

Social work and the impact of the Covid pandemic

Reflections from the workforce

A report for UNISON by the Labour Research Department



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UNISON foreword



Our survey of nearly 3,000 UNISON social work members provides insights into the challenges of working in the sector in the backdrop of the pandemic.

It is UNISON's largest social work survey to date and represents the reflections of an experienced workforce. More than half (56%) of respondents have worked in social work for ten years and over, with 26% having worked for over twenty years.

Our findings reveal that the pandemic has intensified what was already a crisis in social work with continued service cuts, rising demand for services and growing caseloads. This report contains clear messages for employers, social work regulators and governments. Members are extremely concerned about insufficient funding and resources, staff shortages and workloads that are dangerous both to employees and families.

Our members also want the voices of those needing their help to be heard. If social workers have too much casework, they are just firefighting rather than providing the right support. Staff shortages and the use of agency workers mean no consistency for service users, who understandably feel frustrated and lose faith in the care system. Members' top priorities are better pay, better funding for social work/local government and an improved work-life balance. These will be pursued by UNISON in our campaigning and negotiations at all levels.

UNISON calls on governments and employers to support social workers in five vital ways.

1. Improve social workers' working conditions.

Employers must ensure social workers have a safe working environment, free from bullying and harassment. This includes not just from the public but also from unreasonable demands and criticism from managers.

2. Promote a positive image of social work and social workers.

Social workers help thousands of vulnerable citizens along with their families and carers. Yet the media only seems interested when something goes wrong. This leads to staff demoralisation and a negative image for the profession

3. Invest in social worker development.

Employers should invest in recruitment and retention strategies to reduce the turnover of social workers. They should provide social workers with dedicated time, resources and financial support to carry out continuous professional development.

4. End austerity and rebuild public services.

UNISON is campaigning for more government investment in social work and social care funding as part of rebuilding public services and creating fairer and safer workplaces. Cuts and closures of many services have meant many people are struggling to get help when they need it. Social workers are seeing people at breaking point.

5. End privatisation of health and social care.

UNISON supports the role of local government as planners and major providers of personal/community based social services. Social workers should be embedded in communities where they are recognised as a resource.

We thank our members for taking part in this important research.

Christina McAnea

General secretary

Executive summary

In January 2022 public services union UNISON commissioned the Labour Research Department (LRD) to conduct a survey of individuals working in social work. The aim was to investigate their experiences during the Covid, as well as their thoughts about working in the sector as the pandemic appeared to be ending.

The survey follows several other surveys that have been conducted since the introduction of austerity. These detail the strains on workers in the sector, including unbearably heavy caseloads, high stress levels and deep concern about service provision.

However, this latest research shows that social work became even tougher for many working in the sector during the pandemic. This is not just because of fear of the virus itself, but because of a range of problems, including excessive workload and a lack of support.

The survey also finds that even if the virulence of the pandemic appears to be ending, the problems in the sector are not going away. An overwhelming majority of the nearly 3,000 participants in this survey are still concerned about staff shortages (93%), workloads (90%), and the level of service they can provide (89%).

Changes during the pandemic

- Most social work staff (72%) saw their workload increase during the pandemic, with stress levels rising even higher than beforehand (for 78%). Over 80% felt out of control of their workload, and a majority found it harder to take breaks from their work than before Covid.
- Despite this, employers/senior staff generally were not felt to have risen to the challenge of supporting them, with one in three (34%) respondents saying support had diminished.
- Not surprisingly, 70% respondents said their morale had gone down, and almost half (49%) felt they had become less likely to stay in their jobs. These figures were even higher for the 'social worker' occupational group, with 75% saying their morale had gone down and 53% saying there they were less likely to stay in their jobs.
- Concern rose for most social work staff about their relationships with senior staff (57%), with colleagues (62%) and particularly with family and/or friends (66%).
- But the highest level of concern (71%) was over relationships with service users. And a massive 87% were concerned about their ability to provide a good service.
- Nine in ten (90%) staff had increased their working from home, but three quarters (76%) wanted hybrid working to continue.

Moving on from the pandemic

- Despite the waning of the pandemic, concerns remain high, particularly about workload, with 74% saying it is often excessive.
- Workload (cited by 90%), staff shortages (93%) and linked concerns such as working beyond contractual hours (80%) and the lack of work-life balance (79%) are among the most widespread and deeply felt concerns of social work staff in 2022.
- But just as common are worries about the level of service that can be provided, which was experienced by 89% of respondents.
- Harassment and abuse of social work staff are rife. In just the first few weeks of 2022, more than four in ten social work staff had already experienced one or more forms of harassment, abuse or threats from service users or those around them. For 54 individuals, this included physical abuse.
- Younger and less experienced staff had experienced disproportionately high levels of abuse and threats in that period. For example, 56% of 26–35-year-olds and 61% of 19–25-year-olds had been verbally abused in the first weeks of 2022. Also, 22% of 26–35-year-olds and 19% of 19–25-year-olds had experienced threats, compared with an average of 13%. Over half (52%) of newly qualified social workers reported verbal abuse.
- Not surprisingly, more than three quarters (77%) of respondents are concerned about their mental health. The figure is higher for younger age groups. 86% of respondents in the 19–25-year age group expressed concern.
- Another extremely widespread concern of social work staff is being publicly identified and/or blamed in the media or social media in connection with cases (78%).

- While a majority (77%) agree that they receive regular supervision, it is concerning that one in six (16%) do not. There are also widespread concerns about the nature of the supervision. For example, less than half of respondents (48%) feel supervision provides them with emotional support.
- Most respondents are required to maintain continuing professional development (CPD) but only a minority feel they are given enough time, opportunity, resources and/or financial support to do so.

Priorities for UNISON action

- Respondents' top priorities for action by UNISON are very clearly:
 - better pay
 - better funding for social work/local government
 - better work-life balance.
- Workers in adult social care are more likely to prioritise better pay (82%) followed by improved funding for social work (70%) and better work-life balance (58%).
- Those working with children and families are more likely to prioritise better pay (82%) followed by work-life balance (73%) and improved funding for social work (66%).

Emerging issues facing social work

According to social work staff, the critical issues in the next year or two are insufficient funding and resources, staff shortages and workloads that are dangerous to both employees and service users.

In social workers' own words

(names have been changed):

“ Staff morale is very low, lots of people leave and are replaced with either agency or very inexperienced workers who are reliant upon smaller group of experienced workers.”

Emma, social worker, Yorkshire and Humberside

“ Staffing critical and we are not getting takers in recruitment (lost nearly half the team in the last six months). But referrals continue, no waiting lists, senior management pushing through ever more changes, bureaucratic procedures. Hate the fact that we're firefighting and not providing as good a service as we should. Therefore, we end up doing admin after hours to compensate. Work till brain shuts down – usually 1-2.5 hours extra each night. Stress extremely high. Dread team meetings for client allocations.”

Sam, senior social worker, South East

“ In summary, we do not have enough workers and resources to meet demand. This is a systemic issue that needs to be addressed by central government but won't be. There is a real lack of understanding as to what social workers do and their value to the public. We still only receive negative press, and this is seen and felt daily. Often, I have found myself holding all the risk in a case. I am the only support and service working with the individual (other services have high thresholds, or reduced services due to Covid) and the individual blames all their other issues on social services. I often feel like a mechanic with no spanners. I can look at your vehicle with you, assess what needs to happen to get it back on the road, but have no tools to carry out the assessed work. Social work under austerity is a demanding, thankless and quite depressing role.”

Gina, social worker, South West

The survey

Methodology

The survey was conducted through an online questionnaire, which was designed through discussions between staff in UNISON's local government team, active social work members of the union and LRD.

A link to the questionnaire was distributed by email to UNISON members employed in social work on 24 January 2022. These members were also encouraged to ask any non-members they knew working in the sector to complete it. That distribution was later followed up by individual email reminders, emails to branches asking them to remind members to respond and promotion of the survey via UNISON social media. The survey was closed on 22 February 2022.

Respondents

Details of the distribution respondents in terms of their jobs and personal characteristics can be found on pages 31-32.

Key points about the respondent profile are:

- The respondents come from all roles in social work, including students and administrative workers, but half have social worker as their job title
- More than nine in ten work in local authorities
- They are split roughly 50:50 between those working in children and families services and in adult social care
- A majority have worked in social work for more than 10 years
- They are overwhelmingly female and of white ethnic origin
- A majority are in the over-46 age range.

Working during the pandemic

Numerous surveys have shown the increasing stresses placed on the social work sector since the Westminster government's austerity programme dramatically cut council budgets.

For example, research carried out by UNISON in conjunction with *Community Care*¹ showed the disastrous effect of budget cuts and staff shortages on workers' caseloads and their emotional distress. UNISON's 2018 survey on the impact of cuts to local authorities and the work carried out by council employees showed that nearly all felt austerity had damaged their ability to do their job well, most had to work unpaid overtime to keep services going, and stress levels were soaring due to "sky-high" caseloads.

But life clearly became even tougher for many of those working in the sector during the Covid-19 pandemic.

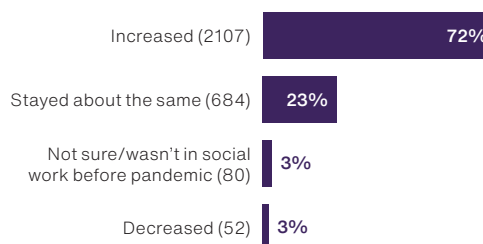
Changes during the pandemic

This latest survey reveals that seven in ten people employed in social work (72%) saw their workload increase during the pandemic, while an even higher number (78%) said their stress levels had risen.

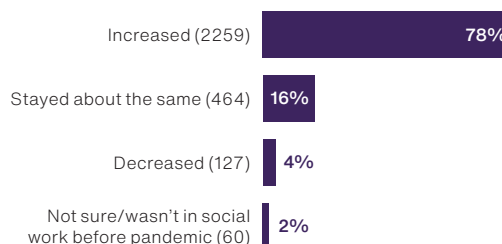
But fewer than one in five (19%) had seen support from their employer or senior staff rise to the occasion, while one in three (34%) had seen it diminish.

Social work students and social work assistants/support/admin staff particularly reported diminishing support from their employer/senior staff. This was true of 46% of students and 43% of social work assistants/support/admin staff.

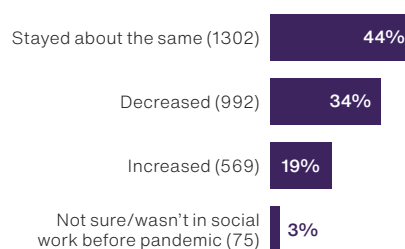
Has your workload increased/decreased during the pandemic?



Have your stress levels increased/decreased during the pandemic?



Has support from your employer/senior staff increased/decreased during the pandemic?



As one respondent said:

"I can work 55-60 hours per week sometimes. Am not even asked if I want to do overtime. It's just expected."

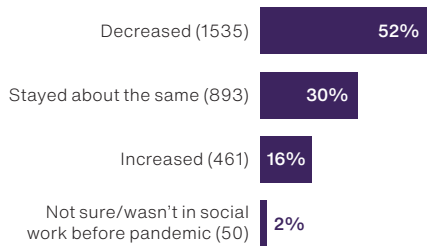
**Donna, social work assistant/
support worker, North West**

More than half of respondents (52%) said it had become harder to take breaks during the day during the pandemic and a substantial minority (43%) had found it more difficult to take leave or time off in lieu (TOIL).

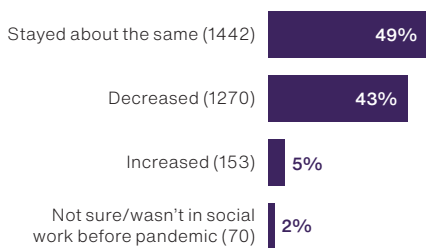
It is perhaps not surprising, then, that 70% said their morale had declined, and almost half (49%) said their intention to stay in their job had gone down.

The percentages were even higher when looking only at social workers, with 75% saying their morale had gone down and 53% that they were less likely to stay in their job. Part-time staff in particular were increasingly likely to say they wanted to quit.

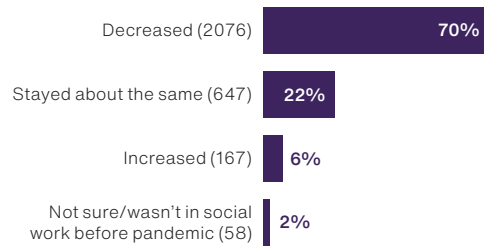
Has your ability to take breaks during the day increased/decreased during the pandemic?



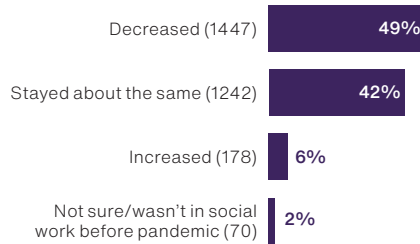
Has your ability to take leave/TOIL increased/decreased during the pandemic?



Has your morale increased/decreased during the pandemic?



Has your intention to stay in your job increased/decreased during the pandemic?



Typical comments were:

“Working 50 hour+ weeks and not being paid for overtime without having time to take TOIL is why people leave.”

Lily, newly qualified social worker, Yorkshire and Humberside

“I will leave my post to protect my own mental health and my family if managers continue to ignore the stress of certain work elements.”

Maggie, advanced social worker, Northern Ireland

Specific concerns during the pandemic

Covid concerns

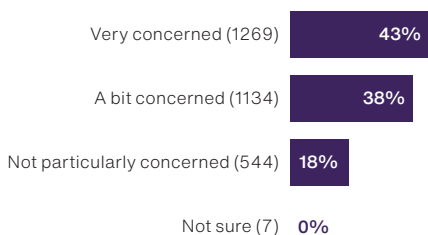
During the pandemic there was a considerable level of worry among social work employees about being exposed to Covid during the course of their work, with more than eight in ten either very (43%) or a bit (38%) concerned.

A quarter (25%) were very concerned about a lack of personal protective equipment (PPE) and other Covid safety measures, with a larger group (39%) a bit concerned.

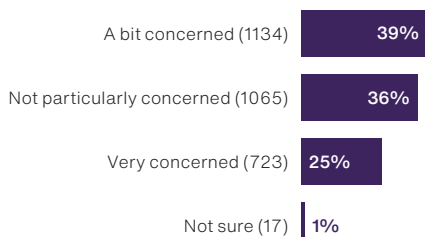
Three in ten respondents had had an individual Covid risk assessment (as opposed to a general workplace one), although a fifth of those who had had one (21%) were somewhat dissatisfied with it.

Those working in local government were less likely to have had an individual Covid risk assessment compared to those working in the NHS.

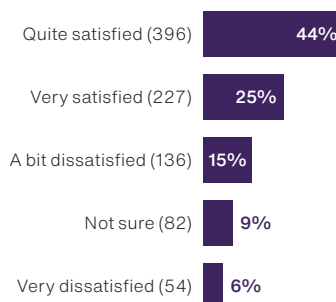
How concerned have you felt about exposure to Covid in the course of your work?



How concerned have you felt about PPE and other Covid safety measures?



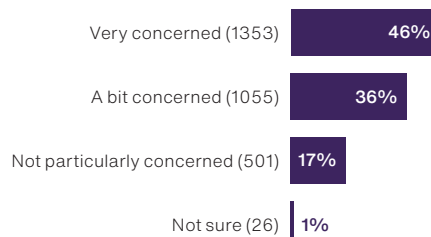
How satisfied were you with the outcome of your individual risk assessment? (Base=896)



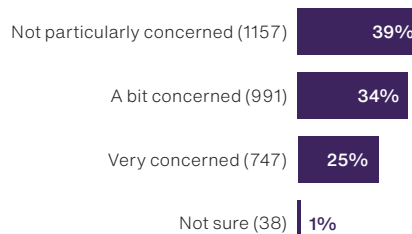
But social work staff were as concerned about control of their workload during the pandemic as they were about the virus itself. More than eight in ten (82%) were either very or a bit concerned.

While increased working from home may have had some benefits, there was concern over IT equipment and/or IT support for six in ten respondents. One in four (26%) were very concerned about this and 34% a bit concerned, with older staff more concerned than younger ones and part-time staff more than full timers.

How concerned have you felt about control over your workload?



How concerned have you felt about your IT equipment and/or IT support?

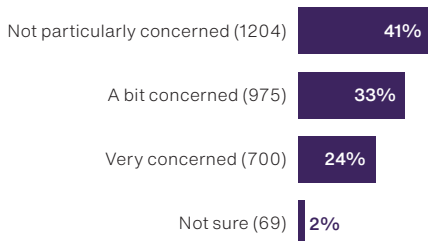


Concerns about relationships

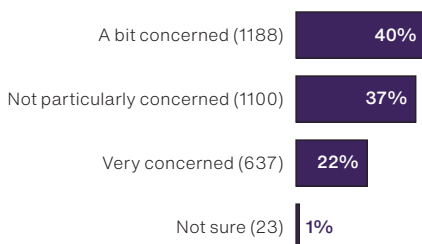
There was also widespread concern expressed by respondents about their relationships both at work and outside as a result of their jobs.

More than half cited concern over relationships with more senior staff (57%), with colleagues (62%) and with family and/or friends (66%). Part-time employees were more concerned over their relationships with senior staff and colleagues than full timers. Local government social work staff were more likely to be concerned about their relationships with colleagues than those working in the NHS.

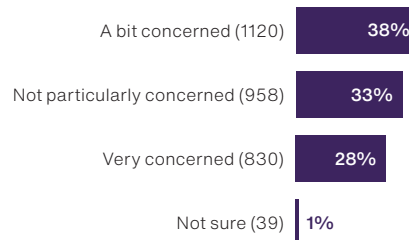
How concerned have you felt about relationships with more senior staff?



How concerned have you felt about relationships with colleagues?



How concerned have you felt about relationships with family/friends?



“My team manager does everything they can to support work-life balance and team morale, but as some team members do not come into the office, then crisis management falls to office-based staff. Newly qualified social workers and students need support and to be in the office. Very senior staff are not in the office and have no idea of the workload involved. You cannot judge quality or staff stress levels through looking at targets alone.”

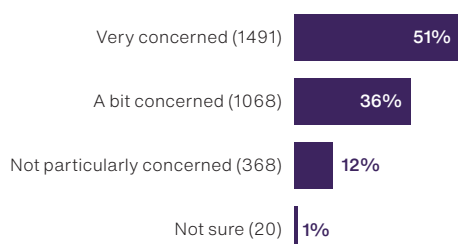
Ness, senior social worker, South West

Concerns over service users

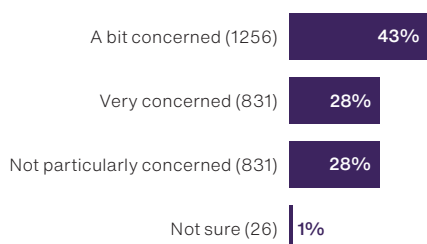
More than eight in ten (87%) social work staff were worried about their ability to provide a good service during the pandemic. This concern was slightly more pronounced among those working with adults than those in children and family services. It was also higher among those of mid-range experience (between five and ten years in social work).

Overall, seven in ten respondents were concerned about their relationships with service users (28% very concerned and 43% a bit concerned).

How concerned have you felt about your ability to provide a good service for users?



How concerned have you felt about your relationships with service users?



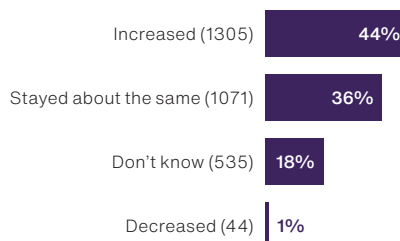
“We are having to deal with service users in extreme distress and they are often frustrated by a lack of services so vent their anger at us. This is also the same with other professionals from other agencies who are under extreme pressure.”

James, consultant social worker, East of England

Harassment and abuse

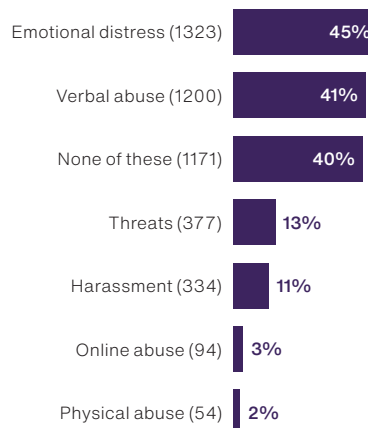
Concern over relationships with service users may be partially reflected in the abuse many social work staff receive. More than four in ten (44%) respondents felt that harassment and abuse of social work staff had increased during the pandemic, with just 1% saying it had decreased.

Do you feel that, during the pandemic, harassment and abuse of social work staff has increased/decreased?



In fact, in just the first seven weeks of 2022, more than four in ten social work staff had experienced one or more forms of harassment, abuse or threats from service users or those around them. In addition to this, 45% had experienced emotional distress.

Since the start of 2022, have you experienced any of the following from service users, their families or members of the public?



In social workers' own words (names have been changed):

"I'm currently off sick due to being physically assaulted by a service user. He also threatened me. I asked over a period of three months to work elsewhere and this was not accommodated. He then assaulted me again but worse than previous assaults."

**Hayley, social work assistant/
support worker, North West**

"I was grabbed and pushed in the street by a service user two weeks ago. My senior manager provided no advice or reassurance following this. Another service user threatened to tie me to a chair and set his house alight, leaving me to 'burn to death.'"

Ellie, social worker, Scotland

"We get so much blame and hostility, but we have no protection. We use our own names, our own cars and have nothing to keep us safe. We're expected to do so much but no one considers the threat and danger we face. Social workers are disliked as much as the police, but they don't use personal details and don't risk been followed home."

Kiren, social worker Yorkshire and Humberside

Those working with children and families were particularly likely to have been on the receiving end of abuse, with 45% experiencing verbal abuse, 13% harassment and 16% threats in this seven-week period.

Even more worrying is the high level of verbal and physical abuse for younger and less experienced social work staff, and for newly qualified social workers. For example, 56% of 26–35-year-olds and 61% of 19–25-year-olds had been verbally abused in the first weeks of 2022. Also, 22% of 26–35-year-olds and 19% of 19–25-year-olds had experienced threats, compared with an average of 13%. Over half (52%) of newly qualified social workers reported verbal abuse.

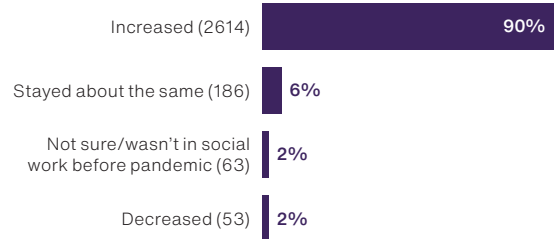
"Parents/grandparents and other family members of the children I work to support have at times been verbally abusive and overly demanding towards me. They have called me incompetent, and other abusive names. I have experienced emotional distress from other professionals such as head teachers and guidance teachers, implying I am not doing enough/ have failed, need to be doing more etc. Many people try blame me for things out of my control and expect me to go even more above and beyond my role."

Millie, newly qualified social worker, Scotland

Working from home

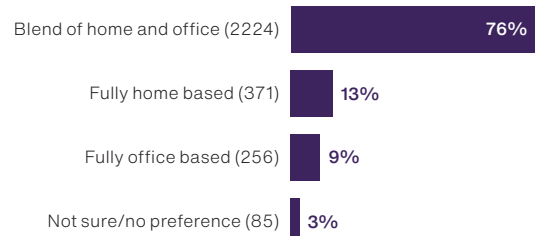
The vast majority of respondents (90%) had experienced more working from home during the pandemic than beforehand, although the proportion was lower (72%) for social work assistants/support workers/administrative staff.

Has working from home increase/decreased for you during the pandemic?



While a certain amount of working from home is seen as desirable for many, few (13%) would like their work to fully home-based in the future. Three in four respondents would like a blend of home and office working, with a rather higher proportion (80%) of those working with children and families than those in adult social care (72%).

Which of these work arrangements would you prefer to have from now on?



Working in social work in 2022

The ending of the pandemic will not mean a stop to many of the worries for social work staff. They clearly have some very serious ongoing concerns about their work, affecting their own personal wellbeing but also service provision.

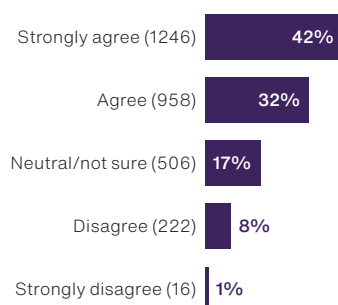
Excessive workload

One of the key issues both over the last two years and currently is excessive workloads. At the start of 2022, just under three quarters of respondents “often feel their workload is excessive” (42% strongly agree and 32% agree). This feeling runs across the board but is strongest among those who work in children and families services.

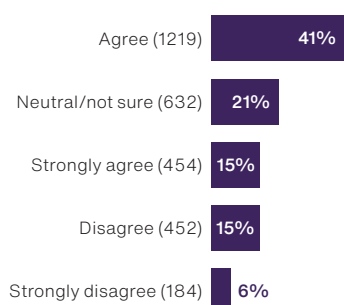
A small majority of respondents overall (56%) agree to some extent that their manager tends to support them if they struggle with their workload, though one in five (21%) disagree with this.

But a worrying one in six respondents (18%) say their manager “tends to blame or criticise me if I struggle with my workload”.

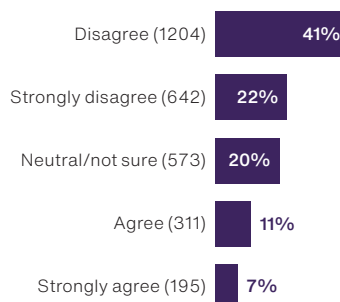
I often feel my workload is excessive



My manager tends to support me if I struggle with my workload



My manager tends to blame or criticise me if I struggle with my workload



Not surprisingly, then, when respondents were asked to say how worried they are about various aspects of their work, workload was one of the very top concerns, cited by a massive 90% (see page 16). As social workers told us:

“Taking leave, flexi/TOIL, being ill and attending training ends up feeling like a punishment because you have the same amount of work to do, even though you are not at work to do it. This means having to work over your contracted hours when you return in an attempt to catch up. All managers really care about is statistics, if a worker is not fast at churning out the written assessments, they are seen as a failing. Managers don’t acknowledge that the job can rarely be done within contracted hours and instead perpetuate the false narrative that it’s the failing of the social worker. Being a social worker is like being in an emotionally abusive relationship. No matter how much you give, it’s never enough and there’s always something wrong. It leaves you feeling inadequate.”

Kelly, social worker, Yorkshire and Humberside

“Currently, many staff members are going off on long-term sick leave therefore support is close to zero. Am I learning how to do the job? No. Have I lost the wish to become a social worker? Yes, of course. Am I scared to enter the profession? Yes, because I will not get enough support and it looks like a game. You win only when you take 30 clients and you do not complain even if the service you can provide is the kind of service you would consider to be inadequate for your own parents.”

Ava, social work student, South East

“In my team, staff are not valued, which is reflected in high staff turnover and poor staff retention, very demoralising.”

Sarah, social work administrative worker, Scotland

Supervision

Adequate supervision of social work employees is crucial both for social work staff and for the users of social work services.

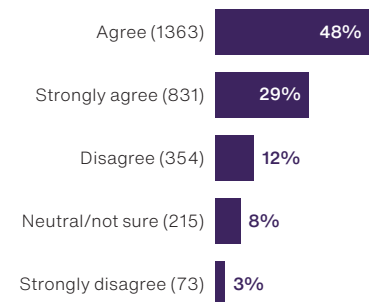
The vast majority of survey respondents (96%) do indeed receive supervision as part of their job. While three quarters of them (77%) agree to some extent that this is provided regularly (29% strongly agree and 48% agree), it is concerning that a minority (16%) do not feel this to be the case.

There are also concerns about the nature of the supervision. Less than half of respondents feel their supervision “provides me with emotional support, which helps me with my work”. Just 12% strongly agree with this and 36% agree.

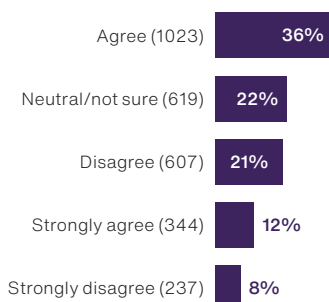
Only just over a quarter (27%) feel the supervision means they have a fair and balanced workload (6% strongly agree and 21% agree).

A substantial minority (39%) feel their supervision is based too much on targets.

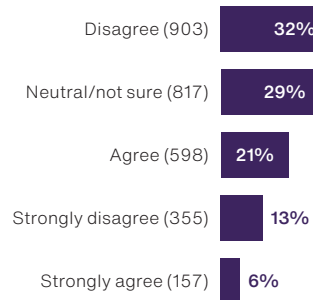
My employer provides me with regular supervision



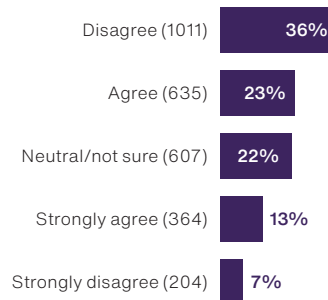
My supervision provides me with emotional support, which helps me with my work



My supervision means I have a fair and balanced workload



My supervision is based too much on targets



“Workloads are increasing more and more demands are being placed on our time. Supervision is often based on defensible practice, it is difficult to raise concerns with senior managers.”

Liam, social worker, North East

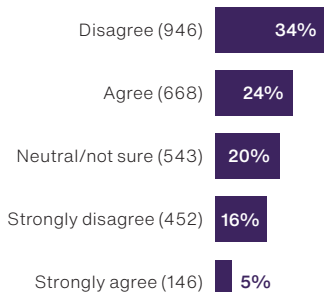
Continuing professional development

Most survey respondents (93%) are required to maintain continuing professional development (CPD) as part of their job. However, there is considerable concern about the amount of time, opportunity, resources and financial support available to carry out and record their CPD.

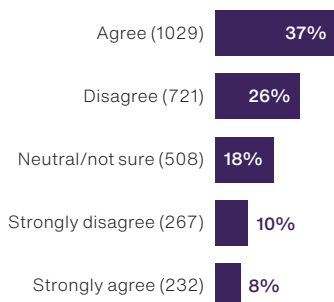
Just 29% agree their employer gives them sufficient time for this, with just 5% strongly agreeing. And fewer than one in five (19%) say their employer gives them enough financial support to carry out their CPD, with only 4% strongly agreeing that they do.

More than four in ten (45%) say they are provided with sufficient resources and the same proportion feel they get enough opportunities.

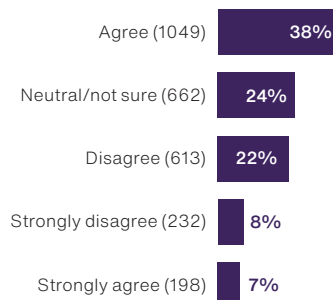
My employer provides me with sufficient time to carry out and record my CPD



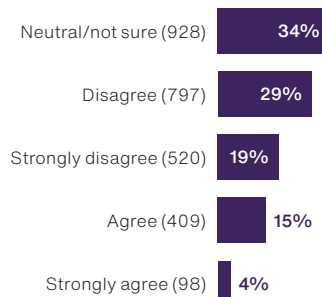
My employer provides me with sufficient opportunities to carry out and record my CPD



My employer provides me with sufficient resources to carry out and record my CPD



My employer provides me with sufficient financial support to carry out and record my CPD



“Told off” by manager for trying to allocate time for my CPD in work hours, told to do it in my own time. I’m there to work not do this.”

Lucy, social worker, South West

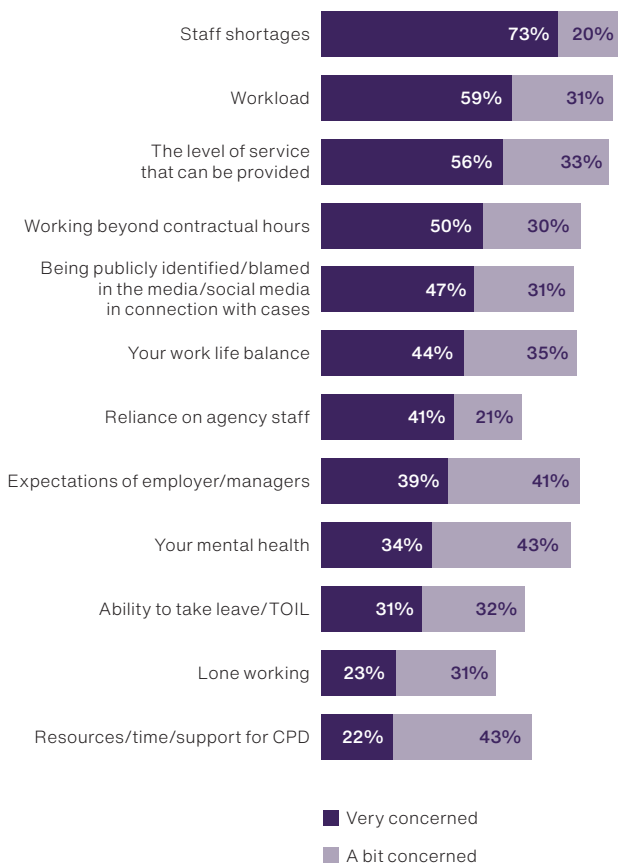
Chief concerns of social work staff

This section of the research was aimed at assessing how concerned social work staff are about a selection of issues related to both their work and its effects on them personally.

Respondents were invited to indicate their feelings about a range of issues presented and to select whether they were “very concerned”, “a bit concerned”, “not particularly concerned” or “not sure”.

For all topics, a majority indicated that they were very or a bit concerned.

How concerned are you about the following aspects of your work?



The issue that caused the deepest and most widespread concern was staff shortages, cited by 93% of respondents. More than seven in ten of all respondents (73%) were “very concerned”, with a further 20% “a bit concerned”. Only a tiny fraction (6%) were “not particularly concerned”.

In social workers' own words:

“The level of vacancies in the frontline teams is at the highest I have ever seen in my 20 years plus social work career.”

Mike, senior social worker, Cymru Wales

“Vacancies have skyrocketed in social work in our local authority. We can't keep good social workers. The complexity and amount of work is causing newly qualified social workers to leave. The pandemic has made this worse due to the sense of team disappearing. Long-established social work teams across the board that were always filled internally all now have external vacancies we can't fill.”

Natalie, assistant team manager, North West

“Just been off for 14 weeks due to work-related stress, on my return only half the team are still in work. High numbers off sick or vacancies that cannot be recruited. Feels very unsupported.”

Tom, advanced social worker, East Midlands

But there was also widespread concern about a number of linked issues, including workload (90% indicating some level of concern), working beyond contractual hours (80%), work-life balance (79%) and ability to take leave/TOIL (63%). Younger staff were more likely than the older age groups to be concerned about these issues.

Concern in these areas was high for all areas of social work but particularly so for individuals working with children and families. Among this group, 86% were concerned about working beyond contractual hours, 71% about being able to take leave/TOIL and 83% over their work-life balance.

Almost eight in ten staff overall (77%) had worries about their mental health, with one in three respondents (34%) “very concerned”. This issue was more likely to be of concern to the younger the age group.

“I have had multiple complaints made against myself by both service users and professionals due to a lack of responses and actions from myself. The majority of the complaints were completely valid and deserved due to me simply not having enough time in the working day and personal time to manage the caseload I currently have. At one point there was only myself in my team, my entire team and manager were on sick leave. However, this shows the stress the job has taken on the work force.”

Ben, social worker, North West

It is not just their personal wellbeing that concerns social work staff, but also the service provided. Nine in ten respondents had concerns about the level of social work service that can currently be provided, the majority were very concerned. Those working in adult social care and particularly those in Emergency Duty Teams (out of hours) had even higher levels of concern.

“Virtually no access to community care support has made my job extremely difficult. You empathize with the client/carer/family then they are expected to wait for months and months for some practical support.”

Laura, care manager, South West

An area where almost eight in ten respondents expressed worry is being publicly identified/blamed in the media/social media in connection with cases. Almost half of respondents were very concerned about this and another third a bit concerned. This concern was particularly marked among those working with children and families.

As respondents put it:

“There needs to be more safety structures in place for social workers who may be at risk of being placed in the media in connection with events which are outside our control. Being a social worker, I have always had a constant fear that if something goes wrong, I will be blamed and lose my job/career and be placed in court or publicly chastised for something I cannot control. This affects your confidence, mental health, and happiness in going to your work. This has to stop.”

Meg, social worker, Scotland

“Social work is a difficult job at any time but increased media scrutiny, public stress levels increasing and a lack of political support means that social workers can often be scapegoated.”

Indira, social worker, West Midlands

Priorities for UNISON action

When it comes to respondents' views on key areas where they would like action from UNISON, the top priorities are clear. The standout responses on this – in terms of being both most widely held and most deeply felt were:

- better pay
- better funding for social work/local government
- better work-life balance.

Respondents were first asked to pick their top five priorities for UNISON action to improve how they feel about work. The responses reveal that majorities chose better pay, better funding for social work/local government, better work-life balance and a home-working allowance.

More than one in four in each case selected flexibility over place and/or working hours, mental health support, improved pension arrangements and car/travel allowance. Those under 25 were substantially more likely to pick mental health support as a top five priority (58%).

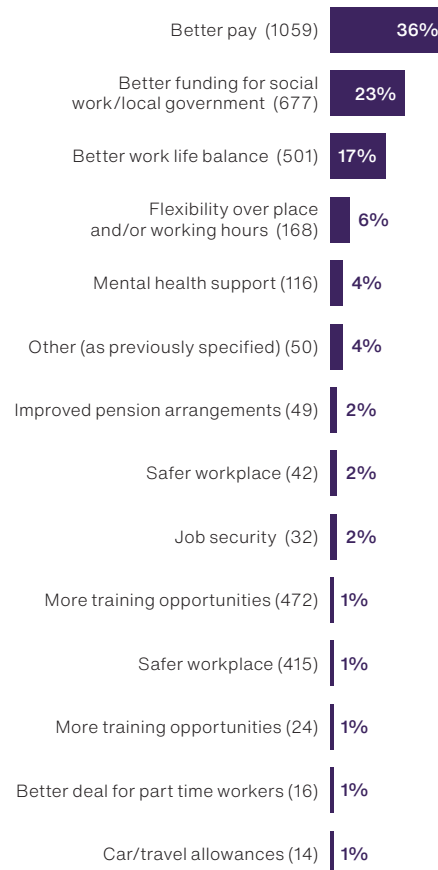
What are your top five priorities for action by UNISON?



Respondents were also asked to choose one of those top five issues they had picked, as their *top* priority.

In this case there was a clear lead for better pay (36%), better funding (23%) and better work-life balance (17%). Nevertheless, there were also substantial numbers saying their number one priority was for flexibility over their place and/or hours of work, for a home working allowance or for mental health support.

What is your top priority for action by UNISON?



While the top three priorities were the same for those working with children and families and those in adult social care, there were some differences of emphasis between the two groups.

Workers in adult social care were more likely to prioritise better pay (82%) followed by improved funding for social work (70%) and better work-life balance (58%).

Those working with children and families were more likely to prioritise better pay (82%) followed by work-life balance (73%) and improved funding for social work (66%).

It was notable that work-life balance was much less likely to be a top priority for part-time workers than full timers.

“My main gripe is the piddling suggested pay rise compared to the NHS staff when we do comparable work in mental health. My pay is 3 to 4K less than if I worked in the NHS.”

Sophie, social worker, North West

“Social workers always get the blame. No services and no staff. Really ashamed to work for a local authority now. The pay is shocking for what I do and the amount of risk I am in every day, not to mention the abuse.”

Emily, principal social worker, East Midlands

Emerging issues facing social work

Survey respondents were asked to set out what they saw as the most important emerging issue facing social work over the next year or two.

Somewhat unusually for such a long questionnaire, a high proportion (almost two thirds) of respondents took the time to add their thoughts on this, and in many cases set out not one but several issues they thought would be critical for the sector.

LRD has attempted to analyse the 1,940 responses to this question by categorising them into around 15 themes. However, most responses covered more than one theme, and so were placed into more than one category for analysis.

The themes identified were:

- Staffing shortage
- Need to attract/retain staff
- Loss of experienced staff
- Increased demand for services/high caseloads/workloads
- Pay inadequate/staff not valued
- Lack of home care/care home capacity/community care
- Funding/resource problems
- Problems with homeworking/virtual meetings/lack of buildings
- Restructuring/privatisation/reliance on agencies
- Management issues/targets/processes/box-ticking
- Covid legacy
- Lack of support for staff/burnout/mental health
- Vaccine mandate
- Image of social work/lack of respect from public
- Other.

These are, of course, artificial categories, and the boundaries between them are blurred. Overall, however, it is abundantly clear that the majority feeling is that the critical issues facing social work in the next year or two fit within a triangle. This links insufficient funding/resources, staff shortages and workloads that are dangerous to both employees and service users.

The single most widespread issue raised by social work staff was funding and resource problems. While many of the other themes arise as a consequence of this issue, variations of this wording – lack of funding and resources – were mentioned quite specifically by 700 respondents, 36% of all those who commented in this section. It was the most common issue raised by staff in all broad work areas but stood out more for those in adult social care than those working with children and families.

This problem was described as both inadequate funding for social work in general but also to specific areas, such as lack of resources for preventative work/early intervention, the disappearance of external services (such as youth services and mental health provision) and the lack of sufficient foster care places. For many in adult social care it was likely the expression of concern about lack of care home places, which some identified specifically (see next page).

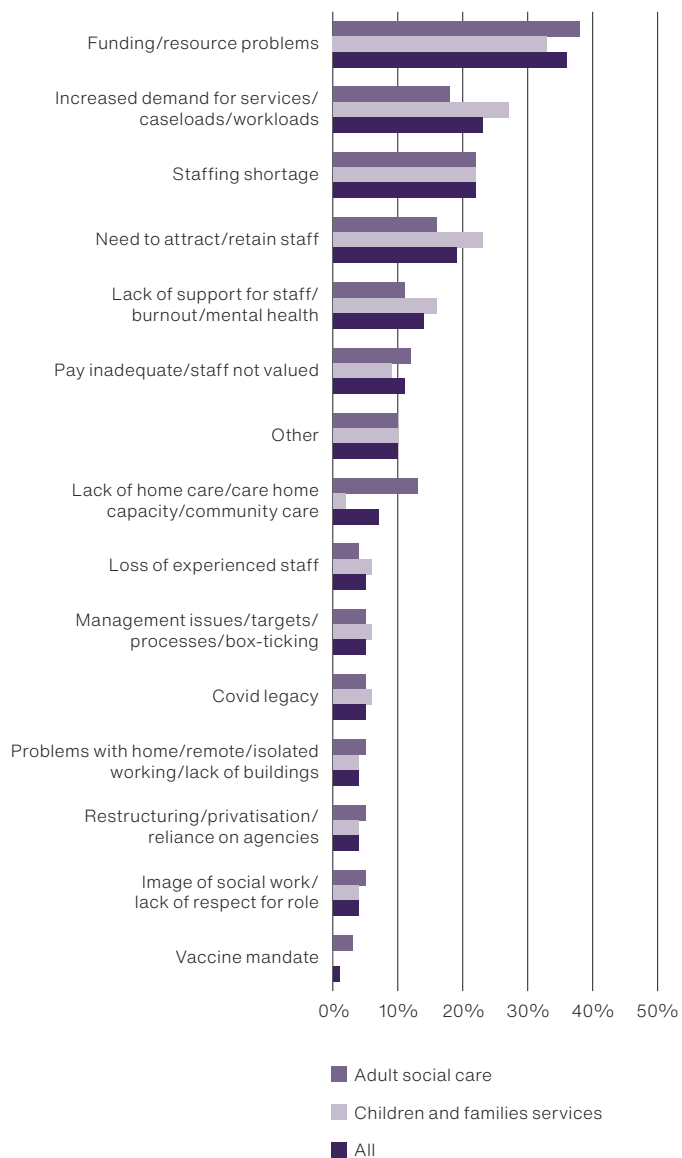
Several respondents referred to the decline in the quality of the services that could be provided.

A typical comment was one that specified:

“The rising need caused by years of austerity then [the] impact of Covid. The stranglehold on resources has been felt and there needs to be a flooding of resources in social care to make children more equal and have better life chances and improved outcomes.”

Reena, team manager, North West

Emerging issues for social work by two main broad work groups



These funding problems merge into the next most common theme raised by staff, categorised for this purpose as ‘increased demand for services/caseloads/workloads’. This was a widespread concern for all work groups but was more dominant among those working with children and families than those in adult social care.

Issues covered in this include cases getting more complex with the increase in poverty, substance abuse, debt, and complex disabling conditions, as well as the growing needs of an ageing population. A common concern is increasing mental ill health, especially among children.

This group of issues also encompasses high caseloads/workloads caused by a lack of staff, which links to three further main themes identified – ‘staffing shortage’, ‘need to attract/retain staff’ and ‘loss of experienced staff’.

Together these three issues were perhaps cited even more frequently than funding/resource problems. However, they were categorised separately as they appeared to indicate subtly different perspectives.

While many (in both main work areas) expressed desperation at the general shortage of staff, another large number specifically identified the problem of people leaving social work altogether and/or the difficulty of attracting new recruits. This was particularly evident among those working with children and families.

A smaller proportion specifically identified the problem of *experienced* staff leaving social work. In some cases, leaving newly qualified/inexperienced social workers to deal with more difficult cases or having less support available to them. Again, this was rather more pronounced among those working with children and families.

Many respondents linked the staffing crisis to unsafe decision making and increased risks to clients, with many using phrases such as “dangerously high caseloads” and “lack of staff and increasing dangerous circumstances for families”.

Another set of emerging issues cited by a substantial chunk of social work staff was around the theme ‘lack of support for staff/burnout/mental health (of staff)’. This was particularly common among those working with children and families, and many respondents specifically used the word ‘burnout’ to describe what they saw as a key emerging issue.

A typical comment was this one that cited:

“Continuing shortage of staff, contributing to excessive workloads on existing staff which causes stress, mental health problems and even burnout/long term sickness absence/leaving jobs or the profession.”

Mia, social worker, Yorkshire & Humberside

Around one in ten respondents specifically referred to staff pay as a key emerging issue, often coupled with the feeling that employees in the sector are not valued, especially among those working in adult social care. One in that sector referred to:

“The lack of pay increases. I feel really undervalued in my role and I don’t feel motivated to work for a government that can’t be bothered to pay their social care workforce properly.”

Dan, social worker, South West

Some of those mentioning pay also referred to the huge number of unpaid hours worked by staff and social workers who felt their pay compared badly with that of other similar professions, such as teaching.

A substantial section of respondents – largely those working in adult social care – cited issues that fitted into a theme of “lack of home care/care home capacity/community care.”

Typical comments referred to:

“The lack of care services available for those needing care, particularly home care and care home placements. We don’t have enough carers and care homes to support people’s needs for leaving hospital.”

Lauren and Noah, social workers in Yorkshire & Humberside and the South East

Other emerging issues mentioned related to aspects of the structure of social work. There were worries about privatisation, particularly the hugely increasing reliance on agency staff. It was pointed out by many that such staff were much better paid than in-house staff, leading some permanent employees to make the shift, with higher costs for local authorities.

“The government needs to put a cap on what agency workers are paid to do social work. I have agency staff who are newly qualified whose take home pay is more than mine. Some poorer performing authorities pay really high rates, which mean it is hard to recruit suitable and reliable staff. This in turn has an impact on staff morale and being able to deliver consistent service to families.”

Alex, team manager, London

There were a number of negative references to the relationship with the health service, with a number of respondents suggesting that the NHS was “taking over” social work. Some Scottish respondents expected the planned national care service to be an important emerging issue, though without judgement as to what the impact was likely to be.

Other issues raised were the legacy of the Covid pandemic, with two main problems raised. One was the isolation felt by many staff with offices being closed and people working from home. Several noted that team working was essential to social work. Also, that there were problems for staff who had qualified during the pandemic and were not having the benefit of working alongside experienced staff. Another Covid legacy raised was the widespread mental health impact on children.

Other emerging issues suggested were work processes being too target-driven and bureaucratic and the public and government image of social work being poor (some mentioning media coverage.)

Comparison across the four broad work areas

This section looks at key differences in responses from staff in the four broad work areas identified in the survey². This is namely those working in children and families services (47% of respondents); adult social care (49%); *both* children and families and adult social care (3%); and out of hours emergency duty teams (EDT) (2%).

Most of the discussion centres around what are by far the two largest groups, staff in children and families services, and those in adult social care.

On the whole there not huge variations in the two main staff groups' experiences and concerns, the main ones being:

- Increased stress was more widespread among adult social care staff and they were more likely to be concerned about the service they could provide
- This group was slightly more likely to have seen a rise in employer support (though still most did not)
- Staff in children/families services were substantially more likely than those in adult social care to have experienced harassment/abuse in early 2022
- On the other hand, staff in adult social care were more likely to have experienced emotional distress
- Staff in children/families services are more likely to be concerned with workload, and to feel unsupported by their line management
- They are also more concerned about issues such as taking breaks, working beyond their contractual hours
- Not surprisingly, therefore, this group was much more likely to prioritise UNISON action to improve their work-life balance
- While pay was the top priority for all groups, it was even more so among adult social care staff than those in children/families services.

Comparison: Working during the pandemic

Stress

While stress increased among all groups of staff during the pandemic, those working in adult social care were rather more likely than those working with children and families to say this. They were the group most likely of the four to have felt increased stress. This is perhaps linked with the variation in the impact of Covid itself on different groups in society.

Stress levels increased/decreased during the pandemic

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2899	1365	1406	80	48
Increased	78%	76%	80%	66%	77%
Decreased	4%	5%	3%	6%	8%
Stayed about the same	16%	16%	15%	24%	15%
Not sure/ wasn't in social work before pandemic	2%	2%	2%	4%	-

² Some percentage figures in this section may differ slightly from those in the overall summary due to the slightly different numbers of respondents on which they are based.

Employer support

Support from employers was lacking across the board but staff working with children and families were less likely than adult social care staff to have seen an increase in support from their employer/senior staff.

Support from employer/senior staff increased/decreased during the pandemic

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2928	1380	1420	81	47
Increased	19%	17%	22%	22%	15%
Decreased	34%	35%	33%	31%	34%
Stayed about the same	44%	45%	44%	44%	51%
Not sure/ wasn't in social work before pandemic	3%	3%	2%	3%	-

Taking breaks

Staff working with children and families saw more change than adult social care workers in their ability to take breaks, with more saying this had increased but also more saying it had decreased.

This could be linked with the fact that these staff were also more likely to have seen an increase in working from home (see box on working from home), with potentially more flexibility about when to take a break. But it could also relate to ability to take breaks before the pandemic, as those in adult social care (and in EDT) were more likely to say it had stayed the same.

Ability to take breaks during the day increased/decreased

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2929	1384	1420	80	45
Increased	16%	18%	13%	21%	9%
Decreased	52%	57%	48%	51%	44%
Stayed about the same	30%	23%	38%	26%	47%
Not sure/ wasn't in social work before pandemic	2%	2%	1%	1%	-

Covid risk assessments

Those working with adults were more likely than others to have had an individual Covid risk assessment. They were also more likely to be broadly satisfied with their risk assessment.

Had individual Covid risk assessment

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2938	1382	1426	82	48
Yes	30%	27%	34%	29%	25%
No	61%	65%	56%	57%	75%
Not sure	9%	8%	10%	13%	-

Ability to provide a good service

Staff working in adult social care (and those working across both main areas) were slightly more likely than those working with children and families to have had concerns over their ability to provide a good service during the pandemic.

Concern over ability to provide a good service

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2936	1381	1425	82	48
Very or a bit concerned	87%	85%	89%	89%	83%
Not concerned or not sure	13%	15%	12%	11%	17%

Comparison: Working in social work in 2022

Harassment/abuse/distress

Staff working with children and families were substantially more likely than those in adult social care to have experienced harassment, verbal abuse, or threats in the first weeks of 2022. Those in adult social care were more likely to have experienced emotional distress.

However, by far the highest rates of such harassment, abuse and emotional distress were experienced by those in EDTs, who were also the group most likely to be subject to physical abuse.

EDT staff were also much more likely than others to feel that during the pandemic, harassment and abuse of social work staff had increased.

Since the start of 2022, have you experienced any of the following?

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2919	1377	1413	81	48
Harassment	11%	13%	10%	10%	17%
Verbal abuse	41%	45%	37%	33%	65%
Physical abuse	2%	2%	2%	3%	4%
Online abuse	3%	3%	3%	5%	2%
Threats	13%	16%	10%	11%	29%
Emotional distress	45%	43%	47%	37%	56%
None of these	40%	40%	40%	53%	17%

During the pandemic, harassment and abuse of social work staff generally has increased/decreased

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2944	1385	1429	82	48
Increased	44%	42%	45%	45%	63%
Decreased	2%	2%	1%	4%	-
Stayed about the same	36%	39%	35%	29%	25%
Don't know	18%	18%	19%	22%	13%

Workload and line management

While majorities of all staff groups said they often feel their workload is excessive, this feeling is most acute among those working with children and families. Those in EDTs were somewhat less likely to say this.

Often feel workload is excessive

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2938	1386	1424	80	48
Agree	75%	77%	73%	73%	60%
Disagree	8%	8%	8%	11%	13%
Neutral/not sure	17%	15%	19%	16%	27%

The difference between the two main groups here may be linked with the nature of their line management. While those in children and families services are slightly more likely to be provided with regular supervision (79% saying so compared with 75% of staff in adult social care), there are a number of indications that staff in adult social care are managed more sympathetically.

For example, adult care staff are slightly more likely to say their manager supports them if they struggle with their workload (57% compared with 56% of those in children and families services) and to *disagree* that their manager blames or criticises them if they struggle with it (66% compared with 61%).

In addition, in relation to their supervision, staff in children/families services are more likely to say their supervision is based too much on targets (41% compared with 31%). Meanwhile, they are less likely to say their supervision provides them with emotional support (46% do so compared with 50%) and to say it gives them a fair and balanced workload (24% compared with 28%).

Working from home (WFH)

Those working with children and families were more likely than those working in adult social care to have increased their WFH during the pandemic. Those working across both areas were even more likely, while those working in EDTs were less likely to have seen an increase.

Working from home increased/decreased during the pandemic

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2906	1381	1399	79	47
Increased	90%	92%	88%	95%	79%
Decreased	2%	2%	2%	-	2%
Stayed about the same	6%	4%	8%	3%	19%
Not sure/wasn't in social work before pandemic	2%	2%	2%	3%	-

For the future, while all groups said a blend of home and office-based working was their preferred choice, this was more apparent for those working with children and families than those in adult social care, while those in EDTs were more ambivalent.

Preferred work arrangement

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2925	1377	1417	83	48
Fully office based	9%	8%	10%	8%	15%
Fully home based	13%	11%	15%	5%	23%
Blend of home and office	76%	80%	72%	82%	56%
Not sure/no preference	3%	1%	4%	5%	6%

Comparison: Chief concerns of social work staff

While majorities of all staff groups are concerned about the specific issues presented in the survey, and in most cases those are large majorities, there are some subtle variations in how widely those concerns are spread.

The main variations between the two main staff groups revolve around working hours.

Those working with children and families are substantially more likely than those in adult social care to be concerned about working beyond contractual hours, their work-life balance and their ability to take leave and TOIL.

However, they are also more concerned about being publicly identified or blamed in the media/social media in connection with cases and also about lone working.

Adult social care workers, on the other hand, are slightly more worried than children and families staff about the service that can be provided.

Those working across the children and families and adult social care sectors are slightly less concerned about all the issues than average.

EDT staff are a little less likely to be concerned than others about issues around workload and hours but are more likely to be concerned about the service that can be provided, being publicly identified in the media and lone working.

Very or a bit concerned

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
Staff shortages	94%	94%	94%	89%	85%
Workload	91%	91%	90%	90%	79%
Service that can be provided	90%	87%	92%	85%	98%
Expectations of employers/managers	80%	81%	80%	69%	73%
Working beyond contractual hours	80%	86%	74%	75%	69%
Work-life balance	79%	83%	76%	76%	65%
Being publicly identified/blamed in media/social media	79%	82%	75%	75%	90%
Mental health	77%	76%	79%	74%	65%
Resources/time/support for CPD	66%	65%	67%	63%	56%
Ability to take leave/TOIL	64%	71%	57%	62%	56%
Reliance on agency staff	62%	63%	62%	45%	64%
Lone working	54%	56%	51%	51%	77%

Comparison: Priorities for UNISON action

Asked about their top five priorities for action, there was only slight variation across the staff groups in the most widely selected priorities.

For all groups these were better pay, better funding, better work-life balance, and a homeworking allowance. The next most popular choice for all except those in EDT was flexibility over place and/or working hours.

For EDT staff, the fifth most common choice was improved pension arrangements, and indeed there were wider variations among the staff groups in the propensity to prioritise this. This is likely to be linked to the different age profiles of the different groups.

Top five priorities for action by UNISON

	All	Children and families services	Adult social care	Both children and families and adult social care	Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)
	2946	1389	1428	81	48
Better pay	82%	82%	82%	83%	79%
Better funding for social work/local government	68%	67%	70%	64%	75%
Better work-life balance	65%	73%	58%	68%	54%
Home-working allowance	53%	55%	51%	48%	46%
Flexibility over place and/or working hours	45%	44%	47%	44%	21%
Mental health support	38%	40%	36%	36%	29%
Improved pension arrangements	26%	23%	28%	31%	54%
Car/travel allowances	22%	23%	21%	22%	27%
Better career opportunities	17%	16%	18%	24%	4%
More training opportunities	16%	14%	18%	16%	17%
Safer workplace	14%	15%	13%	12%	29%
More opportunities for part-time working	10%	10%	11%	6%	8%
Job security	8%	6%	11%	12%	8%
Other	5%	4%	5%	10%	2%

Age profile of four staff groups

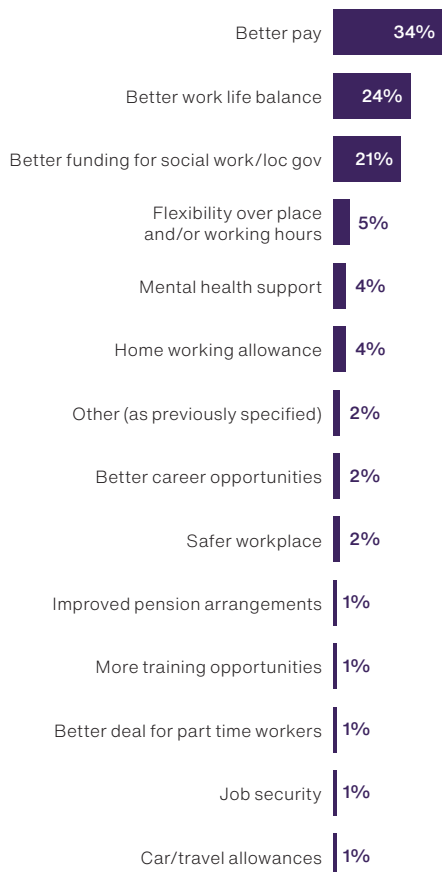
	18 or under	19-25	26-35	36-45	46-55	56-65	66 or over
Children and families services	-	3%	26%	24%	26%	19%	1%
Adult social care	-	1%	17%	24%	30%	27%	2%
Both children and families and adult social care	-	2%	9%	24%	35%	29%	-
Emergency Duty Team (Out of Hours)	2%	-	2%	2%	38%	50%	6%

When asked to select the single most important priority, some differences of emphasis begin to emerge between the two main staff groups (see charts on next page).

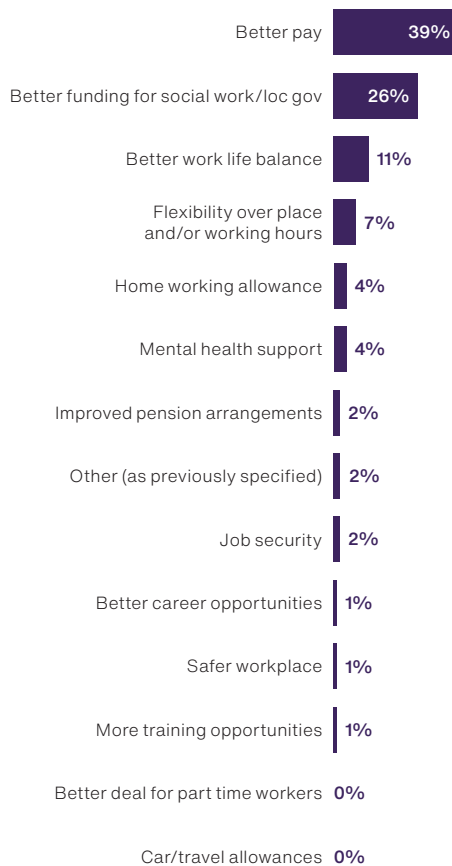
While better pay was the top priority for all, it was even more commonly picked out by staff in adult care (39%) than by those in children and families services (34%). Adult social care staff were slightly more likely to select better funding for social work (26% compared with 24%).

But the starkest difference between the two groups was in the choice of better work-life balance, which was more than twice as likely to be picked out by staff working with children and families (24%) as by adult social care staff (11%).

Top priority for action: Children and families staff

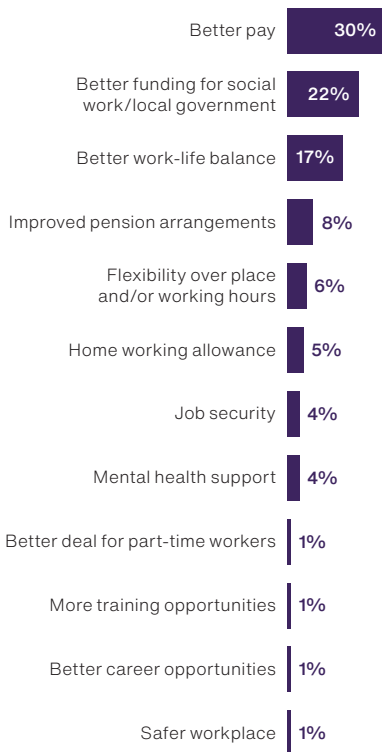


Top priority for action: Adult social care staff



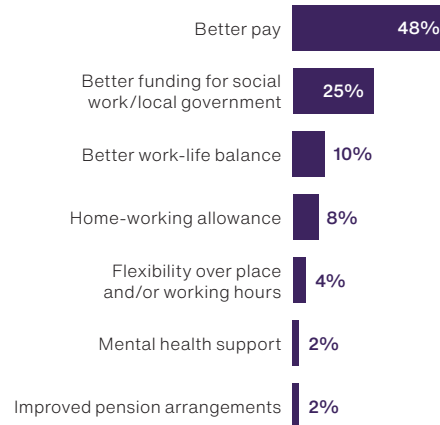
The main variations that stand out from the other two staff groups are that staff working across both children/families and adult social care are much more likely than others to pick out improved pension arrangements. For EDT staff, they are even more likely to prioritise pay than others and much more likely to prioritise home working allowances.

Top priority for action: Staff working across children/families and adult social care



*0% selected car travel allowance or 'other'

Top priority for action: Staff in EDT (out of hours)



Who responded to the survey?

Respondents' jobs

Job title

Social worker (1426)	49%
Senior social worker (572)	20%
Team manager (213)	7%
Social work assistant/support worker (204)	7%
Advanced social worker (137)	5%
Newly qualified social worker (126)	4%
Assistant team manager (59)	2%
Administrative worker in social work team (49)	2%
Social work student (38)	1%
Consultant social worker (32)	1%
Care manager (29)	1%
Principal social worker (28)	1%

Employer

A local authority (2714)	92%
The NHS (145)	5%
A voluntary sector organisation (35)	1%
The private sector (35)	1%
A school (10)	0%
CAFCASS (9)	0%

Broad work area

Adult social care (1432)	49%
Children and families services (1389)	47%
Both children and families and adult social care (83)	3%
Emergency duty team (Out of Hours) (48)	2%

How employed

Directly, on a permanent contract (2839)	97%
Directly, on a temporary contract (57)	2%
Through an agency (39)	1%

Full/part time

Full time (30+ contractual hours) (2433)	83%
Part time (15-30 contractual hours) (472)	16%
Part time (less than 15 contractual hours) (28)	1%

Time worked in social work

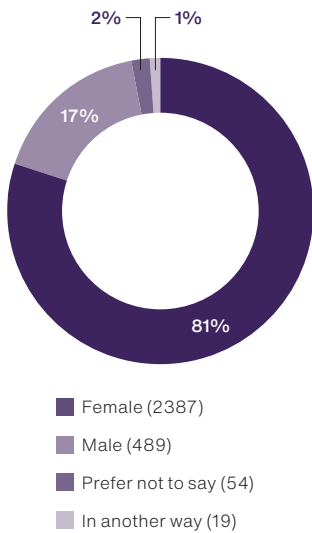
Between ten and twenty years (844)	29%
More than twenty years (783)	26%
Between five and 10 years (622)	21%
One to five years (610)	21%
Less than a year (92)	3%
I have not yet worked in social work as I am a student (10)	0%

Nation/region work in

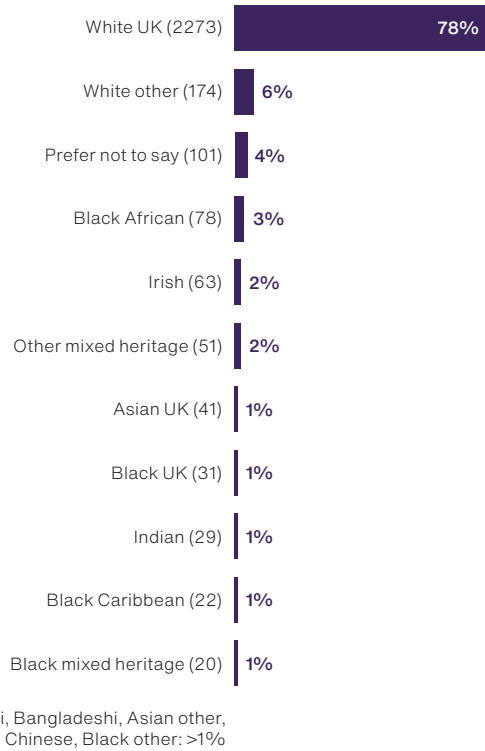
Scotland (638)	22%
North West (353)	12%
South East (352)	12%
Yorkshire/Humberside (299)	10%
South West (258)	9%
London (215)	7%
West Midlands (190)	6%
Cymru/Wales (166)	6%
East Midlands (155)	5%
North East (144)	5%
Eastern (113)	4%
Northern Ireland (59)	2%

Respondents' personal characteristics

How do you describe your gender?



How would you describe your ethnic origin?



Which age band are you in?

