

80-20 Campaign

How much 'direct' time social workers spend with children and families

This work was conducted by BASW England, in partnership with the Children's Commissioner's Office, as part of our attempts to improve working conditions for social workers, and in turn improve outcomes for children.

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BASW
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The professional association for
social work and social workers

Children's
COMMISSIONER

Executive Summary & Aims

Background

Bureaucratic processes, computer systems and paperwork were highlighted as part of the Eileen Munro review.

All good social work is dependent on relationships and the strength of social worker's relationships with service users determines the outcomes.

It is through these relationships with families and children, with supervisors, organisations and statutory and policy frameworks that social work is experienced and practiced.

BASW have been hearing from members that they are still spending too much time in front of their computers rather than undertaking direct work with children.

The Children's Commissioner's Office' 2017 Stability Index heard directly from children about social workers spending less time with them and not seeing or hearing from their social workers enough. Likewise, the [Stability Index 2018](#), warned that far too many youngsters - almost 2.400 - are being shunted around the care system, facing multiple changes to their home, school or social workers.

So BASW and the Children's Commissioner's Office decided to see how widespread the problem was, and what examples of best practice we could find to help shape the environment for children's social workers across England to spend more direct, relationship-based time with children.

The 80-20 campaign is an attempt to eventually reverse the current situation which sees social workers spending close to 80% of their time working on computers or completing paperwork, while only 20% of their time is spent in direct contact, building relationships with children and families.

Statement on relationship-based social work

The centrality of relationships to social work continues to be universally, and increasingly, recognised. Whether they are among professionals, or with children, families and communities, relationships have been described as the place 'where most of the important things happen, for good or for ill, whether social workers recognise it or not' (Howe, 1998, p.45). Social work is a human service and is most likely to achieve its aims through building collaborative and constructive relationships with people. It has this in common with other professions, such as counselling and psychotherapy. However, relationships in social work are particularly complex. Social workers often have a regulatory role that is about enforcing social norms and using authority in an empathetic and respectful way, e.g. safeguarding, youth justice, and mental health. Social work relationships are often with people who are living in challenging social circumstances and experiencing vulnerability, anxiety and depression which is expressed through resistant, hostile or highly unpredictable behaviours. In response social workers will need to use their warmth, empathy, compassion and authority to engage the full participation of service users in assessment, planning, review and decision making. Forming and maintaining these relationships can be demanding, so practitioners need to develop emotional resilience and self-awareness as well as maintain appropriate professional boundaries in challenging circumstances.

Relationship-based practice thus requires skilled and reflective use of self, informed by critical reflection and analysis, and augmented by creativity and curiosity. Such relational, reflective practice cannot happen in a vacuum and must be supported by an organisational environment that encourages learning and creates spaces for emotionally-informed and supportive supervision.

Relationships are influenced by the socio-economic, political, and cultural context within which they occur. Social workers will also have individual views, personal values and assumptions about service users that will shape their relationships. An ability to respect and value diversity is an essential social work attribute, particularly when

relating to people with different lifestyles and backgrounds, such as child-rearing practices, gender roles, sexual orientation, race and culture. To be effective, social workers need to recognize the impact of the power relationship, and how their values and perceptions affect the way they view and interact with others.

The social work relationship forms the medium through which social work assessment, planning, intervention and review take place. Power dynamics are best acknowledged and addressed through adopting collaborative and strengths-based approaches, which involve getting alongside people more closely and supporting the connections and relationships they can and want to change, for themselves, their families, communities and beyond.

Social workers need to work co-productively and innovatively with people, local communities, other professionals, agencies and services to promote self-determination, community capacity, personal and family reliance, cohesion, earlier intervention and active citizenship. Ruth Allen's article in PSW (2017) talked about the importance of knowing and respecting service users and carers, countering stigma, advocacy and protecting human rights. This statement is underpinned by Ruch et al.'s (2018) relationship-based practice model which emphasises the centrality of respectful and empowering relationships with service users and other professionals.

Allen, R (2017) Amazing People, PSW magazine, April 2017

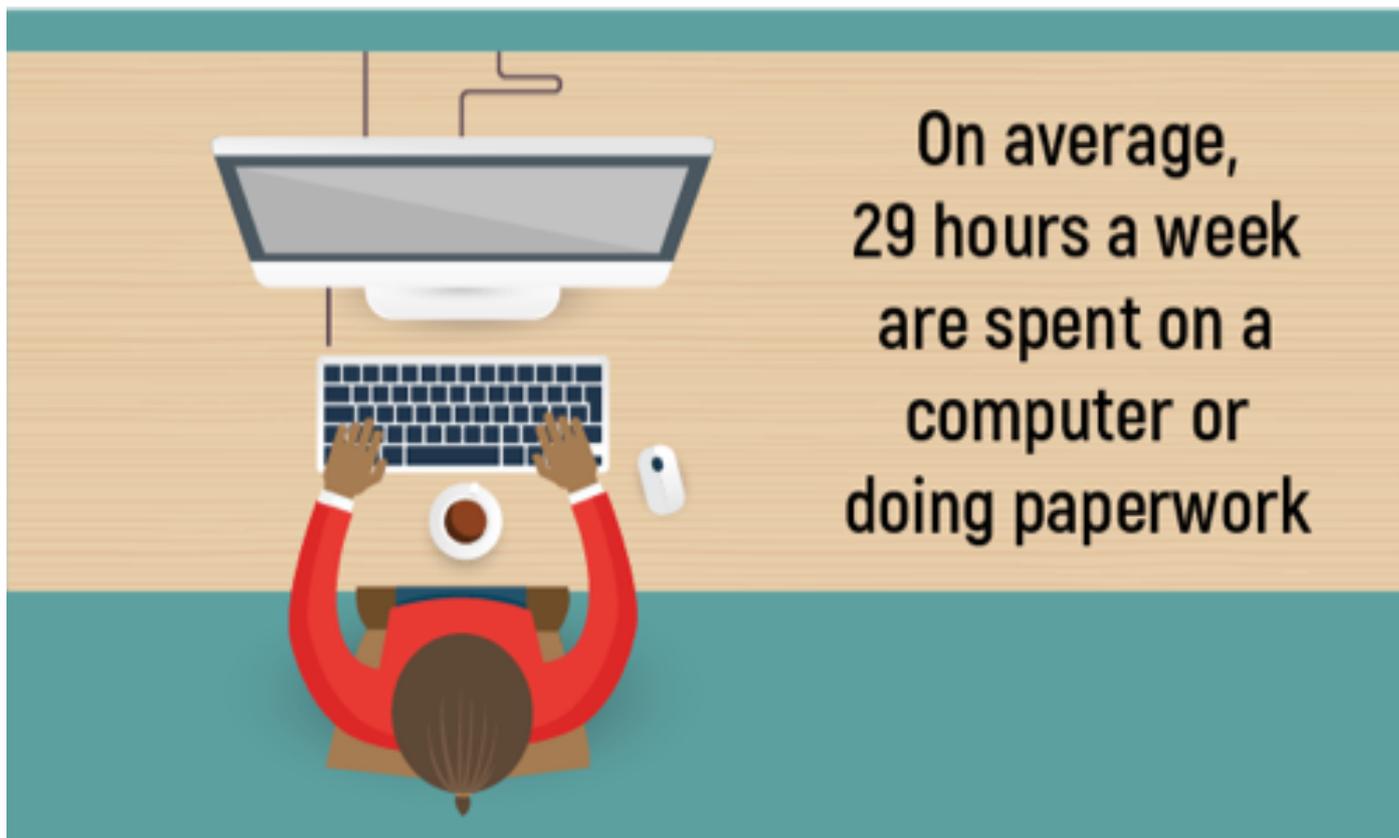
Howe, D (1998) Relationship-based thinking and practice in social work. *Journal of Social Work Practice* 12: 45-56.

Ruch, G., Turney, D. & Ward, A. (2018) *Relationship-based Social Work: Getting to the Heart of Practice*, London: Jessica Kingsley, 2nd edition.

Findings

We asked these six questions and had over 350 responses:

- How many hours do you work a week on average?
- On average, how many hours of your working week do you spend face-to-face with children, young people, parents or carers?
- On average, how many hours of your working week do you spend on the phone with children, young people, parents or carers?
- How many hours of your working week do you spend on a computer or doing paperwork, on average?
- How many hours of your working week do you spend on reflective practice, on average?
- Do you have any comments about your current balance between direct relationship based work and paperwork/administrative duties





**On Average, 11 hours
per week are spent
face-to-face with
children, young
people, parents or
carers**



**32% of respondents said they
spent no time on
reflective practice per week
and 42% said they spent less
than an hour**

On average, the 356 respondents worked 45 hours a week. 11 hours, on average, are spent face-to-face with children, young people, parents and carers. This is just over 20%.

29 hours a week were spent on a computer or doing paperwork which accounts for 65% of the 45 hours a week average working hours.

Some comments from the survey:

“As a team manager the most common frustration I hear from the social work staff I supervise is that they do not have enough time to complete direct work with young people”

“Social work is totally skewed in favour of administration and is the focus of supervision. This bias is shown in the fact that assessments/reports are scrutinised and send back to me for amending, but I have not been observed in direct work with any family/young person in 5 years, yet my paperwork is reviewed regularly.”

“If only we could do the job we all came into the profession to do rather than being a slave to the computer and organisation bureaucracy.”

Maris Stratulis, BASW England manager is leading this initiative and says:

“The term ‘relationship based social work’ is not an add on, it is fundamentally about building relationships and that takes time, investment and commitment. More direct contact is what children are telling us they need, and we need to listen to what they are telling us.”

Anne Longfield OBE, Children’s Commissioner for England, says:

“Children in care deserve the chance to thrive and fulfil their aspirations, and stable relationships are an essential part of building their lives and achieving their potential. Children themselves say that stability is the most important aspect of their experience of care. That’s why I think the 80/20 campaign is an important opportunity to look at the impact of the direct time social workers spend with children and families, and at how we can improve the experiences of children in care.”

Dr Andy Gill, Chair of BASW England, says:

“My social work career began in 1984 when I was funded by Leicestershire County Council to train in cognitive behavioural social work, which led to opportunities to apply these skills in direct work with children and families and to facilitate parent training groups (later achieving a PhD coming from innovatory work).

Since I entered the profession 35 years ago I have seen a significant reduction in the opportunities to work therapeutically with families – an erosion of the social work task you might say. Since then I see two generations of social work who have become too dependent on systems and completing tasks.

The 80/20 Campaign is an opportunity to redress this imbalance. The stakes are high; if we don't coproduce a new definition of what “good” social work looks like then the profession will be further deskilled and narrowed.

What will follow is that social work will become a semi-profession and its status and remuneration levels significantly reduced, as we have seen with probation officers.

Now is the time to stand up and get involved in this campaign, not only for future generations but more importantly for the vulnerable children and adults who depend on our ability to make a lasting difference.”

What next?

There are pathways to better practice, actual practical solutions that we have identified which we will be taking to local authorities with the aim of working with them to implement.

These include investing in better IT systems which don't require duplication. The most common reported IT problems were slow running computers, unreliable photocopiers and case recording systems going offline.

Another example is controlling admin through dedicated admin staff. Most social workers agree that they currently did tasks they felt could be done by an administrator. Examples including minute-taking, typing and scanning.

We know admin teams have been cut back, leaving remaining staff stretched or social workers expected to do their own admin. But by cutting down on unnecessary admin and providing team administrators to assist, social workers can be left to do the real relationship building work, thus cutting down the workload and reducing the need for extra, arguably more expensive agency staff.

We'll also be advocating for a change in management thinking, to support them to move away from managerialism focussing on process indicators and targets and find ways to highlight that direct work provides better outcomes for children.

Leaders and managers should do everything possible to boost staff pride in their work, by supporting them to do what they trained for, by having autonomy to do what matters for their service users, and spend more time engaging in direct work.

Self-efficacy is another area BASW keenly feels needs addressing. Self-efficacy in social workers is boosted by opportunities to identify transferable knowledge and skills from other areas of their work.

Supervisors who are themselves skilled and confident in face to face work are best equipped to help them do that, support them in planning the work and reflecting upon it afterwards, so that any encounter with a family becomes a learning opportunity and something upon which self-efficacy can be built.

In parallel, we will also continue our campaign to lobby government against anti-austerity measures that increase poverty, cause families to break down and thus become one of the drivers behind year-on-year increases in referral rates and child protection measures.

BASW is keen to work with local authorities, the private sector and individuals to implement the 80-20 campaign, to ensure the cogs start turning so that social workers can get back to doing really effective work in communities.