



# Norfolk Parent Survey Overview Report

Eileen Munro  
Marie Devine

November 2015

## **1. Introduction**

As part of the England Innovations Project (EIP), the ten participating local authorities were asked to participate in the delivery of a survey to a sample of parents currently receiving services (i.e. open cases) from Children's Social Care. The aim of the survey is to understand more about their experiences of the relationship of their worker.

Obtaining better feedback from families is part of a wider goal of moving local authorities from excessively compliance-driven organisations towards being better at learning and using that learning to drive improvements. This follows from the recommendations of the Munro Review of Child Protection and fits with the new Ofsted inspection framework. The results of this survey will lead to reflection on whether it is proving useful, whether it needs to be modified, or whether other means of obtaining feedback need to be sought.

Feedback from parents is also an essential component of assessing whether families are receiving an effective Signs of Safety service. A Parent Fidelity Survey has been created by the Casey Foundation but, at the time of undertaking this survey, the results of the staff survey showed only a small minority (16%) were making extensive use of Signs of Safety tools so some of the questions on the fidelity survey would be unanswerable/incomprehensible to most recipients. Therefore, a modified version was created but it is hoped that the full fidelity survey will be used by local authorities in the future

## **2. Methods**

### **2.1 Survey design**

The survey asks questions relating to factors that have been identified as contributing to successful helping relationships. These are embedded in the principles and disciplines of Signs of Safety but are widely aspired to in social work generally and so it seemed reasonable to find out whether or not parents were experiencing these factors. Key factors are: how well they understand professionals' concern, whether they feel listened to, whether they feel their social workers sees the positives in their family, whether they agree with the aims of the work, and whether children have been involved well.

Since the survey was to be administered to a sample of all families receiving a service from Children's Social Care, three versions were created with slightly modified language to be appropriate for Child Protection, Early Help and Children With Disabilities. The survey is comprised of an attitude questionnaire with parents asked to respond to statements about their experience of their social worker on a five point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. There were also two open-ended questions designed to gather more qualitative feedback about their experiences.

An explanation of the survey was produced to give to parents with a copy of the survey so that they understood its rationale. Key messages to be conveyed to the parents were that they may refuse to complete the survey at any point, that the information they give will be confidential, and their social worker will not see their responses. The responses were entered in Survey Monkey in anonymised form and given to MTM for analysis.

## 2.2 Delivery process

In Norfolk, social workers were asked to hand out copies of the survey on their visits to families receiving Child Protection, Early Help and Children with Disabilities services, and ask for their consent to be contacted by telephone to complete the survey. A total of 44 parents gave their consent and were called by a member of the Customer Service Centre. Of these, 4 were non-contactable and 40 were successfully contacted and completed the survey – 26 from Child Protection, 6 from Early Help and 8 from CWD.

As the number of respondents to the Early Help and CWD versions of the survey were extremely low, the findings could not be considered representative enough to be reported here. Therefore, we will only report on the findings from the 26 respondents to the Child Protection survey. However, these too must be treated with caution as no data was recorded to show how many parents refused consent to be contacted and, therefore, the overall response rate to the survey is unknown. So, while the findings provide some feedback on parents' experience with their social worker, they should not be taken as representative of practice in Norfolk in general.

## 3. Summary of findings and discussion

The findings show that the respondents reported a mostly positive experience with their social worker, with a majority responding with 'Strongly Agree' or 'Agree' to ten out of the eleven given statements.

The evidence of good practice on listening to parents, being clearly understood by them, making balanced assessments that parents agree with, involving them in planning and achieving agreement on what needs to change, showing respect by being reliable and caring about positive outcomes for the family indicates that the disciplines and principles of Signs of Safety are being well-embedded in Norfolk. This cannot be simply attributed to Signs of Safety implementation since they are widely accepted disciplines and principles in social work and so workers may have been practicing according to the principles before the reforms. It would be interesting to ask workers whether they felt their way of practicing had changed and the extent they thought the quality of the work was due to the Signs of Safety training and to the organizational reforms that now made it easier for them to practice in the way they aspired to.

A lower level of agreement was given to the statement that the social worker had made sure that the child/ren fully understood what was being done to help them. However, this statement received the most neutral (neither agree nor disagree) responses, in some cases this may be a question of the parents being unable to assess the relationship due to the child's age or communication abilities.

In the qualitative section, parents were asked: *If you could change one thing about how your worker is working with you, what would it be?* A significant number (42%) said they would change nothing at all, and the main desired changes reported were in the way their social worker communicated with them in terms of listening, being clear with them, involving them more or showing more understanding.

One question that is hard to give a firm answer to is 'what percentage of parents *should* agree or strongly agree with all of the statements?' While 100% agreement might be

something to aspire to, realistically the fact is that there are several factors that act against it. Most parents are not fully voluntary users of the service (even parents of a disabled child are not voluntary since there is no other way they can access the services their child needs). Many will have had poor experiences in earlier contacts with Children's Social Care or be influenced by the negative criticisms of social workers that appear so often in the media so that they expect and pay more attention to the negative. In addition, social workers may be influenced by systemic factors that make it hard for them to give the necessary time to be with parents and later reflect on how they interacted: a more coercive approach is generally quicker to take. Therefore, it is unrealistic to expect social workers to counteract these negative factors in all cases.

Since there have been no prior parents' studies of this kind in Norfolk to compare the current research data against, it is difficult to benchmark the exact significance of the findings and to know precisely where and to what to attribute the positive responses. There is, however, good research and survey based evidence that shows that children's services in England has become increasingly adversarial and problematic for parents in the past 15 to 20 years. For example Forrester et al.'s work (2007 and 2008) found highly adversarial practice by children's service professionals, concluding - *'the most striking finding was the high level of confrontation and the low level of listening shown by social workers'* (2008, p32).

Findings are reported for the department, not for individual social workers. An individual might get very critical responses from parents not because of being poorly skilled but because s/he works with the more complex families or has such adverse work conditions that their expertise cannot be fully utilised.

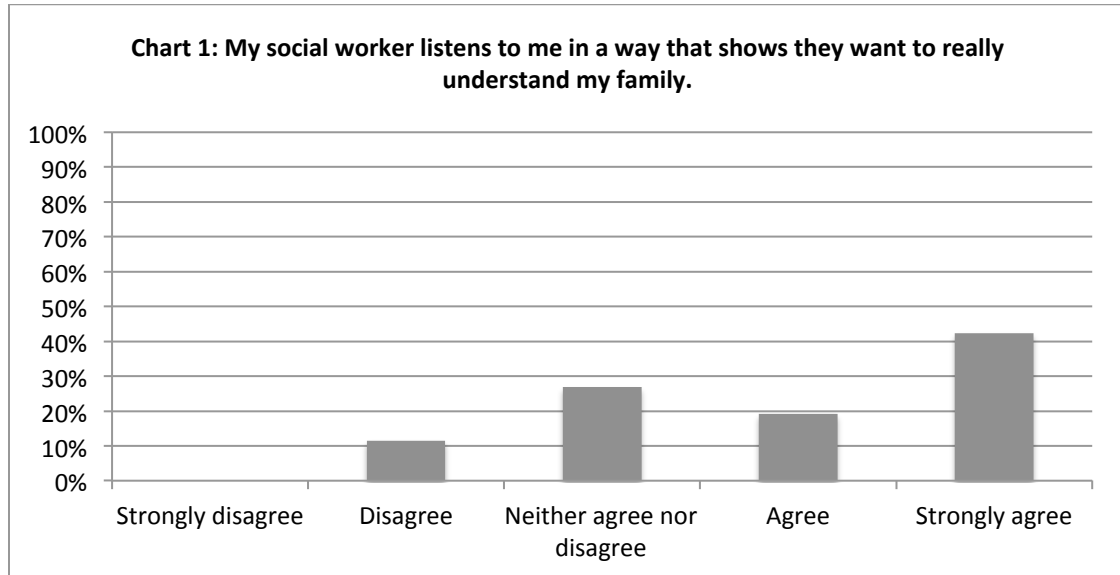
#### **4. Survey results**

Respondents were given a series of statements about their experience of working with their social worker, and asked to rate on a 5-point scale how much they agreed with each statement.

In line with good research practice, the survey asked questions in a random order but in order to discuss them here, they are re-organised into their underlying themes. Constructive working relationships between professionals and family members are a core principle of Signs of Safety and most of the questions (1-9) relate to aspects of these: whether parents feel listened to, whether they agree with the social worker, whether they understand what the social worker is saying and find him/her reliable and whether they feel the social worker wants them to succeed. Questions 10 and 11 relate to how much the children are involved both in terms of whether the social worker listens to them and explains what is happening to them.

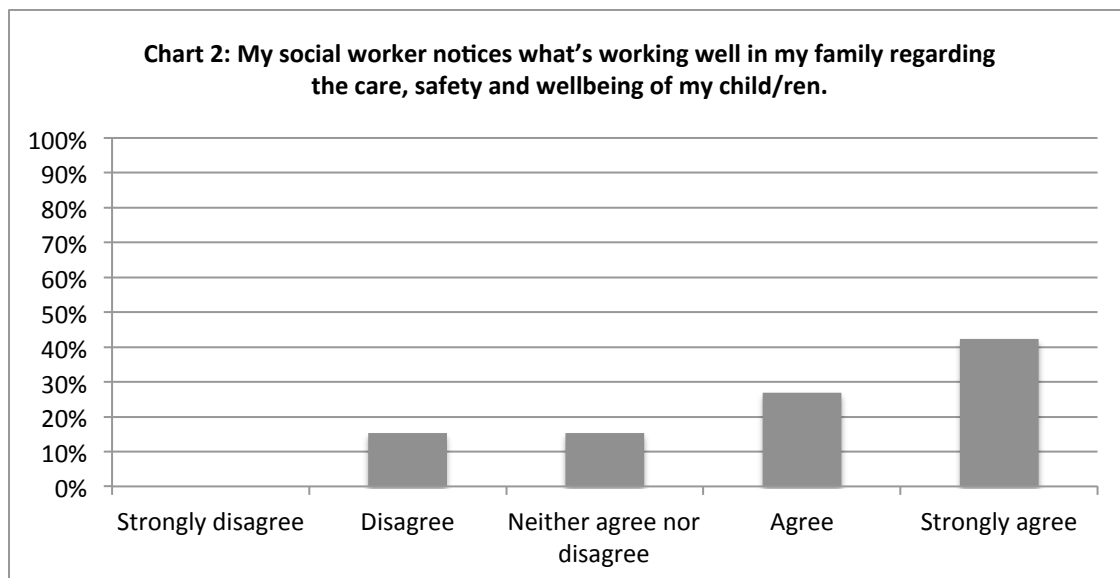
The first question relates to the complaint found in many studies that parents feel the social worker does not listen to what they say, that they arrive with their minds already made up. The responses here indicate that social workers in Norfolk CSC are communicating a genuine willingness to listen and understand, with 62% of respondents agreeing with the statement and 12% disagreeing.

**1. My social worker listens to me in a way that shows they want to really understand my family.**



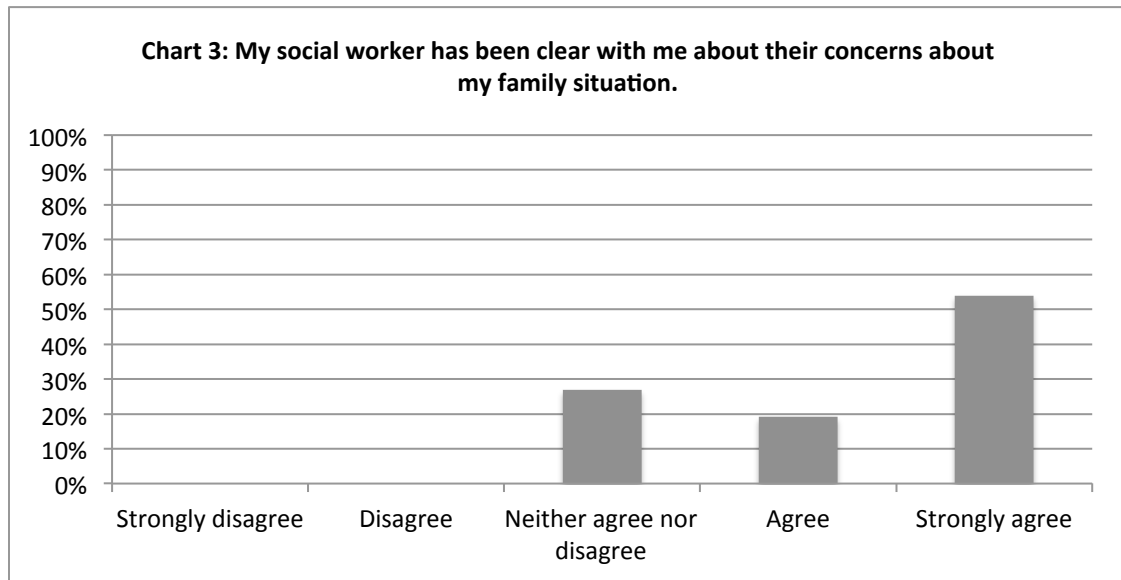
The second question reflects a key principle of Signs of Safety (and of social work in general) that assessments should be balanced, paying attention to what is working well as well as what is worrying. 69% of respondents agreed with the statement and 15% disagreed.

**2. My social worker notices what's working well in my family regarding the care, safety and wellbeing of my child/ren.**

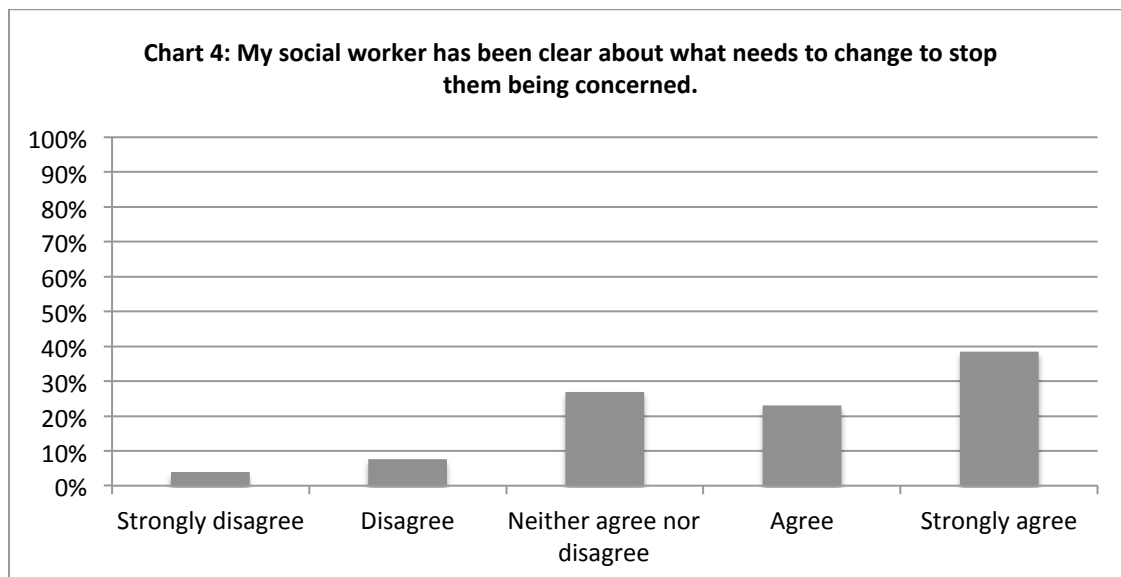


The next two questions, 3 & 4, relate to how clearly the social worker is communicating with the parents and, again, this captures a key discipline of Signs of Safety. The responses to both of these statements were extremely positive with 73% of parents agreeing that their worker was clear about their concerns about their situation, and 62% agreeing that the worker had been clear about what needs to change.

**3. My social worker has been clear with me about their concerns about my family situation.**

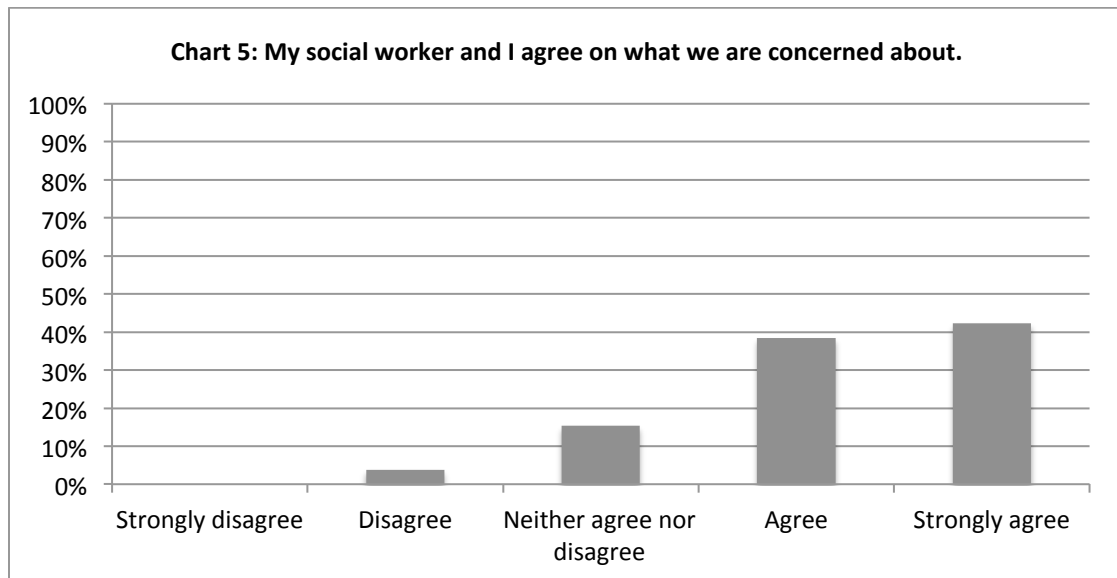


**4. My social worker has been clear about what needs to change to stop them being concerned.**

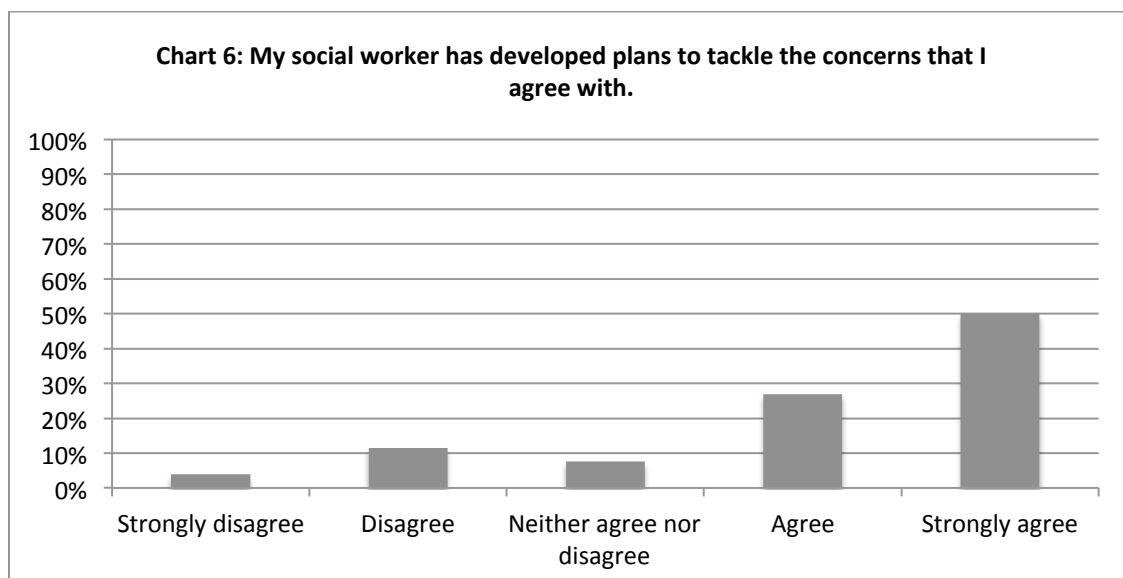


Questions 5, 6 and 7 capture the extent to which parents are involved in planning and agree with social workers on what they are concerned about. Research evidence suggests that agreement is a key factor in effective practice. The findings here show good levels of achievement on this in Norfolk. For Q5, 81% said that they agreed with the concerns of the worker and only 4% disagreed. In answer to Q6, 77% said they agreed with the plans the worker had developed to tackle the concerns. A slightly smaller majority of 65% agreed with Q7 that they had been involved in making the plans.

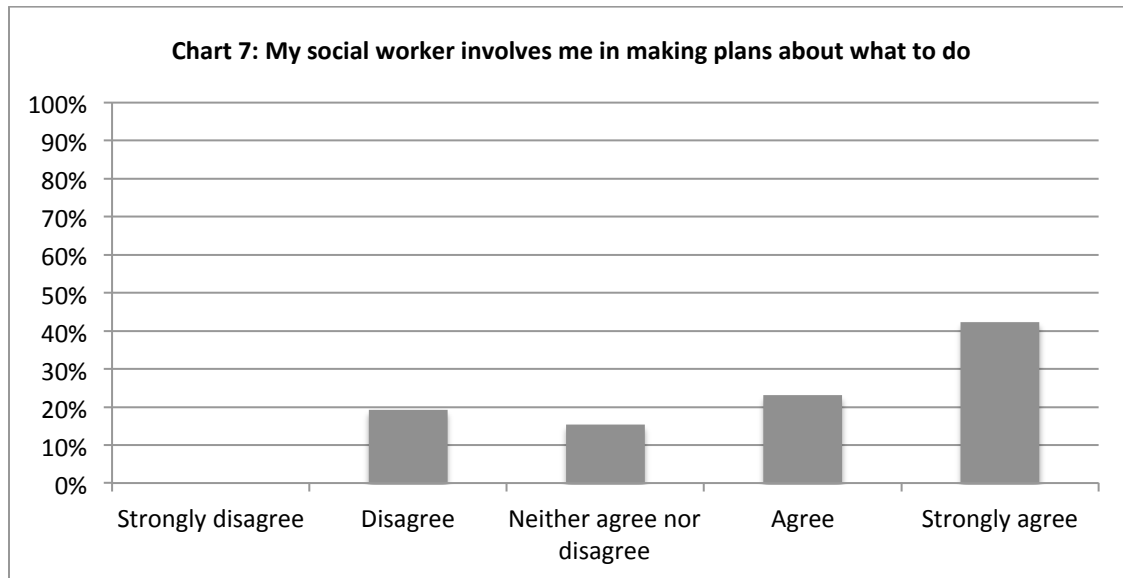
**5. My social worker and I agree on what we are concerned about.**



**6. My social worker has developed plans to tackle the concerns that I agree with.**

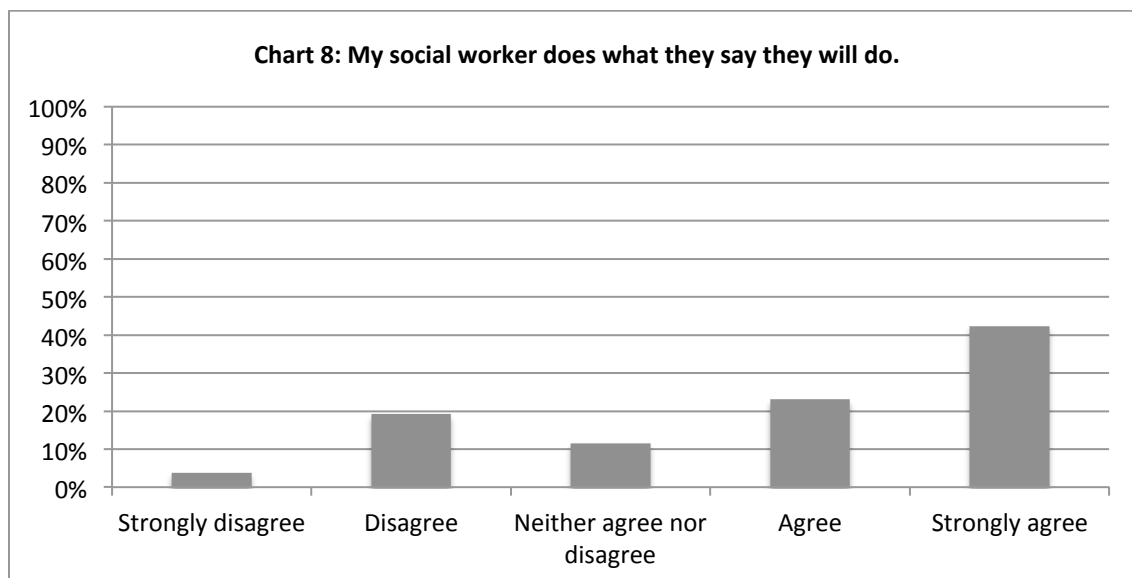


**7. My social worker involves me in making plans about what to do.**



The unreliability of social workers is a common complaint and the responses to the statement in question 8 show that a majority of parents (65%) think their worker keeps their promises on what they will do. However, this question also received the highest level of disagreement in the survey (23%).

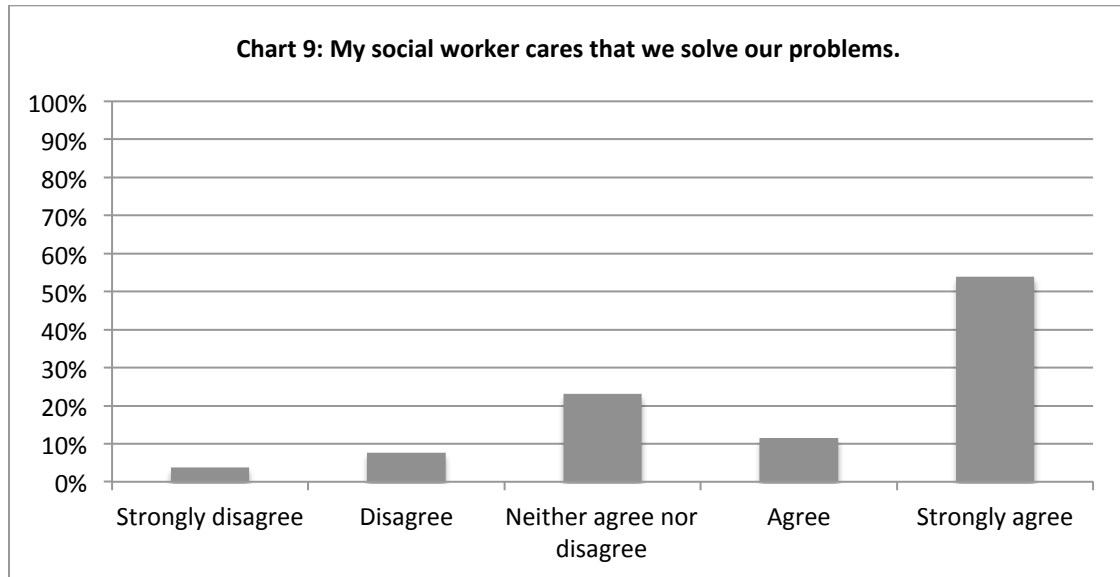
**8. My social worker does what they say they will do.**





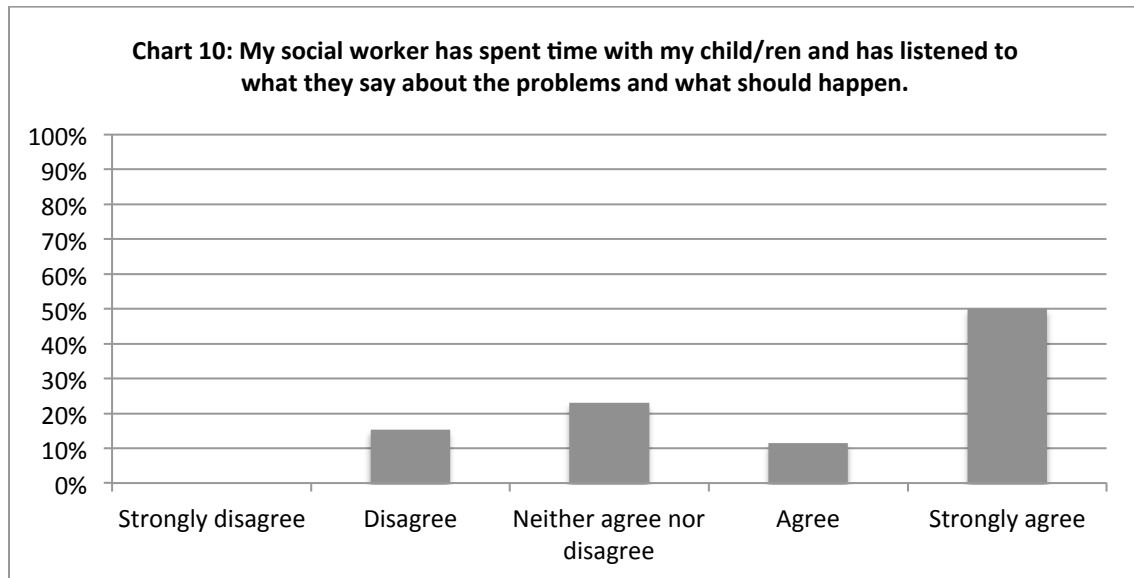
Another factor that contributes to effective work is that parents feel an emotional dimension to their relationship, with the worker wanting them to do well. The responses here to question 9 indicate good levels of achievement on this with 65% of respondents agreeing that their worker cared about a positive outcome.

**9. My social worker cares that we solve our problems.**

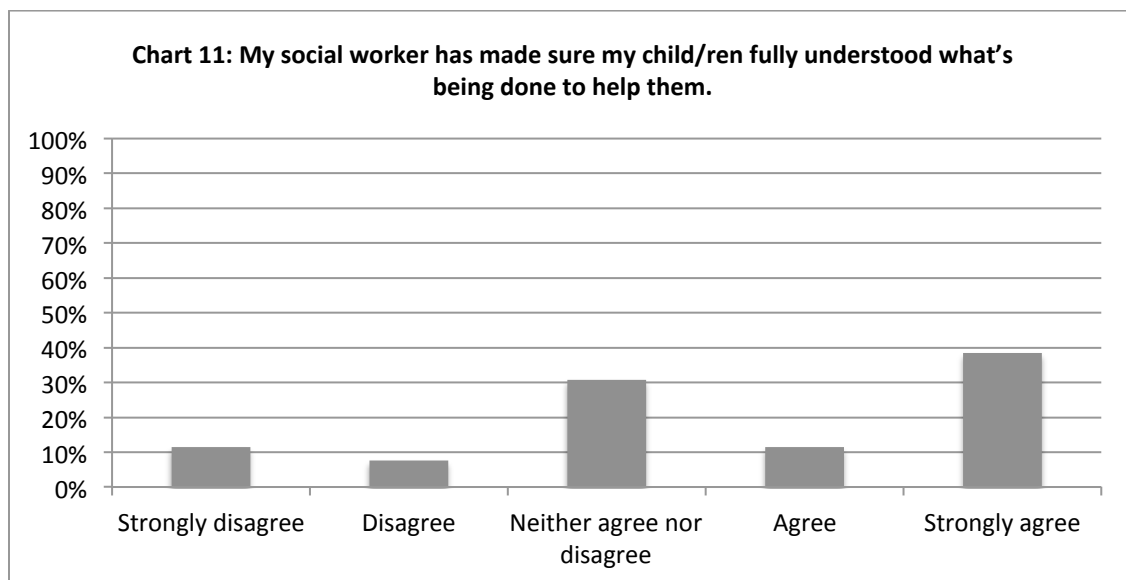


The final two questions concern the involvement of children both in terms of listening to their point of view and in helping them understand what is happening. While a majority of 62% agreed with Q10 that the worker had spent time with and listened to their children, Q11 received a slightly lower level of agreement with 50% saying that the worker made sure that the child/ren had fully understood and 19% disagreeing with this. However, these questions would not have been applicable in many cases where parents felt that the child was too young (or unable) to talk or understand. As a 'Not Applicable' option was not available, it is possible that some responses were recorded as neutral '*neither agree nor disagree*' since the neutral responses here were higher than in the rest of the survey.

**10. My social worker has spent time with my child/ren and has listened to what they say about the problems and what should happen.**



**11. My social worker has made sure my child/ren fully understood what's being done to help them.**



**5. Qualitative feedback**

At the end of the survey, two open-ended questions gave respondents the opportunity to comment freely on their experience with their social worker. The first specifically asked what one thing they would change about the way their social worker worked with them, and the second asked if they had anything else they'd like to add.

92% (24 people) responded to the question about change, and 69% (18 people) added further comments.

**Q1. If you could change one thing about how your worker is working with you, what would it be?**

Of the total responding to this question, 42% (10 people) said that they would not change anything about the way their worker worked with them.

31% (8 people) referred to changes they like to see in the way their social worker communicated with them in terms of listening, being clear with them, involving them more or showing more understanding.

*I would say sometimes the communication could be improved, they listen however they don't always seem to process in the right way.*

*That she doesn't just talk over me, that she actually listens.*

*He would get to the point quicker when explaining things, refers to other cases which makes the conversations more than it has to be.*

*Not be so judgemental, I feel that the worker put my children at risk recently and if that had been anybody else they would have been in trouble for it*

*The social worker should put more faith in me as a mother now things have been better.*

*If they were more open-minded to the situations that arise.*

*Makes decisions with her manager and I feel like I'm being dictated to as opposed to being involved in the plans.*

*All the decisions made were made by the manager of the social worker. We could do with them getting to know us more so that they understand us more, which seems not possible due to staff shortages.*

12% (3 people) said they would like a change of social worker:

*Would like a change of social worker. He doesn't listen to the family. He doesn't get on well with the family.*

*I would have a different one, I don't dislike her but she doesn't seem to care what happens.*

*Never see him again.*

The remaining 12% (3 people) made the following comments regarding change:

*Stick to their promises and make sure they deliver them.*

*Stop praising my partner who has been in the children's lives for less than a year and start praising me for everything I have done for my children.*

*That the social worker was given accurate and correct information from other professionals at the start*

## **Q2. Is there anything else you'd like to tell us about how your worker worked with your family?**

Of the 18 comments received to this question, 10 (56%) were positive and 8 (44%) were negative.

### **1. Positive comments**

*He's doing a brilliant. He's been very understanding, he's helped so much, listened and he's been so good with the children. Listens to our points of view. He's been really excellent. He's not been what I expected of a social worker, he's better.*

*Social worker is doing everything for my children and their needs. Pleased that my social worker listens and is trying everything to get my children home.*

*She has really helped us and I don't want her to leave us.*

*Quite hard to get hold of as she is already busy but she is really great, she feels like a friend.*

*She has been really fantastic with my children.*

*He's been fantastic and really has helped us.*

*My social worker is lovely.*

*Trainer who trained my social worker should train other social workers and to remind other social workers that people have problems and social workers should speak to them with respect.*

*Just that she is a nice one*

*Overall he has delivered.*

## 2. Negative comments

*He needs to not judge people from what is on paper. He needs to see people in person and understand the issues there. He seems to have already made his mind up before he sets foot through the door.*

*No conversation and she hasn't been clear, I don't receive feedback at all. She asked direct questions rather than have a conversation which isn't appropriate for the children. Everything I was asked I've done but they seem to not have completed things should have been done weeks ago, its all rushed at the end.*

*Lots of things are said that never happen. They have been clear with deadlines for what's expected of me, however they are given deadlines by management that aren't met. They have explained what they are doing to help to the oldest child but not the younger ones.*

*He's better than the others, he's OK but there are a couple things in the report that aren't true. I have confronted him, however he denied writing this. My previous social worker had left and I wasn't made aware, I had two stand-in social workers which weren't updated on the situation.*

*I have to keep calling to get them to do things and it seems no matter what I try and do, nothing seems to be good enough. They seem to latch onto the negative things.*

*All he really does is book appointments, the only time he comes over is to deliver negative feedback which puts added pressure on me which makes me worry I will relapse. I don't believe he has taken the time to get to know me. I believe he changes things that have been said and only really been upfront and transparent since I asked him to.*

*I think she judges a bit.*

*We don't feel that our social worker listens to our problems. Our daughter tried to take her own life because of that.*