



'If it's not written down it didn't happen': Contemporary social work as a writing-intensive profession

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Abstract

Social work writing, often referred to as 'recording' or 'paperwork', is frequently the target of criticism in reviews and public media reporting in the UK. However, despite the many criticisms made and its significance in social work practice, little empirical research has been carried out on professional social work writing. This paper draws on findings from an ESRC-funded study in the UK to offer a baseline characterization of the nature and function of writing in contemporary social work. Drawing on text and ethnographic data, the paper foregrounds three key dimensions: the number of written texts, key textual functionalities and genres; the specific ways in which 'text work' constitutes everyday social work professional practice, using case studies from the domains of adults, children and mental health; and the concerns of social workers about the amount of time they are required to spend on writing. The baseline characterization provides empirical evidence for claims made about the increased bureaucratization of social work practice, signalling contemporary social work as a 'writing-intensive' profession which is at odds with social workers' professional 'imaginary'. The paper concludes by outlining the educational and policy implications of the baseline characterization and calls for debate about the nature of contemporary social work practice.

KEYWORDS: BUREAUCRACY; ETHNOGRAPHY; PROFESSIONAL WRITING; RECORDING PRACTICES; SOCIAL WORK GENRES; TEXT WORK

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1 Introduction

In official reports and inspections of professional social work, the importance of writing, usually under the label ‘recording’, figures prominently. Formal reviews of the social work profession in the UK foreground the importance of the written record to social work practice and point to concerns about ‘poor recording’ (Department for Children, Schools and Families and Department of Health 2009; Social Work Reform Board 2009, 2010; Department of Education 2011). Similarly, inspection agencies signal the centrality of written texts to providing a record of services (Ofsted [Office for Standards in Education] 2017a: 13), and in evaluating social workers’ practice (Ofsted 2017b: 33) often point to problems such as ‘issues with record keeping, including timeliness’ or ‘poor assessments of people’s needs and records management’ (Care Quality Commission [CQC] 2017: 35, 41).

However, no substantial research has been carried out to date on professional social work writing. Existing work on this topic tends to focus on student writing (e.g. Simon and Soven 1989; Waller 1996, 2000; Alter and Adkins 2006; Wehbi 2009; Horton and Diaz 2011), with some studies signalling the differences between the writing that students do on courses, as compared with the writing required in professional practice (Paré 2002; Le Maistre and Paré 2004; Paré and Le Maistre 2006; Lillis and Rai 2012; Rai and Lillis 2012). A small number of studies have been carried out on professional social work writing which include writing as empirical data: one case of written records in Children’s Services in a study focusing on spoken discourse (Hall *et al.* 2006); a diary, text and interview-based study with five social workers (Lillis and Rai 2012); and an ethnographically framed study on case recording in adult services (Lillis 2017). Some further studies have focused on social workers’ perspectives on writing (e.g. Roesch-Marsh 2016; Roets *et al.* 2017) and a small number of works have centred on dimensions clearly linked to the production of the written record, such as IT and organizational systems (White *et al.* 2010) and the ways in which information about clients is filtered in interaction (Huuskonen and Vakkari 2015).

The current paper uses a substantial dataset from *Writing in Professional Social Work Practice in a Changing Communicative Landscape* (WiSP),¹ the first UK-nationally funded research project on writing in professional social work, to build a baseline characterization of social work writing. We use the term ‘baseline’ in the same sense as it is used by ethnographic researchers, as a valid construct for referring to descriptions of people/places/events at a particular moment in time against which future comparisons can be made, without detracting from the value of individual case studies. This reflects our empirical goal in this paper of offering a first-level descriptive account of the nature and role of writing in professional social work, given the limited

empirical accounts generated to date, and against the background of which further analyses (from the existing WiSP data and future studies) can be carried out. However, conscious of the potentially positivist orientation that the term ‘baseline’ connotes (for discussion of epistemological debates around use of ‘baseline’, see Prus 1996; Tumilowicz *et al.* 2016). We explicitly also use ‘characterization’ to signal the constructed, partial – therefore necessarily contested – nature of any account that is offered.

The following section provides overview details of the larger study and the specific datasets informing the characterization offered. The main part of the paper is organized around three key dimensions to the characterization: (1) the number of written texts produced, key textual functionalities and genres; (2) case studies from three distinct domains of social work to illustrate the specific ways in which ‘text work’ constitutes everyday social work professional practice; and (3) key concerns by social workers about the amount of time spent on writing. The paper concludes by arguing that contemporary social work is a ‘writing-intensive’ (Brandt 2005) profession, which is fundamentally at odds with social workers’ professional ‘imaginary’ (Castoriadis 1987).

2 The larger study and the database

WiSP is an ESRC-funded research study involving five local authorities in the UK, exploring both the range of written texts produced and the writing practices of social workers. The research centres on three main domains of social work: children’s care, generic adult care and adult mental health care. The key research questions the study seeks to address are as follows:

1. What are the institutional writing demands in contemporary social work?
2. What are the writing practices and perspectives of professional social workers?
3. What are the challenges faced and solutions found?
4. How are writing demands and practices shaping the nature of professional social work?

Epistemologically, the study is ethnographic, adopting a social practice orientation to literacy that involves paying attention to the specific contexts, technologies, interactions and power relations in which writing takes place (Lillis 2013: 158–159).² Methodologically, the study combines tools from ethnography, qualitative discourse analysis and corpus linguistics to explore the nature and significance of writing in professional practice and the ways in which writing is situated within social workers’ everyday working lives. Core datasets include interviews with 71 social workers, 10 weeks of researcher observations, 481 days of social worker activity logs and 4608 texts written

over a three-year period (between April 2014 and May 2017) and constituting a one-million-word corpus. Ethics and governance procedures were followed in compliance with the formal requirements of the university and all agencies involved. All personal data was removed from written texts before leaving agencies to be shared with the research team.³

3 The present study: Building a baseline characterization

The goal of this paper is to characterize the nature and significance of writing in social work professional practice along three key dimensions as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1: Building a baseline characterization: datasets used

Tracking key aspects of writing	Datasets
Number of written texts, key textual functionalities and genres	10 weeks of researcher observations 481 social worker logs 4608 texts (sample in this study: 260 case notes, 25 reports, 150 emails (10% of each text type within the corpus) Handwritten notebooks from seven social workers
The text work constituting social work practice	3 case studies <i>Case 1:</i> 5 days of researcher field notes, 73 written texts, 2 interviews with the social worker; <i>Case 2:</i> 4 days of researcher field notes, 59 written texts, 2 interviews with the social worker; <i>Case 3:</i> 5 days of researcher field notes, 9 written texts, 2 interviews with the social worker, 2 interviews with welfare rights worker.
Key concern of social workers about time spent on writing	interviews with 71 social workers

3.1 Texts and functionalities

Overall, 341 differently labelled text types were found to constitute everyday social work written discourse and practice, ranging from short pieces of writing such as two-word Emails to very long texts such as a 14,000-word Child Permanence Report.⁴ In most cases these texts were written by social workers with almost no administrative support. Of course, some of these text types were specific to some domains (e.g. a Section 7 Report in children's services, an Agreement to Section 117 entitlement in mental health) and some texts had different institutional labellings (e.g. the term 'Case Record' or 'Case Note'), but many labels were used across all domains, to fulfil a number of core functions. Table 2 provides an analysis of the broad functionalities of the many texts types identified, signalling the work that written texts do in social work practice (for acronyms used in the table and in the text below see Appendix).

Table 2: Functions of everyday professional writing

Functions of writing	Examples of texts
Administration <i>Preparatory, interim or short texts, often as part of/before larger activity, or one offs</i>	<i>to do lists; online diary entry; Annual Leave Request</i>
Applications for services, equipment, support checks and referrals <i>Document often on a template to provide services/equipment or specific actions</i>	<i>Housing Application; NSPCC Check; Referral for Emergency Home Based Respite Care</i>
Assessments <i>Document often on a template to check or evidence eligibility or risk, usually in preparation for allowing or preventing service provision or moving onto a next stage in a process</i>	<i>Assessment of Needs and Outcomes; Parenting Assessment; Risk Profile</i>
Case recording <i>Ongoing logging of case activity, usually stored centrally on an authority-based IT system</i>	<i>Case Notes; Contact Log; Statutory Visit Record</i>
Communication with others <i>Sharing/requesting information, via different technologies and media</i>	<i>Emails; instant messaging; Letters</i>
Contracts/contractual information <i>Documents that set out formal arrangements, often with sanctions if not adhered to</i>	<i>Contact agreements; Contract Monitoring Form</i>
Diagrams/drawings/mapping <i>Texts that illustrate a process or relationships, often accompanying other documentation</i>	<i>Chronology; Genogram</i>
Documents when working with clients <i>Documents often completed whilst with clients, often to aid interaction/inform decisions</i>	<i>Social Stories; Worksheets</i>
Meeting-related paperwork <i>Texts written in preparation for, during and to document meetings</i>	<i>Agenda; Minutes</i>
Reports <i>Documents often on a template, with the purpose to evaluate, summarize, and/or state next actions to be done, after an event or process of engagement</i>	<i>Pathway Plan; Approved Mental Health Practitioner Report; Best Interest Statement</i>
Training/supervision documentation <i>Texts aimed at arranging, delivering, evaluating and undertaking training and supervision activities</i>	<i>Portfolio; Supervision Record</i>

3.2 Four key genres

Whilst there are many texts which fulfil the 11 functions identified in Table 2, four key genres were identified as key to social work writing practice across all domains: *Case Notes*, *Assessment Reports*, *Emails* and *Handwritten Notebooks*. We characterize these as 'key' on the grounds (1) that all social workers across the three domains (children's care, generic adult care and adult mental health care) reported engaging in these genres, (2) that from social worker logs these genres were found to be the four most commonly noted writing activities and (3) that the three digitally mediated genres – *Case Notes*, *Assessment Reports* and *Emails* – constituted the most numerous of genres in the text corpus.

In characterizing each of these as a 'genre', we apply an overarching category for related but differently labelled text types. Thus *Assessment Reports* is a term used to refer to the many kinds of assessment reports that social workers produce (e.g. Assessment of Needs, Assessment of Parenting, Assessment of Risks), but designating them as a genre is warranted in terms both of their textual features and the activity they constitute (Lillis 2013: 68–71), as well as by both emic categories and etic analysis. Emically, all labels are warranted by the fact that they are used by practitioners to describe, demarcate and communicate about the different kinds of textual work they carry out, and such institutionally circulating genre labels are thus a meaningful aspect of textual practice. Etically, however, the genre labels are warranted by analysis of a substantial sample of texts from the corpus: 260 *Case Notes*, 25 *Assessment Reports*, 150 *Emails* and seven *Handwritten Notebooks*, constituting 10% of the total of each in the corpus. As indicated by Table 3, a number of key analytic categories were used: rhetorical features, mode, medium, design (including pre-designed elements such as templates) and addressivity. In the labelling of these genres, some elements are more salient (emically and etically) than others; thus the labels *Emails* and *Handwritten Notebooks* foreground mode and medium, whereas *Case Notes* and *Assessment Reports* signal the primary rhetorical function. However, on the basis of the identification of a clustering of features as set out in Table 3, they can each be seen to meaningfully constitute a genre.

Whilst there are clearly typical elements warranting their labelling as genres, it is important to note that there is also considerable variation. For example, as outlined in Table 3, specific rhetorical features constitute *Case Notes*, which typically include descriptions of events, people and situations. This is in contrast with *Assessment Reports*, which typically include evaluations of risk and needs and *emails* which typically include requests for and responses with information.⁵ Based on analysis of the substantial sample,

variation within all genres is also clearly evident, signalling the complexity of the writing in which social workers engage. Key examples include:

- *voice*, the ways in which the social worker represents his or her positionality within a text (an obvious example being the use or not of ‘I’) and the positionality of others (for example whether direct quotes are used when documenting the views of a service user);
- the level of *explicit evaluation* by the social worker of a situation, a person, an event etc.;
- *addressivity*, meaning who the text is explicitly/implicitly addressed to, and how;
- *style*, a large cluster of aspects including layout and punctuation, in/formal and professional register.

Emically, the term ‘style’ is often used to signal variation that is not consequential, with many social workers referring to everyone having their ‘own style’. However, it is important to explore the significance of aspects of style, along with other aspects of variation, in terms of their consequentiality, either for services provided or for the evaluation of the social worker, and this is an area of WiSP ongoing analysis.

4 How text work constitutes social work practice

Thus far we have focused on the range of texts, functionalities and key genres that constitute the social work written textual landscape. However, texts of course do not exist in isolation from each other or from the everyday work of social workers. Drawing on observational data from three case studies relating to the three domains introduced above, in this section we illustrate how texts constitute social work practice and are used to drive social work activity and services. The text work outlined includes examples of the key genres as well as a number of other text types.

Case 1: Children’s care – young person at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE)

The social worker, Layla, received a phone call from the youth offending team in her local authority regarding Sophie, a young person in her early teens who had been identified as being at risk of child sexual exploitation (CSE). Following this call Sophie was allocated to Layla’s caseload, and a member of the youth offending team then visited Layla’s office to update her on the background of the young person and the risks identified. The primary aim was for Layla to identify potential sources of risk to Sophie (e.g. meeting

Table 3: Characterizing four key genres of social work writing

	Case Note	Assessment Reports
Addressivity	No explicit addressee (except where Emails are copied in as case note) <i>Local Authority implied addressee</i>	Varies according to specific type of assessment – service user (e.g. assessment of need) <i>Local Authority implied addressee</i>
Design	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Part of IT system – Select type of c/n from drop down menu – Typically blank text box (some systems have <i>Analysis</i> subhead) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Part of IT system – Agency-branded, templated with set headers and text boxes – Some tick box; some sections limited number of characters
Institutional label	√	√
Institutionally 'given' function	To record all actions, events, interactions and correspondence relating to a specific individual	To present an evidence-based evaluation of the needs of and risks to specific individuals which constitute an argument for specific services and care
Medium	Digital-IT system	Digital-IT system Digital-Word
Mode	Keyed in (laptop mainly, some PC)	Keyed in (laptop mainly, some PC)
Typical rhetorical features/moves	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Description of what happened/what was said that gave rise to the case recording (e.g. a phone call/series of calls, voicemails received/made/unanswered phone calls, home visit, critical incident, paperwork submitted or uploaded on IT system) – Description of action (done/to do, by whom – often stating name, role, contact details), decisions, events, incident, interaction, arrangements/agreements made and remade/confirmed – Evaluation: sometimes interspersed and/or at end of Case Note [Emails/SMS often copied in to 'Case Notes'] 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Personal details of individuals – Descriptions of specific events, histories, actions, interactions – Evaluation of risk and need, structured by templated headings (e.g. health, education, nutrition, capacity) – Recommendations for actions/services
Variations within types	<p>Length: between 6 and 1996 words</p> <p>Voice: of SW and others. Extent to which reported speech used and ways in which perspectives of others reported.</p> <p>Style/design: Bulleted/numbered list; full/abbreviated sentences; paragraphs/continuous text; SW own headings / templated headings (e.g. for statutory visit case notes); unexplained acronyms</p> <p>Explicit SW evaluation and analysis</p> <p>Framing of case: referring to previous events and the history of the case in comparison to/contextualizing the present</p>	<p>Length: between 5 and 45 pages</p> <p>Voice: whether single authored/endorsed or multiple; use of pronouns in framing voice – first, second and third person used.</p> <p>Extent to which reported speech used and ways in which perspectives of others reported</p> <p>Style/design: use of colour and images</p> <p>Explicit SW evaluation and analysis</p>

Emails	Handwritten Notebooks
Named addressee(s)	No explicit addressee <i>Self</i>
Microsoft Outlook (mainly)	– Notebooks – Pen, pencil, highlighter – Post-its
√	? <i>Notebooks, paper, post-its provided by the institution</i>
To communicate with SW colleagues, other professionals, clients and other involved parties about actions, requests, concerns	Ambiguous/contested
Digital-outlook Digital-IT system	Hard copy paper/pen/pencil/notebooks
Keyed in (laptop mainly, some PC, tablet, smartphone)	Handwritten
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Greetings and closings – Requesting and giving information about people, meetings, services – Thanking/acknowledging actions carried out 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Notes of meetings, visits – Direct quotes from SUs, carers and other professionals – To do lists – Names, addresses, phone numbers – Doodles – Diagrams – Drafts of letters
<p>Length: between 3 and 389 words Voice: of SW and others; extent to which directives used, explicit decisions stated, advice requested; querying of work explicit addressee(s): single/multiple Style/design: levels of formality; seriousness/humour; use of heading/topic indicators at start of para Explicit SW evaluation and analysis Attachments</p>	<p>Length: single words to complete notebooks Voice: of SW and others; the extent to which direct quotes are included, use of shorthand Style/design: choice of note book and/or paper, size, colour of pen(s); the extent to which abbreviations, notes or full sentences used</p>

persons and places known to police), but the task became much bigger as, in the process of identifying potential risks to Sophie, many other people were identified as being vulnerable in relation to sexual exploitation and also drug misuse. Layla initiated a meeting with different practitioners working with the identified and yet-to-be-identified at-risk people, and known perpetrators of sexual exploitation.

Following the initial phone call and discussion with a member of the youth offending team, the next four months centred on investigating sources of risk, through Layla communicating with a range of people linked to Sophie, including members of families identified as being ‘risky’ or ‘at-risk’ and other professionals from schools, police and healthcare, as well as Sophie herself.

The text work over the four-month period comprised three key text types: Case Notes (67), Abduction Letters (5) and a Network Map (Figure 1). As with the case above, the Case Notes were typical of the genre in that they detailed events, basic information, perspectives and specific actions taken (key information in the case was the listing of addresses to track where Sophie was at any given time). In addition, texts were used to direct behaviour explicitly: the Abduction Letters, which are specific to CSE work, direct the recipient not to contact Sophie and to ask her to leave in the event that she visits the recipient. Failure to comply with such directives may lead to police action under the 1984 Child Abduction Act.

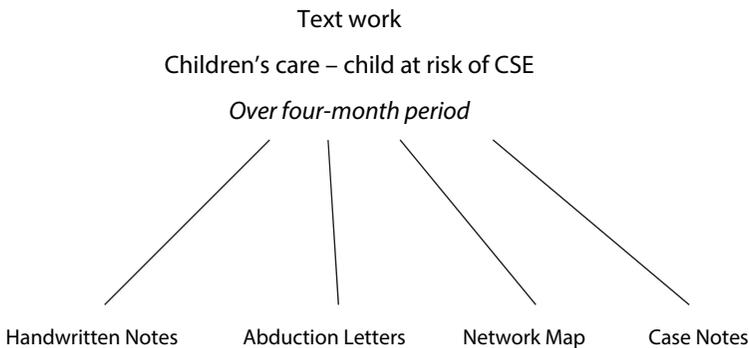


Figure 1: Text work, children’s services

Crucial to details mentioned in the Case Notes and Abduction Letters was the handwritten production of the third key text, the Network Map. The Network Map served to identify potential sources and sites of risk to Sophie (Figure 2).

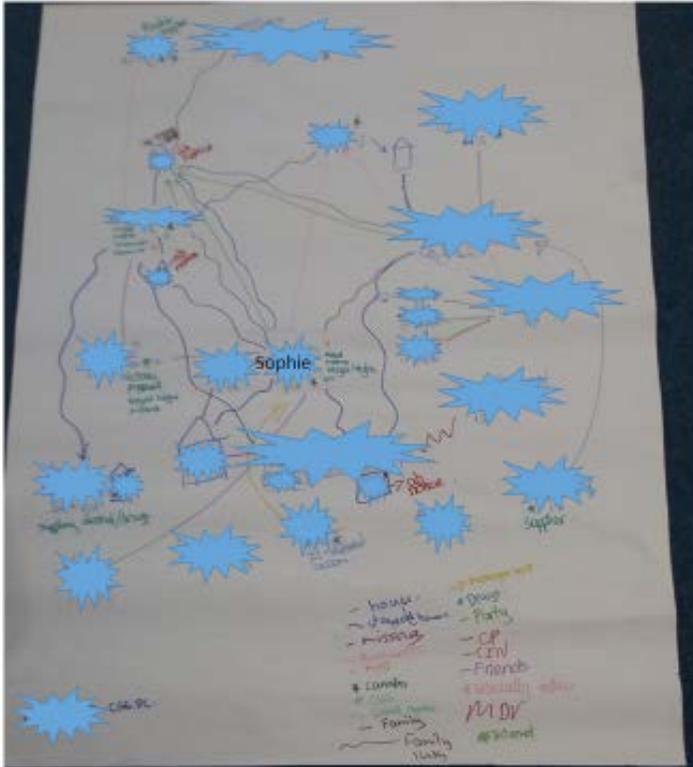


Figure 2: A network map (blue clouds obliterate names and places. The bottom right list is a key of types of risk and relationships)

Layla drew the map by hand on a large sheet of flipchart paper – working on the floor to accommodate the size of the paper – identifying names and ages of individuals where known, using different colours to indicate different risks, and adding lines (directional if appropriate) between people on the map to highlight how potentially ‘risky’ and potentially ‘at-risk’ individuals were linked. Social workers working in the same office as Layla often stopped to comment on the diagram and sometimes provided information that Layla then added. This text is powerful in representing in one place a myriad of details gathered from discussions and emails with young people, parents, police, schools, the pupil referral unit, other social workers and GPs over a four-month period. The map identifies and notes the links between 27 people and/or places. It also functions as a resource for ongoing discussions with other professionals around how identified risk factors may relate to a number of other young people, and what can be done to disrupt these risks. Thus, the text work around Sophie had two clear but critically interlinked foci: to

keep Sophie safe (she went missing a number of times within this four-month period), and to map the potential and known ‘risks’ to Sophie and other connected individuals.

Case 2: Adult care – older man with dementia

The social worker, Hazel, received an ‘alert’ via the IT system, and a subsequent phone call, stating that a man (David) who was suffering with dementia and with whom she had been working for several months had shown increased verbal and physical aggression toward his wife and some carers. David lived with his wife Alice, who was his main carer, in a block of apartments where paid carers were on site 24 hours a day. The urgent concern about David’s behaviour led to Hazel making a home visit on the same day, where Alice stated that she needed a break from caring for her husband, and thus respite care for David was explored. This visit and resulting activity – phone calls with David’s son and daughter-in-law, GP and mental health team, discussion around possible respite accommodation with her manager and making case notes of various conversations – took place on a Friday afternoon, thus intensifying the urgency of the situation and the need to find at least a temporary solution, as Hazel would not be available over the weekend to offer support or mediation. Throughout the afternoon, David maintained that he did not want to go into respite accommodation, and so it was agreed by Alice, Hazel and Hazel’s manager that he would stay at home on Friday night and a place would be reserved in respite accommodation from Saturday. Alice was encouraged to use the alarm in the apartment if she needed help. David moved into respite care on the Saturday.

Over the seven days surrounding the immediate crisis, much of Hazel’s time was taken up with this case, including three home visits, making 14 phone calls and receiving five. A key aspect of her work was communicating and mediating between individuals with different responsibilities towards David and different views about managing his care: these included David’s family (his wife Alice, son and daughter-in-law), his carers, GP and mental health team, the manager at the block of apartments and the respite accommodation manager. David’s own views also had to be taken into consideration. Considerable discussion centred on how best to provide care for David and the exhaustion of Alice, in the context of his aggressive behaviour alongside his lack of memory of such behaviour due to his worsening dementia. Throughout the week, Hazel communicated with her manager face-to-face to keep him informed.

The *text work* during the immediate crisis period of seven days involved Hazel producing and managing a large amount of digitally mediated text writing and managing of texts, including writing 18 Case Notes, faxing the

client's existing Support Plan to the potential respite accommodation managers so that they would be aware of David's needs and filling out and printing a Short-Term Care Referral Form. Handwritten Notes were also made, mainly whilst making the phone calls. The text work over the subsequent six months involved an additional 37 Case Notes, an Assessment of Needs and Outcomes, a Request for Long-Term Placement, a Support Plan, a Mental Capacity Assessment and a Review to secure more permanent accommodation that was both safe and acceptable to David and his wife Alice (Figure 3).

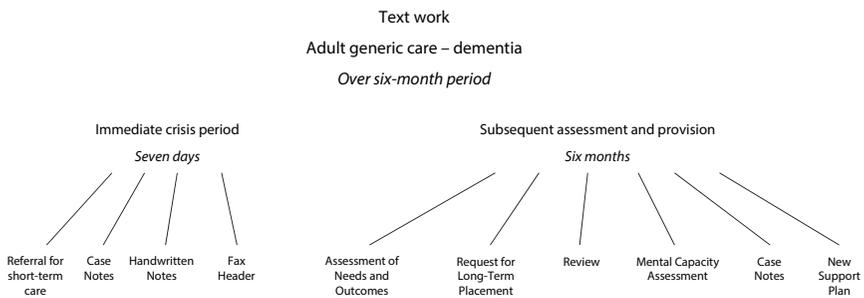


Figure 3: Text work, adult care

The text work carried out by Hazel served to record events, perspectives and situations (Case Notes), assess social needs and mental capacity (Assessments) and request appropriate accommodation (Requests). In this case the text work culminates in a Request for Long-Term Placement, where a categorical evaluation is warranted by descriptive accounts of David's behaviour (Extract 1).

Extract 1

Whilst living at [LOCATION], David has demonstrated that he becomes agitated if he [sic] wife, Alice, leaves the room and David will go in search of her. As such, David, cannot remain safely on his own in his apartment even for short periods. David has also demonstrated that he will attempt to leave his premises unsupported to return to [TOWN] and therefore, he requires close monitoring to maintain his safety. Therefore, without Alice's support, David, cannot safely return home and therefore, it is my opinion that he requires 24 hour residential to meet his needs and maintain his safety. (Request for Long Term Placement)

Unusually (in our dataset), no writing took place during the visits observed, with Hazel writing case notes from memory into the IT system via a laptop on returning to the office.

Case 3: Adult mental health care – Young man and Personal Independence Payment (PIP)

Jane, the mother of Matt, a young man in his twenties who has long term mental health problems, phoned to talk with his social worker. She said that her son was distressed on receiving a letter to say that he had been assessed by the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) as not meeting any of the criteria for being awarded Personal Independence Payment (PIP). This is a welfare benefit introduced in 2012 as part of the Welfare Reform Act, intended to provide financial help to people with a long-term health condition or a disability with the extra costs of basic living.⁶

Matt has been one of his social worker Joseph's cases for several years. Based on formal and informal evaluations of his mental health from this extended period, Joseph felt strongly that the assessment on which Matt had scored zero points was incorrect, a view he reiterates to Jane on the phone. The specific actions arising from this issue involved several home visits, including one that took place three days after the phone call, where the assessment procedure was discussed and where Matt and Jane described the questions asked during the PIP assessment interview and the answers Matt had given. The issue also involved discussions with other social worker colleagues on return from the office and detailed discussions with a welfare rights worker based in the same building.

The text work relating to this specific moment consists of Case Notes documenting Joseph's actions and interactions with Matt and Jane; the drafting of an Appeal against the decision, including a request for a Mandatory Reconsideration Notice; the drafting of a further Appeal following a rejection letter from the DWP; Case Notes logging accounts of the phone calls and visits; and Emails between the social worker and the welfare rights worker. A key aspect of this case is the involvement of the welfare rights worker, Sue, in the Letters of Appeal to the DWP. The Letters of Appeal were written in the voice and name of Joseph, the social worker, with Joseph drafting key sections of the Appeals drawn from existing Assessment texts (Extract 2).

Extract 2

Dear Sir/Madam, I am Joseph XXX social worker for Matt based within the [LOCATION] mental health team. I am writing on behalf of Mr XXX who is a current user of our services. (Appeal)

However, a key brokering role was played by Sue, who was familiar with writing Appeals against PIP decisions in terms of both the criteria and the discourse.

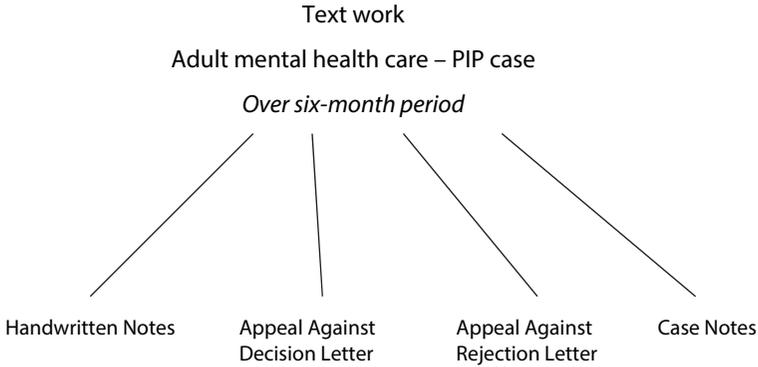


Figure 4: Text work, adult mental health care

From the initial phone call from Jane to the acceptance by Jane and Matt of a revised offer by the DWP took five months. Following a second appeal, Matt's needs were scored at '13' (above the threshold for 'enhanced' allowance) and therefore entitled Matt to financial support with regard to daily living (amounting to £82 a week at that time). This assessment and sum of money were finally granted by the DWP on the understanding that the claimant would not challenge the decision in relation to mobility by taking the case to court.

The last Case Note in this particular crisis documents Joseph's account of a letter written by Jane to the DWP, and Joseph's summary of the decisions and actions taken (Extract 3).

Extract 3

He gave me a note written by his mother stating that DWP had contacted them stating that they had 're-reviewed' his claim and are now offering Matt PIP Care Component only. Mobility Component is not an option so this would still require a Tribunal verdict. Matt's mother accepted the offer so the appeals process ends here and there will be no Tribunal necessary. Arrears will be paid since DLA was stopped whilst the PIP Claims process was going on. Matt was happy with this outcome too, although continues to wonder how the process came as far as it did, given his difficulties and needs. (Case Note)

As with the above cases, Case Notes were produced to record the events, information and specific actions taken in relation to PIP. The other two texts, the Appeal against the decision and the Appeal against the rejection, were written in collaboration with Sue, the welfare rights worker. This case illustrates how some writing is carried out by social workers to support action that is not part of their official workload, but is essential if a decision by another gatekeeping

agency (in this case the DWP) is to be effectively challenged. The social worker works with another professional – both of whom act as literacy brokers on behalf of the service user and his mother.

Key concerns about writing by social workers: ‘If it’s not written down it didn’t happen’

That writing should be part of social workers’ practice was agreed by all interviewed across all three domains, with the written record viewed as ‘absolutely essential’ for a number of reasons. Their functions include the following: as a form of evidence; as a log of work completed and to do; as a means of recognizing, tracking and predicting patterns of events and behaviours; as a means of securing services; and (noted in particular with regard to Handwritten Notebooks) as a semiotic space for reflecting on what are often highly complex situations. These views were expressed by social workers in interviews (Extracts 4 and 5 – broad transcription followed, using standard punctuation, and square brackets for inaudible talk and extended pauses).

Extract 4

[writing is] absolutely essential. There is so much information, so many demands to keep records of things. I write literally everything down. I write the time that I get a phone call, and I write as I’m on the phone, the key points. And when I’ve got time I put them all onto official records (SW, Adult care)

Extract 5

It’s [writing] absolutely essential. We write and record everything that we do in a working day, every interaction that we have with a family. **We have to** record telephone calls, and everything, everything that we do in a day **needs to be** recorded. Any communication that we have with, families that we work with, children that we work with, other professionals, **we have to** make sure that everything’s logged and recorded (SW, Children’s care, emphasis added).

That (some) writing is viewed not only as essential from the social workers’ professional perspective but also as an institutional obligation is signalled in the use of *we have to* and *needs to be* in the second interview (Extract 5) above. Many social workers (40) explicitly expressed concern about the amount of time they were required to spend on writing as compared with working directly with people (Extracts 6 and 7).

Extract 6

You come in to make a difference, and you’re sitting behind a computer, not making a difference (SW, Children’s care)

Extract 7

You're trying to fit everything in. Someone might say 'Your report's not very good' or 'It's late' or 'It's not on time', but then on the other hand you've got a young person saying 'You haven't been to see me. Why do you never come to see me?' (SW, Children's care)

The unease felt at this sense of imbalance of what it means to work in social care is echoed in the comments of another social worker in adult generic care (Extract 8).

Extract 8

I spend very little time doing home visits, other than doing assessments. If I'm visiting someone it's because I'm assessing what the situation is or I'm reviewing the situation. I'm going to gather information to bring it back, to put on the system, to update it. I very rarely spend time with people sitting and chatting, 'How are you doing', you know? It's very service led and it's worrying because you know, obviously they're vulnerable people out there and you want to support them as best as you can. But you don't have time for that social work role. It's about recording, evidencing all the time what you're doing. (SW, Adult care)

A children's social worker reported a view shared amongst colleagues that it was simply not possible to do the work of supporting people and sustain the level of writing activity required (Extract 9).

Extract 9

I would say there is often a debate about you can be a good social worker in practice and you can be a good social worker on paper, but you can't be both (SW, Children's care)

Estimates of the amount of time spent on writing ranged minimally from 13% (an hour a day, 1 person) and maximally to 98% (1 person), with most (60) of those 71 interviewed estimating they spend more than 50% of their working lives on writing. Overall, it was felt that the balance was wrong, with too much time being spent on writing as compared to working directly with service users. The deep concern about the amount of writing *required* of social workers, as compared with the amount of writing and time spent on writing considered *desirable* by social workers, and the fact of the written record being the only way of legitimizing work undertaken, was encapsulated in the comment voiced by many (in interviews and during observations): 'If it's not written down it didn't happen'.

5 Conclusion

This paper has offered a baseline characterization of writing in contemporary social work in the UK, foregrounding the amount and range of writing being carried out, the centrality of four key genres to professional practice and the use of digital alongside conventional writing technologies. We have foregrounded typicality in text work, pointing to key functionalities of text types and key elements of genres in children's services, adult generic services and adult mental health services, but also signalled variation, the significance of each aspect of which it will be important to explore further in the context of specific genre suites and trajectories (for ongoing work in this vein, see e.g. Lillis 2017)

A focus on three cases has illustrated the ways in which written texts are embedded in everyday professional practice and are essential to driving core social work action: describing events, people, situations; assessing needs; managing risk; mediating between other agencies; and requesting and providing services. Findings from interviews with 71 social workers have illustrated that social workers consider writing to be an essential part of professional practice, but also a cause of deep concern because of the amount of time required to be spent on writing, as compared with engaging with people.

This baseline characterization provides empirical support for long-since made claims about the increased bureaucratization of the profession (see e.g. Howe 1992, which continues to be widely cited, alongside more recent expressions, such as Novell 2014 and Parker 2014), which sits alongside official and influential calls to social workers to not make record keeping the primary goal. Eileen Munro (chair of a highly influential 2011 review of child protection in England) stated in a presentation to social worker trainees: 'Your job is not to write beautiful reports and lovely essays. It is to make life different for children' (Munro, quoted in McNicoll 2016). She has also argued against increased requirements for mandatory reporting of child abuse concerns (quoted in Horton 2016).

Yet the reality of everyday professional social work practices sits uneasily with this aspiration. Writing occupies a paradoxical position in contemporary social work practice in a number of ways. First, social workers are routinely required to engage in the writing of a large number of different texts, whilst at the same time being urged not to make writing the centre of their practice. Second, social workers themselves consider writing a meaningful dimension to their work, yet are deeply frustrated by the amount of time they spend writing. The extent to which this is a paradox depends on the specific purpose of the writing and, importantly, having a sense of control over such writing. In the examples discussed in this paper, mandatory routine accounts of events or

repetitive detail in form-filling to secure services were considered a wasteful use of time, whereas texts within the control of the social worker, such as the Network Map and Appeals against DWP decisions, were considered valuable. Exactly which aspects of writing are considered to be meaningful is a focus of ongoing research. Third, the range and complexity of everyday writing is highly visible to practitioners (and researchers) but remains largely invisible in policies underpinning social work provision and professional registration as well as in social work programmes of education and training. Where writing is visible (as discussed in the Introduction) this tends to be when it is identified as a 'problem': for example, when social workers fail to meet deadlines for writing a Case Note within the IT system or for completing an assessment, or when concerns are raised about 'too much description and insufficient evaluation' (comments made by an assessment panel as reported by one social work manager; see also Lillis 2017).

What emerges from this characterization is that contemporary social work is *de facto* a 'writing-intensive' profession (Brandt 2005), rather than a profession where there is, almost incidentally and perhaps temporarily, 'too much paperwork'. Brandt defines a 'writing-intensive' profession as one where 30% of time is spent on writing or preparing for writing, pointing to professions where writing is explicitly a core part of the work – e.g. attorney, researcher, editor, web designer, writer of educational materials. Whilst this is an obvious point to practitioners, in that they know their work involves a considerable amount of writing, the fact of writing as a core social work activity is highly contested. Unlike Brandt's professions where people 'write for a living', social workers' primary goal is not writing, but working to provide services for vulnerable children and adults, and the proportion of time spent on writing is often signalled as disproportionate (Moriarty and Manthorpe 2015).

The baseline characterization offered in this paper is of potential usefulness to policy and practice in the following ways:

- It signals the need for educators and trainers to pay attention to professional writing within programmes of study and professional development, an aspect currently largely missing (see Lillis and Rai 2012; Rai and Lillis 2012);
- The primary data generated in WiSP can be developed into a resource for education and training about the range and complexity of the writing in which social workers are required to engage.

More fundamentally, however, it illustrates the need for a public debate about the nature of contemporary social work, involving unions, government ministers, funding agencies, inspectors and social work regulatory bodies and with

the profession itself listened to carefully. Acknowledging that social work is *de facto* a ‘writing-intensive’ profession would be to engage explicitly with the clash of imaginaries (Castoriadis 1987) signalled in this paper: an institutional imaginary where the written record dominates, and a professional imaginary which has people at the centre.

Note

1. Further details about the WiSP project can be found on the project website: <http://www.writinginsocialwork.com>
2. The WiSP study is part of ongoing research on writing in social work which began in 2009. See for example Lillis and Rai 2012; Rai and Lillis 2012; Lillis 2017.
3. Issues around anonymization and sharing are complex. For brief summary of key issues and decisions made, see <http://writinginsocialwork.com>
4. Throughout we use capitals to refer to institutional labelling of texts and to foreground their significance in social work practice (this includes Emails as a genre).
5. Where rhetorical re-alignment with institutional function is required, the institutional label takes precedence: for example, when an Email is copied into a Case Note, it becomes a Case Note. An analysis of this entextualization practice is the focus of ongoing study.
6. Assessments of PIP are highly controversial. They are carried out by private companies based on the claimant completing a form and being interviewed. The assessor awards a score; points are awarded in relation to assessment of a person’s need in relation to two aspects: ‘daily living’ (e.g. washing and using the toilet) and ‘mobility’ (e.g. being able to walk 20 paces). In order to be eligible to receive payment relating to daily living the applicant needs to score 8 (basic living needs) or 12 (enhanced living needs). Written and oral answers are therefore crucial in determining whether a person is assessed as being entitled to some financial support. See <https://www.benefitsandwork.co.uk/personal-independence-payment-pip/pip-points-system> for further detail.

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Appendix

AMHP	approved mental health practitioner
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CLA	child looked after
CP	child protection
CPN	community psychiatric nurse
CSE	child sexual exploitation
CIN	child in need
GP	general practitioner (i.e. doctor)
IRO	independent reviewing officer
LAC	looked-after child
MAT	multi-agency team
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
PEP	personal educational plan
PLO	public law outline

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