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What the Public Think about Social Services

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What the public think about social services:

A report from Scotland

Abstract

This article reports on findings of a government funded research project which set out to understand what the public think about social services in Scotland. The authors were particularly keen to examine issues of legitimacy, trust and licence to operate for social services as they are framed in public perceptions. Drawing on a national online survey of 2,505 nationally representative adults, the findings provide the first and largest empirical data set on public perceptions of social services in Scotland. Data analysis occurred in two stages and employed descriptive statistical measurement and cross tabulation analysis. The findings indicate that, overall, people in Scotland are positive about social services and the value of their impact on society. Further, they believe that social services perform a valuable public role. These findings are significant for debates surrounding social services and suggest that the Scottish public has a more positive view of social services than social service workers and welfare institutions typically perceive. The findings demonstrate the need to develop a more theoretically rich understanding of the relationships between public perception, legitimacy and social licence in social services, including attention to co-productive models of engagement.

Keywords

Legitimacy, public opinion, public perception, social services, social work.

Introduction

Social services in Scotland, as elsewhere, are in a state of flux and change. Long recognized as a broad group of services, delivered by a diverse workforce and serving a range of publics, social services also operate within changing social, economic and political climates (Ferguson, 2018; Wollmann, 2018). Added to this, recent years have seen radical challenges to relationships between social service ‘providers’ and people who ‘use’ services, such that these once taken-for-granted relations are no longer adequate (Pestoff, 2012). This, in turn, has contributed to new configurations of social services where the once firm boundaries between services are becoming eroded and, for some, irrelevant (Needham and Glasby, 2014; Christie Commission, 2011). Amidst these transformations, public demand for and expectations of social services has perhaps never been greater (Accounts Commission, 2016). For all of the debate surrounding social services, including how they are best configured, resourced and delivered, their place in contributing to individual and social wellbeing is high on the agenda for most Western governments (Wollmann, 2018; Munday 2007). Within this changing context, understanding what the public think about social services is increasingly important. Public opinion has become a key performance measure for social services across the UK and internationally. In Scotland, improving ‘people’s perceptions of the quality of public services’ is one of 55 national performance indicators (Scottish Government, 2018). Across the UK and internationally, public opinion of social services is regularly linked to questions of public value, service uptake and impact, alongside related issues of recruitment, retention and professional identity (Authors’ own, 2016; Legood *et al.*, 2016; Reid and Misener, 2001). In an era where the public dynamic of

social services is increasingly prominent, understanding what the public think has become a key component of workforce strategy, policy development, and service delivery.

Before proceeding further, it is important to provide comment on the units of analysis in this paper, specifically, social services and public opinion. This research focuses on the common parlance of what is referred to as a social service in Scotland. In Scotland, social services are defined as the range of statutory, voluntary and third sector services provided by social work, social care workers and early years workers for adults and children (Scottish Social Services Council, 2018). However, the extent to which the term social services is understood in this way by the Scottish public is unexplored. Relatedly, the extent to which this terminology and grouping of services is transferable as a definition internationally is not under consideration with this research. As Munday (2007 :10) observes:

It is difficult to produce a definition of ‘social services’ that is universally acceptable across Europe and which accurately represents the variety of services and organisational patterns across such a large region.

The recent rise of health and social care integration across the UK and internationally potentially complicates this further, with ‘social care’ now emerging as an additional frame for a, sometimes, similar group of services (Spicker, 2014). Notwithstanding these issues, the term ‘social services’ continues to have widespread currency in Scotland and within the international literature where it is often used interchangeably with the term ‘personal social services’. Both terms are broadly understood to describe social work and social care services that (i) are considered of importance for society as a whole, (ii) fall outside the remit of health services and

(iii) rely on personal interaction between service ‘providers’ and ‘users’ in delivery (Spicker, 2014; Munday, 2007). Beyond definitional issues, our focus on ‘social services’ as a group of services mostly reflects the priorities set and language used by the Scottish Government funding body. However, this shifting lens can also be seen to speak to increasingly integrated modes – and measurements - of public and social services and to the longstanding interplay between policy development, service analysis and knowledge production.

The relationship between social services and public perception has received scant attention in the research and policy literature. Public opinion is a complex phenomenon and is significantly under theorised in the social service literature. Existing approaches tend to imagine an external public existing in a natural state waiting to be revealed, engaged, or mobilised by government and democracy (Authors’ own, 2019). However, various theoretical lenses can be applied to public perceptions research, which caution against one-dimensional interpretations. Research in this area is most developed within Science and Technology studies, which underline the view that publics are plural and dynamic as well as contextual and contested (Marres, 2015). A key message here is that far from being fixed or pre-existing, publics are actively brought into being by the ways one seeks to know and move them. Relatedly, Dowler *et al*, (2006) comment that the term ‘public perception’ is difficult to define. At one level, ‘an instrumental or pragmatic definition is possible: ... ‘public opinion’ is merely the aggregate views of a group of people (usually a randomly selected sample) who are asked directly what they think about particular issues or events’ (p.40). However, the relationship between replies given and any ‘real’ opinion remains contentious. There are clearly no direct ways to access the true beliefs of members of the public in all their complexity, and researchers are reliant on more or less valid methods for

accessing them indirectly, through replies given to specific questions. Public opinion theory is also decisively linked to developing ideas of legitimacy, public value and social license, which speak to the extent to which organisations enjoy a ‘social licence to operate’ (Thomson and Boutilier, 2011). Research in this area highlights that public opinion is not only fluid and multi-dimensional, but a condition constantly ‘in the making’ through networks of relationships between institutions, individuals and groups.

The research reported on in this article is positioned within this developing political, policy and theoretical territory. In 2015 the (Scottish) Social Work Services Strategic Forum – a group established in 2013 as a partnership of stakeholders from across the social service sector - published its *Vision and Strategy for Scottish Social Services 2015-2020*. One of the four work strands was ‘the promotion of public understanding’, which included an action to ‘undertake research into public understanding and value of the sector’ (p.25). The authors were commissioned to conduct the research following a competitive tender, with a brief to examine current levels of public knowledge, understanding and attitudes towards social services and the reasons for these views. Specifically, the research reported on here set out to:

- review UK and international research on public perceptions of social services;
- examine current levels of public knowledge, understanding and attitudes towards social services in Scotland;
- draw conclusions regarding the implications of the findings for future research.

This article reports on the findings, conclusions and questions produced through the research. We begin by locating this discussion within the extant literature. We then outline the research methodology used to address the research questions, before reporting on the key findings. In closing we consider the implications of the research findings for research, policy and practice.

Public perceptions of social services

Despite recognition of the important relationship between public opinion and public institutions and services, attention to what the public think about social services, social work and social care is limited. In Scotland, Davidson and King's (2005) study stands as the only comprehensive measure of public perceptions of social work in Scotland. A report by the Institute for Public Policy Research (IPPR) and Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC) (2009) provides loosely comparable data for England and Wales, though within a frame of social care. By contrast, well established and government sponsored mechanisms are in place to regularly track and report on public perceptions of health, education, transport and policing services. For example, since 2000, Ipsos Mori have published annual surveys of public perceptions of the NHS on behalf of the Department of Health. The authors found few comparative international studies for social services or social work though insights can be drawn from a number of small-scale US-based studies (Olin, 2013; Lecroy and Stinson, 2004). There is a slightly higher propensity of studies examining public perceptions of social work than social services though this may be shifting. Knowledge and understanding is constrained by a paucity of research and by differences in how social services are constructed and grouped across time and space.

Davidson and King's (2005) study reports on findings from a nationally representative survey of 1,015 adults across Scotland and several focus groups. The study found that respondents were more likely to view social workers positively than negatively by a margin of 2:1. Around half believed they understood the social work role. However, most participants could identify only one social work service, with children's services and services for older people most regularly cited. Understanding of social work services was found to be lower in older people, lower class groups and people from Black and Ethnic minority groups. Significantly, those with least understanding were more likely to be in need of social work services. Perceptions of social workers appeared to be shaped by a range of influences, including television and news media, personal experience, and word of mouth. Issues of stigma emerged as a significant barrier to accessing services, though this was less pronounced in services for older people.

The IPPR and PWC's (2009) report on public attitudes towards social care drew on a representative survey of 1,993 adults across England and Wales. The authors reported low awareness, uncertainty, and confusion about the nature of and boundaries between social care services. 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.

Penhale and Young (2015) reviewed the literature concerning what the public think about the conduct and competence of social workers in England. Reflecting the limited literature, much of this study speaks to service user views and sheds limited light on wider public roles. The review

found both negative and positive perceptions of social workers, weighted 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 safeguarding issues. (p.13). Across these differences, the review found that the public consider the work done by social workers to be necessary and 'worthwhile'.

Revans (2007) conducted a telephone poll of 1,000 UK adults and found that ninety-three percent of a sample thought that the contribution of social workers in the community was very or fairly important. Two-thirds said that they would trust social workers to help them or their families, while 29% responded that they would not. Revans explains this positive result in terms of changing population demographics and suggests that as more people are using social services more people are seeing the benefits that it can provide. Considered comparatively, and in light of our own findings, Revans' findings may also reflect the unit of analysis. Across studies, respondents appear more positive about social work's broad role and contribution than about particular aspects of delivery. Again, public perceptions were felt to derive from a range of influences, including a blend of personal experience, the experiences of friends and family and media representations of social work. Media representations were identified as the strongest influence and were perceived to be mostly negative.

Comparative international studies are few. LeCroy and Stinson's (2004) study of public perceptions of social work draws on a nationally representative telephone survey of 386 US adults. They report that participants generally held more positive attitudes towards social workers than was found in a comparative study conducted in 1978. However, 39% of people

would be least happy if their child were to embark on a social work career, compared with other helping professions. Similar to previous published US findings, public knowledge of social work was found to be mixed. The study highlights high levels of knowledge, and bias, towards children's services, heavily outweighing the identification of other services. As with previous findings, social workers were poorly ranked against other professions in relation to their capacity to provide support. Olin's (2013) review of the literature presents a similar picture and concludes that public opinion of social work in the US remains 'variable'. His findings highlight ongoing negative stereotyping of social workers, particularly when considered alongside other helping professionals.

Looking beyond the social service literature, in recent years, across the UK, there has been a reframing of repeat-measure health surveys to also include social care. Findings in respect of social care are limited and mixed. A recent Ipsos MORI (2018) survey found that public perceptions of UK social care services tend to be negative, with only 32% of respondents stating that they were satisfied with provision. However, the 2018 Scottish Health and Care Experience survey reports that, of those who received formal help and support, 80% rated the overall help, care or support services as excellent or good. Recent Scottish surveys reveal considerable variations in experiences, particularly around co-ordination of health and care services and awareness of supports available. Though recent moves to extend existing repeat-measure health surveys to 'include' social care services represent an important development, available reports betray a strong health focus and raise questions as to whether knowledge in this area is best advanced through a more integrative approach.

Finally, in understanding what the public thinks about social services, it is important to look beyond the social science and public service literature. Leading the way in systematic studies of public understanding and perception has been the field of Science and Technology studies (STS). Space precludes a review of this literature however, it has both challenged and advanced traditional conceptualisations, uses of and approaches to public opinion. To summarise, this literature underlines that publics are plural and dynamic and that public opinion and associated ideas of legitimacy and public value are highly contextual, that is, actively shaped by real time issues and events as well as by processes of public, policy and research engagement (Marres, 2015). Relatedly, STS studies question the merits of traditional approaches to improving public perceptions, prompting consideration of alternative models, including those based on public trust and participation (Chilvers and Kearnes, 2016). The transferability and implications of this developing research base for social services needs to be tested and developed.

Existing research on public perceptions of social services is limited. Our review reveals a mixed picture of what the public think, with significant variations across studies in terms of research focus, service groupings and methods of measurement. Further, existing social service research shows little, if any, engagement with interdisciplinary scholarship in this area, including attention to the complexities of measuring or mediating public perceptions. These findings raise a number of important questions about how public opinion is understood for social services and were at the forefront of our considerations for the study.

Methodology

The research adopted a mixed methods approach enabling the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data. Ethical permission was approved by the University of [Institution's] School of Education and Social Work Research Ethics Committee. This article reports on the findings of the online survey only and the discussion of method is focussed accordingly.

Surveys are an established social science tool for establishing how a population understands social phenomena, issues and solutions. More recently, online surveys have emerged as an efficient and accepted method of data collection and are particularly suited to obtaining large sample sizes—thereby generating quality high-volume data (Chang and Krosnick, 2009). This article reports on research findings generated through a national online survey of 2,505 adults aged over 18 and resident in Scotland between 26th October and 3rd November in 2016. As with most studies of public opinion we used socio-demographic information such as gender, age, ethnicity, level of education, and occupational status as explanatory variables. In this respect, the public this research project envisioned is an aggregated population, made up of individuals differentiated by demographic characteristics. An obvious weakness to this approach is that the participants in surveys can be viewed as holding static opinions and attitudes to be elicited through research, rather than attitudes which may shift over time, in different contexts, or in relation to the manner of elicitation (Chilvers *et al.*, 2018). Relatedly, in thinking about how publics are made, a commonly reported 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 and gloss over the ways in which issues arise and knowledge is taken on board by any sampled public.

The survey was designed by the researchers and administered by Opinium. Opinium is an international insight agency and member of the British Polling Council that specialises in providing bespoke 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 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 complete the surveys that may not be completely representative of the wider population. To compensate for this, Opinium actively recruits lower socio-economic status participants to maintain correspondence with the Census demographic profile.

In our commissioning of the survey, Opinium were required to provide sampling parameters that would ensure representation of the Scottish population and for it to have strong external validity in relationship to the target population the sample was to represent. As such, the findings from the survey can be generalized with confidence to the Scottish population of interest. Online questionnaires were undertaken using a non-probability, quota sampling approach, ensuring that the sample of respondents broadly reflected the Scottish population in terms of gender, age, ethnicity and geographic distribution. Furthermore, in order to guarantee representativeness, the sample was weighted by Opinium according to the latest available ONS (Office for National Statistics) data on Scottish population demographics. The sample was also monitored for

regional distribution and for those who have and have not used social services in Scotland.

Sampling investigations by Opinium estimated an expected split of 20:80 between those who have used (or are using) social services and those who have not. Opinium adheres to a privacy policy which assures that all data provided by members is treated as confidential; this is achieved by members being assigned a unique identifier code that is used to identify the data.

The survey comprised 43 questions and took on average 20 minutes to complete. It included a mix of rating scale, rank order, multiple choice, open-ended and demographic questions. The survey was structured to cover six thematic areas including:

- Impressions and perceptions of social services
- Understanding of social services (including interrelationships between social services, social work and social care)
- Issues associated with social services
- Experience of social services
- Trust, value and confidence in social services
- Influences on perceptions

Data analysis

Two normative types of statistical calculation were used in data analysis: 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 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. However, inferential statistical tests are more powerful than descriptive statistic measures of central tendency for our online web survey data. So, for example, we were concerned with making larger inferences about public understanding. We included associations between variables in the analysis; 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 the authors 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 others.

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 was as follows:

- For a population size of 5,290,000 in Scotland
- 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%.

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%.

Research Findings

The findings are reported across four themes reflecting the research questions. These are:

- Public view of social services
- Knowledge and understanding of social services
- Public trust and value
- Influences on public perceptions

Our reporting includes a descriptive account of the findings and attention to statistically significant correlations that emerged across the data. All of the data reported on draws on a sample size of 2505 ($n = 2505$). There is no missing data to report.

Public view of social services

Figure 1. General impression of social services ($n = 2505$)

Almost half the sample reported a positive view of social services in Scotland, with a third (34%) reporting negatively (Figure 1). Similarly, 50% agreed that ‘the provision of social services in Scotland is good’ (Figure 2), with similar results for local provision (Figure 3). While these findings present a mixed picture, they repudiate widely circulated media representations of social services and suggest that the public view is not strongly negative.

Figure 2. Social services provision in Scotland ($n = 2505$)

Figure 3. Local area provision ($n = 2505$) (Figures 2 and 3 positioned side by side if possible)

Notably, the most positive overall findings in the survey were to the following two statements:

- (i) 'Social services play an important role in supporting the most vulnerable people in communities.'
- (ii) 'Social services provide a valuable service to the people of Scotland.'

In respect of (i): 73% of respondents agreed; 13% disagreed and 14% didn't know. In respect of (ii): 71% agreed; 13% disagreed and 16% didn't know. These findings align with the findings from previous studies and suggest high levels of value attribution for social services' role with people who are vulnerable, and for social services as an important public service. These findings are particularly significant when considered in the light of the above-discussed literature on legitimacy. In this study, public value and legitimacy of social services appears to rest significantly on the social role(s) and function(s) it fulfils.

Related survey findings accord with the more general impressions reported above and suggest a more mixed picture of how social services deliver in practice. For example, only 44% of respondents felt confident that social services met their and their family's needs, and half (51%) agree that health and social services work well together to give people co-ordinated care and support. Even acknowledging a mixed picture, together these figures underscore the above conclusion that the public view of social services is not strongly negative.

Overall, cross tabulation and filtering data analysis revealed few significant correlations between public perceptions of social services and demographic factors (as measured across age, gender, education, social classification, work status and ethnicity). However, a statistically significant correlation was identified in the relation between education and opinion of social services. Respondents with lower qualifications tended to report a more negative opinion of social services, while people with at least a degree level qualification tended to report a more positive opinion. No correlation was found between education and contact with social services, indicating that social services were used across all levels of educational attainment.

Linked to the above, a difference was identified between perceptions of social services by readers of different newspapers. The most positive opinion was identified with readers of *The Guardian*, *The Independent* and *Financial Times* with more than 60% of readers reporting 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) reported a good impression of social services.

Figure 4. General impression of social services in Scotland of different newspaper readers ($n = 2505$)

The findings also identified a statistically significant correlation between the gender of the respondent and reported opinions 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. However, analysis of basic respondent characteristics

did not turn up broad or consistent patterns *across* the survey findings. For example, neither education nor how well-off a household is appear to matter very much. This underscores the importance of looking at intersectional influences, when it comes to perceptions of social services, as opposed to simple, one-dimensional characteristics.

Finally, and importantly, a statistically significant correlation was identified between the participant's opinion of the provision in their own local area and their perception of the overall provision in Scotland. This seems to indicate that people's opinion of the broader provision in Scotland is formed from their opinion of specific provision in their local context. People's tangible experience with a social service - which includes how well it performs and levels of satisfaction and problems experienced - tell us something about how social services is perceived more broadly. Thus, next to purpose, the strongest patterns emerge where the process and participatory dimensions of social services are concerned: when people can air a grievance or feed into the delivery process. Broadly speaking, however, there is nothing compelling in the results to suggest that access in itself is a consistent predictor of perceptions. However, involvement with social services, either first-hand experience or through family and friends, was a variable that determined positive perceptions of social services. Nevertheless, a key question about the legitimacy of provision remains from the data generated; that is, to what extent is there a clear linear relationship between people's access to social services and their perceptions of social service workers and the social service organisation?

Knowledge and understanding of social services

Almost three in five (57%) respondents think they have a good or very good understanding of social services in Scotland while 43% think they have a poor or very poor understanding. 8% think they have a very good understanding (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Understanding of social services ($n = 2505$)

When asked which type of issues they most associated with social services, the two most common answers were care or support for older people (50%) and safety and protection of children (47%). As might be expected, there were significant age differences in these rankings. Only 30% of respondents aged between 18-34 ranked care or support for older people 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 was 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.

While the Scottish public appear to have a reasonable understanding of social services, related findings suggest a more uncertain picture regarding more detailed aspects of what social service workers do. Further, when asked to compare social services to other public services (namely, Health, Education and Policing), 43% of respondents ranked social services as the public service they understood least well. These findings are perhaps unsurprising given that only 35% of respondents reported direct experience with social services.

Of those respondents reporting experience with social services (either themselves or someone they know) 77% report 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 analysed, the results show that there is a statistically significant correlation between experience and perceived 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. These findings are significant and encourage a more critical reading of public opinion than is often available. Rather than being dismissed as a deficit, the ‘don’t know’ responses here might be explained as a ‘disinvested public’ (Authors’ own, 2019). This is revealing in the sense that rather than the public having a lack of understanding of issues, or literacy about services, the public may instead be marked by a lack of concern about provision of social services. People's lack of interest militates against expectations generated by theories of publics and co-production which might relying on falsely constructed notions of an ‘actively engaged’ public.

Public trust and value

Over three in five (62%) respondents 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. Linked to this, just over half (52%) agree that social services are often unfairly blamed when something goes wrong, while 28% disagree.

Responses on levels of trust for social services provide one of the most positive responses by the public and suggest, again, that social services in Scotland do have a social licence to operate.

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.

Considered across the findings, patterns of trust varied in accordance with the unit of analysis, that is, when considered in respect of particular social service areas and/or roles. For example, levels of trust were higher in relation to care and support roles and actions than for service assessment and decision making. Relatedly, levels of trust were lowest in relation to decision making in criminal justice sentencing. It is possible that issues of service access, experience and proximity are also at play here, underlining that issues of trust and legitimacy are multi-level, multi-dimensional and bilateral phenomena (see Lamb, 2014). These findings illuminate the ‘mixed picture’ reported in previous studies and suggest differing levels of public trust across social service areas and roles. They also highlight the need to more fully explore and understand differences in public perceptions across social service areas and roles, as well as the kinds of conditions and relationships that enable and constrain public trust across these areas.

When compared with other public services (health, education and policing), 33% ranked social services as the public service they least trust, while only 18% ranked it as the service they most trust. Relatedly, only 39% agree that social services are as highly regarded as other professions that work with the public, while 45% disagree with this statement. Further, while the public may have reasonable levels of trust in social services to do their job well, most still don’t want other people to know of their own involvement with social services. Almost three in five (57%)

Scottish adults say that they wouldn't want people to know about it if they were using social services.

Together, the above findings present a significant if complex picture. Respondents appear to trust and value social services more than those within the profession appear to perceive (Brindle, 2014; Guardian, 2010). However, public trust and value is not as developed for social services as it appears to be for other key public services. Factors influencing public trust and value appear multi-dimensional, with further research needed to unpack the factors affecting public perceptions across particular service areas and roles. Further, the findings affirm the prevailing impact of external factors on trust and value, including professional status and enduring issues of stigma.

Influences on public perceptions of social services

In considering the influences on perceptions of social services, two in five (42%) respondents report 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. Results in this area were reasonably conclusive and accord with existing research findings. However, intersectional findings suggest a more complex picture and point to multiple influences on perceptions, including the existence of risk and protective factors. For example, as reported, just over half of respondents agree that social services are often unfairly blamed when something goes wrong – suggesting that publics may be

more resilient to negative media reporting than is usually assumed. Here the findings speak to gaps between what respondents identify as significant and influential in ‘public’ perception, and the more nuanced dynamics of what respondents appear to think and feel. Developing understanding of the interactive dynamics at play in public perceptions – including attention to which are most fluid and most fixed and under which particular circumstances - is important and requires more in-depth and participatory modes of enquiry than found in the literature to date. Significant advances are being made in this area within the fields of science and technology (Chilvers and Kearns, 2016) and, to a lesser extent, in health. If we wish to influence public perceptions of social services, and associated conditions of legitimacy, trust and value, we need to invest in research and engagement methodologies capable of illuminating these complex phenomena. This aspect was advanced tentatively in the project reported on here through focus groups, albeit with very limited resource. More qualitative findings in this area will be reported on in a future paper.

Conclusion

Despite sustained political attention to the importance of understanding and improving what the public think of social services, no consistent effort has been made to understand public perceptions of social work or social services in Scotland, the UK or internationally. This may reflect the fact that systematic approaches to measuring public perception are still relatively new within public services and that the infrastructures required to support systematic research in social services is significantly underdeveloped (Authors’ own, 2018). Further, no apparent

effort has been made across the UK social service community to improve public perceptions of social services in a systematic, scientific way, nor to test the effectiveness of existing communication efforts. For these reasons, public perceptions of social services in Scotland, and beyond, was a poorly understood phenomenon prior to the commissioning of this research.

Overall, the survey findings suggest a good level of support for social services in Scotland and reasonable levels 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 workers perceive. Overall, people in Scotland appear particularly positive about social services impact on society and believe these services perform an important public role. Reading across the findings, in respect of why publics hold or report the views they do, it can be suggested that public value and legitimacy appears to be linked to issues of service purpose (why it is being delivered), performance (what is being delivered) and process (how it is being done), as well as to shifting expectations and experiences of local social service delivery. The findings suggest that it is not the sources of legitimacy that a social service relies on that matter most, but rather the features that a service displays in its purpose, method and delivery, and its capacity to broker the kinds of relationships with publics that enable core features to be recognisable, such as durable relationships. In the context of a workforce often depicted as demoralised or discouraged by a perceived lack of public and inter-professional value, these findings are significant and offer important opportunities to counter dominant narratives in this area and to direct existing communication and public engagement efforts.

In many ways the findings of this research remain partial but certainly provoke new research questions and approaches to public perception. For example, the findings provide a snapshot of public perceptions of social services in Scotland as reported in 2016 but prompt further pressing issues. Repeat-measure longitudinal research is needed if we are to understand if and how public perceptions shift and are shaped over time. Relatedly, the findings speak mostly to perceptions of social services as a collection of services and do not sufficiently explore differences across social service areas. Additional research is required to investigate the ways in which public perception, legitimacy and trust vary across and within diverse service areas and across different groups. Also, the authors were surprised by the relatively high levels of indifference and “don’t know” responses (between 20-50%) to key survey questions. Perhaps it is this indifference that demands to be analysed in its positivity instead of being dismissed as a deficit. Across these issues, the findings underline that social services, and publics, are diverse, multi-level and multi-dimensional. To the extent that they exist, they do so in relation to dynamic social, economic, political and cultural issues; that is, each are made and remade in the ways we seek to know and represent them. This has important implications for efforts to understand, measure and engage public opinion and needs to translate into research, policy and practice strategies capable of responding to these complexities. Relatedly, these findings question recent political engagement preoccupations with public opinion as a public service performance measure and prompt a more sophisticated and dialogic engagement with this important phenomenon. Issues of public value, legitimacy and social licence do matter in social services: there is now an extensive body of evidence which affirms the significance of these issues for politicians, practitioners and people who use services. However, engagement with these issues, theoretical and applied, needs to

move beyond instrumental efforts to capture and/or control public opinion, towards a more theoretically rich, multi-dimensional, and participatory lens and approach.

To conclude, public opinion is a more complex dynamic than is often imagined and public understanding of social services does not equate to public approval or value. In this respect our findings question the merits of an educative approach to improving public perceptions, which rests typically on a public deficit model, that is, the idea that the public do not value social services because they do not understand them. Reaching similar conclusions, science and technology studies advance alternative approaches including models based on public trust and participation, which involve recognition that public trust needs to be continually brokered, and particularly so in the face of new issues or panics (Chilvers and Kearnes, 2016). This literature may have particular relevance for social services; it would appear to offer a more critically developed lens through which to investigate issues of public perception and a more experimental and co-productive approach to advancing issues of public legitimacy, trust and value.

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