

Evaluation of a Pilot Project for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) in Scotland

Executive summary

Craigforth
January 2020



The research team

This evaluation was undertaken by Craigforth, one of Scotland's leading social research consultancies working across social care, housing and health. Our focus is on delivering high quality quantitative and qualitative research to support the development of effective policy and strategy. We have expertise in both formative and summative evaluation and in the design and implementation of effective engagement approaches, many of these with hard to reach groups. For the last 20 years we have worked with a broad range of clients including the Scottish Government, Scotland's local authorities and third sector organisations.

Jean Gordon is a social worker, practice educator, researcher and university lecturer. She researches and writes about social work practice, education and law. **Charlie Gracie** is a social worker and practice educator with particular experience in residential care, service management, policy development and training. **Lucy Robertson**, Craigforth's Managing Director, is an experienced social researcher, working primarily in the fields of housing and social care.

Acknowledgements

This research would have been impossible without the commitment and goodwill of the frontline practitioners, mentors, assessors and site coordinators who gave up their time to contribute their experiences of newly qualified social work practice to the survey, interviews and focus groups. They are not named in this report to preserve anonymity, but we are very grateful for their contributions and hope we have represented their views well.

We also wish to thank the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) and the coordinators of the pilot sites for their crucial support, guidance and contribution to this evaluation:

Yvonne Bestwick, Workforce Development Team Manager, Aberdeenshire Council

Darren Chapman, Practice Learning Officer, Learning Network West

Lesley Clayton, Operational Learning and Development Lead, North Lanarkshire Council

Gillian Ferguson, Learning and Development Adviser, SSSC

Alison Jack, Learning and Organisational Development Manager, North Lanarkshire Council

Abbi Jackson, Planning Officer, Angus Council

Pat MacCowan, Learning and Development Adviser, SSSC

Ann Marie McKenna, Social Work Learning and Development Manager, East Ayrshire Council

Fiona Pollock, Organisational Development Manager, Angus Council

Eleanor Ramsay, Learning and Development Team Leader, Glasgow City Council

Ruth Shipstone, Social Work Improvement and Quality Officer, Dumfries and Galloway Council

Anne Tavendale, Learning and Development Manager, SSSC

Edel Walsh, Learning and Development Adviser, SSSC



Executive summary

The need for a more robust, systematic and consistent approach to supporting newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in Scotland through their first year of transition into qualified practice is widely accepted. This evaluation was commissioned by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) to inform recommendations to the Scottish Government about the future support and assessment of NQSWs in Scotland.

Aims of the evaluation

- To evaluate the outcomes of different models of NQSW support and assessment at three local authority test sites in Scotland.
- To identify opportunities and barriers associated with implementing different models of NQSW support and assessment.
- To contribute to a growing evidence base about what supports NQSWs to make the transition from students to confident, competent social workers.
- To quantify the costs of pilot implementation.
- To share test sites' learning about effective approaches and innovations in the support and assessment of NQSWs.

The pilot test sites

The pilot ran from November 2018 to December 2019 at three test sites:

- Aberdeenshire Council
- Angus Council
- Learning Network West (LNW), which facilitated a partnership of four local authorities (Dumfries and Galloway, East Ayrshire, Glasgow City and North Lanarkshire) and four universities (Glasgow Caledonian University, Strathclyde University, The Open University and University of the West of Scotland) in the west of Scotland.

The six local authorities involved varied considerably in their geography, size of population, and the level of support already provided to NQSWs. Each test site identified pilot participants and undertook to provide NQSWs with protected learning time, a restricted case load, a range of learning opportunities, and regular, structured, reflective supervision with a social work qualified line manager. Each NQSW was assessed against draft SSSC NQSW benchmark standards at the pilot midpoint (formative



assessment) and endpoint (summative assessment). Within this framework, the three sites developed their own approaches to support and assessment. SSSC provided grant funding and ongoing advice and support to the pilot sites.

Evaluation design and methods

The evaluation took place between November 2018 and December 2019 in tandem with pilot delivery, drawing on evidence from participants using mixed methods: a survey, case studies at midpoint and endpoint and focus groups at each site. Data about time and financial costs of establishing and delivering the pilot were collected and analysed. The diversity of methods and wide participant involvement over time adds strength to the findings. However, there were also research limitations, due to lack of sufficient baseline data about previous NQSW support, a rushed start to the pilot, sometimes several months after most NQSWs had taken up their posts and the complexity of comparing divergent pilot contexts and approaches.

Key findings

Establishing the pilot

- Local authorities with workplace cultures that already prioritised NQSW support were best placed to introduce the supported and assessed year. Conversely, rapid embedding of pilot principles and practices in local authorities without a recent history of sustained NQSW support was more challenging and resulted in less positive outcomes within the allotted timescales.
- Early uncertainty about the final form and workload implications at each site coloured many participants' perceptions of the value of pilot approaches negatively, especially at the start.
- The presence and focus of key individuals in workforce development and planning roles able to drive pilot developments appeared to be a significant factor in perceptions of pilot success.

NQSW learning and development

- NQSWs were said to have grown in confidence, competence and sense of professional identity during the year, and were steadily taking on more challenging work involving fine professional judgements and decision making. All developments previously noted in previous research findings about the first year in practice.
- NQSWs start qualified practice with very varied levels of experience, especially of statutory social work. The importance of an individual



learning plan that follows the student from university into and through practice was stressed, although most NQSWs and their managers were unfamiliar with, and did not make use of, the plan.

- Approaches at all sites were found to have had a positive impact on NQSWs' ability to engage reflectively with practice. Other identified outcomes related more closely to each test site's particular priorities (eg research informed practice in Aberdeenshire and supporting the development of transferable, generic social work skills in Angus).

NQSW, manager and mentor support

- There was broad agreement that enhanced support is necessary for NQSWs' development as social workers, with potential to improve practitioner retention, the overall competence and confidence of the workforce and, ultimately, the quality of the service provided to individuals and families.
- A key predictor of NQSWs' satisfaction with the programme of learning was the quality and consistency of the NQSW's relationship with line manager and mentor. However, staff moves and vacancies significantly disrupted support and assessment for some NQSWs.
- Line managers/ assessors mostly welcomed structured, reflective approaches to supervision that provided insight into the NQSW's practice and overall wellbeing. However, a minority of line managers did not engage with pilot expectations, including regular supervision and protected time, disadvantaging some NQSWs.
- Line manager and mentor engagement was supported best by regular, local opportunities for information giving, support and networking with peers. Test site coordinators also played an essential role in ongoing NQSW, assessor and mentor support and group learning, including responding to changes in circumstances and additional support required by individual participants.

NQSW assessment

- The draft NQSW benchmark standards were found to provide a relevant and user-friendly framework to support NQSW development and to mark progression and achievement.
- Assessment frameworks required to be closely integrated with employers' appraisal and performance management systems. When they were not well aligned, difficulties arose with duplication of effort, as well as potential failure to address employment performance issues timeously.



- For many NQSWs, assessment was stressful, especially in the first half of the pilot when local assessment methods were still under development. For a minority of NQSWs, anxiety about the possibility of 'failing' their first year of practice was thought to have impeded their learning.
- NQSWs in integrated adult care teams with line managers with nursing and other qualifications were assessed by a social work qualified manager from another team. This arrangement could be successful but could sometimes result in an unhelpful dislocation between day to day practice and the assessment process.
- Forms of evidence that were well integrated with practice, such as Open Badges (in Angus), reflective practice discussions and use of recordings and mind maps, were found to be most supportive to learning. Assessment methods that mirrored those generally used at university, such as written essays, were perceived by many NQSWs to be onerous, and to lack full recognition of their status as qualified workers rather than students.
- Assessors who were practice educators were most confident about taking on an assessment role. Some assessors did not think they had the necessary experience and skills to assess practitioners.
- Most participants expressed mixed views about the value of assessment to NQSWs. Overall, there was most support for an approach that emphasises individualised support and continuous consolidation of learning over time in preference to more episodic assessment in order to reach a 'pass/fail' outcome.

Costs, time and resources

- Planning and setting up the pilot required a substantial investment in time and staff resources by coordinating staff at all sites, even when an NQSW support programme was already in place. Development of the working relationships and practices required for the LNW partnership to deliver the pilot in four varied local authorities with university partners was more complex still and required a considerably longer lead in time than was available.
- Expectations of NQSWs and their assessors of the time commitment required for NQSW assessment varied considerably within and between sites, from between four and 10 hours/month near the pilot start. The time spent by NQSWs on assessment activity also varied across the pilot year, rising significantly at two sites to an average of 18 hours during the final month.
- The most conservative estimate of the number of hours of training and learning NQSWs engaged in during the pilot suggests that these



greatly exceeded the minimum of 144 hours required of NQSWs for post registration training and learning (PRTL).

- Most NQSWs had taken allocated protected time, but some felt guilty about doing so. Nearly all NQSWs and some assessors found it challenging to complete the additional work associated with NQSW assessment within working hours and undertook some of this activity out of paid working hours.
- Assessors also made a significant time contribution to the pilot of between six and 18 hours/month, with the greatest demands on their time at the end of the pilot. For assessors, usually in children's services with more than one NQSW to supervise, NQSW assessment represented a considerable additional workload. Concern was expressed by some participants that this time commitment could influence employers to choose not to employ NQSWs in some social work teams in the future.

Conclusions

- The staged and supported approach taken by the pilot was found by nearly all participants to be more beneficial to NQSW learning and workplace culture than the current PRTL arrangements.
- The evaluation findings lend support to previous research that has identified the need for a more consistent national framework for NQSW support. Evidence from the pilot suggests that minimum core components of that support include: a local induction programme; protected time; a restricted caseload; regular group learning opportunities; reflective, structured supervision; and, group or individual mentoring.
- Evidence to support positive outcomes for NQSW assessment was less strong. The evaluation provides some support for an approach that stresses consolidation of learning through a process of 'verification of learning', closely integrated with employers' appraisal and performance management systems and guided by the NQSW's individual learning plan. The verification process could potentially be extended beyond a year if an NQSW required longer to achieve certain benchmark standards.
- The evaluation does not clearly indicate that any one model of support and assessment is 'better' than another but that different approaches may be required for different employment contexts. However, the findings do suggest that employer investment and 'ownership' of any model is a crucial ingredient for successful implementation. This finding has important implications for the capacity building required to establish any future partnerships to



deliver NQSW support and assessment. A partnership approach also requires careful attention to rurality and distance, so that NQSWs in more remote parts of Scotland are not disadvantaged.

- Finally, and encouragingly, there was evidence that the pilot had seeded some positive outcomes in relation to collaborative working, reflective supervision practices and improved awareness of NQSWs' learning and support needs at all three sites. These developments suggest that a more sustained focus on NQSW learning could have a wider impact on workforce learning cultures than the learning, progression and retention of NQSWs.

A Scotland-wide approach to the NQSW year

- The findings support the need for further development of an overarching, mandatory national framework for NQSW support and a form of verification or assessment, underpinned by NQSW benchmark standards, with potential for local development of well evidenced, customised approaches to meet local workforce needs.
- A national framework for NQSW support should constitute an integral part of a career progression pathway from qualifying social work education onwards, as envisaged by Scotland's proposed post-qualifying framework for social work practice.
- Establishment of a different approach to NQSW support and assessment will require significant new resources, including investment in workforce development staffing, if it is to be successful. Other necessary resources will include learning opportunities for line managers and assessors to further develop supervisory, assessment and staff development skills, and for mentors in mentoring skills. Both assessors and mentors will require protected time to undertake these new roles effectively.
- The pilot has generated valuable knowledge and transferable resources that will support future implementation of a national framework for NQSW support. There are also approaches to NQSW learning that merit further exploration, such as distance and online learning, that could be particularly relevant for remote and rural employers. The full potential of partnership approaches between employers and universities has not been sufficiently tested in the short time scales available, and requires more time for development and evaluation, informed by learning from LNW's pilot experiences.



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Glossary of terms

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs): Organisations providing higher, post-secondary, tertiary, and/or third-level education.

Learning Network West (LNW): A learning partnership funded by 13 local authorities and five HEIs to support the practice learning and development of social and health care professionals across the west of Scotland.

Line manager/assessor: This term is used in the report to refer to: line managers with and without assessment responsibilities, and social work trained assessors without line management responsibility.

Newly qualified social worker (NQSW): A social worker in their first year in qualified social work practice. NQSWs are required to undertake and evidence their capability to consolidate their social work skills, knowledge and values at the start of their career as a registered social worker, including their ability to contribute to the protection of children and adults from harm.

Open Badges: Digital certificates that recognise learning and achievement and enable evidence of learning to be collected, managed and shared. The SSSC has developed its own suite of Open Badges: <https://www.badges.sssc.uk.com/>

Personal Development Plan (PDP): An action plan for professional development, typically reviewed on a regular basis throughout the social worker's career. Also has other names eg individual learning plan.

Post registration training and learning (PRTL): Requirements for the training and learning of the social service workforce in Scotland. NQSWs are required to undertake at least 144 hours of training and learning in their first year of qualified practice.

Practice Educator (PE) (or Practice Teacher): A supervisor who is responsible for the support and formal assessment of a social work student undertaking a practice placement during their qualifying social work degree.

Practice Learning Qualification (Social Services): Qualification that enables social workers to assess and support the learning of others, and is also required by supervisors and assessors of social work students on practice learning placements



Appendix 1: Comparison of pilot test sites

	Aberdeenshire	Angus	Learning Network West
No. of local authorities	1	1	4: Dumfries & Galloway (DG) East Ayrshire (EA) Glasgow City (GC) North Lanarkshire (NL)
Population (K)	262	116	930
Geography	Rural/urban	Rural/urban	Rural/urban/city
Pilot delivery	LA learning and development staff	LA steering group	Partnership of 4 LAs and 4 HEIs with LNW
Key participants	NQSWs Line managers Peer Supervisor	NQSWs Line managers Mentors	NQSWs Line managers Mentors (where available)
Pilot start	November 2018	November 2018	DG/EA/NL: November 2018 GC: January 2019
No. of NQSWs (start)	20	13	40 (DG:8;EA:7;GC:18;NL:7)
No. of NQSWs (end)	19	12	39 (DG:7;EA:7;GC:18;NL:7)
Part-time NQSWs	4	0	0
NQSW group learning delivery	Monthly rolling Support Programme sessions facilitated by SW and other facilitators	Monthly development sessions facilitated by pilot project team and other facilitators	Workshops facilitated by steering group members and HEI staff

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No. of NQSW group learning events	12	12	16 + conference
Protected time	1 study day + 0.5 peer supervision and 1 taught day/ month	1 protected time group learning event + 0.5 day badge work / month	0.5 days per week
Supervision frequency	At least monthly	Monthly (more frequent at start of NQSW year)	Fortnightly at start, moving to monthly as agreed between NQSW and supervisor
Supervision arrangements	2-part supervision template: developmental and reflective practice discussion Pre-written reflective log	Supervision template including developmental and reflective practice discussion	2-part supervision template: developmental and reflective practice discussion Pre-written reflective log
Mentoring / peer supervision (PS) frequency	6 weekly sessions (PS)	At least monthly	At least monthly
Mentoring / PS group size	Small groups (c.10 NQSWs) Research-informed practice focus	Individual mentoring	Individual mentoring (where available)
Support for line managers	Group sessions Individual briefing/ support as required	6 group sessions Individual briefing/ support as required	5 workshops
Support for mentors/PS	Supervised by workforce development team manager	12 group sessions Individual briefing/ support as required	2 workshops

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Assessment methods	Reflective logs Direct observations Research task 2 longer written submissions	Open Badges Multi-source feedback tool Structured Professional Discussion	Written submission with direct observation and reflective accounts taken into account by supervisor in their feedback 2 written submissions
Midpoint (formative) assessment	1,500 – 2,000 words written submission 3-way reflective discussion and feedback to NQSW	Midpoint review with assessor Analysis and discussion of multi-source feedback Verbal and written feedback to NQSW	2,000 words written with aggregated feedback to all
End point (summative) assessment	Portfolio of evidence including 3,000 word written submission 3-way reflective discussion and feedback to NQSW	In depth reflective, structured professional discussion of selected practice examples with assessor	3,000 words written, with aggregated feedback given; individual feedback where deemed necessary for further development or to ask for more evidence.



Scottish Social Services Council
Compass House
11 Riverside Drive
Dundee
DD1 4NY

Tel: 0345 60 30 891
Email: enquiries@sssc.uk.com
Web: www.sssc.uk.com

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