



# Social Work Snapshot 2021

# About Frontline

Frontline is England's largest children's social work charity. We're committed to ensuring a safe and stable home for all children so they can reach their full potential – no matter what their social or family circumstance.

We make this happen by recruiting and training new and existing social workers on our Frontline, Firstline and Headline programmes, empowering them as leaders to improve the social work system.

Our Fellowship is made up of all those who have completed one of our programmes. We support our fellows to continue honing their skills and practice, to move into leadership positions, and to develop and implement innovative ideas and initiatives to tackle challenges in the profession.

In this way, we are working to ensure that social workers and social work can have the greatest possible impact for children and families.



# Foreword



by Mary Jackson  
**CEO of Frontline**

In the summer of 2021, we set out to take a snapshot of children's social work in England at this significant moment in time. We wanted the view from the front line – to learn what social workers have to say about how they work and whether, through their work, they are able to achieve their ambition to change children's lives for the better. We wanted to hear from social workers on the impact they have on the children and families they support.

So we asked our fellows, and their social work colleagues these questions. Their responses paint a picture of practitioners who know they make a real, life-changing difference to children and families. They keep children safe, they keep families together, and they do so with confidence and skill. These social workers talk of feeling valued by those they support.

But in addition to this positive picture, we saw, yet again, evidence of the deep-seated challenges that have dogged the social work sector for decades. Excessive bureaucracy. Heavy caseloads. Not enough time with children and families. Social workers are telling us that these things stand in the way of them having the greatest impact they can on children's lives. They are clear, this is what stops them being the very best social workers they can be.

The findings clearly show that the Covid-19 pandemic piled additional pressure on children and families, and on the social workers who support them. However, what is also captured are the signs of a creative and resourceful response from the sector – from social workers, their managers and local authorities. Technology was used in new ways, time has been used more efficiently, travel reduced and co-operation between different agencies has improved.



**They keep children safe, they keep families together, and they do so with confidence and skill."**

# Foreword

**In the sector's ability to innovate and adapt lies the solution to many of the persistent problems that social work faces. Given the freedom to do things differently and try new approaches, social workers rose to the challenge. They showed themselves to be innovative and responsive in the face of extreme and unpredictable circumstances. We need to harness this potential.**

At Frontline, that's what we do. We support our growing community of fellows to innovate and bring about change that benefits children and families. Social workers are best placed to identify what gets in the way of good practice and come up with solutions. We create space to listen to their ideas and help them develop solutions on themes such as technology, targeting bureaucracy and practice-based innovations, all with relationships at their core.

We also develop the leadership skills of social workers and managers on our programmes. We want them to be open to innovative approaches, to seek out new ways of doing things, and to find ways around barriers to good practice. This is essential to bring fresh ideas into social work, to develop them, and to allow change to happen. Great leaders unlock the door to great social work.

The themes coming through in Snapshot indicate such an appetite for real change in the social work system. The pandemic has shown it is possible to do things differently, to adapt and be creative. Social workers have the insight to identify the solutions that enable them to have more impact on the lives of children and families. We want to grasp this opportunity and the enormous potential for change it represents. It will take a collective and concerted effort to tackle these long-established and complex challenges and we plan to work closely and intentionally with those across the sector to seize this opportunity.



**We support our growing community of fellows to innovate and bring about change that benefits children and families."**

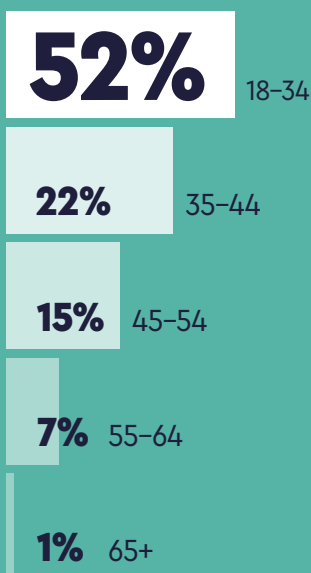
# Who did we speak to?

- 152 responses
- 120 from fellows
- 32 from non-fellows
- 92% of respondents are currently working in children's social work.

- 85% identified as female, which is representative of the children's services workforce as a whole.



**36%** of respondents are based in Greater London, and the rest spread around the country – broadly proportionate to the wider Fellowship.



**50%** are social workers at different levels of seniority (social worker, senior social worker, consultant social worker)

**34%** are in management or senior leadership positions in children's social work

**8%** are in other roles in children's social work

**8%** are not currently working in children's social work

## Methodology

The Social Work Snapshot was designed by teams across Frontline, including colleagues with extensive direct social work experience. The responses are anonymised, though we did collect demographic data such as their gender identity, ethnicity and region. The survey was hosted on the Form Assembly

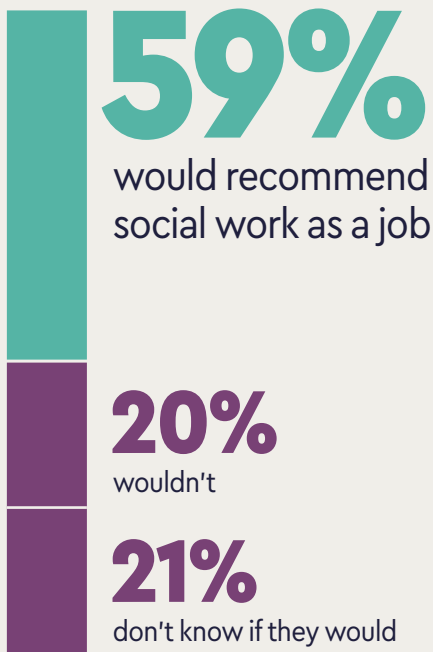
platform, and distributed to Frontline fellows who were encouraged to disseminate it among colleagues in children's services. Staff across Frontline who are qualified social workers were also invited to take part. The survey was closed after 150 responses had been received.

# Findings

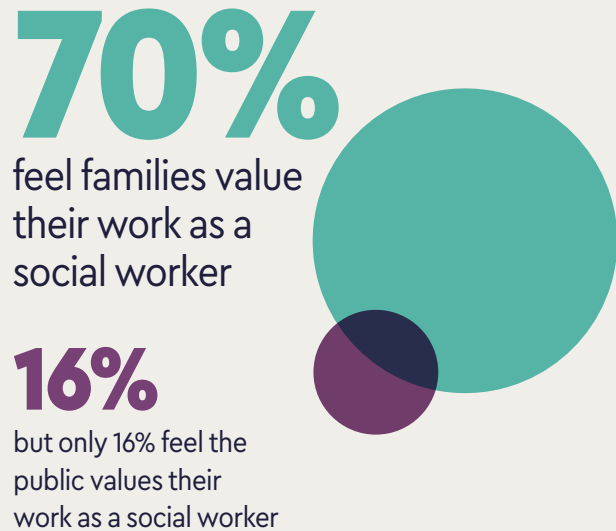
## Our Social Work Snapshot is one of highly skilled and confident social workers who love what they do.

70% of respondents feel valued by the families they support, and 59% would recommend a career in social work to their peers. This vastly outnumbers the 16% who feel their work is valued by the public.

**Would you recommend social work as a job?**



**Do you feel the work you do as a social worker is valued?**



**I love being a social worker. I love that my work has enabled families to stay together and for parents to make meaningful changes that have a positive impact on them and their children."**

# Findings

These social workers make a life-changing difference to disadvantaged children and families. 77% feel they keep children safe; 61% feel they keep families together; others tackle domestic abuse or sexual exploitation. They are not held back by a lack of knowledge or skills, a concern for only 15%, or a lack of confidence, a challenge faced by only 18%. The vast majority of Snapshot respondents (87%) feel they can carry out their duties effectively, and 85% feel they are having a positive impact on the children and families they support.

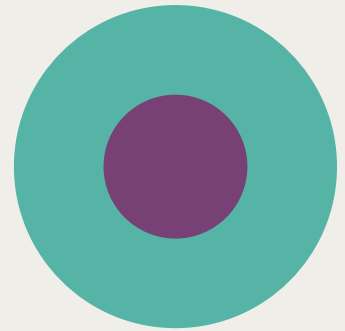
## How do you make a positive difference in the lives of children and families?



**My team has successfully prevented over 70% of the children referred to us from coming into care by reducing community risks and rebuilding relationships with family and educational settings."**

**87%**

feel they are able to carry out the duties of their social work role effectively

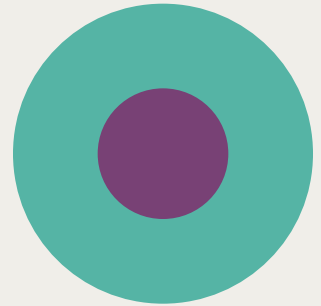


**24%**

but only 24% to a great extent

**85%**

feel they're improving key life outcomes for children



**23%**

but only 23% to a great extent

# Findings

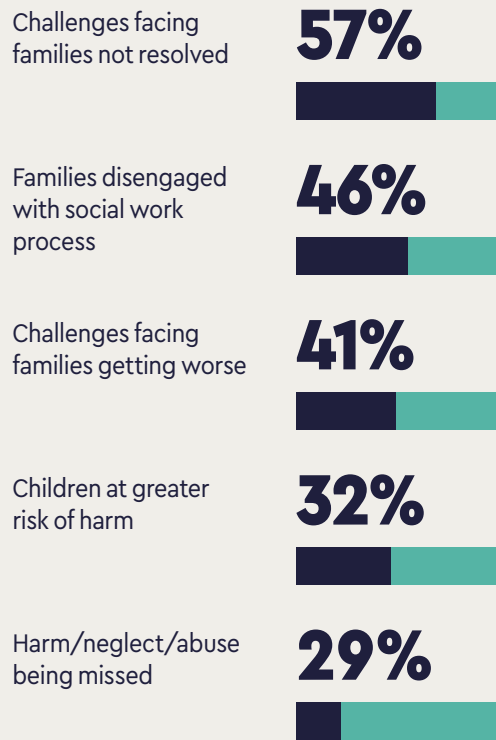
However, fewer than one in four feel their impact is to a great extent. And when social workers were asked what stood in their way, 65% said they feel constrained by the weight of unnecessary bureaucracy; 54% struggle to manage their high caseloads; and 47% do not have enough time to spend with families, doing the direct, face-to-face work they want – and are trained – to do.

As a result, many see the challenges faced by children and families going unresolved, the experience of 57%. 46% say families disengage with social work altogether.

## What barriers prevent you doing your role most effectively/ to the best of your ability?



## What's the impact on the families you support?



**Vast amounts of repetitive paperwork (panel referrals, pre-meetings reports for every meeting, minutes of every meeting, referrals to support agencies, case notes) are prioritised over meaningful visits and direct work."**



# Findings

Unsurprisingly the Covid-19 pandemic was felt to have had a significant impact on children's services. This was reported by 90% of respondents, 57% to a great extent, with the main concern being children going unseen. 70% reported a reduction in face-to-face contact, and 65% faced additional barriers to going into homes. 69% of respondents worried about children falling behind educationally, and 68% saw them facing mental health difficulties. There were significant levels of concern across many other factors including harm and neglect slipping under the radar, and an increase in domestic abuse.

**90%**  
feel the pandemic has had an impact on the ability of children's services to support children and families



**57%**  
to a great extent

## How has the pandemic affected the ability of children's services to support children and families?

Reduction in face-to-face contact	<b>70%</b>
Barriers to entering homes	<b>65%</b>
Children not seen in schools	<b>63%</b>
Children not seen in wider community	<b>48%</b>
Challenges related to home-working	<b>42%</b>
Lack of digital devices	<b>40%</b>

## What's been the impact of the pandemic on the children and families you support?

**69%**  
Children falling behind educationally

**68%**  
Increase in mental health concerns for children

**65%**  
Increase in mental health concerns for adults

**61%**  
Financial difficulties

**58%**  
Child harm going unseen

**54%**  
Child neglect going unseen

**53%**  
Increase in domestic abuse

# Findings

Yet the unprecedented circumstances of the pandemic also led to positive changes in working practices. 79% of respondents reported better use of technology within children's social work, and 72% reported time-savings thanks to shorter travel times. Respondents talked about the accessibility of online meetings for families and young people, better multi-agency collaboration, and an increased receptiveness by local authorities to creative solutions.

**79%**

report better use of technology in children's social work during the pandemic.



**72%**

report time savings due to shorter travel times during the pandemic.



## Positive changes were highlighted in open answers:

Online meetings more accessible

**50**  
mentions

More efficient use of time

**34**  
mentions

Better multi-agency collaboration

**31**  
mentions

Local authorities receptive to creative solutions (particularly around technology)

**27**  
mentions

Young people find it easier to engage digitally

**23**  
mentions

In fact,

**69%**

of respondents feel their local authority is open to new ideas and innovative ways of working more broadly – not just during the pandemic.



# Thank you

We would like to say a big thank you to all of those who took part in Frontline's first ever Social Work Snapshot.

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