What the public think about Scottish social services and why

Report of a research project funded by the Social Work Services Strategic Forum

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Foreword by the Social Work Services Strategic Forum

Our shared Vision and Strategy for Social Services 2015-2020 identifies the need to undertake research into the public’s understanding and valuing of the social services sector.

To progress this we commissioned a research project in 2016 to examine public understanding of the sector and in particular to try to understand the reasons people hold these views. The findings from this research are contained within this report.

The research findings were presented to the SWSSF on 7 June 2017. Members of the Forum welcomed the research, noting in particular the many positive messages found within the study and identifying some useful points to build on and explore further.

We are very grateful to the researchers for their careful work on this area and their insights into the whole topic. We have now asked our Public Understanding Working Group to develop a communications strategy to promote and share the research findings across the sector, to consider how these findings should influence the next steps and what further actions should be considered on behalf of the SWSSF.

In particular the Group will consider the following:

- Potential links for the findings of this research with other public or user surveys undertaken about this sector, for example those undertaken by the Care Inspectorate as part of their scrutiny activities.

- Public understanding of how social services are delivered and how best to improve understanding of how the systems work.

- What the findings mean for the image of the sector and its influence on the resilience of the workforce; trust in services; and recruitment and retention within the sector.

The research and further thinking to be undertaken by the Working Group will contribute useful information to both the Forum and its individual members as they address future opportunities and challenges in regard to the delivery of high quality social services.
Acknowledgements

This research project has been a collaborative work. We are grateful to the Social Work Services Strategic Forum for commissioning and funding the research, and to the Research Advisory Group for providing advice and guidance throughout. Special thanks to Opinium for conducting the national online survey, to Lina Petrakieva for assistance with the statistical analysis, and to Our Voice and Roar for assistance in organising the focus groups. Last, our sincere thanks to the 2,500 people who got involved and told us what they think about social services in Scotland, and to the focus group participants who were willing to share their experience. We hope that this work is the beginning of an ongoing conversation.
# Contents

Acknowledgements .................................................................................................................. 2

List of tables and figures ........................................................................................................ 6

Executive summary .................................................................................................................. 7

Background ............................................................................................................................ 7

Key Findings .......................................................................................................................... 7

Next steps ................................................................................................................................ 9

1 Introduction .......................................................................................................................... 10

1.1 Background ...................................................................................................................... 10

1.2 Aims and objectives .......................................................................................................... 11

2 Research methods ............................................................................................................... 13

2.2 Review of existing knowledge ......................................................................................... 13

2.3 National Online Survey .................................................................................................. 13

2.4 Focus groups .................................................................................................................... 16

3 Literature review ................................................................................................................. 19

3.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 19

3.2 Locating social services ................................................................................................. 20

3.3 Why is it important to consider public attitudes towards social services? ......................... 21

3.4 Why social licence to operate is important for social services? ........................................ 22

3.5 Public perceptions of social work in Scotland .................................................................. 23

3.6 Public perceptions of social work beyond Scotland .......................................................... 25

3.7 Public perceptions of health and social care ................................................................... 27

3.8 Factors influencing public perceptions ............................................................................ 30

3.9 Changing public perceptions .......................................................................................... 32

3.10 Science, technology and society research ...................................................................... 35

3.11 Conclusion ....................................................................................................................... 38

4 Findings: National Online Survey ...................................................................................... 39

4.1 Descriptive analysis of survey findings .......................................................................... 39

4.2 Cross tabulation and filtering analysis ............................................................................ 52

5 Focus group findings ........................................................................................................... 57

5.1 Introduction ...................................................................................................................... 57

5.2 Impressions and perceptions of social services ............................................................... 57

5.3 Experience of social services .......................................................................................... 60

5.4 Knowledge and understanding of social services ............................................................ 63

5.5 Public value and trust ...................................................................................................... 66

5.6 Influences on public perceptions ..................................................................................... 70

5.7 What else matters? .......................................................................................................... 72

5.8 Summary ......................................................................................................................... 73

6 Conclusions and key findings ............................................................................................ 79

7 References ............................................................................................................................ 88
List of tables and figures

Table 1. Composition of focus groups ................................................................. 17
Table 2. Public perceptions of social services ............................................................ 40
Table 3. Issues associated with social services .......................................................... 44
Table 4. Attitudes to social services .................................................................. 46
Table 5. Trust in social service decision making ......................................................... 46
Table 6. Perceptions of social service power .............................................................. 48
Table 7. Qualities associated with social work .......................................................... 49

Figure 1. General impression of social services ......................................................... 41
Figure 2. Understanding of social services ............................................................... 42
Figure 3. Social services provision in Scotland ......................................................... 43
Figure 4. Local area provision .............................................................................. 43
Figure 5. Positive or negative opinion of social services per region .......................... 53
Figure 6. Opinion of provision of social services per region ..................................... 54
Executive summary

Background

- Promoting public understanding of social services is important in supporting public value of the sector and the people who work within it. Actions to promote public understanding need to be informed by a robust understanding of what the public think about Scottish social services and why.

- Social services encompass a broad and diverse range of services, and serve a diverse range of publics. Further, publics, social services, and publics’ relationships to social services are dynamic entities, therefore attitudes to social services can be expected to shift over time and space. This research represents the beginning of enquiry into these issues in Scotland.

- The aim of the research was to better understand public perceptions of social services by exploring the level of knowledge, understanding and attitudes towards social services and the reasons for these views.

- The research adopted a mixed methods approach. Key components included:
  - Review and analysis of existing knowledge and evidence.
  - A national online survey of 2,505 nationally representative adults.
  - Focus groups with members of the Scottish public.
  - Integrated meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

- Findings from the literature review reveal that no consistent effort has been made to understand public perceptions of social services in Scotland. The research study’s closest previous comparison is Davidson and King’s (2005) study, Public Knowledge of and Attitudes Towards Social Work in Scotland. Relatively, no consistent effort has been made to inform public perceptions of social services in Scotland.

Key Findings

Overall, the research findings suggest a good level of support for social services in Scotland and a reasonable level of literacy among respondents about what social services do. In fact, it appears that the public has a much more positive view of social services than social service workers and institutions perceive. Overall, people in Scotland are positive about social services’ impact on society and believe these services perform an important public role. Key findings are outlined below:

- **Public view of social services**

  Half the sample had a positive view of social services and the provision of social services in Scotland, compared to 34% negative, and 17% don’t know. The public view of social services is not strongly negative.
• Positive perceptions of social services

The most positive overall finding in the survey was to the two statements:

"Social services play an important role in supporting most vulnerable people in communities": 73% agreed; 13% disagreed; 14% did not know.

"Social services provide a valuable service to the people of Scotland": 71% agreed; 13% disagreed; 16% did not know.

• Issues of trust and blame

People are generally trusting of social services and believe they are unfairly blamed when things go wrong. Qualitative data showed a strong tendency to trust the individual social service worker over the service or ‘system’ they worked for.

• Social licence to operate

Social services in Scotland do have a social licence to operate (SLO). When we talk about SLO we are really talking about social acceptance and public trust. While the data makes it difficult to quantify the levels of support and trust in exact terms it does suggest the social licence is at the level of acceptance.

• The Scottish public are not illiterate about social services

The data suggests that public understanding of social services needs improvement, but the problem is not one of “illiteracy”. The findings show the Scottish public has a reasonable amount of knowledge and understanding about social services generally.

However, the public’s understanding of the issues related to social services is relatively weak. This is unsurprising given that only 35% of respondents report involvement with social services.

The public’s understanding of home or day care support for older people shows the highest level of literacy.

• The public has a more positive view of social services than social workers perceive

The largely sceptical position of how social services are perceived is held by the profession and institutions themselves and is not shared by the public.

• The media is not as influential in shaping perception as people might think

The data suggests that personal and contextual factors most influenced the ways in which the public understand social services, rather than media coverage or controversy surrounding critical incidents. Fearful tabloid press generated representations of social services appear not to impact decisively on public perception. This means that public understanding is less volatile in relation to media attention than typically believed by leadership and practitioners in the profession.

• Personal exposure to social services influences perceptions

Public perceptions are strongly influenced by repeated exposure to consistently expressed personal experiences or issues arising from local (or lack of) contact with social services.
• “Invisible” and hard to access social services are significant factors

A consistent finding revealed in the qualitative data concerned the “invisibility” of social services and the hard to access nature of social services resources. This finding is well supported by existing research.

• There are few significant correlations with demographic factor data

In terms of concerns about or support for social services in Scotland a significant finding from the survey is that there are few correlations at all between demographic factors of age, socio-economic status and level of education, and concern about or support for social services.

Next steps

• Repeat measure longitudinal research

The above provides a snapshot of public perceptions of social services in Scotland as reported in 2016. Repeat measure, longitudinal research is needed if we are to understand if and how public perceptions shift over time. This would bring public perception knowledge of social services in Scotland in line with wider health and social care data. Consideration should also be given to exploring differences in public perceptions across social service areas, i.e. children’s services, adult services, justice services.

• Identify opportunity for additional and regular qualitative data collection, including the development of hybrid forums.

The research provided limited opportunity to ‘unpack’ reported views and the reasons for these views, particularly amongst publics with limited experience of social services. Parallel initiatives in Health and Social Care, and in Science and Technology, point to the value of public and/or hybrid forums in improving public understanding, public engagement and public value.

• Work with professional institutions, leaders and practitioners to improve self-image.

• Utilise recent scholarship from Science and Technology studies to develop understanding of how greater public approval can be mobilised.

This would involve developing innovative public forums based on co-creation and co-production principles of engagement with the aim of improving the approval rating of Scottish social services.
1 Introduction

This report presents the findings of a research project which set out to better understand what the public think about Scottish social services and why. The research was commissioned by Social Work Scotland on behalf of the Social Work Services Strategic Forum. It was completed by Dr Trish McCulloch, University of Dundee, and Professor Stephen Webb, Glasgow Caledonian University, in 2016/17.

1.1 Background

Social Services in Scotland are in flux. Long recognised as a diverse group of services, delivered by a diverse workforce and serving diverse publics, social services now also operate within a transforming social, economic and political climate. Added to this, recent years have seen radical changes in the relationship between service ‘providers’ and people who use services, such that these terminologies are no longer accurate or adequate. This, in turn, has contributed to new configurations of public services whereby the once firm boundaries between services are becoming eroded and, some might argue, irrelevant. In the midst of these transformations, public demand and expectation of social services has perhaps never been greater. For all of the uncertainty surrounding social services, particularly around how they are best configured and resourced, the place and value of social services in contributing to individual and social wellbeing in Scotland appears firm.

In part response to the above, The Social Services Strategic Forum (the Forum) was established in late 2013 as a partnership forum, chaired by the Scottish Government, to support the development and delivery of a vision and strategy for Scottish social services. The Vision and Strategy for Scottish Social Services 2015-2020 was published by the Forum in March 2015 and set out the following vision:

Our vision is a socially just Scotland with excellent social services delivered by a skilled and valued workforce which works with others to empower, support and protect people, with a focus on prevention, early intervention and enablement. (p.7)

The accompanying strategy sets out four ‘areas for action’, one of which is promoting public understanding. Promoting public understanding of social services is considered important to supporting public value of the sector and the people who work within it. Further, the strategy recognises that
actions to promote public understanding need to start from a clearer understanding of what the public think about social services and why.

Linked to the above, in recent years, we have seen a shift from the view that the public need to be educated so that they understand public services, to a recognition that ‘publics’ possess important local knowledge and the capacity to understand issues and information sufficiently to participate in policy decisions and development. As a result, attention is now moving beyond actions to promote public understanding towards the promotion of public participation and involvement in public services (see, for example, the headline conclusion of the Accounts Commission’s (2016) report on social work services in Scotland). Understanding what the Scottish publics think about social services and why is key to this process and outcome.

A key challenge here is that Scottish social services encompass a broad and diverse range of services and interface with an even broader range of publics. Social services include services as diverse as nursery services, supported living services, service for older people and criminal justice services, for example. Relatedly, the term ‘public’ speaks to a range of publics and people, differentiated across lines of age, gender, sexuality, class, economic circumstances, experience, interests, affiliations, etc. It is to be expected that ‘publics’ understanding and attitudes towards service areas may vary significantly. Equally, publics, social services, and publics’ relationships with social services, are dynamic entities and therefore attitudes to social services can be expected to shift across time and space. This research project represents the beginning of enquiry into these issues in Scotland. It is expected that it will raise as many questions as it provides answers.

1.2 Aims and objectives

The aim of the research was to better understand public perceptions of social services by exploring the level of knowledge, understanding and attitudes towards social services and the reasons for these views.

The specific objectives for the commissioned research were to:
• Identify and gather information from any previous or existing work undertaken to explore public perceptions of the Scottish social services sector.

• Undertake a detailed examination of the current level of knowledge, understanding and public attitudes towards social services and the reasons for these views. Getting beneath the surface of these perceptions is crucial so we can gain an understanding of why people form these views and what influences them.

• Present clear conclusions about current public perceptions and the reasons why these have developed.
2 Research methods

The research adopted a mixed methods approach enabling the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. The key components are as outlined below:

1. Review and analysis of existing knowledge and evidence.
2. A national online survey of 2,505 nationally representative adults.
3. Focus groups with members of the Scottish public.
4. Integrated meta-analysis of quantitative and qualitative data.

2.2 Review of existing knowledge

A targeted literature review was conducted using Glasgow Caledonian University’s web based ‘Discover’ search database which provided access to a range of relevant texts, journal articles and other literature. The review focussed on literature published from 2000 onwards and included various combinations of the following search terms: ‘public perceptions’, ‘public opinion’, ‘public understanding’, ‘publics’, ‘attitudes’, ‘social services’, ‘social care’ and ‘social work’. The majority of papers found were not relevant to the focus of the review and were discarded, a small number were retained.

From the outset, it was clear that this subject area has attracted minimal attention from researchers. As a means of broadening the review, the reference lists of key texts were reviewed for relevant references. The process concluded by a search of grey literature using the search terms noted. A small number of relevant document were found and included within the review.

2.3 National Online Survey

Surveys are an established social science tool for establishing how a population understands problems and solutions. Most studies of environmental action, opinion on climate change and carbon capture and storage technologies (e.g. Miller, Bell & Buys 2007) use socio-demographic information such as gender, age, level of education, and occupational status as explanatory variables. A limitation of surveys is their separation of individuals from their complex web of relationships. At worst, this can simply impose the
categories determined by the analyst (Callon 2006), rather than revealing the thinking of individuals, and can gloss over the ways in which issues arise and knowledge is taken on board by concerned publics.

The survey was designed by the researchers and conducted by Opinium. Opinium is an award-winning insight agency that specialises in providing bespoke and consultative research solutions to a wide range of clients. The survey sample was drawn from individuals who are listed with Opinium, listed members earn credits to participate in and fill out surveys. The survey sample was drawn from a selection of citizens over 18 years, resident in Scotland. The demographic profile of the Opinium participants corresponds with Census data; however, being administered online it requires a level of computer literacy to fill out the surveys that may not be completely representative of the wider population. To compensate for this, the company actively recruits lower socio-economic status participants to maintain correspondence with the Census demographic profile.

Opinium conducted a 20-minute online study with 2,500 adults aged 18 and over in Scotland between 26th October and 3rd November. This sample size reflects a margin of error of 2% which makes our results more robust than a standard political opinion poll. Proportional quota sampling ensured that respondents were demographically representative of the Scottish population in terms of age and gender. As appropriate, the sample was weighted according to the latest available ONS data on population demographics. The sample was monitored for regional distribution and for those who have and have not used social services in Scotland. However, due to the nature of online panels in Scotland at this time we were unable to guarantee sample sizes on these criteria – these were left to natural fall-out. Initial investigations estimated us to expect a split of 20:80 between those who have used (or are using) social services and those who have not used.

The survey comprised 43 questions and took on average 20 minutes to complete (see appendix x). It included a mix of rating scale, rank order, multiple choice, open-ended and demographic questions. The inclusion of five open ended questions produced richer qualitative data for content analysis. Areas covered in the survey included:

- Impressions and perceptions of social services
- Understanding of social services (including interrelationships between social services, social work and social care)
2.3.1 Data analysis

In the analysis of the survey data we used two normative types of statistical calculation: descriptive and inferential statistics. We also produced frequency tables derived from the descriptive statistics. In the final round of analysis, we used cross tabulation and filtering statistics.

Descriptive statistics were the basic measures we used to describe the survey data on public understanding of social services. This consisted of summary descriptions of single variables (also called ‘univariate’ analysis) and the associated survey sample. Examples of descriptive statistics used for survey data analysis included frequency and percentage response distributions, and dispersion measures (such as regions and occupational types). This describes how close the values or responses are to central tendencies in the sample population.

Inferential statistics offer more powerful analyses to be performed on our online web survey data of public understanding. Here we were concerned with making larger inferences about public understanding. We included associations between variables. That is how well our sample represents the larger population, and cause-and-effect relationships. The inferential statistics commonly used in survey data analysis are *t*-tests that compare group averages and in our case the analyses of *correlation*.

The second level of the survey data analysis concentrated on the cross-tabulation and filtering of results. Cross tabulation is a statistical tool used in social sciences to analyse categorical data, allowing us to compare the relationship between two or more categories and understand how they are related to each other. We also applied a filter to our results to see a segment of our respondents removed from the others.
2.3.2 Sample size, confidence level and margin of error

The Survey Monkey sample size calculator uses a normal distribution (50%) to calculate the optimum sample size for survey analysis. Calculation is as follows:

- For a population size of 5,290,000
- With a confidence level of 95%
- Margin of error 2%
- Sample size required is 2400

Confidence level is a measure of how certain we are that our sample accurately reflects the Scottish population, within its margin of error (2%). Common standards used by researchers are 90%, 95%, and 99%. We have used the 95% confidence level.

Margin of error is the percentage that describes how closely the answer our sample gave is to the “true value” in the Scottish population. The smaller the margin of error is, the closer we are to having the exact answer at a given confidence level (95%).

Thus, our sample size of 2505 respondents is very strong in terms of robustness and validity given we required only 2400 for the 95% confidence level, with a margin of error of 2%.

2.4 Focus groups

Three public focus groups were scheduled to add depth to the survey findings. Specifically, this enabled the researchers to explore and unpack individual perceptions, knowledge and attitudes, as well as some of the reasons behind these. Resource was significantly limited for this element of the research and relied on convenience sampling. Two focus groups were conducted in Edinburgh and one in Paisley. A further Glasgow based group was scheduled involving local refugees, however this group was cancelled at short notice following what was reported as ‘a difficult time with social services over the Christmas period’. Focus groups were conducted between 6th December and 6th February 2017. Focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minute and were recorded digitally.
Edinburgh based focus groups were arranged with the assistance of Our Voice. Our Voice is a partnership initiative that operates to support improvements in health and care services in Scotland and to empower people to be equal partners in their care\(^1\). Our Voice provided access to their recently established ‘citizens’ panel’ - a national demographically representative group of citizens recruited to participate in a rolling programme of research and consultation. The decision to host groups in Edinburgh reflected a concern to maximise public engagement - initial scoping indicated that Edinburgh would offer access to the largest number of participants. The remaining focus group was held in Paisley and was arranged with the assistance of Roar: Connections for Life\(^2\). Roar is a Paisley based community project which provides preventative, health and wellbeing services for older people through the development of community opportunities. The project was known to one of the researchers and was selected on the basis that it would provide access to a group of citizens in a different geographic location and, it was hoped, with a different demographic profile. Table 1 details the composition of each group.

**Table 1. Composition of focus groups**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Group</th>
<th>Date</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Edinburgh 1</td>
<td>06.12.16</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>55-68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edinburgh 2</td>
<td>06.12.16</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>55-68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paisley</td>
<td>06.03.17</td>
<td>Mixed</td>
<td>65-83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Edinburgh 1 comprised 3 women and 1 man. Participants identified themselves as: Scottish, English, British and Indian-Scottish respectively. 2 participants were retired, 1 was in employment and one was not in employment. 2 of 4 reported employment experience in professional roles. 2 participants owned their own homes and 2 lived in rented accommodation. 2 of 4 participants reported current or previous experience of working in Health and Social Care. All participants had direct experience of accessing social services either for themselves or in caring for family members.

Edinburgh 2 involved 2 women and 1 man. All identified themselves as Scottish. 2 of 3 participants were retired and 1 was in employment. All reported employment in professional roles and 2 had experience of working in social services. All participants owned their own homes. 2 of 3 participants had direct experience of accessing social services through caring for family members.

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\(^2\) See: [http://www.roarforlife.org/](http://www.roarforlife.org/)
The Paisley group involved 5 men and 1 woman. All identified themselves as White Scottish. All participants were retired. 5 reported employment experience in skilled manual roles and 1 in a professional role. All participants had direct experience of accessing social services through caring for a family member.

Focus groups were conducted using a semi-structured schedule, which served as a prompt to explore the following themes:

- Impression and perceptions of social services
- Experience of social services
- Understanding of social services
- Public value and trust in social services
- Influences on perceptions

2.4.1 Analysis

Focus groups were recorded digitally and transcribed in full. Transcripts were analysed and synthesised using thematic content analysis and occurred in four stages. Stage one entailed reading and re-reading each transcript carefully, a process of immersing oneself in the data while attending to the voice, content and meaning of the transcript. Through this process, each narrative was coded thematically, making initial use of the thematic structure used within the focus groups. This was followed by identification and coding of additional themes, including identification and coding of sub-themes. Next, a comparative analysis of transcripts was completed allowing for progressive refinement of themes, patterns and relationships. Finally, themes and findings were analysed through reference to existing research literature.
3 Literature review

3.1 Introduction

This literature review draws on existing research to outline and synergise findings relating to the public's knowledge of and attitudes towards Scottish social services. The literature review enabled us to identify variables via existing systematic reviews and through consultation with stakeholders which assisted in the design of the questionnaire and focus group structure.

The concept, ‘public’ is pivotal to this study and review. While it commonly refers to groups of people, as in ‘the public’, social science research has recently focussed on the many ways publics form and reform around particular problems or issues. ‘Publics’ is plural and as one social scientist puts it, ‘no issue, then no public’. Research shows that publics form and disband as issues are mobilised, resolved or become less important. We have seen plenty of evidence to support this perspective in relation to child abuse and exploitation scandals. ‘Public awareness’ describes the knowledge that publics have at any one time but it is not synonymous with acceptance. Promoting awareness may not necessarily promote support. Understanding publics better facilitates a more strategic approach to social services provision and resourcing. It also provides a more objective picture of what people really think and thereby helps burst prevailing myths generated by tabloid press and campaigning organisations.

Studies relating to public knowledge, perceptions and understanding of social services are limited in number and depth. Studies pertaining to the Scottish context are fewer still. Davidson and King's (2005) study is given notable attention as it stands as the primary source of knowledge of the relationship between social services and the public in Scotland. This is supplemented with a review of literature findings from the UK and beyond. The review expands on findings from studies relating to social services through examination of literature reporting on public perceptions of health and social care services. The review also considers literature relating to public confidence in the police and the relationship this service has with the media. The latter provides the basis for brief comparative analysis of public attitudes towards two distinct public services. The views of social services professionals are considered briefly, through analysis of a small number of key reports. In the final part of the review, consideration is given to emerging knowledge from science, technology and society studies, which serves to emphasise both the complexity and possibilities of the public's relationship with social
services. It is this literature which goes furthest in unpacking the nature of publics, public understanding and the issues that count for publics. It demonstrates, for example, that there is a difference between public understanding and public approval.

3.2 Locating social services

Social services is defined as incorporating:

...social workers, people working in residential and day care services for adults and children, care at home and housing support staff, occupational therapy staff, mental health officers, people working in adult and child protection and in criminal justice services’ (Scottish Government, 2015, p.8).

The review’s inclusion of the above definition is deliberate. Evidence suggests that the public may be confused about what professions or institutions are encapsulated within social services (IPPR & PwC, 2009). Furthermore, the experiences of social care service users and professionals are almost entirely neglected within existing research, with social work attracting the large majority of attention.

Recent analysis by the SSSC (2013) suggests that a number of myths dominate public perceptions of the Scottish social services workforce. Specifically, the analysis reports that the public believe local authorities to be the majority employer within social services. In reality, only 33% of those employed within the sector work within local authority settings (private: 42%; voluntary agencies: 25%). Further, it is reported that the public believe that most social service professionals are social workers. Data shows that of 189,670 social service workers, social workers account for approximately 10,000 of those (less than 6%). Knowledge of remuneration also appears to be misunderstood; many reportedly believe social services employees to earn the national minimum wage, in fact this applies to only 7% of the workforce (though this myth appears at odds with the one that precedes it). Last, the public reportedly believe that the profession is substantially overrepresented by migrant workers; this figure sat at 3% of the total workforce in 2011. This briefing usefully highlights some of the myths that circulate and shape perceptions of social services and the social service workforce in Scotland. It also highlights contradictions across these myths. However, the publication provides insufficient detail as to the
souces of its reporting and does not provide robust evidence about what the public think about social services.

It is clear from the above that social services is a broad term incorporating a broad and diverse group of services. Relatedly, social services houses an equally broad and diverse workforce. In addition, the above highlights that it is important to talk and think of public understanding in terms of publics, and to conceptualise publics perceptions and understanding as plural, dynamic and dialogic phenomena. This way of talking and thinking will facilitate a better understanding of what publics think about social services and the complexities involved.

3.3 Why is it important to consider public attitudes towards social services?

Scotland’s national performance framework (2016) includes a national indicator to improve people’s perceptions of the quality of public services. The indicator is linked to Scotland’s national outcomes, specifically, national outcome 16: ‘our public services are high quality, continually improving, efficient and responsive to local peoples’ needs’. The national indicator reflects a belief that understanding public perceptions of public services can aid efforts to improve perceptions and services. Tracking public perceptions over time also provides opportunity to examine the relationship between changes in peoples’ circumstances and changes in their attitudes, as well as the relationship between changes in government policy and changes in attitudes. Currently, the Scottish government tracks public satisfaction with health services, public transport and schools (SG refs).

More broadly, in recent years Scottish and UK governments have placed significant emphasis on the importance of engaging the public in public policy development and service delivery (see Christie, 2011 and White, 2006). Public engagement with social services implies a conversation about social services between government, the profession and the public, where all three sides learn about the other’s perspective. Concepts of co-production and co-creation have emerged as cornerstones of policy development for social services. As Reid et al (2014) observe: ‘[governments] believe not only that this broader engagement is vital for a healthy, modern democracy but also that it will lead to better policy making’. Relatedly, the public’s willingness to engage in public policy and service development is
thought to rest, at least in part, on their understanding and views of government and public policy. As Reid et al outline:

If the public trusts government to act in their interests, to make fair decisions, and to listen to their views they may be more likely to respond positively, whilst if they hold more negative views they may opt out. Thus understanding who holds more positive (and negative) views can help government to develop strategies for engaging those whose voices may otherwise go unheard.

Within social work, research has given considerable attention to the impact that it’s public image has on the profession. Lecroy & Stinson (2004) argue that how the public views social work is vital to its acceptance of social work services and related policy positions. Relatedly, how social work is perceived has been linked to service uptake and utilisation (Reid & Misener, 2001), professional capacity (Lecroy & Stinson, 2004), and public value (Legood et al., 2016). It has also been argued that public image is integral to the recruitment and retention of skilled and committed workers (Reid & Misener, 2001; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004; Olin, 2013; SWSSF, 2015; Legood et al., 2016), and to staff morale and job satisfaction (Reid & Misener, 2001; SWSSF, 2015). Further, Olin (2013) maintains that it is important to define exactly what social work is, in order to help the public understand its functions, identity and remit and to provide a profession-driven value base on which to build a positive image of itself.

3.4 Why social licence to operate is important for social services?

There exist then a variety of accepted rationales for understanding and tracking public understanding and attitudes to social services, many of which are endorsed in Scottish public policy. The extent to which existing commitment in this area translates into robust mechanisms for measuring and reporting on public understanding and attitudes to social services remains to be seen.

The Scottish public is far from monolithic in how it is likely to acquire and apply knowledge about social services. It is important to segment the “general public” by relevant social identities and values such as religion, partisanship, education, class, ethnicity, occupation, region, locality, and prior knowledge. The public’s perception of social services reveals not only the level of support but also the legitimacy, or ‘social licence’ to operate for social services in Scotland.
Routinely, measuring the social licence to operate (SLO) in all stakeholder research about public opinion has become commonplace over the past five years. It offers a framework for the design of strategies and tactics to build strong, stable relations for social services. The social licence is the level of acceptance or approval continually granted to public services by local community and other key stakeholders. It has four levels from lowest to highest: withdrawal, acceptance, approval and psychological identification (Boutilier & Thomson, 2011). Many public services are in the acceptance or approval range most of the time. The public rarely identify with the service, the fire service and nursing being two outliers. Social licence to operate can vary across time or between stakeholder groups in response to actions by the public sector (Wilburn & Wilburn, 2011) Social legitimacy is based on established norms, the norms of the public, that may be legal, social and cultural and both formal and informal in nature. Social services must know and understand the norms of the public and be able to work with them as they represent the local ‘rules of the game’. Failure to do so risks rejection.

3.5 Public perceptions of social work in Scotland

Very few studies have been carried out on public perceptions of social services. Davidson and King's (2005) work is seminal to understanding public perceptions of social services in Scotland. Their research explores public understanding of and attitudes to social work in Scotland. This mixed methods study collected data from a nationwide survey (N=1,015) and several focus groups. The overarching aim of the research was to provide the 21st Century Social Work Review Group with a deeper understanding of public knowledge of, and attitudes towards, social workers and the context in which they operate.

In respect of findings, 40% of the study's participants had come into contact with social work services, either personally or through a family member. Of this population, 80% were satisfied with the service they received. Despite the significant number of those who had contact with social workers, only half of participants believed that they understood their role. The minority of participants (40%) correctly understood the education requirements of social workers.

Most participants could name only one social work service, with children's services (relating to abuse and neglect) and assistance for older people being most regularly cited. A very small minority mentioned services such as respite care and occupational therapy. Young people, older people and disability services were considered as most important. Similarly, knowledge of the services provided by
social work departments was fairly low. Understanding was found to be lower in older people, lower class groups and people from Black and Ethnic minority groups. Significantly, those with the least understanding were more likely to be in need of social work services. The need for awareness raising was a strong theme within focus group discussions (Davidson & King, 2005).

Despite a fairly low understanding of social work as a profession, participants generally held firm views about services and practitioners. However, opinions were rarely consistently positive or negative. There was significant ambivalence around issues of power to intervene: 33% felt that social workers held too much power to intervene in people's lives, whilst the same number disagreed with this statement. Many participants called for better training and specialisation of social work staff.

Variations in attitudes towards social work services were apparent across social and ethnic groups. Several participants in C2DE economic groups mentioned that they found social workers often failed to intervene or disengage in accordance with their perceived needs. This group were more likely to advocate for earlier intervention by social workers than those in group ABC1. There was further disagreement between these groups in relation to social work funding. Class groups ABC1 tended to be reluctant to cut funding to any service user group. However, the majority of participants in the C2DE group viewed those in receipt of criminal justice and addictions services as being a lower priority in comparison to other service recipients.

From the survey data, most people would approach social workers for help or advice for an older person, person with a disability or a child. However, less than half would seek assistance for someone who had committed a crime.

Asian and Chinese participants mentioned that social workers had a poor understanding of their communities and that there was a lack of bi-lingual workers. Findings in this area draw on a small sample size and therefore remain questionable.

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3 Economic groups, as used in this study, uses a social grade classification system developed by the National Readership Survey (NRS, 2016). Grades are based on occupations held by participants. This system is widely used within research. More information about how grades are allocated, and the strengths and weaknesses of this system can be obtained by visiting: http://www.nrs.co.uk/nrs-print/lifestyle-and-classification-data/social-grade/
Many focus group participants made reference to a perceived stigma in approaching or using social work services. Often, this was seen as a solution only after exhausting all other options. As a primary source of support and guidance, GPs were preferred to social workers. Participants believed that stigma lessened when using older person services, compared to gaining support for addictions or raising children. Pride, fear of inadequacy and believing that others were worse off than themselves were reasons cited for not accessing services.

Whilst the majority acknowledged that most people would come into contact with social work services at some point in their lives, a quarter of participants believed that they wouldn’t experience this personally. Lastly, participants in this study demonstrated insight into the increasing needs of Scottish people, with 75% feeling that social work services will need to grow in future to respond to increased demand.

3.6 Public perceptions of social work beyond Scotland

Penhale and Young (2015) conducted a literature review of what the public and users of social work services think about the conduct and competence of social workers in England. Much of this review focuses on service user views of social work which, though relevant, is beyond the focus of our analysis here. Review findings in relation to public perceptions of social work are limited and draw on a very small number of studies. Key findings are as summarised below.

The review found low public understanding of the social work role or of what social workers do – this was found to change once individuals come into contact with social workers (especially if not related to child protection or control functions). One cited study (Research Works, 2001) found limited public understanding of the difference between social work and social care, with both areas tending to be grouped together in participants’ perceptions. The same study found that the public were unclear of the relationship between social services and the government and about who was responsible for different services, and that social workers were restricted in their work by the ‘system’ (‘red tape’ and political correctness). Notwithstanding the above, the review found that the public consider the work done by social workers to be necessary and ‘worthwhile’.
The review found that public perceptions of social work derive from a range of influences, including a blend of their own experiences (if any), the experiences of others in their family and social circle, and the picture of social work presented in the media. Media representations were identified as the strongest influence and were perceived to be mostly negative.

The review found both negative and positive public perceptions of social workers, with a weighting towards the negative. Negative views were found to be strongly associated with ‘distorted’ media representations, much of which related to social workers acting (or failing to act) in relation to child protection and safeguarding issues. (p.13). One cited study, conducted by Revans (2007), presents a more positive picture and reveals that ninety-three per cent of people thought the contribution of social workers in the community is very or fairly important and only 5% of the general public thought it is not important. Further, two-thirds of the sample said that they would trust social workers to help them or their families, with 29% responding that they would not trust social workers to help them or their family. Revans explains this more positive result as partly due to the changing demographics of the population: as more people are using social services it is no longer a hidden service and more people are seeing the positive service that it can provide.

The review found little research that considered public perceptions of standards and competence. One study showed a perception that social workers needed to be better trained and fully equipped to do their jobs. They review also noted some public concern around abuse of power and a strong desire for fairness and accountability. Noting the dearth of literature in this area, Penhale and Young’s findings make an important contribution to knowledge in this area. However, it needs to be noted that the findings draw on a very small number of studies.

International comparisons of public perceptions of social work services can be drawn from a small number of key US-based reports. Olin’s (2013) literature review seeks to examine changes in public perceptions of social work from the late 1970s to present day. Olin concludes that public opinion of social work in the US remains variable. Olin also highlights early negative stereotyping of social workers, particularly when considered alongside other ‘helping’ professionals.
LeCroy and Stinson (2004) report on public perceptions of social work as examined in a nationally representative telephone survey of 386 US adults. Similar to previous published findings, the public’s knowledge of social work services was found to be mixed. The report highlights high levels of knowledge – and bias – towards children’s services, which was identified as a key role by 91% of respondents, heavily outweighing the identification of other services. Also similar to previous findings, social workers remained poorly ranked against other professions in relation to their capacity to provide support.

Lecroy and Stinson found that participants generally held much more positive attitudes towards social workers than was found in 1978. 59% of respondents had a positive view of social workers and 96% recognised practitioners as a great source of comfort in times of need. Despite this affirmation, 39% of people would be least happy if their child were to embark on a career in social work, compared with other professions (psychology, psychiatry, counselling, nursing, and religious practice). The report provides no indication of participants’ rationale for their responses, highlighting a need for more focused enquiry into this area.

3.7 Public perceptions of health and social care

In contrast to the very limited published literature relating to public perceptions of social services, there are a number of published reports on public perceptions of health services. Since 2000, Ipsos MORI have conducted a series of annual surveys about public perceptions of the NHS, on behalf of the Department of Health. From 2009, these surveys were extended to examine public perceptions of the NHS and social care. The most recent Ipsos MORI’s (2015) survey found that public perceptions of UK social care services tend to be negative, with only 38% of respondents stating that they were satisfied with the current provision. More positively, just over half (52%) of respondents believe that service users are treated with dignity and respect by social care workers. One third of participants responded ‘don’t know’.
An earlier report on public attitudes towards social care (IPPR & PwC, 2009), drawing on a representative survey of 1,993 adults across the UK, reported low awareness, uncertainty, and confusion about the nature of social care services. Relatedly, it found that ‘the nature of social care and the boundaries between it and other services [were] unclear among the public’. Though perceptions of the quality of social care services were positive overall, 55% of respondents reported that they didn’t have an opinion either way, reportedly reflecting low awareness and uncertainty. Significantly, the majority of respondents (69%) did not feel well enough informed about services and communicated a desire for more information and debate on the future of social care.

In Scotland, the Health and Care Experience Survey has run every two years since 2009. The focus of this survey is on primary care services provided through GP practices. However, in 2013, the survey was redeveloped to include questions about experiences of local care and support services. In respect of care and support services, the 2014 and 2016 surveys (Scottish Government 2014, 2016) found that many people who get support for everyday living receive this outside of formal services. In 2016, 43% indicated that their help did not come from formal services. In 2014, 41% indicated the same. Of those who received formal help and support, 81% rated the overall help, care or support services as either excellent or good, this is a slight decrease from 84% in 2013/14. Users of care services were most positive about particular aspects of person-centred care. In 2016, 90% reported that they were treated with respect, while 87% indicated they were treated with compassion and understanding. Again, these results were a slight drop from 2014 results which were 93% and 89% respectively. In both surveys, users of care services were least positive about coordination of health and care services. In 2016, 75% reported that services were well coordinated, a decrease of four percentage points from 2013/14. Both surveys report considerable variation across Scotland in experiences of care services, especially around co-ordination of health and care services and awareness of the help, care and support options that are available.

The Scottish Social Attitudes (SSA) survey is an annual survey which, since 1999, has measured and tracked changes in people’s social, political and moral attitudes. This survey doesn’t routinely track public attitudes to social services, however, in 2011 and 2013, the Scottish Government funded a series of questions focussed on health and social care services (Reid, Waterton & Wild, 2014). Again, the results of these surveys speak mostly to health services and shed no light on perceptions of social care services broadly. Some attention is given to respondents’ views on who should provide care services for
older people: approximately one half believe that ‘charities would provide better services than government’ (approximately one third); and who should pay for these services: the proportion of people who think that government should pay for the care of older people in need of regular help is in decline, with an increase in the proportion who think that payment for care should be means tested. In 2013 the survey found that views on care provision varied in relation to newspaper readership and education. Broadsheet readers were less likely than tabloid readers to think ‘government should pay for care, no matter how much money the person has’. Those with standard grades or no formal qualifications were more likely than those with Highers or a degree level education to say the ‘government should pay for care, no matter how much money the person has’. 2013 results were based on interviews with 1,497 people.

Looking beyond social services, the 2015 Scottish social attitudes survey included a section on public attitudes on civic participation and co-production (Scottish Government, 2015). The subsequent report concludes that the majority of the 1228 people interviewed support the idea of co-production in both the design and delivery of local public services. At least 8 in 10 felt that people either ‘definitely should’ or ‘probably should’ be involved in making decisions about how local services are run, making decisions about how money is spent on local services, and should be able to volunteer alongside paid staff to provide local services. Most support was shown for people being involved in making decisions about how local services are run, with just over half feeling that people ‘definitely should’ be involved (53%). Importantly, trust was found to be a positive determinant explaining public support for participation and co-production with those who said ‘most people can be trusted’ being more likely to support participation and co-production in public services. Place was also found to be a relevant factor with people living in deprived areas found to be less likely to engage in civic participation activities.

The above findings provide evidence of UK and Scottish government commitment to understand public attitudes to public services, with a particular focus on health services. In recent years we have seen a move to extend analyses of health services to also include social care services. This development is to be welcomed. However, knowledge of public attitudes to social care services remains significantly limited and betrays a strong health focus to the neglect of broader care and support services.
3.8 Factors influencing public perceptions

Established research has extensively examined the relationship between the media and public services in the UK and beyond. Some argue that the media is the primary source of information about social services (Legood et al., 2016) and that the tone and content of media reporting is influential in shaping the public's sentiment towards the profession and individual practitioners (Reid & Misener, 2001). Authors highlight concerns about the use of language and terminology within media reports. For example, Montgomerie-Devlin (2008) notes that the term ‘child prostitute’ remains a widely used description of sexually exploited children in the press. Relatedly, Hussein et al (2007) claim that there is a link between the media's failure to report on elder abuse outwith the environment of hospitals and residential homes and the majority of the UK public incorrectly believing that this is the most common place where such crimes occur. Other researchers are concerned that some services, such as social care, attract very limited coverage, thus denying the public an adequate source from which to draw pertinent knowledge (IPPR & PwC, 2009).

While the media’s coverage (or neglect) of the social service profession can be debated, there is evidence to suggest a longstanding, tenuous relationship between social work and the media. Aldridge (1990, cited in Reid & Misener, 2001, p. 195) observes that ‘the profession gets unusually poor news media treatment’. Similarly, authors argue that news reporting has created a climate of blame and fear both within and towards social work (Reid & Misener, 2001; Munro, 2011; Warner, 2014; Legood et al., 2016). On reviewing related newspaper articles, Reid and Misener (2001) found that 80% of UK headlines were negative about social workers, and that the content of reports where practitioners' remit was to help, investigate or support was not reflected by more affirming descriptions of the professionals involved. Further, social work in the media is synonymous with high-profile cases, particularly 'preventable' child deaths, whereby it is argued that news outlets place heavy emphasis on the negative aspects of cases (such as missed opportunities and mistakes) to increase readership (Jones, 2012). Warner (2014) argues that such events have given rise to political opportunism, through which politicians galvanise and heighten public anger over child deaths to highlight the government's failure to protect the vulnerable. Warner makes this argument on the basis of political manoeuvring witnessed after the death of a young child, Peter Connelly, in 2007. He contends that the opposition party leader and others used their relationship with the media to intensify public hostility and outrage towards social work services.
In the US, the tone of media reporting of social work services is argued as being negative, consistent with news outlets in the UK. Reviewing motion pictures and TV dramas, Olin (2013) noted that the large majority of productions portrayed social workers as incompetent, unethical, middle class women, many of whom had sexual encounters with service users. Congruently, the author found that most US social workers had an understanding of the extent of negative reporting. This finding is notable considering that a previous study found that 23% of people rely on media (TV and newspapers) for knowledge about social work (LeCroy & Stinson, 2004).

Whilst the media's role in influencing public opinion has attracted wide coverage in research, Legood et al (2016) also acknowledges the government as pivotal. During focus groups, social workers argued that if the government were more inclined to promote social work services and to highlight areas of good practice, that this would penetrate into the public’s consciousness, via the medium of the press.

However, the extent to which external sources of information (government action or media reporting) affects public attitudes towards social services is contested. Personal experience of social work has been found to be a key influence on public opinion (Davidson & King, 2005). Furthermore, Legood et al (2016) found that personal experience can negate media reporting, or even co-exist through a process of 'othering' individual workers. That is, a service user may express gratitude to or satisfaction with a social worker, whilst simultaneously holding the view that that practitioner is different from colleagues in their profession. Other authors, such as McKendrick et al (2008), believe that the media has only a minor influence on public perception, with personal experience and vicarious evidence holding greater sway.

The above findings, facilitated mostly through focus groups, are indicative of information sources that affect public attitude to social services, however, they are far from definitive. The primary driver behind collective or individual sentiment, or whether one exists, remains unknown. Not only does this give cause for further empirical examination, it also highlights the challenge the profession faces in understanding and influencing public attitudes towards the services they provide.
3.9 Changing public perceptions

The purpose of this review is to report on what is known about public attitudes to social services. However, a number of existing studies attend explicitly to the question of how to change public perceptions. Some argue that in order to change the perception of social services, that the profession must become better at self-promotion and working alongside the media and government in order to generate better news stories (Munro, 2011; Olin, 2013; Legood et al., 2016). Munro's (2011) review of child protection practice within England recommended the commission of a Chief Social worker role at a national level, in order to bridge a gap between social work and the government. This came to fruition when Isabelle Trowler was appointed to the role in 2013. However, there are suggestions that her role has failed to meet Munro's aspiration, with a number of social work academics criticising the position as being little more than a spokesperson for government policy (Hayes, 2016). Whilst suggestions of self-promotion are readily offered, client confidentiality is cited as a primary barrier to achieving this (Chenot, 2011; Olin, 2013).

3.9.1 Professional perspectives

How social services staff feel about their public image requires further research, although Legood et al's (2016) study offers a useful insight into the views of social workers. Social workers involved in this study (N=16) regularly commented on how they felt their role attracted stigma from the public, who were felt to be hesitant in engaging with them. Practitioners believed the public to misunderstand what their role entailed, and their motivation for intervention. Statutory power was a source of tension between social workers and the public, with the latter reported as consistently overestimating the scope of their authority, particularly when intervening in families' lives. Participants were pessimistic about the potential for changing perceptions to more accurately reflect their remit, stating that the public were reluctant to engage in such an exercise. Social workers reported that they consciously worked to 'hide' their position from public view, through wearing more casual clothing than might be expected. This was argued by the authors as being a protective measure against negative attitudes towards the service. Further coping strategies highlighted included: acceptance (acknowledging that no one really wants social work intervention if it can be helped), maintenance of self-preservation (belief that work is admirable, despite others thinking differently), and 'carrying on regardless' (conceding that attitudes can't be controlled). These forms of 'identity-protection' (p. 11) were seen as effective means of managing the stress caused by perceived friction between the public and the sector. However, in the
long-term, this strategy has been found to cause significant psychological strain, resulting in many social workers leaving their jobs (Côté & Morgan, 2002, cited in Legood et al., 2016).

The Guardian *Social Lives* research is a research study which explores the attitudes and motivations of UK social workers and their colleagues. The 2014 survey found that 90% of social workers feel undervalued by society (compared to 92% in 2010). 85% said negative press makes their jobs harder to do (80% in 2010) and only 3% felt that social work has a positive public image (11% in 2010) (Smith, 2014; Guardian, 2010).

A more recent study by IRISS (2015), conducted in collaboration with the Guardian, provides insight into the views of Scottish social service staff on the profession. Notably, views of the profession appear to fluctuate depending on whether they are employed within the public, private or third sector. Those outwith the public sphere were more likely to agree that they had an increased capacity to improve client outcomes compared to the same time last year (45% and 40% in the voluntary and private agencies respectively versus 20% in statutory employment). Further, whilst less than half (48%) of those employed by voluntary or private agencies agreed that there were tensions between what service users want, and what provisions they had at their disposal, this figure was significantly higher amongst public service workers, with 82% of public service worker participants citing this as a source of tension. There was universal agreement (87% of all respondents) across all social service workers that there had been a reduction in the availability of social services in Scotland between 2014 and 2015. More focused research is required to aid understanding of what lies behind these perceptions, as well as the extent to which professional perspectives influence and inform public perceptions of social services.

3.9.2 The public and the police: comparisons with social services findings

Earlier in this review, it was noted that there is insufficient research to clarify whether the public's knowledge of, and attitudes towards social services is particular, compared with other public services. In conducting this review it became evident that much has been written about the public perceptions of the police, both in the UK and elsewhere. It is apt to briefly examine these findings as it allows for an, albeit limited, comparative analysis of the relationship the public has with these two services.
Bradford et al’s (2009) paper summarises findings from the British Crime Survey and surveys conducted by the Metropolitan Police. It observes that despite crime rates falling nationally, public opinion of local policing was failing to improve. Bradford speculates that this may point to low levels of public knowledge about crime rates in the UK, however, research has failed to clarify whether this is the case. Alternatively, it indicates that other factors are more influential in shaping public satisfaction with the police than service outcomes. Certainly, Bradford found that feeling more informed about police activities was linked to increased satisfaction and confidence in the police. However, a key determinant of public attitudes was whether participants had experienced contact with the police. Unlike the majority of findings from social services research, it was found that those who had contact with the police were more likely to report lower levels of confidence in the service. This was argued as being unique within public services (other than railway services) where first-hand experience led to poorer rates of satisfaction. The authors contended that although the police may do a good job, that the public fully expect this of them, thus making positive experiences unremarkable. Conversely, if individuals had a negative experience, this would be more significant, remembered more vividly and reported more widely. Skogan’s (2006) US-based study validates this contention. Findings show that there is an asymmetrical relationship between confidence in police and the quality of contact. That is, negative experiences result in a 4 to 14 times greater impact on satisfaction scores than coefficients associated with having a good experience. This apparent negativity bias alludes to an interesting comparison with social services, in that the public may hold expectations of this sector’s remit, where effective practice may not always lead to positive appraisal from service users. Further, it may also begin to explain the significance of negative media reporting in shaping public opinion. Again, further research is required to definitively draw or disprove parallels between these concepts.

Relatedly, literature examining the police’s relationship with the media offers an interesting comparison to findings discussed earlier in this review. Leishman and Mason (2002) highlight that the majority of police-related activity was presented in the media through extracts taken from press releases or statements given by senior officers, for example before conducting a criminal investigation or outside courts following sentencing. This is a significant departure from mechanisms for reporting social services related news, which is more likely to be delivered by politicians or other external sources. Opportunity to control the tone and content of press information may impact on how the public appraise public service performance. Further, the authors note that the media are more inclined to report on solved crimes, through coverage of arrests and trial outcomes. Whilst this review has highlighted a number of authors who contend that the media are negatively biased towards social
services, it is notable that ‘good news stories’ in this sector are less obvious and perhaps less measurable. Such findings are illustrative only but offer a broader lens from which to examine what is currently reported as negative media bias. The above does not question that conclusion per se but it does suggest opportunities and mechanisms through which the professional might disrupt and influence that.

3.10 Science, technology and society research

Leading the way in systematic studies of public understanding and perception has been the field of Science and Technology studies. Since the second half of the 1980s there is a burgeoning research base relating to the public’s understanding of, and attitude towards science and technology. Whilst this discipline may be remote from Scottish social services, it is important to examine available literature relating to public opinion. It sheds considerable light on what is meant by “publics” and how public understanding has been framed by governments and institutions. Earlier, this review questioned the uniqueness of the public’s relationship with social services, in comparison to other public services. Drawing on knowledge from science and technology studies adds further layers to this dialogue, and at the very least offers scope for critical discussion regarding the findings of social services specific papers outlined within this review. This paper will now examine a small number of key texts in this area.

Early studies of the public’s knowledge of science were concerned about the concept of scientific literacy, or individuals’ understanding of scientific methods and approaches. In 1980s Britain, there was a wide concern within science about a perceived public apathy towards science, resulting in many scientists moving to work abroad (Gregory, 2001). The Royal Society (1985) published a landmark study around this time calling for the public to better educated, thereby increasing scientific literacy, contending that this would improve attitudes towards this discipline. Funding of scientific and technological research was, and remains a public concern, requiring public assent. This research body lobbied the government for increased emphasis on science education within schools and more widespread media coverage (Gregory, 2001). Their contention was that a better overall understanding of science would result in a better informed public contribution to decision-making. A main concern was that decisions were being made on the basis of inaccurate perceptions of science, describing the public as being “vulnerable to misleading ideas” (The Royal Society, 1985, p. 10). This public deficit model, that is, the working premise that the public generally lack knowledge, has been attributed to the creation of
an inequitable relationship between scientists and the public (Bauer, 2009). The attitude from this perspective to the public was one of subtle derision, where decision-making was only to be considered valid if made by those who could demonstrate scientific understanding. Furthermore, there was a contention by scientists at the time that if the public’s knowledge of science were enhanced, then their attitudes towards it would be more favourable. This argument relies on the existence of a link between access to information and changes to attitude. However, such a correlation is widely argued as being non-existent. For example, Miller (2004) found that although 80% of Americans cannot describe scientific methods, even at a rudimentary level, that public support and value towards science is overwhelmingly high. Instead of forming opinion, most evidence from social psychology deems increased knowledge to act as a barrier to accepting new ideas, instead cementing established ideas about science. Furthermore, it is understandable that despite varying levels of knowledge, that individuals can reach the same conclusion, and hold the same opinions towards complex issues (Bauer, 2009). This is exemplified through consideration of political elections within Great Britain and elsewhere. In earlier sections, this review examined a number of papers advocating for the need to better inform the public about social services, in order to change public attitudes. It is interesting to consider the motives behind such calls. This may point to the existence of a public deficit model within the social services sector. Also, evidence from Miller (2004) and Bauer (2009) challenges the effectiveness of an educative approach.

A decade after the publication of the 1985 study examined above, science moved away from the public deficit model, by advocating a model based on trust. Activists of the Science-in-Society movement called for recognition of the relationship between science and the public and argued that the connection of the two bodies was more worthy of consideration than either in isolation. This opened up discussion of how the public’s knowledge of science and scientists intersect. Gregory (2001) highlights evidence to suggest that the British public acquire, or accept information that is relevant to their everyday lives and that outside of this, the public places a responsibility on experts to hold, maintain and develop knowledge. She usefully offers the example of plumbers here, to illustrate the point. This is argued as being an essential process, given that individuals cannot feasibly obtain, nor retain, universal knowledge. However, this positions experts, such as scientists, as recipients of public trust. As such, when public trust is broken (through controversies such the BSE scandal, for example), it is at this point that the public’s interest in enhancing its understanding of science is piqued. This argument has relevance within social services, particularly, that the public and the profession often decisively intersect when something has gone wrong (Munro, 2004). Whilst earlier the media and government were
considered as bringers of ‘bad news’, findings from science and technology studies challenges the 
perceived significance of these agencies. Rather, the breaking of a trust, borne through delegation of 
knowledge and expertise, may in itself be a more potent driver of public disdain towards social services. 
Whilst this remains questionable, it simultaneously alludes to the need for further examination of the 
complex relationship between the public’s trust and social services.

From literature examined earlier in this review, the culture within social services is that public mistrust is 
something to be deeply concerned about. Bauer (2009) argues, from a science and technology 
perspective, that a sceptical public presents no problem. Rather, this is a by-product of public 
participation. This contention should be of interest, and considered further by those concerned with 
examining the public’s relationship with social services in Scotland. In the preceding sections of this 
review, findings from the majority of papers show that the public are positive, at least in some part 
about social services. Other papers have highlighted concerns about negative bias towards this sector. 
However, there is no evidence to link levels of scepticism or fluctuations in public trust to the public’s 
overall assessment of the value of this public service. For a profession so committed to working in 
partnership with its primary consumer - the public- perhaps, as is argued above, a critical public is 
something to be expected, rather than a body to be tamed.

This review’s remit is to examine the public’s knowledge of social services in Scotland. However, the 
concept of ‘understanding’ is complex in itself. How does one measure knowledge? Or, as Miller 
(2004) asks, what level of knowledge must one hold in order to demonstrate understanding? The 
breadth of such a debate certainly cannot be examined within the scope of this paper. However, within 
science, The Royal Society deemed individuals to hold scientific literacy if they were able to demonstrate 
an understanding of the concepts reported within the science section of The New York Times. However, 
there exists no recognised empirical scale on which knowledge and understanding can be plotted. This 
highlights an enduring problem for researchers attempting to gain an understanding of public 
knowledge of social services.
3.11 Conclusion

The findings drawn from the limited research available highlights the cruciality of the relationship between Scottish social services and the public in how the profession delivers its services and progresses shared outcomes. Whilst studies offer a narrow insight into what the public know and feel about this sector, this review has highlighted many areas requiring more focused examination, in order to better understand what factors affect public satisfaction, the reasons for the variability of public knowledge of service provisions and how to most effectively shape opinions of this ever-changing sector.
4 Findings: National Online Survey

This section reports on the data generated from the online survey. Findings are reported on in two stages. Stage one provides a descriptive analysis of the survey findings. These are reported sequentially in numerical order as represented in the survey design. Stage two presents a cross tabulation analysis, allowing for comparison of the relationship between and across respondent categories.

4.1 Descriptive analysis of survey findings

Q1. When people talk about social services what is the first thing that comes to mind?

For this open text question the main findings show:

- There are 550 unique references to ‘child’, ‘children’ and ‘kids’ within the data.
- The clear majority of responses within this data set referred to an area of children’s social work (welfare, protection, abuse).
- Most responses including references to ‘child’, ‘children’ and ‘kids’ did not include reference to other areas of social services (e.g. elderly, benefits, mental health).
- There are 274 unique references to ‘elderly’ within the data.
- 150 participants solely referred to elderly, while the remainder also indicated that another service area came to mind when posed the question.
- The most common term combined with ‘elderly’ was disability, but a wide spread of other service users was also mentioned.
- There are 273 unique references to ‘benefit(s)’ within the data.
- 155 of these references made no other reference to other areas within social services.
- Across responses, participants used the term ‘care’ 662 times. ‘Help’ was cited 189 times.
- Remaining responses made reference to a variety of other services.

Q2. What perception do you think the public have of social services in Scotland?

For this open text question collated responses were organised into 6 content categories.
Table 2. Public perceptions of social services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Public perception</th>
<th>No of participants</th>
<th>% of respondents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Very good</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e. very positive, very good, very efficient, excellent)</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Good</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e. good, fairly good, positive, efficient, favourable, mostly good, pretty good)</td>
<td>265</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e. average, fair, OK, mixed, adequate, reasonable)</td>
<td>229</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e. bad, poor, negative, low, not good (enough), not very good)</td>
<td>620</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Very poor</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e. very negative, very poor, very bad, terrible, incompetent, inadequate, waste of time, waste of money)</td>
<td>139</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unsure</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(i.e. don’t know, unsure, not sure)</td>
<td>371</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the 1,655 responses to this question, 759 responses were negative. This suggests that 45% of respondents think the public have a negative view of social services. Importantly, this ‘perception’ is more negative that the data generated for Q3 and Q6 (see below).

In addition, 430 responses referred to lack of social services funding, using the following terms: ‘stretched’, ‘cuts’, ‘lack of/under staffed’ and ‘lack of resources’. These references were generally provided as a rationale for the negative perceptions reported, or separately to indicate a belief that social services in Scotland are viewed positively despite financial constraints.

Possible links to focus group findings will be explored below: generally, respondents perceived the public to be negative about social services but not individual social service workers.
Q3. How would you describe your general impression of social services in Scotland?

Figure 1. General impression of social services

Almost half the sample have a positive impression of social services in Scotland, with only a third (34%) reporting negatively. There were no gender differences. Whilst not conclusive this finding tends to repudiate widely circulated media representations of social services which often convey them in a negative tone.
Q4. What level of understanding do you have of social services in Scotland?

Figure 2. Understanding of social services

Almost three in five (57%) think they have a good understanding of social services in Scotland while 43% think they have a poor understanding. Only 8% think they have a very good understanding.

This suggests a reasonably good understanding of social services in Scotland. There is not a high level of reported ignorance about social services in Scotland as might have been anticipated, with more than a half (57%) reporting a very good or good understanding. This suggests that the public consider themselves to be reasonably literate about the nature of social services in Scotland.

Q5. Have you, your family or anyone in your household, ever had contact with social services?

Reported involvement with social services was quite low. Only just over a third of respondents (35%) reported having had contact with social services. 58% reported no contact with social services at all.

Q5B (open text). You mentioned that you, your family or someone in your household have had contact with social services. Please describe the type of contact you have had with social services.

Older people

- 287 references to care for older people/ elderly care
- This included, amongst others, ‘Community Care’, ‘Care in the Community’, respite care, residential care homes, advice on care and acting on behalf of an older relative
Health

- **158** references to health care services
- The most common reference was to services most likely provided by Occupational Therapists (physical aids, home aids and such like)
- Other areas represented were counselling services, mental health support and palliative care

Children’s Services

- **113** references were made to services received by a child relative, or the participant as a child
- These included supports with education, contact with and access to children, learning disabilities/difficulties, accommodation of children by the local authority and child welfare

Financial Assistance

- **70** references were made to benefits and financial assistance
- These included Job Seekers Allowance, Disability Living Allowance, Personal Independence Payments and Employment Benefit

Q6-7. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statements?

*Figure 3. Social services provision in Scotland*

*Figure 4. Local area provision*

Responses show little variation in perceptions of social service provision at national and local levels. Respondents were slightly more positive about national provision. It is perhaps encouraging that only
29% (just under a third) of the sample population disagree with the statement of good provision of social services in Scotland.

**Q8. Which types of issues do you most associate with people receiving help, advice, or support from social services?**

When asked which types of issues do you most associate with people receiving help, advice, or support from social services, the two most common answers were care or support for older people (50%) and safety and protection of children (47%). The five most common responses were as outlined below.

*Table 3. Issues associated with social services*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Issue</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Care or support for older people</td>
<td>50%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and protection of children</td>
<td>47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing issues</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support in bringing up children</td>
<td>23%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help with drug or alcohol problems</td>
<td>21%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As reported in some surveys, support for older people (50%) was considered the issue most importantly associated with people receiving social services help, support, or advice. However, as might be expected, there were significant age differences in this ranking. Only 30% of respondents aged between 18-34 ranked this first, compared to 67% of those aged over 65.

Support in bringing up children was also significantly associated with social services (23%), followed closely by help with alcohol and drug problems (21%). There is a small gender difference here. 26% of women in contrast to 20% of men associated social services with issues of support in bringing up children.

Very few respondents (8%) associated social services with providing support for refugee families.
Q9. Which of the following social care services, if any, have you or members of your household or family used in the last 12 months?

In the last 12 months, 11% report using social services personally, while a quarter (25%) report that someone in their household or family have used services.

One in ten (11%) report that someone within their household or family has used home care or day care support for older people, while 8% say someone has used services for a basic need such as food, shelter and social care for older people or someone with a disability.

The highest direct usage of social care services for respondents was at 3% (home support or assistance) while the average usage of services for this sample population was only 2%. The highest usage for other members of the household or family was 11% for home care or day care support for an older relative.

89% of the sample reported no involvement with any of the social services. Overall, this suggests that the sample population for the survey report very low level of involvement with social services provision. This may impact (positively or negatively) on their understanding and perception of social services.

Questions 10-17 asked about levels of agreement or disagreement with various statements about social services.

A large proportion of Scottish adults value the role that social services play, with 73% agreeing they play an important role in supporting the most vulnerable people in communities.

However, findings suggest some doubts about how this works in practice. For example, only half (51%) think health and social services work well together to give people co-ordinated care and support, and only 44% feel confident social services will meet their and their family’s needs should it be necessary.
Table 4. Attitudes to social services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social services provide a valuable service to the people of Scotland</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I feel confident social services will meet mine and my family’s needs</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health and social services work well together to give people co-ordinated</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>care and support</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Scottish government is doing more these days to help improve the care</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>for people’s lives</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There should be limits on what is spend on social services in Scotland</td>
<td>41%</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services play an important role in supporting the most vulnerable</td>
<td>73%</td>
<td>13%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>people in communities</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The statements ‘Social services provide a valuable service to the people of Scotland’ and ‘Social services play an important role in supporting the most vulnerable people in communities’ provided the strongest positive responses. More disappointing, perhaps, only 51% agreed with the statement “Health and social services work well together to give people co-ordinated care and support”.

Questions 18-21 explored respondents’ trust in social service decision making.

These questions focused on issues of trust with social services. The results were broadly similar across each of the scenarios presented. Although social services are generally trusted in most situations, only 44% trust social services when making recommendations to a court of law about the sentencing of a person accused of a crime.

Table 5. Trust in social service decision making

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Making recommendations about …</th>
<th>Trust</th>
<th>Don’t Trust</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>What level of support should be provided for an older person</td>
<td>53%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What level of support should be provided for someone with mental</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>health needs</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The safety and protection of children</td>
<td>50%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The sentencing of a person accused of a crime to a court of law</td>
<td>44%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Q22. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘Social services professionals can generally be trusted to do their job well.’

Over three in five (62%) agree that social services professionals can generally be trusted to do their job well; 22% disagree, rising to 27% of those aged 65 and over.

Responses on levels of trust for social services provide one of the most positive responses by the public. This is an encouraging finding for social service providers, professionals and government.

Q23. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Social services are as highly regarded as other professions that work with the public."

Despite social service professionals being generally trusted, only 39% agree that social services are as highly regarded as other professions that work with the public, while 45% disagree.

ABC1 are the least likely to believe that social services are as highly regarded as other professions (35% agree vs 50% disagree), while C2DEs are noticeably more likely (43% agree vs 40% disagree).

Q24. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Social services are often unfairly blamed when something goes wrong."

This question focused on issues of blame and blaming of social services when things go wrong. Just over half (52%) agree that social services are often unfairly blamed when something goes wrong, while 28% disagree.

This suggests that the public have a fair amount of sympathy for social services relating to matters of blame. Again, this confounds the media echo chamber representation which tends to offer a blanket of negativity around blame culture.

Q25. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘The image and reputation of social services has improved in recent years’

Only 30% agree that the image and reputation of social services has improved in recent years, while 48% disagree. Read alongside findings from Q24, this may suggest a recognised rise of negative media influence, alongside some public resistance to that.
Q26. From your own experience or from what you have heard, which of the following do you think has the biggest influence on the image and reputation that social services has with the public in Scotland?

Two in five (42%) think that the media, internet and newspapers has the biggest influence on the image and reputation that social services has with the public in Scotland. 16% think the people who use social services have the biggest influence on how social services are perceived, while 12% say it is the social service professionals themselves.

These results were reasonably conclusive with 42% (39% men and 45% women) perceiving the media, internet and newspapers as having the most influence. This accords with existing research findings though runs contrary to received wisdom about the likely impact of media soaps such as EastEnders and The Archers.

Q27. To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement?
‘If I were using social services I wouldn't want other people knowing about it’

Almost three in five (57%) Scottish adults say that they wouldn't want people to know about it if they were using social services.

This findings presents concern, perhaps, for social services organisations. It may also cast fresh light on the findings of Q18 and Q22 about levels of trust in social services. The public may have good levels of trust in social services to do their job but they still don’t want other people to know of their own involvement with social services.

Q28. Which of the following best describes your thoughts on the legal power social services have to carry out their job?

Table 6. Perceptions of social service power

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Social services have too much legal power</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services have about the right amount of legal power</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social services don’t have enough legal power</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Scottish public is divided over the legal power that social services have. Just under a fifth (16%) think social services have too much legal power while 12% think they don't have enough power. Although 36% think they have about the right amount of legal power; a similar proportion (35%) are not sure.
Q29. From your understanding of what social services do, which of the following qualities do you feel is the most or least important in their work?

When asked to rank which of six qualities are the most and least important to the work of social services, 71% think the ability to make accurate assessments of people's needs is in the top 3. However, only 32% think that the ability to help people with financial or practical problems is one of the most important to their work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ability to ...</th>
<th>More important</th>
<th>Less important</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Make accurate assessments of peoples needs</td>
<td>71%</td>
<td>29%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work with other professionals to support people</td>
<td>51%</td>
<td>49%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Create trusting and caring relationships</td>
<td>55%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenge decisions on behalf of service users or carers</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>62%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help people with financial or practical problems</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>68%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen and communicate with people</td>
<td>52%</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Respondent rankings show clear ambivalence in this area. However, 36% (40% men and 33% women) ranked “Ability to make accurate assessments of people’s needs” as the most important quality. Only 7% felt that advocacy was the most important quality in ranking “Ability to challenge decisions on behalf of service users or carers”. Surprisingly, perhaps, the “ability to create trusting and caring relationships” was ranked first by only 12% of the sample population.

Q29B (open ended). Are there any other qualities that you think are an important part of the work of social services? (Please identify other qualities you think are important)

This open question generated inconclusive findings. The highest reported qualities of social services work were: (i) ability / willingness to listen (N=46), and (ii) common sense (N=42). However, these numbers were low and not statistically significant.

Q30. Based on your understanding or what you’ve heard, do you feel that social services respect and protect the human rights of people in Scotland?

Based on their understanding or what they have heard, two thirds (64%) agree that social services respect and protect the human rights of people in Scotland. The finding is generally encouraging for
government and social services. 64% responded positively and agreed, 17% responded negatively, 18% did not know.

Q31. Do you think there is a difference between social services and social care?

Just over two in five (44%) think there is a difference between social services and social care; 18% do not, and 38% do not know. The findings, however, appear less conclusive when read against the open text box responses below.

Q31B (open ended). You mentioned that there is a difference between social services and social care. What do you think the main difference is?

Open text responses suggest that most did not understand the difference between social services and social care. Responses lacked the clarity and cohesion of others provided earlier in the questionnaire. Many participants attempted to define ‘service’ and ‘care’, or stated that there was a linguistic difference between social services and social care.

A difference ambiguously reported was of social care as ‘hands on’. A small proportion of responses (N=156) believed that the difference between social care and social services is that the former engages in ‘ground work’, where workers are at the ‘coalface’, delivering services provided, funded and administered by ‘social services’. Social care was also distinguished in that they do direct work with people, often of a physical nature. ‘Social services’ was regarded by some as a ‘faceless’ body that acts to make decisions about service provisions.

Q32. Do you think there is a difference between social services and social work?

A quarter (25%) think there is a difference between social services and social work, while 34% do not and 41% do not know. The findings were more conclusive than Q31. Only 25% of respondents thought there was a difference between social work and social services, while 34% felt there was no difference, and 41% did not know.

Q32B. You mentioned that there is a difference between social services and social work. What do you think the main difference is?
Open text responses suggest that most did not understand the difference between social services and social work or did not understand the question. The main differences identified but only reported by a small number of the sample are as below.

**Scope, remit and range**

58 participants stated that, unlike social work, social services have a wide and overarching remit to serve communities and the general public. Services provided by ‘social services’ are for all. Provisions delivered by ‘social work’ are for some.

**Social work: a department amongst many**

53 responses alluded to social services encompassing social work. The latter was considered as a department amongst many within a broader social services workforce. Social work was understood as a specialist branch, although there is no indication within these responses as to why social work is distinct from other social services. For some participants in this category, social services is the governing body of social work.

**The providers vs. the doers**

For 51 participants, the relationship between social services and social work is hierarchical to the extent that the former assesses needs, makes decisions and provides funding for services, whilst the latter are tasked to deliver these services. 7 different participants consider social services to be the gatekeeper to social work, stating that some people might need advice or support from the former, but not need services from the latter.

Q33-35. Which of the following public services in Scotland do you most and least understand/ value/ trust?

This question asked the public to compare social services to other public services. The findings show that social services are understood and trusted the least out of the major public services.

Just over two in five (43%) ranked social services as the public service they understood the least, although 22% ranked it as the public service they understood the most.

Similarly, 38% ranked social services as the public service they least value, while only 15% selected it as the public service they most value.
Additionally, 33% ranked social services as the public service they least trust, while only 18% ranked it as the public service they most trust.

4.2 Cross tabulation and filtering analysis

Cross tabulation and filtering data analysis was undertaken by a statistical expert analyst and ‘raw’ data results were received on 27.02.17. Cross tabulation is a statistical tool used in social sciences to analyse categorical data, allowing us to compare the relationship between two or more categories and understand how they are related to each other. The findings are presented below. Having reviewed the results, we are satisfied that the findings of this second stage analysis do not significantly alter the key conclusions and findings reported on in Section Six of the report. In summary, results of this second stage analysis show few significant correlations between public perceptions of social services and demographic factors that have a bearing on the key findings.

4.2.1 Experience, knowledge and understanding

Of those respondents stating that they have had experience with social services (either themselves or someone they know) 77% have a good or very good understanding of social services. Less than 47% of those without experience say they have the same level of understanding. When statistically analysed, the results show that there is statistically significant correlation between experience and understanding of social services. 88% of respondents who answered, “don’t know” if the provision of social services for the public in Scotland is good, have not had experience with social services or don’t remember if they have had contact.

4.2.2 Region, perception and local provision of services

Interestingly, there is a statistically significant correlation found between opinion of provision and the region respondents live in within Scotland. A further correlation was identified between the participant’s opinion of the provision in their own area and their opinion of the provision in Scotland. This indicates that people’s opinion of the broader provision in Scotland is formed from their opinion of
the specific provision in their local area. These findings on region and location also show that the opinion of provision varies significantly from area to area (see figure 5 below).

If response data is paired down and simplified to positive and negative, it reveals there is a correlation between the region and their overall opinion of social services. For example, compared to other regions, Renfrewshire, Highlands and Islands and Tayside have the most overall positive opinion of social services and they score highest in perceiving local area provision is good. At the other end of the spectrum, Central and the Borders have the lowest overall positive opinion of social services and have the fewest of respondents agreeing that local social services provision is good. That seems to indicate that where the local provision is lower, the opinion of social services is lower.
4.2.3 Gender, educational attainment and perception

The findings identified a statistically significant correlation between the gender of the respondent and their opinion of the Scottish Government’s role in improving the care for people’s lives. Overall, a higher percentage of men disagree and strongly disagree that social services improve the care of people’s lives.

An interesting statistically significant correlation was also identified in the relation between education and opinion of social services. From the ratios of the respondents in each category, it is evident that respondents with lower qualifications tend to have more negative opinion of social services, while people with at least a degree level of qualification have more positive opinion (see Table 1 below), even though no correlation was found between education and contact with social services, which indicates that social services are used across all levels of educational attainment.
| Please select the highest level of qualification of academic or professional qualification you have completed. | How would you describe your general impression of social services in Scotland? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| No formal qualifications | Very positive | Mostly positive | Very negative | Mostly negative | Don't know |
| | 3% | 37% | 13% | 30% | 17% |
| GCSE, Standard Grades or equivalent (e.g. BTEC, S/NVQ level 2) | 3% | 41% | 7% | 29% | 21% |
| A Level, Highers or equivalent (e.g. BTEC, S/NVQ level 3) | 3% | 47% | 6% | 26% | 18% |
| Certificate of Higher Education or equivalent (e.g. HNC, BTEC, S/NVQ level 4) | 4% | 42% | 9% | 32% | 13% |
| Diploma of Higher Education or equivalent (e.g. HND/Foundation Degree, BTEC, S/NVQ level 5) | 3% | 43% | 5% | 33% | 17% |
| Undergraduate Degree or equivalent (e.g. BA, BSc) | 3% | 50% | 8% | 27% | 12% |
| Postgraduate Cert or Dip | 4% | 51% | 4% | 32% | 9% |
| MBA | 4% | 52% | 13% | 22% | 9% |
| Other Masters Degree (e.g. MA, MSc, PGCE, PGDE) | 6% | 53% | 8% | 21% | 12% |
| Doctoral Degree (e.g. PhD, DBA) | 10% | 53% | 3% | 14% | 20% |
| Professional qualifications (e.g. CIMA, ACCA) | 3% | 41% | 10% | 30% | 15% |

*Table 8. Education vs Opinion of social services*
4.2.4 Newspaper readership and influential sources of opinion about social services

The data suggests an interesting correlation between opinion of social services and what respondents consider to be the most influential source of the image of social services. A difference was identified between perceptions of social services by readers of different newspapers. The most positive opinion is identified with readers of The Guardian, The Independent and Financial Times with more than 60% of readers having generally positive impression of social services. This compares to readers of the Daily Express and Daily Mail, of which less than 50% (37% and 45% respectively) have a good impression of social services (see Figure 7 below).

![Figure 7. General impression of social services in Scotland of different newspaper readers](image-url)
5 Focus group findings

5.1 Introduction

This section presents the findings from focus groups conducted in Edinburgh and Paisley. Detail of the sample is provided in section 2. Focus group findings are presented across six themes, though there is clear overlap across areas:

- Impressions and perceptions of social services
- Experience of social services
- Knowledge and understanding of social services
- Public value and trust
- Influences
- What else matters?

All participants had significant personal or professional experiences of social services – mostly for older people. Personal experiences emerged as a clear motivation for engagement. There was considerable consensus in perceptions across the Edinburgh groups and across the Paisley group. There were however differences in perception across the two locations. In addition to differences of location, notable sample differences between Edinburgh and Paisley based participants include: (i) age: Paisley group members were older, (ii) gender: the Paisley group involved six men while each Edinburgh group had only one, and (iii) social position: the Edinburgh group had a higher ratio of people in or retired from professional roles. The findings to emerge from the focus group data adds depth, insight and complexity to the survey findings, however it needs to be noted that they derive from a small and particular sample. In this respect the findings are intended to provide illustrative insight rather than statistically representative data.

5.2 Impressions and perceptions of social services

Initial impressions connected and differed across the Edinburgh and Paisley groups. For some participants, social services signified ‘the social work department’, though many concluded this frame had loosened and extended in recent years, aided by recent experience of social services. For most Edinburgh participants, social services were equated with ‘help for people’, ‘care in the community’,
‘support’, ‘home helps and district nurses’. Service user groups most associated with social services were ‘children and the elderly’.

For Paisley participants, the dominating impression of social services was: ‘basically, they’re invisible. You never see them’. For many ‘they’ appeared occasionally, typically at critical points, then ‘disappeared’, with ‘no follow up’:

Social work tend to – you find that social work... They don’t even know I’m there, you know? ...After they’ve initially spoke to you, they tend to disappear into the background.

‘They’ appeared to refer to a narrow group of community based social workers - or case managers - involved in social services for older people. For example, one participant who described never seeing ‘social services’ added: ‘I’ve got a care worker that comes in, that’s about it’. A few Paisley participants described positive experiences, though these emerged as the exception rather than the rule.

Edinburgh participants reported a dynamic impression of social services, which altered as they experienced services and developed a broader understanding:

I think I’ve changed what I think about it because I’ve been semi-involved. ... in the olden days, the social work department looked after [children] ... . Now ... in my mind it’s about young people, babies, children, and old people, ... and my own experience has actually been much more with old people. But it’s also ... I also think of it as interacting with other services like the prison services, like rehabilitating people back into .... To me, it’s young and old.

I think what we’re actually saying is, previously, we probably all thought it was [social work] .... But the more you get into it, the more you realise how many specialisms there actually are; and it’s a broad term for a huge number of areas where specialist skills and knowledge is needed ... Just to call somebody a social worker nowadays doesn’t really mean anything, I think.
Many Paisley participants held a narrower impression:

Its quite easy. [It’s] care at home and day care.

The adult services. [These] are basically the only ones that concern you.

Edinburgh participants also perceived key services to be hidden and not visible to the general public:

The biggest issue that [we] had, who were looking after the situation, and this is not a criticism, we had no idea what services there were there. And it took us forever to link what was health, what was in the GP’s realm, what was in the geriatric hospital. What was social? What was health? What was she entitled to?

Linked to the above, in discussing social services, many participants moved across health and social services with ease, drawing little distinction between the two. Edinburgh participants in particular appeared disinterested in distinctions between social services, social work and social care. Health and social services were seen as strands ‘under one umbrella’, or as a ‘huge network’ or ‘jigsaw’. Notwithstanding the above, many participants described considerable disconnect across health and social care services.

For old people, it’s almost like there’s a grey area because what is health is also social. Once you get into a certain medical condition, it’s social help [that’s needed].

I think, eventually, you’re hoping you’ll find that one person who knows what they’re talking about and has got all the statements.

Across groups, discussion focussed mostly on services for older people, specifically: residential care, care at home, day care and hospital discharge co-ordination.

Though most Edinburgh participants spoke positively of their experience of social services, and of staff in particular, across groups discussion frequently described services beset by resource problems. Participants described services as: ‘overstretched’, that ‘don’t have enough money ... or staff’, that ‘exist on a shoestring’, and that were sometimes ‘inadequate’ or ‘in crisis’. Resource shortages were linked to government cuts and to demographic and social changes. Notably, participants demonstrated
considerable understanding of the challenges facing social services, summed up by one participant as below:

Every client is entitled to person-centred care, but there’s not enough staff or money out there to give each client person-centred care. That’s what the problem is.

5.3 Experience of social services

Across groups, all but one participant reported direct experience of using social services. Reflecting participants’ life stage, the dominant experience was within health and social care services for older people, though extended to mental health, children and families, disability and justice services. Many participants describing significant and long term experiences of caring for a spouse or family member. Some also reported accessing services for their own health and care needs. Four Edinburgh participants reported experience of working within social services, most of which were within the third sector. Personal and professional experience of social services emerged as a clear motivation for engagement in the focus groups and clearly underpinned perceptions.

Participant experiences, and so perceptions, of social services were mixed. Most Edinburgh participants reported positive and considered perceptions:

I found the people who were working and looking after the elderly people were wonderful. I mean, they were compassionate, and they really cared, but it was just the time they didn’t have.

Very positive … [it] was amazing.

I think on the whole they’re very caring within the constraints.

They try their best. … it’s an uphill struggle both administratively and resourcefully, and just general support for them. I think they genuinely do try their hardest. Whether that’s sufficient or not, I don’t know.

Three of seven Edinburgh participants reported mixed or negative experiences, informed by personal and/or professional experiences:

My … direct experience, recently, is that there’s some absolutely astoundingly good individuals within the systems. But where I think it falls down sometimes is the joined-up-ness and the admin.
[it’s] quite difficult because I’ve worked in the sector for so long … . From my own, my mother’s own personal experience, hers was actually a very negative experience in terms of she needed some kinds of social care … and she struggled with the paperwork for it. It’s very, very frustrating and very upsetting. … [but] it’s very mixed because I have some clients who have excellent, you know, experiences with [particular provider] and I have other clients who are really struggling and they don’t get any help. … so, I have a very mixed [view].

It’s been a while since I had direct [professional] contact with social work … . But, I have to say that, for me … I was always disappointed. … social workers, occupational therapists, their bosses.

For Paisley participants, the most significant feature of their experience of social services was a profound lack of knowledge and understanding:

I hadn’t a clue …

And dementia, I didn’t know what I was going through until I found out?

[You] just don’t know what to do.

For these participants, knowledge came slowly, through experience, which was often described in painful terms:

You don’t [choose to] become a carer. What you do, you fall into it.. … And when you become a carer, you find it hard. … We didn’t know … that our normal life was going to be so much affected for so long, and it was that, you became a carer. … I don’t know how I got through this, because I was on my bloody own and I went through that for twelve years. … the last seven years for the worst. And I just got up in the morning, made her breakfast, if the carers didn’t come I gave her a bed-bath, cleaned her up, did this, did the next thing, and took her out during the day. All that. I did all that, and I’m saying to myself “Where did I get the energy for it?” You just go into automatic. … Just keep doing it.

Linked to the above, Paisley participants described often difficult, disorientating, and stressful experiences of being assessed for services and support. For most, social workers and care managers were perceived as reluctant gatekeepers of these services:
I’m quite sure their agenda, they’re told before they leave the office to go and do a visit, ‘Do not…’ you know, on your life, it depends, ‘do not give them any more money or anything that’s going to cost money.’ And it seems to be that’s the agenda … . Money always comes to the forefront.

Some Paisley participants also described isolated experiences, marked by an absence of informal and formal (social service) supports:

I was on my bloody own …

Social care is not there. Social services is not there

The majority of people, when somebody’s struck down, that’s the two of them struck down, … you’re buggered. You’ve not dealt with this before.

Responding to one participant’s contrasting experience, which involved successful access to a range of services, the participant explains the significance of personal and professional capital in accessing social service support:

Aye, but you’re a unique thing [X]. You’re a unique person, you’ve got your daughter and yourself, and you have learnt a bit. But there’s people in this world— other people, there’s other people in this world who can’t do what you do, so, there’s got to be a general rule to help them.

Let me put it this way. You worked, you worked at certain places, and did certain jobs. All I did was put screws into doors, hang doors, do all that. I never worked in offices like [X] and yourself, I never did that, so, how the hell am I supposed to get that into my head?

The other participant concludes: ‘we got support because we went looking for [it]. Support didn’t go looking for them’.

The administrative strain of accessing services for older people, and of negotiating eligibility criteria, also emerged as a concern for Edinburgh participants. Many reported low levels of understanding re entitlements and protracted processes of access to services. While all Edinburgh participants reported
eventually negotiating good outcomes, for all, the process pointed to a need for greater advocacy and support:

The point is, we’re very capable of doing these things – I had my family to support … . There’s so many people out there who don’t have that. That’s where it’s wrong, … that’s the people that need the advocate.

I felt like you needed to be a lawyer to understand some of the complexity.

Discussion in this area highlighted a clear relationship between levels of personal and social capital, service outcomes, and perceptions of social services, with higher levels of capital associated with positive outcomes and in turn perceptions.

Participants also reported experiencing variations in service quality across areas and providers, again focussing on service for older people.

Again, experiences were laced with a strong sense of the constraints facing social services and staff. Interestingly, a number of participants conveyed a sense of sharing this social burden.

5.4 Knowledge and understanding of social services

In order to gauge participant knowledge of social services, participants were presented with a poster showing the range of services. The poster depicts social services across three service groups: Children’s services, Adult services and Criminal Justice services. Participants were asked whether the frame accorded or differed from their understanding.

Edinburgh participants were not surprised by the range of services but conceded to holding a ‘narrower’ lens, shaped by their experience. All participants ‘forgot about the criminal justice part of it’. Only Edinburgh participants saw the relevance of locating criminal justice services within social services.
Participants reported that they understood services for older people best, followed, for some, by services for children and ‘the disabled’. Knowledge of services accorded with participant experience of service.

Most Paisley participants reported very low levels of knowledge across social services, linked to experience and circumstance:

I think my problem is that I don’t know what the social services do, and when, and when in your life [you] require their services. I’m getting to the stage now when I think I probably will be requiring some assistance, but I’m not sure at what point, and to whom, I address that need.

Because I’ve not -. Because we’ve never touched – we’ve never touched.

Edinburgh participants reported least understanding of criminal justice services. Reasons for this were linked to experience, to class and social position and to the low visibility of these services:

Coming back to the bad word, middle class again, you tend, we tend not to see the criminal justice side of it, because, touch wood, our families are not involved with, hopefully, in that process: drug abuse, drug taking, you know, all different things.

For some, low visibility of criminal justice services was also linked to perceptions and constructions of those who use justice services:

Because you probably don’t see criminals as vulnerable people who would need help. They’ve been bad people (others laugh).

For most Edinburgh participants these constructions were fluid and prompted discussion about the ‘hellish complicated’ needs of people who offend, the related complexity of services in this area and the negative ways in which this service and user group is represented by the press. By contrast, most Paisley participants appeared to hold fixed views of criminal justice services and service users. For some, justice services were perceived as competing services and were discussed with frustration and contempt. Frustration in this area appeared aggravated by experienced struggles in accessing social services:

Of that lot [criminal justice], I would say that … they get more support than anybody else. They get more support than anybody.
[researcher: why is it that you feel they get the most support?]

Because it’s true, they do. They just do.

I can’t say that because I’ve no experience of it.

I’ve no experience but I have … I have known of it. Ones, certain ones that I know, a certain boy I know, he’s in and out of prison quite a lot. ... he’s got a house, so, he just loses that house and goes into prison, and when he comes back out again, social work automatically furnish [it] throughout. A few months later, he’s back in again, everything’s all tossed on its head.

There was a thing on the television one night, it was about a chap who went to prison because he enjoyed prison. He didn’t need to have any worries. He got his iPhone. He didn’t have any money worries or anything. ... it seems to be that prison is just another care home for criminals.

You’d be better looked after if you were a criminal, it means you wouldn’t be having to do everything. They should put the old folk that need care in prison and put the prisoners in the care homes.

There’s a bit of truth in there.

Across services, few felt they had a detailed knowledge and understanding and most reported that, prior to accessing services, they understood very little:

I’m not sure I’ve got a handle on any of it.

I think I would say that having gone, experienced what we have on a personal level: care at home, hospital discharge coordination, adult support and protection, I have quite a good understanding of that part … now. But before I had to go through it, I had none and it felt like you were wading through ...

Services for older people emerged as particularly complicated around issues of access and eligibility, and were felt to be ‘complicated unnecessarily’. Other services were described as ‘hellish complicated’ and often invisible to the public.

Discussion around knowledge and understanding of social services prompted detailed discussion about the perceived inadequacy of current mechanisms for supporting knowledge, understanding and access to health and social care services, including but not exclusive to services for older people. Participants
identified a need for better communication, co-ordination, advocacy and help in supporting access to services, as well as improved co-ordination in the delivery of services. For all, this needed to extend beyond the individual in need of support to also include advice, information and support for relevant family members. Paisley participants highlighted the importance of social services being visible within local communities, through formal and informal measures. For Edinburgh participants, GPs and Health centres were considered pivotal to progress, as professionals and spaces that could serve as points of access, communication and signposting. GPs and ‘health and social service centres’ were identified as providing a means of reducing the stigma associated with accessing some services.

5.5 Public value and trust

Participants were asked to consider who and what social services were for. Edinburgh participants identified social services as being about the provision of timely help, care and support for individuals and their families, focussed on individual and social wellbeing. The value of social services was rooted in a strong sense of ‘the social’ and ‘society’, which appeared to translate as a shared commitment to individual and social rights and responsibilities.

For some Edinburgh participants, social services were initially considered to be for those in varying degrees of crisis. However, this view quickly gave way to a conviction that social services were for ‘everybody’. Discussion highlighted the stigma associated with crisis centred services and the importance of (re-)framing social services as timely support for all. This reframing was associated with the growing prominence of services for older people. As one respondent expressed:

   It’s for everybody … I mean, we might not need it just now but I might need it in ten years. It’s everybody, really.

Considering the same question, most Paisley participants drew a distinction between ‘principles and practice’:

   The principle and the practice tends to be different. They’re supposed to be there for the people. But they’re not.

As before, the above tension was immediately linked to ‘cutbacks’ and ‘limited resources’, leading most
to acknowledge that Local Authorities were in a difficult position.

5.5.1 Public value

Most participants valued services for older people, reflecting their life stage:

I really place value on the increasing care needed for the elderly.

I think that’s going to hit all of us, we’re all going to be old at some point and I think that’s a lot of people’s fear.

It’s a … growing and changing problem for support services, because people are lasting longer … . That’s the one that to me … it’s got value.

Paisley participants placed particular value on care and befriending/support services – drawing a distinction perhaps between care and control service. Discussion of value in these areas conveyed the importance of relationship and care, which was significant in easing the strain and isolation of caring. Services and personnel with responsibility for assessment of care needs were least valued by most Paisley participants, though views in this area were mixed, prompting participants to recognise the subjective nature of their views and values:

We’ve only got our own [views] of what happens and this is proving what’s happened with all the social services – everybody’s got a different opinion.

Edinburgh participants were also quick to recognise that assertions of value were subjective. On this basis, Edinburgh participants concluded that one service should not have greater value than another: ‘They all have their merits, don’t they?’.

Compared with other public services, notably health and education, most participants observed that social services ‘probably should be up there, but isn’t’. Participants linked lower level of public value to: ‘the perception that we’ve got on the negatives’ (alluding to earlier discussion about historic and media led perceptions), and to a belief that social services were ‘a broader thing’ and so more complicated to define and understand:
Education’s easy, you send the kid to school. It’s an easy subject to define and I think most people would share the definition of education.

5.5.2 Public Trust

Edinburgh group 1 reported high levels of trust in social services. Remaining groups reported mixed levels of trust. High levels of trust were associated with positive personal experience of social services, emotionally rich, and ‘dependent’ relationships between individuals, families and services. As one respondent put it: ‘you have to trust, otherwise it’s pointless’. Trust was also linked to visible and sustained relationships, and to recognition of the significant constraints that services and staff work within. Lower levels of trust were associated with negative personal or professional experiences and outcomes, and with bureaucratic relationships.

For most Edinburgh participants, when services were strained, stretched and even inadequate, these factors did not necessarily break trust. In these instances, trust was protected by trust in the individual worker and the quality of relationship between the worker, the individual and their family. The apparent resilience of trust in these instances was linked to participants’ capacity to separate the individual providing care, from the system within which that sat. Relatedly, personal experience and relationships emerged as a powerful counter to what Edinburgh participants perceived as the often negative representations of social services provided by ‘the press’. As before, for Paisley participants, services and personnel with responsibility for assessing care needs were least trusted by participants, with trust highly associated with assessment outcomes. Further, it was clear that participants were not emotionally connected to these services or staff in the way they felt connected to staff delivering ‘care’.

Notwithstanding the above, Paisley participants described trusting social services ‘to a point’, with most acknowledging that ‘they do their best’. Another expressed ‘No, I don’t trust the service, I trust the people’. This distinction was shared.

Interestingly, most participants conveyed a sense of having to trust social services:
I would have to trust them, you know? ... Our hands are tied, because it’s the only thing we’ve got here anyway, is social services.

5.5.3 Improving public value and trust

Participants repeatedly identified a need to improve the public visibility and accessibility of services, also linked by some to reducing stigma and improving public engagement. Edinburgh Participants identified a need to develop a ‘communications programme’, to ‘celebrate’ and ‘publicise success’, and to make better use of existing national media opportunities, including for example Children in Need events, which were seen as potentially powerful public engagement opportunities. Participants also identified a greater role for governments and politicians, who were observed to only ‘wade in when there’s a crisis’, and often for political point scoring. Participants concluded that as a public service the public should know that social services are there and how to access them. Discussion in this area suggested a developing identity for social services, with movement from a ‘welfare service’ to a ‘public service’.

Paisley participants highlighted that trust in social services could be improved if social services/social service staff were more visible and did better at ‘follow up’. However, discussion suggested some ambivalence about what participants want from social services, and for older people in particular. On the one hand participants want to see more of social services and to see these services accessible to all. On the other, participants were alert to the costs of improving and extending social services. For a small number of Paisley participants, hesitation was also linked to prevailing negatives attitudes to social services and/or social work:

But, do you feel you need them, X? Have you needed anything? ... I don’t want to go and visit them. Why stir a hornet’s nest?

Finally, some Paisley participants suggested that public trust could be improved if ‘they’ stopped concentrating on one thing, which in this animated exchange meant prisoners and prisons. This exchange, and others, highlighted the complex and interrelated factors informing public perception and value of social services. For Paisley participants, the experience and responsibility of caring for a loved one was often stressful, consuming and lonely. Participants needed to see that society cares for them and is responsive to their rights and responsibilities. Getting this wrong appears to not only affect the people
directly involved, it can affect the capacity of these people to care for and respect the rights and responsibilities of others.

5.6 Influences on public perceptions

Well, the experience has always been the first, but listening to the media, the media is... it’s coming out with ... false news.

All participants identified personal and, to a lesser extent, professional experience as the most significant influence on their perceptions of social services. Next to experience, participants identified the significant influence of ‘the media’, ‘the press’ and ‘the papers’ on public perceptions. For Edinburgh participants, media coverage of social services was perceived to be mostly negative and sensationalised:

The press, yes, which is normally very negative

It’s all negative press that it ever gets. And there’s lots of good.

Paisley participants appeared inconsistent in their relationship with the media. Reporting negative attitudes towards justice services and ‘offenders’, participants cited various stories reported in the press as the reliable source of these attitudes. Minutes later however, discussing a different issue, participants criticised the media’s capacity for ‘false news’ and inclination to distort the truth.

Linked to the influence of the press, participants identified the ongoing, though for some loosening, influence of negative constructions of social services as a form of social policing, particularly in relation to children services. As Edinburgh participants reflected:

But the other thing is the sort of the old reputation of ‘the social’ as the police. So, you take your child to the Sick Kids with bruises on its face and you joke, ‘I’m going to get reported to the social work. That’s another thing that gives it, not a bad name, but a sort of policing.

Edinburgh participants considered themselves able to see past media and negative influences, concluding that press reporting in this area was biased and failed to do justice to the complexity of issues surrounding social service decisions in relation to the care and protection of children: ‘Those who
understand are like ourselves, are older, more understanding, [we've] had experience, informed’.
Similar observations were made by some in relation to services for people who offend.

Paisley participants appeared more influenced by negative press-led perceptions across services areas, though even within this group, for many, perceptions were not fixed:

I think – I feel that, not that I know a lot about it, but the neglected children, I don’t think the social services have got a very good record in that department.
I would say that is their biggest downfall, that’s what lets them down the most.
The bad publicity they get about it.
The silly decisions that they make, like taking children away from home, and being—
Oh, yeah
As I say, I don’t know enough about it, I don’t know if it’s as bad as what the publicity is about it. I’m quite sure there’s quite a lot of good and good people in it, but.

Despite the observed significance of the media on public perceptions, some respondents were initially ambivalent about whether this was for social services to respond to:

Well, the social work, they can’t shout from the rooftops, ‘oh, we’ve made a good job of this’, you know, that’s just not their thing—

Other’s brought a counter view:

Maybe they should though, maybe that’s the problem is that there has to be ... they must have some kind of PR person, if you like, that actually does put it out there. I mean, if you look at, was it Children in Need this year, how they ...? How they publicise all the good things that the money does ... your know, the success stories.

Participants also drew attention to the significance of broader life experience and circumstance and to associated personal, social and political values. For example, one participant associated his positive perceptions with being born in South Africa where, in his words, ‘there are not proper social services’ and
'no social care’. Others identified the significance of class and social position as a factor influencing perceptions. Another identified the significance of professional experience on their developing knowledge, perceptions and values:

My, sort of, career, was in the private sector, in a big global company based in Edinburgh, and until I retired from that and got myself involved with this charity, I knew nothing about [social services] whatsoever. ... I didn’t know any of this because I’d been private industry where you exist in this little bubble of capitalism and you get paid for turning up and all this kind of thing. But my learning curve has been through working with this social charity and I learnt, really, through them. ... if I hadn’t done that, I would be asking, ‘What the heck is [social services]...?’

Personal, social and political values was also linked to attitudes towards people who use social services, and to stigmatised service user groups in particular. Put simply, lows levels of respect, value and trust for particular service user groups were associated with lower levels of respect, value and trust for associated social service areas. Further, strong participant attitudes to and value of one service area or service user group affected public value and trust of the whole.

Service visibility also emerged as a factor influencing perceptions. Using the example of care homes for older people, one participant noted the demise of the citizen and community engagement activity she enjoyed as a child, in this case: ‘visiting the local old folk’s home to sing carols with school or brownies’. This form of community engagement was seen to offer meaningful opportunities to connect publics, communities and services and so mediate negative representations from the press.

5.7 What else matters?

In closing participants were invited to discuss other matters considered relevant. All groups returned to the issue of ‘assessment for care’ and the perceived lack of public facing information about how to access social services and related entitlements for older people.

Others highlighted what they described as current ‘conservative’ politics around payment for care for older people, which, in their view, resulted in unequal service outcomes for rich and poor, favouring the former.
Involvement in decision making also emerged as an important issue to individuals and their families:

A lot of the relatives of people I work with feel that the social work doesn’t involve them enough in decision making. They don’t ask the individual or the family what they would like from the social services.

At a broader level, involvement in decision making was linked to the importance of public communication and engagement, particularly around controversial service areas/service users. Discussing recent controversy around needle exchange services for drug users, Edinburgh participants made the point that social services, government and others need to be more proactive in ‘framing the story’ and promoting public support and engagement around controversial services and service users.

Others highlighted a need to improve ‘communication between the different departments’. Comment here focussed on health and social care services and underlined again the perceived irrelevance of professional boundaries between health and social care. Participants also described diverse experience of social services, suggesting significant variations in service quality across services and regions.

Last, participants returned to what was perceived to be the overriding, and for some insurmountable, issue of ‘money’:

It’s the money again isn’t it… everything boils down to the money. Everything.

5.8 Summary

5.8.1 Public perceptions

Focus group findings reveal mixed perceptions of social services and connect broadly with existing research (Davidson & King, 2005; IPPR & PwC, 2009; Lecroy & Stinson, 2004; Olin, 2013). However, our findings suggest that the public may hold more positive perceptions than is reported by some recent studies and than is sometimes assumed by social service professionals (Penhale and Young, 2015; Ipsos MORI, 2015; Legood et al, 2016; Guardian ref).
Services most associated with social services were services for older people and children, with an emphasis on services for older people. These findings counter previously reported biases towards children’s services, though this is perhaps to be expected noting the sample profile.

Half of the sample held fluid perceptions of social service areas and user groups. The remaining half held fairly fixed perceptions. Fixed perceptions were more prevalent amongst male, older and non professional participants. The findings suggest that increased awareness and use of services for older people may be contributing to a more dynamic and positive perception of social services.

The invisible and opaque natures of social services, and of services for older people in particular, emerged as a significant issue. This message emerges consistently across studies (Davidson & King, 2005; Penhale and Young, 2015; IPPR & PwC, 2009; Ipsos MORI, 2015; Lecroy and Stinson, 2004). For participants in this study, service invisibility creates barriers to access and can contribute to unequal outcomes. Penhale and Young (2015) also report experience of barriers and unequal access to services amongst older people.

In discussion, most participants moved across health and social care services with ease, often drawing little distinction between the two. For some, though not all, the same was true for social work, social services and social care services. This accords somewhat with existing findings (Penhale and Young, 2015; Research Works, 2001 and IPPR & PwC, 2009) however, in contrast with existing studies, appeared to reflect a level of disregard for service boundaries rather than confusion about services.

In common with existing findings, participants demonstrated a considered understanding of social service constraints and of the pressure this places on social service staff (see also Davidson and King, 2015; Penhale and Young, 2015).
5.8.2 Experience of social services

All but one participant reported direct experience of using social services with experience heavily weighted towards services with older people. In this respect the findings present the views of a particular section of the public.

Participant experiences of services were mixed, with variations apparent within and across groups. Broadly, female, younger and professional participants reported more positive experiences than male, older and non professional participants. This accords with findings from Davidson and King’s (2005) study though further research is needed to test and understand the relationships between variables and perceptions.

In common with Penhale and Young’s (2015) and IPPR & PwC’s (2009) findings, for most, initial experience of social services was shaped by a profound lack of knowledge and understanding, particularly of how to access services. For some, understanding improved through experience, though this varied and appeared most positive for those who possessed the capital required to ‘negotiate’ access and progress.

Many participants described demanding and disorientating experiences of caring, experiences often exacerbated by isolation. For many, social service staff provided transformative support within these circumstances, for others they were experienced as reluctant gatekeepers to support. If social services wish to improve public perceptions, attending to service experience appears key.

The strain of accessing and ‘negotiating’ services emerged as significant. Positive experience and outcomes in this area were associated with high levels of personal and social capital. These findings are new and further research is needed, across social service publics, to explore significance and implications.
5.8.3 Knowledge and understanding

Most participants reported low levels of knowledge and understanding of social services. This was linked to the ‘hidden’ nature of social services, to personal circumstance and to services being complicated. These findings accord within existing research (Davidson and King, 2005; Penhale and Young, 2005; IPPR & PwC, 2009) and suggest that there is work to be done if social services are to be better understood as a ‘public’ service. In common with existing studies, services for older people were understood best, followed by children’s and disability services.

Most participants recognised the breadth of social services though ‘forgot’ about criminal justice. Forgetting in this area was linked to low service visibility, to personal circumstance, and to negative perceptions/representations of people who offend.

All participants highlighted the inadequacy of current mechanisms for supporting knowledge and access to social services, and identified various routes to improvement. Findings in this area build on Marcinkiewicz et al’s (2016) findings which suggest that the Scottish public want to be involved in the development of services.

5.8.4 Public Value and Trust

Participants placed significant value on social services, and on services for older people in particular (see also Revans, 2007). Further, participants placed particular value on care and support services and on care relationships. Participants placed less value on assessment and resource management services and on bureaucratic relationships.

Social services were valued as the provision of help, care and support for all. This (re-)framing of social services was considered important to improving public value and to challenging the stigma often associated with social services. Findings in this area connect with Revans’ (2007) conclusions which associated more positive representations of social services with changing demographics of the population and the rising number of (older) people using social services.
Some participants drew a distinction between the ‘principle and practice’ of social services. The perceived principle/practice gap was associated with resource shortages and government cutbacks.

Participants observed that social services were not as valued as health and education services though felt that they should be. Lower public value for social services was linked to prevailing negative perceptions and to the broader and more complicated nature of social services.

One third of participants reported very high levels of trust in social services, which was associated with positive experiences, sustained relationships and emotionally rich relationships. Remaining participants described trusting ‘to a point’ and ‘trusting the people not the service’. Trust in social services was also associated with dependence and with understanding the constraints framing services. Few studies have explored public trust in social services though these findings accord with Revan’s (2007) findings which found that two thirds of those sampled would trust social workers.

Lower levels of trust were associated with negative experiences and outcomes and with bureaucratic relationships. Though loosening, value and trust was also negatively affected by prevailing negative perceptions of social services.

Once gained, trust in social service staff appeared resilient. Trust derived through experience served as an important counter to broader negative influences.

5.8.5 Influences on public perceptions

All identified personal and, to a lesser extent, professional experience as the most significant influence on perceptions. The significant influence of experience is also noted by Penhale and Young (2015) who identify personal experience and the media as the two most significant influences.
Next to experience, and in common with existing research, all identified the significant influence of the media, and in particular the press, on public perceptions.

Media representations of social services were perceived to be mostly negative, distorted and sensationalised (see also, Penhale & Young, 2015; Legood et al, 2016 and Aldridge, 1990). Despite this, a small number of participants continued to cite media representations as reliable knowledge sources.

The sustained influence of negative constructions of social services as a form of social policing also emerged as a key influence. As in other studies, this influence appears to be dynamic and waning, though remains prevalent. (Revan’s, 2007; LeCroy & Stinson, 2004).

Participants highlighted individual life experience, values and politics as an additional influence. Little research exists in this area, contributing to low levels of knowledge about how to influence public perceptions and of the efficacy of different approaches.
6 Conclusions and key findings

The *Vision and Strategy for Scottish Social Services 2015-2020* was published by the Social Work Services Strategic Forum in March 2015. One of its four key work strands is the promotion of public understanding. Promoting public understanding is important in recognising the value of the sector and the people who work within it. The concluding section of this report of a research project goes some way towards fulfilling one core component of the *Vision and Strategy* document:

- Undertake research into public understanding and value of the sector. This will involve collation of existing evidence and might involve engaging with specialist public engagement researchers to identify key areas to focus on in terms of improving public understanding and evaluating public value.

The specific objectives for the commissioned research were to:

- Identify and gather information from any previous or existing work undertaken to explore public perceptions of the Scottish social services sector.

- Undertake a detailed examination of the current level of knowledge, understanding and public attitudes towards social services and the reasons for these views. Getting beneath the surface of these perceptions is crucial so we can gain an understanding of why people form these views and what influences them.

- Present clear conclusions about current public perceptions and the reasons why these have developed.

Public understanding of social services in Scotland was an unknown phenomenon prior to the commissioning of this research. The results of the survey and focus groups provide the first empirical data about perceptions of a nationally representative sample of Scottish people about social services. The survey data provides evidence about how the respondents perceive the value of social services and the prospects for acceptance of various interventions, resource allocation and policy developments in Scotland.
Key findings are presented from the study about public understanding of social services in Scotland in this conclusion. The research was conducted by Dr Trish McCulloch and Professor Stephen Webb and commissioned by the Social Work Services Strategic Forum.

This final section reports on the survey data, focus groups and literature based findings. In order to establish which issues are seen as most deserving of emphasis the statistical data has been aggregated and analysed, and descriptive key findings of themed and correlated data items have been prepared. In addition, using some of the statistics gathered by the survey and existing relevant information, the key findings determine the overall picture in terms of public understanding of social services in Scotland. Although it contains the vital points of the survey, the conclusion is a synthesis of the survey and focus group results, the interpretation of such, and indication about possible courses of action or solution to the issues that emerged from the data.

It is noteworthy that this is the first study of its kind ever undertaken in Scotland. Moreover, with a sample size of 2505, it’s the largest study - in terms of sample size and national population range - ever conducted about public perceptions of social services or social work.

Overall, the survey findings suggest a good level of support for social services in Scotland and reasonable level of literacy among respondents about what social services do. In fact, it appears that the public has a much more positive view of social services than social service workers perceive the public to hold. Overall, people in Scotland are positive about social services impact on society and believe these services perform an important public role. Key issues are addressed by integrating the survey and the focus group findings and it is possible to offer several major findings which act as a summary of the overall analysis. Listed below are eleven key takeaways:

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4 The research study’s closest previous comparison was Public Knowledge of and Attitudes Towards Social Work in Scotland commissioned in 2005. This research comprised two main components: a nationally representative survey of 1,015 adults (aged, 16+) across Scotland, and a series of 8 focus groups. The overarching aim of the research was to provide the 21st Century Social Work Review Group with a deeper understanding of public knowledge of, and attitudes towards, social workers and the context in which they operate.
Key finding ONE – Public view of social services

1. Half the sample had a positive view of social services and the provision of social services in Scotland.

2. The public view of social services is not strongly negative.

3. 50% agreed with the statement "Overall, the provision of social services for the public in Scotland is good". 29% disagreed, and 21% don’t know.

4. 49% of the sample had a net positive view of social services, compared to 34% negative, and 17% don’t know.

Key finding TWO – Positive perceptions of social services

The most positive overall finding in the survey was to the two statements: -

- "Social services play an important role in supporting most vulnerable people in communities". 73% agreed: 13% disagreed: 14% did not know. 1832 respondents (from the sample of 2505) agreed with this statement.

- "Social services provide a valuable service to the people of Scotland” 71% agreed: 13% disagreed: 16% did not know.

- Higher levels of educational attainment correlate positively with more positive perceptions of social services.
Key finding THREE – Issues of trust and blame

People are generally trusting of social services and believe they are unfairly blamed when things go wrong. This is demonstrated in response to the following statements:

- To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Social services professionals can generally be trusted to do their job well”.
  - 62% agreed: 22% disagreed: 16% don’t know.

- To what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement? "Social services are often unfairly blamed when something goes wrong”.
  - 52% agreed: 28% disagreed: 20% did not know.

Key finding FOUR – Social licence to operate

Social services in Scotland do have a social licence to operate (SLO). When we talk about SLO we are really talking about social acceptance and public trust. While the data makes it difficult to quantify the levels of support and trust in exact terms it does suggest the social licence is at the level of acceptance.

- If social services in Scotland has established credibility of the sort reflected in the data its social licence is considered equivalent to the level of ‘approval’ and the justification for its services and funding is stable. The approval level is characterised by respondent support for the service and a resistance to the ideas disseminated by critics of social services.

Key finding FIVE – the Scottish public are not illiterate about social services

- The data suggests that public understanding of social services needs improvement, but the problem is not one of “illiteracy.” The findings show the Scottish public has a reasonable amount of knowledge about the function of social services (legal and organisational) and an average understanding of resources available in terms of types of social services provision.
• However, the public’s understanding of the issues related to social services is relatively weak. The pattern of responses we received to our issue and knowledge questions seemed to reflect wishful guessing. This is unsurprising given that only 35% of respondents report any involvement with social services.

• The public’s understanding of home or day care support for older people shows the highest level of literacy.

**Key finding SIX – The public has a more positive view of social services than social workers believe**

• The largely sceptical position of how social services are perceived is held by the profession and institutions themselves and is not shared by the public.

• While 49% of the sample had a net positive perception of social services, the *Guardian Social Lives Research (2014)* found that only 3% of social workers felt the profession had a positive public image.

**Key find SEVEN – The media is not as influential in shaping perception as people might think**

• The data suggests that personal and contextual factors most influenced the ways in which the public understand social services, rather than media coverage or controversy surrounding critical incidents.

• Fearful tabloid press generated representations of social services appear not to impact decisively on public perception. This means that public understanding is less volatile in relation to media attention than typically believed by leadership and practitioners in the profession.

• While 42% of respondents perceive the media to have the biggest influence on the image and reputation of social services this does not mean the public are unaware of the negative impact this has (48%: Q25) or that this leads to social services being unfairly blamed (52%: Q24)) when things go wrong.
Key finding EIGHT – Personal exposure to social services influences perceptions

- Public perceptions are strongly influenced by repeated exposure to consistently expressed personal experiences or issues arising from local (or lack of) contact with social services. This finding is generally supported by the qualitative data (open text box responses and focus group responses) and pre-existing research.

Key finding NINE – “Invisible” and hard to access social services are significant factors

- A consistent finding revealed in the qualitative data (open text box responses and focus group responses) concerned the “invisibility” of social services and hard to access nature of social services resources. This finding is well supported by existing research on accessing services.

- For focus group respondents ‘they’ (social services) appeared occasionally, typically at critical points, then ‘disappeared’, with ‘no follow up’. The strain of accessing services for older people, and in particular understanding and negotiating eligibility, was a common concern.

- Meaningful involvement in decision making emerged as an important issue to individuals and their families.

- Visibility, public facing communication and engagement was considered critical to improved public understanding and perceptions of social services.

- The qualitative data showed there was a strong tendency to trust the individual social worker but not the service or ‘system’ they worked for.

Key finding TEN – There are few significant correlations with demographic factor data

- In terms of concerns about or support for social services in Scotland a significant finding from the survey is that there are few correlations at all between demographic factors of age, socio-economic status and level of education, and concern about or support for social services.
Key finding ELEVEN – Distinct groups of public perception of social services

- Looking beyond demographic characteristics the findings suggest there are unique audience segments relative to the public perception of social services which can be used for future research. Based on the findings it is feasible to categorise the responses into four distinct groupings of public perception of social services:

1. Optimists
   Scoring high on social services optimism and low on social services reservations.
2. Pessimists
   Scoring high on social services reservations and low on social services optimism.
3. Conflicted (ambivalent)
   Scoring high on both measures of reservation and optimism.
4. Disengaged
   Scoring low on both measures of reservation and optimism.

Further developing these categories can add value to a stratified approach to developing a targeted public engagement campaign, rather than a one-size-fits all for Scottish social services.

Incidental finding

People in Renfrewshire (62%) were most likely to agree with the statement “overall the provision of social services in Scotland is good”. Across all regions in Scotland they also had the best level (71% very good/good) of understanding of social services.

Literature review findings

The findings obtained from the literature review leads to several conclusions.
• First, no consistent effort has been made to understand public perceptions of social services in Scotland.

• Second, no apparent effort has been made within or across the social services community to develop consistent messages.

• Third, few organisations involved in promoting public understanding of social services have developed their messages in a systematic, scientific way or tested the effectiveness of their messages.

• Fourth, there is no convincing evidence showing that messaging efforts to date have significantly improved public understanding of social services.

Summary statement combining literature review and qualitative data findings

We know that public understanding is different from public approval, and we know that public image is not “everything”. In the case of social services, the survey and focus group data show that the public view of social services is not strongly negative. At the same time, the data suggests that public perceptions of social services are based on a limited idea of what it takes to do social services rather than what is means to be a social service worker. Moreover, for focus group respondents there is a distinct tendency to trust social workers more than they do social service providers.

Not all surveyed respondents engage with the social services in the same way and a large segment remains disengaged, suggesting that social services organizations should not use a 'one-size-fits-all' approach in their public engagement strategies. 'Layering and tailoring' information and assistance to the public with varying levels of interest, experience, need, and technical proficiency may be key to sustainable engagement initiatives for social services in Scotland. Similarly, identifying “stakeholder champions”, “strategic information brokers” and visible sites for social services may significantly influence levels of approval and trust for social services. Further research is required to evaluate the possibilities of a stronger online and social media presence and its impact on public understanding.
Remaining critical issues

- The above provides an understanding of public perceptions of social services in Scotland as reported in 2016. Repeat measure research is required if we are to understand if and how public perceptions shift and are shaped over time.

- The findings speak mostly to public perceptions of social services as a collection of services. They do not fully explore differences across social service areas. Additional research data is required to better understand whether public perceptions, understanding and trust vary across diverse service areas. It would be important to investigate whether a ‘layering and tailoring’ approach to public engagement is preferred to a one-size fits all solution.

- How do social services institutions (such as the Social Work Services Strategic Forum) frame questions of public understanding? (deficit model, technical approach to risk management, safety, and political power).

- Are the institutional framings poorly aligned with participants’ responses?

- The literature review shows that efforts have been made to improve what might be termed “public sector literacy” among the general population in Scotland but it remains difficult to empirically establish what has been achieved in terms of evidence-based outcomes. This throws up issues about whether the social services community have been able to “get their message across?” Or even whether the public is insufficiently interested in matters related to social services if they don’t affect them directly?

- Does there remain any significant myth bursting that needs to be done in relation to public understanding of social services especially in relation to influential sources such as the media?

- How can recent scholarship from science and technology studies more productively elucidate participant’s perceptions and social services response to public understanding? This would suggest a more experimental approach to public engagement innovation involving the co-production and co-creation of deliberative democratic forums.
References


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