What the public think about social services: a report from Scotland

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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 wider 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.

Introduction

Social services in Scotland, as elsewhere, are in a state of flux and change. Long recognized as a diverse 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). Added to this, recent years have seen radical challenges to relationships between public service 'providers' and people who 'use' services, such that these once taken-for-granted relations are no longer adequate (Alexander and Charles, 2014). This, in turn, has contributed to new configurations of social services where the once firm boundaries between public services are becoming eroded and, some might argue, irrelevant (Needham and Glasby, 2014; Christie Commission, 2011). In the midst of 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 many Western governments. Within this changing context, understanding what the public think about social services is increasingly important. Public opinion has become a key performance measure for public 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). In the UK and internationally, public opinion of social services is now regularly linked to questions of public value, service uptake and impact, alongside related issues of recruitment, retention and professional identity (Webb, 2016; Legood *et al*., 2016; Reid and Misener, 2001). In an era where the public dynamic of social services is increasingly

prominent, understanding and responding to what the public think has become a key component of workforce strategy, policy development, and service delivery and evaluation.

As shown below, however, public opinion is a complex phenomenon. Various theoretical lenses can be applied to public perceptions research, many of which caution against one-dimensional interpretations and approaches. Even the most rudimentary analyses remind us that publics are plural and dynamic, rather than a uniform body to be understood and 'tamed'. Further, public opinion decisively links to developing ideas of legitimacy and social license, which speak to the extent to which organisations and companies enjoy a 'social licence to operate' (SLO) (Thomson and Boutilier, 2011). Developing research in this area underlines that public opinion is a condition not a commodity and efforts to measure and understand it, far less 'improve' it, must embrace these complexities.

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 late 2013 as a partnership of key 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'. The authors were commissioned to conduct the research following a competitive tender, with a brief to: 'explore and 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, including attention to issues of public trust and value;
- draw conclusions regarding the implications of the findings for future research.

At the request of the Scottish government funding body, and reflecting national policy constructions, social services was constructed broadly and was used to refer to 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). This article reports on the findings, conclusions and questions produced through the research. We begin by locating this discussion within contemporary theory on public perception and research. 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.

Contested terrain of public perception research

As outlined above, what publics think, know, say and do has become a central concern of public sector policy and intervention, particularly in an era when it is fashionable to talk about person-

centred services and coproduction between professionals and publics. Existing approaches tend

to imagine an external public existing in a natural state waiting to be revealed, engaged, or

mobilised by government and democracy. Yet, it is worth considering the extent to which publics

are actively brought into being by the ways one seeks to know and move them; that is, how

publics are actively shaped by the process of policy and research engagement.

The research undertaken for this article began with a recognition that a number of competing

theoretical explanations exist of the making and mediation of publics and the analysis of public

perceptions. Different approaches foreground the relative roles of technologies, issues,

imaginaries, media influences and forms of policy or government intervention in 'the making of

publics' (Marres, 2015). What constitutes 'publics' is contextual and contested. Warner's (2002)

analysis examines the many confusing overlapping uses of the terms 'the public', 'publics' and 'a

public'. He notes that individuals may belong simultaneously to many publics, and that this fact

contributes to the ambiguity and circularity of many publics constituting 'the public', making

research 'difficult'. In terms of definition, he states, 'space and physical presence do not make

much difference; a public is understood to be different from a crowd, an audience, or any other

group that requires co-presence' (p. 53). Warner's argument is that a "public is best understood

as formed around textual practices and self-organised relationships with strangers" (ibid).

Dowler *et al.* (2006) have commented that the term 'public perception' is difficult to define. At

one level, 'an instrumental or pragmatic definition is possible: public perception is simply the

type of information obtained from a public opinion survey. That is, '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). They go on to note that answers to structured questions can be recorded and analysed in simple, quantitative terms as a 'snapshot' of opinion at a given moment in time. However, the relationship between replies given to opinion pollsters 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. As Dowler *et al*. note: 'There is a substantial literature on ways to refine questionnaires to minimize biases and assess validity … but even the best designed opinion poll is restricted to gathering fairly superficial opinions' (ibid.).

Public opinion theory is also decisively linked with developing ideas of legitimacy and social license to operate. In sociology, Scott (1995: 45) summarised that 'Legitimacy is not a commodity to be possessed or exchanged but a condition reflecting cultural alignment, normative support, or consonance with relevant rules or laws'. Suchman (1995: 574) expanded on this and developed what is perhaps the most widely cited definition of legitimacy: 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions'. Legitimacy is conferred on an organization when 'stakeholders—that is, internal and external audiences affected by organizational outcomes—endorse and support an organization's goals and activities' (Elsbach and Sutton 1992: 700). Research in this area, which draws predominantly on

science and technology studies, thus highlights that legitimacy is not only fluid and multi-dimensional, but a condition constantly 'in the making' through situated interactions between institutions, individuals and groups.

Public controversies around social services show that competing perceptions have different implications for people as well as for policy and government decision-making. What these implications mean in terms of public perception, and efforts to measure that, was at the forefront of our considerations for the study. How do publics understand social services? How do public understandings align, or otherwise, with political, professional and practical understandings? To what extent do differing and uncertain definitions of social services play out in levels of public trust, confidence, compliance and participation? We return to these questions later. For now, these issues underline that, as a unit of analysis, 'social services' is also complex and efforts to understand public perceptions must engage with these complexities.

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 work and/or social services 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 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[1]. The

authors found few comparative international studies for social work or social services though

insights can be drawn from a small number of US-based studies (Olin, 2013; Lecroy and Stinson,

2004). Knowledge and understanding in this area is thus constrained by a paucity of research

and by differences in how social work, social services and social care are grouped across

jurisdictions.

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 around 2:1. Around

half believed that 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. Participant

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

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[1] In 2009, this survey was extended to include social care, however the focus and results of the survey remain primarily focussed on health services.

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. Broadly, the findings 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, reflecting low awareness and uncertainty.

Penhale and Young (2015) reviewed the literature concerning what the public think about the conduct and competence of social workers in England. However, reflecting the limited literature, much of this study speaks to service user views and therefore sheds limited light on 'public' perceptions. Broadly, the review found both negative and positive perceptions of social workers, with a weighting towards the negative. Negative views were found to be strongly associated with 'distorted' media representations, much of which related to social workers acting (or failing to act) in relation to 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) findings from a telephone poll of 1,000 UK adults presents a more positive picture and found that ninety-three percent of a sample thought that the contribution of social

workers in the community is 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 more 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, it may also reflect the unit of analysis. Here and elsewhere, 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 the picture of social work presented in the media. 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. The authors report that participants generally held much 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 career in social work, 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. Also similar to 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 tend

to reinforce 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 current provision. By contrast, 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 either excellent or good. Recent Scottish surveys however reveal considerable variations in experiences, particularly around co-ordination of health and care services and awareness of supports available.

As argued, the extant literature on public perceptions of social services is limited. Existing research provides 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 research shows little, if any, engagement with broader scholarship in this area, including attention to the complexities of conceptualising, measuring or mediating public perceptions.

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, problems 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 produced through a national online survey of 2,505 adults aged 18 and over and resident in Scotland between 26th October and 3rd November in 2016. In line with most studies of public opinion we used socio-demographic information such as gender, age, 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 autonomous individuals differentiated by demographic characteristics. An obvious weakness to this approach is that the participants in such surveys are 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, 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 concerned public.

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

Proportional quota sampling ensured that respondents were demographically representative of the Scottish population in terms of age and gender. As appropriate, the sample was weighted according to the latest available ONS data on population demographics. The sample was monitored for regional distribution and for those who have and have not used social services in Scotland. Initial investigations estimated us to expect a split of 20:80 between those who have used (or are using) social services and those who have not.

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 inclusion of five open ended questions aimed to produce richer qualitative data for content analysis. 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 the descriptive statistical tests like measures of central tendency for our online web survey data of public understanding. 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 the 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%. We have used the 95% confidence level.

Margin of error is the percentage that describes how closely the answer our sample gave is to the "true value" in the Scottish population. The smaller the margin of error is, the closer we are to having the exact answer at a given confidence level (95%). Thus, our sample size of 2505 respondents is very strong in terms of robustness and validity given we required only 2400 for the 95% confidence level, with a margin of error of 2%.

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.

Public view of social services

Figure 1. General impression of social services

Almost half the sample reported a positive view of social services in Scotland, with a third (34%) reporting negatively (see figure 1). Similarly, 50% agreed that 'the provision of social services in Scotland is good' (see figure 2), with similar results for local provision (see 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

Figure 3. Local area provision (figure 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 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 will meet 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 of qualification tended to report a more positive opinion. Interestingly, 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 (see figure 4 below).

Figure 4. General impression of social services in Scotland of different newspaper readers

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 all that much. This serves to emphasise 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 would seem to indicate that people's opinion of the broader provision in Scotland is formed from their opinion of the 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 people's 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 understanding of social services in Scotland while 43% think they have a poor understanding. 8% think they have a very good understanding (see figure 5).

Figure 5. Understanding of social services

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 and ambivalent 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 having 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 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.

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 (SLO). 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 social 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 also 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 more 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 already 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 sometimes assumed. Here and elsewhere the findings speak to gaps between what respondents identify as significant and influential in 'public' perception, and the nuanced and sometimes conflicting dynamics of what respondents appear to think and feel.   Developing understanding of the multiple dynamics at play in public perceptions – including attention to which are most fluid and most fixed and under which particular circumstances - is critical and requires more in-depth and participatory modes of enquiry than can be 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 social licence, we need to be willing 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 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 care services in Scotland, the UK or internationally. 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 service 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 disrupt dominant narratives in this area and to direct existing communication and messaging efforts.

In many ways the findings of this research project remain partial and beg as many questions as they offer definitive answers. For example, the survey findings presented provide a snapshot of public perceptions of social services in Scotland as reported in 2016. Repeat measure longitudinal research is needed if we are to understand if and how public perceptions shift 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 data is required to investigate the ways in which public perception, legitimacy and trust vary across and within diverse service areas. Also, the authors were surprised by the relatively high levels of indifference and "unknown" 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, findings from this research 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, cultural and textual practices; 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 engaging with 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 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 and/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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Figures

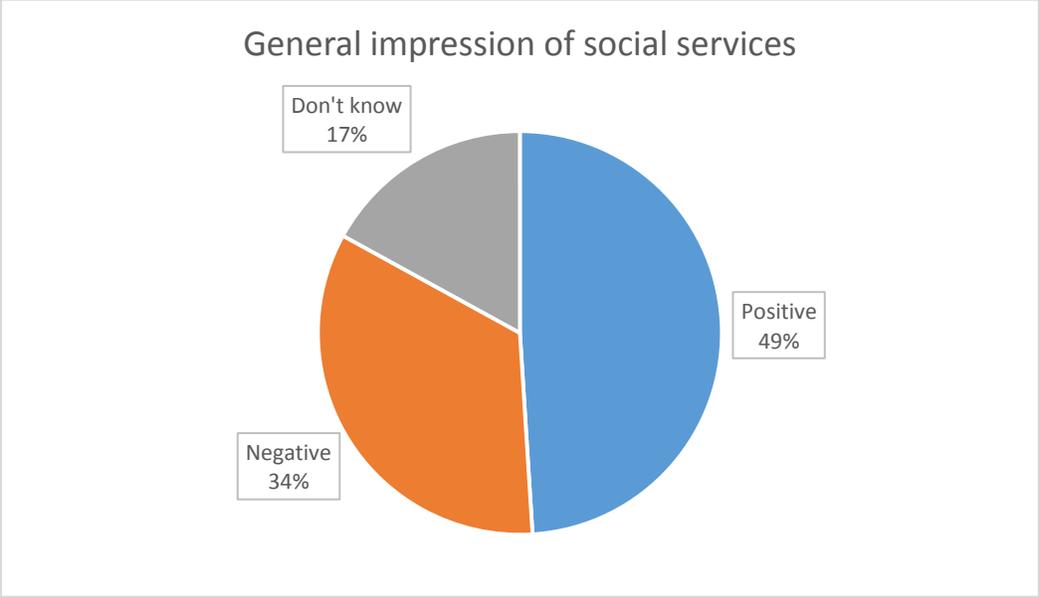Figure 1. General impression of social services

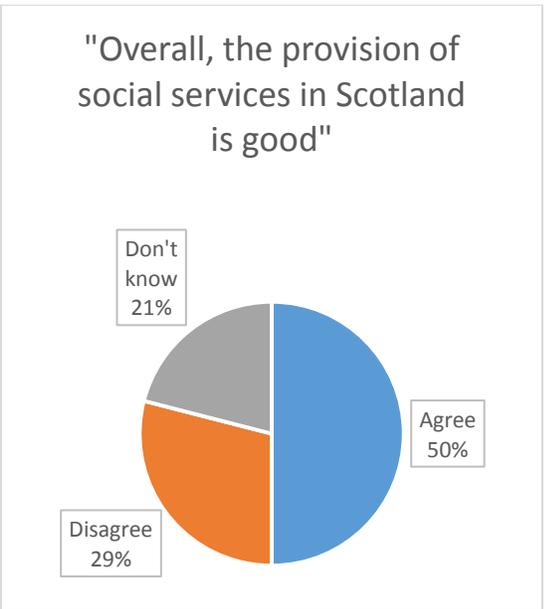Figure 2. Social services provision in Scotland
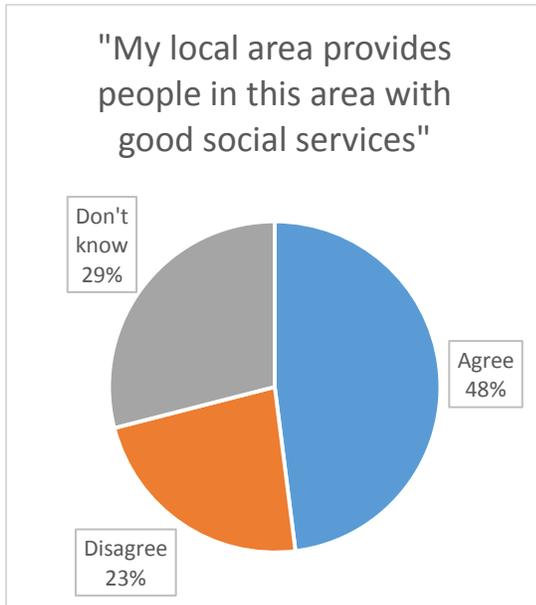
Figure 3. Local area provision

Figure 4. General impression of social services in Scotland of different newspaper readers
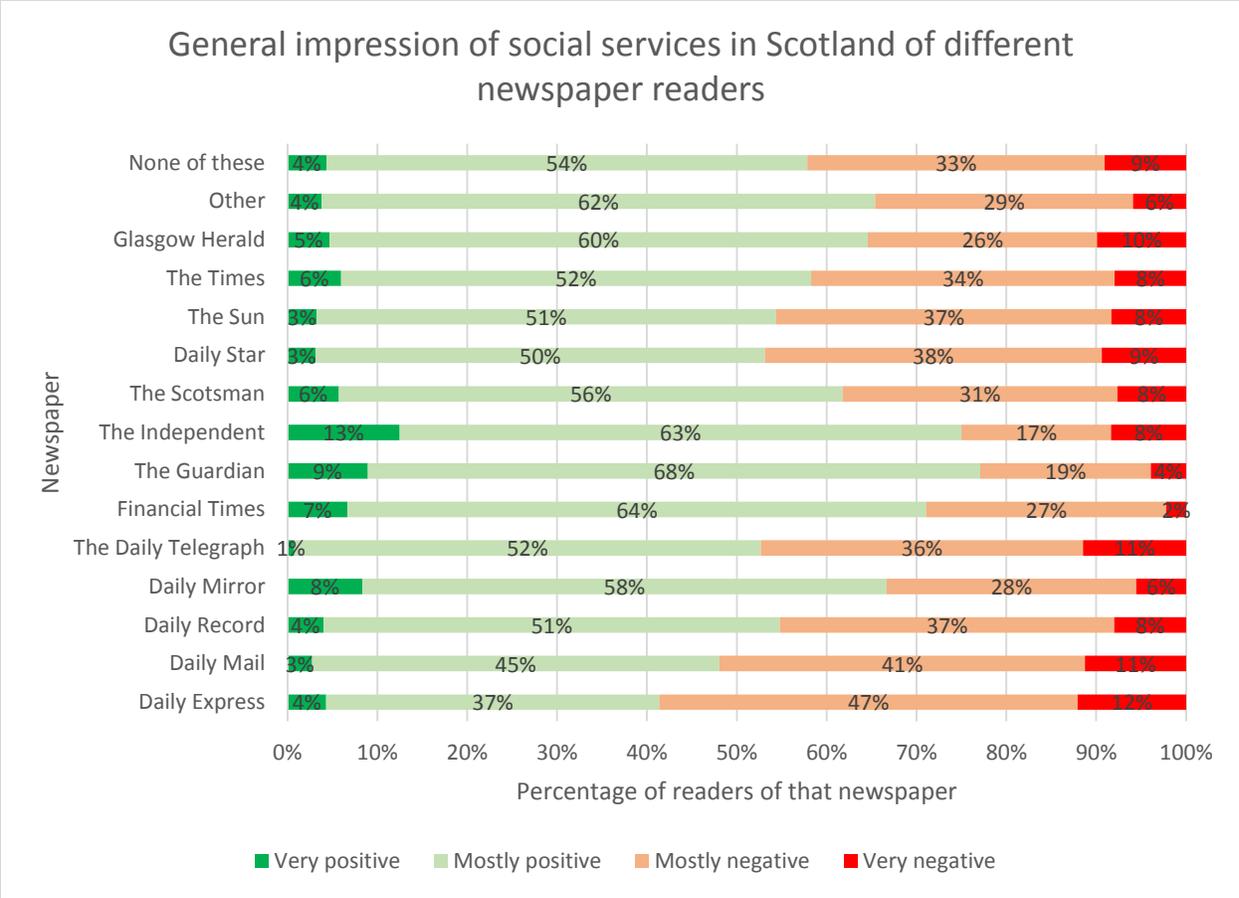
General impression of social services in Scotland of different newspaper readers

Newspaper	Very positive	Mostly positive	Mostly negative	Very negative
None of these	4%	54%	33%	9%
Other	4%	62%	29%	6%
Glasgow Herald	5%	60%	26%	10%
The Times	6%	52%	34%	8%
The Sun	3%	51%	37%	8%
Daily Star	3%	50%	38%	9%
The Scotsman	6%	56%	31%	8%
The Independent	13%	63%	17%	8%
The Guardian	9%	68%	19%	4%
Financial Times	7%	64%	27%	2%
The Daily Telegraph	1%	52%	36%	11%
Daily Mirror	8%	58%	28%	6%
Daily Record	4%	51%	37%	8%
Daily Mail	3%	45%	41%	11%
Daily Express	4%	37%	47%	12%

Percentage of readers of that newspaper

Figure 5. Understanding of social services

Understanding of social services

Poor/ very poor
43%

Very good/ good
57%