

Education Department Research Programme

Public knowledge of and attitudes towards social work in Scotland

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In June 2004, Scottish Ministers initiated the first fundamental review of Social Work since the Social Work (Scotland) Act in 1968. To inform the work of the review, the Scottish Executive Education Department (SEED) commissioned MORI Scotland to conduct a programme of public opinion research. The research comprised two main components: a nationally representative survey of 1,015 adults (aged, 16+) across Scotland, and a series of 8 focus groups. The overarching aim of the research was to provide the 21st Century Social Work Review Group with a deeper understanding of public knowledge of, and attitudes towards, social workers and the context in which they operate.

Main Findings

- Social workers have a prominent profile. People's views were rarely uniformly positive or negative. They tended to be influenced by a range of considerations relating both to the varying roles that social workers are required to fulfil and to the context within which they operate. Adjectives commonly used to describe the profession were 'helpful', 'vital', 'interfering', and 'overworked'.
- Detailed knowledge about social workers and specifically about the different services they provide was fairly low among significant proportions of research participants. Additionally, there was confusion among some over the boundaries between social services and 'the social', and between social workers and social carers. In particular, those sections of the public that are more likely to need support from social workers, namely older people, C2DEs and BME groups have least knowledge of the services.
- Attitudes towards the social work profession are fairly complex and multi-dimensional. Thus while majorities in the survey said they would be likely to approach the profession for help, it was clear from the focus groups that social work is seen as a 'last resort' and not something to be considered lightly. There was clearly some stigma associated with using social work services, particularly for problems such as difficulties bringing up children or drug and alcohol problems. Social work with older people was less stigmatised.
- Respondents were highly ambivalent about when social workers should intervene in people's lives. There was widespread recognition of the difficulties involved in deciding when to intervene and of the tendency for social workers to be 'damned if they do and damned if they don't'.
- There was widespread recognition that demand for social work services is set to increase in the future and that steps need to be taken to ensure that the service is sufficiently geared up to meet this challenge.

Aims and objectives

The aims of the public opinion research were to provide the 21st Century Social Work Review Group with a deeper understanding of public knowledge of and attitudes towards, social workers and social work services, and the context in which they operate. Key themes addressed in the research include:

- views on individual rights to social welfare and individuals/families responsibilities for welfare;
- general perceptions of social workers and social work services;
- use and predicted use of social work services and attitudes to this;
- the desired and acceptable thresholds for risk and intervention by social work services;
- the perceived role and effectiveness of prevention and early intervention work; and
- knowledge and opinions of priorities for social work services and how and why these might change in the future

Methodology

The research comprised two main components: a nationally representative survey and a series of 8 focus groups conducted across the country.

The survey consisted of 2 modules of questions on wave 2 of the MORI Scotland Social Policy Monitor. A total of 1,015 interviews were conducted with a nationally representative sample of 1,015 Scottish adults (aged 16+) between 18th April and 19th June 2005. The survey was conducted face-to-face in respondents' homes using CAPI (Computer Assisted Personal Interviewing).

The focus groups were intended to throw light on the survey findings and enable the research team to explore issues that could not be probed in a quantitative survey. Eight focus groups in total were conducted between 16th and 24th May 2005. Six of the groups were conducted in urban areas and two in rural areas. Quotas were set by age, class, and ethnicity to provide a means of identifying variation in the views of different groups of people.

Findings

General perceptions of social workers

Survey respondents were more likely to view social workers positively than negatively by a margin of around 2:1 (43% versus 24% respectively). Perceptions were similarly mixed in the focus groups with social workers being described as 'helpful', 'nice' and 'vital' but also 'interfering' and 'useless'. It was widely suggested that social workers are too thin on the ground and thus generally overworked and stressed. Their ability to help people was seen to be curtailed by excessive bureaucracy in the profession and restrictive rules and procedures.

There was widespread reference to the 'bad press' that social workers receive. Participants generally felt that this is not always justified and a reflection of a broader tendency among the media to highlight bad rather than good news stories.

Public views of social workers appear to be shaped by a range of influences. The main ones are television news and current affairs programmes, personal contact or experience, newspapers, and word of mouth.

Knowledge of social workers and social work services.

Around half of respondents in the survey felt that they understood what social workers do, while two in five did not.

A majority were able to name at least one social work service. The most commonly mentioned services were those relating to the abuse or neglect of children, care of children and care and assistance for older people. In contrast, services such as respite care and occupational therapy were named by only small minorities of respondents.

Asked to identify from a list of possible options the qualifications required to be a social worker, around two in five correctly selected three or four year's training, equivalent to a university degree. Meanwhile, 25% selected two or three year's training, equivalent to a diploma and 7% selected a year's training and practical experience.

In the focus groups, participants proposed, unprompted, that there should be more information about social work services. This should be both about the range of help available and the means by which this can be accessed.

Attitudes towards using social work services

Majorities of respondents in the survey said they would be likely to approach their local social work services for help or advice for an older person, a person with a disability and children and families having serious problems. However, fewer than half said they would do so for someone who has committed an offence.

In the focus groups, it was apparent that people's propensity to use social work services depended to a large degree on whether or not they felt alternative sources of help were available to them. Most said they would go to their GP in the first instance for help or support relating to personal or family problems. Social work services in contrast were widely perceived as a last resort.

From the survey it was apparent that there is a degree of stigma associated with using social work services. Thus, while there was a general acceptance that *'most people will come into contact with social work services at some point in their lives'*, a majority agreed that *'If I were using social work services, I wouldn't want other people knowing about it'*, and a quarter agreed that *'social work services are for other people, not people like me'*.

Focus group participants suggested that much of the stigma associated with using social work services may stem from the fact that people are often reluctant to ask for help – whether from social work services or from other sources – as they are too 'proud'. There was also some reference to a perception that social workers tend to deal predominantly with very serious problems. Consequently to need these services may be seen to be an admission of failure or inadequacy.

Perceptions of social work services among users

Two in five of those surveyed had come into contact with social work services at some point in their lives, either personally or through a family member.

Of these one in five had been in contact for services for older people, and help and advice about housing, benefits and debt.

A clear majority of those who had used social work – 8 in 10 – were satisfied with the service they received. Half of them were very satisfied.

Reflecting this, a majority were positive about specific aspects of the service. 8 in 10 said the service took account of their general situation, and did what they said they would do, while around 7 in 10 said that staff took time getting to know what they wanted.

Still the focus group research uncovered perceived weaknesses in the way that services are delivered. In particular, several C2DE participants said that, at times, social workers fail to provide support when it is most needed, yet at other times interfere unnecessarily.

Asian and Chinese participants suggested that social work services are neither sufficiently well attuned nor responsive to the needs of their respective communities. In particular, they pointed out that there are not enough bilingual social workers to deal with non-English speaking people, most of whom are older or new to the country and therefore perhaps particularly in need of help or support.

Attitudes towards intervention and prevention in social work

Around a third of survey respondents agreed with the statement, *'social workers have too much power to interfere in people's lives'*, however a similar proportion disagreed and around a quarter were undecided.

Views were similarly mixed in the focus groups. On the one hand several people expressed a view that social workers often intervene too early without knowing all the facts. On the other hand, there was widespread recognition of the difficulties involved in making decisions about when to intervene and of the tendency for social workers to be *'damned if they do and damned if they don't'*.

There appeared to be some class-based differences in attitudes to intervention. Generally speaking, C2DEs tended to favour earlier intervention than ABC1s who were more inclined to stress the importance of having concrete evidence before taking action.

Social work in the future

Three-quarters of survey respondents felt that demand for social work services will increase in the future. Reasons given for this view included the aging population, an increase in drug and alcohol related problems, and family breakdown.

The focus group participants were asked to consider the relative priority they would assign to different social work services in the event of future rationalisation. There was a consensus that services for vulnerable groups, including children, older and disabled people were among the most important.

With respect to lower priorities, there was less agreement in the groups, but perceptions did vary to a degree by class. While ABC1s were generally reluctant to see any services as not needed, C2DEs expressed a view that services for offenders and for people with drug or alcohol problems should be limited, if they are to be provided at all.

In discussing the future of social work, participants in most of the focus groups suggested spontaneously that social workers need to be better trained so that they are fully equipped to do their jobs. Several participants also felt that there should be more specialisation in social work so that staff are able to develop a level of expertise.

Notwithstanding, such suggestions, there was also some feeling that the onus for tackling social problems should not lie solely with a new and improved social work service. Rather, it was felt that the government needs to make greater efforts to tackle the causes of problems, for example, by encouraging individuals to take more responsibility for themselves and their families.

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