

Children's Safeguarding Social Workers' experiences with wellbeing supports to help them cope with work demands



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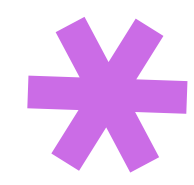


My Role

- I am currently employed as a Senior Social Worker (A) in a Safeguarding Team in the South Eastern Trust.
- Over 12 years of experience working within Children' Safeguarding Services.
- This research study was completed as part of the Research Methods in Social Work Postgraduate Course with the Ulster University.
- Completion of this allowed me to achieve a Masters in Social Work Degree.
- This supported my professional development to transition from Senior Social Work Practitioner to Senior Social Worker in a Children's Safeguarding Team.



Prior to study a Systematic Literature Review was completed in 2021,
“What are the barriers for Social Workers implementing trauma - informed practice with adolescents?”



Background

- One finding was that reflective supervision, a shared reflective organisational culture, and psycho - education could support the development of resilience in Social Workers implementing TIP (McBride 2021). Research also suggests therapeutic support to address any personal history or trauma may be beneficial to building a Social Worker’s resilience (McFadden et al., 2015).
- Staff retention and well - being is a significant focus of attention for current Social Work policy and practice, and potentially in future legislation, this was the topic area chosen for the research study.

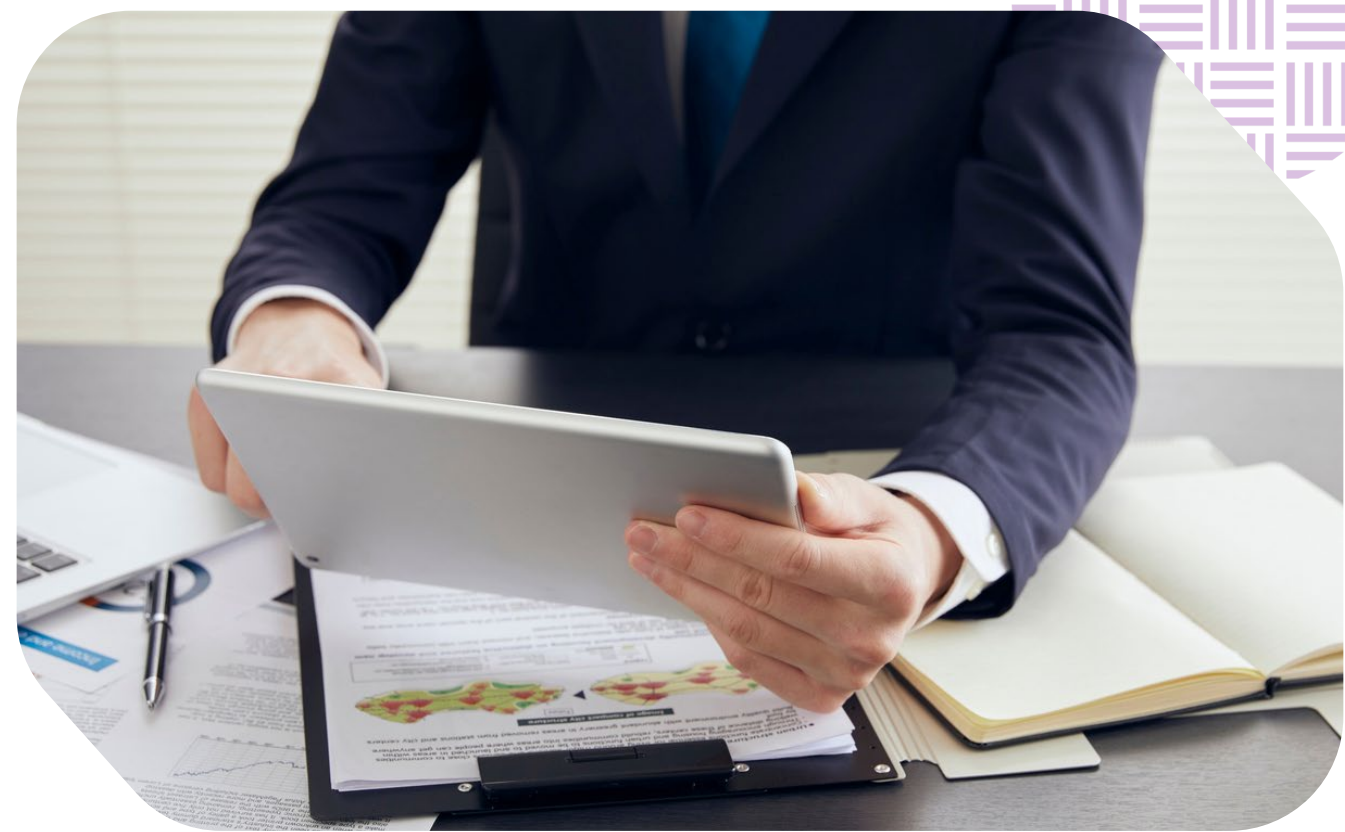
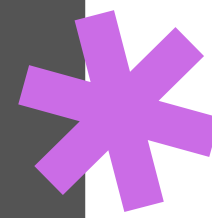




Current Context

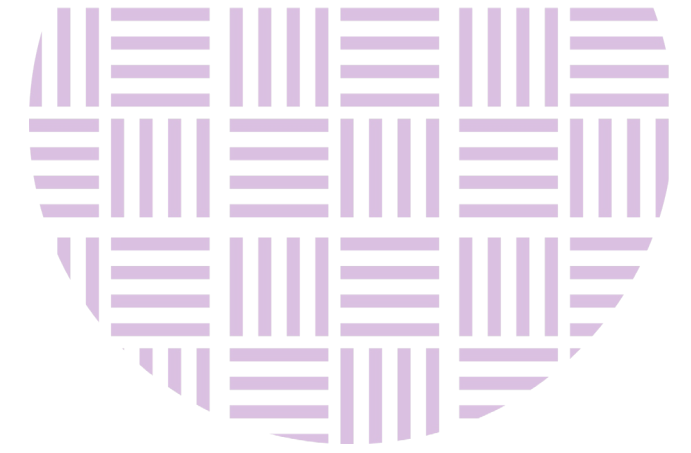
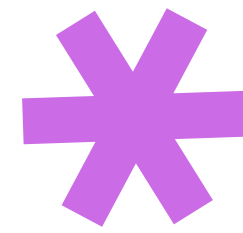
- An Independent Review of Children's Social Care Services in Northern Ireland was completed in June 2023 by Professor Ray Jones.
- Report sets out the political landscape specific to Northern Ireland impacting on policy within Children's Services provision and increased pressure.
- Review highlighted increasing demand and workloads within Children's Services alongside the increasing depletion of staffing within the service due to them leaving the service or through absenteeism due to sickness and burnout.
- High workloads and increasing complexity within cases, increasing numbers of children on the Child Protection Register and children placed in care add to the pressure on the service.
- Safe Staffing in Social Work Project commenced 2023 and remains ongoing.
- This research hopes to make recommendations which will be included in legislation in Northern Ireland, and ultimately to improve recruitment and retention.

What are Children's Safeguarding Social Workers' experiences with available formal and informal wellbeing supports to help them cope with work demands?



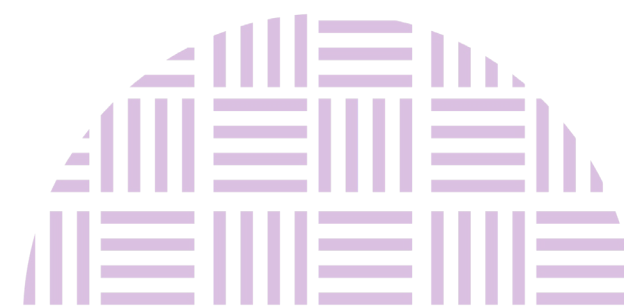
Research Question





Methodology

- Qualitative research study.
- Inductive, hermeneutic phenomenological methodology used to allow a deep understanding of lived experiences of participants to be obtained through semi-structured interviews with open-ended questions.
- Participants were recruited using purposive sampling.
- Inclusion criteria for participants: Band 6 and Band 7 Social Workers employed in Children's Services across a Trust in Northern Ireland.
- Interviews conducted via Microsoft Teams.
- Data saturation was reached after 10 interviews.
- Thematic analysis used to identify patterns and emerging themes from the interviews.
- Manually coded using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-stage process of thematic analysis.





Limitations of Study

- Data is self - reported and therefore subjective.
- Motivation of participants to engage in study may be influenced by their individual experiences.
- Social desirability bias.
- Potential for researcher bias.
- Small scale, cross - sectional study within a region of Northern Ireland and therefore this may limit the applicability of the findings to the wider province, nationally and internationally.



Experiences at the Individual Level

- Positive Attitudes Towards Engaging in Wellbeing Supports
- Resilience
- Self- Care
- Team Culture and Peer Relationships



Experiences at the Organisational Level

- Time
- Accessibility and Visibility of Wellbeing Supports
- Supportive Management
- Organisational Culture



Themes





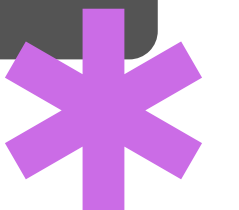
Positive Attitudes Towards Engaging in Well-being Supports

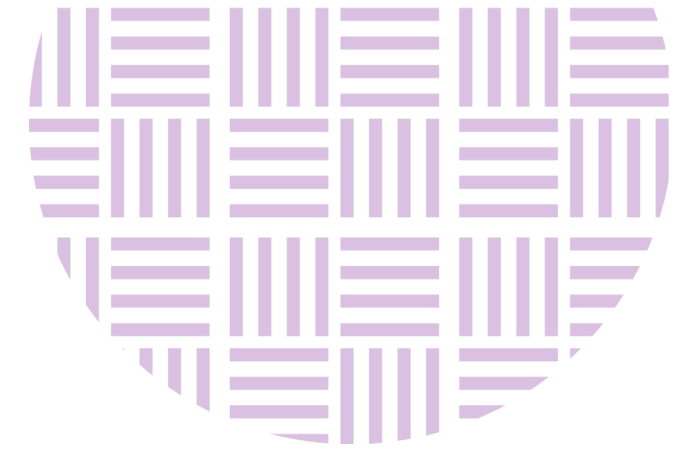
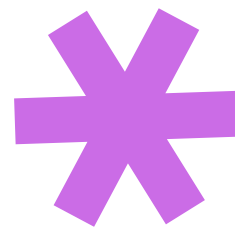


- All participants reflected positive attitudes towards engaging in wellbeing supports.
- Participants identified holding strong views of wellbeing supports as fundamental for CSSWs and outlined varying reasons.

“Being able to engage in well-being is fundamental to be able to off-load the daily expectations that are placed upon you. You're dealing with abusive parents, you're dealing with distressed children, you're dealing with highly stressed colleagues in every area.”

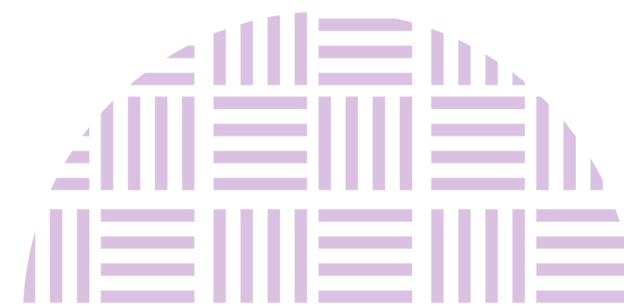
(SW01).





SW07 viewed there are benefits for the service,

“It's not just about making ourselves better social workers and more efficient deliverers of the service. It's actually about psychological well - being, to be able to be in the best, strongest position to help people who are really struggling. Our service users are the most vulnerable people in in our society and we need to be strong enough to be able to deliver.”



Resilience



KEEP GOING

- All participants reported experiencing times of overwhelm in the workplace and all used either formal or informal wellbeing supports to develop and support their own resilience to overcome this.
- Most participants are aware of the Trust funded counselling service however feedback was there were not enough sessions and accessing these during work hours could be challenging. Stigma also a barrier.
- A third also expressed strong views about the need for formal debrief and wellbeing supports following significant incidents.

Almost half reported financing their own long - term therapeutic support outside of the workplace,

"I had loads of trauma from my own background and I was still very young when I became a social worker, so I don't think I knew that yet.

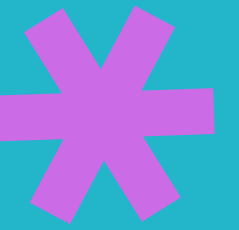
I hadn't really dealt with any of that. But that's why I became a social worker, obviously. But I didn't know that even at the time [...] but it [therapy] was life changing, and I know myself so much better and I can just do my job so much better as well because I know now what my own triggers are and stuff like that. I think that's the kind of stuff everyone probably needs in this job because that's why they probably get into it and then they actually haven't dealt with their own stuff." (SW08).



A majority of participants reflected their views of how committed CSSWs are to their role, summarised by SW07,

“The thing I think is amazing is that staff are very committed. I mean, it's actually a vocation...

...even as it's got tougher for the reasons I've already outlined, it has led to quite a lot of staff turnover, but there are a significant number of highly committed and dedicated staff who love what they do and don't want this to beat them and cause them to leave a job that they actually quite like and they get satisfaction from.”





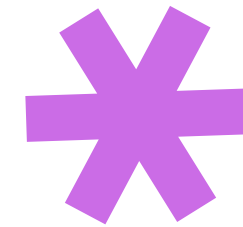
Self-Care

- For all participants, their self-care includes some form of physical activity such as walking, running, or yoga.
- Half of participants reported their wellbeing activities include mindfulness, cold water dips, art and creative hobbies, and spending time with family and friends.

SW06 identified work can be a barrier to availing of this, "I really try and protect that time and get out of work to do it [gym class]. Not get out of work, but like finish. It's at half six at night, so I'll try and finish before that to get there like which shouldn't really be an issue, but it's social work, so it is an issue."



- Several participants shared their views on the importance of adhering to their work/life balance and work hours to maintain well-being with SW09 highlighting how this is part of their team culture,



“If you're not out doing visits and we're leaving the office at 5:00, we're asking each other...OK, you starting to pack up now? Come on. What are you staying for and trying to really not kind of enable each other. In that sense we keep each other accountable.”



- A third of participants also identified they view flexible working hours could support their work/life balance.





Team Culture and Peer Relationships



Almost all participants reported they feel there is a culture of wellbeing within their team, with just one advising, “in general it’s maybe talked about, but nothing’s ever actioned.”

The majority of participants reported their main source of wellbeing support was the relationships with their colleagues and peers within their teams,

“you can lift the phone to anybody, any time of the day really if something happened.” (SW04).

“I feel as if sometimes I have a wee secret life that you can't discuss with anybody outside of this work.” (SW03).

“I often joke with my colleagues that they probably know more about me than maybe some friends and family. Do you know? So we very much know we've all seen each other at our rawest and our most vulnerable probably. And then we've probably also been there with each other when we went through some of our biggest personal achievements or professional achievements or biggest, you know, times of strength.” (SW09).




Several participants also talked about team building, nights out and even just having lunch together as being really important for developing positive peer relationships and team culture,

“Whenever we're all together and doing something together, and actually, you know, we kind of think everything's gonna be all right.” (SW04).



“We have a really, really supportive team. And also we've been there for such a long time. That makes a huge difference as well [...] but I mean those two things go hand in hand too, because if you have a supportive team that works, that has a good atmosphere, then people stay as well because they've no reason to leave.” (SW08).

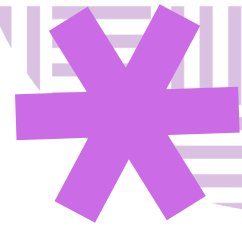
However, some participants emphasised close relationships can be problematic and can impact negatively on team culture,



“Culture wise, I suppose in the team I think we're all very much linked together. If one of us is struggling, you'll see everybody then, like if we all seem to struggle at the same time, then we all thrive at the same time.” (SW09).

“The culture of your team really matters as well in terms of opening up to people [...] If there's toxicity in your team, and you're also not really going to do that if you don't know your team, which happens when there's a high turnover of staff.” (SW08).





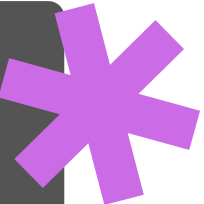

- Time was the most significant barrier participants identified as restraining CSSWs from engaging in wellbeing supports. This theme permeated all interviews.
- Low staffing levels, high caseloads and the prioritisation of statutory duties were identified as impacting upon participants feeling they had time to engage with wellbeing supports.



Time




“The challenge is time. I mean, you hardly get time to fit in your normal social work duties, never mind an addition to that. So well - being kind of takes a back seat. Everything does.”
(SW06).





SW08 provided an example of how this barrier could successfully be removed for staff with the support of the organisation,

“I had to ask my manager obviously if I could have time off, you know, to go to these therapy sessions because they were during working times and she was like, oh, yeah, fire away, of course, whatever you need. So again, everyone's just always so nice and so supportive.”




- Many participants identified more promotion about available supports is needed by the organisation.
- Majority referenced weekly emails sent by a well - being team in the organisation promoting available supports.
- Participants cited these emails as irritating, they don't have time to read them and the stand out for more than half was the purpose was to announce the cancellation of Pilates or yoga classes.

Accessibility and Visibility of Well-being Supports



“Those stupid emails...you get that many rubbish emails, not even relevant. And I just delete, delete, delete. So I think, yes, if they came in and actually did presentations about what's available or, you know, came in and said OK, well, this is happening on whatever Saturday morning at [work location] or whatever that I think, yes, I probably would go to it, yeah.”
(SW10).

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- A third of participants suggested it would be more beneficial for someone to speak to teams directly and specify what is on and where.
 - Some identified the organisation should encourage staff to ensure they feel permitted to access wellbeing supports.
 - Half of participants discussed accessibility to wellbeing supports offered is an issue, highlighting location and timing of classes/appointments around work hours as barriers. These participants also suggested having wellbeing activities 'on site' would promote engagement.

“More well - being days, like tasters of different things like a massage session or somebody doing reflexology or something like that to give people an idea of what there is because I think people don't realise certain things are good for your well - being. I think people overlook a lot of things.”

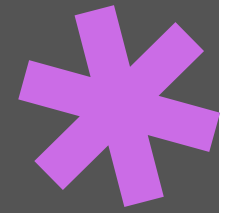
(SW04).



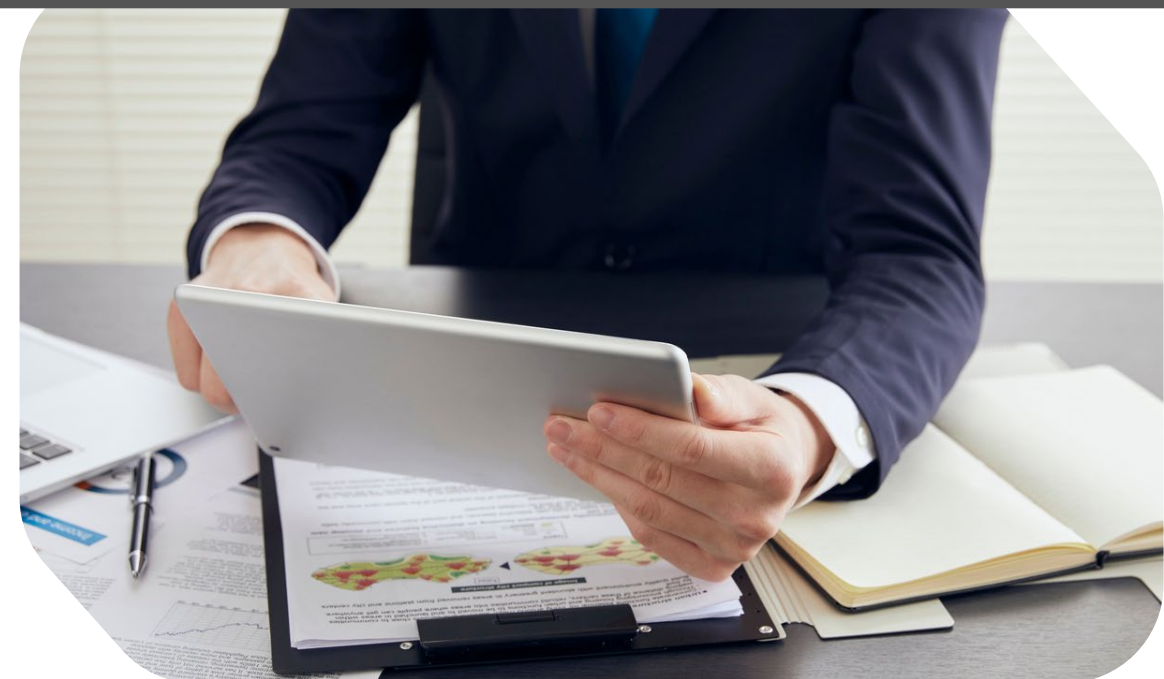


Over half of participants interviewed, identified supportive management as fundamental to managing their wellbeing in work,

“Well, number one for me is if you have a good manager. If you don't like your manager and you don't get along, you're not going to engage that way in supervision because in order to do that and to access that and to reflect on how things are impacting on you, you need to be able to be vulnerable and be open... So it's really, really important that you have somebody that you get along with that you feel like cares about you and cares about your well - being.” (SW08).



Supportive Management





- Good quality supervision, free from interruption and in a private space is important.
- Informal supervision highlighted as equally, if not more important by most participants.
- A culture of shared responsibility also identified as important,

“I think the key is having managers that you can talk openly with, and that are confident to put some stuff on waiting lists and have it worked through duty for example, you know that has been something that's been effective. If it's a collective effort within the team to manage things, it's a difficulty and stress that's a lot more shared. So that's where you get a cultural aspect going, you have more manageable caseloads. Just like sharing the level of responsibility.” (SW05).

Several participants reiterated encouragement and being permitted to avail of wellbeing supports would facilitate their engagement,



“Supportive managers and maybe initiatives by senior managers to encourage people to look after themselves are always good. I mean that makes it sound like I'm a baby and I need someone to tell me what to do and I don't. I'm not saying that. I'm just saying that actually it's very easy to get lost in the demands of the working day.” (SW07).






Organisational Culture



- The overall response was participants view their organisation does care about their well - being, however they view well - being supports could be delivered more effectively.
- One participant highlighted their feelings that responsibility is placed at the individual level,

“They like to be seen to promote a culture of understanding and well - being because that's how organisations should be. But the reality is that they want the work done. I think there's a lot of a desire and a will to be seen to be doing the right thing always, but then it feels like the fault is at the employee level, they're not taking me up on that.” (SW01).





Many participants reported experiencing a high level of abuse and threats of violence from service users, however felt unsupported by the organisation in how this impacted their wellbeing.

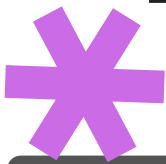
“It just kind of feels like you have to tolerate abuse as part of your job.” (SW06).

“These things do have an emotional impact on you. And I think when they don't take account of that and then they wonder why they can't retain staff, you know, because they're not really supporting staff's well-being - being so then staff burn out and leave and then the situation just gets worse and worse.” (SW08).

More positive recognition for CSSW's achievements as necessary was discussed by a fifth of participants,

“There's always stuff on the Facebook pages about these awards and galas for like residential social workers and social workers all over the place. And I think sometimes, we definitely do get forgotten about in terms of celebration. Celebrations and nice things for children's safeguarding social workers would be great because it is a bit disheartening whenever you're seeing stuff like that and you're like, oh, why did I not get anything like that.” (SW04).

Future Recommendations



Organisational and systems level supports to address heavy workload demands, high numbers of staff vacancies/absenteeism and turnover within CSSWs need to be actioned.

Further research examining the effectiveness of interventions targeted at improving the wellbeing and resilience of Children's Safeguarding Social Workers is needed.

CSSWs may be impacted upon by their own personal trauma history and vicarious trauma experienced through work. The availability of effective interventions to support CSSWs with any personal trauma history and vicarious trauma experienced through work could support their wellbeing.

CSSWs need to be facilitated by supportive managers and their organisation to engage in wellbeing supports, including self-care activities both and in and outside of work.

A positive team culture and supportive peer and managerial relationships are a significant wellbeing support for CSSWs.

CSSWs should be proactively encouraged, facilitated and given permission by their organisation and managers to take time out of work to engage in wellbeing supports.

Recognition, reward and positive public perception could support CSSWs wellbeing.





Areas for Further Research

Further, longitudinal research is needed into what types of wellbeing supports are actually effective at the individual in developing resilience, reducing burnout and retaining staff.

- Wider research in regards to the effectiveness of interventions to support CSSWs with any personal trauma and vicarious trauma experienced through work would be beneficial.
- Further research by the organisation into CSSWs views about the types of wellbeing supports, the timing and location of classes and events, and suggestions CSSWs have for the organisation to improve on these would be beneficial. Involving CSSWs in understanding their views and using these to develop the availability and accessibility of wellbeing supports for CSSWs could be an empowering wellbeing support in itself.
- Further research into how the public perception of CSSWs could be improved, and the implementation of any recommendations, could in turn be supportive to the wellbeing of CSSWs.




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Thank You Very Much!

