Newly qualified social workers in Scotland: A five-year longitudinal study

Interim Report 4: December 2020

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Glossary

ECSW   Early career social worker

NQSW   Newly qualified social worker

SSSC   Scottish Social Services Council

T1   Year 1 data

T2   Year 2 data

T3   Year 3 data

T4   Year 4 data

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report presents findings from Year 4 of a five-year longitudinal study which aims to develop a national picture of how early career social workers (ECSWs) experience and navigate their early years in practice. Year 4 findings draw on 149 responses to a national online questionnaire. This executive summary provides an overview of key findings and an initial mapping of implications for policy, practice and research.

Employment

Almost nine out of ten respondents continue to be employed in statutory settings (88%) with a slight drop in those employed in voluntary settings. Less than half describe working within integrated or interdisciplinary teams. The number of respondents based in children's services continues to drop (down to 44%), with associated increases in adult care (40%) and criminal justice (11%).

Professional movement remains steady with around 1 in 5 moving to new posts in the last year. Levels of **movement** remains broadly consistent with previous years, with 21% describing job changes in the last year. Respondents continue to provide a mix of practical and professional reasons for moving jobs. Most regularly cited reasons were to: (i) reduce stress and workload pressures and (ii) achieve promotion. Movement to reduce stress continues to be most associated with movement from children and family area teams.

We now have robust repeat measure data on social work workforce patterns across service settings, including for newly qualified and early career social workers. We can make better use of this data to understand and support professional experiences within and across service settings and at key career stages, including stages of exit.

Agile working continues to emerge as a significant feature of many respondents' working lives and most continue to describe their experience of agile working in mostly negative terms. However, this year's findings indicate that respondent dissatisfaction with agile working is not related to its agility but to limited and limiting forms of agile working. Where agile working includes access to adequate desk space, essential agile work tools, spaces for quiet and concentrated work and easy access to peer support, agile working is typically experienced positively. Experiences of agile working on these terms remain rare.

We recommend investment in more professionally responsive forms of agile working; that is, forms that recognize and are responsive to the distinct needs of professional social work and its workforce.

Year 4 respondents report increasing **workloads**, with a significant increase this year in the number holding between 31 to 40 cases (27%). This year just over half described their workload as 'manageable' (falling from two thirds in Year 1), while just under half reported that their workload makes them feel

anxious. Workload-related stress continues to emerge as a significant factor in accounts of professional morale and movement, particularly when accompanied by other professional challenges.

Respondents continue to report spending most **time** on report writing and case recording and least time on reading and applying research. This finding is consistent across years. Reported time spent with service users and carers reduced slightly this year. Balance of activity emerges as important to ECSWs and to their professional identity, morale and wellbeing. 'Too much' and unnecessary 'admin and bureaucracy' emerges as a problem across survey sections and years.

There are many implications here for those responsible for supporting ECSWs. We need to understand the drivers behind increasing caseloads while finding ways to ensure that caseloads are manageable for all. Relatedly, we need to find ways of ensuring a more equitable workload experience across localities, service settings, organisations and teams. We also need to achieve a better balance of professional leadership and management if we are to ensure that the human value and values of social work are not subjugated to managerial values. At present, organisations and managers appear to exercise considerable autonomy in these areas with little in the way of impactful professional guidance or governance.

Professional confidence and competence

Most respondents continue to report high levels of **professional confidence and competence** across a range of skills, knowledge, values and self-efficacy measures. Across these measures, lower levels of confidence emerged in only three of 35 areas: (i) use of research skills; (ii) ability to overcome opposition; and (iii) ease of sticking to aims and accomplish goals.

The consistently high level of professional confidence and competence reported across this longitudinal study is both a positive and surprising finding, particularly in light of the well-documented challenges practitioners report in fulfilling their role and purpose in contexts of social inequality, economic austerity and sustained public sector reform. Relatedly, our very positive findings in this area were often at odds with responses captured elsewhere in the survey where respondents describe a struggle to practice in value-led ways. This duality in the study findings likely reflects our mixed method approach to understanding professional experience. It also appears to reflect the pluralities of professional experience, as workers are pushed and pulled between statutory duties, value-led action, organisational norms, regulatory requirements and managerial demands. Expecting a single story to emerge from this experience is misguided.

There are important implications here for social work research methods and for how we read and make use of research findings. Our findings underline the importance of multi-method and plural approaches to research, analysis and reporting. We need to continue to show social work's pluralities, complexities and uncertainties, even and especially when those pluralities do not lead to neat conclusions and actions. Our findings suggest that most ECSWs are confident, competent *and* struggling. Sometimes professional confidence and identity is bolstered by workers' shared sense of struggle and

sometimes the struggle becomes too much. We need to find ways of more explicitly recognising these dualities of professional identity and experience across career stages, including through the development of more relevant and responsive supports.

Supervision, support, learning and development

Our findings suggest that the frequency of **supervision** for ECSWs continues to fall, with those reporting regular access to supervision dropping from 74% in Year 1 to 56% in Year 4.   For most, the focus of supervision continues to be on workload management. While many would like to achieve a better balance between managerial and professional developmental strands, most appear satisfied with the frequency and quality of supervision.   This year, areas for improvement centre on ensuring that supervision is protected and conducted as a professional and skilled exchange. Our findings continue to underline the value ECSWs place on supervision and their investment in it as a key mechanism for professional development, effectiveness and wellbeing.

An important implication of these findings is that supervision can and should be viewed as more than a management tool. Conducted well it has the potential to contribute to many professional development needs and priorities, including the development of professional confidence, competence, identity, learning, leadership, self-care and resilience. For these reasons and others, it is an obvious area for targeted investment, including through the development of more co-productive and developmental models.

Informal support continues to emerge as a critical but underdeveloped element of ECSWs' professional experience and development. It is rooted in an exchange model of development, shows significant impact on professional practice, wellbeing and resilience, and carries minimal additional material costs. However, access to and opportunities for informal support appears to vary greatly across settings. It appears to be rarely 'designed in' to social service environments and is easily 'designed out', i.e. through adoption of limiting forms of agile working. There is potential to better harness the co-productive potential of this particular form of support and development, perhaps through 'seed corn' investment or through supporting bottom up innovation.

Respondents continue to report varied and mixed experiences of **learning and development** opportunities. Most describe opportunities provided 'in house' by employers or via self-directed learning at home. Least time is spent in learning supported by universities and in self-directed learning at work. An increasing number express a desire for more formal, structured and career-focused opportunities, as well as frustration at the limited opportunities and pathways available. However, the generic nature of the research questions and responses in this area make it difficult to draw clear conclusions from the data. Across survey sections, post qualifying learning and development emerges as an important but underdeveloped element of ECSWs' professional journey, with respondents left to make the best of what comes their way.

The key implication of our findings in this area is that there is a need for targeted and collaborative research and investment in this area.

Professional identity and leadership

Respondents continue to report - and find - a strong sense of **professional identity** and confidence in their role and purpose, though this year shows the first dip in these areas. Strains on professional identity continue to be linked to challenges and conflicts in the organisational, interprofessional and socio-economic contexts in which practitioners operate, for example, arising from 'managerialism, bureaucracy and budgets'. Free text responses suggest that practitioners find strength and solidarity in their shared struggle but experience minimal material support to address and overcome known challenges.

The implications of our findings in this area, extend to all involved in providing professional support, supervision, development, registration and governance to ECSWs (see Year 3 report). Our findings from this year underline a need to find ways to better support practitioners to navigate the well-documented micro *and* macro challenges of professional practice.

An increasing number of respondents now recognise **leadership** as an important part of their role and practice. However, experiences of organisational or employer support to develop leadership capacity remain minimal and mixed. Recent national initiatives in this area appear to have had most impact at the level of the individual practitioner with limited evidence of impact on local organisational practice and behaviours. Achieving better alignment between individual and organisational initiatives in this area is needed to maximise and sustain impact.

Next steps

We are now in the final year of the study. The final online survey was circulated to all ECSWs in March 2021. Final participant research interviews will take place between April and May this year. We expect our final report to be available at the close of this year.

Introduction

This interim report presents findings from Year 4 of a five-year longitudinal study exploring the experiences of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) as they progress in their careers. Findings from Years 1 to 3 will also feature in this report.

Led by researchers from the University of Dundee and Glasgow Caledonian University, this project aims to provide a broad view of how early career social workers develop as professionals in Scotland. This research will explore organisational, practical and subjective dimensions of professional social work life.

(i) Overarching aim

The research aims to incrementally develop a national picture of how newly qualified social workers experience and navigate their first five years in practice.

(ii) Objectives

1. To examine ECSW journeys of professional transition and development.
2. To understand how ECSWs experience and navigate a complex, contested and dynamic professional landscape, in relation to professional roles, tasks, structures and settings.
3. To understand how ECSWs are supported, trained and developed across diverse practice settings.
4. To identify ECSW ongoing professional development needs as they progress their careers.

(iii) Themes

Mindful of aims and objectives set for this project, the research will address the following key themes:

- Professional identity and socialisation.
- Knowledge and skills development (professional learning and development).
- Navigating dynamic professional roles and contexts
- Emotions, self-care and resilience.
- Developing value commitment and value strain.
- Recruitment and retention.
- Supervision and support.
- Leadership.

Method

Each year includes data collection, data analysis and data reporting. Methods of data collection include annual repeat-measure online questionnaires, in-depth interviews and participant observation. Members of the research team have responsibility for different aspects of data collection and analysis.

(i) Online survey

An online survey is conducted annually. It follows a repeat-measure process where all 2016 graduates are invited to to complete the same core questions each year. This means that each year our data is drawn from a changing sample of respondents from within the same cohort. This does not allow us to map individual changes, but it does enable us to map changes and identify patterns across the cohort over the designated period.

Exceptions to our repeat measure questions include a section in the first survey (Year 1) that focused on social work education (this was removed for Year 2); a new question in Year 2 to establish the proportion of participants based in inter-disciplinary teams; a new question in Year 3 asking participants to indicate their felt status at that point (i.e. still newly qualified or otherwise); and finally, thinking ahead and responding to the impact of COVID-19 on current working arrangements, we may need to adapt some questions in our Year 5 survey.

The Year 4 survey opened at the start of March 2020 and closed at the end of June 2020. The unfolding situation of COVID-19 and the impact on frontline services meant that we had to extend the closing date of this survey to ensure that participants had fair opportunity to contribute. This resulted in data being collected before and after national lockdown.

We received 149 responses in total (giving a response rate of 38% - based on a total population of 394 ECSWs on the SSSC register in 2020).

Of the 149 responses, 48 were collected at the pre-lockdown stage in March, and 101 responses were collected from April to June during the height of the pandemic.

In analysing qualitative responses, we made use of the alpha numerical shorthand R1, R2, R3, etc., to number each response. We use the same shorthand in reporting on the qualitative data to signal the numerical identity of the respondents.

Consistent with years 2 and 3, the Year 4 survey comprised of eight sections.

Section 1   Current employment

(ii) Interviews

No interviews were initially scheduled for 2020. The final round of interviews are due to take place in Year 5 of the study. However, owing to the significance and gravity of the international COVID-19 pandemic for frontline staff, we felt it was important to capture some of these experiences in more depth from our participants. We approached our existing panel of participants (the group we have been tracing for the last 4 years) and invited them to participate in a short interview. Twelve participants agreed to take part. These initial interviews provided enough data to help build the case for expanding the current project to include a particular COVID-19 strand exploring the impact of the pandemic on frontline social workers. This particular workstream will report separately and later in 2021; although inevitably, findings reported here will feature issues relating to working practices in a COVID-19 context.

Survey respondents

Whilst we had a reduction in online survey respondents between Year 1 and Year 2 (approximately 25%), participant numbers have increased in subsequent years. This is unusual for longitudinal research, as attrition is often expected (See Table 1).

Table 1: Online Survey Participants

Project Year	Online Survey Numbers
1	157
2	118
3	120
4	149

Consistent with previous years, the majority of survey respondents in Year 4 described their gender as female (80%) and the rest as male. The largest proportion were aged between 25-34 years (46%), followed by 35-44 (29%), 45+ (24%), and 20-24 years (0.7%).

Again, consistent with previous years, the majority of respondents described their ethnic origin as 'White Scottish' (74%), followed by 'Other white British' (12%), 'White Irish' (3%), 'Other White' (3%), 'African, African Scottish or African British' (2%), 'Black, Black Scottish or Black British' (2%), 'Other African' (1%), and 'Caribbean, Caribbean Scottish or Caribbean British' (0.7%).

The majority of respondents said they had no disability (93%). Only 6% said they had a registered disability and 0.7% said they had a self-defined disability.

A note on terminology

We recognised in the early stages of the study that 'Newly Qualified Social Worker' might not best describe participants as they develop in their career. In Year 3, we added a question to the online survey asking participants to describe what they would prefer to call themselves at this point. In Year 3 exactly half (50%) said 'early career social worker', followed by 'social worker' (38.7%) – with 6.2% describing themselves as 'other' (with roles such as 'Social Inclusion Coordinator', advocacy worker, manager). Only 5% described themselves as being a 'newly qualified social worker'. In Year 4, just over half now describe themselves as 'social worker' (51%), followed by 'early career social worker' (37%), 'other' (10%) and 'newly qualified social worker' (1%).

The data appears to indicate a shift in how participants perceive themselves as they progress in their careers, with very few describing themselves as newly qualified by Year 4.

1. CURRENT EMPLOYMENT (Section 1)

Most participants in Year 1 were based in statutory authorities (96%). By Year 2 the figure had dropped to 92%. A further drop was noted in Year 3 (85%), but this has increased slightly in Year 4 (88%). The gradual rise in the number of participants based in the voluntary sector (from 3.6% in Year 1 to 11.5% in Year 3) has reduced slightly in Year 4 (9%) (see Figure 1.1). Other longitudinal studies have shown that most qualified social workers tend to stay within local authority employment over time, with only minimal movement into voluntary sector roles (Carpenter et al., 2012; McLaughlin et al., 2020).
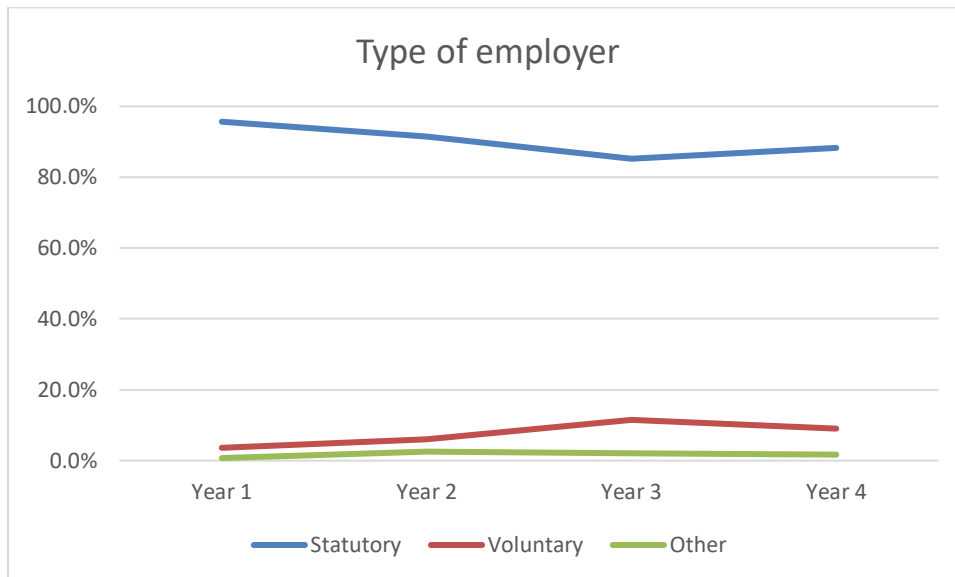
Figure 1.1: Type of employer

Some changes were noted in types of practice setting where participants are situated (See Figure 1.2). Between Years 1 and 2, a rise was noted in those based in children's services from 52% to 59%; however, in Year 3 this figure had fallen slightly to 57%. Year 4 shows a further drop to 44%. Interestingly, adult services was down from 38% to 32% between Years 1 and 2. This downward trend continued in Year 3 (27%) but has since increased in Year 4 to 40%. Criminal justice remained relatively stable at around 6-7% over the first three years, but a rise to 11% is noted in Year 4. Indeed, it seems that a growing number of social workers from children and families have moved to adult services and criminal justice. Children and families would appear to be the only practice area to experience a significant drop. It should be noted that figures here relate to participants who completed our annual survey and are therefore not representative of the workforce as a whole.
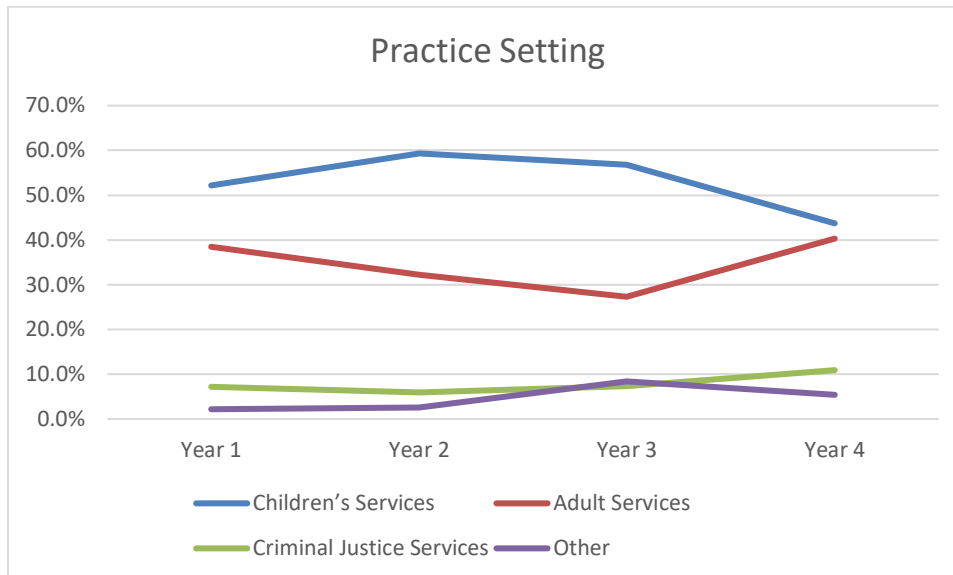
Figure 1.2: Practice setting

Participant movement across practice settings over time may be influenced by several factors, not least changes to local authority and sector wide priorities. In a separate question (first introduced into our Year 2 survey and repeated in subsequent years), we asked participants if they have moved post or changed jobs in the last twelve months. Interestingly, we found consistency between years in the numbers of participants who answered 'yes' – around 20-24% each year.

In common with previous years, Year 4 participants provided a mix of reasons for moving jobs. This year, most frequently cited reasons for movement were: to reduce stress and achieve 'a better work - life balance', from respondents in children and family area teams (7) and promotion (7):

> Moved from children and families in <location>. Due to over work, burn out, lack of resources and insensitive support from service manager. Now feeling well supported. (R2)

Other reasons cited more than once included: less commuting time (3), caseload pressures and/or poor management (3)., existing literature on children and families social work notes high levels of stress and 'burnout' amongst staff in this particular practice area (Ravalier et al., 2020; McFadden et al., 2015). Themes around strain, workload and working relationships emerge as key reasons for social workers either leaving the profession or moving into other areas of practice (McFadden, 2018). While the numbers of respondents reporting movement *from* children and families area teams remain relatively small in our study, the consistency of this pattern across years 2-4, alongside accounts responses of the particular strains of working in this area, is important and merits focused research and analysis.

An interesting feature of participants' accounts of their job changes was the apparent proliferation of specialisms *within* specialisms, such

that a children's service might contain several teams performing slightly different roles, e.g. initial referral team, focused-intervention team, intensive support team and throughcare team. This is an interesting development and might be interpreted as facilitating the development of more specialist and in-depth practice knowledge and skills. On the other hand, it raises broader questions about the fragmentation of a once holistic approach in social work's search for evermore concrete responses to complex need (McBeath and Webb, 1991). There will be opportunity to explore participant reflections on this in the final round of interviews in 2021.

Agile working

Across Years' 1 to 4, over half of participants report to be working for employers with agile working policies in place. Respondent accounts of agile working this year echo those of previous years with emphasis on the negative impacts and costs. However, Year 4 findings make clear that agile working can mean different things in different locations and that these differences can impact significantly on workers experience of it. For example, for some agile working was described as the opportunity to work flexibly, across sites, including one's 'own' office, team and home. It includes access to a fixed or adequate desk space, and to accessible agile work tools, including, for example, a smart phone and a laptop. For these participants, agile working was mostly described positively, as the following responses show:

> I have my own office and I can also work from home allowing more flexibility to plan and prioritise work tasks. (R20)

> More flexibility depending where meetings take place. We still have our own desk space in one office. (R32)

> It is helpful as I have a smartphone and access to laptops to work more flexibly. (R57)

For the majority, agile working did not appear to include easy access to one's team or office, to regular home working, to a personal laptop or smart phone and, critically, to fixed or adequate desk space. In common with previous years, over 80% of qualitative responses discussed the regular challenge of accessing an adequate working space, again highlighting the emotional toll of limited and limiting forms of agile working. In these instances, and for these reasons, agile working was mostly discussed and experienced negatively by the majority of participants and continued to be associated with feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, frustration and stress. As one respondent explains:

> Often can't get a desk in my own office where all my files are kept and have to go to another building. We also are not given laptops or smartphone so can't even do basic things like check emails without a proper computer. Overall it just feels unsettling, like you are always on the move. (R29)

These messages, accumulative across the 4 years, suggest that worker dissatisfaction with agile working is not necessarily associated with its

agility but with the experience of limited and limiting forms of agile working; specifically, with a reported failure to provide many ECSWs with regular and easy access to adequate desk space, agile work tools, peer support and capacity for quiet, concentrated and confidential work.

Studies looking at the role of material space in social work often highlight tensions around access and control of physical working environments, as well as the impact of configurations and arrangements on the interaction, communication and wellbeing of social workers (Jeyasingham, 2020). Evidence is emerging to suggest that agile practices are having a negative impact on the quality of service received by service users where a lack of 'physical' stability is affecting social workers' ability to access crucial support and opportunities for critical reflection (Ferguson et al., 2020). In our study, team and team identity, proximity, privacy and opportunities for informal discussions are clearly important to the vast majority of participants. Agile working is perceived as a threat, or at least an obstacle in most cases. The nuance within these findings ought to be of concern to employers and policymakers tasked with driving forward 'progressive' changes to working environments within the public sector. Drives for efficiency will invariably create other costs, which our evidence indicates by the cumulative negative impact of agile working on early career professionals.

Lastly, in the wake of COVID-19, hygiene also emerged as an increasing concern, related to the increased use of shared desks and equipment. Some respondents also discussed the transition to working from home. We expect to report more fully on this transition in our forthcoming COVID-19 strand of this study.

Improvements to working environment

Despite concerns around agile working (highlighted above), Year 4 data indicates that participants are slightly more satisfied with their physical working environment than in previous years. 50% of participants identified that they were mostly satisfied, albeit with most suggesting areas for improvement. As in previous years, positive responses were mostly associated with having a designated desk or work-space and a modern and fresh environment.

Participants not satisfied with their physical working environment mostly discussed the challenges of agile working as discussed above, specifically: hot desking, inadequate desk and/or office space, limited access to mobile work tools, and noise levels associated with spaces accommodating multiple teams.

Across responses and years there is notable consistency regarding what matters most to participants regarding their physical environment. Access to a fixed or designated desk space emerges consistently as most significant to participants, closely followed by modern and up-to-date facilities, including access to adequate space, lighting, heating and technology. A significant number also highlight the importance of access to quiet/ confidential spaces to meet and work with colleagues and people who use services, and spaces to take a break and/or eat lunch away from one's desk. A small number identify the value of access to showers and

bike storage to support health and wellbeing.

The consistency of these messages across participants and years is significant and echoes findings in studies that focus specifically on the impact of material and physical spaces on social work practice (Ferguson et al., 2020; Jeyasingham, 2020).

Time spent on social work tasks

Across the four years, a fairly consistent pattern continues where participants tend to spend most time on report writing and case recording. Least time is spent on reading and using current research, knowledge and evidence. No significant changes are noted in Year 4; however, contact with service users and carers has reduced – perhaps unsurprisingly in the current context (please see full data sets in Appendix 1).

Workload

In Year 4 there is some variation in terms of a slight reduction in those holding 11-20 cases and a rise in those holding between 31 to 40 (see Figure 1.3). Variation here likely reflects several factors, not least the diverse range of workload management arrangements across 32 local authorities and other agencies in Scotland, as well as the type of work and particular setting in which participants are based. However, the rise those holding between 31 to 40 cases is significant, as it indicates that – for some participants at least – workloads are becoming substantial. Indeed, a wide range of existing literature suggests that excessive workloads can lead to stress and 'burnout' amongst social workers (Hussein, 2018; Ravalier, 2019). By comparison, the percentage of newly qualified social workers in England holding 20 or more cases after two years in practice is around 38% (McLaughlin et al., 2020) - whereas the Year 2 stage of our study showed the equivalent figure to be much higher in Scotland at that point - around 51.3% (rising to 53.3% by Year 4). However, throughout our study, the majority of participants have reported that workloads were 'manageable', with most feeling confident to take on more complex work (more detail below). It should be noted here that participants who answered 'none' (see Figure 1.3 below) were mostly based in secondary settings (such as hospital or court-based services) where working practices do not require staff to hold cases.
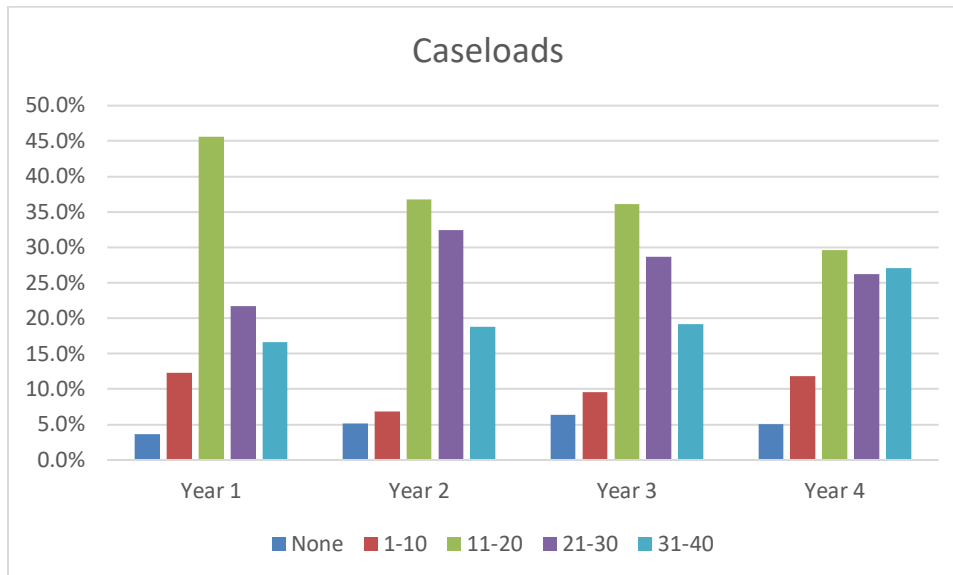
Figure 1.3: Number of cases held

The majority of participants in Year 1 reported that work allocated to them was appropriate for their level of skill and knowledge, and that workloads were manageable - with many feeling confident to take on more complex work. However, data from Year 2 showed that whilst most continued to feel confident, there appeared to be less agreement that current workloads were manageable and more agreement that workloads were making early career social workers feel anxious. Data from Year 3 indicated that levels of anxiety had decreased since Year 2, and that confidence to take on more complex work had returned (almost back to Year 1 levels). Year 4 data indicates that the majority still think that allocated work is appropriate; however, we noticed that whilst the majority still feel that workloads are 'manageable', the proportion has reduced from 67.4% in Year 1 to 53.4% in Year 4. We also noticed an increase in those who felt that workload is making them feel anxious (from 38.4% in Year 1 to 48.3% in Year 4). This may be attributed to increasing caseloads (as noted above) and possibly confounded by the current COVID-19 context (please see full data sets in Appendix 1). Nevertheless, figures here are concerning when set against a broader UK picture where levels of anxiety and stress around workloads seem to grow as practitioners progress in their careers (see McLaughlin et al., 2020).

2. PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE (Section 2)

Key to this study is examining and developing perceptions of professional confidence and competence of social workers as they progress in their careers. Data gathered in Year 1 established baseline levels of confidence and competence across a range of occupational items drawn from the Professional Capabilities Framework and National Occupational Standards. Our focus here is on four key domains: skills, knowledge, professional values and self-efficacy:

Skills

In this domain, respondents were asked to rank how confident they felt across a range of typical social work skills. Participants ranked themselves on a scale from 'confident' to 'unconfident'. Whilst Year 1 data indicated strong levels of confidence across all skill areas, Year 2 data indicated slight reductions in confidence with 'delivering personalised services', 'using research skills to inform practice and enhance learning' and 'managing demands on own time to prioritise what is important as well as what is urgent'. Year 3 data indicated an upward shift in confidence across all skill areas for the majority of participants, with Year 4 data showing no significant changes here (please see full data sets in Appendix 1).

Knowledge

Respondents were asked to rank how confident they felt in their understanding of particular areas of knowledge for practice. Data from across Years 1 to 4 shows growing levels of confidence across most knowledge domains. Clear progress is noted in 'legislation', 'principles of risk assessment and risk management', and 'statutory and professional codes…' (please see full data sets in Appendix 1).

Professional values

We asked survey participants to consider a number of items relating to professional values (drawn from codes of practice). Participants were asked to rate their ability to demonstrate professional values on a scale from 'always' to 'never' (see Appendix 1). The key point from the survey data is that from Years' 1 to 4, the majority of early career social workers feel they can demonstrate professional values either 'always' or 'often'. Slight variation is noted between years, but no significant patterns have emerged.

Self-efficacy

The project team used a widely adopted method of measuring self-efficacy developed by Ralf Schwarzer & Matthias Jerusalem (1995) (see Year 1 report for more detail).

Participants were asked to consider nine areas of self-efficacy and rate themselves against a scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. In Years 1 and 2, the same three areas of self-efficacy emerged as top:

1. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
2. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
3. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.

In Year 3, the same areas also emerged as top; however, with a

switch between position 1 and 2:

1. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
2. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
3. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.

However, Year 4 data shows a slight change in the top 3 with a new entry in third position:

1. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
2. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
3. If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution.

The majority of early career social workers in Year 4 report sustained high levels of self-efficacy since the last survey.

From Years' 1 to 4, evidence continues to suggest either high or growing levels of confidence across each domain. This may indicate that practitioners continue to 'advance' as they progress in their careers, giving weight to the notion of accruing professional expertise (and its effects) as an incremental process of development over time (Dreyfus and Dreyfus, 1986). However, studies that mention confidence levels caution that progress often depends on a range of variables, not least supportive teams and managers, as well as good informal relationships with peers and cultures of learning within organisations (Grant et al., 2017).

3. FORMAL SUPERVISION (Section 3)

Whilst most survey participants continue to receive formal supervision on a monthly basis, we noticed a continued reduction in this proportion from 65% to 55% from Years' 1 to 4 (please see Figure 3.1). Other reductions are noted in those receiving fortnightly supervision – down from 8.9% to 0.9%. However, an increasing number of participants (now 40%, up from 30% in Year 3) are subject to 'other' arrangements. For many in this group, 'other' referred to supervision every 6 to 8 weeks. However around 10% described patterns of supervision which took place 3 monthly or less. Indeed, whilst reductions in the frequency of supervision could be concerning at first glance, these findings are not unique to Scotland. In a longitudinal study involving 208 newly qualified social workers in England, Manthorpe J et al. (2015) found that a tapering of frequency was common as NQSWs became more experienced. They also interviewed 23 social work managers and found that wider organizational pressures had an impact on the time they were able to give to NQSW supervision. Interestingly, our study has shown fairly consistent agreement (with a slight dip noted) by the majority from Year 1 (77.2%) to Year 4 (74.2%) that the frequency of supervision has been appropriate.
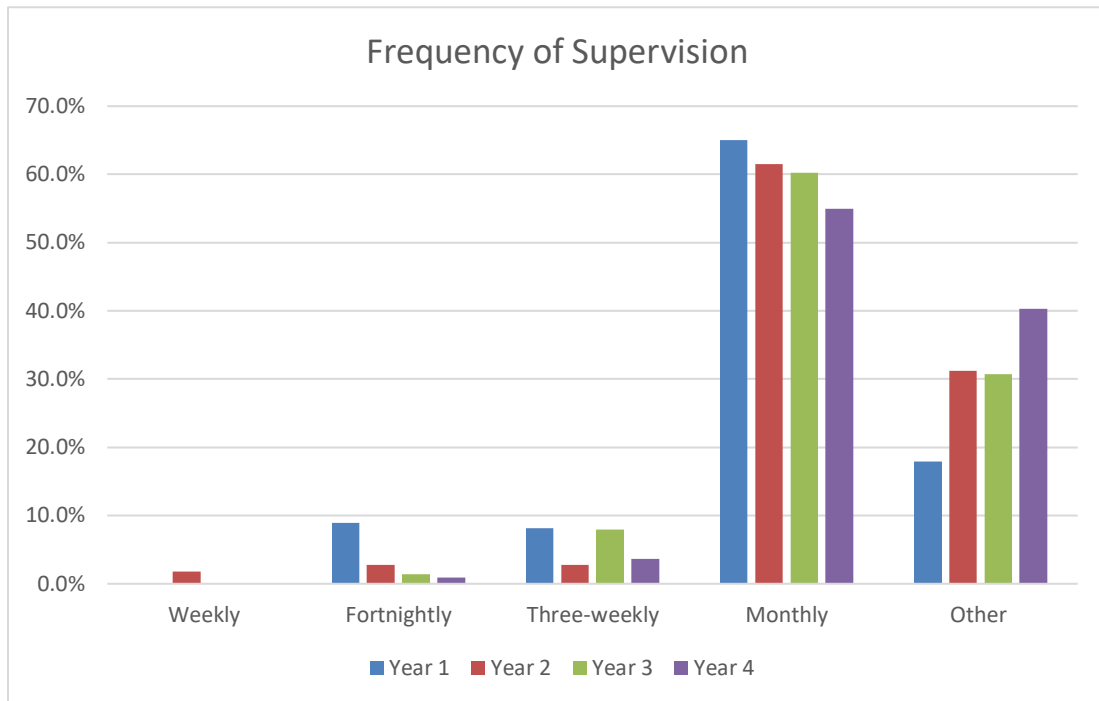
Figure 3.1: Frequency of supervision

For the majority of participants, supervision continues to last between 61 and 90 minutes (see Figure 3.2). Indeed, this pattern had increased incrementally over the first three years, reducing slightly in Year 4; however, whilst there had been a gradual decline in those receiving over 90 minutes of supervision, this appears to have increased slightly in Year 4. This may be linked in many ways to the growing number of cases being held by participants (please see Figure 1.3), as well as the reduced frequency in supervision meetings (thus requiring more time to discuss developments or issues in cases emerging between supervision sessions).
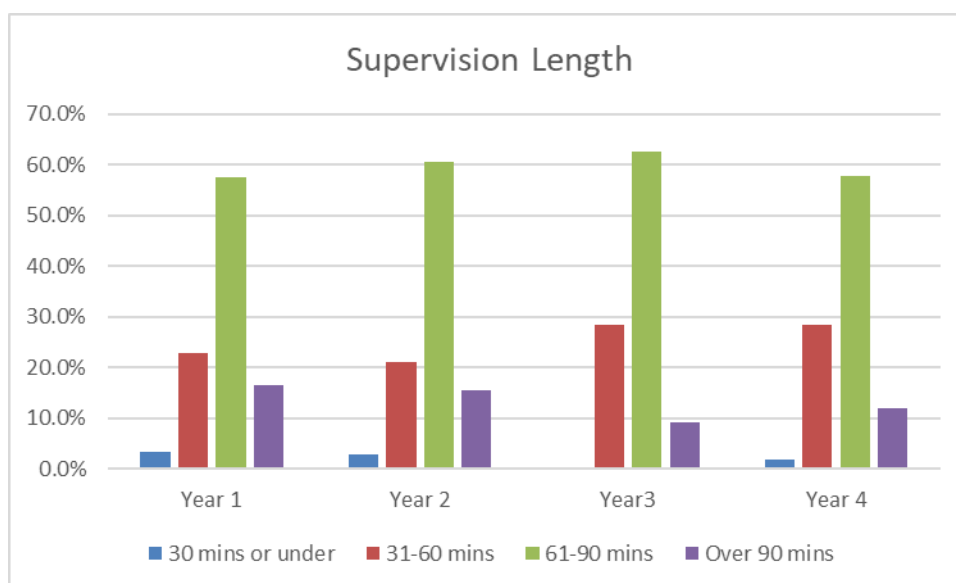
Figure 3.2: Length of time spent in supervision

While the main focus of supervision still seems to be workload management for most participants, we noticed a drop here from 75% in Year 3 to 63% in Year 4. The majority of participants in Year 4 agree that the frequency (74.2%) and quality (64.1%) of supervision they receive is appropriate, and most (80.5%) continue to feel supported by their manager (Please see Appendix 1 for full data sets). Interestingly, studies that mention supervision experiences of NQSWs tend to highlight significant variations in frequency, quality and purpose across cohorts (Hunt et al., 2017). Experiences are more likely to be contingent on context, such as the particular management culture of employers and particular needs of individual NQSWs (O'Donoghue et al., 2017).

Improvements to supervision

Participants' qualitative responses continue to help us understand what is important to social workers in their developing experiences of supervision and where they would like to see improvement. Year 4 findings build on previous findings and highlight scope for improvement in two areas. First, responses speak to the importance of supervision being conducted in a professional and respectful manner. Specifically, that it takes place regularly, when scheduled, with adequate time and structure and without interruptions. The following responses are illustrative of the responses in this area:

> Time for supervision, without interruption. (R24)

> It would be good to get it when planned, rather than it being cancelled and for more than 1 hour to be allocated as I handle complex cases which require in-depth discussion. (R44)

These findings also reflect the above discussed quantitative findings which highlight variation in experiences of supervision and an increasing number who experience supervision less than monthly.   Essentially, qualitative responses in this area suggest a desire for a more protected and respected space. Participants also expressed a desire for a more skilled, personalized, contextualised and developmental approach, including attention to feedback and guidance, exchange of expertise and discussion of relevant knowledge, research and training:

> It is a bit scripted, this is the model used by my organisation. It's to ensure that specific things are covered … it does look like we are working through a list. (R15)

> Reflecting in-depth on a piece of work and identify improvements in my practice. More discussion about areas I don't feel completely confident in and have a formal plan for further development relating to my job (R33)

> More opportunity for reflection and discussing my emotional responses / emotional impact of work on me and how this may be affecting my practice. (R39)

> More emphasis on up to date research, and training opportunities. (R55)

Responses in this area were often linked to experiences of working with risk and complexity.

More broadly, responses here and across the survey data suggest developing clarity and confidence amongst participants regarding their professional needs, and recognition of the importance of supervision to their wellbeing and development. It would be helpful to compare these perspectives with those from social workers providing supervision, and with findings from comparative professional groups.

INFORMAL SUPPORT (Section 4)

In this section of the survey we explored participant experiences of informal support from team members and other non-management staff in their employment settings.

Data in Year 4 is consistent with previous years in that the majority of participants continue to place significant value on the support, advice and learning opportunities provided by their colleagues. Key patterns to emerge over the last four years are a gradual movement in those seeking advice from 'frequently' to 'occasionally' (see Figure 4.1) and clear movement to an exchange model of informal support.

Figure 4.1: Frequency of advice sought from colleagues

Qualitative data, here and across the survey sections, underlined again the significant value of informal support for most participants. In Year 4, the types of support most frequently described were: (i) advice, knowledge and information exchange, relating mostly to casework and supporting services; (ii) space for reflection, feedback and critical thinking, particularly in working through professional issues and dilemmas; and (iii) emotional and wellbeing support. Again, responses underlined the reciprocal nature of support relationships and, for some, the everyday nature of support:

> This is present every day and the most helpful form of support I have. This involves colleagues having a 'listening ear', checking in when they have overheard a difficult phonecall and in giving practical advice. (R50)

In common with previous years, Year 4 findings also highlight variation in experiences of access to informal support, with limited accounts of support often linked to agile working practices described above or to case load pressures, stress within teams and associated staff absence:

> My colleagues are feeling the pressure of high case load and most of them are off sick due to work related stress. (R64)

> My team is currently in a very bad place. I have 2 colleagues who I can trust to give reliable support and advice however from a team of 10 this is not an acceptable rate. (R56)

Our findings support a long line of research that demonstrates the importance of recognising the value of informal support in professional environments (Bennett et al., 1993; Thompson et al., 1996; Smith and Nursten, 1998; Collins, 2008). Informal support continues to be underplayed by the absence of any official recognition or mechanisms to nurture this crucial dimension of professional life.

PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT (Section 5)

Year 4 data shows that participants continue to access a range of learning and development opportunities, including shadowing other social workers, self-directed learning at work and home, and learning provided by employers, outside organisations and universities (see also, SSSC, 2019). Most time is spent on learning provided by employers, closely followed by self-directed learning at home. Least time is spent on learning provided by universities and self-directed learning at work. Qualitative findings suggest that that this pattern mostly reflects the learning opportunities available to early career social workers rather than participant preferences and/or identified needs. Year 3 and 4 data shows participants seeking more structured and formal learning opportunities as opposed to in-house training provided by employers.

Types of knowledge thought to be important to participants has shown little variation across years. From a choice of seven identified knowledge areas, most participants in the first two years ranked the following areas of knowledge as most important (and in this order):

1. Risk assessment and risk management
2. Social work interventions
3. Legislation

By Year 3, the same three areas scored high again, however, with slight variation in terms of order this time:

1. Legislation
2. Risk assessment and risk management
3. Social work interventions

In Year 4, the same three areas appear again in the top three, with risk assessment and management returning to the top spot:

1. Risk assessment and risk management
2. Legislation
3. Social work interventions

In each year, the least important areas of knowledge continue to be 'health and safety', followed by 'social work theory, research and evidence summaries'. We might speculate that the low ranking of social work theory, research and evidence speaks to the often-cited gap between social work research and practice (Epstein, 2009). However, given the complexity of this issue for social work, more research is needed to better understand practitioners' developing relationship with social work theory, research and evidence. We hope to unpack some of this in our Year 5 interviews.

Despite slight variation, data from Years 1 to 4 suggest that the majority of participants continue to take the lead on their own professional development and learning with emphasis on informal and self-directed methods. Many ECSWs are generally satisfied with the quality of training on offer; however – as noted above - a growing proportion would prefer more advanced and more specialised inputs which are less likely to be made available by employers with restricted training budgets.

In respect of time spent on learning and development, a significant proportion of respondents (38%) continue to receive over 10 hours of training provided by employer. Here the range goes from 10 to over 60 hours (though some participants included Mental Health Officer training in this section). However, data over the last 4 years shows that the number receiving 10+ hours of training from their employer has steadily declined, whilst those receiving 6-10 hours has increased (see Figure 5.1).
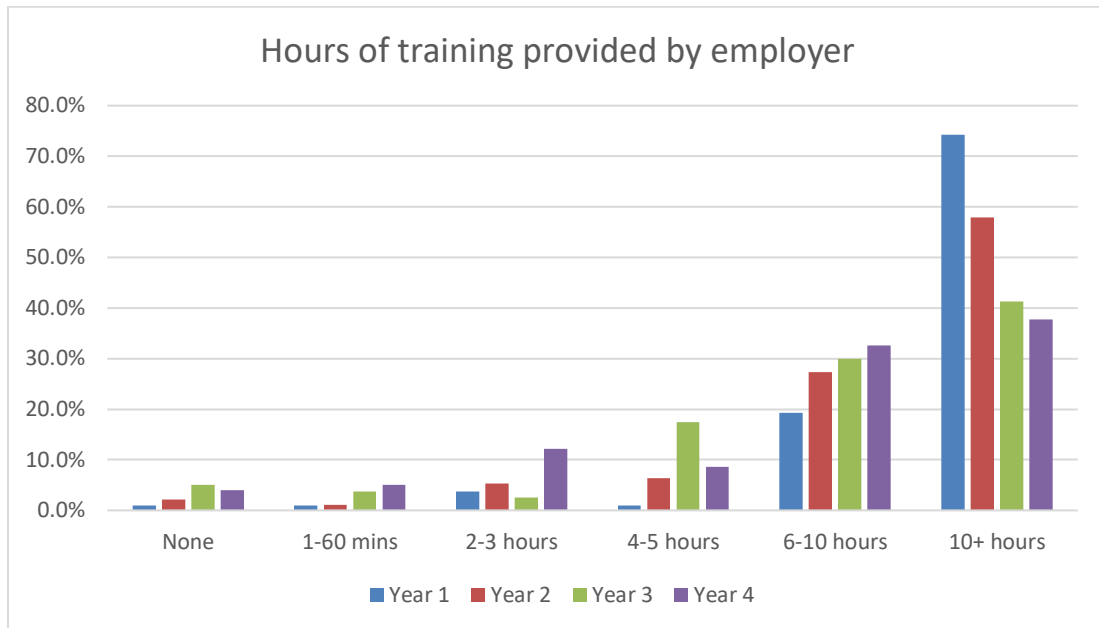
Figure 5.1: Hours of training provided by employer

Participants continue to report spending a significant amount of their own time (10+ hours) – increasing in Year 4 - on learning and development (i.e. researching topics, reading books and journal articles) (see Figure 5.2). Here the range goes from 15 to 100 hours.
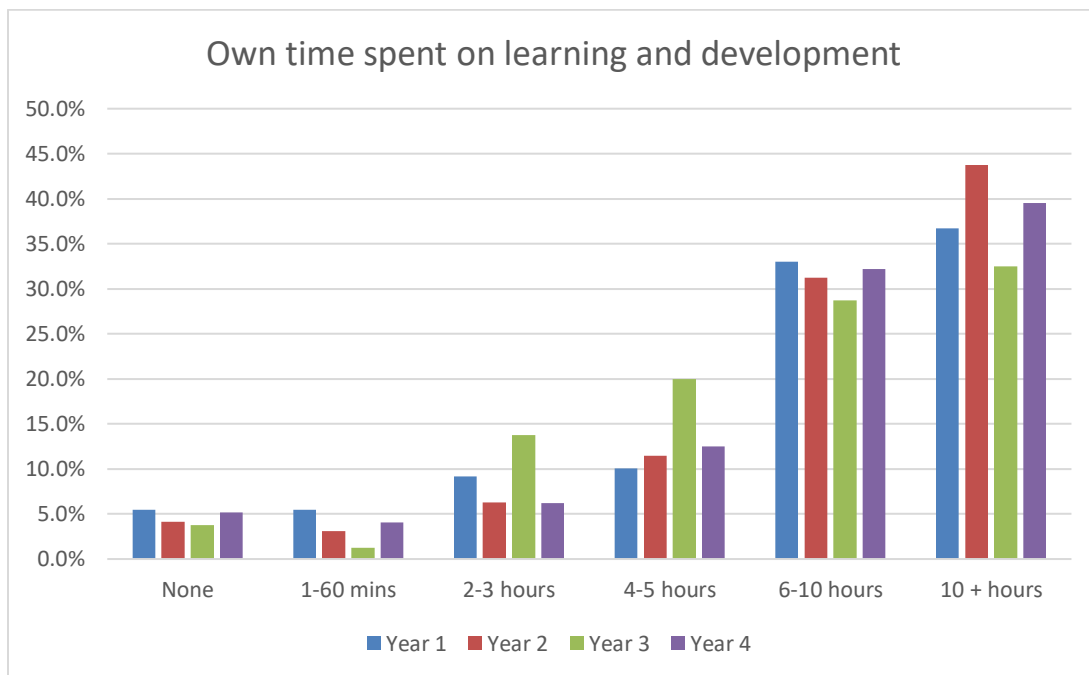
Figure 5.2: Own time spent on learning and development

Participant satisfaction with the **amount** of learning and development opportunities available to them has gradually declined each year. Year 4 data shows a further decline in overall satisfaction and a sharp increase in dissatisfaction (see Figure 5.3). This appears to reflect respondents' desire for access to 'more' learning and development opportunities generally, and to more structured, specialised and external opportunities specifically.
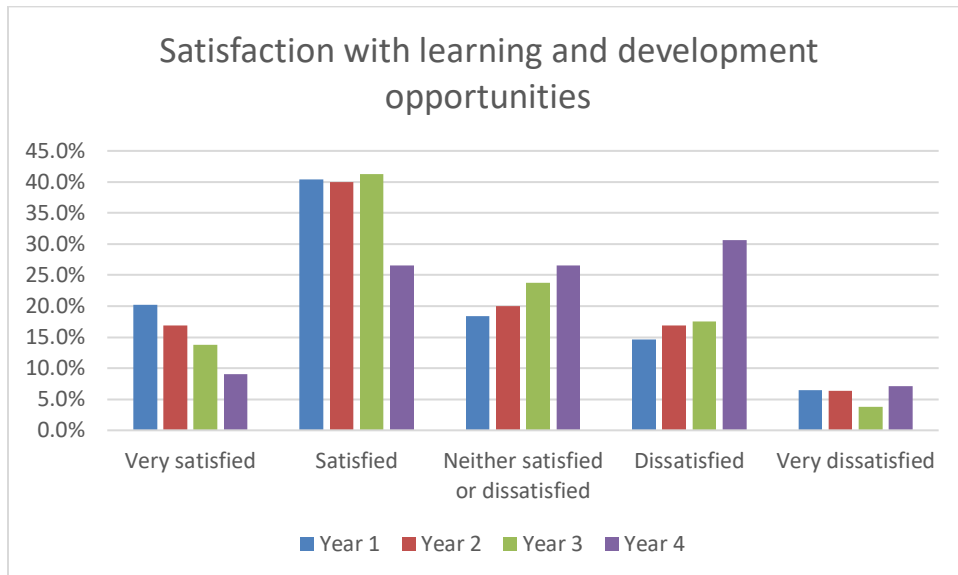
Figure 5.3: Satisfaction with amount of learning and development opportunities

Participants were also asked about satisfaction with the **quality** of learning opportunities available to them. Over years 1 to 3 most respondents were 'satisfied' with the quality of learning accessed. However, in Year 4, we found a sharp rise in those who felt that quality was 'above' average and a sharp decline in those who felt it was 'satisfactory' (see Figure 5.4). This suggests an increasingly diverse experience of learning and development amongst respondents, a finding supported by responses in our qualitative data.
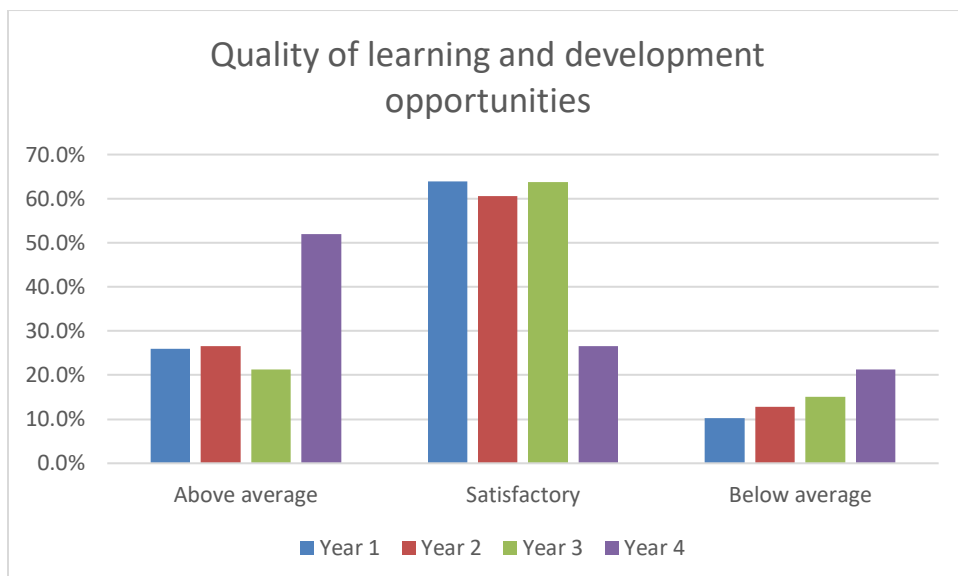
Figure 5.4: Quality of learning and development opportunities

Finally, participants were invited to identify their professional learning and development needs at the current time. Year 1 responses to this question were varied, but needs were broadly framed as wanting more: more practice experience, more formal training and more

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protected opportunities for self-directed learning (i.e. space for independent learning, reading and research). Findings from Years 2 and 3 were more specific and tended to focus on issues of risk and protection, aligned often to respondents' particular service area. Year 2 and 3 responses also conveyed a desire for deeper and richer learning, with some evidence of progress towards this in Year 3 - for example, through application for, or enrollment in, specialized and/or external courses. This finding was also prominent in Year 4 as respondents expressed a desire for more formal, specialist and external learning in key practice areas, associated often with formal post-qualifying qualifications and career progression. Learning needs most frequently mentioned in this context included post-qualifying learning in child-care and protection, adult protection, mental health officer training, and practice educator training. A smaller number also mentioned a desire for specialist learning related to leadership and working with risk, complexity and trauma:

> To complete the post graduate course in child protection to further enhance my knowledge, skills and practice. (R16)

> Specific criminal justice training … I have contacted CYCJ [Centre for Children, Young People and Justice] with managers permission. (R28)

> I have expressed an interest in further education to complete the MHO training and have the support of my manager to apply for this. (R19)

> The training offered to me was more mandatory training … I feel I would benefit from more specific training such as trauma based practice, life story work, etc. (R61)

Notably, respondents' articulation of their learning needs is mostly constrained to core social service areas and specialisms. This sits in contrast to the breadth and complexity of social work as a discipline and field of practice and perhaps speaks to the increasingly regulated contexts of professional practice (Worsley, Beddoe, McLaughlin and Teater, 2020).

Year 4 participants continue to describe unequal access to and support for professional learning and development from employers, with particular obstacles described in accessing formal learning and development opportunities outside of the organisation:

> I am currently undertaking a postgraduate qualification in autism which I sourced myself but I am fully supported by my employer. (R4)

> Have requested to do Post Graduate CP [Child Protection] Certificate and this has been refused due to time and costs. (R14)

> I am supported by my immediate manager and his manager. I dont think higher up management understand the need for high

quality and specialised training to promote better outcomes for people we work with. (R3)

There is limited opportunity for progression within my workplace, I am still at the same stage I have been for 4/5 years. (R30)

As some of these examples illustrate, in common with the wider research literature in this area, described obstacles continue to include a lack of protected time, organizational permissions, clear signposting and support for learning, and financial resource (see also, SSSC, 2019).

These findings provide important insight into how ECSWs experience post qualifying learning and development opportunities, particularly noting the limited research evidence in this area (Grant et al., 2017; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014). Our findings echo many of those reported in the SSSC's (2019) recently commissioned research in this area and underline the need for further attention to this area. Findings from both studies reveal good motivation for learning and career development amongst social workers and a range of learning opportunities and activities available to them. However, both studies also note important gaps in provision and an absence of 'overall strategic direction and coherency' (SSSC, 2019:3).

In some respects, the obstacles to high quality post-qualifying professional development pathways are straightforward. Social service providers in Scotland and beyond have seen significant and sustained budget cuts in recent years, which have had a disproportionate and sometimes devastating effect on workforce development budgets. However, as Gordon et al (2019) note, close analysis also reveals 'a complex interaction of existing and historical financial, structural, geographical and cultural influences'. We note, as they do, that there is no 'quick fix' to these challenges. Findings from this study and others underline that progress will require more equitable attention to pre-qualifying and post-qualifying learning and a more coherent and collaborative approach to investment, provision and evaluation across professional learning (SSSC, 2016). We might also reflect on recent responses across practice and academia in the face of budget and market challenges. Consider, for example, the recent turn in practice towards 'in-house' learning provision (Stevenson, 2019), or the turn in academia towards more lucrative international post-qualifying markets. Further research is needed on the impacts of these shifts in post-qualifying learning provision. For now, we would observe that market-led responses, pursued narrowly, risk eroding the already fragile learning partnerships, pathways and inter-sectoral dialogue that is critical to professional growth, learning and development.

PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY (Section 6)

The online survey presented respondents with a series of general statements on professional identity. Participants were invited to rank the extent to which they agreed or not with each, using a scale from

'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (see Appendix 1).

Data from the first three years showed that participants' sense of professional identity, as well as their overall confidence as social workers, continued to rise each year. However, Year 4 data indicates the first drop in participants' feeling they have a sense of their own professional identity (from 81% in Year 3 to 78% in Year 4). We also noted the first decline in confidence in their role as social workers from 87% in Year 3 to 82% in Year 4. Free text responses suggest that this dip relates to the challenging organizational, interprofessional and socio-economic contexts in which practitioners operate, and the challenge of retaining a robust professional identity in the absence of substantive practical and emotional supports. However, it is important to note that, for most, professional identity and confidence in role remains resilient and robust for most.

In common with wider research, participants continue to report that service users, employers and colleagues help to shape their professional identity, as well as their own sense of professional self. Participants were also invited to rank a series of six statements from what had the 'most' to 'least' impact on their sense of being a professional. Items that have the most impact on participants' sense of being a professional are consistent over the four years, including participants' ordering of these:

1. Having the ability to make complex judgements and decisions
2. Having autonomy over the work I do
3. Being able to apply my professional values

Also consistent across years is the item ranked as having the least impact on participants' sense of being a professional, that is, 'Being registered with the SSSC'. This item was scored 'least' by 42% in Year 1, increasing to 52% in Year 2 and 62.3% in Year 3. This figure reduced slightly in Year 4 to 57%.

The significance of autonomy to developing professional identity also emerges from wider research in this area. Webb (2017), for example, discusses autonomy as ideally located within a network of accountability and professional conduct and governed at a distance. The intersections then of autonomy, professional competence and governance also appear to be significant, with implications for all involved in support, supervision and governance roles.

What does 'professional identity' mean to participants?

In free text boxes, survey participants were invited to comment on what professional identity meant to them. Year 4 responses align closely with those from previous years while also indicating a more assured sense of professional self. As in previous years, professional identity is associated with a clear sense of role and purpose, value-based practice, and recognition and respect from others, specifically other professionals and the public (see also Grant et al., 2017). Participant clarity in this area is reflected in the response below:

Having a clear definition and understanding of my role, the values that underpin it and the importance of the role in society. (R6)

Restrictions on professional identity

Perceived restrictions on professional identity were also clear and consistent and, in common with previous years, speak to restrictions experienced within and beyond the profession. Again, most frequently cited restrictions were:

- 'bureaucracy, managerialism and budgets.', each of which were felt to significantly constrain workers' ability to do their job.
- A perceived lack of understanding, respect and/or value from others, specifically health and education professionals, and extending to the wider public, politicians and policy makers.
- The absence of a unifying or empowering professional body.

In common with previous years, a small number of participants also highlighted restrictions arising from a lack of opportunity and support for CPD. Examples of responses from different participants in this area are provided below:

Management shaping the way we work. Major restrictions on how we practice caused by shortages of staff and funding. Forcing us to be care managers rather than social workers. (R24)

Lack of understanding from others about the purpose and role of social workers, as well as lack of respect at times. (R13)

I feel like our union / body could be more positive [about] social workers. I feel like the SSSC is something that exists to keep us in line and will discipline us if we don't, but I don't feel like the[y are] a positive supportive outlet for us. (R27)

Time to keep up to date with research and academic findings. (R32)

Strengthening professional identity

Responses to the question 'what would strengthen your professional identity' reflect the restrictions discussed above and, again, were notably clear and consistent, as illustrated in the response below:

Education, good management and an organisation that is supportive of social justice and tackling poverty. (R1)

In common with Year 3 responses, most responses also underline the importance of action within and beyond the profession.

Internally (within the profession), responses highlight the importance of:

(i)   strong leadership and management, more closely aligned to

	social work's role, values and responsibilities;
(ii)	greater autonomy and service user focused work, 'beyond budgets and savings';
(iii)	greater recognition, representation and support for the profession and its workforce; and
(iv)	improved post-qualifying education and training opportunities.

Externally, participants spoke to a need to promote improved recognition, understanding and respect from partner professionals and public. Again, these messages are broadly consistent across the four years, with participant responses in this area developing in clarity and consistency. Notably there is considerable overlap between our findings in this area and the developing research literature in this topic (See, for example, Webb, 2017; Levesque et al, 2019; Beddoe, 2015; and Staniforth, 2016).

The consistency of our findings in this area, across the 4 years and across survey sections and questions, provides important insight into how early career social workers experience identity formation and how they can be supported to develop and maintain a robust and resilient professional identity. Our findings in this area have implications for all involved in providing support, supervision, management, registration and governance to early career social workers, and at the same time underline the interactive and multi-dimensional nature of this endeavor. Equally, our findings point to the need for the profession, early career social workers included, to consider how it can best/better enable and mobilise the kind of collective voice and actions that many suggest is needed.

DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP (Section 7)

In this section participants were asked if they understood what leadership meant to them at this stage in their careers. Findings from Year 1 suggested that the concept of leadership was relatively new to frontline staff in social services, with many yet to develop their own understanding of leadership in their everyday role. Findings since suggest a steady increase in understanding of leadership amongst participants, as shown below (see Figure 7.1).
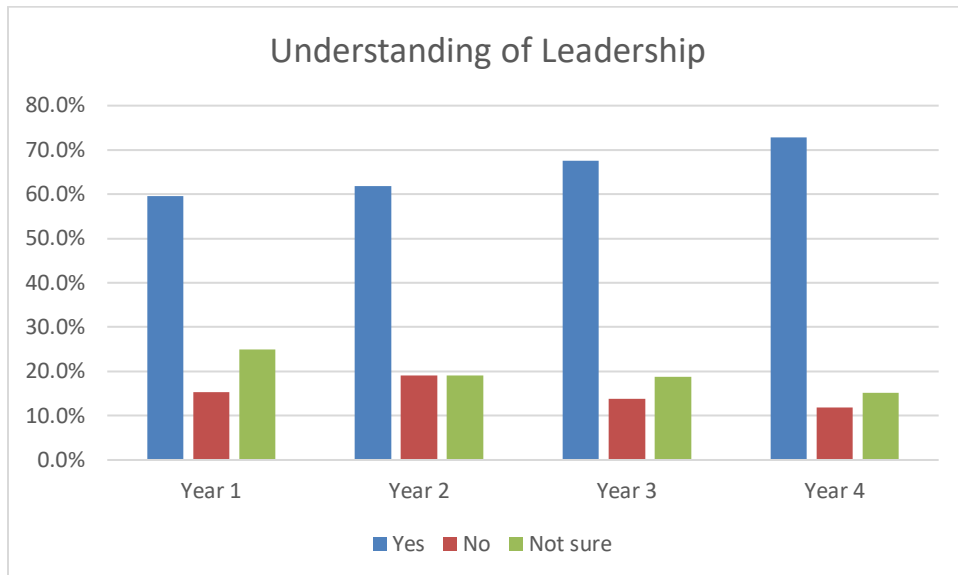
Figure 7.1: Understanding of leadership

Whilst understanding of leadership continues to improve year-on-year, there was a decline across Years' 1 to 3 in those who felt that developing leadership capacity is important to their professional role. However, Year 4 data indicates a change in this pattern with more than 80% ranking leadership as moderately or very important to their role (see Figure 7.2). These findings are replicated across the UK with Miller, Schaub and Haworth (2019) also describing growing momentum around leadership amongst practitioners in England and Wales.
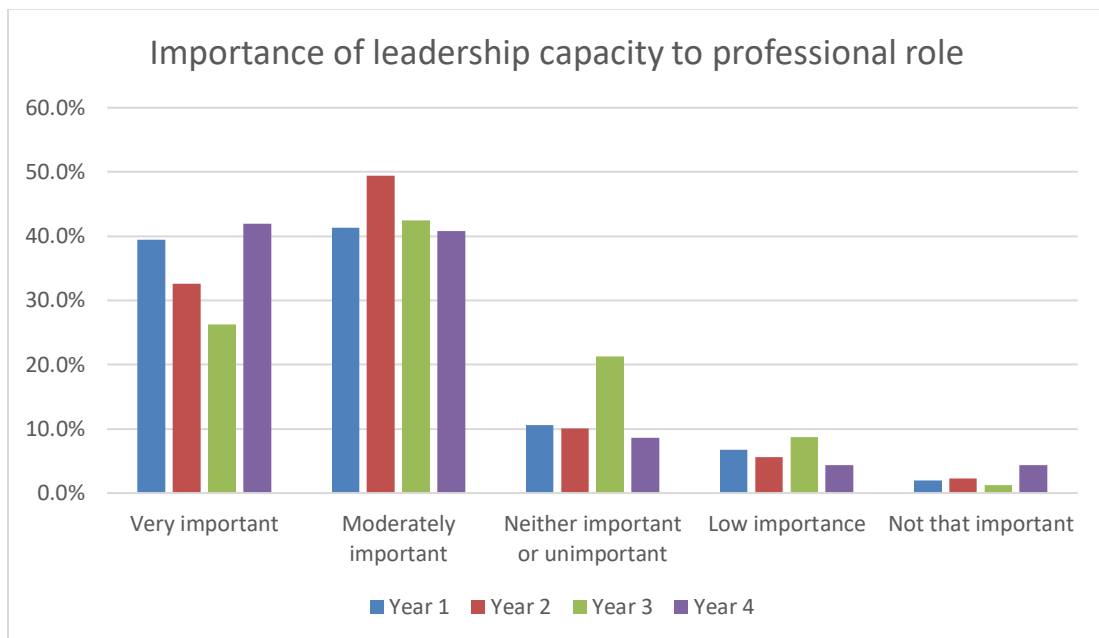
Figure 7.2: Importance of leadership capacity to professional role

Participants were asked if they had developed particular leadership capabilities in the last twelve months, drawing on the leadership capabilities framework developed by the SSSC in 2012. Our data continues to show development across key leadership capabilities, with

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'motivating and inspiring others' continuing its upward trajectory. However, Year 4 data shows slight reductions in the development of 'vision' and 'collaborating and influencing' (see Figure 7.3).
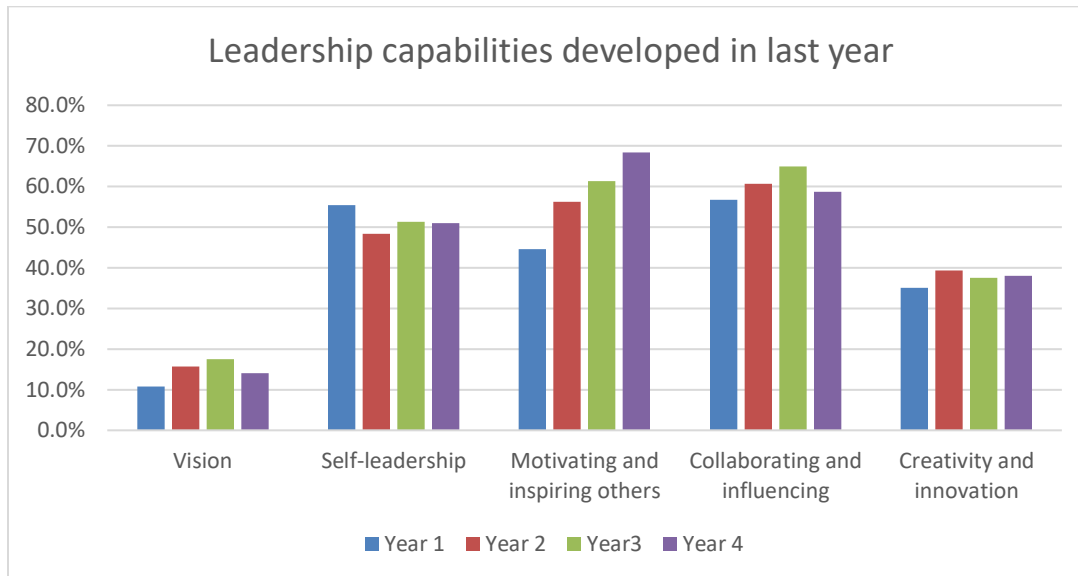
Figure 7.3: Leadership capabilities developed in last year

When asked if employers had provided support to develop leadership skills in the last twelve months, there is a steady increase across years in respondents reporting 'yes' (see Figure 7.4). However, four years in, more than 55% continue to report that support for developing leadership skills is not forthcoming.
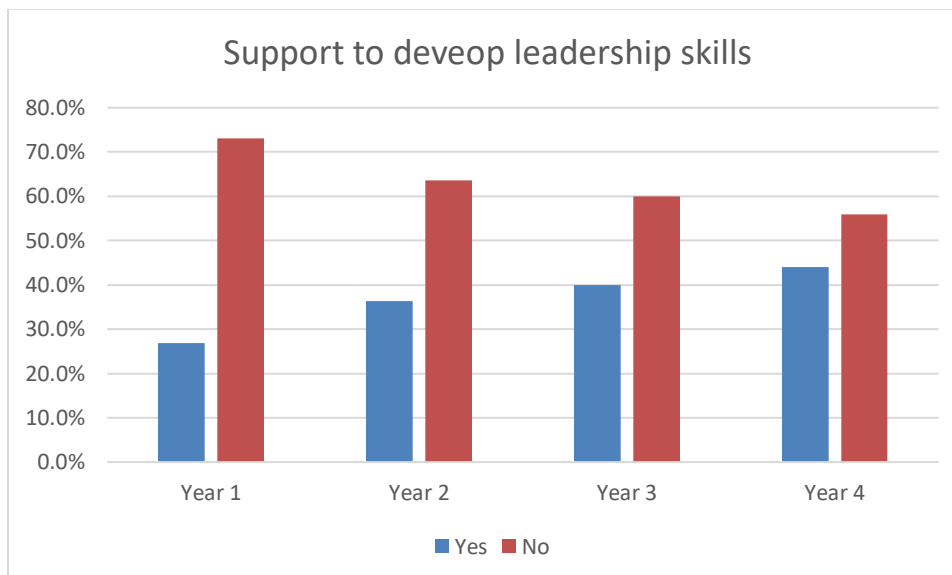
Figure 7.4: Support from employers to develop leadership skills

Relatedly, participants were asked if they had engaged in any formal leadership development activity in the last twelve months. Again, we note a slight but steady increase over the last four years, however in Year 4 'yes' responses remain very low at 16% (see Figure 7.5).
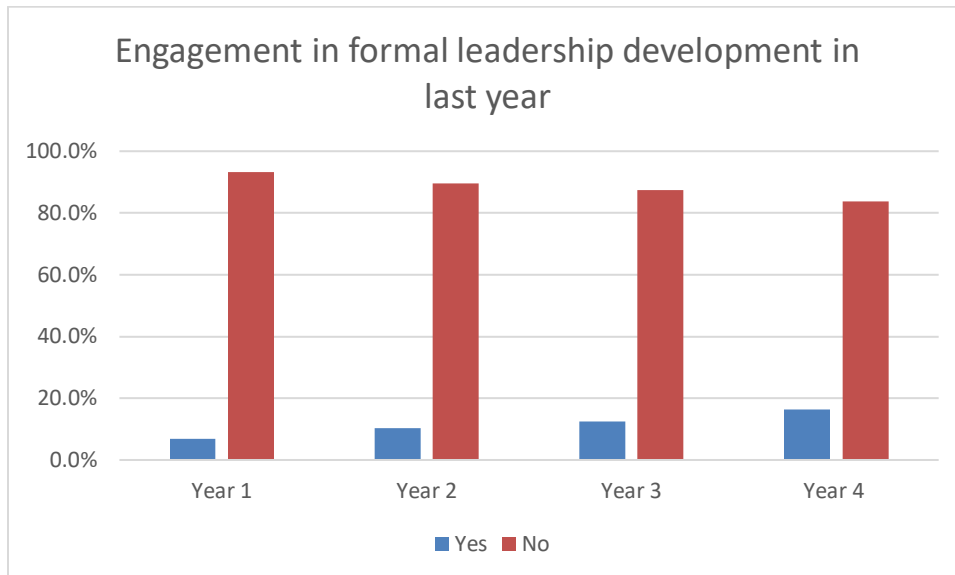
Figure 7.5: Engagement in formal leadership development

When asked what employers could do to help them develop leadership skills, responses repeatedly highlight a continued need to 'provide opportunities' in everyday organisational practice. Suggested opportunities are varied and include: discussion, guidance, mentoring, support, team-based initiatives and training.

Broadly, our findings present a mixed picture regarding the development of leadership capabilities amongst early career social workers. Despite various national initiatives to nurture the development of leadership capacity across social work careers (Scottish Government, 2010; SSSC, 2016; 2020), and a developing understanding amongst early practitioners of the place of leadership in their day to day work, regular attention to and support to develop leadership capability at a local/ organisational level appears limited. Reviews by researchers from University of Stirling in 2016 (SSSC, 2016) and more recently by Miller, Schaub and Haworth (2019) reached similar conclusions. Our findings also prompt questions regarding the impact of national initiatives in this area on the workforce and on local organisational practice in particular. We perhaps need to consider how to augment national initiatives and investment with more localised actions to track and support local impact. As Miller et al. (2019) note, this is not only about improving leadership in social work or improving social work through leadership. It is also about improving leadership through the integration and embedding of social work knowledge, values and skills.

ANYTHING ELSE? (Section 8)

Each year, survey participants are invited to tell us 'anything else' about their experience of being a social worker in Scotland today. In years 1 and 2, just under half of respondents chose to answer this question. In years 3 and 4 response rates dropped to approximately one third of respondents. Accordingly, and as is typical with qualitative data, the findings presented in this closing section should not be read

as representative of ECSW's experience. They are presented as illustrative examples of respondents' closing reflections and need to be read and systhesised alongside the wider study findings.

Broadly, responses in this area cut across the research themes and findings. They illuminate the highs and lows of being an early career social worker in Scotland today and the interactive effects of working within rewarding, challenging and uncertain contexts. Our findings underscore the plurality of ECSWs' experience and the cumulative strains of common obstacles, tensions and contradictions.

Year 1 responses were generally balanced but optimistic, with participants conveying a strong sense of 'pride' and worth arising from their role and purpose. Respondents also highlighted the significance of support from colleagues and teams as they settled into practice, including challenges associated with austerity, bureaucracy and service integration. For most, where respondents felt supported, even 'overwhelming' challenges could be navigated positively.

A less optimistic picture emerged in Year 2. Of 58 responses, only nine could be framed as positive. Again, respondents spoke to the fulfilling and rewarding elements of their role but, for almost all, this was counterbalanced by fuller accounts of challenges. Again, support from colleagues and management emerged as particularly significant, though this was often discussed within a frame of being 'lucky' or fortunate, indicating that participants felt that this kind of support wasn't commonplace. Frequently mentioned challenges included: inadequate resource (within and beyond social work), heavy workloads, lack of respect and recognition from other professionals and too much administration and bureaucracy. A small number voiced thoughts about leaving the profession.

This negative lean continued in Year 3. Of 41 responses, only four could be categorised as positive. Of the remaining 37, 19 were unreservedly negative and 18 presented a mixed picture. Year 3 responses spoke to a purposeful but difficult, and for some overwhelming, experience of doing 'battle' in challenging times. Key challenges align with those highlighted in previous years and continued to centre on challenges associated with budget cuts, inadequate funding and a lack of recognition, respect and support from others.

In Year 4, 46 participants chose to respond to this question. In common with previous years, responses reveal a negative tilt. 6 of 46 responses can be framed as positive, 21 as negative and 19 as neutral or mixed.

Across responses, there remains good evidence of the purposeful and rewarding nature of working with people in challenging circumstances. Again, responses highlight the rewarding nature of frontline work with service users, the significance of support from peers and, albeit less frequently, the value of good management. However, accounts of the rewarding nature of practice continue to be in the minority and are almost always followed by accounts of the challenge of doing good work in difficult circumstances, that is, in the face of sustained 'budget cuts', 'inadequate resource', 'a resource-led approach', 'managerialism' and a

continued 'lack of understanding' from others. Some of these challenges are captured in the illustrative responses below:

> I love being a social worker, I've worked very hard to get to where I am. … I feel that there needs to be more investment within local authorities to enable them to invest in their workers who work with the most vulnerable in society. I feel social work is now more about case management rather than intervention, and this is great loss. … There is a strong, capable and dedicated social work workforce in Scotland, but unfortunately we are being let down by budget cuts and bureaucracy. (R27)

> I followed a career in social work with the wish to help and support individuals who struggled to do so themselves. I feel like I have joined the profession at a time where numbers, money and performance are at the forefront of management agenda. Continuing to hold on to my values and to work in a way that promotes human rights and needs is difficult in this climate. I will continue to hold on to my value base and everything that is important to the people I work with and fight for their needs. I honestly regularly question my career choice due to the bureaucratic culture which I feel myself working in. (R7)

> I feel that a culture of accountability, professional insecurity and high levels of anxiety means that care and compassion are being squeezed out of the profession. There are amazing social workers working incredibly hard for people but that is despite the system rather than supported by it. (R33)

> Seems social work is losing its identity especially with the introduction of partnership working. Social workers do not exist anymore, it's all about health, education or other emergency services. (R18)

> I really wish we had better press. COVID-19 has highlighted again how far down the line we are in order of importance and how society values us. (R14)

Respondents continue to highlight the emotional, stressful and draining nature of practice, as participants describe the 'struggle' of holding on to their professional values and working in ways that feel right and just. As in previous years, there are indicators that these struggles are more acute in some service areas and teams than others and for some participants can become 'too much', particularly when experienced alongside a lack of support from peers and/or management. Again, this kind of combination of challenges was sometimes associated with intentions of movement and/or exit.

> It is almost four years since i qualified and in this time, as a social worker working in a statutory children and families department i feel demoralised and burnt out. Due to a lack of support from manageralism and the inevitable and endlesss form filling i am about to transition to the third sector where i am hopeful things

may be different. (R43)

As in previous years, a small number of participants expressed concerns about the role and purpose of the SSSC, specifically relating to its handling of registration and conduct concerns and its capacity to speak, stand up for and support the profession.

Looking forward, frequently mentioned actions for improvement and/or change included:

- 'Investment' / 'reinvestment' in social work, local authority services and community resources, more clearly aligned to social work values and principles of prevention and minimal intervention.

- 'An equal emphasis on health and social care', i.e. not privileging one over the other.

- 'Better press' and 'promotion', towards improving understanding of and respect for social work practice and decision making.

COVID-19 did not feature significantly across participant responses. This likely reflects the fact that participants were completing our survey before the first period of lockdown in Scotland or as the impact of COVID-19 on working practices was just unfolding. We will have much more to say on this when we report on our new COVID-19 strand of the study in autumn 2021.

Four years into our study, a striking feature of responses to our closing question is the consistency of responses across years. Further, there is good alignment between the messages emerging here and those from qualitative responses across the survey sections. We can conclude that early career social workers find significant fulfillment and reward in their role as social workers, specifically in the value of their work for those they work with and for society more broadly. They place significant value on support received from colleagues and managers, and good support appears to be strongly associated with a positive early career experience. However, in common with social workers across career stages, many ECSWs report being frustrated and worn down by routine obstacles to good practice, specifically:

(i)   the absence of adequate investment in social work and in adjoining community-based services,
(ii)   experience of inequality within integrated service provision and structures and
(iii)   a perceived lack of recognition, respect and support from others, and from other professionals in particular.

Summary of key findings

Employment

Almost nine out of ten respondents continue to be employed in statutory roles (88%) with limited movement into voluntary settings. Less than half describe working within integrated or interdisciplinary teams.

44% of respondents were based in children's services, a drop from 57% in Year 3 and from a high of 59% in Year 2. This decrease is accompanied by increased distributions across adult and criminal justice services. 40% of respondents were based in adult services, a rise from 27% in Year 3, while 11% were based in justice services, a rise from 8% in Year 3.

Levels of movement remains broadly consistent with previous years, with 21% describing job changes in the last year. In common with findings from previous years, participant reasons for movement continue to include a mix of practical and professional reasons, opportunities and strains. Again, Year 4 findings show workers taking responsibility for their professional path and wellbeing, including by moving out of professional environments experienced as detrimental to that. Again, accounts of the latter mostly involve movement *from* statutory children's services, typically when practice challenges are accompanied by experiences of poor support. As noted in our Year 3 report, more in-depth analysis of national workforce data is needed to aid the sector's understanding of and ability to respond to problematic patterns and shifts.

The number of respondents who report working within an agile working environment remains relatively stable at just over 1 in 2. While most continue to describe this experience in mostly negative terms, this year's findings make clear that agile working can mean different things for different people, and that these differences can impact significantly on the experience of it.

Positive experiences of agile working continue to be strongly associated with access to allocated or adequate desk space, flexibility, access to peer support and access to relevant agile work tools. Notably, accounts of agile working on these terms were rare. For most, experiences of agile working continue to be associated with feelings of uncertainty, anxiety, frustration and stress. COVID-19 will likely have significant and lasting impacts on social workers' working environments; findings from our COVID-19 strand of this study should aid our understanding of these issues.

Year 4 findings reveal some important changes in workload levels, including a rise in those holding 31-40 cases. Relatedly, the number of respondents who felt that their workload was manageable has dropped from 67% in Year 1 to 53% in Year 4. Further, those who report that

their workload makes them feel anxious has increased from 38% in Year 1 to 48% in Year 4. Here and elsewhere our findings continue to suggest diverse professional experiences across the early career workforce, which appear to be linked to a mix of individual and organisational factors. Our findings suggest clear room for improvement in ensuring a more equitable early career experience linked to more consistent use of professional protections and supports.

Across service settings, respondents continue to report spending most time on report writing and case recording and least time on reading and application of knowledge, research and evidence. Contact with people using services also reduced slightly this year. Given the timing of data collection, this may reflect changes to practice patterns caused by COVID-19.

Professional confidence and competence

Year 4 data continues to indicate strong levels of professional confidence and competence across most knowledge, skill and value domains for most respondents. Findings in this area are supported by similarly positive accounts of developing professional identity. However, across years, one of the curiosities of participant responses in these areas are the disparities, or at least pluralities, that emerge across the quantitative and qualitative data in these areas. For example, reporting on professional confidence and competence, most respondents feel that they can demonstrate their professional values 'always' or 'often'. Yet, a key challenge described across qualitative responses is the challenge of working with people in ways that feel fair and just, often linked to experiences of managerial, bureaucratic and resource-led organisational practice. We suspect these disparities reflect the labour that goes into navigating and negotiating routine practice conflicts, and perhaps the sense of professional solidarity achieved through struggle (discussed further below). We hope to explore these reflections within the Year 5 interviews.

Supervision, support, learning and development

Supervision continues to be an important and valued mechanism for professional support and development and typically takes place in the context of a one to one relationship between an ECSW and their manager. Again, our findings indicate that supervision works best when it is regular, person-centred and relational and when it combines a focus on case-management, wellbeing and development. Respondents this year also placed emphasis on supervision as a skilled activity and ideally involving exchange of expertise.

ECSWs reporting regular access to supervision continues to fall, with 40% of those surveyed in Year 4 reporting irregular or infrequent access to supervision (a rise from 30% in Year 3). As noted, more in-depth research into social work supervision practice is needed to unpack difference in professional experiences in this area. As we noted in Year 3, improving the experience and quality of supervision practice does not appear to be especially complex, but it does require a more consistent commitment to prioritising this important aspect of

professional practice and development.

Informal support continues to emerge as a key aspect of respondents' professional wellbeing and development. Respondent accounts reveal support as occurring most naturally within team relationships and, increasingly, as an exchange process, as ECSWs give and receive support. However, again responses reveal important differences in access to peer support, linked to experiences of agile working practices, physical proximity to teams, case-load pressures, staff absence and team and organisational cultures. The significance of peer support for respondents in this study is at odds with the very limited attention given to this area in social work policy, practice and research.

Professional learning and development amongst ECSWs continues to be mostly self-directed with an increased desire for external learning opportunities, often associated with a formal qualification and/or particular career progression pathways. Access to external learning and development in these forms appears mixed and, for many, limited, linked to issues of finance, support and permission. External provision in this area continues to appear limited.

Discussed knowledge and training priorities continue to centre on issues of risk, legislation and interventions, linked, typically, to key service areas. Relatedly, responses in this area are surprisingly uniform, especially taking into account the breadth and diversity of social work as a profession and practice.

Respondent satisfaction with the *amount* of learning opportunities available continued to decline, while satisfaction with the quality of learning available varied significantly across respondents. Our findings in this appear to reflect above-noted differences in access to external learning opportunities.

Professional identity and leadership

Participant responses in this area are mostly consistent across years, while at the same time underlining the multi-dimensional nature of professional identity and confidence. Respondents continue to convey a developing and robust sense of professional identity, rooted in a clear and critical sense of purpose, values and contribution.

Identified challenges to professional identity continue to revolve around:

  i.   organisational bureaucracy and inadequate resource, and the value conflicts arising from each;
  ii.   lack of recognition, respect and support from others, within and beyond the profession; and
  iii. the absence of a unifying, collective and supportive professional body.

Identified aids include:

i. strong leadership and management, aligned to social work's role and values;
ii. greater autonomy and service user focused work, 'beyond budgets and savings';
iii. greater recognition, representation and support for the profession and its workforce; and
iv. improved post-qualifying education and training opportunities.

Importantly, for many, professional identity also emerges as relatively resilient, even in the face of routine and significant challenges to that. We might speculate that ECSWs, like other social groups, find strength not only in supports to their (professional) identity but also in their struggle and shared experience. This might also illuminate why experiences of recognition, support and solidarity from others, or the absence of these, emerge as so critical in professional accounts.

Year 4 findings present a mixed picture regarding the development of leadership capacity amongst early career social workers. Despite evidence of developing understanding of the place of leadership in their day to day work, and opportunities for practice leadership in day to day practice, respondent accounts suggest that recognition, support and reward for practice leadership at an organizational level remains rare. In this respect our findings suggest a gap between national initiatives and enthusiasm in this area and local organisational practice. They also suggest a continued privileging of traditional and hierarchical models of leadership in which leadership is primarily constructed as a role rather than a disposition.

Conclusion

We are now four years into our five-year longitudinal study and have gathered a wealth of data on ECSWs' experiences of professional practice. Our findings illuminate the highs and lows of being a social worker in Scotland today and advance our understanding of what matters in supporting and protecting their professional development and contribution. There are important consistencies across the study findings however our longitudinal and mixed method also helps us understand the many complexities of professional identity and practice.

Our findings make clear that ECSWs' experiences of practice are often plural and defy a single story. ECSWs are both confident and competent in their professional identify and contribution and weary and worn down by the daily struggle of reconciling social work's many contradictions. This struggle is exacerbated by service systems and processes focused at the level of the individual and by the absence of adequate support.

There is evidence of good leadership, management, support and developmental opportunities for ECSWs in places, particularly at a micro and local level. These kinds of supports matter and can sustain ECSWs through challenging circumstances and transitions. However, experiences of support vary significantly and there is limited evidence of a structured

and coherent approach to professional support and development, particularly in forms that recognise social work's macro challenges. There are also few examples of innovation in this area, likely linked to an absence of developmental investment, and much more can be made of co-productive and exchange approaches.

Post-qualifying education, learning and development occupies a curious place in respondent accounts; it is both always present, but often in the background. It appears to lack a clear place and purpose in ECSWs' developing identity and experience.

The consistency, complexity and significance of the findings that emerge from this study, and from a number of connecting research studies, invite us to find more collaborative ways of recognising, supporting and sustaining social workers in their important role and contribution. This work and activity must extend beyond public service restructure, workforce planning and other professionally-centric strategies and approaches, to also grapple with the significant economic, social and cultural obstacles which continue to constrain social work and social workers and their capacity to support individual and social change.

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APPENDIX – DATA SETS

Time spent on social work tasks: ranked from 1 (most time) to 7 (Least time)

Legend:
- Service user and/or carer contact
- Report writing (including assessment/ risk management plans / care plans / support plans)
- Case recording/ data entry
- Responding to crisis
- Liaising with other professionals, teams, services
- Reading, analysing and using current research, knowledge and evidence
- General admin

Statements on Workload

Year 1 - I feel confident to take on more complex work
Year 2 - I feel confident to take on more complex work
Year 3 - I feel confident to take on more complex work
Year 4 - I feel confident to take on more complex work

Year 1 - My workload is making me feel anxious
Year 2 - My workload is making me feel anxious
Year 3 - My workload is making me feel anxious
Year 4 - My workload is making me feel anxious

Year 1 - I feel that I have a manageable workload
Year 2 - I feel that I have a manageable workload
Year 3 - I feel that I have a manageable workload
Year 4 - I feel that I have a manageable workload

Year 1 - The types of cases I have been allocated are appropriate for my skill / knowledge level
Year 2 - The types of cases I have been allocated are appropriate for my skill / knowledge level
Year 3 - The types of cases I have been allocated are appropriate for my skill / knowledge level
Year 4 - The types of cases I have been allocated are appropriate for my skill / knowledge level

0.00%   20.00%   40.00%   60.00%   80.00%   100.00%

■ Strongly agree   ■ Agree   ■ Neither agree or disagree   ■ Disagree   ■ Strongly disagree

Skills - Confidence Levels

Year 1 - Deliver personalised services using outcome-…
Year 2 - Deliver personalised services using outcome-…
Year 3 - Deliver personalised services using outcome-…
Year 4 - Deliver personalised services using outcome-…

Year 1 - Work with other professionals and agencies
Year 2 - Work with other professionals and agencies
Year 3 - Work with other professionals and agencies
Year 4 - Work with other professionals and agencies

Year 1 - Synthesise knowledge and practice
Year 2 - Synthesise knowledge and practice
Year 3 - Synthesise knowledge and practice
Year 4 - Synthesise knowledge and practice

Year 1 - Use research skills to both inform practice…
Year 2 - Use research skills to both inform practice…
Year 3 - Use research skills to both inform practice…
Year 4 - Use research skills to both inform practice…

Year 1 - Produce records and reports that meet…
Year 2 - Produce records and reports that meet…
Year 3 - Produce records and reports that meet…
Year 4 - Produce records and reports that meet…

Year 1 - Exercise assertiveness, power and authority…
Year 2 - Exercise assertiveness, power and authority…
Year 3 - Exercise assertiveness, power and authority…
Year 4 - Exercise assertiveness, power and authority…

Year 1 - Make professional judgements about…
Year 2 - Make professional judgements about…
Year 3 - Make professional judgements about…
Year 4 - Make professional judgements about…

Year 1 - Analyse and synthesise complex information
Year 2 - Analyse and synthesise complex information
Year 3 - Analyse and synthesise complex information
Year 4 - Analyse and synthesise complex information

Year 1 - Manage demands on your own time to…
Year 2 - Manage demands on your own time to…
Year 3 - Manage demands on your own time to…
Year 4 - Manage demands on your own time to…

0.00%   20.00%   40.00%   60.00%   80.00%   100.00%

- Confident
- Somewhat Confident
- Neither confident or unconfident
- Somewhat unconfident
- Unconfident

Knowledge - Confidence Levels

Legend: ■ Confident ■ Somewhat confident ■ Neither confident or unconfident ■ Somewhat unconfident ■ Unconfident

Professional Values - Confidence Levels

Year 1 - Take responsibility for the quality of your work…
Year 2 - Take responsibility for the quality of your work…
Year 3 - Take responsibility for the quality of your work…
Year 4 - Take responsibility for the quality of your work…

Year 1 - Uphold public trust and confidence in social…
Year 2 - Uphold public trust and confidence in social…
Year 3 - Uphold public trust and confidence in social…
Year 4 - Uphold public trust and confidence in social…

Year 1 - Respect the rights of people who use services,…
Year 2 - Respect the rights of people who use services,…
Year 3 - Respect the rights of people who use services,…
Year 4 - Respect the rights of people who use services,…

Year 1 - Promote the independence of people who use…
Year 2 - Promote the independence of people who use…
Year 3 - Promote the independence of people who use…
Year 4 - Promote the independence of people who use…

Year 1 - Create and maintain the trust and confidence of…
Year 2 - Create and maintain the trust and confidence of…
Year 3 - Create and maintain the trust and confidence of…
Year 4 - Create and maintain the trust and confidence of…

Year 1 - Protect and promote the rights and interests of…
Year 2 - Protect and promote the rights and interests of…
Year 3 - Protect and promote the rights and interests of…
Year 4 - Protect and promote the rights and interests of…

Year 1 - Practice honesty, openness, empathy and respect.
Year 2 - Practice honesty, openness, empathy and respect.
Year 3 - Practice honesty, openness, empathy and respect.
Year 4 - Practice honesty, openness, empathy and respect.

Year 1 - Promote equal opportunities and social justice.
Year 2 - Promote equal opportunities and social justice.
Year 3 - Promote equal opportunities and social justice.
Year 4 - Promote equal opportunities and social justice.

Year 1 - Practice in a manner which reflects anti-…
Year 2 - Practice in a manner which reflects anti-…
Year 3 - Practice in a manner which reflects anti-…
Year 4 - Practice in a manner which reflects anti-…

0.0%   20.0%   40.0%   60.0%   80.0%   100.0%

■ Always ■ Often ■ Sometimes ■ Rarely ■ Never

Statements on Formal Supervision

Legend: Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree or disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree

Categories (top to bottom):
- Year 1 - I am happy with the frequency of supervision I...
- Year 2 - I am happy with the frequency of supervision I...
- Year 3 - I am happy with the frequency of supervision I...
- Year 4 - I am happy with the frequency of supervision I...
- Year 1 - Supervision is a safe space for me to express my...
- Year 2 - Supervision is a safe space for me to express my...
- Year 3 - Supervision is a safe space for me to express my...
- Year 4 - Supervision is a safe space for me to express my...
- Year 1 - I am happy with the quality of supervision I...
- Year 2 - I am happy with the quality of supervision I...
- Year 3 - I am happy with the quality of supervision I...
- Year 4 - I am happy with the quality of supervision I...
- Year 1 - My manager is good at explaining complex...
- Year 2 - My manager is good at explaining complex...
- Year 3 - My manager is good at explaining complex...
- Year 4 - My manager is good at explaining complex...
- Year 1 - During supervision, I get time to discuss my...
- Year 2 - During supervision, I get time to discuss my...
- Year 3 - During supervision, I get time to discuss my...
- Year 4 - During supervision, I get time to discuss my...
- Year 1 - I feel supported by my manager
- Year 2 - I feel supported by my manager
- Year 3 - I feel supported by my manager
- Year 4 - I feel supported by my manager
- Year 1 - Whilst in supervision, I get sufficient time to...
- Year 2 - Whilst in supervision, I get sufficient time to...
- Year 3 - Whilst in supervision, I get sufficient time to...
- Year 4 - Whilst in supervision, I get sufficient time to...
- Year 1 - My manager gives me good advice and guidance
- Year 2 - My manager gives me good advice and guidance
- Year 3 - My manager gives me good advice and guidance
- Year 4 - My manager gives me good advice and guidance
- Year 1 - The main focus of my supervision is workload...
- Year 2 - The main focus of my supervision is workload...
- Year 3 - The main focus of my supervision is workload...
- Year 4 - The main focus of my supervision is workload...
- Year 1 - I have adequate time to prepare for supervision
- Year 2 - I have adequate time to prepare for supervision
- Year 3 - I have adequate time to prepare for supervision
- Year 4 - I have adequate time to prepare for supervision

Statements on Professional Identity

Year 1 - I feel I shape my own professional identity
Year 2 - I feel I shape my own professional identity
Year 3 - I feel I shape my own professional identity
Year 4 - I feel I shape my own professional identity

Year 1 - Service users help to shape my professional...
Year 2 - Service users help to shape my professional...
Year 3 - Service users help to shape my professional...
Year 4 - Service users help to shape my professional...

Year 1 - My colleagues help to shape my professional...
Year 2 - My colleagues help to shape my professional...
Year 3 - My colleagues help to shape my professional...
Year 4 - My colleagues help to shape my professional...

Year 1 - My employer helps to shape my professional...
Year 2 - My employer helps to shape my professional...
Year 3 - My employer helps to shape my professional...
Year 4 - My employer helps to shape my professional...

Year 1 - My social work education has helped to shape...
Year 2 - My social work education has helped to shape...
Year 3 - My social work education has helped to shape...
Year 4 - My social work education has helped to shape...

Year 1 - My ability to locate and use up-to-date research,...
Year 2 - My ability to locate and use up-to-date research,...
Year 3 - My ability to locate and use up-to-date research,...
Year 4 - My ability to locate and use up-to-date research,...

Year 1 - I feel respected by other professions
Year 2 - I feel respected by other professions
Year 3 - I feel respected by other professions
Year 4 - I feel respected by other professions

Year 1 - I am clear about my professional contribution
Year 2 - I am clear about my professional contribution
Year 3 - I am clear about my professional contribution
Year 4 - I am clear about my professional contribution

Year 1 - I have confidence in my role as a social worker
Year 2 - I have confidence in my role as a social worker
Year 3 - I have confidence in my role as a social worker
Year 4 - I have confidence in my role as a social worker

Year 1 - I feel I have a clear sense of my professional...
Year 2 - I feel I have a clear sense of my professional...
Year 3 - I feel I have a clear sense of my professional...
Year 4 - I feel I have a clear sense of my professional...

0.0% 20.0% 40.0% 60.0% 80.0% 100.0%

■ Strongly agree ■ Agree ■ Neither agree or disagree ■ Disagree ■ Strongly disagree

54