# The View from Here

People's experiences of working in social services: A qualitative analysis

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**OCTOBER 2015**

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CPS COMMUNITY CARE PROVIDERS SCOTLAND

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# INTRODUCTION

**In early 2015, Iriss conducted research designed to understand the experiences of frontline practitioners in delivering care and support. The exercise adopted a different approach to gathering practitioner views by inviting people to sign up to record their experiences over one week using a qualitative 'diary method'.**

This research comes at an extremely challenging time for the care sector and its workforce in Scotland. There continue to be concerns regarding the future of job quality in social care. This is at a time when the sector needs to develop the workforce in order to take on ever more challenging and complex client groups that require more personalised services. It was within this challenging context that participants were asked to give their views and insights into a number of crucial areas concerning work and employment in social care.

Seventy four people submitted responses. The voluntary, public and private sector were almost equally represented in the data set. This report represents an analysis of the prompt cards and time sheets issued to frontline practitioners regarding these themes. A number of key findings are summarised below.

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# KEY FINDINGS

**Relationships: What made care workers feel valued at work?**

- Interpersonal relationships were seen as central to feeling valued in work.
- Private sector respondents were more likely to highlight how good relationships with people supported by services were key to feeling valued.
- Public and voluntary sector respondents were more likely to cite good relationships with managers and peers through team work and support and supervision (as well as relationships with users) as essential to feeling valued at work.

*"I feel valued at work when I get positive feedback from my colleagues and supervisors. After every shift my team leader makes a point – thanking each member of staff for their hard work. All of the co-ordinators also make a point of thanking staff and highlighting good practice."*

**Support and supervision**

- Across all sectors experiences of supervision were mixed, but with the majority reporting largely positive responses.
- The importance of good supervision influenced other aspects of other parts of participants' working lives, such as opportunities for relevant training, as well as constructive and supportive relationships with line managers.
- Successful supervision was based on friendly and supportive supervisors, who demonstrated listening skills, were experienced and understood the pressures of working in the field. Consistent and regular formal contact with supervisors, and a focus on learning and sharing practice during supervision, rather than on performance indicators were valued.
- A minority raised concerns about the quality/appropriateness of supervision. Resource pressures often pushed out formal supervision, undermining the accessibility of managers and leading to irregular sporadic and fragmented coverage. Line management skills in supervision were a key reason for shortfalls in quality of provision.

*"My experiences with support and supervision, up until now have been a success. I feel that the office staff and managers have been 'out in the field' providing care, so they can mostly relate to any queries or issues I may have…"*

*"I am happy with supervision in my current workplace, however when I did out-reach previously I would regularly go without supervision and would at times not see my line manager for weeks. This can be challenging as there is no opportunity to talk to anyone."*

## Learning and development

- Participants indicated how they had benefitted from good training and development from their employers over their careers. The statutory requirements for training under Scottish Vocational Qualifications were a strong impetus for training.
- In recent times the scope for learning and development had been affected by budget and time constraints. This meant for many only mandatory training was available, leading to levels of dissatisfaction.
- Continued passion and dedication to their work, meant many participants were taking initiatives on their own to keep their personal learning about their job up to standard. These approaches to learning involved discussions and sharing knowledge and expertise with line managers, other workers and people supported by services.
- Web-based information from statutory and other sources such as newsletters were also seen as useful learning devices.

*"I have the opportunity to raise training requirements and interests at supervision – however, the reality of having to take a chunk of time out of working on a daily basis with clients makes me hesitant about training."*

*"A lot of my learning comes from other team members – either through general discussion or observing them/their work. My colleagues are great at sharing their experiences and letting me look at reports they have written if I am doing something new."*

## Work-life balance

- The vast majority of employees worked more hours than what they are contracted for. The most common reason for undertaking additional hours was staff shortages.
- Workers complained of frequent unscheduled changes to rotas and shifts making it difficult to plan everyday events.
- Workers also reported taking work home with them and difficulties in taking breaks or cutting them short. Work-related pressure made it difficult for workers to engage in family activities or personal relationships outside work.
- Some workers reported negative wellbeing impacts, including sleep deprivation, stress and a loss of enjoyment in the job as a result of these pressures.
- Some workers had the benefit of organisational flexi-time policies or a good relationship with their line manager to help them cope with pressures of work-life balance. These options were generally more often reported by workers in the public and voluntary sectors.

*"Work-life balance can fall out of kilter especially when there are staffing issues and I feel obliged to cover extra shifts – this can start to feel stressful."*

**Pay and conditions**

- The majority of respondents were dissatisfied with their pay and conditions package. Dissatisfaction was most pronounced in the private and voluntary sectors. There was some evidence of in-work poverty from a small minority of respondents.
- Relatively few respondents, mainly from the public sector, were satisfied with their pay and conditions package. Participants cited opportunities to develop new skills, promotion and a strong vocational orientation as reasons for their satisfaction.
- Workers felt under-valued for what they perceived to be complex and demanding tasks undertaken over unsocial and fragmented hours. There was a perception that governments and society in general did not value care work. Zero hour contracts were seen to further undervalue care work.
- Participants expressed concerns about the impact on service quality as people left the sector, or feared the poor wages and conditions would erode goodwill among staff.

*"A carer's wage isn't great. Society values money more than people…"*

**Challenges of working in social care**

- Austerity and scarce resources in public services represented a major challenge to workers and their ability to effectively achieve their outcomes for users.
- Work intensification (having to do more with the same or less resources) was the most significant impact of austerity measures across the three sectors. Short staffing and increased workloads hindered learning, the amount of time spent with users, and led to diminishing perceptions of job security and well-being among staff.
- Poor inter-personal relations with line managers, colleagues and some people supported by services were seen as potential barriers to progress in achieving outcomes. Common concerns related to risk aversion and a lack of flexibility among some managers.
- There was a view that poor communications between staff and senior management along with other government agencies such as those responsible for housing or health contributed to challenges in achieving outcomes.

*"To do my best for the service user I need a full complement of staff…"*

**Opportunities of working in social care**

- Many respondents reported that personal relationships with line managers and colleagues were helpful to them achieving their goals.
- Participants reported how teamwork and trust among workers, as well as approachable managers and supportive supervision was key to successful

outcomes. Praise for line managers and their contribution was particularly common among public and voluntary sectors workers.
- Training and good communications were seen as helpful in achieving successful outcomes in social care.
- The ability to exercise independence in decision-making in some aspects of work and participate in shaping services was seen as a key factor in achieving outcomes. This perception was particularly present among voluntary sector workers.

*"I get a great deal of self-satisfaction knowing I have supported someone – helped them access the local community, meet friends, even wash their hair, put their bins out – knowing that I help make that person's life a little easier and that helps them to feel good."*

**Future aspirations – Where would you like to be in 5–10 years?**

- Across all sectors, the majority of respondents expressed a desire to stay in care work over the next five years, some expressed a hope for a better pay settlement during that period.
- Public sector workers were more optimistic about being able to secure a 'traditional' career path of gaining qualifications and experience and moving onto management roles.
- Career aspirations were seen to be limited by lack of opportunities in the more remote, rural areas. Some of those seeking further promotion did so with the caveat that they would still want direct contact with people supported by services and have the ability to help them in their lives.
- A minority of respondents expressed a desire to leave the sector, due to excessive workloads, stress and low pay.

*"I used to want it as a career. Now I am not sure as there is not much financial reward for so many hours and it's a struggle…"*

*"I aspire to have career in care – in 5 to 10 years I would like to be working with children and moving up the ladder in a service."*

# RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICY, PRACTICE & FUTURE RESEARCH

**Recommendations for policy**

- Key stakeholders should continue to promote a 'national conversation' with regard to social care work, and whether and by how much it is or should be valued and rewarded in society. This should involve continued consultation

between the social partners (employers, unions, government (central and local) officials around appropriate pay levels in social care and the means to achieve it.

- Further effort is required to build cross-sectoral cooperation between government, employers and unions regarding the best way to phase in the new National Living Wage, and aspire to a real Living Wage.

## Recommendations for practice

- Drawing from data revealed in this project, there is a need to promote the business case for addressing issues of work-life balance within social care providers. This should highlight the negative implications for worker health and performance from the lack of work-life balance and intensified workloads. This should be targeted at levels of government and provider organisations.
- There is a need to invest adequate resources in social care so as to ensure the consistency of supervision across the three sectors. There would be value in a move towards a commitment of resourcing an agreed guaranteed supervisory frequency, depending on care setting for every social care worker.
- Key stakeholders should investigate what lessons can be drawn from informal approaches to learning and development to be transferred to facilitate formal, organisational programmes. There is a need to ensure that informal workplace learning contributes towards overall progress on employee learning, qualification and training across the sector.
- Using the results of this study, key stakeholders should promote the social care sector as a good place to work because of its close, supportive team-based working relationships.

## Recommendations for future research

- There is a need to investigate career paths across public, private and voluntary providers to understand any differences and barriers to progression. Consider the potential for location-specific projects, exploring prospects for developing stronger career paths in all areas (urban and remote rural communities) to retain valuable staff, complementing national strategies.
- Further research is needed into commissioning practices and how these influence staffing levels at the frontline and with line management roles. Particular focus should be on whether there is adequate support for front-line staff following austerity driven restructuring of management roles.

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