

In March 2017 Dr Ravalier, alongside the Social Workers Union (SWU) and British Association of Social Work (BASW), released the first of the annual 'Social Worker Working Conditions' surveys. The aim of that survey was to determine levels of working conditions and stress for the UK's social workers. We found that, when compared to the UK national average, working conditions are extremely poor. These poor conditions are exacerbating stress-related symptomology, and adding to high levels of intentions to leave the job and presenteeism levels (5). At the same time, we demonstrated that social workers are engaged in their work in spite of these working conditions (6). They therefore enjoy the job, despite the working conditions, and are performing the role to a high standard due to their love for the job.

This report will demonstrate the findings of the second annual 2018 Social Worker Working Conditions survey.

1.1 Working Conditions & Stress in Social Work (2017)

Workplace stress is an important consideration for employees and employers alike. In 2004, the UK Health and Safety executive released the 'management standards' approach to dealing with stress in the workplace (7). This approach suggests that there are seven predominant working conditions (also known as psychosocial hazards) which, if left in a chronically poor state for an extended period of time, can lead to stress sickness absence in employees. These working conditions are 'everyday' stressors which are continuously (or repeatedly) present over an extended period of time. Indeed, numerous researchers argue that while acute stressors such as the exposure to death and violence are immediately stressful and difficult to deal with (8), it is this more continuous and chronic-lasting stress which is most likely to impact individual psychological and physiological health (9).

Alongside the management standards approach, the Health and Safety Executive also released a survey tool to measure the seven working conditions (demands, control, managerial support, peer support, relationships, role, and change – see section 2.1 for more information on each of these). The working conditions have subsequently been shown to predict stress and related outcomes in a number of public and private sector organisations such as the police (10), teachers (11), and privately-employed care workers (12), among others.

The 2017 social work working conditions report used the Health and Safety Executive's management standards, as well as measure of job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and presenteeism. Working conditions were found to be chronically poor – six out of seven conditions measured in the management standards approach (demands, control, managerial support, relationships, role, and change) were at chronically poor levels. Similarly, we found high levels of dissatisfaction at work, intentions to leave the job, working while so ill individuals should be taking sick leave, and stress.

However, we also demonstrated that social workers are generally very engaged in their work, meaning that they work with a distinct sense of vigour, dedication and absorption *in spite* of the negative working conditions. This suggests, therefore, that despite working conditions (and in particular the workload placed upon social workers in the UK) being chronically poor and in need of significant improvement, social workers are still highly engaged in their jobs. However, these working conditions mean that a significant number of social workers are working while ill, dissatisfied in their jobs, and intending to leave their current role.

1.1.2 Influence of the 2017 Report

It is important that we as researchers demonstrate the influence that the 2017 survey has had thus far, in order to demonstrate the necessity of continuing on with the annual survey. Since the release

of the 2017 report, we have been able to spread the main messages of the findings to a variety of audiences. Firstly, the 2017 report led to the 'Respect for Social Work' campaign by BASW and SWU ([see here](#)). The campaign has since received a significant amount of press and media coverage, including coverage on the BBC news, Sky news, Channel 4 news, the Guardian and Observer, amongst many others. The work has also led to a 90-minute House of Lords debate led by Lord Kennedy of Southward ([see here for video](#)) and the work has meant numerous questions have been asked of ministers in the House of Parliament regarding caseloads and the impact of regulations on social workers. We have also spoken at a number of national, international, and profession-related conferences.

1.2 Stress, Mental Health, and Employee Health

It is widely understood by academic researchers, organisational leaders, and increasingly employees that chronic, extended periods of stress in the workplace can have significantly negative influences on employee health and wellbeing. For example, the INTERHEART studies (1) found that chronic stress in the workplace was as strongly associated with the development of coronary heart disease (and related syndromes) as well-known and widely-researched risk factors such as high blood pressure and smoking. Similarly, chronic stress has the potential to depress the workings of the immune system (13), and it is also related to subjective and behavioural manifestations such as insomnia (14), anxiety (2), and musculoskeletal pain (15). It is no surprise therefore that workplace stress has a significant knock on effect on employing organisations.

1.3 Stress, Mental Health, and Organisational Impacts

Stress and mental health are the biggest causes of long-term (i.e. that which lasts 4 weeks or more) sickness absenteeism in the UK (16), with public sector employees more affected than their private sector counterparts (17). Indeed, in 2016 approximately 11.7 million working days were lost in the UK due to stress, accounting for approximately 24 working days lost per employee per episode (17). Reports are also suggesting that the health and social care employment sector is among the most stressful, with the Labour Force Survey from 2016 (18) suggesting that this sector has the highest incidence of stress-related sickness of all sectors.

Workplace stress has also been shown to be related to particular 'outcome' measures, called such because they are likely to emerge due to high levels of stress and/or poor working conditions. These outcomes include turnover intentions (which are argued to be the best predictor of actual turnover) and job satisfaction (19), and presenteeism (i.e. attending work when ill enough that the employee should have taken sick leave) among others.

1.4 Objectives

The main objective of this report is to identify what working conditions are like for UK social workers in 2018, and the influence that these have on stress. Furthermore – and perhaps most importantly – we will look at what social workers believe need to be done in order to improve working conditions, and subsequently reduce stress and related outcomes.

1.5 Aims

This project has seven main aims:

1. To investigate stress levels in UK social workers.
2. To investigate stress experienced by social workers in different job roles.
3. To investigate the 'working conditions' faced by UK social workers.
4. To demonstrate how satisfied social workers are with their role, how many are seeking to leave the profession or the role in the next 12 months, and the level of presenteeism in the sector.

5. To demonstrate how frequently social workers are exposed to negative service user/family behaviour.
6. To demonstrate how the working conditions that social workers are exposed to influence stress, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and presenteeism.
7. And finally, to chart any differences in stress, working conditions, job satisfaction, and presenteeism over the previous 12 months.

2. Methodology

This section outlines how we undertook the study, i.e. the methods used to collect the information.

2. Methodology: What We Did

As we have seen from the introduction and background, it is clear that chronic stress at work can have serious impacts on both individual employees, their employing organisations, and their clients/service users. Working conditions subsequently influence the experience of stress, with the Health and Safety Executive suggesting that chronically poor working conditions can lead to stress. Social workers are facing increasingly difficult conditions – austerity and cuts to resources and other public-sector freezes are making the job role increasingly difficult.

This project therefore looks to investigate working conditions, stress, job satisfaction, presenteeism, and turnover intentions in UK social workers. Differentially from the 2017 survey, we are also seeking to look at the prevalence of exposure to negative service user/family behaviours.

2.1 Working Conditions

As in 2017, we used the Health and Safety Executive's (HSE) Management Standards Indicator Tool (MSIT). The MSIT measures 'psychosocial' working conditions which, if left in a negative state for an extended period of time, may lead to physical and/or mental sickness in employees. The MSIT was released by the HSE in 2004 (20) and investigates seven areas of the workplace:

- **Demands:** how much work an individual has to do – both quantitative (amount of work) and qualitative (complexity of work).
- **Control:** refers to the amount of say that an individual has over their job, including the pace of the job and decision making.
- **Managerial Support:** relates to the amount of support which is offered by management within the organisation.
- **Peer Support:** is the amount of support which is offered by peers and colleagues at work.
- **Relationships:** is to do with the amount of unacceptable behaviours from others in the workplace, such as bullying or conflict between staff.
- **Role:** how well individuals understand their role in the organisation, and ensuring that there are no conflicts within their role.
- **Change:** how well change is communicated within an organisation.

The MSIT survey tool has been used widely in both public and private sector organisations (12,21), and we used the MSIT to measure working conditions in the 2017 survey (5). Higher scoring on each of the seven measured conditions indicates better working conditions, with national and social work benchmarks available for comparison against (22).

2.2 Job Satisfaction, Turnover Intentions, Presenteeism

As we demonstrated in 2017, working conditions can be a significant influence on stress-related individual/organisational outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and presenteeism. As such we re-measured these three outcomes so that current levels can be measured, and comparisons made against last year.

Job satisfaction was measured by one single 'global' measure. It therefore sought to assess how satisfied social workers with their job, and scored on a 5-point Likert scale from 'Extremely dissatisfied' to 'Extremely satisfied' (Dolbier et al., 2015). The question asked was:

"Taking everything into consideration, how do you feel about your job as a whole?"

A distinct limitation of the 2017 survey was the way in which we asked about intentions of social workers to leave the role. We asked about whether social workers were likely to leave their current role, but not whether they were aiming to leave the social work profession. To rectify this, in 2018

we have asked two distinct questions, each of which was answered on a 'yes or no' scale, followed by a monthly timescale question:

“Are you considering leaving your current job?”, followed by “If yes, how long (in months) do you see yourself staying in the job?”

This is the same question as in 2017, and was designed to gain an understanding of the number looking at leaving their current job. In order to gain a better understanding of those looking to leave the social work profession as a whole, we also asked:

“Are you considering leaving the social work profession as a whole?”, followed by “If yes, how long (in months) do you see yourself staying in the social work profession?”

Thirdly, we asked about presenteeism. Presenteeism is the phenomenon by which an employee continues to attend work despite being so ill that they should stay off. This in turn influences their performance and efficiency at work, and is closely related to actual sickness absence and mental health. High levels of presenteeism, therefore, in the social work profession can influence the care and services that are provided to service users. In order to measure presenteeism we therefore asked a single question, with potential answers being “no, never”, “yes, once”, “yes, 2 to 5 times”, and “yes, more than 5 times” (23)

“Over the past 12 months, have you ever gone to work despite feeling you should have taken sick leave because of your state of health?”

2.3 Employee Stress

We used a short measure of perceived stress, the Perceived Stress Scale (PSS) (24). The PSS is a 4-item stress measure which asks participants to rate on a five-point Likert scale how often they had experienced a range of stressful situations in the previous month. Respondents are asked to answer from [0] never to [4] very often.

2.4 Service User Behaviour

Negative service user behaviour has been gaining increasing attention over the past 12 months, and in fact was discussed relatively frequently in the 2017 survey open responses. Therefore, we asked about the prevalence of negative service user (and family) behaviours toward social workers. The questions were adapted from our previous study on teachers (25), with answers provided on a 6-point Likert scale from [1] never through to [6] daily. The questions therefore asked about the prevalence of negative behaviours from service users and/or their parents both online and in person:

“I am subject to derogatory words from service users and/or their family online”

“I am subject to derogatory works from service users and/or their families in person”

“I am subject to derogatory, aggressive, or violent behaviour from service users and/or their families in person”

2.5 Areas for Improvement

As per the main objective of this study, we not only sought to investigate the workplace influences on social worker wellbeing, but also individual and managerial strategies that can be used to reduce these stressors. Therefore, we asked a single open-ended question:

“In one sentence, how would you make the role of a social worker less stressful?”

2.6 Demographic Questions

In order to gain an understanding of the characteristics of the respondents to the survey, a number of demographic questions were asked of participants. As such, we asked social workers who took part in the survey to state their age, gender, location, job role, and amount of experience in the current role. We also asked respondents to select who they were employed by and in which country.

3. Findings

This section describes the findings from the study. It therefore states the statistical outcomes from the study, and then describes this in non-statistical terms.

3. Findings

3.1 Demographics: Who Took Part?

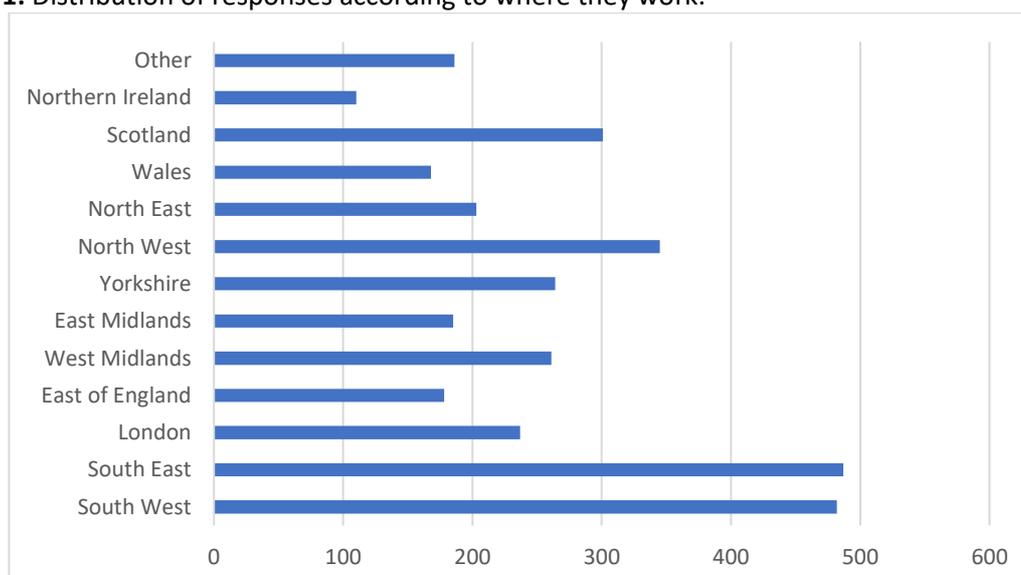
Demographic information gives a general look at who it was that took part in the project. *Table 1* below depicts this demographic information, broken down by the job role that they fulfilled according to the four most frequently stated job roles. Although we received data from individuals who were employed across at least 12 different job roles, we have condensed them into four different overarching groups: children and families, adults, agency/independent, and 'other'.

Table 1: Demographic information for respondents in the survey.

	Average Age	Gender (%)		Experience in role
		Male	Female	
All responses (n=3421)	40.81	11.2%	88.5%	8-10 years
Child & Family (n=1953)	38.72	9.2%	90.7%	5-8 years
Adults (n=587)	42.67	13.6%	86.1%	8-10 years
Independent (n=90)	49.57	12.1%	86.8%	8-10 years
'Other' (n=202)	46.54	14.4%	85.1%	8-10 years

We also had respondents from right across the UK. Distribution of responses can be seen in *Figure 1*. As would be expected, the majority of responses came from social workers in England (2,642), compared to Wales (168), Scotland (301), and Northern Ireland (110). In England, the majority of respondents came from the South East and South West, followed by the North West of the country. *Appendix 1* shows results of working conditions, stress, presenteeism, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions as broken down by geographical area. Note that we also asked respondents who they were employed by, but will not share this information in order to maintain anonymity of response.

Figure 1: Distribution of responses according to where they work.



3.2 Working Conditions 2018

As already described, working conditions were measured using the Management Standards Indicator Tool. Therefore, below are the findings, and average scores on each of the MSIT factors, as well as

percentile scoring. These percentiles chart performance of social workers (also separated by job role) against a set of UK average benchmark scores, with higher scoring indicating better working conditions.

Table 2: Scores on working conditions, and benchmark scores for ‘good performance’, according to Edwards & Webster (2012). Also, 2017 scoring for comparison purposes.

	Demands	Control	Managerial support	Peer support	Relationships	Role	Change
All responses	2.29	2.96	3.18	3.78	3.81	3.72	2.44
(Percentile)	(<5 th)	(5 th)	(10 th)	(25 th)	(5 th)	(5 th)	(<5 th)
2017 score	2.47	3.10	3.22	3.71	3.91	3.85	2.52
Child & Family	2.11	2.87	3.19	3.78	3.76	3.74	2.43
(Percentile)	(<5 th)	(<5 th)	(10 th)	(25 th)	(5 th)	(5 th)	(<5 th)
2017 score	2.16	2.94	3.21	3.71	3.86	3.85	2.41
Adults	2.52	3.02	3.15	3.85	3.90	3.62	2.36
(Percentile)	(<5 th)	(5 th)	(10 th)	(50 th)	(5 th)	(<5 th)	(<5 th)
2017 score	2.52	3.15	3.21	3.73	3.88	3.66	2.46
Independent	2.58	3.19	3.14	3.56	4.01	3.89	2.59
(Percentile)	(<5 th)	(10 th)	(10 th)	(10 th)	(10 th)	(10 th)	(5 th)
2017 score	2.91	3.22	3.13	3.54	4.04	4.05	2.77
‘Other’	2.65	3.25	3.37	3.76	3.99	3.96	2.70
(Percentile)	(<5 th)	(10 th)	(25 th)	(25 th)	(10 th)	(10 th)	(10 th)
2017 score	2.62	3.19	3.24	3.73	3.91	3.89	2.60

The findings demonstrated in *Table 2* above generally continue to show poor working conditions for UK social workers, irrespective of their job role. It is fair to say, therefore, that working conditions continue to be unacceptable. The percentile figures in the table above show the scoring on each of the seven conditions in comparison to the UK average provided by Edwards and Webster (22). These benchmark figures set the UK average, with the percentile scoring allowing comparison of UK social worker scoring versus these averages. In general, the higher the percentile scoring, the better. For example, if any one condition scored in the 95th percentile, this would mean it scores better than 95% of the UK average. Alternatively, a low scoring percentile of, say the 5th percentile, means scoring is worse than 95% of the UK average – a poor and worrying score.

It is argued that poor scoring on these working conditions over an extended (chronic) period of time can lead to stress and mental health-related sickness absence. In fact, five of the seven factors measured here scored poorly. As such, demands, control, relationships, role, and change all score worse than 90% to 95% of the UK national average. The only two slight exceptions to these negative findings are the two ‘support’ conditions, i.e. support from peers and management. Managerial support scored in the 10th percentile and peer support in the 25th. While these findings are not ideal, it does demonstrate that these two support conditions do provide some respite for social workers.

Finally, *Table 2* above states working conditions scoring from 2017, in order to allow for comparison of this year’s figures. Generally, the current year’s findings are worse than they were one year ago. As such, with very few exceptions, working conditions appear to have worsened over the past 12 months. Once again, the only real exception to this was the support gained from peers – this score seemed to improve over the previous 12 months.

Explanation Box 1: What these findings actually mean

Overall these results demonstrate that working conditions for UK social workers – irrespective of their job role – are unacceptable. Indeed, the Health and Safety Executive suggest that should the working conditions measured in this study be at unacceptable levels for too long of a time period (i.e. they are chronic) then ill mental and/or physical health can occur. The one buffering effect (i.e. that preventing ill-health in staff) is the support that they are gaining from peers and management in their organisations.

3.4 Stress, Job Satisfaction, Turnover Intentions, Presenteeism, and Behaviour

As previously described we measured job satisfaction, intentions to leave the job, and presenteeism as ‘outcome’ measures in this project (along with stress). Again, these are called ‘outcome’ measures because they are potential outcomes of negative working conditions. For example, it is well known that poor working conditions are closely related to increased stress, intentions to leave the role, and worsened job satisfaction.

Table 3: Scores on all four outcome measures – stress, job satisfaction, presenteeism, and turnover intentions – separated by role and for comparison the 2017 scores.

		All Respondents	Child & Family	Adults	Independent	‘Other’
Stress		8.54	8.70	8.72	8.32	7.43
<i>2017 score</i>		<i>7.82</i>	<i>8.11</i>	<i>7.91</i>	<i>6.96</i>	<i>7.44</i>
Job Satisfaction (Dissatisfaction)	Slightly	25.1%	26.3%	25.4%	18.0%	22.3%
	Extremely	21.0%	21.5%	21.2%	23.6%	16.3%
	Total	46%	48%	47%	42%	39%
<i>2017 score</i>		<i>41%</i>	<i>43%</i>	<i>42%</i>	<i>34%</i>	<i>37%</i>
Presenteeism	2-5 times	41.4%	42.5%	40.4%	39.6%	32.0%
	5 times +	25.5%	26.4%	26.4%	17.6%	23.6%
	Total	67%	69%	67%	57%	56%
<i>2017 score</i>		<i>60%</i>	<i>64%</i>	<i>56%</i>	<i>55%</i>	<i>59%</i>
Leave Current Job	% Leave	60.5%	62.3%	60.1%	57.8%	50%
	<i>2017 score</i>	<i>52%</i>	<i>55%</i>	<i>51%</i>	<i>54%</i>	<i>49%</i>
Average Length	14.4 months	15.6 months	14.3 months	12.5 months	12 months	
	<i>2017 score</i>	<i>15 months</i>	<i>13 months</i>	<i>18 months</i>	<i>9 months</i>	<i>18 months</i>
Leave Social Work	% Leave	37.6%	37.6%	41.6%	43.3%	35.6%
	Average Length	16.5 months	15.5 months	19.0 months	12.2 months	17.8 months
Service User Behaviour	Online	28.0%	29.9%	28.2%	26.4%	16.8%
	In-Person Words	64.5%	72.7%	53.7%	50.6%	43.4%
	In-Person Behaviour	42.7%	50.5%	29.0%	34.1%	25.2%

Table 3 above outlines percentage and average scoring on each of stress, job satisfaction, presenteeism, turnover intentions, and service user behaviour, as well as 2017 figures for comparison where available. Once again, scores on each of these measures were quite poor. According to Warrtig (26), English average stress scores on the Perceived Stress Scale (as used in this project) is 6.11 (SD 3.14), with higher scoring demonstrating higher levels of stress. Scoring for all respondents, irrespective of job role, was much higher than the English average (although still within one standard deviation). Therefore, stress scores are higher than the English average, and are in fact also much higher than 2017 figures. This demonstrates that stress scores are high in UK social workers, and have increased over the last 12 months.

Mean UK scoring are not available for any of the remaining measures, but comparisons can be made against 2017 figures. As such, close to half of social workers in this country are either slightly or extremely dissatisfied in their jobs. This figure has increased from 2017 in all job roles, and is highest in child and family social workers. Furthermore, over two-thirds of UK social workers report having

attended work over the last 12 months *at least* twice, despite being so ill that they should have taken sick leave. These figures are, predictably, highest in children and family social workers, and are higher in 2018 than they were in 2017.

Two new measures were also taken in response to 2017 findings. The first is that of turnover intentions. In 2017, we asked only about whether people were looking to leave their job, and not whether they were looking to leave the social work profession as a whole. As such, two turnover intention measures were asked – one asking about migration away from their current job (but still likely staying in the social work profession), and a second asking about attrition from the social work profession altogether (27). Predictably, migration within the social work profession was more likely than attrition away from it. Indeed, 6 in 10 respondents suggested that they were considering leaving their current role – higher than found in 2017. However, the length of time respondents suggested they may stay in their role is similar to that found in 2017. However, potentially more serious are the ‘attrition’ findings – one third of social workers suggested they were looking to leave the profession completely in less than 18 months.

The second ‘new’ measure in the project was that of service user behaviour. In particular, we asked about how often social workers are exposed to negative words and/or behaviours from service users in a manner similar to Ravalier and Walsh’s (25) work with English teachers. We found that just over a quarter of social workers were exposed to negative words online (i.e. social media) at least once a month. Nearly three quarters of children and family social workers were most likely to be exposed to negative words from service users or their families at least once a month, whereas the average was approximately 6 in 10 for all social work professionals. Finally, over 40% of social workers – and half of children and family social workers – were exposed to negative *behaviours* from service users and/or their families. These findings are particularly worrying for the health and safety of the country’s social workers.

3.5 Biggest Influences on Stress

A multivariate hierarchical linear regression was conducted in order to see which working conditions (demands, control, managerial support, peer support, relationships role, change, and service user behaviour) most readily influenced the experience of stress. In other words, we looked at which working conditions influenced stress.

Table 4: Regression results for perceived stress, demonstrating the working conditions which influence stress for all social workers

Outcome Measure	Significantly Related Factor	Coefficient Estimate (B)	t	P	Adjusted R ²
Perceived Stress	Demands	-1.09	-16.9	<.001	.31
	Managerial Support	-.56	-9.08	<.001	
	Role	-.40	-6.19	<.001	
	Control	-.28	-4.0	<.001	
	Change	-.19	-2.9	.005	
	Words in Person	.17	5.6	<.001	

Overall the numbers in the table (and all other linear regression tables) are not particularly important. However, the higher the coefficient estimate (B) value, the more of an impact this particular factor has on the outcome measure compared to the others. For example, in the table above we know that the ‘Demands’ factor is the one which most readily influences stress because its coefficient estimate is the highest out of all of these factors.

Results suggested that the poor levels of six particular working conditions influence the experience of stress across all respondents. In particular, demands, managerial support, role, control, change, and negative service user words in person all negatively influenced stress. However, it is the ‘demands’ (or the amount of work social workers have to do) which was most influential to stress – therefore the amount of work that social workers have to do is the factor which is leading to stress most readily.

3.6 Influences on Job Satisfaction, Turnover Intentions, and Presenteeism

A further linear regression was run in order to look at the influence of working conditions on each of presenteeism, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions.

Table 5: Regression results for presenteeism, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions (job and profession), demonstrating the working conditions which influence these outcomes for all social workers

Outcome Measure	Significantly Related Factor	Coefficient Estimate (B)	T	P	Adjusted R ²
Job Satisfaction	Demands	.24	15.75	<.001	.42
	Managerial Support	.26	13.84	<.001	
	Role	.12	7.76	<.001	
	Peer Support	.10	6.19	<.001	
	Control	.10	5.75	<.001	
	Change	.07	4.02	<.001	
Intentions to Leave the Current Job	Managerial Support	.29	16.29	<.001	.24
	Demands	.25	14.75	<.001	
	Relationships	.07	4.15	<.001	
Intentions to Leave the Social Work Profession	Demands	.08	7.28	<.001	.12
	Managerial Support	.07	6.52	<.001	
	Control	.06	5.35	<.001	
	Peer Support	.53	4.10	<.001	
Presenteeism	Demands	-.22	-10.33	<.001	.23
	Managerial Support	-.14	-6.77	<.001	
	Relationships	-.12	-6.09	<.001	
	Change	-.10	-4.55	<.001	
	Control	-.08	-3.47	.001	
	Words in Person	.06	5.17	<.001	

Overall the numbers in the table (and all other linear regression tables) are not particularly important. However, the higher the coefficient estimate (B) value, the more of an impact this particular factor has on the outcome measure compared to the others. For example, in the table above we know that the 'Demands' factor is the one which most readily influences job satisfaction, intentions to leave social work, and presenteeism, because its coefficient estimate is the highest out of all of these factors.

As a reminder, job satisfaction investigates how happy (or satisfied) employees are in their role. Findings suggested that the demands social workers faced at work (i.e. amount of work), support from management and peers, understanding of role in the organisation, the amount of control over the way that work is done, and how change is communicated each significantly influenced job satisfaction.

Turnover intentions were measured via two questions – intentions to leave the current job but stay within the social work profession (migration), and intentions to leave the social work profession all together (attrition). Both managerial support and demands influenced migration and attrition, whilst relationships added to the experience of migration, and control and peer support added to social workers wanting to leave the profession altogether.

Finally, presenteeism is the phenomenon which occurs when individuals go to work despite being ill – this illness may be something small such as a cold or flu, or something more significant such as returning to work following a period of more serious illness. Once again, managerial support and demands influenced presenteeism. Additional to relationships, change, control, and negative words from service users and/or their families each affected the likelihood of presenteeism.

3.7 Areas for Improvement

The final question we asked was for respondents to provide a single sentence as to how to make their job role less stressful. Over 2800 individual responses were gathered with over 3,800 suggestions, and these were then analysed using a content analysis. Content analysis essentially looks at the number of times any particular comment or topic is mentioned, and the findings are presented in the table following. Overall therefore these are the single most stressful aspects of the social work role, according to respondents within our survey.

3.7.1 Workload

The first, and most frequently discussed stressor in the social work role, was that of both quantitative and qualitative workload. Workload (or 'demands' as sometimes otherwise described) relate to the sheer amount (i.e. quantitative) or difficulty (i.e. qualitative) of work expected of workers. This workload is subsequently due to three more specific work-based difficulties: caseload, staff, and admin/IT. It is worth noting that these three factors, and the 'workload' theme more widely, is the exact same outcome as was found in the 2017 report.

As per 2017 findings, caseload was the number one most frequently discussed outcome. This refers to the sheer number of cases expected of social workers, as well as having too many cases which are complex and difficult. Relatedly, the second issue is not having enough social workers – more social workers would provide greater support to deal with the extensive caseloads. The way in which to improve this is to obviously reduce the number of cases given to any individual social worker, or to have a national limit as to the number of cases any one social worker can be expected to take. Furthermore, where cases are identified as being particularly complex, co-working these cases should be the default position. This could also include co-working complex cases alongside non-social work qualified staff, to help share the burden among staff who are likely to be less 'expensive' to recruit and maintain at work.

The second element of working which respondents described as being difficult was that of administrative duties. In particular, respondents described that they were expected to undertake numerous repetitive administrative tasks, and not having enough non-social work qualified support for these admin tasks. Additionally, respondents suggested that having some small enhancements to IT available would help with administrative tasks. For example, having IT available so that case notes can be written up and entered immediately after a meeting, and not having to re-enter notes into the IT database at a later date. Furthermore, organisational management should undertake a review of the amount of administrative tasks expected of staff, and whether they are all required or how the paperwork can be reduced. However, it is also understood that management within employing organisations are exposed to high workloads, including supervision of a large number of staff. Therefore, employing organisations should have a policy which describes a maximum number of employees to be directly line managed by any one manager.

3.7.2 Service Users

The second most frequently discussed stressor is titled 'service users', and relates to the amount of resources available to service users, and negative behaviour experienced from service users. As such, respondents wanted greater resources for service users – they want to be able to refer service users to a wider selection of resources where required, but due to austerity and various other cuts this is becoming increasingly difficult. Secondly, respondents described as stressful the negative service user words and behaviours that they are at times exposed to, as well as the words/behaviour of family members. In order to help here, respondents would like a clear policy on managerial support available to deal with that negative behaviour, and that this policy is adhered to each and every time a report of negative behaviour is provided.

Table 6: Content analysis of main findings.

Main Theme	Number of Mentions	Underlying Codes	Description	Improvements
Workload	1,890	Caseload	By far the most commented difficulty. Relates to both amount and/or difficulty of cases.	1. Lowered caseloads. 2. Co-working the most difficult cases
		Staff	Not having enough staff for the number of cases.	3. Recruit more staff! 4. Fairer allocations of caseloads. 5. Recruit more unqualified staff to share the burden. 6. Cap on the number of workers any one manager manages
		Admin tasks & IT	Over-recording and repetition of paperwork. Not having enough admin support staff.	7. Management review whether all (repetitive) paperwork is necessary. 8. More admin support staff to help with the administrative load. 9. IT systems should be used to make reporting and admin less demanding.
Service Users	680	Resources	More community resources needed for service users.	9. Clearly related to austerity – not enough resources to fully support all service users.
		Behaviour	Aggressive and inappropriate behaviour from service users and families/carers.	10. Clear management/organisational policy, which is stuck to, to provide support during these challenging periods.
Support	580	Managerial Support	Respondents wanted more support from managers, but it is clear how busy they are.	11. By capping management numbers, greater support can be given to individual staff.
		Supervision	Reflective supervision is an important element of the profession, and should be conducted at regular intervals.	12. Reflective supervision should be offered regularly. 13. Regular reflective supervision should become part of PCF/SOP.
		Change	There appears to be lots of organisational and policy-related change which needs greater communication and consultation.	14. Reasons for changes within organisations should be made transparent and discussed with staff.
Working practices	467	Physical Conditions	Hot-desking, a space away from desk for lunch and wellness, IT provisions.	15. If hot-desking is necessary, have the same rules for management and staff! 16. A room/space somewhere which is booked and left empty for two hours across lunch. 17. Meetings not scheduled between 12pm and 1pm.
		Flexible working & IT	Having flexible working which is supported with appropriate IT would allow social workers to work away from the office (e.g. between visits, from home, from hospital).	18. Flexible working should be allowed for the proportion of each week, and IT (smartphones, tablets, laptops) should be used more frequently to allow this.
		Respect for social work	More respect and understanding of the work that social workers are doing considering the difficulties in the role.	19. Greater respect from all stakeholders.

3.7.3 Support

This 'support' theme relates to the support which is provided by management and supervisors in three areas: general support in the role, reflective and case supervision, and support in terms of the way in which change is communicated in the organisation. Respondents therefore wanted managers who had the time to give greater levels of support to employees they were line managing. However, there is an understanding that the role of the social work manager is a broad one which has high workloads in its self. Therefore, respondents suggested that management should have the maximum number of people that they line manage capped so that they can provide the support required.

Secondly, and importantly, respondents also wanted regular and meaningful case and reflective supervision. Reflective supervision is an important element of social work practice, and helps to deliver the best outcomes possible for service users. In order to recognise the importance of clinical supervision, it should become an integral part of practice and be integrated into the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) or Standards of Proficiency (SOP). This would help to ensure the second improvement – clinical supervision which is meaningful and is undertaken on a regular basis.

Finally, social workers wanted greater support with respect to the change that is happening in the workplace. Whether these changes are being pushed politically, organisationally, or from management downwards, the reasons for this change was not explained clearly enough and there was no meaningful employee consultation. As such, in order to improve on this, employee views on the impacts of change should be consulted prior to any implementation, and there needs to be greater communication of the necessity for change.

3.7.4 Working Conditions

The fourth area requiring improvement is described as 'working conditions', and relates to both the physical (ergonomic) working conditions and flexible working arrangements. Physical working conditions were particularly exemplified in three areas: hot-desking, quiet/lunch spaces, and IT provisions once again. In addition to IT requirements discussed previously, hot-desking was a particular issue. In particular, not having enough desks for the number of staff working at one time is stressful, and can be easily improved by, for example, having a weekly or fortnightly booking system for work spaces. Furthermore, a large number of respondents described having to eat at their desks due to a lack of space for either eating or taking time away from their desks during the lunch period. In order to improve on this, respondents suggested that meetings should not be booked between 12pm and 1pm and that there should be at least one room available each day during these times to allow people to leave their desks. Finally, and importantly, we need greater respect for social work. Whichever stakeholders this comes from (political, organisational, service user, academic), social workers need and deserve greater respect for the job that they do.

4. So, What Next?

This section describes what we suggest should be the next steps, based on the findings from the study.

4. So, What Next?

4.1 Summary of Findings

For the second year in a row, the results of this survey have demonstrated that social workers are still exposed to significantly poor working conditions. Indeed, six of the seven working conditions measured in the project exist at chronically poor levels which, if continuing at poor levels such as these, may lead to sickness and related absence. These conditions (demands, control, managerial support, relationships, control, and change) all score worse than 95% of employees in other organisational and vocational roles. It is also worth noting that these working conditions are even worse in 2018 than they were in 2017, meaning that working conditions have continued to worsen over the past 12-18 months. The only working condition which has not worsened over the past 12 months, and is not scoring as consistently poorly as the rest of the conditions, is peer support. However, it is the *demands* faced by UK social workers which was the one working condition which was found to be operating at poor levels and consistently influencing stress, satisfaction etc.

Similarly, poor outcomes were found with respect to stress, job satisfaction, presenteeism, turnover intentions, and frequency of poor service user behaviour. As such, stress findings were higher both than the English average and the 2017 score. This finding is particularly concerning considering the social care sector has among the highest levels of stress sickness absence of all employment sectors in the country (18). Similarly, close to half of respondents described themselves as being dissatisfied in their jobs which again is higher than 2017 scores. Levels of presenteeism were also high – higher than 2017 once again. In fact, nearly 7 in 10 of all social workers had attended work at least twice in the past 12 months despite being so ill that they should have stayed at home. Satisfaction and presenteeism are each related to a number of important organisational variables, including absence, attrition, and productivity, meaning that high levels of dissatisfaction and presenteeism increase the likelihood of these negative outcomes.

This year we asked two questions regarding intentions to leave – the first asked about respondents' intentions to leave their current job, and the second intentions to leave the social work profession as a whole. Intentions to leave the current role were high – approximately 6 in every 10 social workers who responded were considering leave their jobs in the next 14 months or so. As expected these figures were higher than those for social workers intending to leave the profession overall. Despite this, close to 40% of respondents suggested that they were aiming to leave the social work profession altogether. Individuals leaving the profession mean greater levels of training new employees is needed, experienced staff are lost, and large amounts of new recruitment activity which can also have significant financial impacts.

Even more than in 2017, we need consistent and systematic focus on improving working conditions improvements. We demonstrated that working conditions – and in particular demands and managerial support – consistently influenced these outcome measures. Therefore, taking measures to improve these conditions (see below) will help to improve social work, and therefore social work practice in the UK.

The final new set of questions asked relate to the frequency of negative behaviours experienced by social workers. The most shocking of these findings was that nearly three quarters of child and family social workers were exposed to negative words in person from service users or their families at least once a month.

4.2 What Do We Suggest?

Importantly, the qualitative 'improvement' comments closely matched the survey findings. Also, we have seen a number of qualitative comments regarding the sources of stress for UK social workers which have closely mirrored the findings from the quantitative survey undertaken. However, the study has also demonstrated that there are a number of improvements which can be implemented, and this should therefore be seen as an opportunity for positive change.

In order to improve working conditions, we suggest that there are a number of employment improvements which can be made. High caseloads clearly impact workload, and more social work staff are needed to help with this caseload. Alternatively, there can be more cases which are co-assigned between social workers and support staff. Similarly, social workers should be co-assigned to working the most difficult cases. We also need a reduction in administrative tasks (by reducing the amount of paperwork, and reducing the repetition of paperwork), for which IT support and resources can play an important and useful role.

Social workers also wanted greater support from within their employing organisations. First of all, they have described the importance of reflective supervision, which helps social workers to provide the best support possible particularly in the more complex and demanding cases. Therefore, they suggest that the provision of reflective supervision should be ingrained in social work practice and education by inclusion in BASW's PCFs or SOPs. This would mean that managers and/or supervisors are more likely to provide reflective supervision on a regular basis, as needed in the occupation.

Finally, certain work practices need improvement. While there is some understanding that hot desking may be necessary due to lack of space and the transient nature of the role, it is still a distinct stressor. In an ideal world, all social workers would have a fixed desk that they could work from, but lack of space makes this impossible for many. Therefore, changes such as a desk sign up at the start of each week could be implemented where necessary, with everyone (management included) having to use the same system. Interestingly, flexible working (such as the ability to work from home one or two days a week) and adequate IT resources (such as being able to fill case notes in remotely) would help with this too. Lastly, employees having a space away from their desks to eat lunch, reflect, go to when ill etc would be a positive step, as would not booking meetings across the lunch period.

Overall therefore, we have seen that social workers want the best for their service users – they have clearly suggested that the service users need greater resources in order to ensure better outcomes. However, we also need greater respect for social work. If we have respect from all sources, then changes will be made for the better.

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Appendix 1: Working Conditions Findings by Country

	England (n=2,642)	Northern Ireland (n=110)	Scotland (n=301)	Wales (n=168)
Working Conditions				
Demands (Percentile) <i>2017 UK score</i>	2.29 (<5 th) 2.42	2.34 (<5 th) 2.40	2.78 (<5 th) 2.32	2.31 (<5 th) 2.69
Control (Percentile) <i>2017 UK score</i>	2.97 (5 th) 3.09	2.99 (5 th) 3.09	2.99 (5 th) 2.97	2.79 (<5 th) 3.50
Managerial Support (Percentile) <i>2017 UK score</i>	3.21 (10 th) 3.22	3.15 (10 th) 3.28	3.17 (10 th) 3.29	3.01 (<5 th) 3.34
Peer Support (Percentile) <i>2017 UK score</i>	3.78 (25 th) 3.72	3.84 (50 th) 3.67	3.88 (75 th) 3.92	3.68 (25 th) 3.84
Relationships (Percentile) <i>2017 UK score</i>	3.87 (5 th) 3.91	3.71 (5 th) 3.84	3.68 (5 th) 3.97	3.60 (5 th) 4.10
Role (Percentile) <i>2017 UK score</i>	3.75 (5 th) 3.85	3.72 (<5 th) 3.75	3.64 (<5 th) 3.70	3.59 (<5 th) 3.70
Change (Percentile) <i>2017 UK score</i>	2.49 (<5 th) 2.52	2.33 (<5 th) 2.46	2.23 (<5 th) 2.33	2.31 (<5 th) 2.38

Appendix 2: 'Outcome' measures for England's Social Workers

		All Respondents	Child & Family	Adults	Independent	'Other'
Stress		8.49	8.65	8.64	8.17	7.23
<i>2017 UK score</i>		<i>7.82</i>	<i>8.11</i>	<i>7.91</i>	<i>6.96</i>	<i>7.44</i>
Job Satisfaction (Dissatisfaction)	Slightly	24.9%	26.2%	25.4%	20.8%	19.6%
	Extremely	21.1%	21.3%	19.0%	27.8%	17.6%
	Total	46.1%	47.5%	44.4%	48.6%	37.3%
	<i>2017 UK score</i>	<i>41%</i>	<i>43%</i>	<i>42%</i>	<i>34%</i>	<i>37%</i>
Presenteeism	2-5 times	40.9%	41.7%	40.4%	35.1%	32.5%
	5 times +	24.8%	26.1%	24.3%	20.3%	22.1%
	Total	65.7%	67.8%	64.7%	55.4%	54.6%
	<i>2017 UK score</i>	<i>60%</i>	<i>64%</i>	<i>56%</i>	<i>55%</i>	<i>59%</i>
Leave Current Job	% Leave	59.3%	61.1%	57.6%	59.5%	50.0%
	<i>2017 score</i>	<i>52%</i>	<i>55%</i>	<i>51%</i>	<i>54%</i>	<i>49%</i>
Leave Social Work	Average Length	16 months				
	<i>2017 UK score</i>	<i>15 months</i>	<i>13 months</i>	<i>18 months</i>	<i>9 months</i>	<i>18 months</i>
Leave Social Work	% Leave	38.1%	37.7%	39.4%	47.3%	35.1%
	Average Length	17 months				
Service User Behaviour	Online	27.6%	28.5%	28.0%	25.8%	17.4%
	In-Person Words	63.4%	70.8%	54.6%	52.1%	41.4%
	In-Person Behaviour	40.7%	48.0%	28.2%	36.6%	21.3%

Appendix 3: 'Outcome' measures for Northern Ireland's Social Workers

		All Respondents	Child & Family	Adults	Independent	'Other'
Stress		8.42	8.10	TOO FEW RESPONDENTS TO MAKE AN ACCURATE REPRESENTATION		
<i>2017 UK score</i>		<i>7.82</i>	<i>8.11</i>			
Job Satisfaction (Dissatisfaction)	Slightly	20.0%	20.6%			
	Extremely	25.5%	23.8%			
	Total	45.5%	44.4%			
<i>2017 UK score</i>		<i>41%</i>	<i>43%</i>			
Presenteeism	2-5 times	41.8%	44.4%			
	5 times +	20.9%	20.6%			
	Total	62.7%	65.0%			
<i>2017 UK score</i>		<i>60%</i>	<i>64%</i>			
Leave Current Job	% Leave	57.8%	59.7%			
	<i>2017 score</i>	<i>52%</i>	<i>55%</i>			
	Average Length	12 months	13.6 months			
<i>2017 UK score</i>		<i>15 months</i>	<i>13 months</i>			
Leave Social Work	% Leave	32.1%	35.5%			
	Average Length	14 months	13.7 months			
	Online	26.3%	38.1%			
Service User Behaviour	In-Person Words	66.1%	77.5%			
	In-Person Behaviour	47.7%	51.6%			

Appendix 4: 'Outcome' measures for Scotland's Social Workers

		All Respondents	Child & Family	Adults	Independent	'Other'
Stress		8.53	9.05	8.32	TOO FEW RESPONDENTS TO MAKE AN ACCURATE REPRESENTATION	
<i>2017 UK score</i>		<i>7.82</i>	<i>8.11</i>	<i>7.91</i>		
Job Satisfaction (Dissatisfaction)	Slightly	25.6%	25.0%	23.6%		
	Extremely	20.9%	23.6%	29.1%		
	Total	46.5%	48.6%	52.7%		
	<i>2017 UK score</i>	<i>41%</i>	<i>43%</i>	<i>42%</i>		
Presenteeism	2-5 times	46.2%	52.7%	40.0%		
	5 times +	19.6%	19.6%	25.5%		
	Total	65.8%	72.3%	65.5%		
	<i>2017 UK score</i>	<i>60%</i>	<i>64%</i>	<i>56%</i>		
Leave Current Job	% Leave	61.1%	65.1%	69.1%		
	<i>2017 UK score</i>	<i>52%</i>	<i>55%</i>	<i>51%</i>		
	Average Length	13 months	12 months	17 months		
	<i>2017 UK score</i>	<i>15 months</i>	<i>13 months</i>	<i>18 months</i>		
Leave Social Work	% Leave	37.3%	38.1%	50.9%		
	Average Length	21 months	20 months	21 months		
Service User Behaviour	Online	25.7%	23.1%	34.4%		
	In-Person Words	69.5%	84.3%	68.6%		
	In-Person Behaviour	51.6%	65.9%	43.6%		

Appendix 5: 'Outcome' measures for Wales' Social Workers

		All Respondents	Child & Family	Adults	Independent	'Other'
Stress		8.72	8.70	9.66	TOO FEW RESPONDENTS TO MAKE AN ACCURATE REPRESENTATION	
<i>2017 UK score</i>		<i>7.82</i>	<i>8.11</i>	<i>7.91</i>		
Job Satisfaction (Dissatisfaction)	Slightly	30.1%	35.3%	26.3%		
	Extremely	21.7%	21.2%	34.2%		
	Total	51.8%	56.5%	60.5%		
<i>2017 UK score</i>		<i>41%</i>	<i>43%</i>	<i>42%</i>		
Presenteeism	2-5 times	44.6%	48.3%	42.1%		
	5 times +	30.4%	24.1%	44.7%		
	Total	75.0%	72.4%	86.8%		
<i>2017 UK score</i>		<i>60%</i>	<i>64%</i>	<i>56%</i>		
Leave Current Job	% Leave	65.7%	67.8%	73.7%		
	<i>2017 UK score</i>	<i>52%</i>	<i>55%</i>	<i>51%</i>		
	Average Length	12 months	10 months	10.5 months		
	<i>2017 UK score</i>	<i>15 months</i>	<i>13 months</i>	<i>18 months</i>		
Leave Social Work	% Leave	41.5%	39.3%	54.1%		
	Average Length	19 months	21 months	18 months		
Service User Behaviour	Online	36.7%	44.4%	31.6%		
	In-Person Words	61.8%	77.9%	42.1%		
	In-Person Behaviour	48.5%	55.8%	23.7%		