

UK Social Workers: Working Conditions and Wellbeing

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This work was conducted as an independent study into social worker wellbeing. Dr Ravalier is not employed by either the SWU or BASW, and the findings are completely independent of these organisations. They have had no influence on what is reported here.

The views expressed are those of the authors alone.

About us

This report is being put together by Dr Jermaine M Ravalier of Bath Spa University. Dr Ravalier is senior lecturer of psychology and co-leads the Psychological Research Group at Bath Spa University. He has expertise in working conditions, and how these conditions may influence health and wellbeing of employees. Furthermore Dr Ravalier investigates ways in which these working conditions, and subsequently employee health and wellbeing, can be improved.

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Executive Summary & Aims

Background

Stress at work is a significant issue for employees in all employment sectors. Indeed work stress has been shown to be related to negative health complaints such as cardiovascular disease and increased burnout symptomology, and affects productivity and other organisational outcomes. Workplace stress is therefore the biggest cause of long-term sickness absence in the UK public sector (i.e. that which lasts longer than 4 weeks) and the second biggest cause of short term sickness absence behind illnesses such as colds and flu. It costs the UK economy greatly each year, equating to approximately £800 per employee employed each year in many sectors. However, while it is widely agreed that social work may be one of the most stressful occupations in the country, particularly in a rapidly changing political environment, working conditions which may lead to stress have never been investigated with respect to stress in this occupation.

The aims of this project are therefore as follows:

1. To investigate stress levels in UK social workers.
2. To investigate differences in stress experienced by social workers in different job roles.
3. To investigate the 'working conditions' faced by UK social workers.
4. To demonstrate how satisfied social workers are with their role, the how many are seeking to leave the role in the next 12 months, and the level of presenteeism in the job role.
5. To demonstrate how the working conditions that social workers are exposed to influence stress, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and presenteeism.

Findings

It was found that working conditions for social workers across the UK, irrespective of job role, are extremely poor. The only possible exception to this is peer support, i.e. the support that social workers received from colleagues.

Overall however we found that irrespective of the job role in this sector, the demands that individuals had on their time was consistently found to be related to increased levels of stress, intentions to leave the job, job satisfaction, and presenteeism. Therefore the sheer amount of work, and diversity of work required of UK social workers, was consistently found to influence these outcomes. These survey results are backed up by comments left by respondents to the project – in particular respondents described the sheer number of cases, and too much administrative work, were the two types of work demand which needed significant improvement.

Furthermore the influence of ethnicity and having a disability was investigated. First of all, social workers who are non-white and British described that this often allowed them to take a different perspective to their role in social work, and in particular have a greater understanding of the influence of the different cultures of service users. However, respondents also described that there was a culture of institutional racism, which played against non-white employees. With respect to those social workers with a disability, respondents described a lack of understanding from management and colleagues within their organisation, and others also described a lack of reasonable adjustments for their disability at work.

It is concluded here that urgent action needs to be taken to reduce the demands faced by social workers across the UK. Indeed, evidence is provided here to demonstrate that without improving on

the caseload and administrative demands of the role (particularly for children's and adult's social workers), a large proportion of social workers may leave the role across the next 18 months.

1. Literature Review: Background to the Problem

It is widely known that working conditions can have an impact on employee health and wellbeing. These working conditions therefore need to be considered across various occupations and job roles in order to determine areas for improvement within these job roles. Social workers provide an invaluable service throughout the UK and the world, but are facing unprecedented pressures. This report seeks to determine working conditions for social workers from across the UK, and whether these working conditions are linked to the experience of stress.

1.1 Effects of Stress

It is now accepted that workplace stress can negatively impact employee physiological and psychological health. For example, the INTERHEART studies (Rosengren et al., 2004) demonstrated that chronic psychological stressors were very strongly linked to the development of coronary heart disease, with this association as strong as well-known risk factors such as smoking and high blood pressure. Similarly, Segerstrom and Miller (2004) demonstrated that periods of chronic stress can depress the immune system. Furthermore chronic work stress is related to subjective outcomes such as insomnia (Clint et al., 2008) and musculoskeletal pain (Palliser, 2005), among others.

The effects of stress therefore not only impact the individual, but have knock-on effects on organisations. The mean number of days lost across all UK organisations due to stress in 2016 was approximately 24 per employee per episode, equating to 11.7 million working days lost in the UK (Health and Safety Executive [HSE], n.d.), although this figure is higher in the public sector compared to private organisations (Chartered Institute of Personnel Development [CIPD], 2016). Indeed, the 2016 Labour Force Survey (HSE, 2016) suggested that those working in the health and social care sector having the highest incidence of sickness absence due to stress of all occupations recorded. Stress is therefore the number one cause of long term sickness absence (greater than 4 weeks) among public sector employees, and second only to colds/flu in short term absence (CIPD, 2016). Stress is also related to increased turnover intentions (Tziner et al., 2015) and 'presenteeism' (i.e. attending work when sick; Johns, 2010), among numerous other negative outcomes.

In 2004, the UK Health and Safety Executive released a set of 'management standards' which identify working conditions which have the potential to negatively impact employee well-being (Cousins et al., 2004). These seven factors and the associated indicator survey tool have been used to assess the psychosocial working conditions in public and private organisations since release. For example Houdmont, Kerr and Randall (2012) measured psychosocial well-being in the police, Ravalier, McVicar and Munn-Giddings (2014) used the Management Standards Indicator Tool (MSIT) with a sample of public-sector workers, and Houdmont et al. (2013) within a mix of public and private organisations. These psychosocial working conditions are examples of everyday stressors – those which are present continuously or repeatedly over a prolonged period of time. Many argue that these everyday stresses are responsible for most stress-related absences (Chandola, Brunner and Marmot, 2006), even in roles replete with acute stressors such as exposure to death (Houdmont, Kerr and Randall, 2012).

1.2 Stressors in Social Work

Social work is often assumed to be one of the most stressful job roles in the UK, although official national statistics for social work sickness absence are difficult to attain. Despite this, it is clear that those working in 'service' occupations such as social work have the highest sickness absence rates of any occupational group in the UK (Office for National Statistics, 2014). However, the organisational causes and thus how working conditions influence stress in such a high profile and important job role is unclear. This project therefore seeks to address this, as well as how stress can be improved in this job role.

Objective

The main objective of this project is to identify not only what the sources of organisational stress are for social workers, but also what social workers believe should be done in order to reduce this stress.

Aims

There are therefore five main aims of this project:

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

2. What We Did and How We Did It

It is widely known that working conditions can have an impact on employee health and wellbeing. These working conditions therefore need to be considered across various occupations and job roles in order to determine areas for improvement within these job roles. Social workers face increasingly difficult working conditions in the UK due to successive cuts in public sector funding and recruitment freezes across the sector, among other things. This project therefore will determine the influence of these working conditions on social worker stress, retention, job satisfaction, and presenteeism. Additionally we will determine whether employee engagement can buffer some of the negative effects of working conditions. Lastly, the project will investigate whether race or having a disability negatively influences the role that a social worker undertakes.

Overall, therefore, we have aimed to investigate as much of the social work role as possible, and as such we have sought to investigate the following areas:

2.1 Working Conditions

In order to look at the working conditions faced by social workers we used an approach called the 'Management Standards'. These were released by the UK Health and Safety Executive (HSE) in 2004 and look at seven areas of the workplace which, if left in a 'poor' state over an extended period of time, can lead to poorer psychological wellbeing. The seven areas investigated are:

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

Alongside these management standards, the HSE also released an 'indicator tool' (the management standards indicator tool, MSIT), a survey tool which can be used to measure group scores on each of these seven factors (Mackay, 2004). The MSIT has been widely used across both public sector (e.g. Houdmont, Kerr, & Randall, 2012) and private sector (e.g. Ravalier et al., 2015) organisations, and is therefore a reliable method to use. Higher scoring on each of these factors demonstrates better working conditions.

2.2 Employee Engagement

Employee engagement refers to a positive work-related state of mind. When an employee is highly engaged, they have a sense of energy and a connection with their job role and they can deal with the demands of their job well. It is therefore a "positive, fulfilling work-related state of mind that is

characterised by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Shaufeli, Bakker, and Salanova, 2006, pp. 702). Engagement is therefore the opposite of burnout. Engagement was included in the project because it has been shown in the healthcare sector to influence a number of employee and patient/service user outcomes. We therefore used a scale called the ‘Utrecht Work Engagement Scale’ (UWES). The UWES is a 9-question scale which is positively-phrased, and asks individuals to answer regarding the frequency of the statements asked from ‘Never’ through to ‘Always’. [See here for more](#) information on the UWES.

2.3 Job Satisfaction, Turnover Intentions, and Presenteeism

As already reported, chronic workplace stress can significantly influence a number of work-related outcomes. In particular, in this project we asked about three outcomes (named so because they are potential outcomes of chronic stress), and latterly their respective relationships with stress and working conditions. The first of these outcomes is job satisfaction. This measure asked, through a single question, how satisfied social workers were with their job and scored this on a 5-point scale from ‘Extremely dissatisfied’ through to ‘Extremely satisfied’ (Dolbier et al., 2005). In particular, we asked respondents:

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

Secondly we looked at turnover intentions. Turnover intentions are clearly related to higher stress levels in both academic and non-academic literature alike. Essentially, turnover intentions ask whether an employee is looking to leave their job firstly, and secondly how long they are likely to stay in the role. Again this was measured using a single question, and answered using either ‘yes’ or ‘no’. The question we asked therefore was as follows, with a second asking how long (in months) respondents saw themselves staying in the social work profession (Dolbier et al., 2005):

“Are you considering leaving your current job?”

The final outcome measure was ‘presenteeism’. Presenteeism is the name given to the behaviour where an employee goes to work despite being ill or sick enough that they should stay at home. This is a particular issue because presenteeism influences productivity and efficiency, and with social workers in particular therefore can influence the care that they provide to service users. The question we asked was as follows, with responses being “no, never”, “yes, once”, “yes, 2 to 5 times”, and “yes, more than 5 times” (Aronsson et al., 2000):

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

2.4 Race and Disability

In the demographic questions, we asked for individuals to state whether they saw themselves as having a disability, and what race/ethnicity they saw themselves as. As well as this we asked whether individuals felt that either their race and/or disability influenced the way in which they do their jobs. These were open-ended questions, in which we asked individuals to respond to the questions in one sentence, should they feel that this was necessary.

2.5 How to Improve

The main objective of this project was to identify interventions, described by social workers, to reduce the stress that they experienced. Therefore one open-ended question was asked here. In particular, the following was asked:

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

2.6 Demographic Questions

Finally we asked a number of demographic questions in order to gain an understanding of the characteristics of those who responded in the project. In particular, we asked respondents' age, gender, UK region/country, job role, length of experience in their job role, ethnic group, whether they felt that they had a disability, and contracted hours versus actual hours worked.

3. Findings

3.1 Demographics: Who Took Part?

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

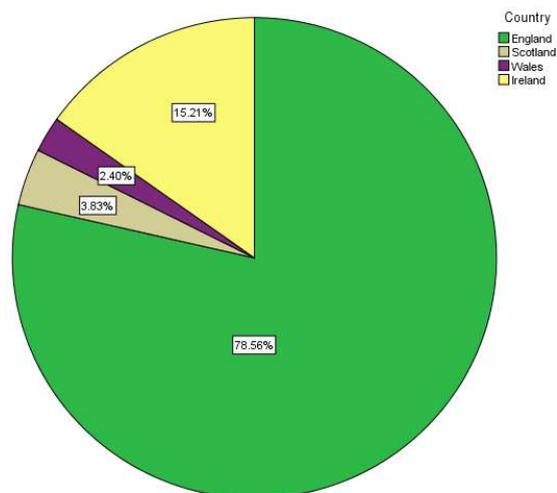
Table 1: Demographic information for respondents.

	Average Age	Gender		Experience in role	Contracted hours	Actual Hours worked	Ethnicity		Disability	
		Male	Female				White	BAME	Yes	No
All responses (n=1,268)	45	17%	82%	7 years, 8 months	34	44	89%	11%	15%	85%
Child & Family (n=385)	46	18%	82%	7 years 9 months	34	42	88%	12%	15%	85%
Adults (n=261)	43	18%	82%	7 years, 3 months	35	47	88%	12%	18%	82%
Independent (n=68)	53	19%	79%	9 years, 1 month	31	43	92%	8%	10%	90%
‘Other’ (n=144)	49	11%	89%	8 years, 6 months	33	42	91%	9%	15%	85%

Note that 410 respondents decided not to include all demographic information. Values for age, length of experience, contracted hours, and actual hours worked are average figures. All other figures are percentages.

Additionally it is worth noting that 92% of social workers work more hours every week than they are contracted to. On average they work nearly 10 hours per week (9.82 to be exact) more than they are contracted to. Assuming a very conservative average annual wage of £29,000, this is approximately £110 per day per social worker. Extrapolating across all UK social workers (approximately 100,000), this equates to over £600,000,000 per year, or 64 days per person.

Figure 1: Pie chart showing distribution of respondent according to which country of the UK they live in.



3.2 Descriptives: What Do the Findings Show?

The following provides data and describes the meaning of this data. Descriptive statistics simply describe the findings, usually against a set of benchmark scoring. This is what will be demonstrated below. You will see scoring on each of the things we measured, as well as comparing these to benchmark scores where available.

3.2.1 Working Conditions

As already described, working conditions were measured using the Management Standards Indicator Tool. Therefore below are the findings, and average scores on each of the MSIT factors, as well as percentile scoring. These percentiles chart performance of social workers (also separated by job role) against a set of UK average benchmark scores.

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

	Demands	Control	Managerial support	Peer support	Relationships	Role	Change
All responses (Percentile)	2.47 (<5 th)	3.10 (5 th)	3.22 (10 th)	3.71 (25 th)	3.91 (5 th)	3.85 (10 th)	2.52 (<5 th)
Child & Family (Percentile)	2.16 (<5 th)	2.94 (5 th)	3.21 (10 th)	3.71 (25 th)	3.86 (5 th)	3.85 (10 th)	2.41 (<5 th)
Adults (Percentile)	2.52 (<5 th)	3.15 (10 th)	3.21 (10 th)	3.73 (25 th)	3.88 (5 th)	3.66 (<5 th)	2.46 (<5 th)
Independent (Percentile)	2.91 (5 th)	3.22 (10 th)	3.13 (5 th)	3.54 (5 th)	4.04 (10 th)	4.05 (25 th)	2.77 (10 th)
‘Other’ (Percentile)	2.62 (<5 th)	3.19 (10 th)	3.24 (10 th)	3.73 (25 th)	3.91 (5 th)	3.89 (10 th)	2.60 (5 th)

*Note that the figures in brackets represent the ‘percentiles’ of scoring for each of these factors.

The results show that, for the vast majority of job roles irrespective of which country they live in, working conditions are in a completely unacceptable level. As an example, the percentiles show what scoring on each of these factors is compared to the national average provided by Edwards and Webster (2012). Therefore, the percentile shows how much better respondents scored on each management standard versus a benchmark score. For example, scoring for all respondents on the ‘Demands’ factor is in the 5th percentile. This means that demands scored worse than 95% of respondents in the benchmark – a very poor result reflecting high levels of demands for social workers in the UK.

Explanation Box 1: What these findings actually mean

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

3.2.2 Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a positive measure – in particular it measures how ‘bought in’ or engaged an employee is within their role, with higher scoring indicating better engagement. Scores here, when compared to a UK-wide benchmark score, suggest either average or high engagement scores.

Table 3: Scores on employee engagement, and benchmark performance, according to Schaufeli and Bakker (2004).

	Total Score	Benchmark	Percentile
All responses	4.57	Average	50 th
Child & Family	4.51	Average	50 th
Adults	4.52	Average	50 th
Independent	4.77	High	75 th
'Other'	4.67	High	75 th

Explanation Box 2: What these findings actually mean

Social workers are moderately to highly engaged in their job – this is a good finding. This means that, despite the negative working conditions described above, employees are still relatively to highly positive and fulfilled by the job. This therefore suggests that social workers in the UK are positively involved in their job, despite the working conditions above. Social workers therefore enjoy the actual job that they do – whether it be child protection, adults, or something else – but they are doing these roles under significant strain from the characteristics of the organisation that they work in.

3.2.3 Job Satisfaction, Turnover Intentions, & Presenteeism

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

Table 4: Scores on the three other ‘outcome’ measure – job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and presenteeism – separated by job role.

		All Respondents	Child & Family	Adults	Independent	'Other'
Job Satisfaction	Slightly	20%	20%	23%	17	19%
	Extremely	21%	23%	19%	17	18%
	Total	41%	43%	42%	34%	37%
Presenteeism	2-5 Times	42%	43%	38%	45%	43%
	5 Times +	18%	21%	18%	10%	16%
	Total	60%	64%	56%	55%	59%
Turnover Intentions	% Leave	52%	55%	51%	54%	49%
	Average Length	15 months	13 months	18 months	9 months	18 months

Overall, each of job satisfaction, presenteeism, and turnover intentions are at high levels. For example, across all respondents over 40% are dissatisfied with their job, and 60% have attended

work when they should have taken time off due to illness at least twice in the last 12 months. Furthermore over 50% of all social workers are looking to leave the job. Additionally, of the 50% of those who have stated that they are seeking to leave the profession, the average length they want to stay in the profession is 15 months.

It is also worth noting that child/family social workers have higher overall levels of each of these measures. Of the four occupational groups included they are therefore less satisfied in their jobs, have greater levels of presenteeism, and are most likely to leave the job. Indeed the average length of time that child and family workers are looking to stay in the role is just 13 months (although this is less than ‘independent’ social workers).

3.3 Inference: What Do the Findings Mean?

As well as providing each of the ‘descriptive’ findings above which demonstrate the levels of stress, working conditions, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and presenteeism, inferential statistics were also conducted. These provide evidence as to what it is about the workplace which lead to negative outcomes such as stress, poor job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and presenteeism. As such I will first provide a series of numerical, stats-based descriptions, followed by an easier to understand description.

In order to do these analyses, a statistical approach called ‘linear regression’ was used. Linear regression looks at how much any one measure can influence another. For example, within this analysis, the main objective was to look at the influence of difference working conditions (i.e. the seven things measured by the management standards) on outcomes (stress, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and presenteeism). Therefore a number of linear regression analyses were conducted to look at these influences.

3.3.1 Working Conditions and Stress

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

Table 5: Regression results for perceived stress, demonstrating the working conditions which influence stress for all social workers

Outcome Measure	Significantly Related Factor	Coefficient Estimate (B)	T	P	R ²
Perceived Stress	Demands	-1.32	-11.64	<.001	.34
	Control	-.37	-2.97	<.01	
	Peer support	-.48	-3.92	<.001	
	Relationships	-.36	-3.34	.001	
	Role	-.30	-2.58	.01	

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

Results suggested that the poor levels of five particular working conditions influence the experience of stress across all respondents. In particular, demands, control, peer support, relationships, and role all negatively influenced stress. However, it is the ‘demands’ (or the amount of work social workers have to do) was the most led to stress – therefore the amount of work that social workers have to do is the factor which is leading to stress most readily.

3.3.2 Working Conditions, Job Satisfaction, Turnover, and Presenteeism

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

Table 6: Regression results for presenteeism, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions, demonstrating the working conditions which influence stress for all social workers

Outcome Measure	Significantly Related Factor	Coefficient Estimate (B)	T	P	R ²
Presenteeism	Demands	-.22	-5.68	<.001	.20
	Relationships	-.13	-3.57	<.001	
	Change	-.11	-2.51	<.05	
Job Satisfaction	Demands	.35	7.33	<.001	.46
	Control	.29	5.50	<.001	
	Managerial Support	.27	5.10	<.001	
	Relationships	.14	3.10	<.001	
	Role	.25	4.90	<.001	
Turnover Intentions	Demands	.11	5.20	<.001	.25
	Control	.08	3.18	<.05	
	Managerial Support	.10	4.57	<.001	
	Relationships	.04	2.29	<.05	

As a reminder, presenteeism is the phenomenon which occurs when individuals go to work despite being ill – this illness may be something small such as a cold or flu, or something much larger such as returning to work following a period of more serious illness. It was shown that the demands (amount of work), relationships (when relationships are strained between workers), and change (not being sufficient information about why changes are occurring within a profession or organisation) factors which predicted presenteeism. However, it was the amount of demands which most influenced presenteeism.

Job satisfaction investigates how happy (or satisfied) employees are in their role. There were more factors which predicted worse job satisfaction than for either presenteeism or turnover. In particular having high levels of demands, not enough control how the perform their job role, a lack of managerial support, strained relationships, and a lack of understanding of their role in the organisation all led to great dissatisfaction in the role. However, once again it was the amount of demands that individuals had in their job role which most influenced satisfaction.

Finally, turnover intentions measured whether individuals were looking to leave their role. As such we looked at which working conditions were most closely linked to individuals wanting to leave their job role. Once again we found that high demands, low control, a lack of managerial support, and strained relationships led to individuals wanting to leave the job. However, again for this outcome it was demands which most greatly made social workers want to leave the job.

3.4 Summary of Findings

Overall therefore it is clear that both the demands and relationships factors are consistently related to the negative work-related outcomes of stress, presenteeism, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. As such the amount of work that social workers have on their plate in the line of duty, as well as strained relationships with others in their job role, were consistently related to these four outcomes.

However, it is the 'demands' factors which is consistently the factor which is causing most of the problem. Therefore having too much work to do was the one thing which consistently influenced the perception of stress, job satisfaction, and turnover intentions. Moreover, from the coefficient estimates in each of the tables, it is clear that demands was also the *most impactful* out of all of the related factors.

Explanation Box 3: What this actually means

This is therefore strong support for the argument that it is the amount of demands that a social worker has to deal with in their role which is most closely related to the experience of stress, poorer job satisfaction, more presenteeism, and social workers wanting to leave the profession

3.5 Minority/Disability Experiences of being a Social Worker

We were asked to include a question regarding race, and whether respondents felt that ethnicity played a part in how they are able to carry out their job role. We left this question open for interpretation, not phrasing it either negatively or positively so as to ensure that responses are in no way biased by the question. Therefore the question asked was as follows:

“In your current role, do you feel your ethnicity has influenced how you have been able to carry out your job? Please describe this in one sentence.”

Similarly, we also asked whether people who had a disability believed that this in some way affected their job role as a social worker. The actual question that we asked was as follows:

“If you consider yourself as having a disability, do you feel that it has influenced how you have been able to perform your job? Please describe this in one sentence.”

3.5.1 Does Race Affect the Social Worker Role?

To the question regarding ethnicity, we received responses from approximately 130 individual respondents, and responses were analysed via content analysis (see [Section 3.6](#) below). Over 200 points were made, each of which fit into one of 11 separate themes. The following two descriptions represent the comments which were made most often, starting with the most commonly described theme: institutional racism (mentioned 40 separate times). Respondents described being either victim or witness of institutional racism from management in their local authority. For example respondents described being “surprised at the level of prejudice in social work settings”, that “institutional racism is still entrenched in local authority”, that individuals are “undermined and overlooked” due to their race, and “I feel that social workers who are not white British have a harder time than I do”. These quotes – taken directly from the data – demonstrate that some do believe that institutional racism is entrenched within their local authorities.

The second most frequently discussed topic with respect to race and ethnicity was positive in nature – respondents felt that being of a non-white British background was an advantage in a number of different ways. In particular being of a different ethnicity to the majority of colleagues, and at times a similar ethnicity to some of their service users, allowed a greater understanding of the cultures and nuances of some of these other individuals. Therefore being a social worker of a ‘different’ ethnicity could be a strong positive for social work practice. For example, respondents have commented:

“being of a different nationality has helped me to be able to use a different set of skills to adjust to the current financial crisis”.

“I have more awareness of the existence of the various cultural perspectives”.

“Being a foreigner does give a different perspective”.

3.5.2 Does having a Disability Affect the Social Worker Role?

As above, we also sought to investigate the influence that having a disability while employed as a social worker can have on the job role. Over 160 individual comments were made and these separated into 17 different themes, the most commonly discussed two of which are described below. First of all individuals described that there was a lack of understanding from others in their employing local authority, including some peers and management. In particular responses included the following:

“Always seem to be treated differently by management, despite being highly functioning.”

“Yes I am a lot slower but expected to cope with the same pressures.”

“At times the condition is not understood and therefore I ‘soldier on’ rather than give cause for judgement and stigmatisation.”

Secondly, a number of individuals (32 out of the 160 to be precise) described that reasonable adjustments which were needed in the workplace in order to undertake their job role were either not provided or difficult to come by. Therefore this makes the job increasingly difficult for those who are affected:

“Yes, there is no accommodation for the chronic fatigue I suffer regularly.”

“I was dismissed on capability grounds at the age of 58 by one LA because I was too ill to work - my caseload at that time was 183!”

“post access to work took assessment it took 9 months for all equipment to be in place and no organisational changes were made.”

3.6. Improving Stress in the Workplace

The final question we asked was for respondents to provide a single sentence as to how to make their job role less stressful. Over 1300 individual responses were gathered with over 1700 suggestions, and these were then analysed using a content analysis. Content analysis essentially looks at the number of times any particular comment or topic is mentioned, and the findings are presented in the table following. Overall therefore these are the single most stressful aspects of the social work role, according to respondents within our survey.

From this element of the project, it became increasingly clear that social workers love the actual job that they do. It is also clear, when comparing the results here to the survey results above, that stress in social work is not caused by their basic job role – the individual cases, families they work with, emotions associated with the job etc. Rather stress is caused by their working conditions. Table 7 describes these stressors.

Table 7: content analysis of main findings.

Main Theme	Number of Mentions	Underlying Codes	Description
Workload	739	Reduce caseload	This was by far the most widely discussed issue – too many cases, or cases which are too complex.
		More SWs	Related to the above, more social workers required to sufficiently undertake the job to a high enough standard.
		Reduce paperwork	This code is typified by two things: either reducing the amount of paperwork that a social worker has to undertake, or having more admin support for the paperwork they have to do.
Managerial Support	360	Managerial support	Respondents wanted management within their organisation who understand the social work role, and thus can provide greater support.
		Timescales	Associated with managerial support and workload, many social workers described very tight timescales as the number 1 issue they face in their job role.
		Expectations	Similar to timescales, social workers described having high expectations placed upon them by management in their organisation.
Supervision	248	Reflective supervision	Respondents wanted supervision which is reflective with an experienced colleague at more regular intervals, such as least once a month, in order to improve their practice.
Social work culture	138	Respect and understanding	SWs want more respect and understanding of the fantastic job that they do, and the difficulties of the job. This respect/understanding is required from politicians and public alike.
		Blame culture	SWs feel there is a distinct culture of blame – both within organisations and more widely politically. This again makes the job role more stressful.
'Other' Conditions	95	Ergonomics	The work environment, and in particular hot desking/not having a dedicated computer to work from, was a distinct issue.
		Pay & conditions	Some respondents asked for a 'modest' increase in pay, whereas others asked for greater availability of flexible working policies.

The 'Main Theme' is the overarching issue found, whereas the underlying codes look at the theme in more depth. Then the number of mentions shows how often this theme was discussed.

As the table describes, five main themes emerged. The first – and the one which was most frequently discussed – was the sheer amount of work that was required of social workers. Workload, including having too many cases or cases of too high a complexity, and paperwork/administrative duties were the two biggest issues here. Furthermore respondents wanted more managerial support in order to provide more support when social workers felt they needed it. Managers who were more supportive would also understand that the timescales that they place upon social workers could be too great at times, and that expectations placed upon them are difficult.

The social workers who responded to this project also described the importance of reflective supervision in allow them to provide greater support to their clients, and also helping to reduce stress in the role. They therefore wanted reflective and/or clinical supervision on a regular basis, such as at least once a month.

Respondents described an overarching culture which comes from sources external to their organisation which was damaging to morale and increasingly stressful. In particular respondents wanted more respect and understanding of the complexities of their role from the public, the media,

and politicians more widely. Similarly they felt that there is a distinct culture of 'blame' toward social workers, rather than one of understanding and support when multi-disciplinary decisions go awry.

Finally social workers described issues with the material conditions under which they were working. In particular there were issues with the physical working conditions – this was typified by stress being caused due to having to share computers (and not having enough computers for all of those in the office), and having to work in hot desking (again with not enough desks to go around). Relatedly they suggested that greater availability of flexible working (*and in particular working from home*) would really help with this. Furthermore a few respondents asked for a 'modest' increase in pay.

4. Findings by Job Role and Country

4.1 Working Conditions by Job Role

[Appendix 2](#) contains the table which shows results for the included measures in this project: working conditions, employee engagement, job satisfaction, turnover intentions, and presenteeism. For each working condition among each job role with the exception of peer support, it is clear that working conditions are unacceptable. By comparing working conditions to UK-wide benchmark figures, we see that each of the working conditions are operating at a poor level for each job role. Peer support on the other hand scored well – this means that social workers (particularly those employed in adults, or ‘other’ roles) can rely on their colleagues to provide help and support as and when it is needed and asked for.

Overall, however, it is clear that children’s social workers have worsened working conditions than any of the other occupational groups included in this project.

4.1.1 Regression – Influence of Working Conditions on Stress (Adults)

The following demonstrate the results of linear regression analyses to demonstrate which working conditions (measured by the MSIT) most readily influenced stress in those who are employed as *adults* social workers only.

Among these adults social workers, three working conditions most likely influenced stress as an outcome measure. In particular, the amount of demands that adults social workers face, strained relationships with colleagues, and a lack of understanding of the role social workers play were those working conditions which led to stress.

4.1.2 Regression – Influence of Working Conditions on Stress (Children’s)

The following demonstrate the results of linear regression analyses to demonstrate which working conditions (measured by the MSIT) most readily influenced stress in those who are employed as *children’s* social workers only.

For children’s social workers, only two working conditions most clearly influenced stress. The first was, once again, the amount of demands that individuals had to face in their job role. The second was having a lack of support from peers in the role.

4.1.3 Regression – Influence of Working Conditions on Stress (Independent/Agency)

The following demonstrate the results of linear regression analyses to demonstrate which working conditions (measured by the MSIT) most readily influenced stress in those who are employed as *independent* social workers only.

With those employed as independent and agency social workers, there were two negatively related working conditions (although these are not the amount of demands faced in the job role). The first is having a lack of control over how they undertake their job, and the second is having a lack of peer support in the role.

4.2 Working Conditions by Country

The table in [Appendix 1](#) demonstrates differences of scoring on all measures across the four countries of the UK. Note that because this part of the study had an English element, there were many more English respondents than any other. This therefore means we should take the findings lightly until further investigation within the other parts of the UK is conducted. However, this is a good start and is likely indicative of the true picture.

4.2.1 Working Conditions by Country

It is clear that for each of England, Scotland and Ireland working conditions are very poor. In fact, across each of these three countries everything apart from peer support scoring was in the 10th percentile at the very least. This means that working conditions in each of these seven factors, as well as total working conditions, are worse than 90% of those in the benchmark scoring. This result is therefore indicative of social workers having distinctly poor working conditions. The one exception of this is peer support – in comparison to each of the other working conditions, the support that social workers gain from their peers is a distinct positive.

4.2.2 Regression – Influence of Working Conditions on Stress (England)

The following demonstrate the results of linear regression analyses to demonstrate which working conditions (measured by the MSIT) most readily influenced stress in *English* social workers only.

In English social workers, having too many demands and insufficient support from peers in their organisation led to stress.

4.2.3 Regression – Influence of Working Conditions on Stress (Ireland)

The following demonstrate the results of linear regression analyses to demonstrate which working conditions (measured by the MSIT) most readily influenced stress in *Irish* social workers only.

Among Irish social workers, stress was caused by a mixture of too many demands, lack of managerial support, strained relationships with colleagues.

4.2.4 Regression – Influence of Working Conditions on Stress (Scotland)

The following demonstrate the results of linear regression analyses to demonstrate which working conditions (measured by the MSIT) most readily influenced stress in *Scottish* social workers only.

In Scottish social workers, a lack of understanding of the social work role (presumably related to political changes in the country) which led to stress.

4.2.5 Regression – Influence of Working Conditions on Stress (Wales)

The following demonstrate the results of linear regression analyses to demonstrate which working conditions (measured by the MSIT) most readily influenced stress in *Welsh* social workers only.

Among Welsh social workers, only the amount of demands placed upon their time significantly increased stress in the role.

5. So, What Now?

The results of this project have demonstrated evidence which seems to support much of the anecdotal evidence that is reported throughout the UK. We have demonstrated that social workers across the UK are exposed to high levels of negative working conditions, and that these conditions are significantly influencing the role that they do. However, the demands faced by social workers in the UK was the one working conditions found to consistently influence each of the outcomes measured in the project. Therefore, because there are high levels of demands in the job role, social workers have greater stress, attend work while ill too often (i.e. presenteeism), have decreasing job satisfaction, and perhaps most importantly are looking to leave the job within the next 18 months.

It is clear that there needs to be a consistent and systematic focus on improvement of working conditions for those in the social care sector across the UK. However, with so many potential issues to deal with, a staged and focused approach is required.

We suggest that there needs to be a focus on improving the amount of demands experienced by social workers as a first phase approach because this would subsequently improve stress and make individuals less likely to leave the job. In particular, by having a system of case allocation which more clearly takes into account both the number of cases allocated as well as (and perhaps most importantly) the **complexity** of these cases would reduce workload. Furthermore having regular (monthly) and meaningful reflective supervision would help to work through these cases (and in particular the more qualitatively difficult cases) and thus make them less stressful. Finally greater help with administrative tasks, and less repetition of tasks, would significantly reduce workload.

This project suggests that there needs to be greater respect and understanding of the social work role, including improvement of the material working conditions of those in the role. Therefore social workers need to be given greater credit and positive support for the job that they do. This would mean that social workers would not be working under a culture of blame as readily, and thus reducing stress from that perspective. Also, however, it may mean that social workers would be allowed greater freedom for flexible working, as well as provided with adequate resources for the job role which they perform.

Following an initial phase there should subsequently be work on improving the other working conditions identified as influencing perceived stress over the medium term. However, it is vital to continue the measurement started in this project across subsequent years in order to chart changes in the profession over time. This would also have the added effect of evaluating the effects of interventions introduced to improve on the factors suggests above, as well as demonstrating how any other major initiatives which are introduced to the social care sector might influence stress.

Finally, institutional racism is a problem for some from within their local authorities. This therefore needs greater investigation, and addressing where it is found to be a problem. Additionally however, being a minority could be a source of positivity – allowing social workers to identify with service users of varying nationalities and build on the strengths which come from their ethnicity and background. Furthermore those who are working as a social worker while having a disability encountered particular difficulties, in particular due to a lack of understanding by colleagues and management, and a lack of reasonable adjustment. As an important topic, this again needs greater investigation.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Differences in each of the measures across the four countries in the UK

Appendix 2: Differences in each of the measures across job role.

Appendix 1: Differences in scoring across the four countries of the UK

	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
Working Conditions				
Demands (Percentile)	2.42 (5 th)	2.40 (5 th)	2.32 (5 th)	2.69 (5 th)
Control (Percentile)	3.09 (10 th)	3.09 (10 th)	2.97 (5 th)	3.50 (50 th)
Managerial Support (Percentile)	3.22 (10 th)	3.28 (10 th)	3.29 (10 th)	3.34 (25 th)
Peer Support (Percentile)	3.72 (25 th)	3.67 (25 th)	3.92 (75 th)	3.84 (75 th)
Relationships (Percentile)	3.91 (5 th)	3.84 (5 th)	3.97 (10 th)	4.10 (10 th)
Role (Percentile)	3.85 (10 th)	3.75 (5 th)	3.70 (5 th)	3.70 (5 th)
Change (Percentile)	2.52 (5 th)	2.46 (5 th)	2.33 (5 th)	2.38 (5 th)
Total (Percentile)	3.20 (5 th)	3.18 (5 th)	3.18 (5 th)	3.33 (5 th)

Social Worker Engagement				
Total	4.57	4.62	4.40	4.74
Benchmark (Percentile)	Average (50 th)	Average (50 th)	Average (50 th)	High (75 th)

'Outcome' Measures					
Total Stress		7.83	7.92	6.84	7.65
Presenteeism	2-5 times	41.3%	40.5%	41.9%	30.0%
	5 times +	18.4%	16.7%	9.7%	20.0%
	Total	59.7%	57.2%	51.6%	50.0%
Job Satisfaction (Dissatisfaction)	Slightly	20.2%	19.7%	21.9%	15.0%
	Extremely	20.8%	21.3%	9.4%	30.0%
	Total	41%	41%	31.3%	45%
Turnover Intentions	% Leave	52%	52%	41%	55%
	Average Length	14 months	17 months	16 months	18 months

Appendix 2: Differences in scoring by job role

	Adults	Children	Agency	'Other'
Working Conditions				
Demands (Percentile)	2.52 (<5 th)	2.16 (<5 th)	2.91(5 th)	2.62 (<5 th)
Control (Percentile)	3.15 (10 th)	2.94 (5 th)	3.22 (10 th)	3.19 (10 th)
Managerial Support (Percentile)	3.21 (10 th)	3.21 (10 th)	3.13 (5 th)	3.24 (10 th)
Peer Support (Percentile)	3.73 (90 th)	3.71 (75 th)	3.54 (50 th)	3.73 (90 th)
Relationships (Percentile)	3.88 (5 th)	3.86 (5 th)	4.04 (10 th)	3.91 (5 th)
Role (Percentile)	3.66 (<5 th)	3.85 (10 th)	4.05 (25 th)	3.89 (10 th)
Change (Percentile)	2.46 (<5 th)	2.41 (<5 th)	2.77 (10 th)	2.60 (5 th)
Total (Percentile)	3.20 (<5 th)	3.11 (<5 th)	3.33 (5 th)	3.27 (5 th)

Social Worker Engagement				
Total	4.52	4.51	4.77	4.67
Benchmark (Percentile)	Average	Average	High	High

'Outcome' Measures					
Total Stress		7.91	8.11	6.96	7.44
Presenteeism	2-5 times	38.3%	42.5%	44.9%	42.6%
	5 times +	18.2%	21.1%	10.1%	16.3%
	Total	56.5%	63.6%	55%	58.9%
Job Satisfaction (Dissatisfaction)	Slightly	23.1%	19.8%	17.4%	18.1%
	Extremely	18.9%	23.1%	17.4%	19.2%
	Total	42%	42.9%	34.8%	37.3%
Turnover Intentions	% Leave	51%	55%	53.6%	49.2%
	Average Length	18.5 months	13 months	9.5 months	18 months