

USER VOICE

ONLY OFFENDERS CAN STOP RE-OFFENDING

DOES SOCIAL WORK CARE?

A User Voice consultation for the College of Social Work

Supported by the Centre for Innovation in Health
Management, University of Leeds

THE COLLEGE OF
SOCIAL WORK

CHM

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

The College of Social Work, established as a result of the recommendation of the Social Work Task Force, commissioned User Voice to conduct part of its wide-ranging consultation examining social worker activities. The over-arching aim of this piece of work was to explore the approach the College of Social Work should make for the profession so that social workers are able to work with and support their clients as efficiently and effectively as possible. This report sets out the main findings of the work carried out by User Voice.

Methods

This project was a collaborative venture led and delivered by User Voice and supported by the Centre for Innovation in Health Management at the University of Leeds.

User Voice is led and delivered by ex-offenders and former drug and alcohol users. It exists to reduce offending by working with the most marginalised people in and around the criminal justice system to ensure that practitioners and policy-makers hear their voices. It is well placed to gain the trust of and access to people involved in crime and addiction.

A number of focus groups were held at various locations through England in prison and in the community with young offenders and adults with drug and alcohol misuse problems who had first-hand experience of social workers. The format of these sessions consisted of two parts. The first involved an activity in which participants commented on statements placed around the room reflecting their agreement or disagreements with the statement. Part two involved a more detailed discussion revolving around experiences of social services and suggestions for improvement. A number of participants were also given the opportunity to make further comment and contributions through interviews.

Statement exercise findings

I expect my social worker to listen to me

Most participants expected social workers to listen to them. However, comments received via the placement of post-it notes indicated that this did not regularly happen which created a sense of powerlessness over their own lives.

I expect my social worker to tell me what to do

Some respondents expected support and guidance from social workers in relation to 'being told what to do', but felt that there was a subtle difference between being guided and being told.

My social worker must put my best interests first

There was generally strong agreement that social workers must put the best interests of participants first during their engagements and interactions, except when there were children involved whose interests were the most important.

Social workers don't understand me

A number indicated that social workers do not understand them because they do not know a great deal about their life histories. They wanted to talk to people who had experienced similar situations and had their own contact with social services.

Focus group and interview findings

Much of the discussion focused around a set of recurring themes (in order of frequency of occurrence):

- Participants did not generally believe that social workers listened to them.
- Social workers assigned to participants seemed to change frequently, thereby creating feelings of instability in the relationship.
- Social workers do not understand the lives experienced by participants.
- Social workers break up families without seeking a young person's view on what should happen.
- Participants experienced many placements whilst being placed in care.
- Those with similar life experiences should be engaged as social workers.
- Social workers should attempt to work with appropriate 'information givers' who can work with young people before introducing them to formal processes coordinated by social workers.
- Social workers should have more training to enhance their communication skills and to enable them to be more empathetic with participants.
- There should be more information on the rights of the individual or family when social workers first become involved.
- Social workers have heavy workloads.
- A lack of trust of social workers.

Recommendations

In developing its role the College of Social Work should take account of service users' experiences and perceptions expressed in this consultation including the following:

1. The need for social workers and decision-making procedures clearly and demonstrably to **listen** to individual service users before plans or decisions are made affecting their future.

2. The need to ensure that social workers' **communication skills** enable them to communicate empathy with and confidence on the part of service users.
3. The importance of ensuring that social workers and decision-making procedures systematically provide service users with **information on their rights**.
- 4.. The high importance placed by service users on the need for greater **stability of relationships**, both with individual social workers and in relation to changes of placements.
5. The importance of ensuring that those delivering social work services have **personal experience** of the situations and circumstances affecting service users including:
 - (a) the use of former service users in providing information and assisting in assessments at the beginning of the process
 - (b) the use of former service users in peer mentoring, and
 - (c) viewing former service users as a source of potential future recruitment to the social work profession and developing proactive and systematic strategies to promote this
6. The need for the delivery of social work services, and the **training** which underpins delivery, to be strongly **value-driven** in addition to developing skills and promoting qualifications and standards
7. The importance of embedding structures in social work agencies for effective **service user engagement**, enabling service users to provide regular feedback on their perception and experience of the services which they receive.

DOES SOCIAL WORK CARE?

Social workers play an essential role in protecting children and young people from harm and in supporting people of every age who find themselves in vulnerable circumstances. It is clear, however, that social work is facing some acute challenges and concerns. These include the quality of initial training, recruitment and vacancy rates, and the status of the profession as a whole. These issues and others have an impact on day-to-day practice.

In December 2009 the Social Work Task Force published its final report which made a range of challenging recommendations to the Government for social work reform. The report emphasised that the practice of social work needs to be raised to a new level. Recommendations included a call for a reformed system of initial training, together with greater leadership and a strong national voice for the social work profession, led by a college of social work.

The Government response accepted the recommendations, and undertook to take them forward. During the initial stages of development the College of Social Work has arranged a very wide consultation about the purpose and functions of the College. A range of stakeholders, including social workers, those who use social work services and those who employ social workers, have been involved. The consultation took place between mid May and October 2010 and will inform the further development of the College.

In September 2010, the College of Social Work commissioned User Voice to conduct part of its wide-ranging consultation examining social worker activities. The over-arching aim of this piece of work was to explore the approach the College of Social Work should make for the profession so that social workers are able to work with and support their clients as efficiently and effectively as possible. This report sets out the main findings of the work carried out by User Voice.

OUR APPROACH

In order to facilitate meaningful and full involvement of people who use services, The College of Social Work recognised the need for this consultation to be delivered by user-led organisations.

User Voice

User Voice is led and delivered by ex-offenders and former drug and alcohol users. It exists to reduce offending by working with the most marginalised people in and around the criminal justice system to ensure that practitioners and policy-makers hear their voices. It is well placed to gain the trust of and access to people involved in crime and addiction. It aims to deliver a powerful rehabilitation experience for service users, better rehabilitation services and institutions, and more effective policy.

User Voice was founded in 2009 by Mark Johnson, an ex-offender and former drug abuser, best-selling author of *Wasted* and social commentator. Mark's experiences of prison, and later as an employer of ex-offenders and consultant – taking on various roles within the criminal justice system and voluntary sector – left him convinced of the need to create a model of engagement that is fair and incentive led. His aim was to foster dialogue between service providers and users that is mutually beneficial and results in better and more cost-effective services.

All the work User Voice has done suggests offenders want to talk to people who have 'walked in their shoes'. This includes:

- **User Voice Councils** that can be developed for use within prisons or in the community for probation, youth offending teams and other related services.
- **Bespoke consultancy** where User Voice works with clients to design projects aimed at accessing, hearing and acting upon the insights of those who are hardest to reach, including prisoners, ex-offenders and those at risk of crime. These projects include staff and user consultations, workshops and research.
- **Advocacy work** aimed at engaging the media, the public, practitioners and policy-makers.

User Voice recruits qualified and talented ex-offenders to lead the organisation and to carry out its frontline work. This has a profound impact on employees' self-confidence and transforms their long-term employment prospects. More broadly User Voice demonstrates the hugely positive role ex-offenders can play given the right circumstances.

Service user involvement

Listening to service users to improve public services is not a new concept; in fact, it is now commonplace. There is broad recognition that effective user engagement can help to improve services and their outcomes by:

- identifying their needs;
- highlighting current systemic failings or gaps between provision and the reality for the end user; and,
- providing ideas for change.

Marginalised groups are often missing from user engagement strategies. This is particularly true of those with substance misuse problems and young offenders. This project – indeed User Voice itself – is based on the belief that we all benefit and learn when service users are engaged in the services that impact on their lives and their path to rehabilitation.

Given the personal and professional experience of our staff, we feel that we are uniquely placed to reach adults with substance misuse problems and young offenders, especially those most excluded, often deemed ‘hardest to reach’ and motivate them to engage in the consultation.

Methods

This project is a collaborative venture led and delivered by User Voice and supported by the Centre for Innovation in Health Management at the University of Leeds. Given its core theme, the project sought to involve service users in a way that altered the traditional dynamics of power in research activity. Too often research about service users is undertaken by academics without their involvement and with little attention given to issues of power and involvement. With this in mind, in this project User Voice took the lead role and the Centre for Innovation in Health Management were commissioned to collect and analyse the research data. This helped redress the power dynamic in favour of the user.

In order to address the over-arching aims of the project, perspectives were sought from two groups who had had experience of social services and social workers: **young offenders** and **adults with drug and alcohol misuse problems**. To do this we conducted five discussion groups in prisons and in the community in a range of geographic locations across England and followed some of these up with one-to-one interviews. In total 46 took part representing a diverse range of experiences and backgrounds, including:

- 37 male
- 9 female
- 14 young offenders
- 32 adults

Five focus groups were held at various locations with those who had first-hand experience of social workers. Groups were identified as either 'young offenders' or 'adults with drug and alcohol misuse problems'.

These sessions consisted of two parts. Part one involved an activity where participants commented on the following statements placed around the room reflecting their agreement or disagreements with the statement.

I expect my social worker to listen to me

I expect my social worker to tell me what to do

My social worker must put my best interests first

Social workers don't understand me

The second part involved a general discussion revolving around experiences of social services and suggestions for improvement. Participants were encouraged to be solution focussed relating their own engagement with social services, both positive and negative, to recommendations for change. Throughout the process of undertaking focus groups facilitators identified individuals who clearly felt more comfortable in a one to one session. These participants were given the opportunity to give further insight through interviews.

In order to protect the identity of those who contributed to focus groups and interviews we have changed their names.

STATEMENT EXERCISE FINDINGS

In each focus group session, a number of statements relating to social workers were placed around the room with response categories placed beneath it ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Each participant was encouraged to place a post-it note indicating their preferred response to the statement within a category; they were also encouraged to include comments on their post-it notes clarifying their response.

The charts do not differentiate between young offenders and adults as there was little variance in the responses given. A more detailed breakdown to the statement exercise, by focus group session, is provided in Appendix 1.

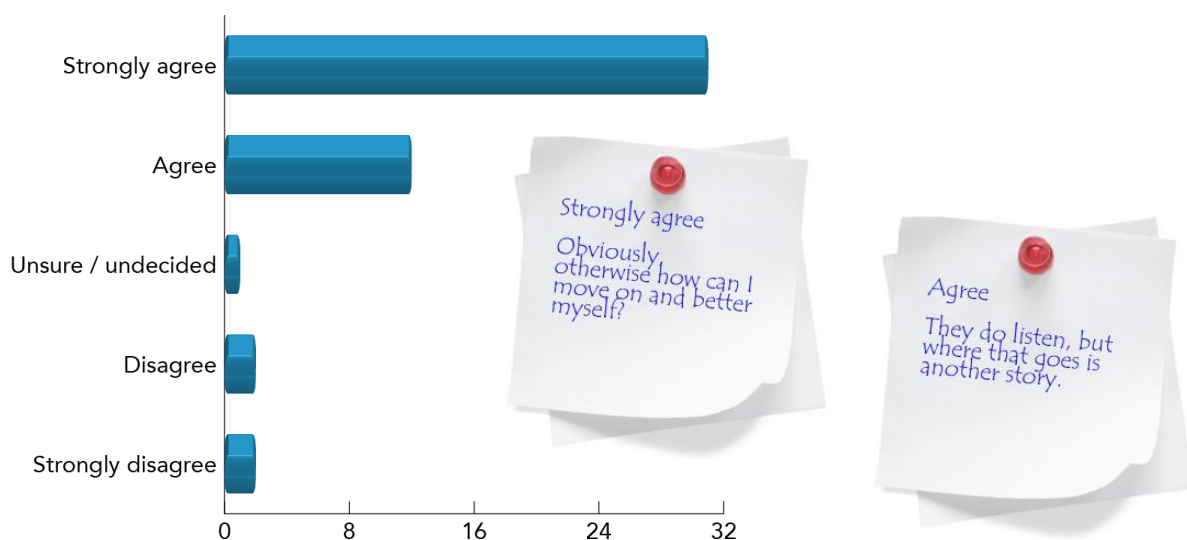


Figure 1: I expect my social worker to listen to me

Across all four focus groups, most participants expected social workers to listen to them. However, comments received via the placement of post-it notes indicated that this did not regularly happen. Around a third of those who participated in the sessions believed that social workers gave the impression to them (and others around them) that they listened to their issues and concerns, but this was not reflected in their (social worker) actions. This generated feelings of being talked at rather than being involved.



Figure 2: I expect my social worker to tell me what to do

There was some variation in response to this question. Some respondents expected support and guidance from social workers in relation to ‘being told what to do’. However, others felt that social workers often adopted a ‘parent-child’ approach to working with participants – which was inappropriate given the age and maturity of some of the group.

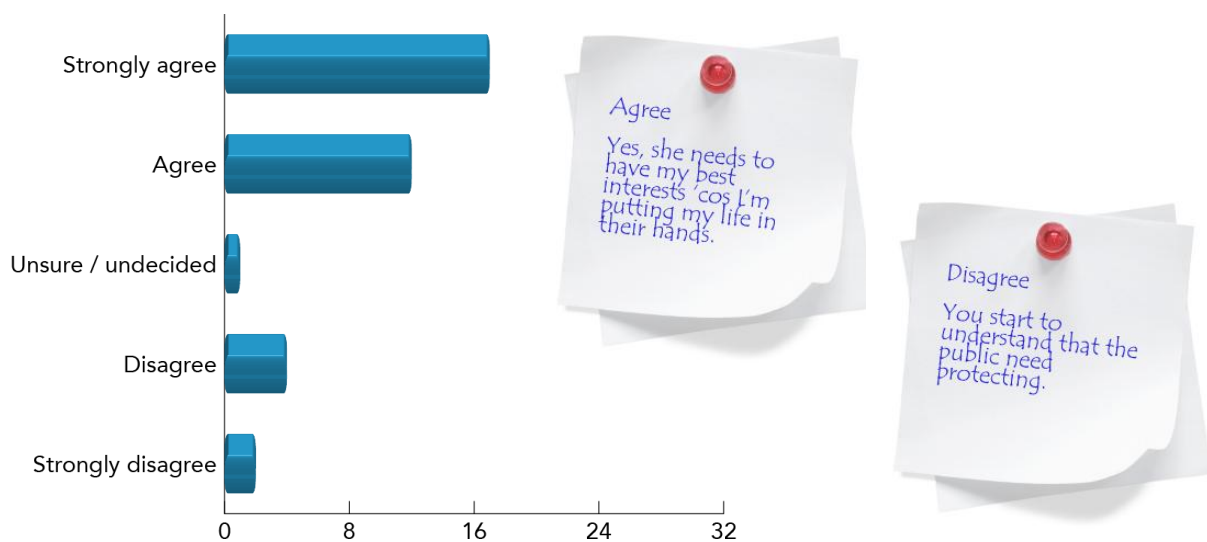


Figure 3: My social worker must put my best interests first

There was generally strong agreement that social workers must put the best interests of participants first during their engagements and interactions. This did not always happen though; some participants indicated that social workers provided them with ‘false promises’, whilst others indicated that they ‘didn’t get the feeling that this always happened’. A minority disagreed with the statement by

clarifying that the interests of the child, where relevant, should be the primary concern, which was most evident among adults.

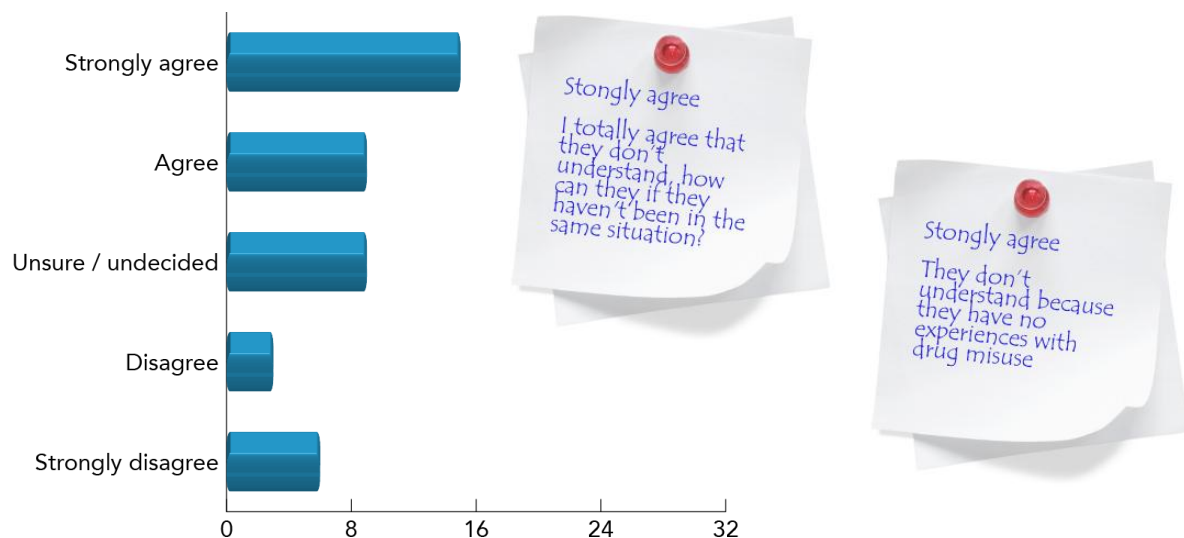


Figure 4: Social workers don't understand me

The majority of participants agreed with this statement for a variety of reasons. Around half of participants indicated that social workers do not understand them because they do not know a great deal about their life histories or experiences. Others stated that in order for social workers to fully understand participants situations required them (social workers) to have direct experiences of the issues they regularly faced.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Following the statement exercise, each focus group then moved on to discuss some of the points or issues raised by participants as a result of the activity in more detail. The whole focus group discussion was designed to be an emergent and developmental exercise dominated by the topics and areas put forward by participants themselves. The facilitating research team acted as note-takers and guides, ensuring all topics raised at the session were given equal time for discussion and debate.

Much of the discussion focused around a set of recurring themes (in order of frequency of occurrence) which are explained in greater detail in the next section:

- Participants did not generally believe that social workers listened to them.
- Social workers assigned to participants seemed to change frequently, thereby creating feelings of instability in the relationship.
- Social workers do not understand the lives experienced by participants.
- Social workers break up families without seeking a young person's view on what should happen.
- Participants experienced many placements whilst being placed in care.
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- There should be more information on the rights of the individual or family when social workers first become involved.
- Social workers have heavy workloads.
- A lack of trust of social workers.

Participants did not generally believe that social workers listened to them

This was a very common theme across all of the focus group sessions. Many participants felt that, as children and adults, they were unheard. Around a third indicated that they had very little say in decisions that affected where or how they lived because they were considered too young to understand such issues. This left them feeling powerless and voiceless in the direction of their care and personal development. Some also stated that they felt more capable of making decisions, or at least being involved in them, than the social worker allowed.

" ... when I was in school, we had a big massive round table and they'd sit me on one side and him [social worker] at the other and every time that we had a meeting, every three months or six months or whatever, I'd jump on the table and try and

attack him. Because I just hated him because that's one thing he did do, he didn't listen. And I wanted him to listen, like think ... like ask me but he never, he just decided for me. You'd have all these people sat in a room and then I'd be out the room and then I think I was allowed in for the last half an hour while the summary was done and then they'd ask my opinion. But they never took it into consideration anyway, so it was pointless."

(Male adult)

"They have all these people making decisions about me that have never met you and don't know you and they don't come and ask you, they just make decisions. You come in and then they tell you what's happening."

(Male adult)

"If no-one's listening to you, you think well you know what, I might as well end up in prison or end up in this place where you're smoking weed or selling crack. And you're thinking that's when they want to listen to you, after you've been in prison, then they want to listen to you."

(Male adult)

"Sometimes you need a bit of guidance or advice, not just to be forced into something."

(Female adult)

"I'm not going to waste my time and breath you know what, I'm not going to walk in a social worker place to sit down and listen to them talk to them, I'd rather make them listen to what I've got to say. I've no time for them."

(Male young offender)

"I need them to hear my voice, I need their help. I'm 17 now, I'm 18 in July and obviously I'm not going to have a social worker no more and I've had them all my life and I'm not going to have one no more. It's going to be a shock, isn't it? I reckon it's going to be a bad thing. I reckon I could end up in jail all my life."

(Male young offender)

"I do hold back but obviously like when I speak to my social worker, I tell her things, I ask her things and I think she just ... she doesn't understand why I want these things. She just thinks well that's not going to be good for you."

(Male young offender)

CASE STUDY: DARREN

Darren can remember being involved with Social Services when he was about 7 or 8 years old. This was at a time in his life when he kept running away from living with his step-father (who was looking after Darren and his brothers and sisters in an attempt to support Darren's mother who was having difficulty coping with things). Darren claims that Social Workers didn't really do much for him during this time, other than moving him from place to place. In total Darren remembers being

moved between around a dozen children's homes during his childhood. It didn't appear that Social Workers listened to the requests of Darren when it came to where he lived: *'I was meant to go and visit the places first'* Darren told us, *'but they ended up just dropping me off there – they never really listened to me a lot'.*

Social workers assigned to participants seemed to change frequently, thereby creating feelings of instability in the relationship

Many participants indicated that relationships between themselves and social workers were difficult to develop because social workers would frequently change. This meant that, for many, communication and trust would need to be developed with new social workers – causing frustration for some participants who would be required to constantly repeat information and provide contextual details for the situation they were in. This, in effect, acted as a mechanism for preventing progress and movement forward for some participants who were seeking stable guidance and support from a single source.

"... my social workers change on a regular basis. They don't want to handle my case and they'll pass it on to somebody else, so I've never got to the point where I've actually been able to know the person and for them to know things about me. They've just heard what they've heard through the previous social worker."
(Female adult)

"If they only know what's in the logbook, they don't know nothing. Because when I speak to my social worker, yeah, she doesn't actually know my life. Every year I've had a different social worker and they always leave, so the next social worker comes in and she just reads the book straightaway and she thinks oh my gosh. And then she sees me and she's all timid and that ... They don't take the time to get to know you, they just think they know you from what they've read from the file."
(Male young offender)

"I've had different experiences with them because I've had quite a lot of different social workers and that. And because when they keep leaving and they go into the community team and stuff and like they get a higher position or something, you know. And yeah, I've been in different children's homes, foster carers and stuff, just me and my dad. It's been difficult because I've always felt unsettled; I've never like really had a stable life."
(Male young offender)

Social workers do not understand the lives experienced by participants

There was considerable debate in all focus group sessions relating to the knowledge and understanding of social workers in relation to the lived experience of participants. Around a third of participants were extremely frustrated by the fact

that social workers would make assessments and judgements on their lives when they had no real experience of what participants faced.

"No matter what happens, if you're in trouble, you need help, you go to your parents. And when your parents aren't there to help you, the next best thing people say is social workers but as you say like I had an experience ... even people I know, people that's lived in care their whole life, the social worker don't help nobody."

(Male adult)

"Basically my drug-taking took over my life, heroin was my life; my kids came second, heroin came first ... I went into Social Services, told them I couldn't cope, 'Well we'll give you a social worker, to help you out, give you a food parcel'. I didn't need a food parcel, what I needed was my kids taking away so's that I knew they would be okay and looked after and cared for and me and Martin could sort ourselves out. Because I couldn't do both together."

(Female adult)

"Like you said, she knows what her feelings are and how she felt, so them who's going to college and studying about it ... she doesn't know how that person's feeling."

(Female adult)

"Social workers need to know, they need to understand you can be a good parent and be a drug user, you can be in the middle. You can be good enough and you can be better with support."

(Female adult)

"I just strongly disagree because of my experiences and I just feel like they don't always know what's best for you. You have to kind of tell them what you want and what you want to change because if you don't do that, then you won't be able to go further and that and get what you want to get."

(Male young offender)

"Well I think like there's a few that do but some of them sort of ... but most of them ... they think that they understand what you're going through but they don't ... And they don't know about what you're thinking, what you have been through. They might see what's written on the paper isn't it but that doesn't mean that they actually know."

(Male young offender)

"Some social workers don't even have kids and they come in thinking oh if I had a kid, I'd do ... you ain't got a kid, so you don't know. You don't understand really, do you?"

(Male young offender)

CASE STUDY: FORMER DRUG USER, MOTHER AND SISTER

In one of the focus groups three family members talked about the experience with Social Services from their own perspective. The family members were a former drug user, the former drug user's mother, and the former drug user's sister.

The former drug user used heroin for many years. This resulted in becoming addicted and as a result relationships with family members breaking down. Social services got involved when she had a child. Her young daughter was eventually taken away from her due to her inability to cope with the responsibility of being a mother. She agreed with her mother (the daughter's grandmother) having her daughter, as she accepted that she was unable to care for her due to her drug use, but felt that her daughter should go to family, as she knew them.

The former drug user's mother described how it was heart breaking watching her daughter and granddaughter being split apart, as a direct result of her drug use. The grandmother, herself was not a drinker or smoker and felt that her granddaughter should go and live with her as she would be close to her family. She communicated this to Social Services and after they checked her background, they refused to allow her granddaughter to live with her whilst her daughter looked for help to get clean. Social services refused this request because the former drug user's mother had previously (but no longer) been in a violent relationship.

It was a very difficult situation for the sister as she was watching her mother, sister and niece hurting. She felt that social services could have been more sensitive to their issues rather than looking for excuses to not have her niece live with them. She stated she felt hopeless as all she wanted was for her family to be a unit even if her sister had a drug problem. She went on to say that they supported her sister throughout her recovery process and never gave up hope in her, however social services did. Rather than help they were a hindrance.

Social workers break up families without seeking a young person's view on what should happen

There were strongly held views amongst many participants that social workers did not provide supportive roles when parents and their children wanted to stay together. This created a sense of fear for many when social workers expressed an interest in them or their family members. Some highlighted that, in their own cases, more considerate support for parents (in terms of dealing with the complexities of bringing up children) would have been more beneficial, rather than immediately resorting to placing children in care. Others indicated that preventative action, such as removing a child from a potentially dangerous environment, was the correct form of action in many situations.

" You feel like you can't open your mouth and say anything, don't you? ... Like you might not understand my behaviour and what's going on but actually I really do

love my kids and I really want to do the best thing here... So like I don't want it to be like I'm the enemy because when you've met them, you feel like the enemy."
(Female adult)

"I think they could do with changing the name because the name Social Services to me, it's like straightaway it put me on the defensive when I hear that Social Services are getting involved. I was straightaway like well come on then, let's get ready to think about this and things like that. And also, I think there should be like a different mix to it, like because they are against you. The majority of them... my experiences are anyway, they've always wanted to get a result, if you like, always wanted to prove that I've done something. That's how it's felt anyway."
(Male adult)

"Instead of just banging me straight in care, just give my mum the help that she needed. Instead of taking me out once a month for a cheeseburger or something... They should have started helping her first ... they could have thought about where they put me."
(Male adult)

"... I asked them to take them away from me, I couldn't cope with children, the heroin was coming first."
(Female adult)

"But at the end of the day, I think if you're in a situation where a social worker's involved, then I think that that social worker's best interests has got to be that kid."
(Male adult)

"... you just feel like kind of I'm fed up with Social Services, they piss me off. They've taken me from mum, my mum wanted me so much and they kept saying they were going to put me on this section, that section so I can't see my mum. It's all bullshit because I couldn't be bothered, I'd just walk out from the home and go home and they'd report me missing. I'd get arrested and they'd do the same thing over and over again."
(Male young offender)

"I think that they help you but... they help you and that but they're breaking your family apart. I want to be with my brother and my brother went somewhere, my other brother's there, my little brother's gone somewhere else and it's mean on us all and not in our best interests like."
(Male young offender)

CASE STUDY: RYAN AND MATT

In one of the groups there were two sets of brothers both of who had been in contact with social services for many years. One set of brothers described their mother using drugs and social services getting involved with them and taking them into care. However, they felt that their mother still looked after them and they had

all they needed. During the process of being taken in to care, they were spilt up and one of the brothers explained that he used to run away from the care home in Wales, and come back to London to be close to his mum and siblings. He went on to say that they never listened to him, they did what they wanted to do and in the process split him up from his family. When he became frustrated and did not know how to express this frustration, Social Services had him sectioned for depression where they restrained him and injected him with drugs. He described that all he needed at that time was someone to understand him.

Participants experienced many placements whilst being placed in care

A significant number of the focus group participants had been subject to many different placements whilst in the care of social services. This involved regular interactions with a range of social workers; most of these interactions were negative from the perspective of the participants who had been placed in care. A small number of participants indicated that the lack of stability caused by regular changes in care settings lead to criminal activity.

"Between the ages of 8/9 to 15½, so I spent like eight months a time in each different place and then upped and left."

(Male adult)

"... until they put me in care, I didn't have a criminal record. I was running away but I didn't have a criminal record and within two months of being in care, I was up for robbing cars, assaults, drinking, drugs, everything. And then it got to the point where I were doing it every week because the people that they had in the homes didn't help like."

(Male adult)

"I'm worse now than I was before, than before they put me into the secure unit, that's what I'm saying. I never used to do all these things but when I was in the secure unit, I met all these people and then I've just kind of seen them on the street and it's just worsen."

(Male adult)

CASE STUDY: JOHN

John's experiences as a child, being placed in various care settings, were not positive. John desperately wanted to remain with his brothers and sisters, but as there were seven of them, he recognised this was difficult: *'They separated us; they separated all of us'*. Even when placements could be made for him and some of his siblings (with foster parents) the experience was not pleasant – there was a real and noticeable difference in the way he was treated in comparison to his foster parents own children. *'They had kids of their own and they treated their kids differently ... they gave their kids cuddles'*. This difference in treatment caused John to feel angry and resulted in him being involved in a fight with his foster parent's son: *'... and that was that, so I got moved on again'*.

Those with similar life experiences should be engaged as social workers

Lack of familiarity, by social workers, with the lives experienced by participants caused participants to suggest that an effective social worker might be one who has a similar background. Some felt that if social workers had such experiences these could be drawn upon in order to associate more positively and helpfully with clients. Complexities and ambiguities in language used by social workers could also be mitigated if they associated more directly with them.

"I think it depends on the person and their outlook on the way they see things but the majority of social workers I've had, I haven't liked them from the first time I've met them."

(Female adult)

"Like the language people were using. And then also, I felt like they were getting at me rather than ... when they should have been supporting me. And I wanted ... what I really, really wanted and needed was someone to mention about what my rights were."

(Female adult)

"... probably using people who've been there, walked in the shoes, worn them out and are now no longer in the need of Social Services but probably put a lot back into Social Services that maybe they've experienced themselves."

(Male adult)

Social workers should attempt to work with appropriate 'information givers' who can work with young people before introducing them to formal processes coordinated by social workers

Because of the fear and anxiety faced by many participants who have come into contact with social workers, two participants suggested that it may be useful and beneficial for social workers to liaise with community intermediaries first, rather than undertaking initial, direct, contact. Such 'information givers' would act as the first point of contact for those who are subject to the interest of social workers. These community-based intermediaries, former service users themselves, would be able to informally support participants in a non-threatening way, whilst demystifying the process of social service engagement in their personal and family affairs.

"... if you've got people that can come out and assess people, not come out as Social Services but come out ... for an hour or a few hours, you'd get the basic gist of it and like assess people and then have Social Services in."

(Male adult)

"Yeah, so then that'd help the workload because there is a lot of people that Social Services are involved with, that they don't need to be."
(Male adult)

"I think they need to change their approach. What would be nice would be for like somebody to go ... come and talk to me ... Like me and you could talk or we could talk ... before Social Services come in ... And then like you've got a more relaxed approach to it."
(Female adult)

"I just wanted to be prepared for this, so that you're not frightened, nobody's going to frighten you into doing anything that you don't want to do and then Social Services come in."
(Female adult)

"I think people who have had experiences with Social Services before, if the Social Services like employed them to go and see the families first. If not to assess them, just to... like that lady said, give them information, 'You do know you can do this' and I think that'd help."
(Male adult)

Social workers should have more training to enhance their communication skills and to enable them to be more empathetic with service users

Lack of apparent ability to flexibly deal with the complex needs of service users led to suggestions that social workers required more training and development – based on the personal experiences of those in the focus group sessions. Some suggested that more sensitive approaches to dealing with their personal situation, rather than resorting to physical restraint, would have been beneficial to participants. Others outlined that improvements could be more instantly made if social workers communicated with each other in relation to the specifics of cases within their workload. A small number of participants recalled that their first encounters with social workers were frightening experiences purely because they were unsure of the processes, procedures and actions that were about to take place – therefore, the suggestion came forward that social workers should attempt to take this into consideration when seeking access to individuals and families.

"I got done for about 17 assaults throughout care, where it was just little bruises but they'd back you into a corner and they won't let you go out to calm down or anything and then they all jump on you restraining you. And because they don't know how to do it properly, they end up getting a few bruises or whatever and you're getting done for assault."
(Male adult)

"The youngest one were lost and it took me ... and my ex-wife, it took us both the best part of two years ... because one had got one social worker and one had got

another and getting the two halves together just didn't happen ... one was slightly better than the other, one we got more ... shown slightly more empathy towards the ex-wife if you like ... But I wish they had spoke to each other because I'm sure it would have been half the time. Who knows what damage were done to that young one when he was split up from his sister and his mam and put in a home miles away from where he lived."

(Male adult)

"They just didn't listen to what I wanted. I still needed contact with X, do you know what I mean, it wasn't our fault that she'd gone into care. Nobody informed us."

(Female adult)

"Because I'd just been arrested, I knew I was going to go to prison ... And I was going down to this Social Services places and the Police were there, there's a whole crowd of people round this table and I was just on my own and I felt really ... you know, I'm quite articulate but I felt really, really frightened. I felt powerless and I felt like as well overwhelmed by all the bureaucracy and the paperwork and the reports and the language."

(Female adult)

" ... she were really understanding because I was getting upset, frustrated you know, I were crying saying you know, I've wanted this baby for so long, she's going to be loved, blah-blah-blah. And she were really understanding and she said 'I can totally see where you're coming from, it looks bad but you haven't done nothing so don't worry."

(Female adult)

"I just think respect, that's a major thing. If you want to get along as well, because if you're going to have a long time with this person and I think mutual respect ... not to like each other but as long as you respect each other, then you can get that bit further along."

(Female adult)

"And involve other people from other sectors to help them, you know like a drug worker to help them and understand that not everybody's the same, people are all different."

(Female adult)

"They need to train the people properly, isn't it? ... My social worker was saying 'Yeah, I'll do this, I'll try and sort this out for you'. And you go and meet them wherever and you're waiting ... they come and its like 'What's going on?' and they haven't done nothing ... just making excuses, when they'd said 'Oh yeah, I'm going to do this for you'. I mean I reckon they need to actually like stick by their word ... False promises isn't it, false promises."

(Male young offender)

"They need to kind of just speak to you more or even if they can't come, they should at least inform you, get someone to inform like the Prison Service to inform you or write a letter to you at least, just so that you know that they're not coming and they're actually showing that they care because they're letting you know, isn't it? But when they don't let you know or they don't contact you or nothing, it's just like oh it's the same thing over and over."
(Male young offender)

CASE STUDY: SHARON

Sharon had recently secured permanent accommodation for herself and her young child. She was finding it difficult to make ends meet but was, just about, coping. However, one day whilst cleaning her small flat she knocked over the baby milk she was preparing for her child. This was the only milk she had and she did not have any money to buy more. As a last resort, she called her local Social Services to ask for support in buying some more milk. Sharon claims that they appeared disinterested and said they couldn't support her: *'They didn't say 'have you tried this?', 'have you tried that?' – they just basically said we can't help you and put the phone down'*. Sharon thought that the only option available to her was to resort to an activity she was all too familiar with, shoplifting. Luckily for her, a friend suggested she contact the Salvation Army who were able to purchase some milk for Sharon. This has left Sharon feeling let down by Social Services: *'they are supposed to help you and I've never been to them for nothing ... I've never been to Social Services and asked for anything and this is how they're supposed to help me; how is that helping anyone?'*

Social workers have heavy workloads

Around a quarter of participants recognised that social workers often had large case-loads which prevented them from developing sustained relationships. However, this led a small number to believe that social workers were dis-interested in their situation and providing a sustainable solution; rather there was the belief that social workers wanted a more rapid result.

"But in the social worker's defence, I think a lot of people, like the public and Government, they put a lot of pressure on the Social Services, like they have to get it right all the time. I mean like with Baby P and things like that, they have to get it right. So I think the pressure makes anybody crumble doesn't it, there's not many people ... so because of the pressure that they put them under, it's making them do these mistakes."
(Male adult)

"I remember like with my social worker ... when I had my social worker, I know he must have had about 15 other cases as well that he was dealing with, so that's why he didn't have a lot of time and was trying to rush things. That's why he was just chucking me in places all over because I know he had a load of other cases to deal with as well ... They're not having the time to actually go in and evaluate the

situation and actually speak to them and see what everyone wants and what they need and what help they need because they're like rushed off their feet, aren't they?"

(Male adult)

"... they should have like one social worker to one or two families, that can actually put the time and the effort into going to listen to them."

(Male adult)

There should be more information on the rights of the individual or family when social workers first become involved

In an often highly charged situation within which many participants were placed during the initial stages of contact with social workers, some suggested that more information on their rights should be provided to them. This would help them to make more informed decisions, and react more appropriately to the situation they were faced with.

"... when I went to this first meeting, the chairperson who isn't part of Social Services, came to see me before we went in the meeting and he said 'Have you seen all the reports that have been written about you?' And I said 'No, they've just told me to come today, I thought it was like an informal meeting'. He said 'Oh no, this is really, really serious you know, your kids could get taken into care today. Have you got legal representation?' And I said 'No' and he said 'Oh well I don't think... then I'm not happy for it to go ahead without you having legal representation and without you having seen all the reports'. And this is somebody who's like the chair of the panel."

(Female adult)

"I'd want more information about my rights and I'd want information about how I complain about the way I've been treated. And support with that complaint. You know like when people complain in the NHS, there's... I think it's called ICAS that help you pursue a complaint, that help you with the language and how to write a letter. I don't think there's anything like that that relates to Social Services, like an ombudsman or something."

(Female adult)

A lack of trust of social workers

As a result of personal and shared negative experiences of social workers, many participants indicated that it was difficult for them to place trust in them. This lack of trust led many participants to believe that social workers had limited ability to change things for the better. There was also the perception that social workers were judgemental based on passed actions or activities of participants, rather than focusing on the future.

"You need trust and you need to know them... like you ain't going to open up to a complete stranger are you, you need to get to know the person and say right, yeah, I can trust him, I can tell him things... You ain't exactly going to tell them everything. Obviously some things you won't be able to tell them but if you've got that close friendship or not close friendship but if you've got the trust, then you're going to be able to open up to them more and then they'll know what's actually happening."

(Male young offender)

"I think they're nose, I think they're quite nose; that's what you think straightaway isn't it? Obviously now I've had them and that you don't really think that but that's what you think. When the social worker comes in you're thinking never seen you before and you're asking me all these questions, you're very nose, that's what you think."

(Male young offender)

"They don't even have the power to change things, that's what I feel... they don't have no power or they say this and don't do that at the end of the day."

(Male young offender)

"They're judgmental as well, like if you've done something in your past that ain't necessarily good, they'll like read you as they have to read your history and like just judge you on that. You could be a totally different person to how you was before but because you did do something in your past and they read it, they automatically in their minds, they're thinking oh he's like this, he hasn't changed."

(Male young offender)

"I think you need a good friendship or a good relationship with the person. Don't make false promises and do your best to listen... Come across as if it ain't just a job that you have to do. So it's not because they have to do it, it's because they want to do it, they want to help you."

(Male young offenders)

RECOMMENDATIONS

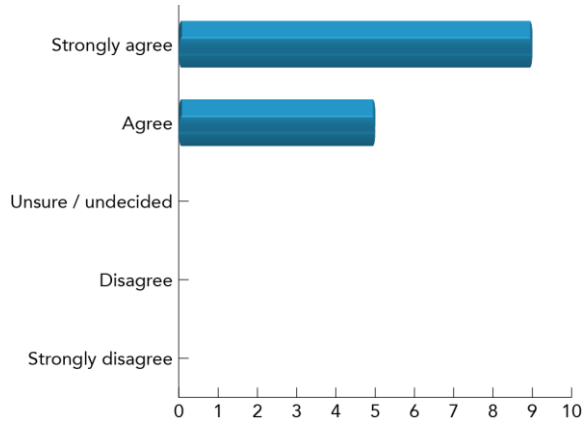
In developing its role the College of Social Work should take account of service users' experiences and perceptions expressed in this consultation including the following:

1. The need for social workers and decision-making procedures clearly and demonstrably to **listen** to individual service users before plans or decisions are made affecting their future as adults and young people consistently felt unheard with experiences of being placed in care on many occasions with little or no discussion with them as a young person.
2. The need to ensure that social workers' **communication skills** enable them to communicate empathy with and confidence on the part of service users.
3. The importance of ensuring that social workers and decision-making procedures systematically provide service users with **information on their rights**.
4. The high importance placed by service users on the need for greater **stability of relationships**, both with individual social workers and in relation to changes of placements.
5. The importance of ensuring that those delivering social work services have **personal experience** of the situations and circumstances affecting service users as they felt that there was a consistent lack of a 'role model/worker' including:
 - (a) the use of former service users in providing information and assisting in assessments at the beginning of the process;
 - (b) the use of former service users in peer mentoring; and
 - (c) viewing former service users as a source of potential future recruitment to the social work profession and developing proactive and systematic strategies to promote this.
6. The need for the delivery of social work services, and the **training** which underpins delivery, to be strongly **value-driven** in addition to developing skills and promoting qualifications and standards. This needs to reflect the careful balance between the care and punitive/control function of social workers, which has a fundamental affect on the relationship with the service user.
7. The importance of embedding structures in social work agencies for effective **service user engagement**, enabling service users to provide regular feedback on their perception and experience of the services which they receive.

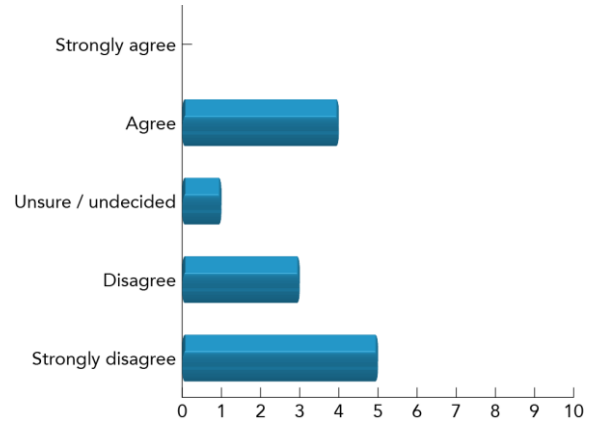
For example, partnership 'young people in care and leaving care' structures should be developed by local authorities. Social worker training could explore how social

workers fully support engagement models with young people and adults while in a Social Work team and with client and peer groups. This should focus on the most marginalised group of young people and adults.

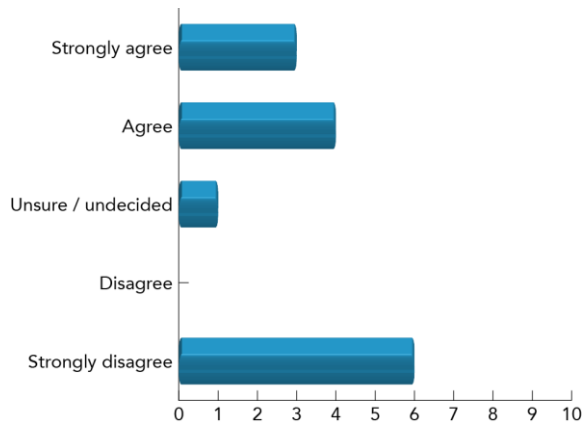
APPENDIX 1: RESPONSES TO STATEMENT EXERCISES



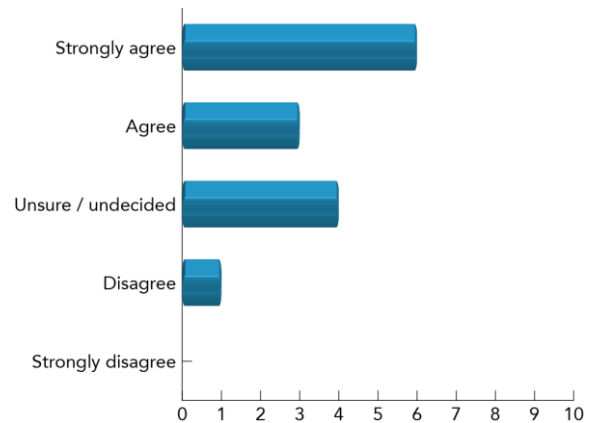
Adult focus group 1: I expect my social worker to listen to me



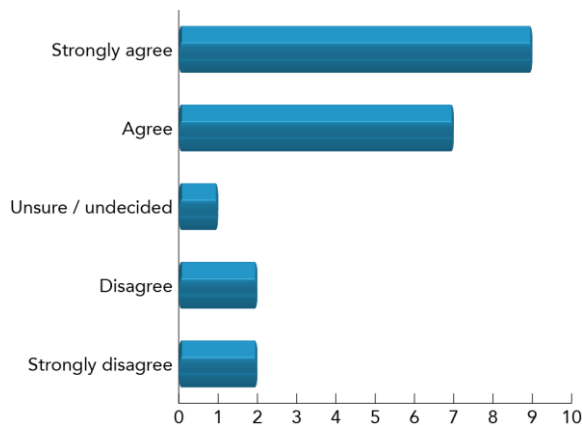
Adult focus group 1: I expect my social worker to tell me what to do



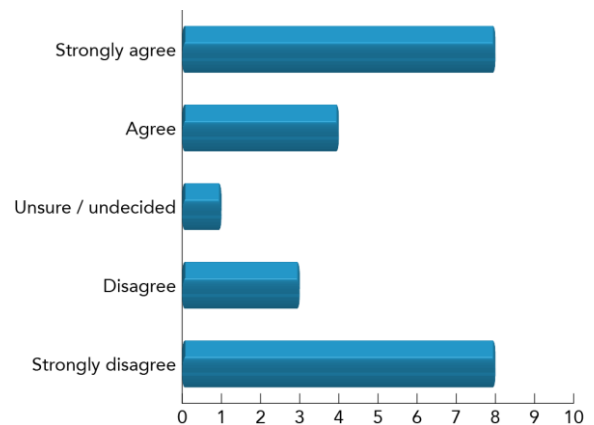
Adult focus group 1: My social worker must put my best interests first



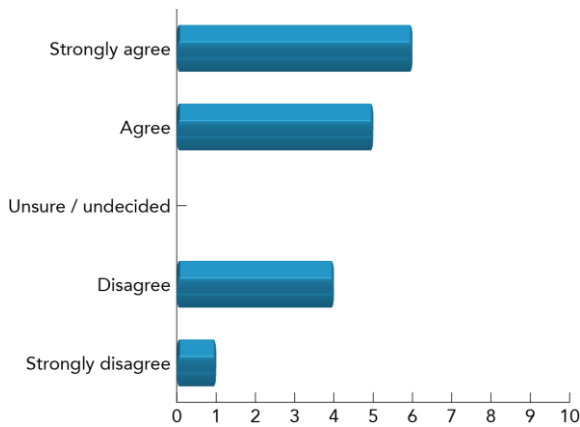
Adult focus group 1: Social workers don't understand me



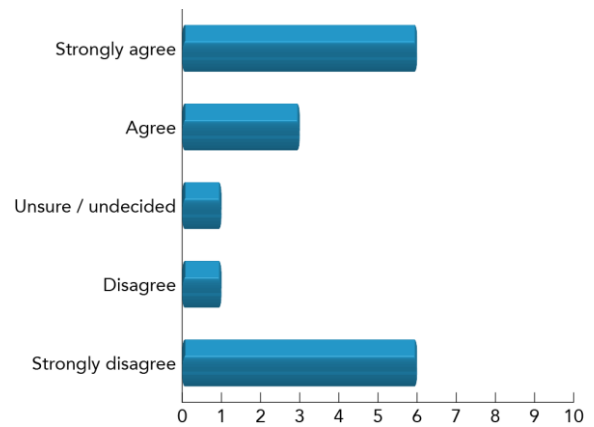
Adult focus groups 2 & 3: I expect my social worker to listen to me



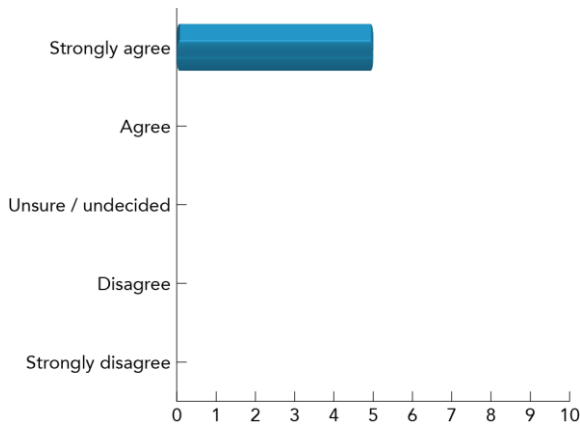
Adult focus groups 2 & 3: I expect my social worker to tell me what to do



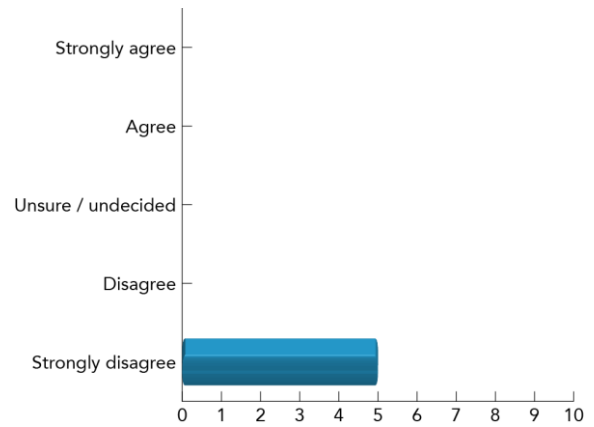
Adult focus groups 2 & 3: My social worker must put my best interests first



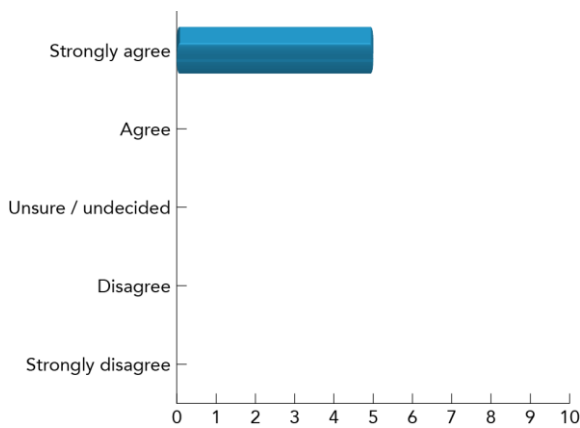
Adult focus groups 2 & 3: Social workers don't understand me



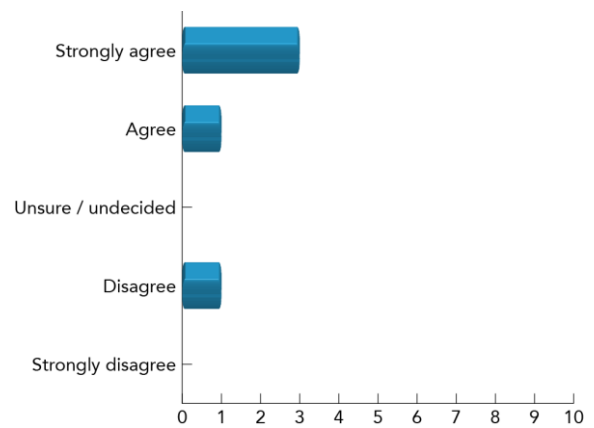
Young offender focus group 4: I expect my social worker to listen to me



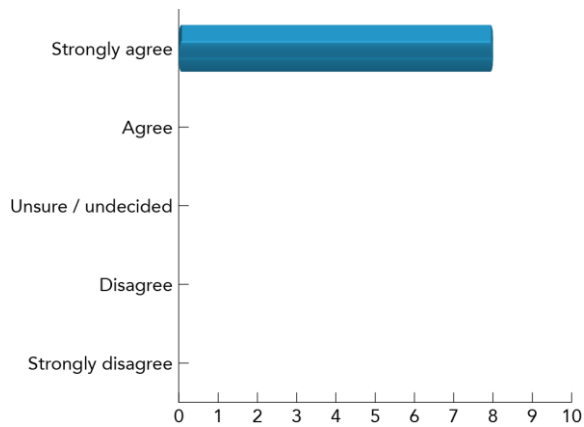
Young offender focus group 4: I expect my social worker to tell me what to do



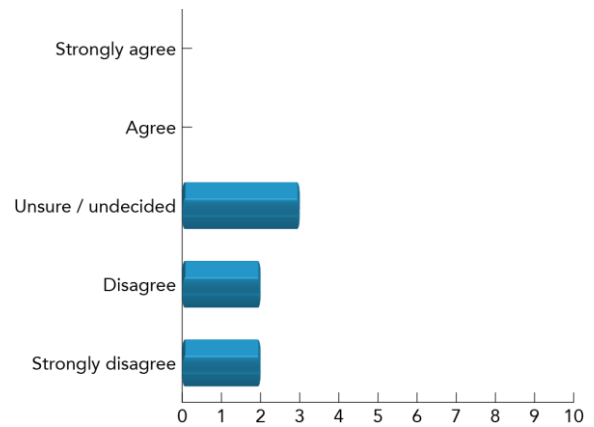
Young offender focus group 4: My social worker must put my best interests first



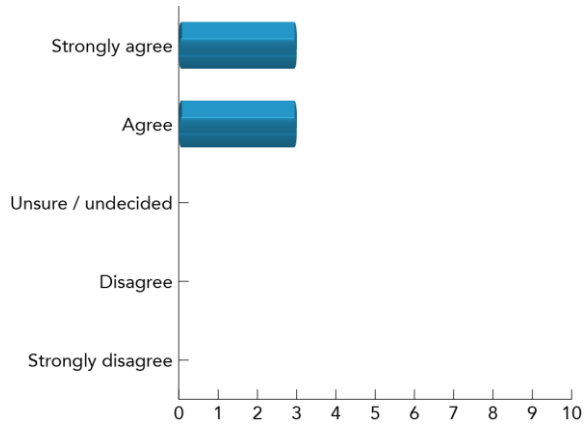
Young offender focus group 4: Social workers don't understand me



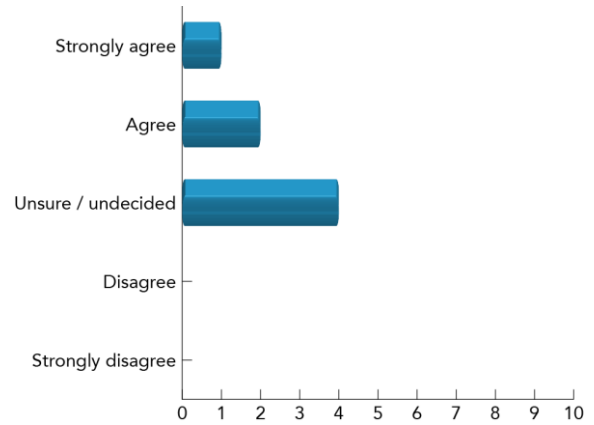
Young offender focus group 5: I expect my social worker to listen to me



Young offender focus group 5: I expect my social worker to tell me what to do



Young offender focus group 5: My social worker must put my best interests first



Young offender focus group 5: Social workers don't understand me



Adult participants in one of the focus groups

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