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The Social Work Public Perception Myth

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Abstract

Social workers in England consistently raise concerns that the public have a negative perception of them. In contrast, when the public are asked directly about their perceptions of social workers, they tend to be relatively positive. Within this context, this research undertook a genealogy of discourse looking at government policy texts from 2003 to 2023 to better understand how and why a discourse around negative public perception of social workers perpetuates. In total, twenty policy texts were analysed. The findings demonstrate that government policy texts consistently refer to a negative public perception of social workers and the need to address this. Most of these assertions are made with limited or no evidence. Despite this, they are frequently used to justify major reforms within the profession. After presenting these findings, the article looks in more depth at the research that does exist around the public perception of social workers in England. Linked research and literature related to media portrayals of social workers are also discussed. It is suggested that alongside justifying reforms, the discourse around the negative public perception of social workers acts to distract from other issues facing the profession, including working conditions, and to control social workers and reduce dissent.

Keywords: discourse, genealogy, media portrayal, public perception, social work

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Introduction

It is well documented in research that social workers in England believe that the public has a poor perception of them (Leigh, 2014; Legood *et al.*, 2016; Gibson, 2019; YouGov, 2020, 2023; Murphy, 2022; British Association of Social Workers (BASW), 2023; Johnson *et al.*, 2023; Koutsounia, 2023; Rowe *et al.*, 2023; Murphy *et al.*, 2024). There has been decidedly less focus on determining the public's actual perceptions of social workers. The few studies that have looked into this have found generally favourable public perceptions of social workers (Research Works, 2001; Revans, 2007; Cragg Ross Dawson, 2020; Rowe *et al.*, 2023). Within this context, this article presents the findings from a genealogy of discourse examining government policy texts in England that engage with the topic of public perception of social workers during the period of 2003–2023. Through this analysis, it is demonstrated that the taken-for-granted, and rarely evidenced, discourse around a negative public perception of social workers is perpetuated primarily through repetition by authority, and acts to distract, control and impose reforms on social workers. Following this analysis, the second half of this article explores the research and evidence that does exist around the public perception of social workers, suggesting a more complex, nuanced, and predominantly positive, picture.

Genealogy of discourse

The term 'discourse' relates to 'historically variable ways to specifying knowledge and truth' (Foucault, 1980, p. 93). The methodology of genealogy of discourse looks to analyse the way that truth and knowledge are perpetuated through discourse by identifying errors, false appraisals and faulty calculations, in particular those related to the power relations (Anais, 2013). The use of the term genealogy, instead of history, avoids the presumption of positive progress often associated with historical analyses. This point is significant to this research because despite at least twenty years of policy reforms in England being justified based on a need to address public perception, this has not altered the continued focus on this area (Department for Education (DfE), 2023a, 2023b). This suggests a distinct lack of progress, either because the policy reforms have failed to achieve their goals, or because the issue itself has been erroneously presented or understood.

The focus of this genealogy is on policy published by the government or a government department from 2003 to 2023. Efforts were made to identify and review all major government policies that mention the public perception of social workers during the twenty-year period being examined. Policies were found using the researchers own knowledge, informed by previous genealogical research in this area (Hanley, 2021),

supported by chronologies of key policies published elsewhere (Jones, 2014; Purcell 2020), and supplemented by searches on Google and gov.uk using the keywords of ‘social work’, ‘perception’, ‘image’, ‘confidence’, ‘trust’ and ‘faith’.

In total, twenty policy texts met the inclusion criteria:

- 2003—Every Child Matters
- 2003—Keeping Children Safe: The Government’s response to The Victoria Climbié Inquiry Report and Joint Chief Inspectors’ Report Safeguarding Children
- 2005—Children’s Workforce Strategy: A Strategy to Build a Workforce for Children and Young People
- 2006—Options for Excellence: Building the Social Care Workforce of the Future
- 2007—Care Matters: Time for Change
- 2008—Staying Safe: Action Plan
- 2008—Building Brighter Futures: Next Steps for the Children’s Workforce
- 2008–2020 Children and Young People’s Workforce Strategy: The Evidence Base
- 2012—Caring for Our Future: Reforming Care and Support
- 2014—Taking Forward Professor Croisdale-Appleby’s Review of Social Work Education
- 2014—Consultation on Knowledge and Skills for Children and Family Social Work: Government Response
- 2016—Regulating Social Workers: Policy Statement
- 2016—Strategic Statement for Social Work with Adults in England 2016–2020
- 2016—Putting Children First: Delivering our Vision for Excellent Children’s Social care
- 2017—Confidence in Practice: Child and Family Social Work Assessment and Accreditation System: Government Consultation Response
- 2018—Consultation on Improvement Standards for Child and Family Social workers: Government Consultation Response
- 2018—Social Work England Secondary Legislative Framework: Government Consultation Response
- 2022—Changes to the Regulatory Framework for Social Work England: Government Consultation Response
- 2023—Stable Homes, Built on Love: Implementation Strategy and Consultation: Children’s Social Care Reform
- 2023—Stable Homes, Built on Love: Government Consultation Response

‘Image problem’

In 2003, *Every Child Matters* (Department for Education and Skills (DfES), 2003a) highlighted that ‘social workers have suffered from a

poor public image', linking this to recruitment and retention issues within the profession (p.85). No evidence is provided for this assertion. The [Laming \(2003\)](#) inquiry into the Death of Victoria Climbié that *Every Child Matters* asserts to have been in response to makes no reference to concerns around the poor public image of social work. The government's official response to the Victoria Climbié report that accompanied the release of *Every Child Matters* also makes limited mention of negative public perception, other than referring to an ongoing recruitment and retention plan that aims to 'inform the public about what social workers and social care workers do' ([DfES, 2003b](#): 17). The follow-up policy, *Children's Workforce Strategy* ([HM Government, 2005](#)), refers to 'immediate challenges' including improving the 'status, numbers and quality' of children and families' social workers (p.44). Again no evidence is provided for the 'status' of social workers being an immediate challenge.

The joint policy report *Options for Excellence* from [DfES and Department of Health \(DoH\) \(2006\)](#) describes that ongoing reforms, including restricting the title of social work, regulating the profession and issuing codes of practice, have all been measures to 'protect service users and improve the public profile of social care' (p.3). Other statements in that text include that 'further research also suggests that the key reasons for high vacancy rates include poor public perception of working in social care' although no specific reference to research is provided (p.17). This does not preclude later claims of a social work 'image problem' being used to justify a range of initiatives, including publicity and recruitment campaigns, and the introduction of 'flexible entry routes' into social work (pp.35–6).

This discourse is also found in *Care Matters: Time for Change* ([DfES, 2007](#)) released the next year, where 'a key aspect of improving recruitment' of social workers is described to be 'establishing a positive public image of the profession' (p.128). These public image concerns are then used to justify policies including targeted recruitment campaigns and exploring 'new initial training routes for social workers' (p.128). This is all said to be justified 'in response to what children and young people and those currently in the profession have told us' during a consultation (p.128). No further specifics are given about this feedback.

Staying Safe: Action Plan ([Department for Children, Schools and Families \(DfCSF\), 2008a](#)) set out a cross-government action plan that includes the need to improve public perception of social workers. In this case, the text describes hearing from over 1,000 people. For example, there is a quote from one parent who highlights in relation to social workers:

Based on, not on any experience, but based on things that you read in the press, TV programmes etc, they tend to rush in like a bull in a china shop (p.32).

The two other quotes from the public in that section about social work are both very positive, including one from a young person and another from a parent. The only additional evidence about public perception provided is that professionals themselves raised explicit concerns about 'negative perception of social workers in the media' (p.33). These discussions then lead into an action plan that once again includes a national marketing campaign, and now more explicit plans to pilot fast-track qualifying routes for social workers.

That same year in *Building Brighter Futures* (DfCSF, 2008b), it is claimed that whilst teachers 'enjoy relatively high status', other professions, such as social work 'are held in relatively low esteem' (p.42). Yet again, no evidence for these assertions is provided. Following on from that, the *2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy* (DfCSF, 2008c) made no reference to the public perception of social workers. The accompanying evidence base document released at the same time makes the claim that social work is a 'low status' occupation, justifying this with evidence that half of students entering social work degree programmes had fewer than 240 UCAS points (DfCSF, 2008d: 32). The only other evidence for a low status of social work that is presented is a link to an IPPR report that found that early years and childcare workers do not feel respected (Cooke and Lawton, 2008). However, that report again spoke only to professionals, not the public, and more significantly, none of those in the sample were social workers.

'Absolute public confidence'

In *Caring for Our Future* (HM Government, 2012) the government outlined their intentions to appoint a Chief Social Worker (CSW) as part of an effort to 'ensure that people are confident that they will be able to develop trusting and rewarding relationships with those giving them care and support' (p.49). The first CSW for Children and Families was appointed within the DfE in 2013. They would go on to play a lead role in a range of professional reforms also justified based on the need to address negative public perceptions of social workers. This includes the introduction of a Knowledge and Skills Statement (KSS), a statement on what a child and family social workers should be able to do at the end of their first year in practice (DfE, 2014a). In the government response to the consultation on the KSS, the DfE (2014b) argued for 'the need to have absolute public confidence in social workers' (p.11).

That consultation response also highlighted that the introduction of the National Assessment and Accreditation System (NAAS), a national system of assessment for qualified child and family social workers, would increase the 'professional status' of social workers alongside the KSS (DfE, 2014b: 11). The CSW for Children and Families had a key role in

the design and introduction of the NAAS, justified in *Putting Children First* (DfE, 2016) as an ‘opportunity to develop the confidence of the public in the profession’ (p.22). No evidence for why this public confidence is a key focus is provided. *Putting Children First* also justifies additional reforms, such as the establishment of a ‘What Works Centre’ for children’s social care, based on a need to improve the ‘status’ of social work (p.41). Two follow up government consultation responses would also include statements attributed to the CSW referencing the need for ‘national recognition’ (DfE, 2017, p. 6) and ‘public confidence’ (DfE, 2018, p. 5) in social work as justification for the NAAS. Neither of these statements was directly linked to responses or evidence gathered in the consultations (or elsewhere).

‘Trust and confidence’

The majority of the texts identified in this genealogy focus on children’s social work. This suggests that the rhetoric around the poor public perception of social workers is predominantly perpetuated in relation to children and family social workers. However, it is important to acknowledge that this discourse is also found in policy texts related to social work with adults. For example, in the response to the Croisdale-Appleby review into social work education (DoH, 2014):

the government notes Professor Croisdale-Appleby’s recommendation that, to raise the quality of practice and level of public confidence in the social work profession, a Licence to Practice should be developed and that the ASYE should be bolstered (p.14)

The Croisdale-Appleby (2014) report itself makes a far more expanded case for a licence to practice and a strengthened assessed and supported year in employment (ASYE), in particular highlighting the need to for better support for social workers. At no point in those discussions, nor anywhere else in the report, does Croisdale-Appleby (2014) suggest these changes are needed to improve ‘public confidence’.

Strategic Statement for Social Work with Adults (DoH, 2016) states that ‘the public know what a doctor, a nurse or a police officer is and what they do—they are valued and respected as professionals... we want this to be the case for social workers’ (p.2). Again, no evidence for these assertions is provided. However, the rest of the document outlines a range of reforms that are justified based on this central premise, including the introduction of the fast-track qualifying programme with a mental health focus: Think Ahead. A new specialist regulator for social work, what would become Social Work England (SWE), is also suggested as part of these reforms. Similarly, in the joint DfE and DoH (2016) policy *Regulating Social Workers*, a new regulator was proposed

to 'promote the status and standing of social work' (p.3). This mirrors calls for a new regulator to improve the 'status and standing' of social work in the aforementioned *Putting Children First*, published just one month earlier (DfE, 2016, p.25).

In the government's response to the consultation on the regulatory framework for SWE, the [DfE and Department of Health and Social Care \(DHSC\) \(2018\)](#) state that the aim of the new regulator would be, amongst other things, 'building public trust and confidence' in social work (p.3). Although most references to the need to improve trust and confidence in social work in that text are presented without linking them to consultation responses or other evidence, there is a reference to a single consultation respondent who noted that providing information on the core functions of SWE will improve 'public confidence' (p.25). Similar justifications around 'public confidence' would be used in responding to a consultation on significant changes to this regulatory framework four years later, but again the text failed to clearly link these assertions to the consultation feedback they received (DfE, 2022, p. 9).

The most recent reform plans for the social work profession, announced in *Stable Homes, Built on Love* (DfE, 2023a), made limited reference to public perception. However, the introduction of an Early Career Framework (ECF), a proposed continuing professional development framework for children and family social workers, is justified in part based on the need for the public to be 'assured that social workers have the practice capability needed' (p.122). No evidence is provided for this need. The [MacAlister \(2022\)](#) review, one of several reviews that informed these policy reforms, did make mention that introducing the ECF would mean 'we should have greater confidence in the social work system' (p.140). The issues around public confidence in social work are explored more overtly in the government's response to the consultation on *Stable Homes, Built on Love*, where it is noted that some organisations and practitioners who responded highlighted concerns about the public image of social workers (DfE, 2023b). This is again linked with the need for the ECF, but no mention is made of any responses from members of the public highlighting their poor perceptions or lack of confidence related to social workers.

'Warmly disposed'

The genealogy presented in the previous three sections demonstrates that the discourse of a negative public perception of social work is prominent in government policy texts, but also that these assertions are rarely linked to evidence. Therefore, it is important to look at what research actually does say about the public perception of social workers. For example, in a series of focus groups in 2001, [Research Works \(2001\)](#) found

that the public generally felt that the work that social workers do is worthwhile, and the status of social workers was seen as comparable to teachers, nurses and the police. In a larger investigation in 2007, 1,000 members of the public were surveyed for the industry news outlet Community Care (Revans, 2007). 93 per cent of respondents stated that social workers make a very important or fairly important contribution to society, and two thirds said they would trust social workers to help them and their families.

In a more recent public survey commissioned by SWE, Cragg Ross Dawson (2020) found that 88 per cent of participants agreed that social work is important in helping vulnerable people, and 70 per cent agreed that social workers make a big difference in improving people's lives. Reflecting on these findings, SWE (2021) would recognise 'the public are more warmly disposed towards social work than is widely believed, including by social workers' (p.17). In a follow-up study, also commissioned by SWE, Rowe *et al.* (2023) reported that only 44 per cent of the public surveyed think that social work is respected in society, lower than most other professions. However, it is important to recognise that finding is a reflection of respondents' perception of society, not of social workers. In contrast, when asked about their own perceptions of social workers, respondents were predominantly positive, including 85 per cent agreeing that social work is important in helping people who are at risk of harm and 74 per cent stating that social workers want the best for people they work with. It should be noted that both of these studies also identified that the public were more aware of children and family social work than other areas (Cragg Ross Dawson, 2020; Rowe *et al.*, 2023). This may be because of the emphasis that government policy and media reporting tend to place on children and family social work, a point returned to below (Jones, 2014; Purcell, 2020; Murphy, 2022).

These positive findings around the public perception of social workers reflect similar findings from other jurisdictions, including Scotland (McCulloch and Webb, 2020), Sweden (Nilsson and Landstedt, 2022), USA (Calhoun *et al.*, 2020), Croatia (Knežević and Butler, 2003), New Zealand (Staniforth *et al.*, 2014), Albania (Osmanaga, 2019), Kazakhstan (Tulebayev, 2021), Nigeria (Amadasun, 2021) and Turkey (Bolgün and Sahin, 2019). These studies, from England and internationally, also habitually highlight that the public recognise that media portrayals of social workers tend to be overly negative and inaccurate. They also show that the public tend to recognise the challenges social workers face around working conditions, staff shortages, workloads, resource restrictions and government failures to tackle the root causes of social problems. Collectively, this evidence is suggestive of a significantly more positive and nuanced public understanding of social work than was presented in any of the policy texts analysed above.

'Dim view'

As identified in the genealogy, one area of reform that the discourse around a negative public perception of social work has been used to justify has been the introduction alternative qualifying training routes into social work, in particular fast-track programmes (DfES and DoH, 2006; DfES, 2007; DfCSF, 2008a; DoH, 2016). The most prominent of these today is Frontline, a fast-track social work qualifying scheme introduced in 2013 that has been publicly funded to expand rapidly since (Hanley, 2022). The case for the introduction and funding of Frontline drew extensively on the discourse around negative public perceptions of social work (MacAlister *et al.*, 2012). This included setting out that one of the core problems Frontline would address is the 'low status of the profession' (p.5). The evidence presented for this low status was threefold. The first piece of evidence was that social work post-qualifying programmes receive low numbers of applicants who are Russell Group university graduates, suggesting this represents 'the public's dim view of the profession' (p.5). The second piece of evidence was a focus group of eight Russell Group graduates who had applied for the Teach First teacher qualifying programme that Frontline is modelled on. Despite this very small and very specific sample, the findings are cited, with no accompanying methodological details, to suggest a poor public perception is preventing people from applying for social work courses.

The only other evidence cited in the Frontline proposal for this 'low status' is a survey carried out by Ipsos MORI that found that 60 per cent of public respondents trust social workers to tell the truth. MacAlister *et al* (2012) compare this with doctors (88 per cent), teachers (81 per cent), professors (74 per cent) and judges (72 per cent), to make the case that the public have a negative view of social work. However, what that proposal leaves out is that doctors, teachers, professors and judges were listed as the four highest rated professions in the Ipsos MORI (2011) trust survey that year, and that social work at 60 per cent is actually higher than the average profession (52 per cent), and substantially higher than many professions, including business leaders (29 per cent), journalists (19 per cent), and politicians (14 per cent).

It is ironic then that the eventual creation and public funding of Frontline would open the door for far more direct influence of business leaders, politicians and journalists over the qualifying of social workers, all professions that have regularly partnered with Frontline and been represented on their board (Hanley, 2022). Although recent Ipsos Mori (2023) surveys of professional trust do not include social work, it is noteworthy that levels of trust in business leaders (30 per cent), journalists (21 per cent), and politicians (9 per cent) have remained consistently lower than the 60 per cent cited for social work in the Frontline proposal.

Charity CEO, the role that the lead author of the proposal, Josh MacAlister, would eventually take up within the Frontline organisation, has also been consistently rated lower in public trust, most recently at 44 per cent (Ipsos Mori, 2023). MacAlister would also go on to chair the aforementioned MacAlister Review (MacAlister, 2022). His appointment by the Conservative government at the time to chair that review was controversial, in no small part because of his role in founding Frontline and the negative discourse he has perpetuated around social workers (Hanley *et al.*, 2021). MacAlister is also now a politician, having been elected as a Labour MP in 2024, meaning he has joined the lowest rated profession for trust according to Ipsos MORI (2023), at just 9 per cent.

Despite Frontline being introduced over a decade ago with an explicit goal to address the status of the profession, it continues to highlight public perception as an issue (Frontline, 2022). To make this case, they point to a survey of 2,000 adults, where 58 per cent believed that social workers have a bad reputation. However, as with the findings in Rowe *et al.* (2023) discussed above, these findings represent a perception of societal perceptions, not social workers.

'Mythical public'

The discourse examined here has clearly impacted on social workers. As noted in the introduction, a range of studies have found that social workers overwhelmingly believe the public has a negative perception of them (Leigh, 2014; Legood *et al.*, 2016; Gibson, 2019; YouGov, 2020, 2023; Murphy, 2022; BASW, 2023; Johnson *et al.*, 2023; Koutsounia, 2023; Rowe *et al.*, 2023; Murphy *et al.*, 2024). As an illustrative example, the study from Rowe *et al.* (2023) that reported 44 per cent of the public believe social work is respected in society, also reported only 11 per cent of social workers believed this. Such is their lack of faith in the public, LeGood *et al.* (2016) found that social workers believed that negative public perception could not even be changed by providing the public with evidence that refutes their beliefs about social workers. These findings from social workers are often treated, in the studies themselves as well as elsewhere, as if they are a proxy for public perception itself.

In their work on the public perception of social workers in New Zealand, Beddoe *et al.* (2019) have highlighted a similar disparity between generally positive public perceptions and social worker belief in a negative perception, describing social workers believing in: 'a mythical "public"—a critical entity that social workers have created' (Beddoe *et al.*, 2019, p. 542). They link the creation of this mythical public not only to political discourse, as has been outlined here, but also to negative media portrayals of social workers. There is no lack of research identifying negative and inaccurate portrayals of social work in England

across a range of media, including film, television, and the press (Franklin and Parton, 2001; Reid and Misener, 2001; Freeman and Valentine, 2004; Personnel Today, 2009; Warner, 2013, 2014; Edmondson and King, 2016; Leedham, 2022, 2024). In much the same way that social worker beliefs about public perception are often equated with public perception itself, negative media treatment of social workers is also frequently treated as reflective of public perception, including in some of the research studies already cited in this article (Leigh, 2014; Edmondson and King, 2016; Legood *et al.*, 2016; Leedham *et al.*, 2022, 2024), as well as, I must confess, by me in previous work (Hanley, 2021).

Linked to these negative media portrayals, it is frequently suggested that social workers need to be better at engaging with the media and promoting themselves (Ayre, 2001; Reid and Misener, 2001; Freeman and Valentine, 2004; Revans, 2007; Personnel Today, 2009; Legood *et al.*, 2016). However, many social workers do speak out about their profession publicly, including to journalists and politicians, but also in other, increasingly digital, spaces when these opportunities are not forthcoming (Sen *et al.*, 2020; BASW, 2023; Hanley, 2024). Indeed, it may be social workers' long history of speaking out that explains exactly why political and media networks are so driven to perpetuate this discourse of a negative public perception. Social workers in England have highlighted how their beliefs in negative public perceptions, and the negative media portrayals they believe stoke these negative perceptions, create a culture of fear and anxiety, leading social workers towards compliance and hindering dissent (Leigh, 2014; Legood *et al.*, 2016; Gibson, 2019; YouGov, 2020; Murphy, 2022, Koutsounia, 2023; Murphy *et al.*, 2024).

Concerns about a negative public perception of social workers can also serve to distract from other areas. For example, unlike the lack of evidence for a negative public perception, the poor working conditions and under-resourcing of social workers in England is backed up by a substantial and ever growing body of research (YouGov, 2020, 2023; BASW, 2023; Johnson *et al.*, 2023; Rowe *et al.*, 2023). That research also shows that the reasons social workers are leaving the profession in such high numbers do not relate to public perception, but instead relate primarily to working culture and workloads (Johnson *et al.*, 2023; YouGov, 2023). In this way, the discourse around the negative public perception of social workers allows policy makers to shift blame for their own failures onto the aforementioned 'mythical public'.

Conclusion

A noted limitation of Foucauldian genealogy is that it is inherently based on a selective reading of historical texts. For example, this research was limited to the past twenty years, whilst these issues around public

perception have been discussed for much longer than that (Department of Health, 1998; Ayre, 2001). There is also the potential that some relevant policy documents may have been unintentionally omitted or missed in the search process. Furthermore, the focus on policy texts only provides a partial picture of the way that discourse perpetuates. Policy networks also perpetuate discourse through media comments, political manifestos, committee meetings, speeches, panels, private discussions, legislation and other forums afforded to them (Jones, 2014; Purcell, 2020; Hanley, 2022, 2023). Additionally, as was noted in the latter half of this article, media networks, academic literature and social workers themselves also play a key role in perpetuating this discourse.

Three key impacts of the perpetuation of discourse of a negative public perception of social workers have been identified in this article:

- Distracts from other issues,
- Controls social workers and reduces dissent, and
- Provides justification for reforms and policies.

It is the third of these that was most prominently noted in the genealogy. The analysis presented here therefore suggests that ongoing reforms that have been justified through deferring to public perception should be re-evaluated. This includes the aforementioned ECF (MacAlister, 2022), but also other reforms such as plans for a new Readiness for Professional Practice framework for social work students (SWE, 2022).

This analysis should also lead to a re-evaluation of previous policy reforms that have been justified through this discourse, including creating SWE (DfE and DHSC, 2018), fast-track programmes (MacAlister *et al.*, 2012), What Works Centre (DfE, 2016), CSWs (HM Government, 2012), the KSS (DfE, 2014a), and the NAAS (DfE, 2016). Reviewing these reforms in this way could help facilitate a better understanding of why they may have failed to achieve their stated goals, if the issues they were set up to address were erroneously framed. The NAAS in particular may warrant a review after it was scrapped in 2022 following consistent failures to meet targets, high costs, and widespread resistance from the profession (Preston, 2022). It may even be valuable to use this lens to review reforms that now feel more historic in nature, but were justified at the time through recourse to public perception, including the decision to move to a degree as the minimum qualification for practice (DfE, 2003) and even the move to make social work a regulated profession (Department of Health, 1998).

None of this is to suggest that there can never be legitimate public perception issues to address in relation to social work. For example, as was noted above, the persistent focus in political and media discourse on social work with children and families means that the public are much more aware of this area of social work (Cragg Ross Dawson, 2020;

Rowe *et al.*, 2023). This focus on children and families is most notable when the profession is being framed negatively, as in the case of child deaths (Jones, 2014; Warner, 2014), or when claiming a negative public perception, as identified in this genealogy. This also means that the justification for introducing reforms is often focused, at least initially, on children and family social work. This can be seen in the case of the fast-tracks, first introduced into children and family social work, and later expanded into mental health social work (DoH, 2016). Therefore, there may be justification in seeking to broaden the public's understanding of the multitude of roles that social workers engage with.

However, this research suggests that any future pronouncement around negative public perception, or use of this discourse to promote or implement reforms, should be challenged to provide specifics and evidence that go beyond repetition of discursive formations. Central to this is that media portrayals, the beliefs of social workers, and political pronouncements should not be allowed to stand in as proxies for actual research into public perceptions. This analysis also suggests that other jurisdictions where research shows a generally positive public perception, should consider examining how this issue is portrayed in government policy texts (Staniforth *et al.*, 2014; Bolgün and Sahin, 2019; Calhoun *et al.*, 2020; McCulloch and Webb, 2020; Amadasun, 2021; Tulebayev, 2021; Nilsson and Landstedt, 2022).

There are a number of ongoing campaigns seeking to challenge negative media portrayals of social work in England and the UK, usually with specific goals around improving recruitment and retention (Frontline, 2022; Social Workers Union, 2022; Hardy, 2023, Samuel, 2024; Naqvi, 2023). However, the predominantly profit-driven and politically connected media in England is strongly incentivised towards stories that emphasise scandal, drama and conflict, more likely to be associated with negativity towards social workers (Ayre, 2001; Warner, 2013, 2014; Jones, 2014; Leigh, 2014; Edmondson and King, 2016; Leedham, 2022, 2024). Therefore, without fundamentally changing the role of the media in England, these campaigns are unlikely to make significant progress. This research may also explain the proliferation of these campaigns, being that they are far more palatable to the political discourse than campaigning on other areas, such as working conditions, resourcing and government policy failures.

This research suggests that a better focus of campaigning efforts could be challenging the inaccurate portrayals of public perception stemming from political and media networks, and highlighting to social workers that the public actually hold generally favorable views of them. As well as confronting the ways that this discourse is used to distract, control and impose reforms on social workers, a campaign of this nature could have a positive impact on recruitment and retention. This would be achieved through highlighting that despite constant negative discourse

from policy and media networks, social workers and the good work that they do still manage to break through and find a positive place in the hearts and minds of the majority of the public. That is a real testament to the profession, and should be celebrated.

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