




What Works for
**Children's
Social Care**



HAPPIER, HEALTHIER PROFESSIONALS PHASE TWO: RCTS AND PILOTS CONDUCTED WITH PUBLIC-SECTOR WORKFORCES

SUMMARY REPORT

January 2022





What Works for Children's Social Care

Acknowledgements

What Works for Children's Social Care want to thank Bev Curtis, Practice Development Manager and the practice lead for this strand of work, for her invaluable insights and feedback throughout the design and implementation of these studies. We would also like to thank current and past WWCSA colleagues for their invaluable contributions - including Clare Clancy, Vicky Clayton, Nick Fitzhenry, Daniel Kearns, Patrick Sholl, and Ella Whelan.

Funding

The Economic and Social Research Council funded this work (grant no. ES/N003586/1), following funding from the Department for Education for the first phase of the research programme.

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About What Works for Children's Social Care

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSA) seeks better outcomes for children, young people and families by bringing the best available evidence to practitioners and other decision makers across the children's social

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HAPPIER, HEALTHIER PROFESSIONALS

PHASE TWO: RCTS AND PILOTS CONDUCTED WITH PUBLIC-SECTOR WORKFORCES

This summary report provides an overview of the second phase of the Happier Healthier Professionals (HHP) programme, a series of evaluations of interventions which aim to increase the wellbeing of social workers and other frontline public sector professionals.

Introduction

Public-sector organisations, such as Children's Services departments, are characterised by high levels of work pressure and emotional labour, and their employees are prone to poor wellbeing (Maslach et al., 2001; Van Loon et al., 2015). The task of social workers is made harder by the many competing and complex demands made on them, which contributes to high levels of stress and burnout (Balloch et al., 1998; Lloyd et al., 2002; Ben-Porat & Itzhaky, 2015), while also feeling under-appreciated for their contributions to some of the most vulnerable people in society (DfE, 2019; DfE, 2020; DfE, 2021).

The turnover rate of social workers in 2020 was approximately 13.5% of the total workforce, and there was an overall sickness absence rate of 2.9% (Gov.uk, 2021). Social workers also report a high prevalence of working overtime. In the DfE's 2021 survey of children's social workers, 14% of social workers said they did not think they would

be working in child and family social work at a local authority in 12 months' time. There is, however, a paucity of evidence showing how local authorities (LAs) might address these issues through the introduction of policies or interventions.

Happier Healthier Professionals

The HHP programme evaluates interventions designed to improve the wellbeing of social workers and other frontline professionals. In this report, we describe the findings from four randomised controlled trials and two pilots. These studies were conducted between January 2020 and October 2021, with ten local authorities and two partner organisations - the Ministry of Defence (MoD) and Frontline. In total, 2,553 social care staff and students and 276 MoD personnel participated in the programme's randomised controlled trials (RCTs). The full report can be found on the What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSC) website.

Study Methods and Outcomes

Our interventions were evaluated through a combination of RCTs, some including Implementation and Process Evaluations (IPEs), and pilot studies. RCTs are used to establish causal relationships between interventions and outcomes, while IPEs provide insights into how interventions work and their implementation. Pilots aim to establish the feasibility and acceptability of interventions, often among a smaller number of participants.

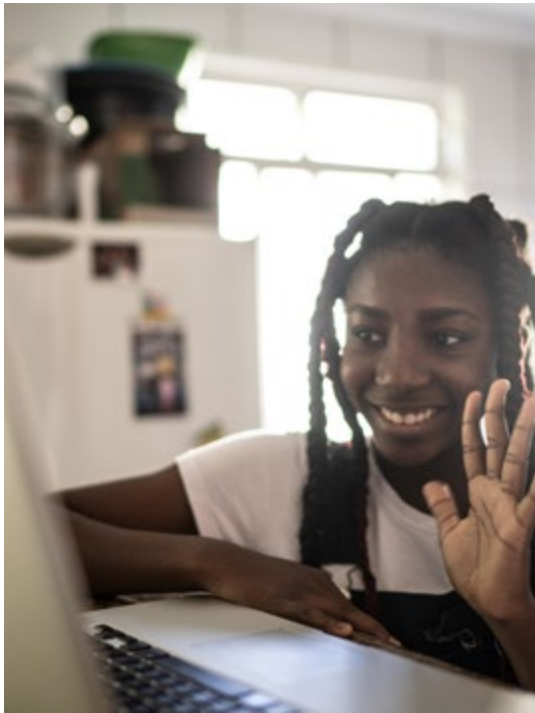


RCTs

We conducted four RCTs, three of which also included IPEs. For three of the four RCTs, the primary outcome was subjective wellbeing. Secondary outcomes varied for each evaluation. In the fourth RCT - two online experiments focused on increasing diversity in social work management roles - the outcome focused on participants' assessments of fictitious applications for a job. Randomisation was conducted at the individual level for all trials.

Pilot Studies

We also conducted two pilot studies. The primary aim of the dictation software pilot was to understand the acceptability of the intervention among participants in order to assess its suitability for a larger RCT. We also gathered information on our hypothesised outcomes to understand the potential effectiveness of the intervention and to further inform our logic model. For the flexitime pilot we aimed to understand the feasibility and perceived effectiveness of the intervention via qualitative methods only.



RCT 1: SYMBOLIC AWARDS: MESSAGES OF GRATITUDE FROM CARE LEAVERS

Research suggests that symbolic awards, such as non-monetary awards that recognise employees for their work can have a positive impact on the motivation and retention of staff (Thibault-Landry et al., 2017; Gallus, 2017). This was supported by research conducted in [the first phase of the HHP programme](#), which showed that messages of thanks from senior staff at their organisation can improve social workers' sense of feeling valued and recognised for their work (WWCSC, 2021).

Research also suggests that increasing contact between employees and the beneficiaries of their work can increase their sense that their work has a positive impact on others (Grant 2007; Grant, 2008; Grant, 2012; Kosfeld & Neckermann, 2011). Thus, we hypothesised that symbolic award interventions could have a positive impact on social workers' wellbeing and motivation.

TRIAL INFORMATION

INTERVENTION

Social care staff in seven local authorities were sent a video of local care leavers talking about their positive experiences with their social worker. Care leavers reflected on the importance of the role of their social worker, the positive impact it had on their life, and expressed gratitude for their social worker's hard work and efforts. One video, each featuring several care leavers, was produced for each local authority.

PARTICIPANTS

Videos were sent to a total of 1969 social care staff in seven LAs. A total of 428 completed our survey to provide outcome data for our primary and secondary outcomes.

METHOD AND DESIGN

The trial was an individual-level RCT. We sent two online wellbeing surveys to all participants to measure our outcome measures, once at pre-intervention and once post-intervention. Our primary outcome was subjective wellbeing and secondary outcomes were burnout, intrinsic and prosocial motivation, and perceived social worth. We also conducted semi-structured interviews to understand participants' views about the intervention and its implementation.

The full study protocol can be found [here](#).



WHAT WE FOUND:

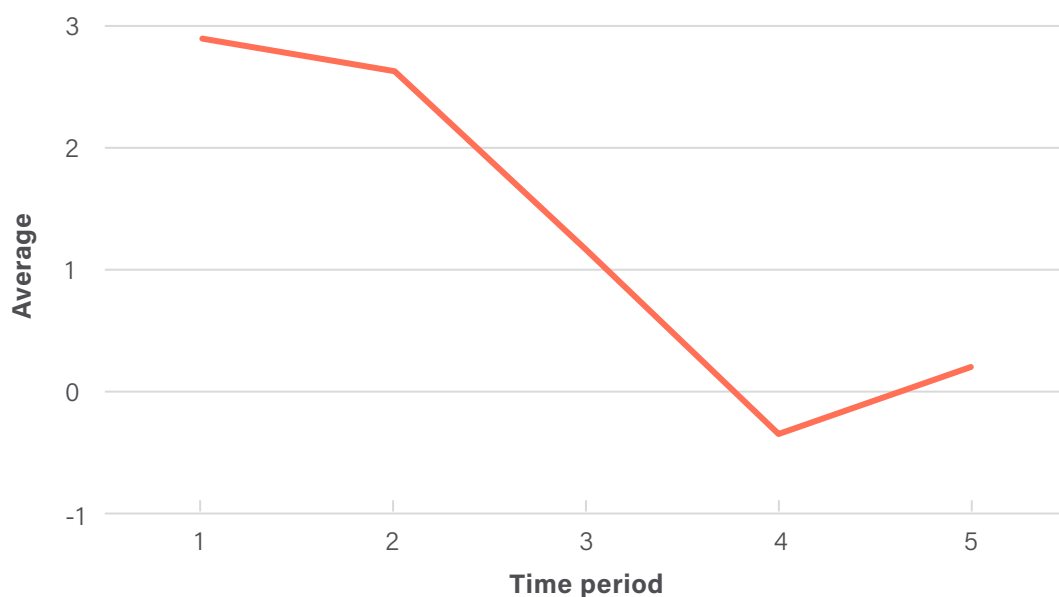
RCT Findings:

- No significant positive impact on our outcomes: We did not observe a significant impact of the intervention on any of our outcome measures, though there were small, directionally positive differences across all of our outcomes for participants who had received the intervention compared to the control group.
- Possible effectiveness in the short-term: We conducted exploratory analysis which indicated that the intervention may have been effective in the weeks directly following its launch, but then appeared to attenuate over time. These analyses were exploratory and not pre-specified in our trial protocol and should therefore be interpreted with caution. However, this provides tentative evidence that the intervention may have been effective, if only in the short-term.

IPE Findings:

- **Addressing the scarcity of positive feedback mechanisms:** Interview participants welcomed the opportunity to hear direct feedback from beneficiaries, noting that they normally only received feedback when something had gone wrong or if a complaint was made.
- **Positive feedback from interviews:** Interview participants were very positive about the intervention, reporting that it had a positive impact on their motivation and wellbeing.
- **Differential impact depending on team:** While staff who worked with older children in care or in leaving care teams were very positive about the video, staff who worked in other teams explained that it made them happy for those social care staff that did work directly with children leaving care, but indicated that it did not have a great impact on them personally.

Figure 1: Average attenuation of outcome coefficients post-intervention





RECOMMENDATIONS:

- **Design interventions carefully to maximise impact on target population:** More work on the design of the intervention, such as staff consultation or a small pilot study, should be conducted prior to rollout to ensure the intervention content and delivery mechanism is acceptable to the target audience.
- **Continuous rather than one-off interventions:** LAs should aim to establish processes which collect and disseminate this kind of feedback on a more continuous (rather than once-off) basis in order to produce a more meaningful positive impact on their staff.
- **Tailor messages to the work of teams:** To maximise effectiveness, LAs might consider creating more personalised symbolic award interventions for different social work teams.





RCT 2: SOCIAL WORKERS INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION

Research suggests that high-quality relationships with others are a core component of wellbeing (Ryff & Singer, 1998). Moreover, there is evidence that workplace loneliness is related to lower levels of job performance, suggesting that a sense of connection at work can also positively impact on organisational outcomes (Ozcelik & Barsade, 2018).

Studies have found that job resources, such as strong social support, can help to counteract the negative impact of excessive job demands, i.e. burnout (Bakker et al., 2005). There is evidence to suggest that interventions which leverage peer support to counteract these pressures are effective (Van den Heuvel et al., 2015; Rickard et al., 2021). Research also indicates that newer employees reap more benefits from social connection interventions compared to more experienced or tenured employees (Winslow et al., 2017).

The Social Workers Inspiring the Next Generation (SWING) intervention drew from a recent field experiment which supports this hypothesis, conducted with 911 call operators in Canada. Employees were sent a series of messages from colleagues, with the messages designed to provide social support and increase a sense of professional identity (Linos et al., 2021). The intervention was found to have a positive impact on both burnout levels and retention levels six months post-intervention.

TRIAL INFORMATION

INTERVENTION

The intervention involved sending a series of weekly text messages to social workers and trainee social workers in the Frontline programme. The messages were written by Frontline alumni and experienced social workers, and each focused on a separate theme designed to provide 'words of wisdom' by reflecting on the challenges they themselves had faced at the start of their career in social work.

PARTICIPANTS

Messages were sent to 1148 current trainees on the Frontline social work programme. The intervention was implemented in consecutive years with two cohorts. A total of 267 responded to our post-intervention survey.

METHOD AND DESIGN

The trial was an individual-level RCT. We sent two online wellbeing surveys to all participants to measure our outcome measures, once at pre-intervention and once post-intervention. Our primary outcome was subjective wellbeing and secondary outcomes were burnout, sense of connection to one's profession, and self-reported sickness absence rates. We also conducted semi-structured interviews to understand participants' views about the intervention and its implementation.

The full study protocol can be found [here](#).

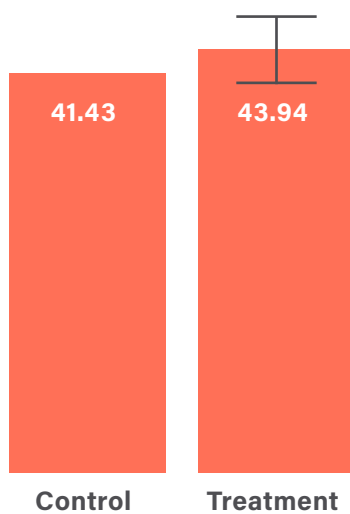


WHAT WE FOUND:

RCT Findings:

- **Results suggest no impact:** Our analysis demonstrated no significant impact of the messaging on any of our outcomes, including subjective wellbeing, burnout, professional identity, and sickness absence levels.

Figure 2: Overall Burnout and SWING



N = 267, *p<0.01 ***p<0.001
Copenhagen Burnout Inventory (survey data, 19 items on a 1-5 scale)

IPE Findings:

- **Communication overload:** In interviews, participants noted that they were already receiving an excess of wellbeing related communications from both Frontline and their LA employers in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and reported feeling fatigued and overwhelmed as a result. They also noted that they were used to receiving communications via email, and receiving text messages on the same subject may have exacerbated this.
- **Type of social support not sufficient to address social workers' needs:** Participants reported a desire for messaging content that was more useful and practical for their work, e.g. links to external resources. Others felt the messages should recognise the negative as well as positive elements of social work. Participants also noted they felt more engaged with messages written by Frontline alumni, as they felt they could more easily identify with their experiences.



RECOMMENDATIONS:

Due to the trial showing no significant impact on our outcomes, we will not continue with further data collection for the trial as previously indicated in the trial protocol. Prior to rolling out of the trial in other contexts, we recommend the following adaptations to the intervention design are considered:

- **Appropriate messenger for social support messages:** Social support messages should be written by people recipients can relate to.
- **Desire for tangible and instrumental support:** Messages should include practical support and advice.
- **Deliver wellbeing interventions in person:** Social support interventions in social work settings may be best delivered in-person, particularly in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic where there has been less in-person contact with colleagues.





RCT 3: MINISTRY OF DEFENCE INSPIRING THE NEXT GENERATION

Past research has demonstrated that emphasising the importance of one's work through anecdotes and reflections written by senior-level colleagues can have a significant impact on employee performance and the extent to which they feel dedicated to their jobs (Grant, 2008; Linos, 2021). Moreover, there is evidence to suggest that workforce wellbeing interventions which leverage peer support are effective across different sets of public-sector employees, including police officers (Van den Heuvel et al., 2015), and hospital nurses (Rickard et al., 2012).

The Ministry of Defence (MoD) encompasses a number of organisations including the Royal Navy, Army, Royal Air Force, Joint Forces Command and MoD Civil Service (MoD, 2017). Defence Intelligence (DI) is an integral part of the MoD, gathering and analysing military intelligence for decision makers (Gov.uk, n.d.).

As part of their work, MoD-DI staff deal with wide-ranging issues that are of key importance in protecting the public, including dealing with responses to national disasters, preventing child exploitation, and being involved in diplomatic missions with hostile countries (Alessandri, 2019). Perhaps influenced by the distressing content of their work, mental health issues are cited as the leading cause (22%) of non-industrial MoD Civil Servant sickness absence, and the highest cause of long-term sickness absence (MoD, 2017). MoD-DI staff are therefore an important group to target with wellbeing interventions.

TRIAL INFORMATION

INTERVENTION

A series of eight weekly emails were sent to MoD Defence Intelligence civilian and military employees who started their roles at the MoD during the past two years. The emails contained messages written by senior leaders, wellbeing/diversity and inclusion leads, and experienced employees, and described the shared experiences, challenges and the rewarding nature of their work.

PARTICIPANT

Messages were sent to 276 staff members at the MoD-DI. Out of these, 98 responded to our post-intervention survey.

METHOD AND DESIGN

The trial was an individual-level RCT. We sent two online wellbeing surveys to all participants to measure our outcome measures, once at pre-intervention and once post-intervention. Our primary outcome was subjective wellbeing and secondary outcomes were sickness absence; organisational commitment and perceived organisational support; and a sense of feeling connected to one's profession. We also conducted semi-structured interviews to understand participants' views about the intervention and its implementation.

The full study protocol can be found [here](#).



WHAT WE FOUND:

RCT Findings:

- **No significant positive impact on our outcomes:** We did not observe a significant impact of the intervention on any of our outcome measures. While there were small differences between the treatment and control group, there were a mix of positive and negative differences across the outcomes. The response rate to our survey was lower than anticipated, and consequently the confidence intervals were large and we had low power to detect effects of the intervention.

IPE Findings:

- **Managers as facilitators of messaging:** Interviews revealed that team managers had used the messaging as material to open up discussions around wellbeing with their team.
- **Desire for more personal, resource intensive interventions:** Findings from the RCT were supported by interviews, which suggested that some participants didn't feel the messages were impactful. Even for those who enjoyed the intervention, there was a sense that they should be coupled with interventions that are tailored to the individual, and which are more resource intensive in terms of time and monetary investment. Interviewees felt that wellbeing interventions could be delivered face-to-face, as emails add to an already excessive amount of correspondence from the DI.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Due to the trial appearing not to have a positive impact on any of our outcomes, we are not continuing with further data collection for the trial as previously indicated in the protocol. Prior to rolling out of the trial in other contexts, we recommend the following adaptations to the intervention design are considered:

- **Prompt managers to discuss messages:** Involve managers to help make the messages more salient and to utilise their position to open up subsequent conversations around wellbeing.
- **Consider combining messaging campaigns with more intensive wellbeing interventions:** Interviews suggested there was a desire for the wellbeing leads to organise more face-to-face initiatives, and offer more personalised support.
- **Tailor message content carefully:** Tailor social support messages so that the right staff members are receiving the most relevant content, bearing in mind tenure at the organisation and higher support needs on entry to the organisation.



RCT 4: INCREASING DIVERSITY: TWO ONLINE EXPERIMENTS TO REDUCE BIAS IN SOCIAL WORK HIRING

Children's social care is one of the most diverse public sector workforces (Gov. uk, 2019), and social work undergraduate programmes receive the highest number of applications from individuals from ethnic minority backgrounds (UCAS, 2020). Despite this, in 2020 just 2% of directors in children's services identified as Black African or Black Caribbean, despite 12% of children's social workers in England being Black (ADCS, 2020).

While some of this variance in representation in senior roles may be explained by socio-economic differences such as unequal access to education and variation in educational attainment (DfE, 2021b, Britton et al., 2020; ONS, 2020), there is reason to suspect that racial discrimination may play at least some role in hiring decisions in the workforce. A recent survey conducted with 100 Black safeguarding professionals found that almost half of respondents felt that they lacked fair and equal opportunities to progress in the workplace (Brown et al., 2021).

There is research to suggest that 'evaluation nudges' - interventions which make changes to the choice environment of those people assessing candidates - can reduce bias in recruitment processes. It is hypothesised that when evaluators view candidate CVs side by side their attention is focused on the pertinent aspects of a candidate's application, and away from those which are unrelated to job performance, such as their ethnicity (Bohnet, 2016). Research also indicates that removing features of a candidate's identity altogether may reduce bias (Goldin & Rouse, 2000; Stephanie et al., 2020).

TRIAL INFORMATION

INTERVENTION

Participating social workers were asked to imagine they had been asked to assess applicants for a final stage interview for a managerial position within children's services. They were presented with fictitious CVs to review, which included either typically White British names, or names which are typically associated with Black African, South Asian or Middle-Eastern backgrounds. They were asked to complete two separate experiments as part of the same session:

- The first experiment involved participants assessing CVs in pairs (the 'joint' condition) rather than individual CVs consecutively.
- The second experiment tested the effectiveness of removing the candidate name from the head of the CVs ('blinding' CVs).

PARTICIPANTS

Participants in both experiments were 303 qualified social workers, including team managers and senior leaders.

METHOD AND DESIGN

We conducted these experiments using the online survey platform Qualtrics. The experiments took the form of two individual-level RCTs, conducted consecutively by participants in one session. The order that the experiments appeared was also randomised to ensure there were no order effects on the findings.

The full study protocol can be found [here](#).



WHAT WE FOUND:

Experiment 1:

- Candidates with typically minority ethnic names progressed at a higher rate when reviewed alongside another candidate: Participants were much more likely to 'progress' Minority Ethnic Group candidates in the 'joint' evaluation condition, when there was an explicit choice between two candidates. These findings were statistically significant at the <math><.01</math> level.

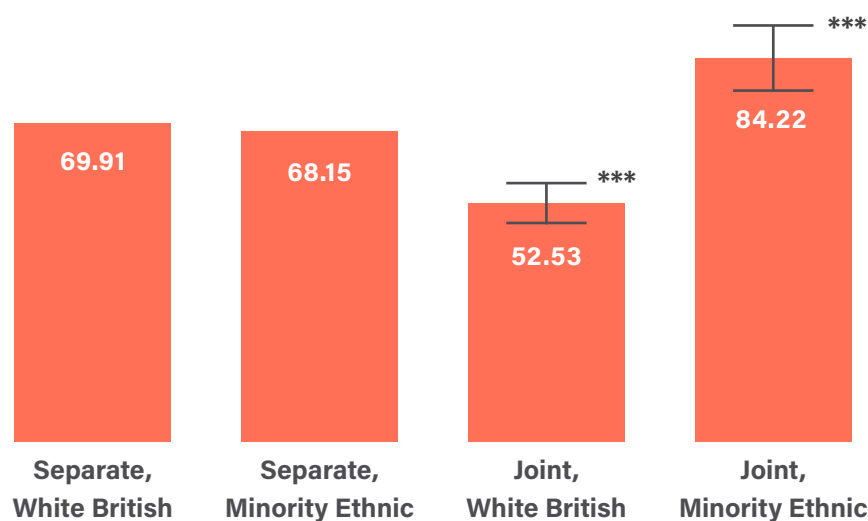
Experiment 2:

- No difference between conditions in blinding experiment: There was no significant difference between participants' evaluation scores of CVs from White British and Minority Ethnic Group candidates. There was also no statistically significant difference between the evaluation scores of candidates in the blinded condition compared to either of the two 'ethnicity' conditions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Embedding explicit candidate comparison:** Recruitment teams might identify ways that they might incorporate direct comparisons between candidates as an additional step in their processes. For example, a second reviewer might compare the applications of candidates not initially selected for interview with those who were as an additional step to guard against bias.
- **Blinding applications as default:** As it is a low-cost and light-touch intervention, we recommend that the Blinding Applications intervention is implemented where similar policies are not already in place as a means to protect against bias in recruitment processes.

Figure 3: Rates of progression, evaluation condition and perceived ethnicities



N = 303, *p<0.05 **p<0.01 ***p<0.001



PILOT 1: DICTATION SOFTWARE: REDUCING ADMINISTRATIVE BURDEN

Social workers experience high workload demands, with high caseloads and administrative burden. They report that time-pressure as a result of these administrative tasks, such as statutory reporting, has a direct impact on the time they are able to spend with children and families (Munro, 2011).

In recent polling conducted by WWCS, paperwork was the factor most commonly listed by social workers (25% of respondents) as one of the top three pressures on their time that takes them away from working directly with children and families. Similarly, a recent DfE report (N = 2,240) found that ten percent of social workers who were thinking of leaving the profession said that a more manageable workload in terms of administration and paperwork would be the primary factor that would encourage them to remain in social work. In line with this, administrative support has been identified as one of several potential moderators of burnout amongst social workers (Hussein, 2018), suggesting that interventions that offer administrative support may have a positive impact on burnout levels.

TRIAL INFORMATION

INTERVENTION

Social workers were provided with a dictation app - 'Dragon Anywhere' - for use on their work smartphones. This software is designed for users to quickly and easily dictate their case notes and reports rather than typing them, while also allowing them to produce notes while away from their computer.

PARTICIPANTS

The dictation software was provided to 52 social workers in two LAs - Brent Council (n = 20) and Coventry City Council (n = 32).

METHOD AND DESIGN

This was a one-month pilot study. Pre-intervention focus groups were conducted in Brent only, while interview and survey data was collected post-intervention in both LAs. We were also provided with app usage data by Dragon Anywhere for the Brent cohort. Usage information in Coventry was measured via self-report survey data at the end of the pilot.



WHAT WE FOUND:

Addressing the time pressure associated with administrative tasks: There was broad agreement amongst focus group participants that there was demand for an intervention which reduced the time burden associated with paperwork.

- **Usability of the app:** The app was generally regarded as intuitive and easy to navigate, though there seemed to be some differences in experiences of using the app according to how comfortable participants were with technology. However, there were also reports of participants finding it time consuming to enter the dictated text into their case management system.
- **Variation in perceived impact and low usage:** Usage data indicated that there was low take-up of the software. Several participants reported that they were comfortable with their current processes, and that they didn't feel that adopting a new technology would be particularly beneficial to them. However, some recipients who used the app more often reported substantial time-savings, with one interviewee describing it as a "game changer".
- **Type of reporting:** There was variation in the type of report social workers found the dictation software useful to use on. More formal documents were seen as less favourable, whereas the app was seen as useful for recording visits, especially as notes could be recorded in the car directly after the meeting.
- **Time investment:** Several participants recognised potential benefits of the intervention, but reported that they anticipated there being an upfront time investment required to make best use

of it, which they explained they were often too busy to make. Participants indicated that they might have been more willing to do so if they knew they would have had access to the app for a longer period. Those that did use the app more regularly reported that the more time they spent using the app, the more comfortable they became with it, and the more they got out of it in terms of time saved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- **Training:** LAs who wish to implement the intervention might consider assigning a dictation 'lead' who could facilitate the training and be on hand to provide training for new starters, share best practice, as well as support and guidance for social workers who are already using the software.
- **Mobile app:** LAs looking to introduce dictation software should aim to retain the mobile element of the software.
- **Identify users within the workforce:** LAs might consider a short pilot to understand which of their staff realise most benefit from the intervention, to ensure that their budget is not spent on licences which are subsequently unused.
- **Make uses and benefits salient:** LAs may consider producing resources to make the potential uses and gains of the app more tangible for social workers during implementation to increase uptake.
- **Shareable guidance:** LAs might consider producing some bite-size guidance documents which could be shared with social workers to be referred to when making notes.



PILOT 2: FLEXIBLE WORKING FOR SOCIAL WORKERS

In recent years, there has been a dramatic increase in the incidence of flexible work practices (FWPs), which are described as practices that transfer autonomy to employees over when, where, or how much they work (Brewer, 2000; Kelly & Moen, 2007; Leslie et al., 2012;). The Covid-19 pandemic has seen a huge increase in the focus on FWPs, and in the discussion around the potential benefits of a shorter working week.

A series of large trials conducted in Iceland between 2015 and 2017 in a range of workplaces measured the impact of shifting employees to a shorter working week (i.e. from 40 hours to a 35 or 36 hour working week) without any reduction in pay. This resulted in substantial improvements in employees' wellbeing, work-life balance, perceived burnout and stress, as well as resulting in higher productivity, despite working fewer hours overall (Haraldsson et al., 2021). Indeed, in addition to improving wellbeing, evidence indicates that employees who use practices such as telecommuting (Gajendran & Harrison, 2007), flexible schedules (Leslie et al., 2012), and compressed work weeks (Baltes, 1999) outperform those who do not.

TRIAL INFORMATION

INTERVENTION

We focused on a policy which allows staff to compress their contracted working hours into 4-day weeks or 9-day fortnights. The evaluation took place in one LA, where the policy already has high levels of uptake and a clear process exists for staff to apply to make use of flexitime.

PARTICIPANTS

The policy is available to all staff in children's services in Stockport Council.

METHOD AND DESIGN

The evaluation consisted of 11 semi-structured interviews with staff at one time-point.

The full study protocol can be found [here](#).





WHAT WE FOUND:

- **Perceived positive impact:** Consensus among participants in the study was that the compressed hours flexible working policy represented a net positive to the LA and its workforce, with interviewees reporting significant benefits to their wellbeing. There was also a sense that the policy improved work-life balance and enhanced staff enjoyment of non-working time. This meant that some staff felt they were more refreshed when they returned to work, and more productive as a result.
- **Different views on boundaries and adherence:** Interviewees noted the need - and challenge - of being strict in adhering to their non-working time. Social workers reported that norms had formed in their team around not disturbing their colleagues' non-working days with issues to do with their cases. More senior members of staff, however, were more likely to think of their non-working time as time where they were contactable in cases where their team needed them.
- **Planning the duty rota:** Senior staff acknowledged the challenge in balancing adherence to staff's working patterns with ensuring service delivery was uninterrupted, though careful planning between teams, particularly around the duty rota, was seen as a protective factor against disruption.

- **Importance of organisational culture:**

Senior staff's commitment to prioritising staff's work-life balance was seen as an important factor in social workers being able to make best use of the policy. The LA's commitment to flexible working was seen by participants as one of its 'values'

RECOMMENDATIONS

Planning; It is important that LAs conduct careful planning and establish clear processes, especially around the duty system, before the introduction of FWPs.

Monitoring of potential negative impacts on team workload; Managers should carefully monitor the extent to which time-pressure is displaced to other team members, and adjust working patterns accordingly to ensure workloads are equitably distributed across their team.

Commitment to work-life balance and organisational culture; Senior leaders and managers should aim to demonstrate the LA's commitment to staff work-life balance by protecting staff's non-working days wherever possible. This may help to cultivate a wider organisational culture where staff wellbeing is prioritised, and which may produce further downstream benefits for the workforce.



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