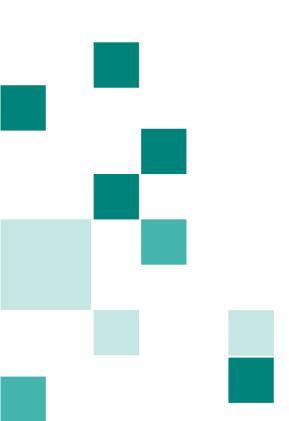# Learning from the NQSW pilots and next steps in developing a supported year

June 2020

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Introduction

The Scottish Government's **Social Services in Scotland: A Shared Vision and Strategy 2015-20** set out a transformational vision of the sector based on principles of social justice and empowerment (Social Work Services Strategic Forum, 2015). The strategy identifies the importance of continuous professional development and career pathways in retaining staff and delivering excellent social services.

Policy and research report that a more consistent, robust and systematic response is required to support newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) in Scotland to successfully navigate the competing pressures, demands and expectations of their professional role at this formative stage of their career.

In response to the policy and research findings, the Scottish Government asked the SSSC to provide recommendations on the design, implementation and delivery of a sustainable and accessible national approach to a supported year for NQSWs, underpinned by a clear evidence base and an indication of aligned costs.

This report outlines the learning from the activity to date and the next steps in the development and delivery of a Scotland-wide approach to a supported year for NQSWs.

This report **should be read in conjunction with** the executive summary of the NQSW Pilot evaluation report (Gordon et al, 2020).

You can read the report here.

It is also beneficial to read the **Newly qualified social workers in Scotland: A five-year longitudinal study: reports 2017, 2018 and 2020** (Grant, McCulloch, Daly and Kettle, 2020) and **Report into a post-qualifying learning and development framework and career pathway for social workers in Scotland** (Gillies 2015) and **Implementing a probationary year for social workers in Scotland: An option appraisal commissioned by the Scottish Social Services Council, Dundee, SSSC**, (Gillies 2016) which have influenced the development of the approach to date.

What we did

1. Plan the approach

Planning for and design of the project was influenced by findings from two strands of research; Gillies' review of the current post qualifying learning and development framework and an options appraisal on the implementation a probationary year for social workers in Scotland (2015, 2016) and the initial findings from the early stages of the five-year longitudinal study of the experiences of NQSWs (Grant et al, 2017 and 2018).

Key considerations	
A lack of quality assurance and a wide variation in support and learning opportunities. The benefit of cumulative opportunities for reflection and development. The benefit of regular and frequent feedback. Developing learning cultures and raising practice standards. A focus on professional identity and confidence of social workers. A sustainable approach delivered and maintained by employers. **Gillies (2015, 2016)**	Support and learning opportunities are valued but inconsistent in provision. The importance of structured and standardised induction. An improved balance of formal learning, self-directed learning and individually identified learning needs. Reducing inconsistences in respect of caseload volume, protection and complexity. Need for greater consistency in content, depth and structure of learning opportunities. The value of extending supervision beyond caseload management to have a greater focus on reflection and analysis. The importance of critical reflection in the development of professional identity. The importance of informal support and the added value of formal mentoring arrangements. **Grant et al. (2017, 2018, 2019)**

2. Pilot different approaches to a supported and assessed year

Three test sites were commissioned by the SSSC to develop and implement a supported and assessed year for NQSWs:

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

Considerable collaboration took place between the pilot sites and within the sites to establish a structured programme of support and development for NQSWs to enable them to consolidate and enhance their knowledge, skills, learning and development. The model of support developed by each site was consistent with local needs, however with an undertaking that the following elements would be common to all NQSW participants:

- protected learning time
- a restricted caseload
- regular, reflective supervision
- access to induction, based on the already developed local model
- access to a range of learning opportunities
- formative and summative assessment of NQSWs development and progress against a set of six draft benchmark standards developed by the SSSC in 2018.

As with the support element, each site enhanced or developed its own, customised approach to this assessment on the understanding that assessments would be carried out by a qualified and registered social worker.

We provided grant funding and ongoing advice and support to sites and commissioned Craigforth to conduct an evaluation of the pilots.
The pilot project was implemented from November 2018 to December 2019 with the independent evaluation in tandem with delivery.

3. Develop a web-based learning resource

Some areas that expressed interest in taking part in the pilot, but did not meet the criteria, were invited to engage with and collaborate on the development of national web-based learning resources for NQSWs, employers, line managers and relevant others.

The web-based resource is seen as a critical component in the development of a consistent, Scotland-wide approach to a NQSW supported year with particular benefit to smaller employers and those in more remote and rural locations. We facilitated sessions to test this assumption and explore what would be most useful in the design, structure and content, starting in October 2019.

What we learned

We have considered the findings from the evaluation of the pilots (Craigforth, 2020) along with the interim findings from the longitudinal study (Grant et al. 2017, 2018) and further data and recommendations from other sources such as bi-monthly project meetings and quarterly returns from the pilot sites. Here are the main things we learned.

- A staged and supported approach is more beneficial to NQSW learning and workplace culture than the current post registration training and learning (PRTL) arrangements.

- Different approaches will be required for different employment contexts, however, to improve consistency and quality of experience, any approach should be mandatory in nature, with minimum standards for employers and access to agreed resources.

- Minimum core components of NQSW support are identified as: a local induction programme; protected time; a protected caseload; regular group learning opportunities; reflective, structured supervision and group or individual mentoring.

- The opportunity to consider practice against the draft NQSW standards, provide and receive developmental feedback and agree an individual development plan at the beginning, mid and end point is beneficial. This activity is appropriately located with employers and consideration needs to be given to how this can link with current appraisal arrangements.

- HEIs have a critical contribution to make in shaping an effective model of transition from education to employment as an individual learning plan developed with the student at university is potentially a valuable tool in bridging the gap between university and employment and in guiding initial development discussions and planning with supervisors.

- Reflective approaches to supervision that provided insight into the NQSW's practice and overall wellbeing are beneficial and welcome, however further thought needs to be given to tools and activities that will support this. Further exploration is also required of the best practice approaches to remote and group supervision.

- Evidence of progress against some of the NQSW standards is consistently well evidenced and others less so, such as continuing to explore and draw on evidence, research and best practice. Going forward this needs to be addressed to ensure the model supports proper consideration and evidence against all NQSW standards.

- Forms of evidence that are well integrated with practice rather than assessment methods mirroring those generally used at university are found to be most supportive to learning and affirms the NQSW status as a qualified worker rather than a student on placement.

- Supervisors and mentors may require to be upskilled to provide structured, reflective supervision and developmental feedback.

- Opportunities to explore professional identify and role are helpful, as is professional supervision with a registered social worker, particularly in multi-agency settings.

- Further consideration is required to firmly locate feedback from people who use services as a central element in the development of the NQSW.

- There are benefits to supporting learning, consolidation and development of practice through some form of agreed verification, however the value of the assessment methodologies tested is unclear. Further consideration is required of ensure an equitable approach to verification and governance across Scotland and continue to meet the SSSC registration requirements.

- Informal support is an important element of the NQSW supported year, further consideration needs to be given to how this can be successfully achieved and maintained in a climate where there are more agile and home-based working arrangements.

- The development of a web-based learning resource needs to include access to online training and resources to supplement, and in some instances replace, face to face provision which is currently restricted due to COVID-19.

- Employer investment, ownership and leadership are crucial for the successful implementation of any model or approach. Successful implementation requires clarity with regards to the approach, sufficient lead in time, clear communication and access to the required guidance, tools, support and resources.

- The model needs to be sustainable and make use of existing processes and arrangements where possible. There will potentially be significant set up and ongoing delivery costs associated with the approach, even where there is an established infrastructure. More work is needed to accurately cost the model.

- There is inconsistency in the understanding of the protected title and requirement to join the SSSC Register. An individual is only entitled to use the title social worker from the point they are registered with the SSSC. We

will consider how we can streamline the process between being de-registered as a student and applying to join the social work part of the Register.

- Consideration needs to be given to how the continuous professional learning and advancement of social workers will be addressed beyond the newly qualified period.

What we will do next

We considered whether we should pause this project given the current global pandemic and the continuing uncertainty with regards to the personal and professional impact and cost of COVID-19. We concluded there was merit in continuing, as the approach and associated resources will be helpful to NQSWs and those who support them.

We remain committed to developing the NQSW supported year in partnership with the sector and will create a range of opportunities for engagement while being mindful of the current context.

The aim of phase two is to fully develop the model and associated guidance, templates and other resources by the end of March 2021 and the web-based resources by July 2021. A small-scale early implementation of the model with identified partners will begin in April 2021, with a view to wider implementation in phase 3, currently planned for autumn 2022.

Next steps in phase 2

- **Finalise a Scotland-wide approach to a NQSW supported year**
  The approach will retain and refine the core elements tested in the pilots with associated guidance and agreed templates and resources. Key activities will include refining the NQSW Standards and developing Standards for Employers. There will also be a focus on developing training, learning materials and resources specific to the model of supervision and development for NQSWs in their supported year. We will investigate the feasibility of alignment of the intended approach with employers existing appraisal systems and agree local quality assurance arrangements for confirming NQSWs have evidenced practice against the NQSW Standards. We will invite the sector to take part in a small scale, soft implementation of the approach from April 2021 and work with them to prepare and throughout delivery.

- **Complete the development of a web-based learning resource for NQSWs and those who support them**
  The web-based learning resource will be populated with materials and resources relevant to the NQSW supported year. We will identify reference groups from a range of settings to test and feedback on online resources over the life of the project and include resources specific to smaller employers, remote and rural areas and those that are useful in the provision of online support and learning.

- **Develop a better understanding of how to maximise online support and connection**
  We will develop and deliver some online support to NQSWs entering the workplace in relation to meeting regulatory requirements and signposting resources. We will create opportunities to get a better understanding the needs of NQSWs and those who support them in agile and home-based work environments.

- **Collaborate on transitions**
  We will collaborate with universities and employers to have greater consistency in preparation for transition to the workplace and use if individual learning plans.

- **Agree quality assurance and governance arrangements**
  We will explore quality assurance and governance arrangements that are robust, streamlined and satisfy the regulatory requirements. Consideration will be given to existing and emerging infrastructures at a regional and national level which have actual or potential links with the SSSC's responsibilities as regulator.

- **Provide evidence to support sustainability of a national approach**
  We will conduct further activity to build on existing data to determine costs associated with the implementation and ongoing operational delivery of the refined model.

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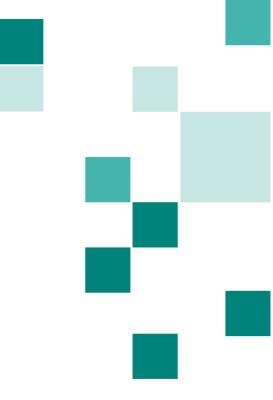
Resources

Experiences of NQSW supported year pilot leads video
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K2Wbc0lo1O0&feature=youtu.be

How do newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) experience and navigate their first year of practice? animation https://vimeo.com/309845631

Both videos are available on the NQSW page of the SSSC website
https://www.sssc.uk.com/supporting-the-workforce/newly-qualified-social-workers/