

A day in the life of social work

Research from
Community Care
and UNISON



Key findings

- Caseloads continue to be a source of stress for many social workers. Almost half (48%) said they feel 'over the limit' as regards their caseload.
- More than half (56%) said their caseload is influenced by staff shortages.
- Austerity is taking its toll on the profession, and on service users. Three-fifths of respondents (60%) felt that cuts had made an impact on their ability to make a difference.
- The vast majority (80%) experienced emotional distress during the day while four in 10 (42%) had been verbally abused. Both figures were increases on 2014 responses to the same questions.
- The proportion of social workers who visited clients at home or saw them in institutional settings was up from 2014, at 55% (from 50%) and 42% (from 37%) respectively.
- The majority do not have their own desk at work (59%) and, of these, 55% reported that hotdesking had a detrimental effect on their work.
- Almost half (47%) of workers finished the day with concerns about their cases; three-quarters (74%) of these said this was due to them being unable to get necessary paperwork completed.
- Two-thirds (67%) of those who completed the survey said they had not had a lunch break on 21 September 2016 – a significant increase on the 54% who replied similarly in 2014. More worryingly, an almost identical proportion (64%) said they "almost never" take a break at work.
- The average number of hours worked on the day of the survey – including any time spent working at home – was 9.5. The average number of hours practitioners said they'd actually been paid to do was only 7.5. Almost one in 10 of all respondents to the survey (175) reported working 12 hours or more; 28 said they'd put in a shift of at least 15 hours.

The highs and lows of a day in social work

We asked social workers to share the most challenging and rewarding things that happened to them during their day's work.

“

“A client learning to sign his name today.”

“A three-year old disclosing physical violence.”

“A mother finding her voice to leave her abusive ex-partner.”

“Helping an elderly woman move from a residential home into her own home.”

“Observing a newly qualified social worker's development.”

“Being allocated all the new cases because of staff shortages.”

“A nursing home closing down, making the crisis of care beds even greater.”

“A service user telling a core group today that she felt like she had realised the value of being an independent woman, to give her real choices.”

“Dealing with staff issues within the team when morale is low.”

“A 13-year-old girl being able to reflect and identify some positives in her life despite initially saying life was terrible.”

”

Introduction

What does a day in the life of an average social worker actually look like, and how does it feel? What are the stresses and strains? What are the rewards that keep practitioners doing their jobs, despite the difficulties caused by financial cuts?

In an attempt to get to the bottom of these issues, Community Care and UNISON asked more than 2,000 social work professionals to describe their day on 21 September 2016 to get a snapshot in time of the lives of social workers. This report analyses their responses, and compares them with the findings of a similar survey we carried out in 2014 to see how life has changed.

We found some disturbing trends that indicate a profession on the brink of burnout including very high levels of emotional distress experienced at work, high levels of abuse, complicated caseloads and working long hours without breaks. There have been some positive improvements, such as in the number of employers offering formal caseload management systems and an increased amount of time spent with service users. But, despite these improvements, it is clear social work remains a profession under enormous pressure.



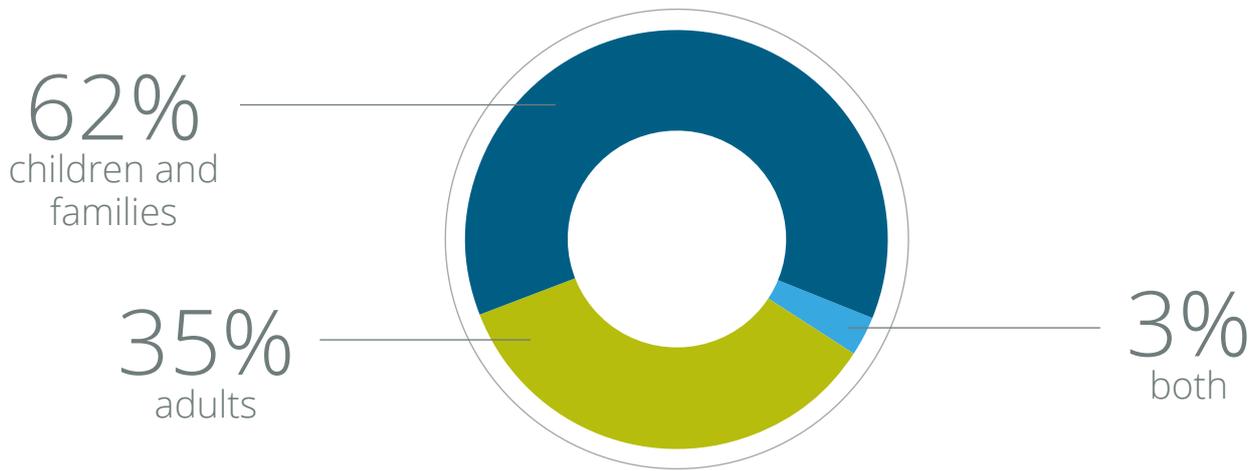
Methodology

The survey gathered responses from 2,032 professionals from all corners of the UK.

Respondents completed an online questionnaire, which was promoted on the Community Care website, by UNISON to its members and via social media and a 'tweetathon'.

Among social workers who took part, 85% said they worked for a local authority and 90% described their working hours as full-time (more than 30 contracted hours). Among those who worked in children's services, the largest group worked in child protection (48%) while for those in adult services, working with people with mental health problems (27%) was the most common specialism.

Who respondents work with



Job roles

Social worker | 44%

Senior social worker | 15%

Newly qualified social worker | 12%

Frontline manager | 10%

Advanced/consultant/principal social worker | 5%

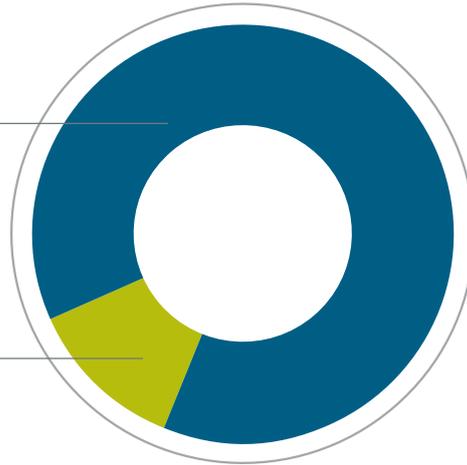
Support worker | 4%

Other | 10%

Contracts

88%
respondents on
permanent contracts

12%
temporary/agency
contracts



Feeling 'over the limit'

The size and manageability of caseloads remains a real issue for many practitioners. Positively, almost a third (30%) said their employer operated a formal caseload management system, (a policy regarding how cases are allocated to social workers) but despite this almost half (48%) said they felt 'over the limit' with the number of cases they had been given – up from 43% in 2014. **Among those who described their job role as 'social worker', the figure was even higher, at just over 50%.**

As in 2014, the majority of respondents (82%) said they manage their own caseload. The median number of cases was 20, however, 140 respondents reported having 35 cases or more while 37 respondents said they had 50 cases or more. Most who reported these very high caseloads were permanent social workers or senior social workers and were evenly split between those working in children's and adults' services.

In 2009 the Laming Review recommended those working in child protection should have no more than 13 cases. However, most children's services departments aim for 18-20 cases. Ofsted has recorded concerns about caseload levels in 14 councils inspected since January 2016. Community Care research on social worker burnout in 2015 found high levels of emotional exhaustion even among those social workers with less than 20 cases.

Fifty-six percent of respondents (up from 53% in 2014) said that the size of their workload had been influenced by staffing shortages, for example because of unfilled vacancies or long-term sickness in the team.

Tell us about the most
challenging aspect of your day:

*“Managing a staff
member who was
crying at her desk due
to high workload.”*

*“Finding the time to
write good quality,
reflective case notes;
instead they become
descriptive in the hope
I can return to them
at some later fictional
time to evaluate them
and add the analysis.”*



Time and space pressures

Demonstrating the pressure that social workers find themselves under, two-thirds (67%) of those who completed the survey said they had not had a lunch break on 21 September 2016 – a significant increase on the 54% who replied similarly in 2014. **More worryingly, an almost identical proportion (64%) said they “almost never” take a break at work.**

The average number of hours worked on the day of the survey – taking in the whole 24-hour period, and including any time spent working at home – was 9.5. The average number of hours practitioners said they’d actually been paid to do was only 7.5. Almost one in 10 of all respondents to the survey (175) reported working 12 hours or more; 28 said they’d put in a shift of at least 15 hours.

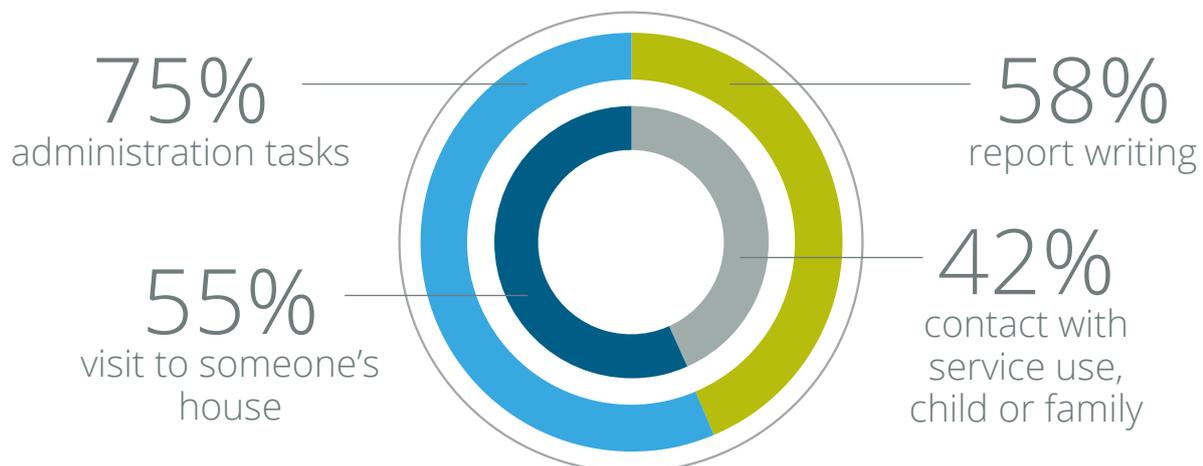
Space, as well as time, constraints can have an impact on the ability of social workers to do their jobs. Hotdesking has been a contentious issue in the profession for a good while now, with some local authorities abandoning it in their social work teams – yet almost six in 10 (59%) of those who completed the survey said that they did not have their own desk.

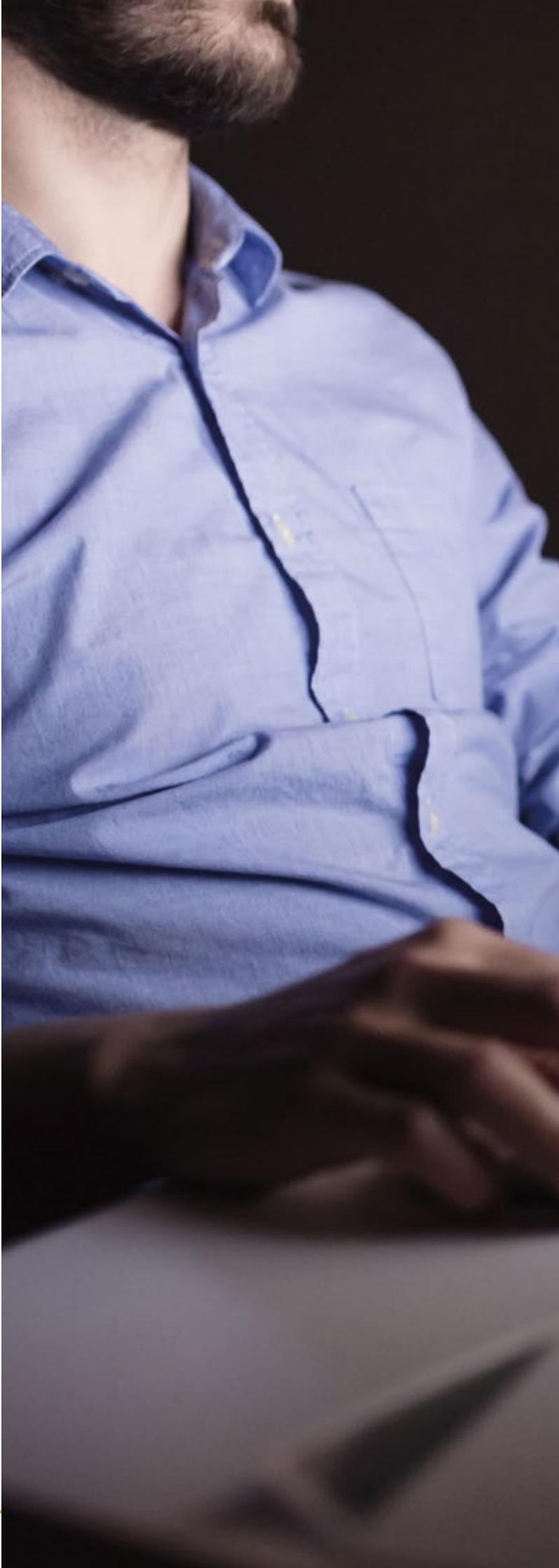
A number of these workers described their first task of the day as being to locate a desk and set up a workspace that’s comfortable to spend time in. “The joys of hotdesking: logging in my phone, getting everything out of my tambour unit, plugging in my headset,” commented one. Significantly, of respondents who hotdesk, more than half said that they find the practice to be detrimental to their work.

Breaking down the day

Most respondents spent a large proportion of their day dealing with paperwork or dealing with other agencies compared with the number who spent time with service users during the day.

Case recording featured in 85% of responses, while 75% mentioned administration tasks and 58% had report writing in their day. This is compared with 55% of respondents who said they’d paid a visit to someone’s house and 42% who reported having contact with a service user, child or family in an institutional setting.





“Knowing that at 5pm, a midnight finish is going to be necessary is hard.”

Compared with 2014 these proportions have improved slightly.

While it's tricky to pin that rise on any one factor, it's notable that recent years have seen social work employers making use of mobile technology, enabling them to push on with admin tasks without being chained to their desks.

Supervision

Just over one in five (21%) of social workers said they'd had supervision on the day of the survey. Most (53%) described this as having been a combination of reflective and traditional case-management approaches.

Reflective | 11%

Case management | 28%

A combination of the two | 53%

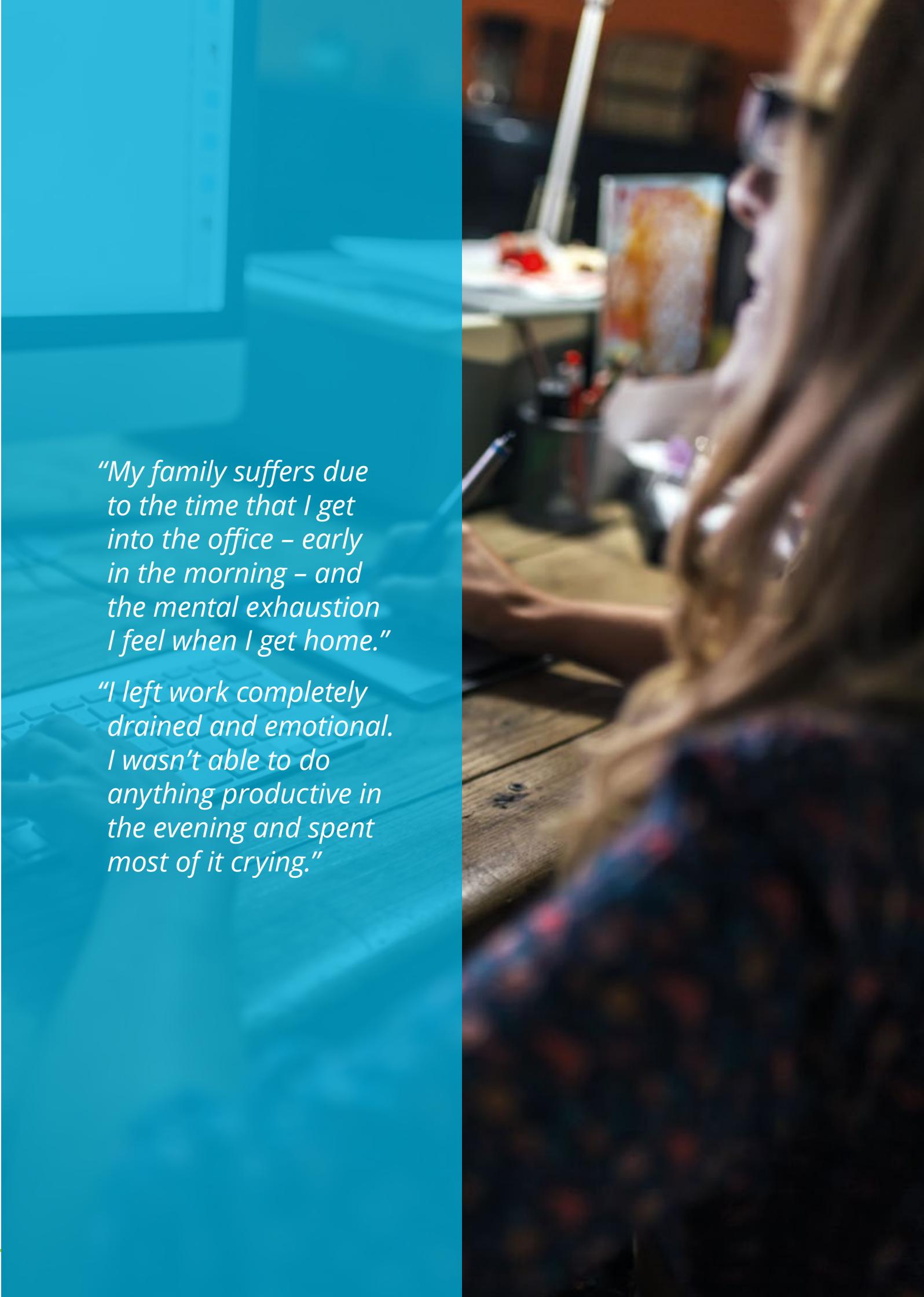
Group supervision | 8%

Stresses of the job

Social workers continue to feel the impact of cuts to budgets and resources. Three-fifths (60%) said that cuts had affected their ability to make a difference, an identical proportion to 2014. Explanations given included social workers having to take on tasks that other agencies would previously have handled, the housing crisis and welfare reform agenda piling problems onto families that social workers cannot solve, and intervention thresholds being raised, meaning that practitioners aren't getting involved in situations until they have reached crisis point.

The vast majority (80%) said they'd experienced emotional distress during the day, up from 74% in 2014. While those who said they'd been physically abused fell from 3% to 1%, there was a similar rise (from 38% to 42%) in the proportion who said they'd faced verbal abuse, while those who'd experienced threats also went up slightly from 9% to 12%. Some of the situations social workers said they'd faced included a nine-year-old child self-harming and trying to hang themselves, an "incredibly aggressive" father making threats and distressed colleagues needing to be supported.

The cumulative effects of these stresses can be seen in many of the answers social workers gave when asked whether their day had had an impact on their personal and family life. Others mentioned routinely feeling anxious, emotionally exhausted and unable to engage with partners and families after clocking off for the day, one commenting that the pressures of the job had led to divorce.

A woman with blonde hair, wearing a plaid shirt, is sitting at a desk in an office. She is looking down at a laptop. The desk has a pen holder with several pens, a small container with a red object, and a box of tissues. The background is slightly blurred, showing office shelves and a desk lamp. A large blue semi-transparent rectangle is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing white text.

"My family suffers due to the time that I get into the office – early in the morning – and the mental exhaustion I feel when I get home."

"I left work completely drained and emotional. I wasn't able to do anything productive in the evening and spent most of it crying."

Reflecting on the day

Even after downing tools, 47% of workers said they'd finished their day with serious concerns about their cases. Despite many having worked above and beyond their contracted hours, almost three-quarters (74%) said this was because they'd been unable to get all the necessary paperwork finished.

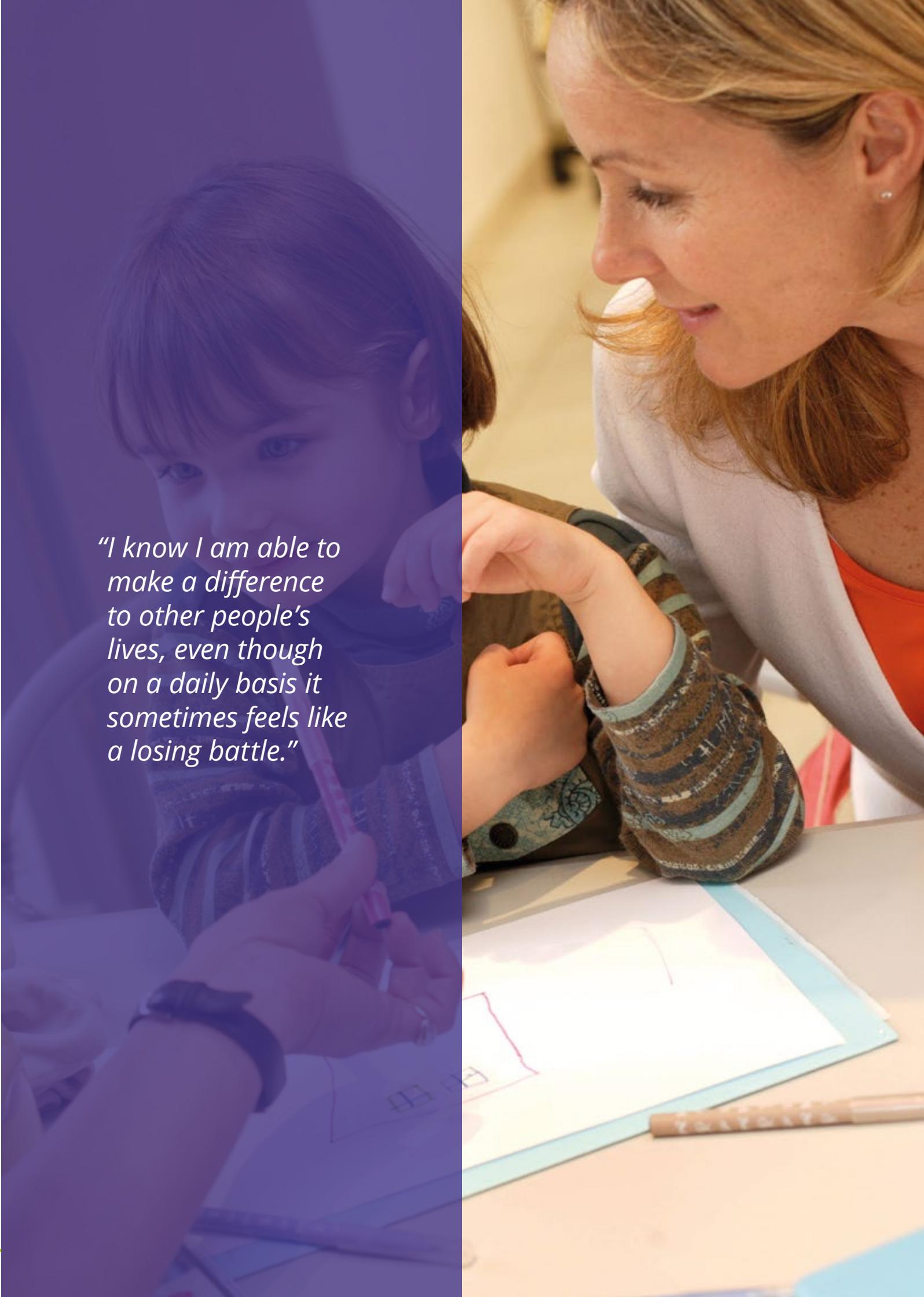
When asked what they'd have changed about their day if they could, many respondents gave answers wishing that there could have been more hours in it, or similar. Others said they wished they could be more organised or productive, or that stress hadn't affected their behaviour towards others.

Despite the overwhelming impression of a stressed and busy workforce, social workers were clear about the things that make their jobs bearable, and their commitment to the vulnerable people they were helping. **Asked what had been the most rewarding thing to happen on the day of the survey, respondents mentioned breakthroughs with service users, receiving thanks from families and praise from other professionals, and having colleagues around them who are supportive, no matter how tough the job gets.**

Final thoughts

This research highlights the continuing pressures that many social workers experience as part of their daily work lives. An already demanding profession is being made more difficult by service and budget cuts, which are having a direct impact on the ability of practitioners to do their jobs and – crucially – on the wellbeing of the people that they work with.

Social workers' comments on the things that made their day rewarding, and the differences they made, underline the commitment most have to their roles and to the adults, children and families they support. But it is extremely concerning that an increasing proportion face abuse and distress at work, and that many feel that their jobs are having a negative effect on their own home lives.

A photograph of a woman with blonde hair leaning over a table, looking at a drawing made by a young child. The child is holding a pink marker. The scene is brightly lit, and the woman is smiling slightly. The child is wearing a striped sweater. The drawing on the table shows some lines and colors. The image is split vertically, with the left side having a purple overlay.

"I know I am able to make a difference to other people's lives, even though on a daily basis it sometimes feels like a losing battle."

Making a difference

Thinking about all the things you did today, please give us an example of how your work has changed a service user's life for the better or how you think it will make a difference in the future, however big or small.

“

“Children will be safe tonight, will be fed tonight, will be able to get into a clean bed tonight, and will not be as frightened or worried as they were last night.”

“A 13-year-old girl opened up to me on our hour journey back to her placement after she had ran away, I could see she was feeling much better by the end of the journey after talking things through.”

“I have increased an adult's care package which means he will have more day-to-day support because he was really struggling to cope.”

“A clear plan for court should offer an opportunity for parents to make some changes and reduce abuse of their child, potentially leading to his return home.”

“An isolated client made the first steps to attend a place where she can make a friend who is not a paid carer. It could be life-changing in her ability to access the community, and be less isolated and reliant on paid carers.”

“A young mum ending an abusive relationship with my support will not be hit any more and her daughter won't have to witness this.”

“A tiny baby was able to be placed in a place of safety and prevented from immediate and significant risk.”

“A looked-after child will be able to take part in his class photo.”

”

A day in my life

Case study 1: A newly qualified social worker, working full-time in a children and families team in an outer London borough.

What was your first task of the day?

Calling a father who wasn't sticking to the family plan.

Did you have a lunch break?

No, I almost never take a break at work.

How many hours did you work? 10

How many were you paid for? 7.25

What was the most challenging thing that happened today?

Having the same conversation with managers about how stressed and overworked we are, only to be told social workers can't run out of time and have to be allocated cases – and then being given a Child in Need case that already needs a strategy meeting at 1pm on top of a full caseload.

What was the most rewarding thing that happened today?

My colleagues supported me.

Thinking about all the things you did today, can you give us an example of how your work has changed a service user's life for the better, or how you think it will make a difference in the future?

I helped a child who keeps absconding from home to be kept safe.

Do you feel your ability to make a difference today was affected by cuts to budgets and resources?

Yes – we are asked to do tasks ourselves that were previously commissioned out.

Has your work today had any impact on your personal or family life?

Yes. My anxiety has increased. I'm constantly too tired to cook or exercise. I am not sleeping well.

What would you have done differently or changed about the day, if you could?

Not gone into work.

Case study 2: An approved mental health professional working full time in the south of England

What was your first task of the day?

Log on, check emails and the day's tasks – and offer support to a new manager.

Did you have a lunch break?

No, I almost never take a break at work.

How many hours did you work? 12

How many were you paid for? 7.4

What was the most challenging thing that happened today?

Learning that another colleague in my team – a competent, confident social worker just finishing their ASYE with flying colours – has gone off with stress, the second this week from our team. We are imploding!

What was the most rewarding thing that happened today?

Having in-person conversations with two families I've worked with for several years, saying goodbye because I'm leaving my job and being thanked by them. I feel privileged to have been in these families' lives.

Thinking about all the things you did today, can you give us an example of how your work has changed a service user's life for the better, or how you think it will make a difference in the future?

I supported some very distressed carers, created lists of tasks going forward that could help a very strained family home and ensure an effective handover to a new worker, giving some reassurance of continuity.

Do you feel your ability to make a difference today was affected by cuts to budgets and resources?

Yes. Recruitment isn't taking place, appalling staffing levels are increasing risk, there's no dedicated health service for a niche client group, our team isn't being monitored and 'grown' to meet rapidly increasing demand, and an organisational restructure is affecting work practices, and clients and their families.

Has your work today had any impact on your personal or family life?

I missed an evening yoga class, was late for dinner and didn't get to oversee my kids homework or talk to them properly about their day. As with most days, I ended up tired and grumpy.





Case study 3: A social worker employed full-time in the voluntary sector, in Scotland

What was your first task of the day?

Attending a children's hearing.

Did you have a lunch break?

No, I almost never take a break at work.

How many hours did you work? 7.5

How many were you paid for? 7.5

What was the most challenging thing that happened today?

Trying to convince a children's panel that contact needed to stop for a child, in front of a mum I'd worked intensively with for months. This was within a stressful and long children's hearing. The mum became upset and angry. It was very challenging to be clear about the harm contact causes to the child while being aware that you're hurting the parent.

What was the most rewarding thing that happened today?

During a therapeutic contact session I was supporting, a little boy, who usually uses avoidance strategies when he has difficult feelings, told his dad he wanted to come home but was worried things would go wrong. His dad was able to be open and warm and reassuring. They had big cuddles – it was such an important opportunity for repair in their relationship.

Thinking about all the things you did today, can you give us an example of how your work has changed a service user's life for the better, or how you think it will make a difference in the future?

I think the contact session I supported means that a little boy will feel more loved, supported and reassured by his dad. I think that the amazing progress that the dad demonstrated is a good indicator that rehabilitation at home is a real possibility.

Do you feel your ability to make a difference today was affected by cuts to budgets and resources? No.

Has your work today had any impact on your personal or family life?

Yes – I felt preoccupied by the difficult children's hearing and didn't feel like talking to my husband after work.

What would you have done differently or changed about the day, if you could?

I would have prepared better for a tough day.

UNISON recommendations

Government must:

- Recognise the detrimental impact of local government funding cuts on social work and social workers and take steps to ensure that social work is adequately funded, staffed and managed
- Recognise the impact of cuts on related services which support clients and help them live integrated, happy and secure lives – such as housing, public health services and transport and reflect this in local government funding settlements

Local authorities and other social work employers should:

- Ensure that proper risk assessments are regularly carried out in recognition of the high levels of stress and abuse experienced by social workers
- Introduce caseload management systems
- Review and minimise the use of 'hotdesking'
- Provide social workers with adequate admin support and equipment to minimise the amount of time spent on paperwork
- Ensure regular, reflective supervision
- Ensure that social workers take adequate breaks during work time
- Ensure that social workers do not exceed their contractual, paid working hours
- Carry out the Social Work Health Check at regular intervals. This is a system to check how well an organisation manages social work caseloads and stress and is recommended in the Social Work Employer Standards.
- Work with their local UNISON branch on all the points set out above

UNISON pledges to support social workers and good quality social work services and will:

- Ensure maximum membership amongst social workers and trained workplace reps in every workplace
- Ensure that branch health and safety reps regularly assess the risks to social workers and act upon them
- Continue to lobby UK governments and Shadow teams to ensure that the position of social work funding and employment is known and acted upon





If you would like a copy of Community Care's research on social worker burnout please contact judy.cooper@rbi.co.uk

Picture credits

Cover – Clock - Time management, Copyright Gary Brigden, Page 4 – Cultura/REX/Shutterstock 2864978a,
Page 7 – Monkey Business Images/REX/Shutterstock 5592385a, Page 9 – WestEnd61/REX/Shutterstock 5796198a,
Page 11 – WestEnd61/REX/Shutterstock 5537488a, Page 13 – Burger / Phanie/REX/Shutterstock 583676c,
Page 15 – Miscellaneous government bills, Copyright Gary Brigden, Page 16 – Jeff Blackler/REX/Shutterstock, 1691403c,
Page 17 – Juice/REX/Shutterstock 4205496a.