e-Readiness in the social care sector: building the capacity for e-learning: a summary

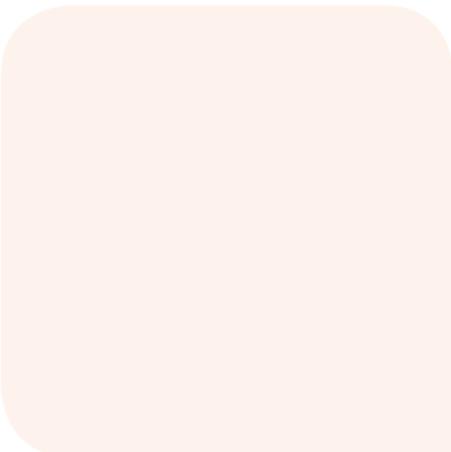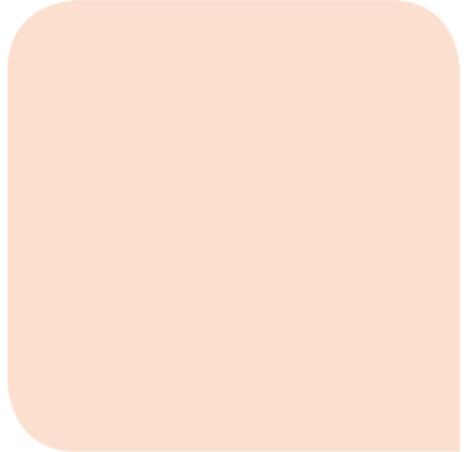
social care
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e-Readiness in the social care sector: building the capacity for e-learning

Introduction

e-Readiness in the social care sector: building the capacity for e-learning describes a research study conducted for the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) by Ipsos MORI to establish whether the social care sector in England is ready to maximise the use of e-learning in terms of technical and organisational infrastructure, and in terms of the availability of e-learning content for social care.

In caring for people, there is no room for mistakes. This means that it is extremely important that all workers within the social care sector, from unpaid carers to social workers, keep up to date with good practice. It is equally important that they can do so quickly and easily.

As a promoter of good practice in social care, SCIE actively seeks and develops ways that can help spread good practice. e-Learning is one method that can assist in promoting good practice.

SCIE defines e-learning as 'the use of information and communication technologies (ICT) to provide, support or enhance learning'. e-Learning

can be delivered through any electronic media and draws on interactive technologies, exploiting them to enhance learning experiences. SCIE advocates its use as a complement to other, more traditional methods of teaching.

SCIE has a programme of work on e-learning, which includes developing e-learning materials, developing the infrastructure necessary for the use of e-learning in the social care sector, and conducting and supporting research into the effective application and implementation of e-learning.

Core to this programme is establishing the basis from which any work will flow. How ready is the social care sector for e-learning?

In addition to establishing the e-learning readiness of the sector, the report also sought to provide an assessment of the current capacity of the social care sector as a whole to use and produce e-learning, in particular in internet-based learning, and to exploit its full potential in pursuit of improved services for users and carers. Ipsos MORI was commissioned by SCIE to carry out the following stands of research:

- a review of the literature surrounding e-readiness and e-learning in the social care sector.
- a survey of 516 social care sector employers (mostly managers, with three in five operating

in the private sector, a quarter in the voluntary sector and one in seven from local authorities).
- a survey of 994 social care sector staff (largely women with two in five being frontline workers).
- a series of four case study focus groups among social care staff to assess the practical enablers of and barriers to e-learning.

The information contained in this summary draws on the full report of this research, which was informed in the first place by a review of the literature that comes later in this summary.

Employer survey

Overall 2,000 social care organisations were contacted, drawn from a sample of over 21,000 care homes, domiciliary care providers and social services departments. Organisations were invited to take part in a web-based survey and were also sent paper-based versions of the questionnaire. At the conclusion of the fieldwork, a total of 516 employers had completed the survey, including 400 social services departments, 600 domiciliary care providers and 1,000 care homes.

Sixty per cent of these employers were from private care organisations. Twenty-three per cent were in the voluntary sector and 14 per cent represented a local authority. Given the lack of a comprehensive, single database of social care employers it is difficult to assess how this sample compares to the entire sector.

Of the respondents, 35 per cent of the non-council employers said that they ran the organisation, while 60 per cent were managers. Among council employers, 83 per cent were managers.

Twenty-two per cent of replying organisations had less than 20 employees at the main place of work, while 39 per cent had between 20 and 50 staff members. Only 15 per cent had more than 100 employees.
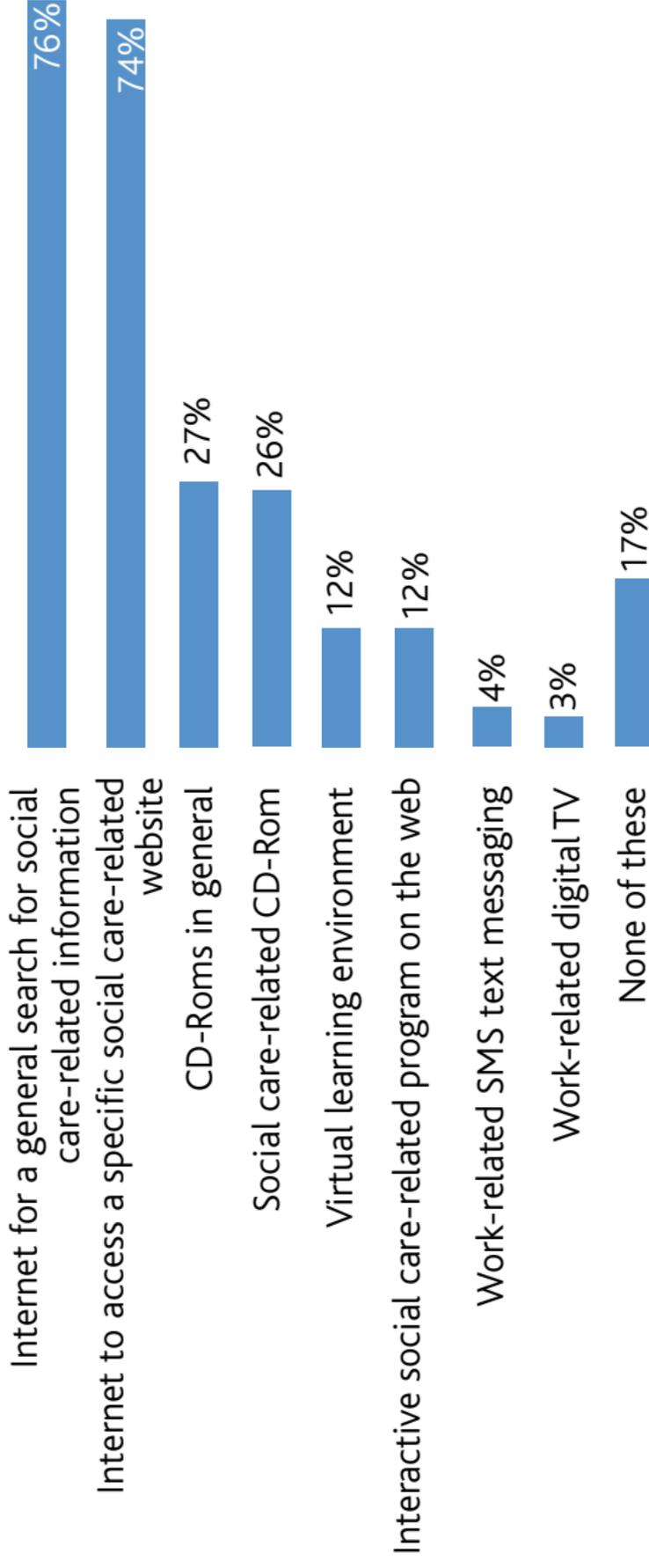
Overall, 52 per cent of respondents had been in their current job for over five years, with 25 per cent having been in their post for two to five years.
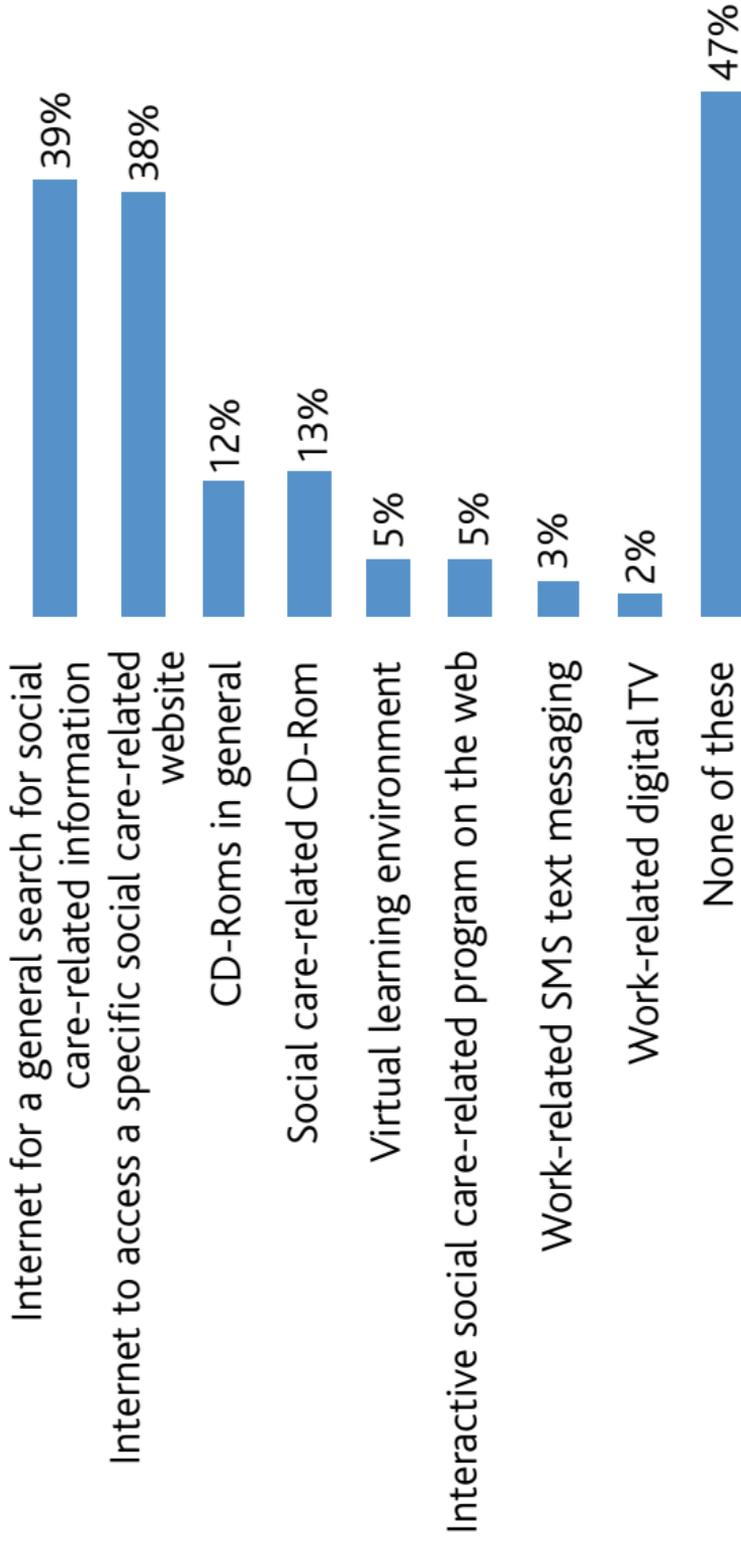
Key messages

- Forty-seven per cent of employers believed that e-learning could be effective over the next couple of years.
- Results indicated that the current usage of e-learning appeared to be low and that private sector respondents were significantly less likely to feel that their staff made use of e-learning methods than their counterparts in the public and voluntary sectors.

The employer survey showed that overall 47 per cent of respondent organisations had used e-learning techniques such as CD-Roms and similar. This ranged from 35 per cent among private sector organisations, through to 39 per cent in the voluntary sector and to 49 per cent of council employers.

Q. Which of these e-learning methods, if any, have you personally used at work in the last three months?

Method	%
Internet for a general search for social care-related information	76%
Internet to access a specific social care-related website	74%
CD-Roms in general	27%
Social care-related CD-Rom	26%
Virtual learning environment	12%
Interactive social care-related program on the web	12%
Work-related SMS text messaging	4%
Work-related digital TV	3%
None of these	17%

Q. Which methods, if any, do you think your employees have used at work in the last three months

Method	%
Internet for a general search for social care-related information	39%
Internet to access a specific social care-related website	38%
CD-Roms in general	12%
Social care-related CD-Rom	13%
Virtual learning environment	5%
Interactive social care-related program on the web	5%
Work-related SMS text messaging	3%
Work-related digital TV	2%
None of these	47%

Employers cited three main drivers for the use of e-learning techniques:

- flexible time-wise for employees
- cost-effective for the employer
- time-effective for the employer.

When asked about e-training, 75 per cent of respondents to the survey estimated that less than 10 per cent of their organisational training made use of e-learning. Sixty-eight per cent said that none of their induction training used e-learning. Only a quarter of employers said that their trainers made use of e-assisted training either very or fairly often. All results indicated that the current usage of e-learning appeared to be low and that private sector respondents were significantly less likely to feel that their staff made use of e-learning methods than their counterparts in the public and voluntary sectors.

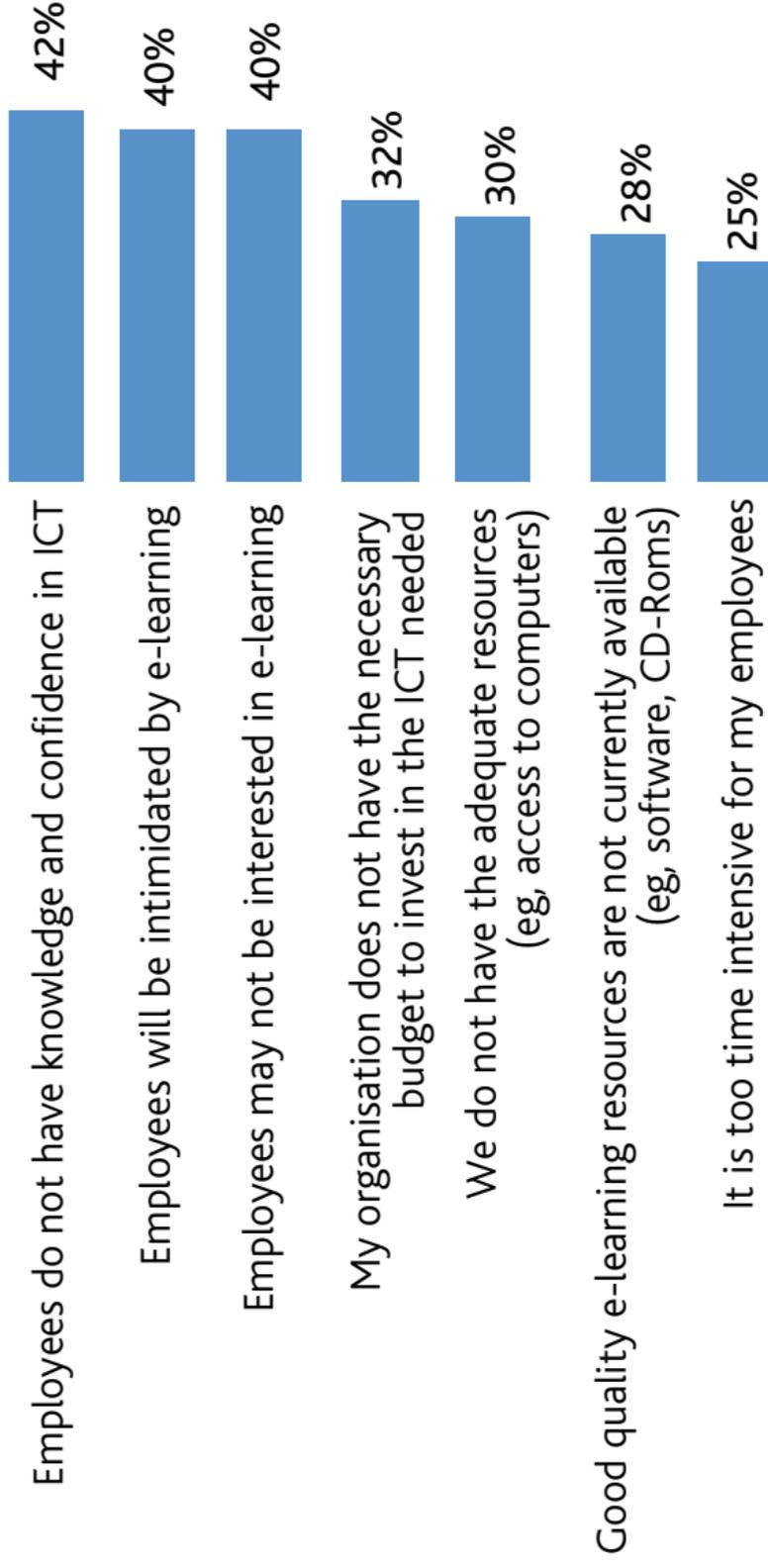Some of the reasons employers identified for poor take-up of e-learning were:

- employees did not have the knowledge and confidence in ICT or would be intimidated by e-learning or simply not interested
- they were limited by resources, including access to computers and budget
- they lacked the knowledge of where to find e-learning resources on the web
- they were unaware of grants that would help them to access e-learning.

For those employers who did not currently use e-learning, again it was concerns around employees' interest and skills in ICT and lack of resources that they stated as barriers to e-learning. Sixty-eight per cent mentioned not having adequate resources and 58 per cent said they were concerned about employees not having the knowledge and skills and confidence in ICT as well as not being interested.

Certainly access to computers is also an issue. Nearly half of employers said that at least three quarters of their staff had access to a computer at work, but a significant minority – one in four – said that less than a tenth of their workforce could access a work computer. Half of the organisations ensured all computers had online access and a further 18 per cent of employers said that most of their computers were online. Of these online computers, four in five had broadband.

However, while current use of e-learning appears low, more employers said that they would like to use it. Forty-one per cent were either very or fairly positive about the idea of using e-learning for training their staff, compared to 24 per cent who were negative. Statutory sector employers and those with more than 100 employees were the most positive, while the voluntary sector employers and those with 11–20 staff members were most negative. Forty-seven per cent of employers, however, believed that e-learning could be effective over the next couple of years.

Q. Why do you say you feel e-learning is *not an effective approach* for your organisation?

Response	%
Employees do not have knowledge and confidence in ICT	42%
Employees will be intimidated by e-learning	40%
Employees may not be interested in e-learning	40%
My organisation does not have the necessary budget to invest in the ICT needed	32%
We do not have the adequate resources (eg, access to computers)	30%
Good quality e-learning resources are not currently available (eg, software, CD-Roms)	28%
It is too time intensive for my employees	25%

Staff survey

Alongside the employer survey, Ipsos MORI carried out a survey of social care staff. Of the participating employers, 216 agreed for their employees to participate in this further survey. Their employees were then sent paper questionnaires to complete. An additional 1,000 social care organisations were sent employee questionnaires and invited to participate. In total, 994 completed staff questionnaires were completed and returned.

The employee sample was, we believe, broadly representative of the social care workforce as defined in the literature review, although – due to the very nature of the survey process – it is likely that frontline workers were slightly under-represented. Thirty-eight per cent of the surveyed employees said that they carried out frontline work, while 23 per cent said that they performed a managerial function. Eighteen per cent said that they supported or maintained the organisation.
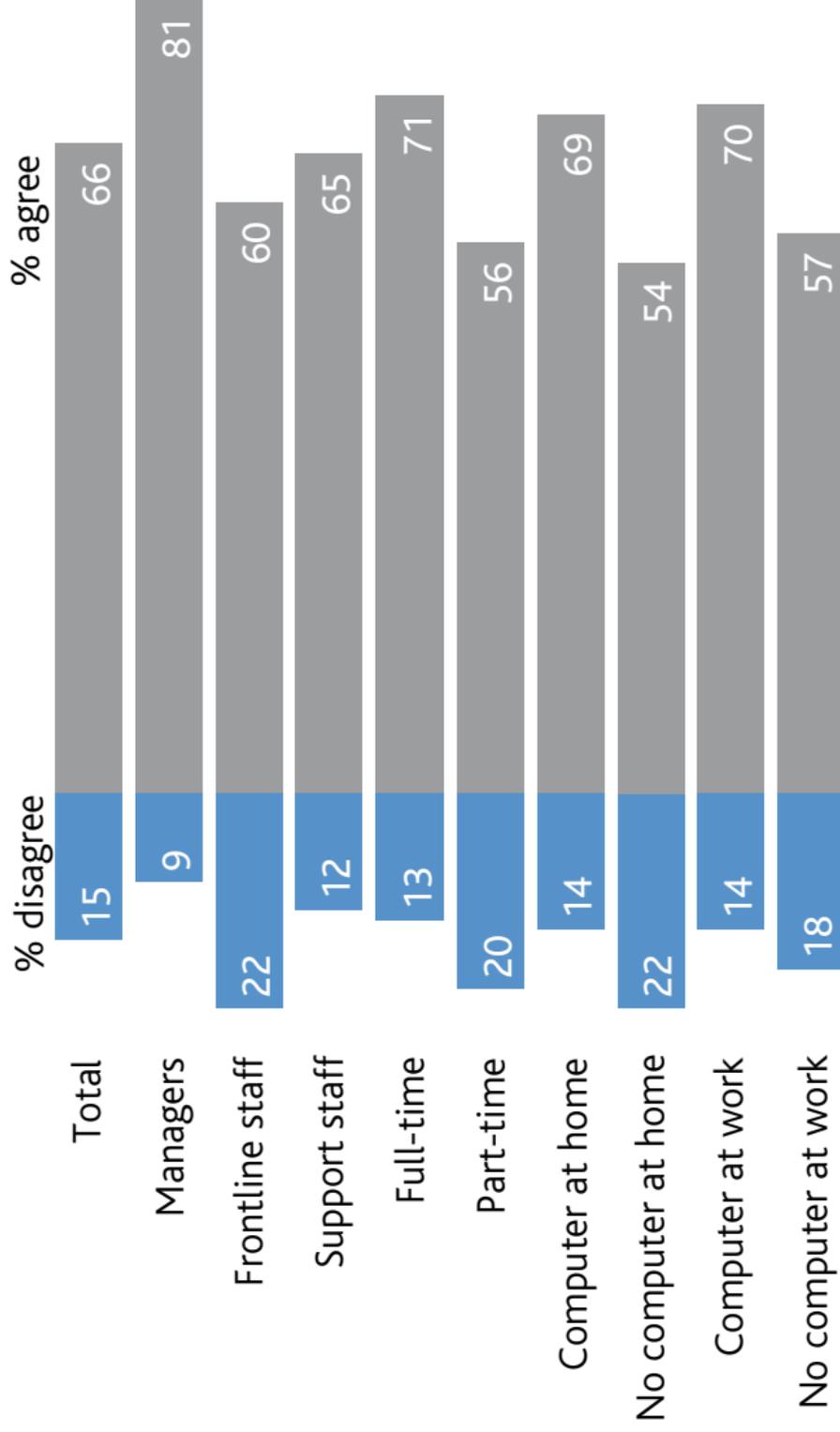
Key messages

- Staff may not be as significant a barrier as employers appeared to think.
- Eighty-one per cent of employees had access to a computer at home and 68 per cent had access to one at work.

- Employees were also keener than employers to see more e-enabled training

The sample was predominantly female (87 per cent), with a small but significant proportion working part time (30 per cent). Ninety-four per cent of these part-time workers were women. As for the sample's age, 26 per cent were under 35, with 55 per cent aged between 35 and 55.

Overall, only nine per cent of those surveyed were qualified, registered social workers, while 14 per cent were still studying. Six per cent of surveyed employees said that they had no formal qualifications, 17 per cent said that their highest qualification was a GCSE and a further 31 per cent said that they had an NVQ Level 1 or 2. It is worth noting that 59 per cent of support workers and 57 per cent of frontline staff fell into these last three categories.

Fifty-four per cent of the people surveyed worked for a private care provider, compared to 30 per cent who worked in the public sector and 14 per cent in the voluntary sector. It is noteworthy that 53 per cent of participating frontline workers were employed in the private sector, while 40 per cent of surveyed managers worked in the public sector. Frontline workers were also much more likely to work part time (34 per cent) and to work from more than one location (42 per cent) than the overall sample (30 per cent and 26 per cent respectively).

I feel I have the skills I need to use IT

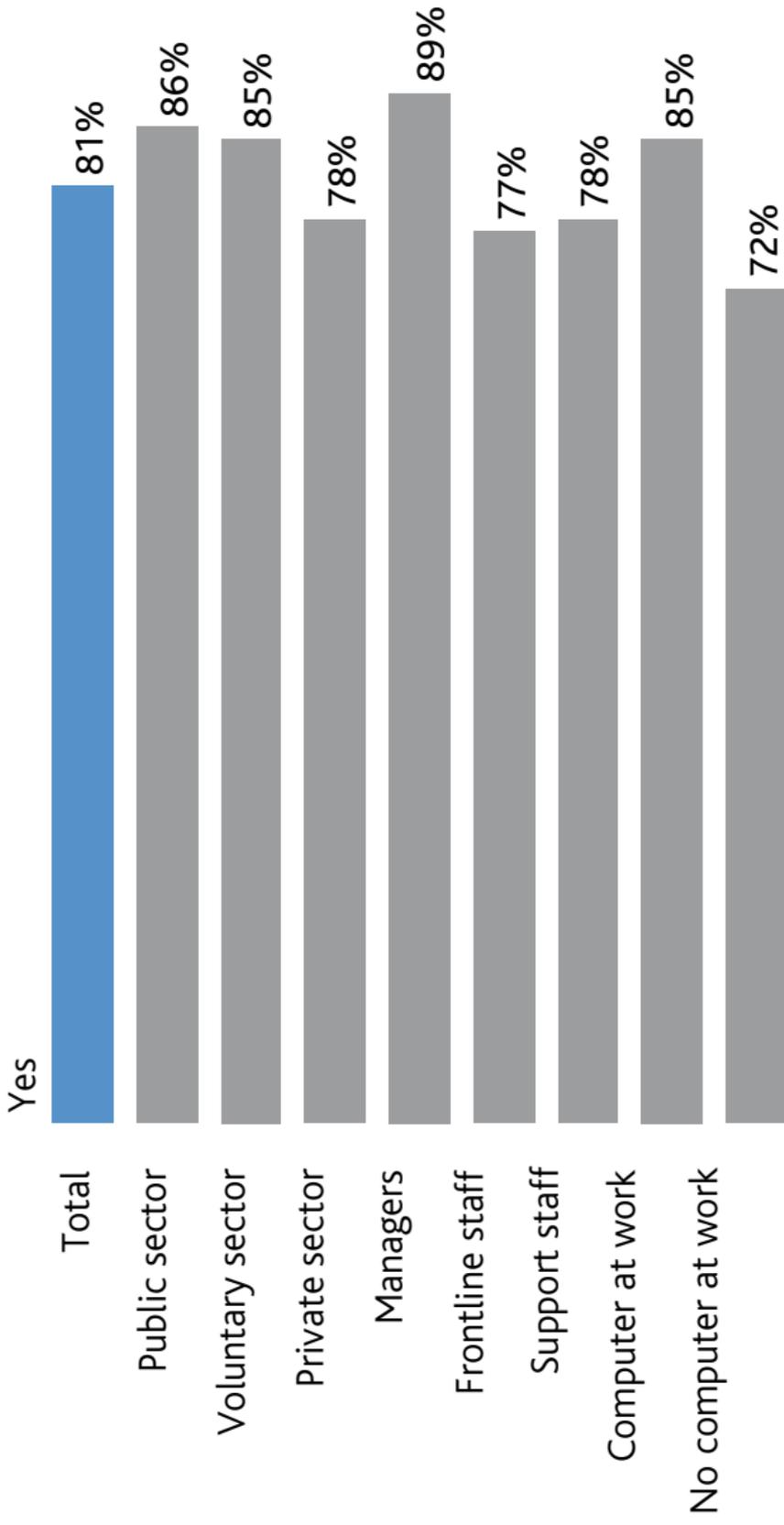|	% disagree	% agree
Total	15	66
Managers	9	81
Frontline staff	22	60
Support staff	12	65
Full-time	13	71
Part-time	20	56
Computer at home	14	69
No computer at home	22	54
Computer at work	14	70
No computer at work	18	57

The employee survey overwhelmingly showed that despite social care employers being sceptical about the value of e-learning and, on the whole, traditional in their approaches to training and learning, that the employees were ready for e-learning. Staff may not be as significant a barrier as employers appeared to think.

Sixty-six per cent of employees felt that they had the skills to use ICT and 29 per cent strongly agreed with the statement 'I feel I have the skills I need to use ICT'. By contrast, only 15 per cent felt that they did not have appropriate ICT skills. In fact, some focus group participants felt that their skills were undervalued, not only by their employers but also by the sector as a whole.

It also appeared that staff were better resourced in terms of computer access than their employers believed. Eighty-one per cent of employees had access to a computer at home and 68 per cent had access to one at work.

Despite a high availability of computer access at home, access to and the use of computers at work are also important drivers of e-readiness. Employees use their computers at work much more regularly than they use their home computers. Thirty-one per cent of those who used a computer at home said that they used it every day. In comparison, 50 per cent of those who had a computer at work used it every day.

Q. Do you have access to a computer at home?

Yes

Category	Percentage
Total	81%
Public sector	86%
Voluntary sector	85%
Private sector	78%
Managers	89%
Frontline staff	77%
Support staff	78%
Computer at work	85%
No computer at work	72%

Employees were also more likely than employers to see the advantages of using ICT. Over half said that computers speeded up their work. However, 28 per cent of employees said that even though they had access to a computer at work they never used it. This is more likely to be because they did not need a computer to do their work than that they were refusing to use it.

Employees were also keener than employers to see more e-enabled training. Only one per cent of those who had been trained by their current employer said that e-enabled training had been used but was not helpful, while 35 per cent said that it had been used (either all the time or sometimes) and was always helpful. A quarter, however, said that e-enabled training was not needed.

Two thirds of employees were fairly or very interested in receiving training and learning resources via a computer or through the internet, including over a third who were very interested. A similar proportion also thought that e-learning was a practical option.

Focus groups

Ipsos MORI also ran a series of four focus groups in the workplace. The demographic profile of those who participated in the focus group very much mirrored the make-up of the employee survey respondents. Of the 18 participants, only one was male and four were under the age

of 35. Four were also support staff (a cook, a handyperson, a housekeeper and a secretary) while the rest (with the exception of two managers) were frontline staff.

Key message

- One of the main barriers to effective e-learning was the lack of accessible computers at the workplace.

In general, staff seemed to value the training they received and trusted their employer to choose appropriate training for them. They also found the idea of e-learning attractive, citing convenience, comfort and the ability to 'go at your own speed' as the key benefits.

It was recognised that not all social care training could be delivered effectively using only an e-learning approach. On the other hand, there was also a clear preference for forms of 'blended' e-learning – where a significant proportion of content (between 30 and 80 per cent) was delivered online (as with many distance learning courses) and where trainers made use of ICT during training sessions.

One of the main barriers to effective e-learning was the lack of accessible computers at the workplace. Home learning was therefore the most practical option at present.

Literature review

Prior to the survey just over 100 pieces of literature were studied although there was little with direct reference to the e-learning readiness of the social care sector.

Key message

- The messages from the literature review highlighted that those engaging in work-based training were not as ready for e-learning as those taking formal training who tended to be younger and more used to using IT.

The literature did provide information, however, on what e-learning was and to what extent different types of learners in the social care sector were ready to use e-channels. Some evidence surfaced about the e-readiness of social care organisations to deliver learning through e-channels, and the factors driving e-learning in social care both externally and those that enabled organisations to respond positively to these factors. It also provided some innovative and relevant examples of e-learning practice.

The messages from the literature review highlighted that those engaging in work-based training were not as ready for e-learning as those taking formal training who tended to be younger and more used to using IT.

Those taking a vocational training route were more ready for e-learning if they were taking management-related courses or those related to childcare. Overall, however, most vocational care-related courses were not e-enabled – but they could offer an opportunity for greater e-learning engagement as the learners taking this route wanted greater flexibility in course delivery.

The literature review particularly questioned the readiness of small and medium social care agencies for e-learning. It concluded that the outlook of these agencies may be similar to that of other small to medium enterprises – with learning not embedded in organisational culture – and that as a result they would be least likely to enable their staff to benefit from e-learning. This is significant since the majority of social care is delivered by small private care organisations. Small and medium agencies were also more likely to 'buy in' training from external agencies.

Conclusions

Key message

- The social care workforce is largely ready for e-learning, although care providers are not.

Most social care in England is delivered by small private organisations, and if the outlook of these agencies is similar to that of other small

businesses – with learning not embedded in organisational culture – then they are among the least likely to be ready to supply and promote e-learning. These organisations were, however, aware of the potential benefits of e-learning (in terms of saved staff time and resources) but seemed culturally unwilling to translate this understanding into the capital investment required to make work-based e-learning initiatives viable.

Central to employers' unwillingness to commit to e-learning was the belief that their staff would not be able to 'cope'. However, there is substantial evidence that the social care workforce could benefit from e-learning and that the virtual communities it fosters could benefit from a relational 'learning style' built around information exchange and the sharing of best practice.

The research findings and the literature review showed that e-learning had many benefits, both for employers and learners, due to its time-wise flexibility and cost-effectiveness for employers and the convenience, comfort and the ability to 'go at your own speed' as the key benefit for employees.

It showed that for employees, e-learning:

- provided flexibility, enabling learners to fulfil their learning ambitions at a time, place and pace that suited them

- broke down physical separation between the home, the workplace and the place of learning
- blurred the boundaries between formal and informal learning
- enabled individualised learning
- allowed for personalised learning support
- facilitated collaborative learning, for example via chat rooms and peer group support
- made learning interactive
- built people's confidence by circumventing the fear of making public errors
- helped to build links between isolated individuals and like-minded or experienced individuals
- provided access to expertise and resources irrespective of distance
- made learning more accessible to disenfranchised learners (special needs learners found it easier to learn from a computer screen than in a classroom setting).

For organisations and employers, e-learning:

- helped employers to reach new learners
- effectively met the learning needs of different groups of learners
- enhanced the value of diagnostics, curriculum delivery, communication, tutor and peer support and assessment
- engaged staff and promoted a sense of involvement and ownership
- achieved training quality at scale
- improved workforce effectiveness

- reduced training costs
- improved workforce retention
- improved execution of goals
- reduced the cost of operational processes
- improved the external image of organisational competence (indicated by an improved share price for companies)
- improved functionality (indicated by an increased revenue for businesses).

So the benefits of e-learning to both employers and employees are clear and well-documented, although its use across different sectors is still relatively low. Its use in the social care sector appears lower still. However, the social care workforce exhibits a high level of ICT literacy and may actually be more e-ready than much of the general population. It is certainly more e-ready than employers currently think.

Recommendations

The research programme developed a clear set of recommendations to inform SCIE's future work on e-learning:

- disseminate and promote the research findings so that the applicability of e-learning to the sector could be boosted, and the image of the e-resistant social carer could be challenged
- encourage the provision to employers of clear information on available funding sources

- encourage the provision to employers of clear information on where to find e-learning and e-training resources
- encourage the promotion to employers of home-based, 'own time' e-learning as an enhancement to their staff's training, provided that staff are offered the support and time in which to do it.

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The full report is available at www.scie.org.uk/elearning/readiness.asp
All SCIE publications and resources are free. This publication is available in an alternative format upon request.

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