

Social Workers and Information Technology

(Summary Paper prepared by GfK and SCIE July 2017)

1. Introduction

Anecdotal evidence suggests that many social workers are keen to embrace the opportunities afforded by digital technology. Many also see these technologies as a new means of engaging with service users, a capability that has proven especially welcome in children’s social work where new apps have enabled children and young people to record their thoughts and share these remotely with their social worker and other professionals involved in their care. However, support for these new tools is not universal and there is still reluctance or reservations relating to concerns around governance, information-sharing and confidentiality issues, which have been raised by some commentators. Significant attention has also been paid to Social Workers use of social media, perhaps driven by concerns about the ethics and appropriateness of this form of communication.

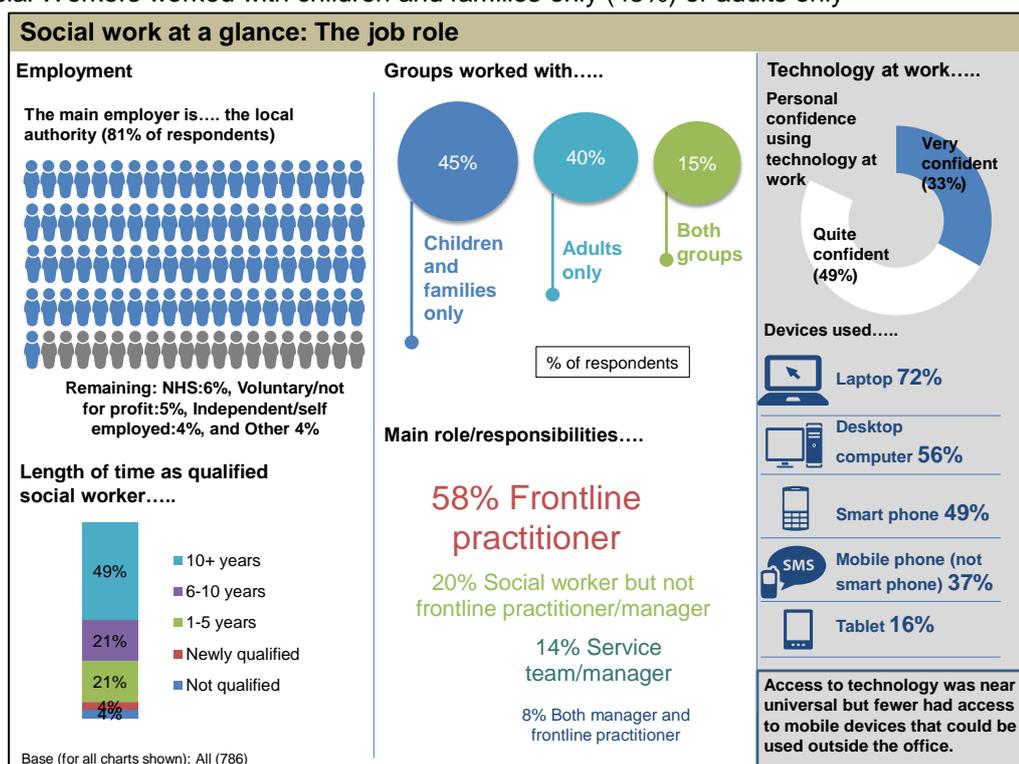
Research was conducted to gain insight into how the social work role can be supported through the use of information technology, understand how social workers currently use IT in their role and, also evaluate the gap between current availability and perceived requirements. The study included a qualitative component (via SCIE database on an opt-in basis) of four focus groups (two with adult social workers and two with children’s social workers) and a small number of telephone interviews with registered social workers in September 2016. It also included a quantitative online survey (786 completed interviews) of social workers in January/February 2017. Participants were invited to take part through SCIE’s database and, in addition, through communications from professional bodies e.g. ADASS, BASW, ADCS, heads of services and relevant magazines and also via SCIE’s website. Data was weighted. This summary report looks at the top level findings and key messages.

2. Social work: the job role and general use of IT

Key findings (online survey) The vast majority of social workers (8 in 10) were employed by local authorities. Around two fifths of Social Workers worked with children and families only (45%) or adults only (40%) and under a fifth (15%) worked with children and families and adults.

Social workers worked across a number of areas; the majority (78%) said they worked in social care; and around a half (46%) mentioned mental health. The other areas were;

- Learning disabilities (38%)
- Physical/sensory disabilities (37%)
- Child protection (37%)
- Older people (33%)
- Looked after children/care leavers (31%)
- Health (28%)
- Substance misuse (27%)
- End of life care (20%)
- Criminal justice (9%).



Almost half (49%) had been in social work 10 plus years and a majority (58%) identified as frontline practitioners

Access to technology is almost universal but fewer have access outside the office. A third of respondents are very confident using technology at work (with another 49% very confident).

3. Use of digital technology

On a general note storage of data and access via mobile technology was a concern for some due to perceived risks of security of confidential and sensitive data. There is a lack of uniform understanding about what is secure and what is not and inconsistent use across organisations of cloud or web-based interfaces to store or access information. Use of digital technology was widespread, although there are different policies and accepted practices across different organisations, a few examples are given below:

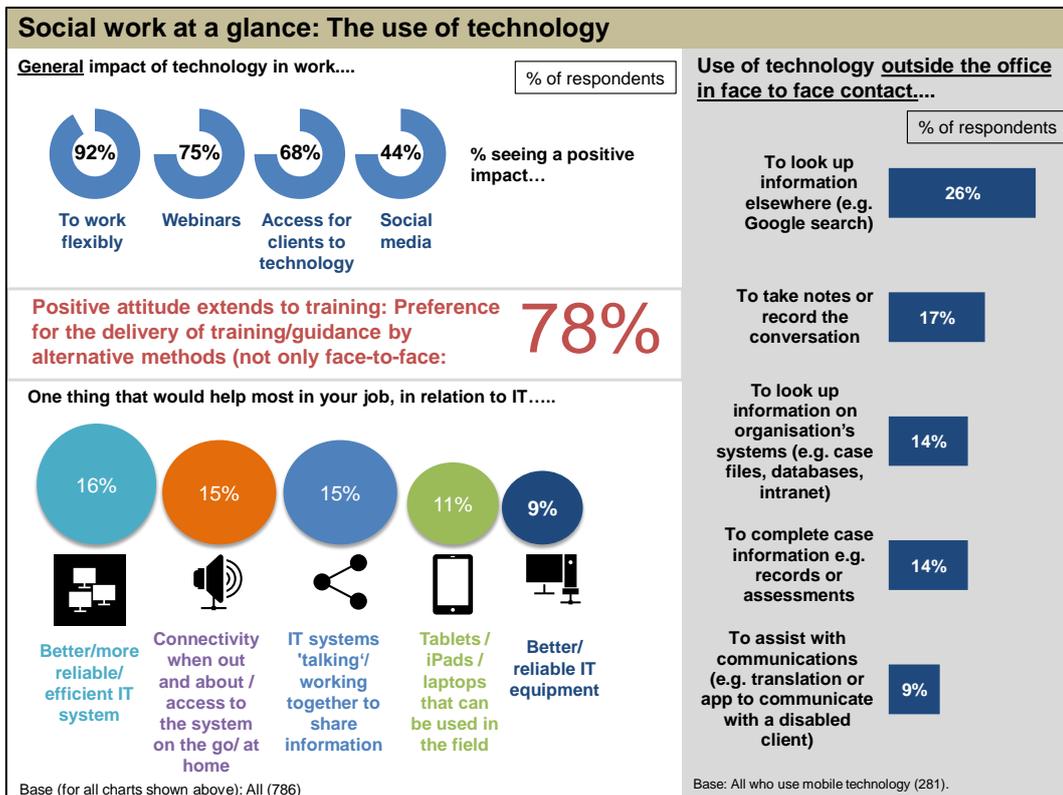
- **Facilitating of administrative tasks;** recording assessments and reviews, updating client records, writing reports and judgements, accessing research data and information.
- **Day-to-day communication with clients;** email, text reminders about appointments, online access to resources (tablets or laptops) and social media (although less popular, with some organisations banning it).
- **Communication with clients to gather specific data;** online assessment forms, communication aids (i.e. during observation work), Skype for review meetings (although admittedly limited), three way telephone conferencing to conduct an interview with access to an interpreter service, taking/uploading photos of home conditions and Facebook used as evidence in court for offences such as assaults, domestic violence, sexual abuse (although some organisations do not allow the use of Facebook for any purpose).
- **Interventions (for client or practitioner) delivered remotely;** e-learning or self-guided therapy or support, telecare which supports clients in their own homes and (limited use) using a sensor to monitor the movements of a client with dementia.
- **Supporting team work (within and across individuals & teams);** aside from general email and phone use, participants cited; peer support through use of social media and communities of practice, increasing use of online forms for supervision, use of LinkedIn and Twitter to share articles regarding changing policies (although some organisations do not allow the use of social media, including Twitter).

Source: SCIE

Key findings (online survey)

More than a quarter of social workers only had access to databases (including client caseload information) (26%) or Government secure email (33%) when office based.

There was a positive outlook relating to impacts of technology in work; most commonly the ability to work flexibly (92%), webinars (75%) and access for clients to technology (68%). Fewer agreed that social media had a positive impact (44%). Almost eight in ten said there was scope to include more on technology in training.



Issues mentioned by more than 1 in 10 social workers were; improvements in IT systems and equipment (general), connectivity and use of technology when out of the office. The majority used digital technology in their job and two fifths used 'mobile' devices (laptops, smartphones or tablets) in face-to-face interactions with clients, primarily to look up information (26%) and/or to take notes or recorded conversations (17%). In these cases, two fifths thought it had a positive impact on the quality of their interaction, but 3 in 10 felt it had had a negative impact.

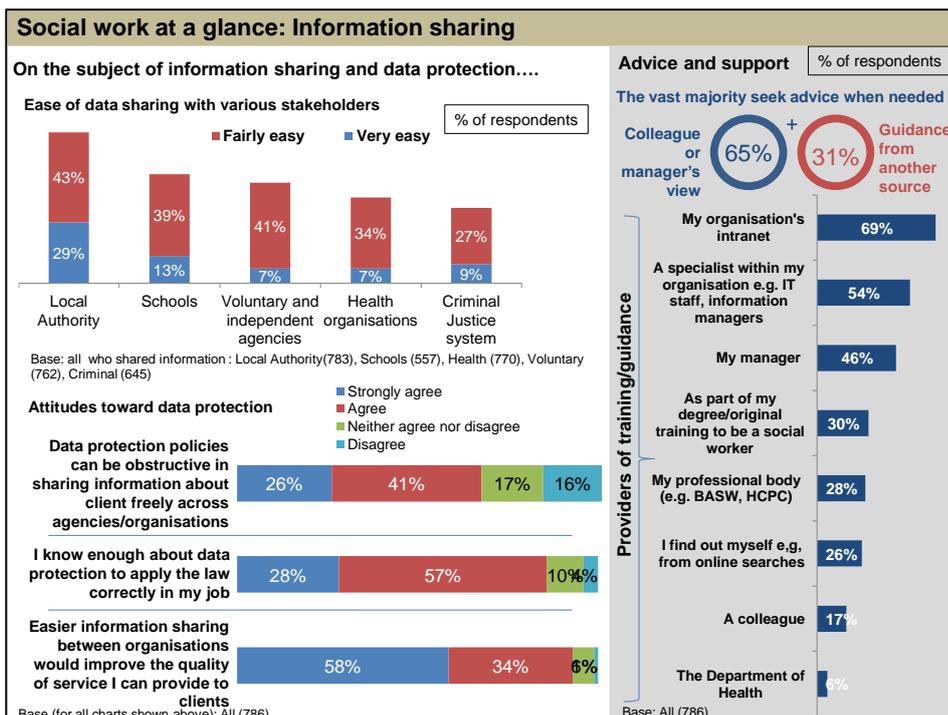
4. Information sharing

There is a heavy reliance on access to case specific data (demographic information, background, needs, service history, address etc.) in day to day practice. The first port of call is generally internal systems and databases. Different electronic recording, assessment and planning systems were cited; Frameworki, Liquid Logic, Asset, Asset Plus, Childview, Mosaic etc. However, participants also talked about the need to liaise with other organisations and professionals (i.e. the NHS, schools, police, courts etc.) to gather all relevant case specific data and this data sharing can be challenging and experiences variable. Some organisations are reluctant to share information citing the Data Protection Act but it is believed that other reasons include the time it takes, even if there is a duty to share basic information; protection of what they see as 'their information', protecting the privacy of the client and fears about breaching confidentiality. Key issues were identified as anxiety at an organisational level about breaching security, variable access to secure e-mail systems and, when working across organisations, different information systems with various security and encryption. A single system with all having graded access to information was discussed as a solution.

Source: SCIE

Key findings (online survey)

The vast majority (98%) mentioned at least one difficulty in relation to information sharing. The most common issue being attitudes of other agencies (69%) and lack of consistency in a) recording information and b) levels of security and encryption across organisations (60% on both cases). Around a half mentioned issues related to systems not being user friendly, unreliable, time lags in information provision and lack of data linkage. Social Workers were asked how easy it was for them to share information with a range of organisations. Almost three quarters (72%) thought it was easy to share information with the Local Authority. Fewer than half said the same for other organisations.



Positively, the vast majority (85%) of social workers agreed that they knew enough about data protection to apply the law correctly in their job. However, there was recognition that data protection policies can be obstructive in sharing information (67% agree) and/or easier information sharing would improve the quality of service for clients (92% agree). For advice and support; the majority discussed concerns internally or with another source. Providers of training or guidance were mainly contacts in the respondent's own organisation.