

Summary of Polling Workstream 2020/21

Bev Curtis, Practice Development Manager

Abby Hennessey, Research Associate

Alyssa Eden, Research Assistant

About WWCSO Polling

What Works for Children's Social Care (WWCSO) have been running polls with social workers to gather their views on a range of topics since July 2019. Over the last two years, the numbers of social workers registered on the site have grown and WWCSO continue to seek ways of increasing the numbers of social workers registered. Social workers are currently employed from a range of organisations from all over the country, and from different roles providing us with a broad brushstroke of different opinions. There are 878 social workers currently registered to participate as of the 31st March 2021.

This report

This report explores the responses given by social workers during the period covering August 2020 to March 2021. Covering the four areas of wellbeing; current affairs; covid and practice; practice and research, this report seeks to look at patterns and themes that arise from the responses that social workers give. Both quantitative and qualitative analysis are provided here to give oversight of the sector's response to the polling surveys we send.

Covering patterns of responses to the different categories, the report also provides an overview of social workers wellbeing responses since April 2020. The report finishes with a summary of the main themes arising out of the free text questions asked over the last six months.

Although some links are provided here to individual reports the full library of results can be found [here](#).

Response rates to questions

On average over the six months from September 2020 to March 2021, 71 social workers responded to each of our surveys. At its highest, responses reached 115 for the wellbeing questions asked in March, the first time for 2021. At its lowest, response rates hit 33 for a question asking social workers if they understood the symbols used in a [Predictive analytics](#) question. Despite 177 participants looking at this question only a very small number responded. Looking at why this might be the case there are two reasons that might explain the low response rate. Firstly, Predictive analytics or machine learning as it is also referred to is not a common area of discussion within the social work



profession and there are also tensions regarding its application to the social work profession. Secondly, the question was particularly complex and it required additional time to understand what was being asked of the participant. As the surveys are intended to be quick and easy to complete, participants may not have felt they had time to think about what was being asked. Responses were also generally low in December and probably reflect the time of year when work and home life pressures tend to increase.

Despite 878 social workers registered on the site, response rates have never reached anywhere near this number. However there are a couple factors that may explain why; Although 878 social workers may be listed some of those will have moved jobs and their email addresses may not be valid. Social workers are also able to de-register so that they do not receive the emails but this is not reflected in the total number registered. It is probably more useful therefore to look at how many view the question and then respond. In general the conversion rate from view to vote is in the mid 50% range. At its lowest during this period it was 32% and at its highest it was a 76% conversion rate. At its lowest, participants had been asked what [innovative practice](#) they had adopted during the pandemic would they keep and how they would prefer to share this learning with colleagues. This question was asked on the 22nd December and probably explains the low response. Asking, [“If you ever considered a change of career, what would you choose?”](#) elicited the higher rate of 76% and shows how important this question might be for the participants. It was asked at the beginning of September 2020 when schools were just re-opening amid concerns numbers of covid numbers beginning to rise and worries about increased referrals to social work after the summer break, a common experience but this time exacerbated by schools being closed for a much longer period due to lockdown.

It appears from looking at response rates for questions that particularly complex research questions are not popular with the cohort, in fact overall, research based questions tend not to fare well in our polling figures. Wellbeing questions tend to elicit a consistent number of participants at the higher rate averaging at 101 responses. Current affairs questions elicited high numbers of free text (qualitative) responses which are covered later in the report.

Wellbeing

The wellbeing of social workers is measured by using the Office of National Statistics (ONS) four wellbeing measures. Participants are asked to score themselves in the following four areas; anxiety ; happiness; life satisfaction and life worthwhile. The scale is from 0 to 10 with 0 being “not at all” and 10 being “completely”.

Below in Fig 1 is a table charting the wellbeing averages from April 2020 to April 2021, and in Fig 2 the averages for each month are provided.

Fig.1



Average wellbeing scores April 2020 - April 2021

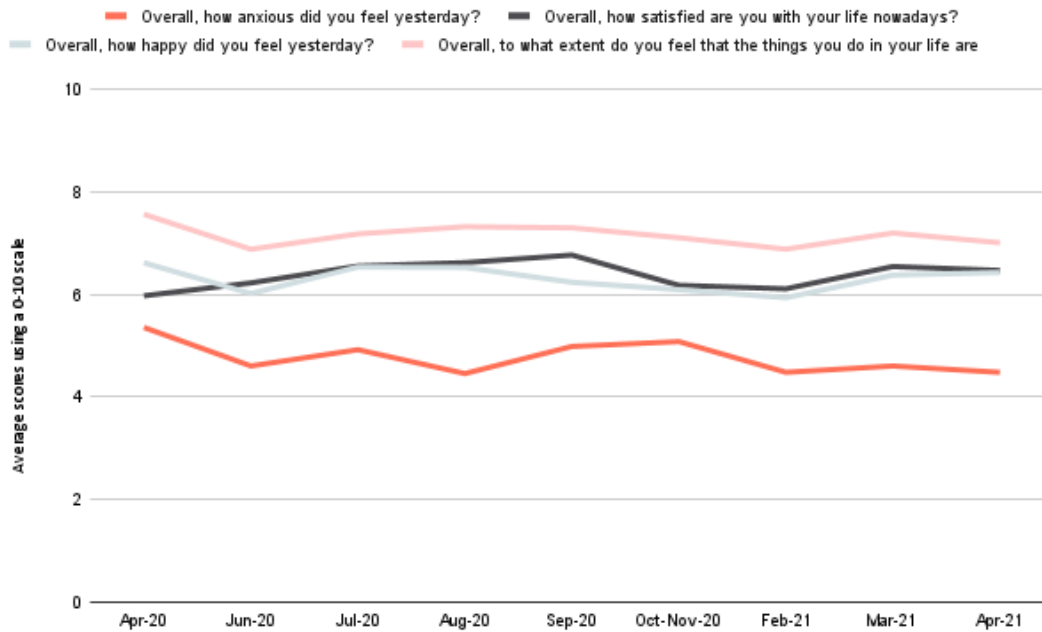


Fig 2

	Apr-20	June 20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-Nov-20	Feb-21	Mar-21	Apr-21	
Overall, how anxious did you feel yesterday?	5.4	4.6	4.9	4.5	5.0	5.1	4.5	4.6	4.5
Overall, how satisfied are you with your life nowadays?	6.0	6.2	6.6	6.6	6.8	6.2	6.1	6.5	6.5
Overall, how happy did you feel yesterday?	6.6	6.0	6.5	6.5	6.2	6.1	5.9	6.4	6.4
Overall, to what extent do you feel that the things you do in your life are worthwhile?	7.6	6.9	7.2	7.3	7.3	7.1	6.9	7.2	7.0

On 23rd March 2020 the PM announced the first COVID-19 lockdown and the first recorded level of anxiety for April 2020 averaged at 5.4. Since then, anxiety has averaged at between 4.5 and 5.1 but has never returned to its highest level of 5.4 again. In April 2021 it averaged at 4.5, one of its lowest and this may reflect how participants feel about the slow easing of restrictions or the recorded success of the vaccination rollout programme.

Life satisfaction averages have increased over the year and have continued to remain higher than the first recorded average of 6.0 back in April 2020. In April 2020 the average was at 6.5.



Both happiness and feeling life is worthwhile show lower averages than when first recorded. One can only hypothesise why these two domains have remained on the low side in the last six months as participants have not been asked for reasons why they score as they do. It may reflect the enduring impact of lockdown measures and this may make people feel they cannot make positive plans for the future coupled with the extra pressures on workloads and family life.

A comparison of hours extra worked, Time off in Lieu (TOIL) policy and work/life balance with wellbeing averages was completed in [October](#). Wellbeing averages reflected the ease of taking TOIL or how many extra hours extra were worked.

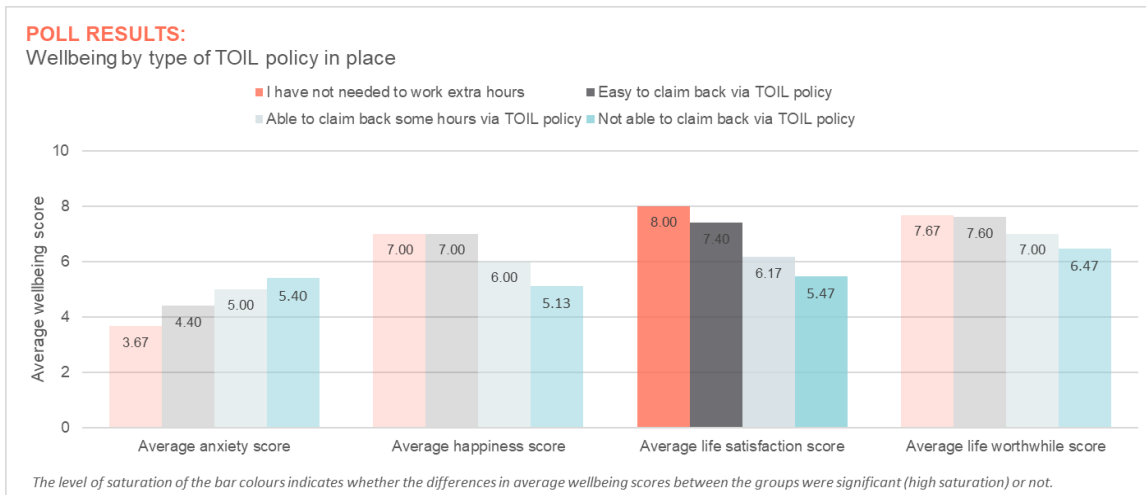
In Fig. 3 below the four wellbeing domains are shown with columns reflecting hours worked. The depth of colour reflects its significance. Out of the four domains, life satisfaction seems to bear the impact of extra hours worked, where it appears the more hours that are worked the lower life satisfaction experience average was scored.

Fig.3



In Fig.4, Wellbeing was measured against the ease of taking back the time via the TOIL policy when one needs to claim it back. Again, life satisfaction was the wellbeing area impacted the most by the experience of social workers' ability to claim back TOIL, i.e. if they were not able to take back their TOIL they had the lowest average for life satisfaction and second highest anxiety average. It is worth noting that these comparisons were based on 97 social workers and with low numbers one cannot confer causality or generalise results across the total social work population.

Fig.4



Overview Polling Free-Text Responses

From mid-September 2020 to mid-March 2021 children’s social care professionals in England, who were signed up to polling with What Works for Children’s Social Care, were asked on a fortnightly basis to share their experiences, views and ideas in response to different questions. This report provides an overview of how many practitioners responded to each type of question (e.g. current affairs, research questions, or practice and working environment) and presents collective overarching themes.

Overview of response rate for each category

Practitioners provided the most responses (64 and 65) when asked questions about Current Affairs. We asked two questions on Current Affairs. One on Looking Back Over the Year and another on Priority Areas for the Care Review. Practitioners also responded well when asked questions about Practice and (their) Working Environment (24, 43). We asked two questions on Practice and Working Environment. One question on Innovative Practice and another on Returning to Lockdown. Practitioners provided the least amount of responses (3, 10, 46 and 6) when asked questions about our Research Projects. We asked four questions which relate to our research projects: Social Workers in Schools, Mothers in Prisons, TOIL and LGBTQ+ issues. TOIL received a high number of responses (46), however, this question connects with Practice and Working Environment which was well responded to.

Therefore, questions on Current Affairs and questions about Practice and Working Environment tend to receive a high response rate, however questions relating to our research projects generally receive a low response rate.



Overarching themes across individual reports

New challenges, heightened need, and adaptation to new ways of working

Practitioners shared how, during the pandemic, they adapted to new ways of working and shared the benefits of virtual working. For example, staff made use of technology for direct work and made creative use of in-person contact e.g. use of garden visits. However, a lack of in-person multi-agency support was also raised, leaving the onus on CSC. Also, practitioners highlighted how the pandemic exacerbated the needs of families. Some staff felt increased pressure and their workloads increased. Staff were proud of their continued efforts to support children and families, for practising-self care, and for maintaining workplace and social connections during the pandemic.

Investing in high quality provision

Practitioners advocated for investment in a range of service provisions, such as preventative and early intervention services to minimise the need for entry into care. Also, increasing the availability and stability of placements was considered a priority, and many staff raised concerns about the for-profit care sector and its impact on the quality of care received. Many practitioners call for investment in foster carers and special guardians, including better pay for carers, upskilling and a review of kinship care assessments.

Staff raised the importance of understanding an individual's journey through the system and beyond, with a focus on improving outcomes. Practitioners highlighted the benefits of relational, strengths-based and needs-led approaches in minimising entry to care, and how investment in higher quality therapeutic and early intervention provisions will improve children's experiences of social care.

Overworked and under-valued

Practitioners shared that they want to see working conditions for social workers improved. Staff felt that increasing workforce capacity and the stability of the workforce should be priority areas. Some shared feelings of being shamed for taking TOIL, a lack of clarity around TOIL policy, and high caseloads. Some staff questioned whether LA's should pay overtime instead of having a TOIL policy. Staff also want to see better understanding and promotion of children's social work by the government.

Analysis

In both the qualitative data and the quantitative data response rates were at their lowest when we asked research questions. This finding is not surprising given that social work practitioners are likely to feel less connected to research topics than to practice issues. However, development in this area is a key objective for future polling. Social workers' views regarding our research projects and plans are invaluable in terms of planning but it is also imperative that we conduct research that connects with social workers' needs and interests. We therefore need to make our research questions more



appealing and relatable to social workers. Current affairs questions, questions on practice conditions and wellbeing were popular subject areas and will continue to be central to future polling questions.

Reports on the results for polling questions are now provided every three months with a high level summary of the data collected, replacing the fortnightly report on each survey. This decision will be reviewed periodically to ensure it meets the needs of the organisation, polling participants and the sector.

Using polling surveys will continue to be one of the ways that WWCS temperature checks the social work community. Results have been useful in a number of contexts, including both for researchers in the team but also for knowledge sharing in general. Growing the number of social workers signed up for polling remains a priority and will continue through the usual channels. It is hoped that when safe to do so, we will visit local authorities and attend sector events in person to promote polling and increase sign ups because a greater sample size will improve the reliability of polling results.

Appendix

Polling questions September 2020 - March 2021

Free-text Questions: Mid-September 2020 – Mid-March 2021			
Date	Topic area	Question(s) asked	Category
Sep-20	Social Workers in Schools	What is your view of the idea of placing social workers in schools?	3
	Mothers In Prison	Whilst the mother served a prison sentence what type of care was provided to the children?	3
Oct-20	TOIL	If you were to conduct research on the TOIL policy in your organisation, what question would you want to ask?	3
Nov-20	Returning to Lockdown	Is there a specific need for children, young people and families created or exacerbated by Covid-19 which services are currently not addressing?	4
Dec-20	Looking Back Over the Year	When you reflect back on this very strange year, what makes you feel proud about how you have managed your way through it?	1



	Innovative Practice	What examples of best practice / key learning can you share? Is there anything that you have found especially useful? It would be great if you have other suggestions for sharing good practice.	4
Feb-21	Care Review Priority Areas	What do you think the priority areas should be for the Care Review?	1
March-21	LGBTQ+	Have you ever discussed LGBTQ+ issues with the young people you have worked with?	3

Category Classifications

1. Current Affairs

2. Wellbeing Questions from the Office for National Statistics

3. Research Questions

4. Practice and Your Working Environment

Individual themes from each report

Looking Back Over the Year (December, 2020)

Current Affairs (64)

- Continued efforts to support children and families
- Finding the positives and practising self-care
- Choosing to leave or remain in the profession
- Maintaining social and workplace connections
- Adaptation to new ways of working
- Surviving and managing 2020



Care Review Priority Areas (January, 2021)

Current Affairs (65)

Workforce Priority Areas

- Reviewing Diversity in the Workplace
- Recognition for Social Workers
- Government's Understanding and Promotion of Social Work
- Reduction of Caseloads
- Increasing Workforce Capacity and Stability
- Moving Towards Strengths-based, Relational Practice
- Decreasing Workplace Bureaucracy

System Priority Areas

- Increasing the Availability and Stability of Local Placements
- A Greater Focus on Early intervention and Prevention
- A Review of Thresholds for Entering the System and Care
- Ensuring Transparency with the Care Review Process
- A Review of the For-profit Care Sector
- Ensuring Quality Provision of Services
- Needs of Children In Care Prioritised
- Recognising the Role of Poverty
- A Consistent Special Guardianship Order (SGO) Offer Across Local Authorities
- Mental Health Prioritised, especially for Children In Care
- Investing in Foster Carers
- Understanding and Improving Children's Experiences of Social Care

Social Workers in Schools (September, 2020)

Research Questions (3)

- Longevity of intervention
- Contextual and resourcing factors
- Preventative alternative

Mothers in Prison (September, 2020)

Research Questions (10)

- Care and Care Proceedings
- Suspended Sentences for Mothers

TOIL (October, 2020)

Research Questions (46)

- Contextual facilitators and barriers



- Shamed for taking TOIL
- High caseloads
- Lack of clarity around policy
- Pay overtime instead

LGBTQ+ Issues (March, 2021)

Research Questions (6)

- Not applicable to them as work with babies and children.
- Explore LGBTQ+ issues with staff they supervise.
- Differing experiences with discussing LGBTQ+ with children.

Returning to Lockdown (November, 2020)

Practice and Working Environment (24)

- Lack of in-person multi agency
- Specific needs for children and families (e.g mental health & contact)
- Increased workloads and pressures
- Health and safety of CSC staff

Innovative Social Work Practice (December, 2020)

Practice and Working Environment (43)

- Benefits of virtual working
- Use of technology for direct work
- Maintaining team communication
- Creative use of in-person contact
- Collating and sharing best practice

