

# The Social Work Public Perception Myth: A Policy Analysis and Implications for Practice



## Foreword

Many social workers worry about the impact of negative public perceptions on their work and on their profession.

In this new research, Joe Hanley examines what the public really think - as opposed to what different agencies report the public think - and explores why this might be the case. He concludes there are a range of important practical lessons including implications for social work recruitment and retention.

An important read both for social workers themselves - and for leaders and educators in the social work sector.

Luke Geoghegan  
Head of Policy and Research, BASW





## Executive Summary

- It is well documented that social workers believe the public has a negative perception of them.
- In contrast, when the public are asked directly, they tend to be positive about social workers.
- This research sought to understand how and why government policy in England perpetuates this 'myth' of a negative perception.
- 20 government policy texts from 2003 – 2023 were reviewed, using the methodology of 'genealogy of discourse'.
- It was found that these policies make frequent claims about negative public perception, but fail to evidence them.
- These claims are used frequently to impose reforms on the profession.
- They also reduce dissent from social workers, and distract from other issues, such as working conditions.
- Challenging false claims about negative public perception of social workers could have a positive impact on social worker morale, as well as improving recruitment and retention.

## Introduction

This briefing introduces research that was undertaken to explore why there is a widely believed “myth” that the public are negative about social workers. This myth is particularly believed by social workers, but is perpetuated by the media and policymakers. However, when the public are asked directly, they tend to be positive about social workers.

There is already extensive research exploring social work and the media, and therefore this research looked to analyse policy texts in England to understand how this myth gets perpetuated by policymakers. It was found that policy texts promote claims there is a negative public perception of social workers, but fail to evidence this. Despite this, policy reforms in England are frequently justified through deferring to negative public perceptions of the profession.

This briefing introduces the research study, based on the methodology of ‘genealogy of discourse’. A brief literature overview is provided, followed by an introduction to the methodology. The findings are then considered, alongside implications for practice.

## Literature Review

Research consistently finds that social workers believe that there is a negative public perception of them<sup>1</sup>. This is also commonly suggested in the media, where many articles treat it as presumed that the public are negative about social workers. Social workers describe the negative impact of this belief on morale, happiness, confidence, and mental health, creating a culture more orientated towards fear, anxiety, and blame<sup>2</sup>. It also creates feelings of stigma related to the social worker role, where social workers can become afraid to even tell people what they do for a living.

In contrast, research finds consistently that the public are more positive about social workers than they believe. For example, a 2007 study from Community Care found that 93% of the public surveyed believe social workers make a very important or fairly important contribution to society<sup>3</sup>. More recent studies on public

perception from the national regulator in England, Social Work England, published in 2020<sup>4</sup> and 2023<sup>5</sup>, have also found this positivity from the public. This includes 88% agreeing that social work is important in helping vulnerable people.

This led Social Work England to conclude “the public are more warmly disposed towards social work than is widely believed, including by social workers”<sup>6</sup>. These findings of a positive public perception are consistent internationally, including in research from Scotland, Sweden, USA, Croatia, New Zealand, Albania, Kazakhstan, Nigeria and Turkey.

As well as finding a positive perception of social workers, these studies also tend to find that the public is aware of challenges around inaccurate media portrayals, poor working conditions, staff shortages, high workloads, resource restrictions and government policy failures<sup>7</sup>. This is suggestive of a much more nuanced understanding of the social work profession from the public than is widely believed.



## Methodology

The methodology used in this research was a genealogy of discourse, most commonly associated with the work of French philosopher Michel Foucault<sup>8</sup>. The approach essentially involves analysing written or spoken words (discourse) over time. The focus is to understand how commonly held beliefs developed and are maintained. There is an emphasis on looking for errors and false appraisals, in particular those that stem from power relations<sup>9</sup>. The focus on genealogy, as opposed to history, removes the presumption of progress that is often associated with historical analysis.

In this case, policy texts in England from 2003 – 2023 were examined. In total 20 policy texts were analysed that engaged with the subject of the public perception of social worker. A full list of policies reviewed is presented at the end of this briefing. The policies examined cover both children and adult social work, but the majority focused primarily or exclusively on children's social work. The original article on which this summary is based goes through all 20 policies in more detail.



## Findings

The findings showed that the policy texts made regular claims about a negative public perception of social workers and a need, often treated as urgent, to address this. For example, the 2003 policy *Every Child Matters*<sup>10</sup> stated "social workers have suffered from a poor public image" and the 2008 policy *Building Brighter Futures*<sup>11</sup> claimed that social workers "are held in relatively low esteem". Most of these texts provide no reference or evidence to back up these claims. At times consultations are relied upon, but respondents to these are predominantly professionals or organisations. For example, following the public consultation on the 2023 policy *Stable Homes, Built on Love*<sup>12</sup> the government noted concerns from social workers about their public image. However, no mention is made of responses from the public to confirm this belief.

Other times the evidence cited is weak, or even irrelevant. For example, in 2008 the evidence document for the *2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy*<sup>13</sup> claimed that social work is a "low status" occupation. The evidence cited for this is a report that is actually about early years practitioners, not social workers.

Despite this weak evidence base, claims about a negative public perception of social workers are relied on frequently to introduce reforms. Previous and ongoing reforms identified in this research that were justified through deferring to public perception include:

- Fast-track social work qualifying programmes (Frontline, Think Ahead, Step Up),
- Social Work England,
- Chief Social Worker posts,
- National Assessment and Accreditation System (NAAS),
- Knowledge and Skills Statements (now Post-Qualifying Statements),
- What Works Centre for Children's Social Care (now Foundations),
- Early Career Framework (soon to replace the ASYE), and
- Readiness for Professional Practice framework (likely to replace PCF for qualifying programmes).

## Discussion

This research demonstrates that policy texts perpetuate the belief that there is a negative public perception of social workers, despite evidence strongly suggesting the opposite. These claims are then used to impose reforms on the profession. Understanding this may help to understand why many of these reforms have failed to have the positive impact that was promised.

For example, the fast-track qualifying programme, Frontline, was established in 2013 with claims that it would address the public's "dim view" of social work<sup>14</sup>. However, after a decade where Frontline have been heavily funded and expanded rapidly, the organisation still regularly makes claims about a negative public perception of social work, including in their ongoing campaign 'This is the Work'<sup>15</sup>. Therefore, either Frontline failed in this goal, or the issues it set out to address were incorrectly understood or framed from the start.

Another influence of this public perception myth in policy is that it distracts from the failures of these reforms, and the government's unwillingness to address underlining social issues. The government, in effect, blames the public for chronic problems like poor social work recruitment and retention. This is despite research finding that the main reasons social workers leave the profession do not relate to public perception, but instead relate to poor working conditions<sup>16</sup>.

## Conclusions

The research suggests that reform efforts over the past 20 years of social work should be re-evaluated based on this new lens. There should also be a pause and evaluation of ongoing reforms that are being introduced that have been justified based on claims related to negative public perception, including the Early Career Framework and the Readiness for Professional Practice framework.

This does not mean that there can never be a genuine issue related to the public perception of social workers that needs to be addressed. For example, alongside finding generally positive views of social workers, the research

that does speak to the public has also found that they are more aware of children's social work than adult social work.

However, any future pronouncements about social worker public perception should be challenged to provide specifics, and evidence for their assertions. This should then be open to scrutiny and evaluation. Importantly, social worker beliefs, media portrayals, and government pronouncements, should not be allowed to stand in as proxies for actual public perception.

## Implications for Practice

As well as imposing reforms on the profession and distracting from other issues, claims of a negative public perception of social workers act to dissuade social workers from challenging or dissenting. They induce fear and anxiety in social workers, and can reduce their willingness to speak out. This may be very important for keeping social workers in line, a group with a long history of engaging in activism and challenge. Social workers should be made more aware that the public generally have positive views of them, and this could help foster improved working relationships with individuals, families and communities.

There are a number of ongoing campaigns focusing on the media portrayals of social workers, and looking to challenge these. These are linked to high vacancy rates and the need to improve social work recruitment and retention. However, a more effective way of achieving this may be to highlight to social workers that, contrary to common belief, and what media and policy networks claim, the public actually do have a positive perception of them. Celebrating this, and challenging false claims about a negative public perception, could drastically reduce the negative impacts of this myth, and have a real positive impact on social worker recruitment and retention.

## Appendix: List of Policies

2003	Every Child Matters
2003	Keeping Children Safe: The Government's response to The Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report and Joint Chief Inspectors' Report Safeguarding Children
2005	Children's Workforce Strategy: A Strategy to Build a Workforce for Children and Young People
2006	Options for Excellence: Building the Social Care Workforce of the Future
2007	Care Matters: Time for Change
2008	Staying Safe: Action Plan
2008	Building Brighter Futures: Next Steps for the Children's Workforce
2008	2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy: The Evidence Base
2012	Caring for Our Future: Reforming Care and Support
2014	Taking Forward Professor Croisdale-Appleby's Review of Social Work Education
2014	Consultation on Knowledge and Skills for Children and Family Social Work: Government Response
2016	Regulating Social Workers: Policy Statement
2016	Strategic Statement for Social Work with Adults in England 2016-2020
2016	Putting Children First: Delivering our Vision for Excellent Children's Social care
2017	Confidence in Practice: Child and Family Social Work Assessment and Accreditation System: Government Consultation Response
2018	Consultation on Improvement Standards for Child and Family Social workers: Government Consultation Response
2018	Social Work England Secondary Legislative Framework: Government Consultation Response
2022	Changes to the Regulatory Framework for Social Work England: Government Consultation Response
2023	Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation: Children's Social Care Reform
2023	Stable Homes, Built on Love: Government Consultation Response

## References

- 1 For example, British Association of Social Workers (2023) [\*The BASW Annual Survey of Social Workers and Social Work: 2022\*](#), Birmingham: British Association of Social Workers.
- 2 For example, Murphy, C. (2022) ["I don't want my face on the front page of The Sun': the 'Baby P effect' as a barrier to social worker discretion"](#), *Journal of Children's Services*, 17/1: 45-58.
- 3 Revans, L. (2007) ["Social workers win public backing in GSCC and BASW poll"](#), *Community Care*, 2 May.
- 4 Cragg Ross Dawson (2020) [\*Perceptions of social work\*](#), Sheffield: Social Work England.
- 5 Rowe, J., Grandon-White, S., Owen, M., Harmer, L. and Kearney, S. (2023) [\*Public Perceptions of the Social Work Profession\*](#), London: YouGov.
- 6 Social Work England (2021) [\*Social Work in England: First Reflections\*](#), Sheffield: Social Work England (p.17).
- 7 For example, Cragg Ross Dawson (2020), Rowe et al. (2023).
- 8 Foucault, M. (1980) [\*Selected interviews and other writings, 1972-77\*](#), New York: Pantheon.
- 9 Anais, S. (2013) ["Genealogy and critical discourse analysis in conversation: texts, discourse, critique"](#), *Critical Discourse Studies*, 10/2: 123-135.
- 10 Department for Education and Skills (2003) [\*Every Child Matters\*](#), London: Department for Education and Skills (p.85).
- 11 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) [\*Building Brighter Futures: Next Steps for the Children's Workforce\*](#), London: Department for Children, Schools and Families (p.42).
- 12 Department for Education (2023) [\*Stable Homes, Built on Love: Government Consultation Response\*](#), London: Department for Education.
- 13 Department for Children, Schools and Families (2008) [\*2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy: Evidence base\*](#), London: Department for Children, Schools and Families (p.32).
- 14 MacAlister, J., Crehan, L. and Olsen, A. (2012) [\*FrontLine: Improving the Children's Social Work Profession\*](#), London: Institute for Public Policy Research (p.5).
- 15 Frontline (2022) [\*Shifting the Social Work Stigma\*](#), Frontline, 17 October.
- 16 Johnson, C., Jouahri, S., Early, S. White, Y., Woods, D., Pollock, S., Scholar, H. and McCaughan, S. (2023) [\*Longitudinal study of local authority child and family social workers \(wave 5\)\*](#), London: Department for Education.



Joe Hanley is the author of:

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It is a resource and consequently does not necessarily reflect the views of the Open University or BASW.

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