



Frontline

Making social work
better for children

Snapshot of children's social work 2024

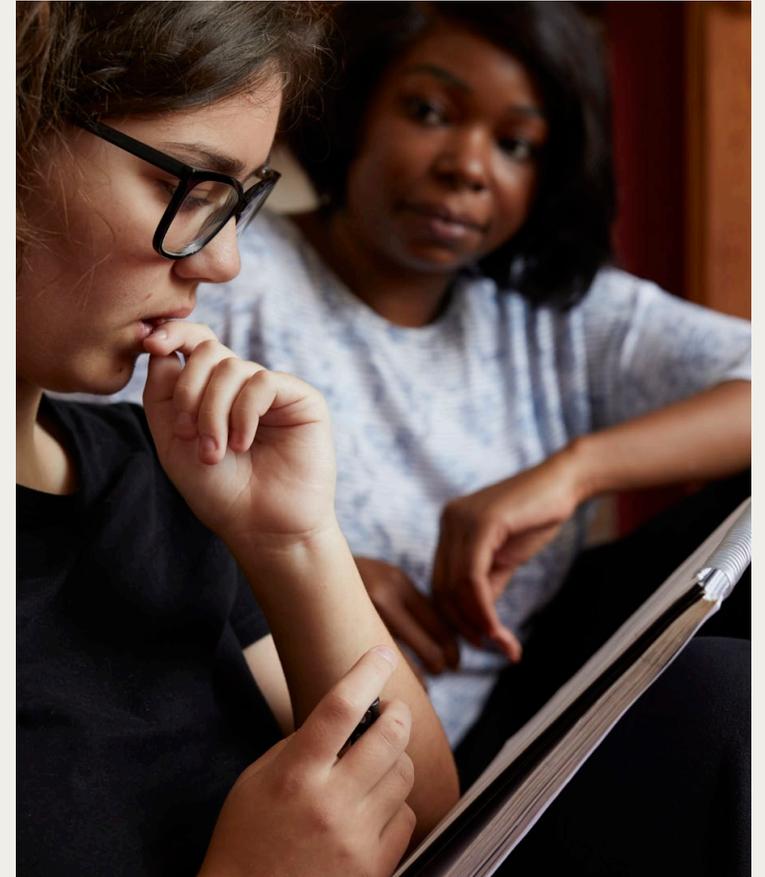
Introduction

Everything we do at Frontline aims to make life better for children who need a social worker, to help keep them safe from harm and to give them every possible chance to fulfil their potential.

Every year **700,000 children** and their families rely on the support of a social worker in England. Currently there are only **40,000 full time equivalent social workers** in children's social care, of whom 7,000 are agency staff. And the workforce shortage of more than 7,700 vacancies is set to increase over the next 10 years.*

The number of children being taken into care is rising, while more families are living in poverty and struggling with mental health, addiction and domestic violence.**

The current climate is difficult and complex, with rising levels of division across communities and more people than ever affected by poverty and destitution. These complications mean that existing challenges around mental health, housing and substance abuse are only exacerbated for families.



*[Department for Education](#), 2024

**[NSPCC](#), 2024

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A message from Frontline's chief executive

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We wanted to hear directly from social workers working day-in and day-out with the children and families – all so that we could listen to what is really happening for people across the country and share urgent recommendations for Keir Starmer's new government.

Snapshot 2024 shines a light on the state of social care and the challenges facing children and families who need the support of a social worker across England. Sadly, it echoes previous findings that the sector has been aware of for a long time. Not nearly enough has changed in terms of improving support for

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children, families and social workers and now the challenges are compounded by worsening poverty and the rise of extra-familial harms.

Social workers shared details on what support they need to ensure they can continue doing their jobs – something which national government needs to consider when considering how to address the current workforce retention crisis. Policy makers must listen to social workers' voices to make real change in the sector; for social workers themselves, and for the children and families who rely on their support.

Mary Jackson, chief executive at Frontline

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What we did

We wanted to hear from social workers on **what is and isn't working in children's social care**, so that we could take these findings to the new Government. We asked questions about their roles, their workplace and their work with children and families.

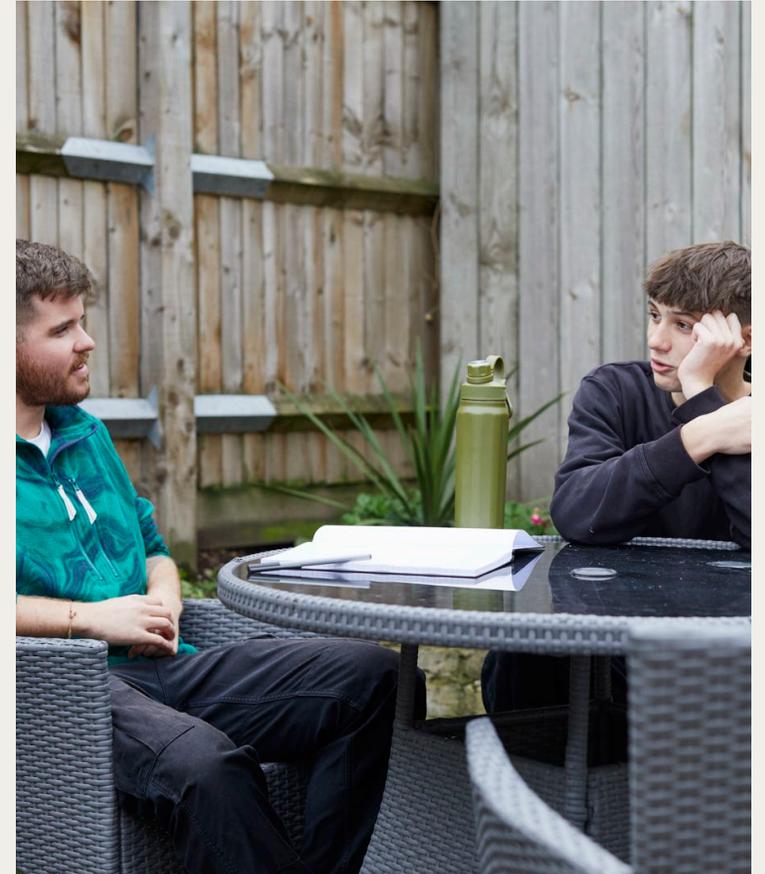
We received **570 responses** from both Frontline fellows and others who work for local authorities across England. All respondents were children's social workers currently working on a statutory basis.

Policy makers must listen to social workers if we're going to make social work better for children and families. To help, we have drawn up key recommendations for both national and local government, based on the responses we received and shaped by our chief social worker, to help make social work better for children and families and improve their outcomes.



Key findings

1. **Children and families with social workers are struggling with poverty** and are becoming increasingly reliant on benefits and food banks.
2. **Young people are also more at risk of harm outside the family home** and they and their families need more support from local and national government.
3. Social workers are doing great work, but **they still face significant barriers to doing their jobs**. Excellent leadership can and does help, but it is vital to address the other challenges facing the profession.
4. Almost all who responded think **the public has a negative perception of them as social workers** and believe this has a detrimental impact on their work.



Recommendations

1. To reduce pressure on families and therefore children's services, **national and local government must make child safety a priority**, starting with tackling child poverty and extra-familial harm.
2. At a local level, **the support available to families needs to be improved**, through better social work leadership, improved workplace culture, joined-up services and more time spent with families.
3. **A national campaign is needed to change the perception of social work as a profession.** This would increase the appeal of social work as a career and help existing social workers feel appreciated, bolstering recruitment and retention. It would also help challenge the stigma families face when they have a social worker, making them feel more comfortable about engaging with services.



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A young girl with dark hair in braids is sitting on a bed in a bedroom. She is wearing a red and black plaid shirt and light blue jeans. She has a thoughtful expression. The room has purple walls, a white headboard with shelves holding various toys, and a window with purple curtains. A large, dark blue banner with white text is overlaid on the image.

Children and families are struggling and need help

Poverty is having a huge impact

Poverty can put enormous pressure on families who are already facing challenges and often exacerbates existing problems.

Seven in ten respondents identified poverty as one of the top structural problems impacting the lives of children and families they work with.

Past data has shown that over half of all children referred to social care live in households receiving benefits.* **Seven in ten** respondents reported a rise in the number of families they work with accessing benefits.

And more than **four fifths** reported a rise in the number of families they work with using food banks.

We welcome the Government's introduction of the child poverty taskforce and have joined the Children at the Table campaign calls for the two-child benefit cap to be scrapped immediately.

*[Policy in practice](#), 2022

72% of social
workers identified
poverty as a key issue
impacting families

85% of social
workers reported
a rise in families
using food banks

The risk of other harm is increasing

Social workers identified an increased risk of harm happening to children and young people outside the family home.

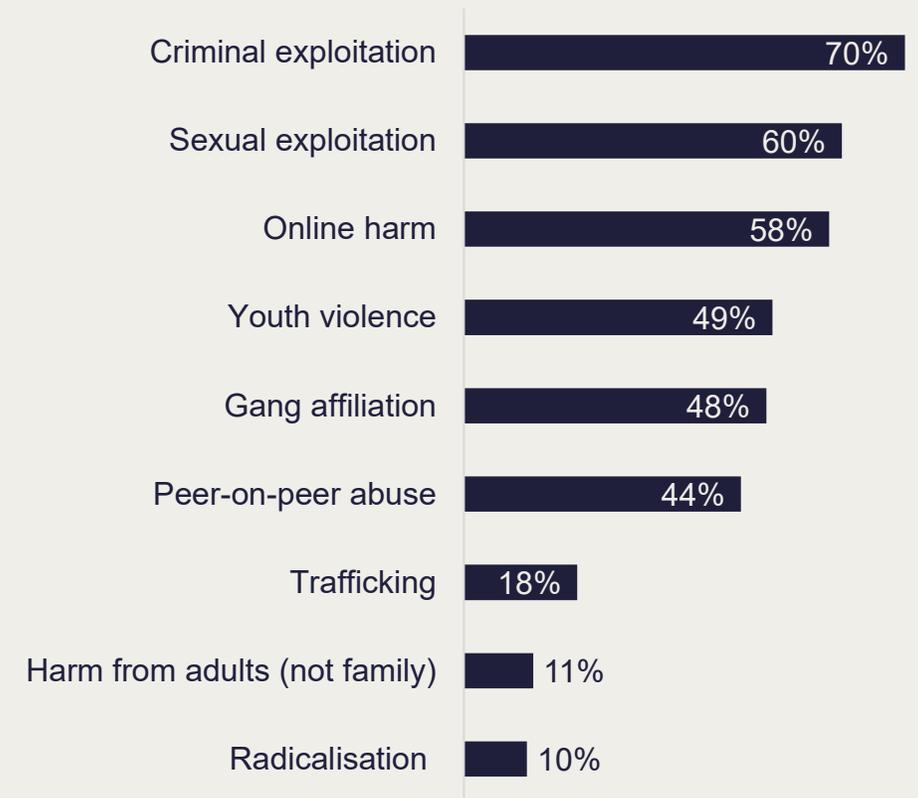
Nearly **four in five** of respondents reported a rise in young people being at risk of extra-familial harm. Of those respondents, **seven in ten** reported a rise in criminal exploitation and **three fifths** reported rises in sexual exploitation and online harm.

We know that looked-after children are generally at a higher risk of criminal and sexual exploitation than their peers not in care.*

More needs to be done to ensure social workers are given the training and support that they need to meet these challenges and ensure the best outcomes for children at risk of harm.

*[NSPCC](#), 2024

You said you had seen a rise in young people being at risk of extra-familial harm.
 What types of harm?



Strong multi-agency working is crucial

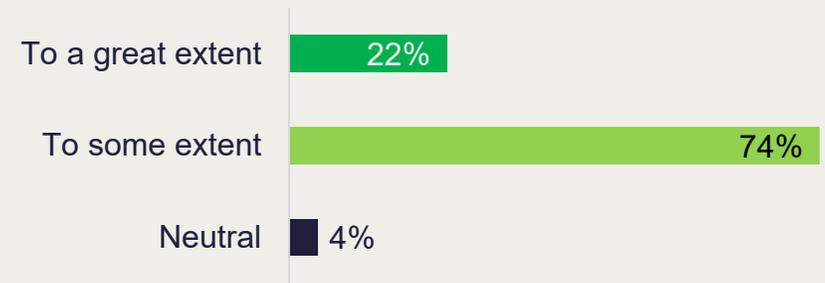
It is important to acknowledge that social workers can't do everything alone. Many respondents identified the need for more collaboration between partners, such as schools, mental health services and police.

Only **one fifth** said they could collaborate effectively with other agencies to a great extent. **Three quarters** said they could only collaborate effectively to some extent.

Respondents rated the majority of external support resources as poor. These include programmes on finance, specialist educational support, domestic abuse, parental support, counselling and mental health and housing.

Multi-agency working needs to be drastically improved by introducing more joined-up ways of working – through joint systems and training.

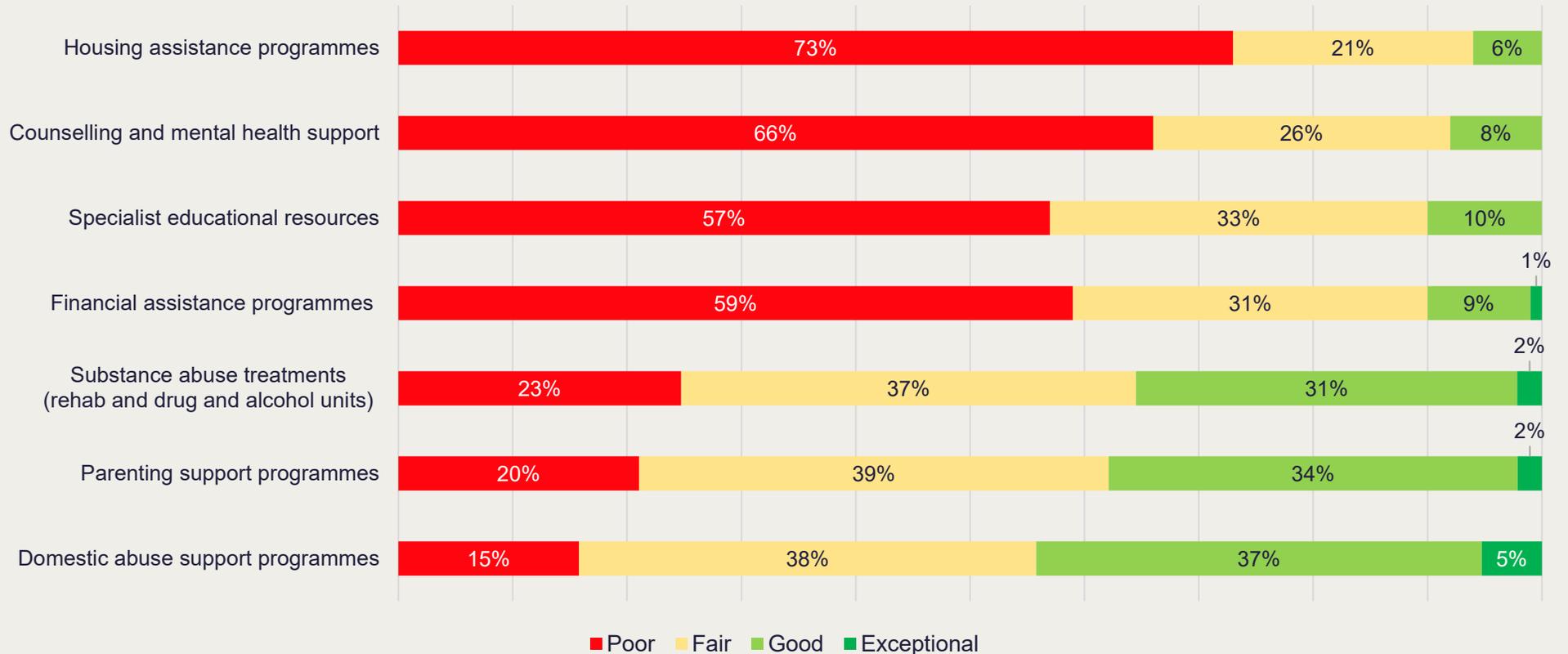
To what extent are you able to collaborate effectively with other agencies?



“All agencies are struggling for resources. We need a better cross-service approach to look at our resources and what the best combined use of them could be.” – survey respondent

External resources for children and families

How would you rate the following external resources which you can refer children and families to?



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A photograph of two women sitting at a wooden table in a meeting room. The woman on the left has curly hair and is looking towards the woman on the right. The woman on the right has braided hair and is speaking. There is a laptop, a smartphone, and some papers on the table. A whiteboard is visible in the background.

Social workers need more support

Social workers feel able to do their jobs, but not to the fullest extent

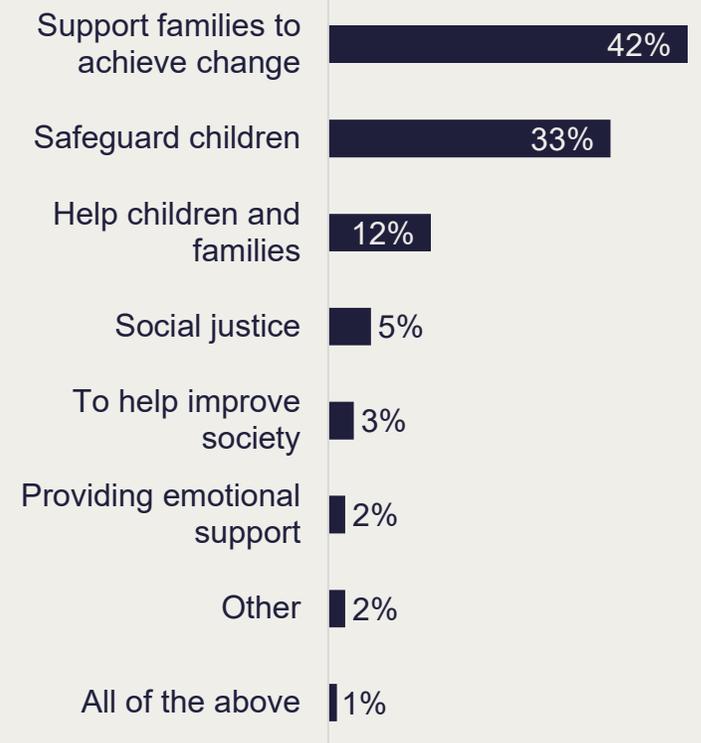
“I love knowing that I am doing everything in my power to ensure that the children I work with have a happier and safer life. I also love when I can support a family to make positive change.” – survey respondent

Social workers shared with us what they love about the job. It’s clear that relationships between people are at the heart of the job. Many told us that helping children see a better future and working closely with families were the things they valued the most.

Respondents shared their views on the core purpose of social work. **Over 40%** said to support families and **a third** said to safeguard children.

Encouragingly, **over 80%** of respondents said they feel able to achieve what they believe the purpose of social work is to at least some extent. However, only **one in ten** said they can achieve it to a great extent.

What do you think the core purpose of social work is?



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Existing barriers to doing the job

Social workers reported several barriers preventing them from doing their job well. The most common was high caseloads (number of children they support), with **two thirds** reporting it as an issue.

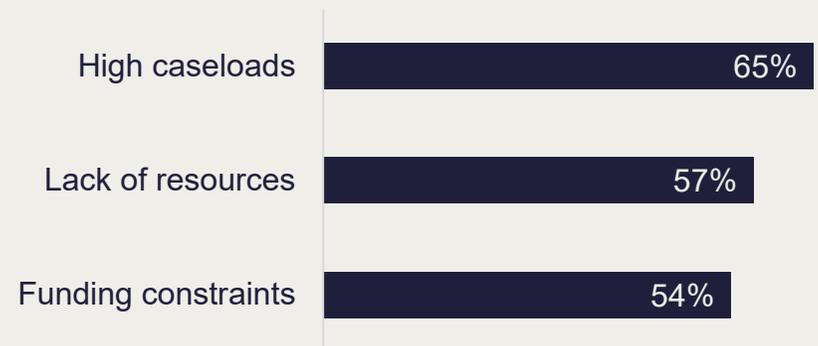
In line with this, **three out of five** respondents said they don't think they see each child who they are responsible for often enough.

The obvious answer is that more money is needed in the sector to help meet the lack of resources, but there are other changes to be made too.

Staff shortages are a clear problem and one that, if addressed, could make significant differences to social workers' ability to do their jobs and their work satisfaction. And ultimately allow them to provide better support for children and families who really need it.

The recent Department for Education data marking the increasing lack of new recruits as 'critical', only proves the importance of offering development opportunities to ensure we're retaining those already in the job.*

Respondents selected the top three barriers that stop them from doing their job well. The chart below shows the three most selected barriers and the proportion of respondents who selected them.



*[Department for Education](#), 2024

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Great management and leadership really helps

Quality supervision, professional development and strong leadership are all crucial in providing effective support for families. They are also important in helping social workers feel valued and empowered.

When asked if they see their supervisor often enough, **a strong majority** said that they do, which is encouraging. But nearly **one in four** said that they don't. **More than nine in ten** said supervision is helpful for supporting their work, and investing in leadership development is crucial. **Six out of ten** said supportive management is vital for their job.

The concern and disappointment expressed by local authorities following the ending of the Pathways programme made clear how much they value leadership development training. Frontline knows how crucial great leadership is and so is working to create new leadership development training.

Over 85% of respondents said that supervision was helpful in supporting their work with children and families

Long-term retention is an issue

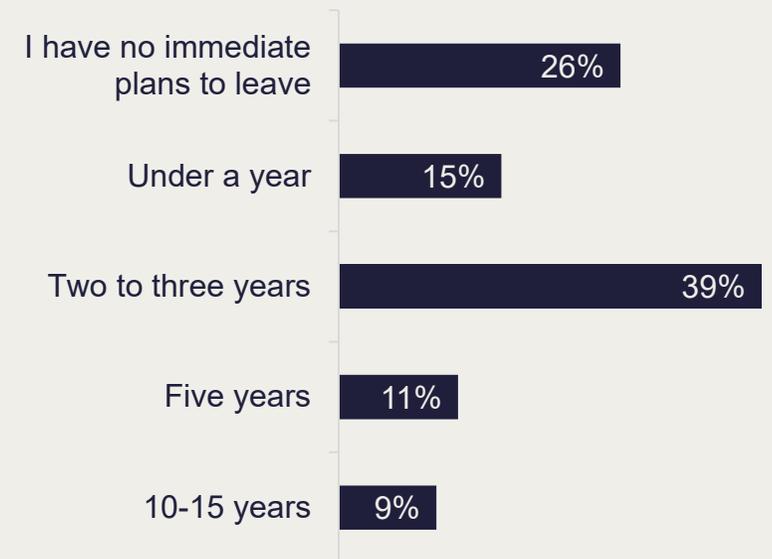
It is well known that low levels of recruitment and retention are ongoing issues that have a detrimental effect on the sector.

More than half of social workers who have qualified within the last two years said that they plan to leave within the next three years.

Less than half of all respondents would recommend the profession. A further **one in ten** respondents said they would recommend but only with an added stipulation, for example 'yes but not right now'.

We need to see a drive to stabilise the profession and ensure social workers are happy to remain in their jobs. This will require the barriers that social workers identify in this report to be addressed. When recruiting new social workers, the focus should be on attracting diverse individuals who reflect the communities they serve. Training should focus on preparing social workers for the realities of the role and equip them with the skills to overcome these barriers themselves.

How long are you currently planning to stay in your job?*



*results from those who have qualified as a social worker in the last two years

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The perception of social work

The image of social work needs to change

For decades, social workers have been depicted in an overwhelmingly negative light across the media. In 2023, there were **four times** as many negative news stories about social workers as there were positive ones.*

Nine in ten felt they are negatively perceived by the public. And **94%** of respondents felt these public perceptions and media portrayals affect them in their roles and in their ability to work with children and families.

A national government campaign could work to change the public image of social workers and shed light on the invaluable work they do.

We also know that portrayals in media and TV can have a huge effect on the public's image of social work. We support Community Care's work to encourage the use of more careful language when depicting social workers in news and TV – and believe the Government should be doing more to support this.

*[Community Care](#), 2023

91% of social

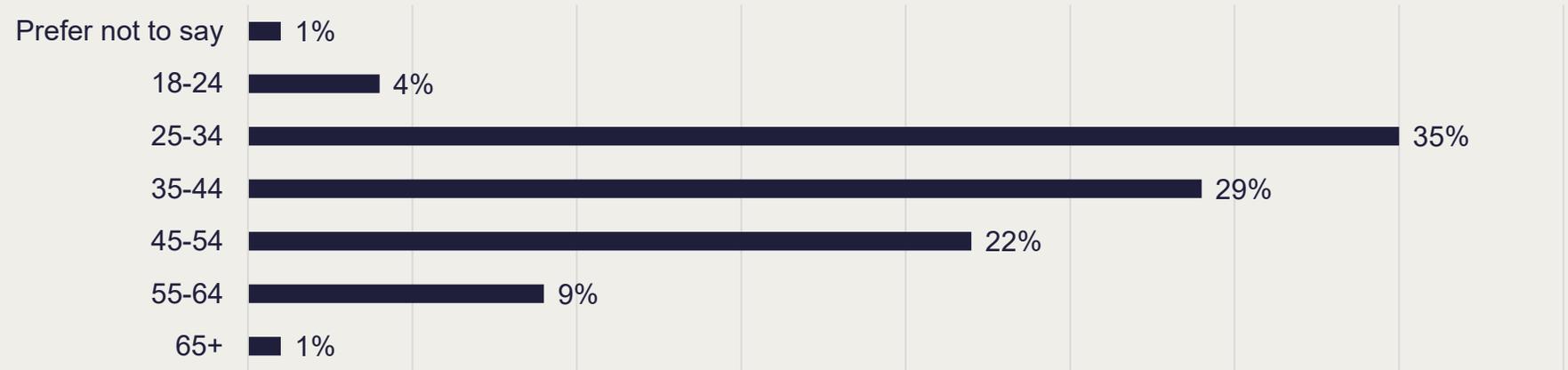
**workers feel that they are
perceived negatively by
the public**

“The public perception of social work is one of the biggest barriers to working with families. There remains a stigma to having social work involvement and there are so many myths and misconceptions held. A campaign could promote and clarify our role to show the public the work that we do.” – survey respondent

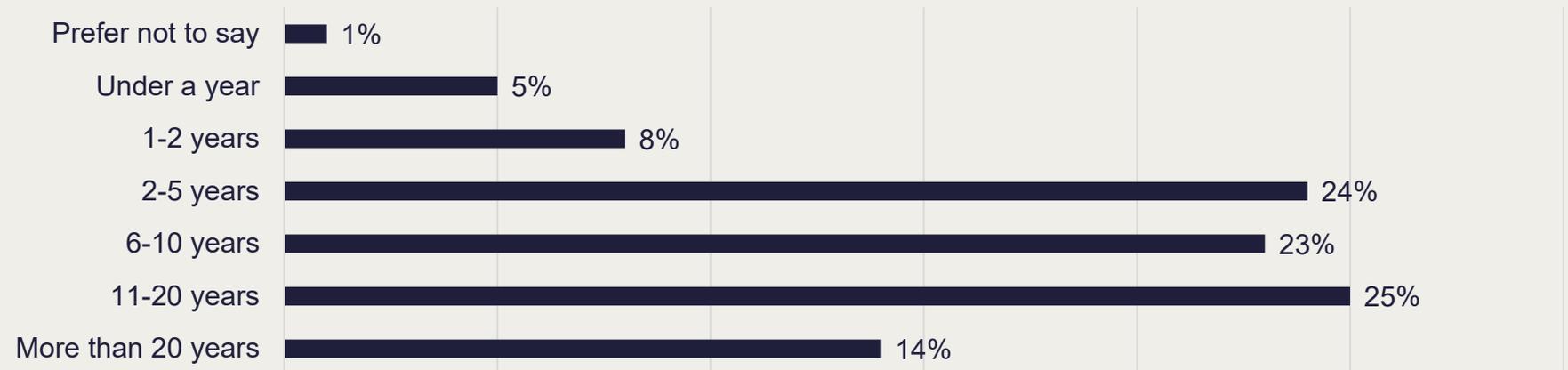
Demographics of our respondents

Out of 570 respondents:

Age



How long since social work qualification



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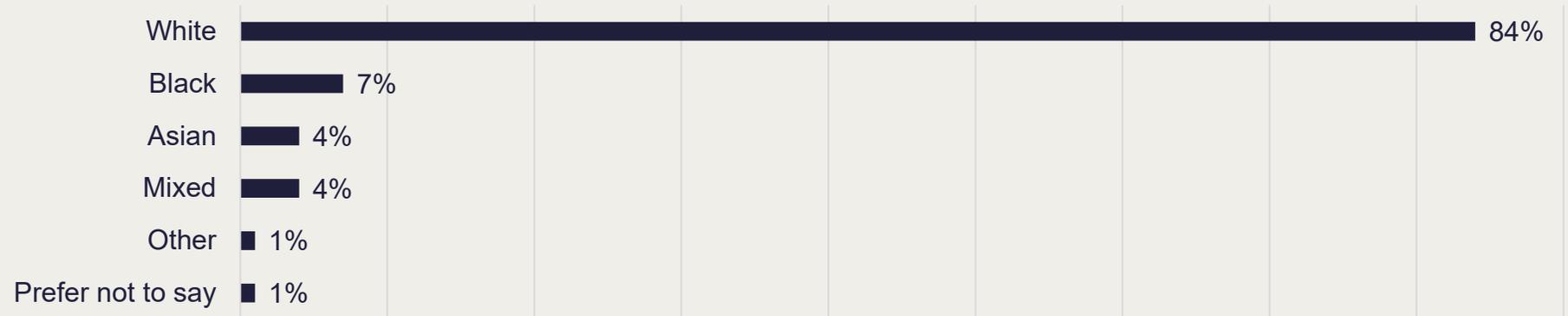
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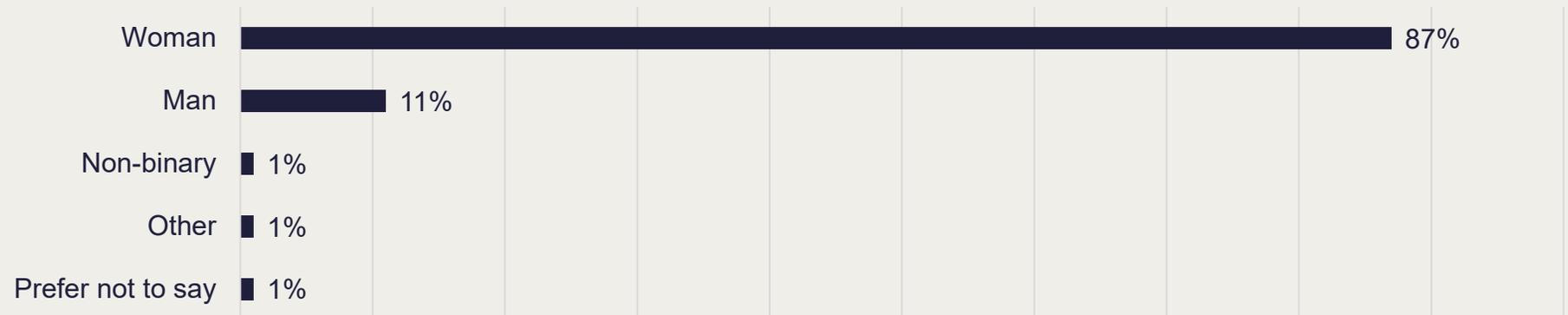
Demographics of our respondents

Out of 570 respondents:

Ethnicity



Gender identity



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