

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

Interim Report: December 2017

Scott Grant, Trish McCulloch, Martin Kettle, Lynn
Sheridan, Stephen Webb

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- Billy Fisher, South Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership
- NQSW representative [TBC]

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Project Team

- Scott Grant, Lecturer in Social Work, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Trish McCulloch, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, University of Dundee
- Lynn Sheridan, Lecturer in Social Work, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Martin Kettle, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Glasgow Caledonian University
- Stephen Webb, Professor of Social Work, Glasgow Caledonian University

Glossary

NQSW	Newly qualified social worker
SSSC	Scottish Social Services Council

Executive summary

This report presents year one findings from a five-year study which aims to develop a national picture of how NQSWs experience and navigate their first years in practice.

The project is a mixed-method longitudinal cohort study of NQSWs over a period of five years. Methods of data collection include annual repeat-measure online questionnaires, focus groups, in-depth interviews and participant observation.

Year 1 findings draw on 157 NQSW responses to a national online questionnaire and 16 in-depth interviews with NQSWs across Scotland.

Key findings

- **Routes into social work**

The majority of NQSWs entered social work education with knowledge and experience of social care. Motivations for a career in social work were mostly value-led, followed by a desire for a fulfilling career and/or career progression.

60% of respondents came through undergraduate routes and 40% postgraduate routes. Routes into undergraduate study were notably varied, spanning employment/ return to study (51%), FE routes (31%), and school (12%).

NQSWs report a positive experience of social work education with 86% describing the quality of education as good or very good. Identified areas of strength are broad based, suggesting that NQSWs value an integrated approach to education and learning.

Identified areas for improvement are best distilled as a desire for 'more', though this may reflect the framing of key questions. In particular, NQSWs identified a desire for more practical and applied learning, including more balanced attention to specialist areas of practice.

- **Employment**

96% of respondents were employed in statutory settings. 74% were on permanent contracts, with the remainder on temporary contracts. The majority were situated in children's service (52%), followed by adult services (38%) and criminal justice (7%).

60% of NQSWs described an unstructured induction lasting 1-2 weeks. However, most reported a common induction experience,

centred around professional shadowing, agency visits and reading organisational policy.

Around a third of respondents report some form of workload protection. Just under half report caseloads of between 11 and 20, while 35% report caseloads of between 21 and 40. Just under half report holding cases relating to child protection, sexual offending and adult protection. The majority of NQSWs said they felt workloads were manageable and appropriate to their level of expertise.

NQSWs describe spending the majority of their working time on report writing (35%) and case recording (21%). Least time was spent on 'reading, analysing and using research knowledge and evidence'.

NQSWs reported reasonable levels of confidence and competence across four broad domains: skills, knowledge, self-efficacy and professional values. Slightly lower levels of confidence were identified in relation to decision making in complex situations and use of research skills.

- **Supervision and support**

The majority of NQSWs report regular experiences of supervision, typically on a monthly basis. For most, supervision is experienced as practical (96%), supportive (81%) and focussed on workload management (72%). Identified areas for improvement included: a more protected and balanced approach extending beyond 'case management' to also incorporate critical reflection and discussion.

NQSWs placed significant value on informal support from colleagues and peers. For most, this emerged as a primary source for professional advice, guidance and emotional support.

- **Professional Learning and development**

In the first year of practice, professional learning and development opportunities mostly took the form of shadowing colleagues, corporate or work-based training and, to a lesser degree, self-directed study. NQSWs prioritised procedural and practical knowledge, specifically relating to risk assessment and management, legislation and social work interventions.

- **Professional identity**

75% of respondents described having 'a clear sense of my professional identity', however free text responses suggest a less clear picture. For many, professional identity was about professional purpose and values, for others it was about competency and proficiency, and for others it was about public and professional

recognition.

Half of the respondents identified a lack of respect and value from other professionals as a key obstacle to their developing professional identity, followed closely by internal/ sector challenges. NQSWs felt that professional identity could be strengthened through improved public understanding of and value for the social work role, improved inter-professional understanding and value, and improved opportunities for professional development and career progression.

- **Developing leadership**

Just over half of the respondents felt that they understood the importance of leadership capacity at this point in their career. The remainder did not or were unsure. 27% felt they had been supported to develop their leadership capacities, mostly through informal mechanisms. NQSWs identified a need for more explicit support in this area from employers and more talk about leadership in day-to-day practice. A small number didn't see leadership as 'a priority right now'.

- **What else matters?**

When invited to discuss any additional areas, key themes included: education, transitions, austerity, workloads, integration, identity and emotions.

INTRODUCTION

This interim report presents findings from the first stage of a five-year longitudinal study exploring the experiences of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) as they progress in their careers.

Led by researchers from Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of Dundee, this project aims to provide a broad view of NQSW professional development across Scotland. The project seeks to capture professional experiences, report on observed practice, and trace the professional journey of NQSWs over a period of five years. Through incremental stages, this project will develop a national picture of how NQSWs experience and navigate their first years in practice. The research will explore organisational, practical and subjective dynamics of professional development and work-based experiences, mapping the extent to which newly qualified social workers are 'constitutively entangled' (Orlikowski, 2007) within complex structures, identities, processes and contexts.

(i) Overarching aim

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

(ii) Objectives

1. To examine NQSWs' journeys of professional transition and development.
2. To understand how NQSWs experience and navigate a complex, contested and dynamic professional landscape, in relation to professional roles, tasks, structures and settings.
3. To understand how NQSWs are supported, trained and developed across diverse practice settings.
4. To identify NQSWs' 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 & support
- Leadership

METHOD

This project is a mixed-method longitudinal cohort study of NQSWs over a period of five-years. Each year includes data collection, data analysis and data reporting. Methods of data collection include annual repeat-measure online questionnaires, focus groups, in-depth interviews and participant observation. Members of the research team have responsibility for different aspects of data collection.

(i) Literature review

The project team completed a preliminary stage 1 literature review in 2016. Methods of data collection were informed by initial appraisal of existing research. Stage 2 of this review is currently underway. This will be completed by June 2018.

(ii) Online survey

Phase 1 of the online questionnaire was issued in February 2017. The total population of newly-quality social workers (NQSWs) in Scotland in 2016 was 404. The online survey received 157 responses (giving a response rate of 38.8%).

The online survey will follow a repeat-measure process where participants will be asked to complete the same questions at each stage of the project. This will enable researchers to map changes and identify patterns over the course of the project. The second wave of data collection will occur in March 2018.

Comprising of 11 sections (see below), the questionnaire covers a range of dimensions mapped to the aims and objectives of this project. The online survey is the primary source of data in this research.

Questionnaire structure:

Section 1	Previous work experience
Section 2	Education
Section 3	Current employment
Section 4	Induction
Section 5	Professional confidence and competence
Section 6	Formal supervision
Section 7	Informal support
Section 8	Professional learning and development
Section 9	Professional identity
Section 10	Developing leadership
Section 11	Space to add anything else NQSWs would like us to know about their experiences

Measuring incremental change in longitudinal research requires the same questions to be asked at equidistant points. As participants have given information about previous work experience (Section 1), education (Section 2) and induction (Section 4) during the first wave of data collection, these elements will be removed for the second wave. This will make the questionnaire shorter (and quicker to complete).

(iii) Individual interviews

In order to explore the individual career trajectories of social workers in greater depth, we recruited a small sample of NQSWs for a series of in-depth interviews at three key points during their careers: year one, year three and year five.

The first round of individual interviews were completed in July 2017. We completed 16 in-depth interviews with NQSWs across five local authority areas in Scotland. These NQSWs have agreed to engage in subsequent interviews during the course of this project. The project team are currently involved in data analysis of interview transcripts. This report will touch upon emerging themes.

The second wave of interviews will take place in July 2019.

(iv) Focus groups

We proposed to conduct regional focus groups in years' two, three and four of this project. Participants from different authorities and agencies were invited to attend sessions across Scotland.

Year two focus groups were completed in November 2017 in three locations. Locations were selected in discussion with local authority learning and development leads. We sought to provide geographical spread while also taking into account existing NQSW networks. All registered NQSWs who graduated in 2016 were invited by email to attend one of the three groups. Participation was also encouraged by learning and development leads.

Focus groups took place in Aberdeen, Glasgow and Dalkeith. Groups lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and were recorded digitally. Table 1 details the composition of each group. Sign up for the Aberdeen and Dalkeith focus group was slow and there were a number of 'no-shows' on the day. Reflections on participation suggest that geography, a short sign up period and a blanket email invitation may have impacted on response rates. It is recommended that future focus groups are held in Glasgow and Edinburgh to aid participation. A second attempt will be made to reconvene a focus group in Aberdeen.

Table 1: Composition of focus groups

Focus group	Date	Numbers
Aberdeen	14.11.17	2
Glasgow	17.11.17	6
Dalkeith	21.11.17	2

Focus groups were framed by the project aims and objectives. They were conducted using a semi-structured schedule. The schedule was used as a prompt to explore the following themes:

- Reflections on 'readiness'
- Professional transitions (A) education to practice
- Professional transitions (B) becoming a social worker
- Career progression: expectations, ambitions and needs
- Exploring what else matters.

The project team will provide an indication of emerging themes in the findings section of this report.

The next wave of focus groups will take place in November 2018.

(v) Ethnography

To help address bias in self-reporting by participants involved in focus groups, online surveys and individual interviews, we proposed three small-scale concentrated periods of ethnography. These would ideally take place in a representative sample of social work organisations. A member of the research team would spend around ten days in a social work office to observe NQSWs in practice. We proposed to do this in years' two, three and four.

The first period of ethnography will begin in March 2018. This will take place in one of Scotland's largest local authorities. Data collection in this first wave will be undertaken by a PhD student attached to the project. The student will observe NQSWs in situ and compile fieldnotes which will be analysed and synthesised with existing data sets from each part of this project.

Second and third waves of ethnography will be conducted in other areas of Scotland – particularly covering east and northern parts of the country.

The project team will report on findings from the first period of ethnography in our next report (December 2018).

FINDINGS – STAGE 1

This section will present findings under key themes related to the aims and objectives of this project. To bring clarity to the findings - given the breath of data collected - we decided to use the structure of the online survey as a frame to present data in a manageable form for the reader. This section will highlight emerging themes from survey data and individual interviews.

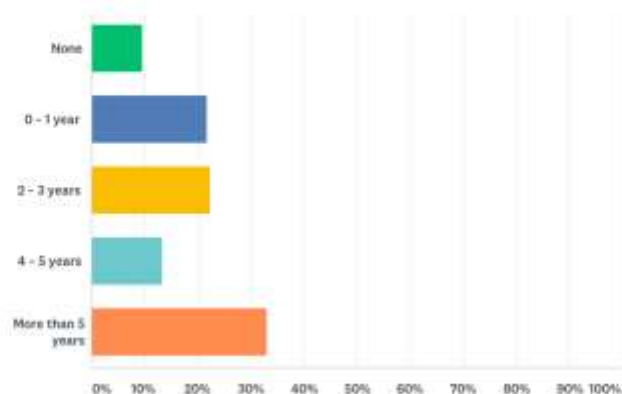
(a) PREVIOUS WORK EXPERIENCE

The online survey presented a number of questions to participants on their previous work experience. The objective here was to reveal characteristics of the sample participants in relation to what experience they brought to professional social work education and subsequent practice. We asked questions about reasons for pursuing social work as a career and types of social care experience gained during paid and voluntary employment.

89% had previous experience of working in social care environments before undertaking social work training. In terms of length of experience, around a third of participants brought over 5 years. Just over a third brought between 2-5 years, with only 9% reporting to have no experience of paid or voluntary experience within social care environments (see Table 2). These figures are unsurprising as most social work courses require candidates to have some previous experience of working in social care roles. However, it does suggest that most participants come with a basic understanding of what helping professions do. These findings are consistent with other studies which suggest that social workers tend to enter education with a nominal understanding of social work roles and tasks.

Table 2

Q4 Broadly speaking, how much social work / social care experience (i.e. voluntary or paid work) did you have prior to entering your course?



NQSWs were asked about what attracted them to social work as a career. Respondents were invited to comment in free text boxes within the online survey. For the majority, a clear theme emerged in relation to the alignment between personal and professional values. As one NQSW put it:

'Personal values, developed through personal and professional experience, and a desire to build a career on that'.

A large proportion of NQSWs were attracted to social work as a 'fulfilling' career choice. As two NQSWs commented:

'Being part of a profession, developing my practice, new challenges, improving career opportunities'

'Enjoyed work in social care ... wanted to develop'

Some NQSWs mentioned their own lived experience of social work intervention as being a catalyst. This was captured well by one NQSW:

'My aunt has been a foster carer for over 20 years. I grew up in a household where social justice and helping others are seen as very important values. I believed that my values and skill set were suited to a social work career.'

Others expressed a more direct wish to work with specific groups, such as children and young people, substance misuse and disability.

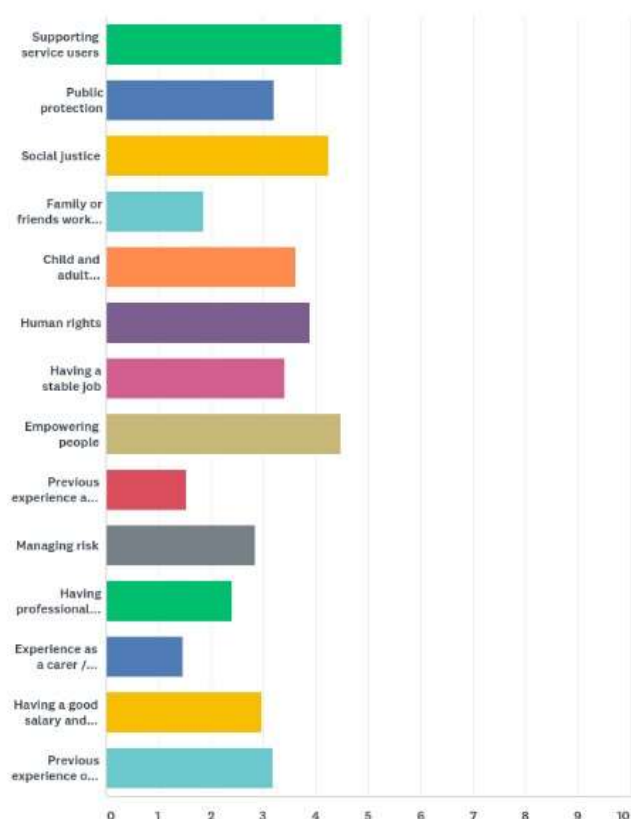
Respondents were then presented with a series of statements designed to capture the breadth of social work from a macro (political welfare) endeavour to a micro (supporting individuals) enterprise. NQSWs were invited to say whether each had a major / minor influence on their decision to enter social work. Three key influences emerged from the data (see Table 3):

1. Supporting service users (57% said 'major influence')
2. Empowering people (55% said 'major influence')
3. Social Justice (50% said 'major influence')

These findings suggest that motives for entering the profession seem grounded in value-oriented dispositions. Very few participants seemed motivated by material factors such as salary.

Table 3

Q8 Thinking about your reasons for choosing social work as a career, to what extent did the following items influence your decision:



(b) EDUCATION

Social work education has a long and enduring history in Scotland. It is a necessary step for all those wishing to become qualified practitioners. The project team felt that experiences of pre-qualifying education were important to consider here, as this crucial phase in professional learning is often thought to have significant and lasting influence on social workers throughout their careers. In particular, we felt it was important to explore perceptions of the quality of education received, and the extent to which NQSWs felt prepared to enter practice after completing their course. We asked specific questions on practice placements, classroom learning and suggested improvements to gain a deeper understanding of NQSW experiences in this critical stage of their formation and transition into professional life.

Around 60% of NQSWs qualified through undergraduate routes; the remaining 40% through postgraduate means. Using free text boxes, participants who entered undergraduate routes were asked to state if they came directly from school, college or other. The majority of NQSWs who undertook undergraduate social work study seemed to come directly from college or employment. A minority came directly

from school, which may indicate (as pointed out earlier) a preference for candidates with some degree of exposure to social care environments (be it though placements at college or from recent employment in social care roles). This also raises questions about whether social work is promoted as an option at school, as for nursing or medicine (where pupils are encouraged to gain work or voluntary experience with services users in the community before applying for courses).

For those NQSWs who entered social work education as postgraduates, Table 4 below illustrates the spread of degree subjects studied at undergraduate level.

Table 4: Routes into postgraduate social work

Undergraduate subject	Total (n=63)
Social science / sociology	15
Psychology	14
Other*	23
CLD / community work	2
Health studies	2
Criminology	1
Residential child care	1
NA	4

*Includes: History, English, business management, economics, French, geography, music, law, philosophy, information and library studies, computing, film and tv.

Table 4 demonstrates that a significant proportion of graduate entrants into social work education came with a grounding in general social science type subjects. These findings are consistent with other studies on the characteristics of postgraduate social work students where candidates tend to come from traditional social science backgrounds.

In terms of degree classifications achieved by NQSWs who undertook postgraduate social work studies, the majority (56.6%) achieved a 2:1, with 15% achieving First Class honours, 21.6% achieving Upper Second and 3.3% Third Class. The survey also revealed that 3.3% were admitted to postgraduate courses with Ordinary degrees.

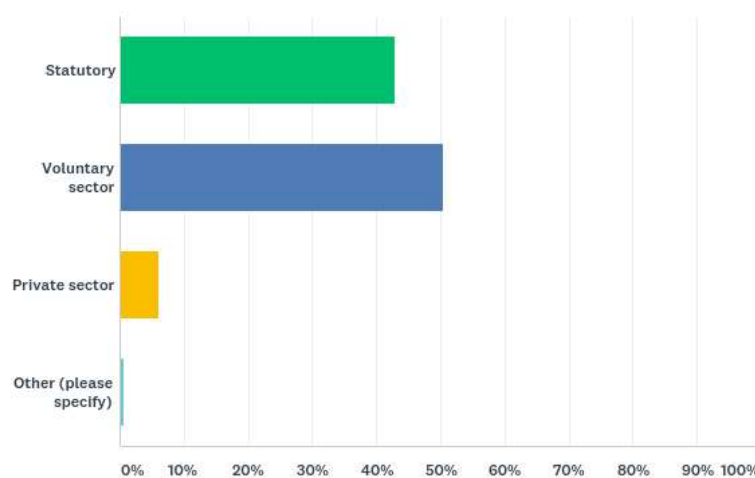
The majority of NQSWs completed their undergraduate or postgraduate social work education in Scotland (93%). Three participants referred to completing their qualification in Canada, Nigeria and the United States.

First and second placements

NQSWs were asked about types of practice placement offered to them during their course. **First** placements seemed to have a 50/50 split between statutory (50%) and voluntary/private sector placements (43% and 7% respectively). First placements were split between children's services (45%), adult services (44%), criminal justice (4%), and the rest placed in specific projects / specialist teams (such as generic 'duty' teams which cut across children, adult and criminal justice provision) (see Table 5).

Table 5

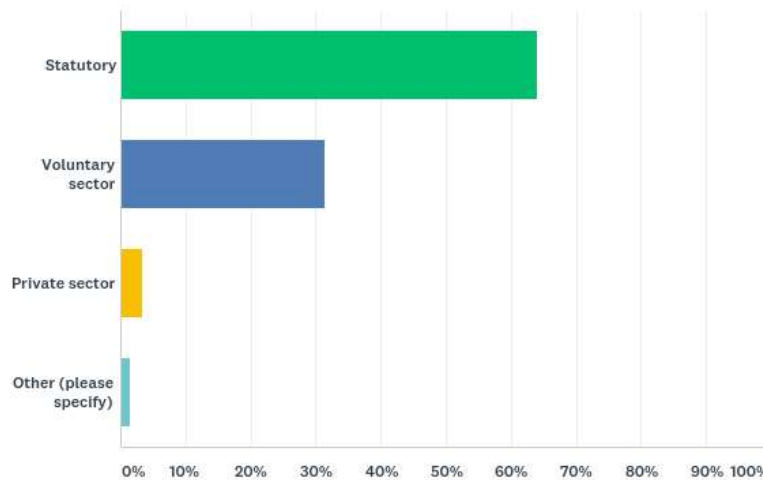
Q16 In what sector did you complete your first practice placement?



The majority of participants did their **second** placement in statutory services (64%). The remaining third did their placements in voluntary / private sector settings (31% and 5% respectively). Second placements were split between children's services (46%), adult services (39%), criminal justice (9%), and the rest in specific projects / specialist teams (see Table 6).

Table 6

Q17 In what sector did you complete your second practice placement?



These findings on practice placement settings are consistent with sector-wide expectations. HEIs and placement providers aim to provide students with experiences in both statutory and voluntary settings. Indeed, when asked about how well placements prepared NQSWs for practice, the majority answered positively: 47% said 'well' and 26% said 'extremely well'. Social work education was also rated positively: around 31% described their experience as 'very good', with 54% answering 'good' and 13% 'fair'.

Strengths and weaknesses of social work education

When asked about classroom learning as preparation for practice, a mixed picture emerged: 54% reported that classroom learning had prepared them 'well' or 'extremely well'. 22% took a neutral position and 22% said it had prepared them 'slightly'.

When asked to comment in on what was 'good' about their experience of social work education, the majority of NQSWs provided responses that reflected an appreciation of the integrated nature of learning, ie combining practice experience with classroom-based learning – translating theory into practice in real time. Table 7 below illustrates some of the positive aspects of social work education mentioned by NQSWs.

Table 7: Strengths of social work education

Strengths	Number of times mentioned
Quality of teaching and learning, breadth and relevance of learning content	63
Knowledge, experience and passion of lecturers and tutors, emphasis on applied knowledge	33
Quality of support from lecturers and tutors	25
Variety of teaching and learning methods	15
Focus on reflection and critical thinking	9
Peer learning / good relationships	8
Service user and carer involvement	7
Focus on values, social justice and empowerment	6

Other positive responses mentioned include having good practice placements with a wide range of learning opportunities. As two NQSWs commented:

'My placements were invaluable to my learning and they were the experiences that shaped the social worker I am now'

'I felt lucky to get two great placements with great practice teachers'

NQSWs were also asked to comment on what was 'bad' about their social work education. Responses suggest some diversity across student / educational experiences, reflecting variations across routes, courses, providers and locales. That said, main themes were generally framed around specific course and placement experiences. Key issues across both areas are illustrated below.

Course wide issues (in order of importance):

- too much of a gap between taught content and 'realities' of practice, not enough emphasis on practice / practical aspects
- too much attention paid to children and families. Other service areas/ user groups not addressed adequately
- course demands: too much / not enough
- over-assessment or inconsistent marking
- poor quality of teaching.

Practice based learning (35 responses related directly to this):

- not enough focus on practice-based learning (links to course wide issues above)
- poor quality practice placements (relating mostly to voluntary sector opportunities, lack of choice, range etc.
- lack of statutory placement opportunities.

Improvements to social work education

When asked about potential improvements to social work education, the majority of NQSWs seemed to agree that more emphasis on specialisms was preferred: 60% 'Strongly Agree' and 21% 'Somewhat Agree'.

As reflected in free text responses in the last section on what was 'good' / 'bad' about social work education, the majority of participants felt that more emphasis on practice placements would be preferred: 58% 'Strongly Agree' and 28% 'Somewhat Agree'. The majority of NQSWs also felt they would have benefited from more input by frontline practitioners in classroom learning: 44% 'Strongly Agree' and 37% 'Somewhat Agree'. Another dimension of social work education that NQSWs felt important to highlight was social work interventions. Around 47% 'strongly' agreed and 33% 'somewhat' agreed that more input on these aspects of practice were required in pre-qualifying education. These findings – albeit indicative - suggest that NQSWs placed particular value on practice- focussed/work-oriented learning opportunities whilst at university. This is perhaps unsurprising finding given the timing and focus of this research.

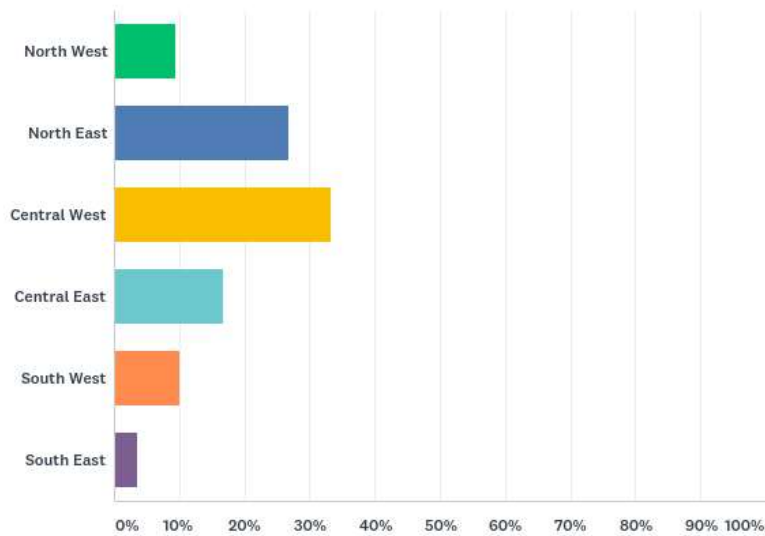
(c) CURRENT EMPLOYMENT

A crucial part of this project is to understand the experiences of NQSWs as they progress in professional employment. The project team designed a variety of questions to explore this area in some depth within focus groups, individual interviews and online surveys. Our objective in this first wave of data collection was to establish a baseline to help us map subsequent changes and patterns over the five-year course of this study.

The majority of participants were in statutory roles (96%) at the point in which they completed the first online survey (March 2017). The largest proportion of the sample were employed in 'central west' (33%) locations in Scotland, followed by 'north east' (27%) and 'central east' (17%) (see Table 8). The majority reported to be on permanent contracts (74%), with the remainder on temporary arrangements. The majority were employed on a full time basis (88%).

Table 8

Q27 Broadly speaking, which area of Scotland are you currently based?



Participants were spread across different social work settings, with the majority situated in children's services (52%), followed by adult services (38%) and criminal justice (7%).

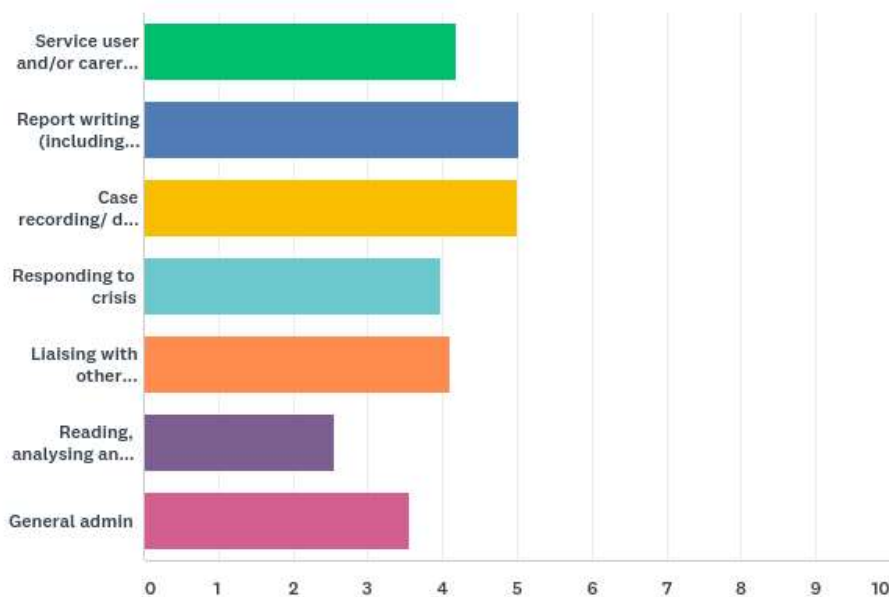
Time spent on tasks and agile working

To get a sense of where NQSWs efforts are focused at the start of their careers, participants were asked to rank time spent on typical social work tasks from most (scored 1) to least (scored 7). Two particular areas emerged strongly (see Table 9):

1. Report writing (35% scored 1; 20% scored 2)
2. Case recording (21% scored 1; 31% scored 2)

Table 9

Q37 Thinking about everyday social work tasks, please rank the following from those you spend most time on (1) to those you spend least time on (7)



Least time was spent on 'Reading, analysing and using current research, knowledge and evidence' (53% scored 7). Two areas fell in the middle:

1. Liaising with other professionals, teams, services (30% scored 4; 25% scored 5)
2. Service user and/or carer contact (23% scored 3; 19% scored 4)

It seems here that many NQSWs appear to spend more time doing desk-based activity than other social work tasks. This is despite roughly half the number of respondents (51%) reporting to be working for employers who subscribe to agile working policies.

The impact of agile working emerged as a significant issue for those NQSWs subject to it. Respondents were invited to comment on their experiences of agile working in free text boxes within the online survey. A small number of NQSWs noted some positive aspects such as the ability to work from multiple sites/ locations, reduced travel time; opportunities to interact with a broader group of colleagues; and the ability to find quiet places to work when required. However, a larger proportion of NQSWs responded negatively when reflecting on the impact of agile working. Here we found interplay of practical and emotional costs:

Practical costs:

- time
- no physical place / no storage
- perceived health costs and risks of portable working practice
- strife / tensions with colleagues; inequity of desk space
- less access to peer support
- generally working in noisy / disruptive environments.

Emotional costs:

- no sense of place / belonging / safety: unsettling for many
- isolation; reduced sense of 'team'; overwhelming for new workers
- 'added stress' / anxiety / hard to cope with sometimes.

These findings are concerning. The objective of agile working is to promote independence, autonomy, creativity and flexibility for professional staff. Indeed, whilst this may be the case for more experienced social workers, the same cannot be said for newly qualified practitioners who often gain more from informal peer learning and peer support as they become socialised into professional roles. Indeed, the project team intend to monitor the impact of agile working closely over the five-year period of this project.

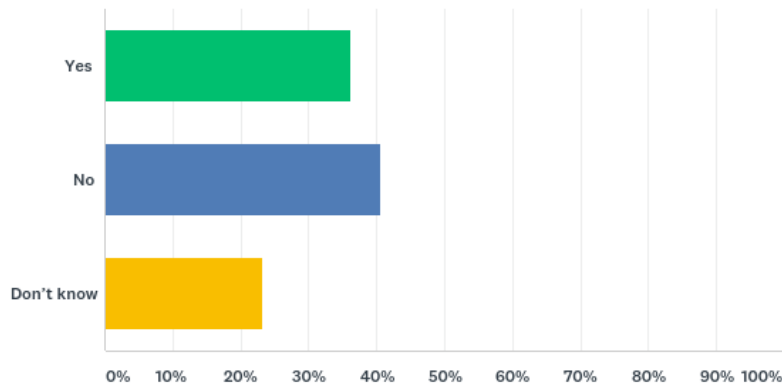
Workload

When participants were asked about additional work they might do for their employer outside normal working hours, around 46% reported doing extra unpaid hours each week (average of 10 hours). Qualitative data from free text responses in the online survey suggests that most of this extra time is spent on catching-up with report writing and case notes.

Around 36% of NQSWs report to having some degree of workload protection. Approximately 41% say they have no protection, whilst 23% suggest they simply 'don't know' whether they have protection or not (see Table 10). Whilst these figures are concerning on first sight, they may simply reflect diverse arrangements for workload management across 32 local authorities. There is no formal agreement or national standard for initial NQSW workload allocation in Scotland.

Table 10

Q38 Is your overall workload protected? (i.e. a limit or cap placed on the amount of work / cases allocated to you)



In terms of average caseloads, the largest proportion (around 46%) hold between 11-20 cases, followed by 22% holding 21-30 and 17% holding 31-40. Whilst the last figure may be concerning, it is not entirely clear which types of cases (ie what level of complexity) are being held (see Table 11). Perhaps more concerning here is that around 48% of NQSWs say they are holding cases relating to child protection, sex offenders or adult protection. Of those participants who answered this particular question in the survey, 38 said they were holding child protection cases, with 25 holding adult protection and 14 holding sex offender cases (see Table 12).

Table 11

Q39 How many cases do you currently hold? (this includes allocated reports)

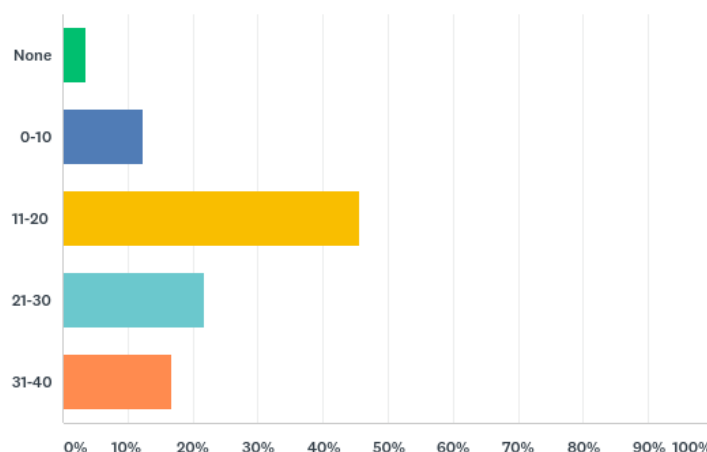
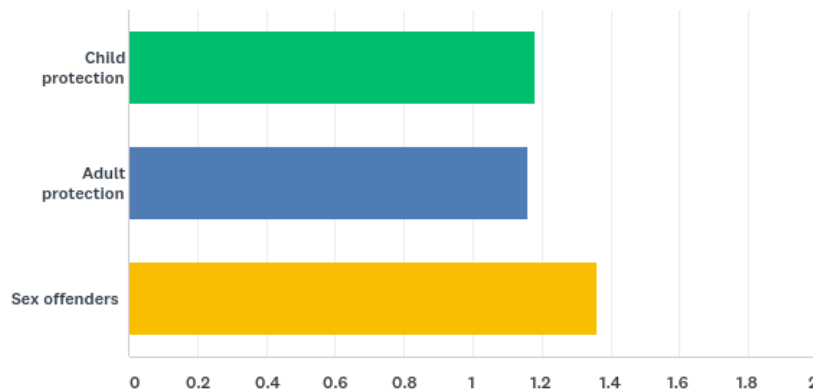


Table 12

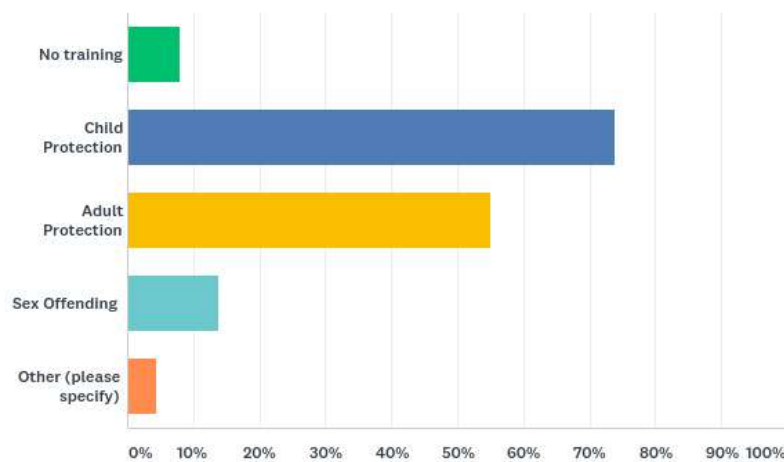
Q41 If Yes, How many cases are you holding?



Whilst the preceding findings may be of concern on first reading, the majority of participants did report that they had child protection training (74%), with 55% having input on adult protection and 14% on sex offending (see Table 13). The majority of NQSWs felt that cases allocated to them are appropriate for their level of skill and knowledge as new staff (27% 'strongly agree' and 51% 'agree'). In essence, the majority felt that current workloads were manageable with 23% saying they 'strongly agree' and 44% in general agreement. Interestingly, the majority of NQSWs felt confident to take on more complex work - 19% 'strongly' agreed and 41% said they agreed.

Table 13

Q42 Have you received any specific training on child protection, adult protection or sexual offending since you began employment? (please tick all that apply)



At this stage in the survey, NQSWs were asked about satisfaction

with current physical working conditions. Respondents were invited to comment on changes or improvements they would like to see in their working environments. Responses to this question were, on the whole, more negative than positive. Suggested improvements and changes (in order of frequency) include:

- more desks / space aligned to staff numbers / group spaces to support team activities
- fixed desks
- less noise (smaller offices, away from open plan)
- more private spaces for telephone calls, conversations, report writing, meetings
- more storage
- more / dedicated service user suitable spaces
- improved / up-to-date IT
- refreshed environment: dated and tired, feel unvalued
- safe spaces – interview rooms with telephones
- access to natural light / window
- parking
- bringing social work services together
- access to a water cooler.

While some aspects of the findings in this section were concerning, the project team were left with the impression of a workforce who appeared – on the face of it - confident and able to engage in complex work at this stage in their career. The impact of physical environments emerged as particular area worthy of further attention (this will be addressed in subsequent waves of data collection). However, findings here are generally consistent with existing studies on young professionals which suggest that levels of confidence are typically inflated at the start of new employment.

This may reduce through time (we hope to capture this over the next five years). Another general point to highlight here is that respondents who agree to engage with research on a voluntary basis tend to give more positive than negative responses questions when asked. The project team acknowledge that degrees of bias are very difficult to eliminate in a study of this nature; however, we hope that our ethnographic component (starting March 2018) will provide some degree of counterpoint here.

(c) INDUCTION

Induction is recognised as an important stage in the introduction of young professionals to the culture and working practices of organisations. Our objective here was to explore the general character of induction experiences for NQSWs across Scotland, as very little is known about this currently.

The majority of NQSWs in our study received some form of induction (76%). Of this proportion, the majority (59%) reported that employers did not provide a structured approach to this.

Analysis of qualitative free text responses suggest that what constituted induction for the majority of NQSWs could be expressed as the following: shadowing and observation; visits to internal colleagues and external agencies; corporate induction/ training: covering systems, health & safety, IT and HR matters; and finally, general reading of organisational policies and procedures.

Typical length of induction periods ranged from one day to two months – the average for the majority being 1-2 weeks. The minority who said they received no formal induction put this down to 'lack of organisation', with some reporting to be returning to the same local authority whom they previously worked for (in some cases agencies had sponsored NQSWs during their social work education). The majority of respondents said that someone in their organisation had been allocated to support their induction (57%); this was mostly managers (40%), followed by recognised mentors (21%).

In free text boxes, NQSWs were invited to recommend improvements and/or changes to induction for new staff in the future. Significant consistency was noted across responses which included (in order of frequency):

- an identified mentor for the first year
- more structured approach overall: protected, longer, pre-planned/ timetabled
- induction packs made relevant to professional role / specialism / key procedures
- use of checklists to ensure consistency
- clearer / accessible information relating to organisational procedures and practices
- weekly / fortnightly support for first year
- early but balanced allocation of work to aid focus / sense making
- capped case load
- early access to systems / tools
- regular supervision in first few months to aid induction

- avoid induction over holiday periods
- more diverse shadowing opportunities during induction.

The picture emerging here (consistent with previous studies) would appear to show some inconsistency in providing structured or formal induction to NQSWs. There is no national agreement on what induction should constitute for new staff. Each local authority will have their own arrangements for this aspect of organisational socialisation; however, NQSWs have made it clear here that induction requires more attention from social work employers across Scotland.

(d) PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE

Key to this study is examining and charting the development of professional confidence and competence of NQSWs as they progress in their careers. As indicated earlier in the section on 'current employment', NQSWs appeared to present with strong degrees of confidence in their ability to manage workloads and complex cases. However, our objective moved on here to establish baseline levels of confidence and competence across a range of occupational items drawn from the Professional Capabilities Framework and National Occupational Standards. The difficulty here for the project team was trying to locate and identify a range of items from Scottish guidance and policy documents. This proved difficult as Scotland has no detailed equivalent to current English standards. The proposed benchmark statement on social work in Scotland was thought to be too abstract to translate into measurable items for the purposes of this study. Indeed, after reviewing available literature, the team agreed on a range of individual items linked to four key domains: skills, knowledge, self-efficacy and professional values.

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'.

NQSWs said they felt most confident 'Working with other professionals and agencies' (64% confident; 30% somewhat confident), followed by 'Managing demands on time' (45% confident; 47% somewhat confident) and 'Produce[ing] records and reports that meet professional standards' (41% confident; 43% somewhat confident).

Trying to identify what skills NQSWs felt least confident in at this stage of their career proved more difficult. Very few NQSWs (only 1 or 2 participants) said they felt 'unconfident' in any of the skill areas presented to them. A slight negative skew was identified in two areas: 'Make[ing] professional judgements about complex situations' (13% 'slightly unconfident') and 'Use[ing] research skills to both inform practice and enhance your own learning' (12% 'slightly unconfident'). That said, larger proportions of NQSWs said they felt 'somewhat confident' across both skill domains (51% and 47% respectively).

Knowledge

Respondents were asked here to rank how confident they felt in their understanding of knowledge across a range of social work areas. Participants ranked themselves on a scale from 'confident' to 'unconfident'.

NQSWs said they felt most confident in their understanding of knowledge in relation to 'Theories underpinning human development' (30% confident; 56% somewhat confident), followed by 'Statutory and professional codes, standards, frameworks' (28% confident; 57% somewhat confident) and 'Principles of risk assessment and risk management' (21% confident; 61% somewhat confident).

Similar to reported confidence levels in skills, very few NQSWs said they felt 'unconfident' in their understanding of knowledge. A slight negative skew was identified in two areas: 'Legislation' (10% 'slightly unconfident') and 'Theories of discrimination in contemporary society' (7% 'slightly unconfident'). Again, as with skills, larger proportions of NQSWs said they felt 'somewhat confident' across both knowledge domains (60% and 49% respectively).

Self-efficacy

The project team decided to use a widely adopted method of measuring self-efficacy developed by Ralf Schwarzer & Matthias Jerusalem (1995). This measure was designed to explore multiple dimensions of self-efficacy that we felt NQSWs would be able to identify with. Please see below for the full list of items developed by Matthias and Jerusalem (1995):

- I can always manage to solve difficult problems if I try hard enough
- If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want
- It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals
- I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events
- Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations
- I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort
- I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities
- When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions
- If I am in trouble, I can usually think of a solution
- I can usually handle whatever comes my way.

NQSWs were asked to consider each item and rate themselves against a scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. The top three areas of self-efficacy to emerge were:

1. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities (23% 'strongly agree'; 59% 'agree')

2. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events (17% 'strongly agree'; 62% 'agree')
3. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort (14% 'strongly agree'; 61% 'agree')

Again, as with skills and knowledge, very few NQSWs felt they lacked confidence. The only negative skew in the data on self-efficacy related to the item 'If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want' (21% disagreed; 57% neither agreed nor disagreed). This item is perhaps unusual in that it prompts the respondent to think about transgression – it also lacks clarity on what 'opposes' might mean in certain contexts. On reflection, the project team felt that this particular item was perhaps too problematic for NQSWs to consider as an aspect of self-efficacy. The team intend to remove this item in the second wave of data collection.

Professional values

In this section of the survey, we asked NQSWs to consider a number of items relating to professional values (drawn largely from codes of practice). Participants were asked to rate how able they felt to demonstrate their professional values from 'always' to 'never'.

As with preceding aspects of professional competence in skills, knowledge and self-efficacy mentioned so far in this report, NQSWs gave very positive responses to items presented to them here on professional values. Most felt able to 'Practice honesty, openness, empathy and respect' (84% 'always'; 14% 'often'), followed by 'Practice in a manner which reflects anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, respecting diversity within cultures and values' (72% 'always'; 22% 'often') and 'Take responsibility for the quality of your work and for maintaining and improving your knowledge and skills' (65% 'always'; 26% 'often').

Like previous sections here, NQSWs rated themselves positively across a range of items. The only negative skew identified in the data on professional values emerged in two areas: 'Uphold public trust and confidence in social services' (12% sometimes; 3% rarely) and 'Promote equal opportunities and social justice' (11% sometimes; 1% rarely). However, in both items the majority of NQSWs did respond positively (respectively: 47% 'always'; 35% 'often' and 51% 'always'; 34% 'often'). For some NQSWs, concepts of public trust and wider dimensions of social justice may be difficult to translate into practice.

As mentioned in the previous section, NQSWs presented themselves as very confident across a number of domains. However, as noted

already, existing literature indicates that confidence levels are generally inflated at the start of new careers.

(e) FORMAL SUPERVISION

The importance of supervision in social work is well established. In this section of the survey, the project team sought to explore NQSW experiences of formal supervision (delivered by line managers).

The majority of NQSWs (96%) said they received formal supervision from their line manager. For those who did not receive formal supervision, we invited them to explain why in free text boxes. The responses ranged from simply having 'ad-hoc' arrangements in their organisation to others examples where managers had recently left, were on leave or had moved jobs – leaving the NQSW (and presumably other staff) without structured supervision until new senior staff were in place.

The majority of NQSWs (65%) reported getting formal supervision on a monthly basis. Around 18% said they said they got 6- to 8-weekly sessions, with 9% reporting fortnightly and 8% three-weekly (see Table 14).

The majority of NQSWs (70%) received supervision in a closed office space. Around 28% had supervision within interview rooms. The remaining NQSWs said they received supervision in spaces ranging from conference rooms to open plan offices. One NQSW said they got their formal supervision in a kitchen (although a kitchen may indeed be a staff room or other temporary space in some organisations).

For most NQSWs (57%), periods of formal supervision lasted from 60-90 minutes; others (23%) received 30-60 mins and a smaller proportion (16%) got over 90 minutes (average of 2 hours) (see Table 15).

Table 14

Q57 How often does supervision take place?

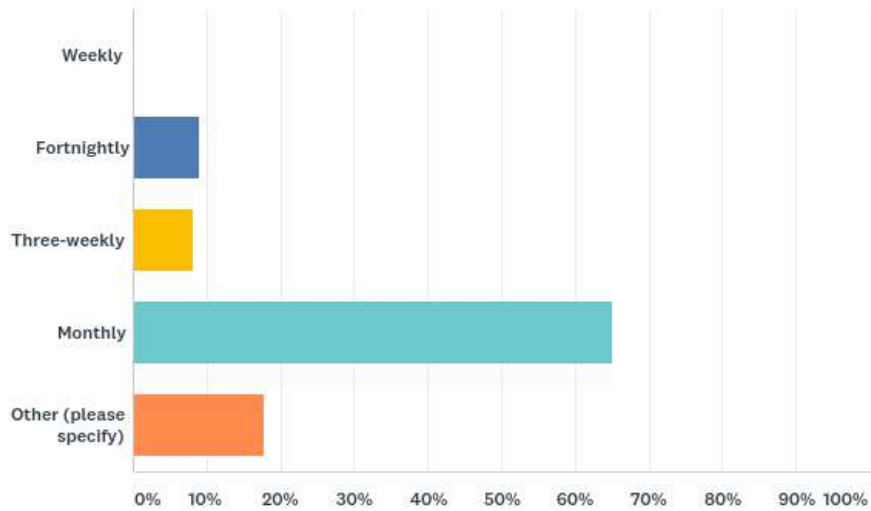
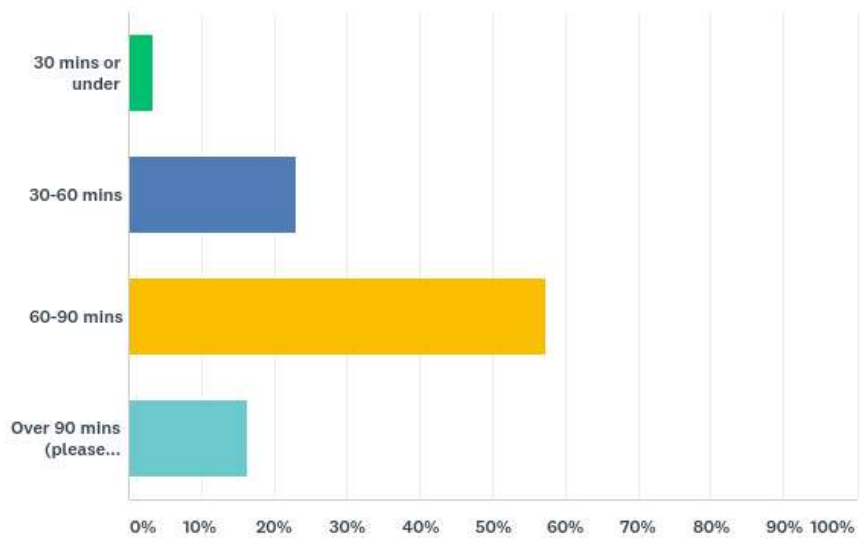


Table 15

Q59 How long does supervision typically last?



In the online survey NQSWs were presented with a series of statements on aspects of supervision. Respondents were asked to rate the extent to which they agreed or not with each item. The scale used a ranking from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

Most agreement emerged in relation to the following three items:

1. I feel supported by my manager (45% 'strongly agree'; 36% 'agree')
2. My manager gives me good advice and guidance (41% 'strongly agree'; 45% 'agree')
3. The main focus of my supervision is workload management (33% 'strongly agree'; 39% 'agree')

Whilst responses to the first two items are positive, the third example gives cause for concern. It seems like a significant proportion of NQSWs see the main focus of formal supervision as workload management. However, what is meant by workload management may differ by interpretation. For some, workload management may be a positive experience - but for others less so.

In essence, the majority of NQSWs responded positively to the range of statements presented to them; however, a negative skew was identified in items such as getting enough time in supervision to reflect on practice (18% disagreed), having adequate time to prepare for supervision (16% disagreed), having time during supervision to discuss professional learning needs (16% disagreed) and overall contentment with the quality of supervision (14% disagreed). Given that no formal arrangement exists for the structure, content and frequency of formal supervision for NQSWs in Scotland, then inconsistencies in experience are perhaps inevitable.

Improvements to supervision

Using free text boxes in the body of the online survey, NQSWs were asked to comment on what they would like to see changed or improved in their experience of formal supervision. In summary, supervision was seen to be exceptionally important and valued by all respondents. There appeared to be significant consistency in relation to areas for improvement – noted below in order of frequency.

- More formal arrangements for protected time and frequency of supervision.
- A more structured and balanced approach: extending beyond case management.
- For supervision to be a safe and confidential space, where NQSWs feel they are listened to and trusted.
- For group supervision and peer support structures to be considered as important adjuncts.

- More approachable and skilled supervisors.

A significant proportion of NQSWs said they would like less emphasis on case management and more emphasis on a structured approach to supervision. In discussions about supervision, two quotes captured the essence of this:

'I would like it to be more focused on reflection and me as a person and not just as a case manager'

'There needs to be a formal plan that is structured with equal emphasis on case load management, professional learning needs and emotional support. This has to also be in protected time with both parties engaged in the meeting, rather than mobile phones on and taking calls etc.'

Supervision is clearly important to NQSWs. The findings here suggest that – on the whole – supervision is being provided with degrees of frequency, support, depth and attention – all of which may account for the number of positive responses captured here. However, the number of NQSWs who viewed the purpose of supervision to be about workload management remains a concern.

(f) INFORMAL SUPPORT

Recognised as another crucial aspect of organisational socialisation, the provision of informal support from colleagues and peers is seen to be important for young professionals at the start of their careers. In this section of the survey we sought to explore NQSW experiences of informal relations with team members and other non-management staff.

NQSWs were asked here about the extent to which they agreed or not with a number of statements in relation to informal support. Respondents were invited to rank their responses from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'.

Levels of agreement were strong in relation to three particular statements:

1. I feel supported by my colleagues (71% 'strongly agree'; 19% 'agree')
2. I feel I am learning from my colleagues (64% 'strongly agree'; 26% 'agree')
3. My colleagues give me good advice and guidance (61% 'strongly agree'; 31% 'agree')

NQSWs clearly appreciate the support, advice and learning opportunities provided by their colleagues. Levels of agreement

here were stronger than levels of agreement in relation to support from line managers. The majority of NQSWs (75%) said they sought advice guidance from colleagues 'frequently'.

In free text boxes within the online survey, NQSWs were invited to comment on the types of informal support offered to them from colleagues and peers. Responses here were broadly positive with a few exceptions. A large proportion of responses seemed to address two key elements:

1. Professional advice and guidance from colleagues, cited by almost all respondents.
2. Emotional support, cited by over a third. Emotional support was also included within generic references to support, advice and guidance.

Professional advice and guidance from peers and colleagues included (in order of frequency):

- practical aspects of the job: including use of organisational systems and processes, understanding procedures, use of standardised tools, and how to navigate administrative tasks
- how to manage cases: mundane and complex
- advice on resources/ professional contacts
- feedback on work and performance
- informal mentorship
- provision of shadowing and joint visits.

Indeed, just as much attention was given to how informal support was offered to NQSWs, with emphasis on:

- team working / camaraderie
- safe, dialogic, curiosity-driven discussions about practice issues
- approachable, encouraging and constructive relationships
- genuine interest in the NQSW as a person
- encouraging NQSWs to ask questions
- sharing experience and knowledge
- for some, having lunch together away from desk
- general information sharing
- informal peer supervision / informal chats and 1:1 advice.

Nurturing NQSWs by taking care of their emotional as well as professional needs emerged strongly in discussions about informal support. Some examples are given below:

'Just asking how I am feeling making sure I am alright'

'My colleagues offer me what my manager should, they encourage and help me grow'

'Good team support where we trust each other enough to vent or cry without judgement or passing it on to other colleagues. I am very grateful my local authority have not implemented agile working as I need my team.'

NQSWs were also asked about how colleagues and peers contribute to their professional learning. Again, respondents were invited to comment in free text boxes. A number of responses echoed the previous section by referencing a variety of informal and formal ways that professional learning is helped by colleagues and peers. The majority of comments mention advice, guidance and support through day-to-day listening and discussion with team members. We found occasional references to more formal / structured means of professional learning such as being given suggested reading and research from colleagues. Some of the more frequent keywords / areas emerging in free text responses are given below:

- informal / regular advice and guidance
- being available
- team meetings where issues, insights or case-based discussions are routinely explored
- informal case based discussions
- informal observation (shadowing) of other colleagues
- some colleagues having a 'listening ear'
- emotional support
- feeling valued
- sharing experience and insight
- receiving feedback
- learning / journal groups
- encouragement
- recommendations and insight into training events
- normalising feelings (ie feelings not being problematised in formal supervision)
- group / peer supervision (ability to critically reflect with colleagues).

In discussions about learning and development, one particular quote captured the general experience of NQSWs. The NQSW here felt that colleagues and peers were perhaps more important to their professional development than line managers:

'They [colleagues and peers] are key to my development. I go to them first before going to my line manager'

Informal support from peers and colleagues is clearly important to NQSWs. The findings here suggest that newly qualified practitioners gain significant benefit across emotional, intellectual, organisational and practical domains. But as with induction and supervision, there is no recognised structure or framework for the provision of informal support in Scotland that provides consistency for NQSWs as they

enter the profession.

(g) PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

Appropriate and adequate learning and development opportunities are critical to the occupational socialisation and progression of young professionals. The project team were interested here in generating a picture of what constitutes learning and development for NQSWs at the initial stage of their careers. Dimensions of quality, frequency and depth of learning opportunities were explored in this part of the study.

The first aspect explored was the amount of time spent on different aspects of learning. On a scale from 1-6, NQSWs were asked to rank the time spent on items from most (scoring 1) to least (scoring 6).

The majority of NQSWs spent most time on the following two areas:

1. Shadowing other social workers / professionals (36% score 1; 27% score 2)
2. Learning / professional development provided by employer (28% score 1; 34% score 2).

NQSWs seemed to spend the least amount of time engaging in learning provided by universities (54% score 6). These findings suggest that NQSWs appear to engage in work-based learning opportunities more than learning activities outside agency settings. Earlier findings on 'education' demonstrate that NQSWs seem to want more specialist knowledge and practical skills for their immediate role and task in statutory environments (in particular).

This tendency for deeper technical understanding is reflected in responses to a subsequent question asking NQSWs to rank (on a scale from 1 [most] to 7 [least]) the type of knowledge important to their current role. Three areas emerged strongly here:

1. Risk assessment and risk management (34% score 1; 18% score 2)
2. Legislation (20% score 1; 27% score 2)
3. Social work interventions (27% score 1; 15% score 2).

These findings are consistent with other studies of NQSWs where more practical aspects of knowledge are favoured above more theoretical understandings of role and task. That said, the data here had a curious negative skew in relation to purely technical knowledge such as health and safety (61% score 7) and employer policies and procedures (32% score 6; 9% score 7). However, the

wording of the question did prompt NQSWs to think more about their immediate social work role – so it seems possible that some NQSWs may have focussed on knowledge important to immediate case work rather than knowledge deemed important to their understanding of the organisation in which they work.

At this stage in the survey, NQSWs were presented with a series of statements on support for learning. Respondents were asked to rank the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each item. Findings suggest that the majority of NQSWs appear to have control over their own learning and that adequate learning opportunities are made available to them. Strong levels of agreement emerged in four particular areas:

1. I take the lead in identifying my professional learning and development needs (38% 'strongly agree'; 50% 'agree')
2. My manager supports my requests for learning and development opportunities (41% 'strongly agree'; 39% 'agree')
3. My employer provides me with adequate professional learning and development opportunities (25% 'strongly agree'; 55% 'agree')
4. My employer gives me adequate time for professional learning and development (20% 'strongly agree'; 37% agree).

However, while it would appear that the majority of NQSWs are at least receiving learning 'opportunities' and adequate time to engage in such, a large proportion of respondents said that most types of learning had been 'informal' (15% 'strongly agree'; 38% 'agree'). Again, it should be noted that apart from current PRTL arrangements, there is no nationally agreed framework of structured learning and development for NQSWs at the post-qualification stage.

Whilst a large proportion of NQSWs view their learning as 'informal', the majority of respondents (74%) said they had received over 10 hours of work-based training since joining their organisation. The average amount of hours spent in training ranged from 20-150 hours.

In terms of own time (outside working hours) spent on learning and development (ie researching topics, reading books and journal articles), a large proportion (37%) had spent over 10 hours on this since qualifying. Free text responses suggest a range between 20-400 hours, followed by 33% spending 6-10 hours and 10%

spending 4-5 hours. These figures suggest that NQSWs are keen to supplement their work-based learning with additional time spend on more traditional forms of knowledge acquisition.

NQSWs were then asked to rank how satisfied they felt with learning and development opportunities made available to them so far. The majority answered positively (20% 'very satisfied'; 40% 'satisfied'). NQSWs were then asked about the 'quality' of learning and development opportunities made available to them. Again respondents answered positively (25% said opportunities were above average; 63% said opportunities were satisfactory).

Using free text boxes, respondents were invited to comment on what they thought their professional learning and development needs were at this stage of their careers. Responses to this question were varied, but needs were broadly framed as wanting more formal training and more protected opportunities for self-directed learning (ie space for independent learning, reading and research).

A small proportion identified a generic need to simply access relevant training. Some raised the issue of funding – highlighting this as a barrier to access. This mostly affected those employed within third sector organisations and those on temporary contracts. As one NQSW commented:

'My work provides no time for study or SDL. Funding for external courses is limited... because I am a temporary employee'

A larger number identified a need for formal training relevant to their service area, professional role and particular area of casework. Broadly speaking, recurring themes emerged here on training to support knowledge of legislation, policy, procedure and process relating to key priorities, systems and service user groups - specifically:

- Adult support and protection
- Child protection
- Risk assessment and management (tools).

And with less frequency:

- adults with incapacity
- inter-professional working: specifically, use of authority/ assertiveness
- assessment tools and approaches
- mental health and mental disorders
- sex offenders
- domestic violence offenders
- the Children's Hearing System

- benefits system.

Participants were then asked to comment (in free text boxes) on how their employer could support their professional learning and development at this point in their career. The most commonly cited word here (similar to the last question above) was 'training'. Broken down, this related in most cases to going beyond what is currently offered in-house by employers - leaning more towards specialised inputs on areas relevant to their current practice role. Some NQSWs went further to suggest that employers could focus more on the following:

- protecting time for learning and development
- supporting and resourcing supervision and mentoring
- supporting a richer culture of learning in social work organisations
- allocating casework with attention given to development needs.

Learning and development are clearly important to NQSWs. Findings here suggest that respondents are generally content with existing opportunities made available to them; however, many felt that learning could be more structured, targeted and deeper. NQSWs appear to want more by way of specialist inputs relating to their particular area of practice. The majority feel confident to take the lead in identifying and seeking opportunities for development; however, resourcing, availability and quality are important factors in their pursuit of learning.

(i) PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

The concept of professional identity has emerged in recent years as a crucial aspect of occupational socialisation for newly qualified staff in different professions. The project team were interested here in what shapes the professional identity of newly qualified social workers and how this 'sense' or way of being is translated into practice.

Within the online survey, respondents were presented with a series of general statements on professional identity. NQSWs were invited to rank their level of agreement with each. The top four statements with most agreement were:

1. I feel I shape my own professional identity (26% 'strongly agree'; 61% 'agree')
2. My colleagues help to shape my professional identity (29% 'strongly agree'; 57% 'agree')
3. My social work education has helped to shape my

professional identity (23% 'strongly agree'; 62% 'agree')

4. Service users help to shape my professional identity (22% 'strongly agree'; 60% 'agree').

It should be noted that NQSWs expressed more agreement than disagreement with *all* items presented to them here. It seems that professional identity is something shaped by a number of aspects – not least colleagues, education, service users, employers and NQSWs themselves.

Linked to the concept of professional identity, respondents were invited to rank a series of items in terms of impact on their sense of being a professional. This section was scored from 1 (most impact) to 6 (least impact). The spread of results here was mixed; however, a skew towards most impact was found across the following three items:

1. Having the ability to make complex judgements and decisions (20% score 1; 33% score 2)
2. Having autonomy over the work I do (30% score 1; 15% score 2)
3. Being able to apply my professional values (18% score 1; 26% score 2).

A skew towards least impact was found across the following items:

1. Being registered with the SSSC (20% score 5; 42% score 6)
2. Having a clear boundary between social work and other professions (28% score 5; 19% score 6)
3. Having access to continuous professional development opportunities (21% score 5; 15% score 6).

What emerged here was that aspects of doing social work seemed to link more closely and strongly with a sense of being a professional. Surprisingly, aspects relating to professional registration seemed to matter least.

Indeed the complexity of professional identity as a way of being emerged in free text responses and discussions about what this meant to NQSWs. The data collected here proved challenging to analyse for clear themes.

For some, professional identity was less about 'self' and more about collective identity. As one NQSW put it: 'to me this means belonging

to a profession with a specific set of expertise, values, knowledge and skills'. For others, professional identity related to how they were perceived by those outside the social work space: other professions, public and agencies.

Articulations of professional 'purpose' featured heavily in responses, many of which started from or included explicit reference to professional values, as well as to knowledge and skills. As one NQSW commented:

'Professional identity means following values specific to that profession. Social work values are specific'

Articulations of purpose attracted a number of specific responses within free text boxes including:

- the provision of person-centred and relationship-based 'care', 'support' and 'service', focused on individuals and families (not community/ society)
- respect, empowerment, challenge and change
- advice, decision making and intervention
- working holistically with complexity, tackling inequality and promoting social justice.

For some NQSWs, professional identity simply meant:

'Being of service to others whilst challenging social injustices'

'Being able to support and empower my service users'

For others, professional identity was more about professional competence and proficiency, clarity and confidence, autonomy and accountability - again underpinned by developing knowledge, values and skills. Reflected in the quotes above, some NQSWs felt that PI was about public and professional recognition, respect, status and value.

The diversity of data collected here demonstrates that professional identity remains a deeply complex area. Indeed, whilst a clear theme of 'purpose' emerged in most responses, the meaning of professional identity for NQSWs seemed to be plural, contested and fluid for most. The following quotes from NQSWs illustrate the multitude of dimensions associated with professional identity:

'Professional identity changes with each social work role'

'It is the image a person has about how they perform their role. The image is continually fashioned in the movements along the ways of organisational and professional life'

'Personally I think we should be agents of social change, but

this identity isn't always encouraged'

'Within social work children and families have a strong identity, probably the strongest. However in relation to members of the public we have a negative identity. I think other professionals feel sorry for us.

'For social workers to cease being scapegoated in the media arena. Raise the profile of the profession'

For some, professional identity remained unclear: 'it's a tricky one, I don't know if I've figured it out yet'.

For others, professional identity is personally important: 'everything: it means everything and makes me feel valuable.'

For some, professional identity meant little: 'not a lot. The degree was a means to an end. I don't see myself any different to before, when I had a different professional hat on'

Restrictions on professional identity

After exploring what professional identity meant to NQSWs, the survey then asked respondents to consider what they thought restricted their professional identity. NQSWs were invited to comment in free text boxes.

Responses here seemed to fall across two categories, which can be framed as:

- a lack of respect and value from others (external)
- internal/ sector challenges.

Around half of the respondents identified a lack of respect and value afforded by others (typically other professions, in particular health colleagues) as a key restriction on their sense of professional identity. Lack of respect and value was identified as particular problem amongst NHS staff. Some NQSWs noted dismissive treatment from NHS colleagues:

'The dominance of the medical model of health and social care. The lack of respect held for social work as a profession especially from nurses doctors and psychiatrists.'

'Within adult services I felt very much disrespected by health who had the hierarchy. I feel more valued and respected as a child social worker'

These findings are concerning. It should be noted that in the emerging field of integrated health and social care partnerships, health are the dominant partner under these new arrangements. It

could be argued that a marginalisation of social work under this new model of care may have a detrimental effect on any collective, let alone personal, sense of professional identity in the profession itself.

Some NQSWs identified that negative public perceptions and attitudes may also have a restrictive effect on their professional identity. Negative perceptions were felt to be aggravated by a poor understanding of the social work role, compounded by negative media representations. As one NQSW put it: 'I don't feel safe telling people my profession ...'

Just under half of the respondents identified internal / sector challenges as another restriction. Some aspects here included budget cuts, impacts on time and workloads:

'Our role is being diluted and we are becoming accountants. High caseloads mean we are unable to form professional relationships with service users'

Some NQSWs highlighted that having limited opportunity for professional development and career progression (no specialist routes, for example), including a lack of opportunities to keep up to date with relevant knowledge and research, meant that they felt excluded from the status of professional (often, in this case, associated with progressive / deeper learning in other professions such as law or medicine).

The final part in this section of the survey asked NQSWs to comment on what they thought would strengthen their professional identity. The responses here had more clarity and consistency than earlier questions. Three key actions emerged from the data.

1. Improve public understanding of, and regard for, the social work role through improved media coverage.
2. Improve recognition, understanding and value of the social work role across professional groups, particularly in health and social care partnerships.
3. Improve attention to, and provide time for, professional development and career progression, including attention to learning, knowledge and skill development, knowledge exchange and post-qualifying opportunities.

Additional priorities identified by NQSWs included:

- more time and resource 'to do "social work" with service users'
- a clearly defined and well understood professional role. (Responses in this area spoke to the breadth, diversity and sometimes fractured nature of the social work role. As one NQSW put it: 'Social work is so diverse. This diversity in itself

- can create fractions')
- a strong professional union / body to strengthen the profession.

Overall, NQSWs seemed to acknowledge professional identity as a fluid concept that is often difficult to anchor in concrete language. It appears to be a way of being; a position constituted by multiple dimensions and open to change. It has objective roots in tangible skills and subjective roots in how social workers are perceived by others. Whatever professional identity is to NQSWs, the data here suggests that it needs framed with better clarity.

(j) DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP

Following the SSSC's commitment to enhancing leadership skills across all levels of social service delivery in Scotland, the project team felt it necessary to explore this issue with NQSWs at the initial stage of their careers. The data collected here establishes a baseline from which the development of leadership skills can be traced over the next five years.

In this section of the survey NQSWs were asked if they understood what leadership meant to them at this stage in their careers. This was a closed question with three options: 'yes', 'no' and 'don't know'. The majority of NQSWs (60%) said they understood what leadership meant. Around 15% said 'no', with around 25% answering 'don't know'. As the concept of leadership across all levels of social work is relatively new, it could be inferred that 40% of respondents have yet to develop their understanding of this in their daily role.

NQSWs were asked to rate how important they felt developing capacity for leadership was to their role. Around 39% said 'very important', with 41% answering 'moderately important'. NQSWs were then asked if they had been supported to develop 'leadership skills' within the last year. Around 73% said no. For those answering 'yes', it would appear that most support came from a line manager.

Asked if they had participated in any formal leadership activity in the last year, around 93% of NQSWs said 'no'. The following question asked if NQSWs had developed any leadership capabilities in the last year. Around 82 participants skipped this question; however, for those who answered it (74), the top three leadership capabilities to emerge were:

1. Collaborating and influencing (56%)
2. Self-leadership (55%)

3. Motivating and inspiring others (44%).

In free text responses, NQSWs were asked about what employers or others could do to help develop their leadership skills. More than half said that employers could do more to support NQSWs to identify leadership skills and make more opportunities available to practice and develop in this area. Training featured as a key route to developing these skills, as did discussion, feedback and supervision from managers. Around 11 respondents identified a need to 'talk about it' within day to day practice. As one NQSW put it:

'Begin by discussing this – I work for a LA and I have never had a discussion with anyone in management about leadership. I have however built confidence from my team and developed my leadership skills this way'

Some NQSWs referred to knowing little and receiving no input on leadership skills:

'Unsure, I have no knowledge in this area'

'No input from my employer in this area'

Other NQSWs took the view that employers lacked understanding of what leadership ought to be. One NQSW referred to what their agency lacked: 'a clear vision of what leadership within the organisation means'

Some NQSWs felt that developing leadership skills was not necessarily important to them at this stage in their career:

'Not a priority right now'

'I have only been here for a couple of months; sure leadership will come in time!'

'I see this role as more collaborative, everyone equal and working together as opposed to me leading'

Here, as with responses to questions elsewhere relating to skills and knowledge, there seems to be a default position to further / deeper / better training as an emerging theme. There is clearly a need to address a number of areas where deeper learning and development is required for NQSWs across a range of practice areas.

(k) ANYTHING ELSE?

The project team understands that a prescribed set of questions will never capture all aspects and dimensions of NQSW experiences with any great precision. We felt it necessary therefore to include a

general question at the end of the online survey – one that invited NQSWs to say whatever they wanted about their experiences in practice so far. We left this deliberately open and provided larger free text boxes for NQSWs to write as much as they wanted.

Seventy of the 157 respondents chose to provide a concluding reflection on the experience of being a NQSW in Scotland today. These reflections cut across the project themes and findings and highlight the diversity and nuances of the NQSW experience. Broadly, they speak to the highs and lows of becoming a social worker within challenging and changing contexts.

By far the most frequently cited positive of becoming a social worker was the experience of support from colleagues and teams. Respondents also highlighted a sense of pride and worth arising from their role, the value of learning in practice, and the value of access to structured and learning and support opportunities. As one respondent concludes:

'I smile and feel proud of myself for achieving a social work degree and becoming a social worker. The job presents with challenges but I am relishing the opportunity to prove my worth.'

The most frequently cited challenge was the impact of austerity and cuts on day-to-day practice and developing professional identities. For many, this manifest in an experience of increasing demand, high caseloads, firefighting, staff shortages, limited support and a relentless focus on budgets and cost. For some this was experienced as an 'erosion' of the social work role as financial values were felt to take precedence over professional values.

'The focus on budgets is really strong in my area and balancing the need to save money, meet need [and] promote independence and choice is the biggest challenge.'

'The difficulty has been the rising financial issue in health and social care...the drive for all assessments is to reduce cost, so much so that we feel more like accountants and risk losing sight of the values and principles under which we were trained. I appreciate budget management is an aspect of our role but at present it is overwhelming all other values such as empowerment, social justice, equality, self-determination and care. I worry about losing the beliefs that led me to want to become a social worker.'

Other shared challenges included the transition from education to practice, an experience felt to be aggravated by current climates. However, where respondents felt supported, even 'overwhelming' transitions could be experienced as positive.

'Being a NQSW is a huge jump from being a student...increase in caseload, high profile cases, risk management mean that the transition [is] difficult.'

'I have found it quite overwhelming coming from a short postgraduate course into field work, however the transition has really strengthened my learning and forced me to develop my skills and confidence.'

Respondents also highlighted challenges arising from integration, including lack of adequate preparation and a perceived lack of respect and value from health colleagues:

'Some professionals, for example health, sometimes treat me like nothing. Sometimes my facts and contributions seem to be ignored. This makes me feel intimidated and undermines my profession.'

Other identified lows included too much time spent on paperwork and report writing to the neglect of time spent with people, a lack of time to research and understand practice issues, poor work/life balance and a perceived hostile media.

Emotions featured heavily in respondent reflections, including references to pride, passion, care and joy as feelings associated with developing professional identity and practice. However, respondents also spoke of the emotional labour of practice, citing feelings of fear, worry, frustration, stress, anxiety, insomnia and loss of appetite. Emotional labour and strain was frequently linked to fiscal pressures, high caseloads and staff shortages, as well as to broader sector pressures and demands.

'I feel up against it at every turn...changes...further financial cuts, IT issues and the amount of paperwork we are expected to do. Plus the negative media attention of social work. It's a thankless role most of the time.'

'During the first six months I considered quitting due to the stress and anxiety I experienced. I worried...my cases were difficult and involved situations that I had never dreamed of being involved in, often on my own. I had a loss of appetite, sleepless nights and anxiety before meetings. As time has progressed this has lessened considerably.'

'I feel scared that high caseloads and firefighting will lead to me making mistakes. I've seen colleagues in trouble and reported for being behind with case notes and breaching data protection in error - colleagues with caseloads of 40+ and no end in sight. The impact of cuts, being agile, working with no safe space for teams, shortage of staff and unhappy

colleagues. I feel disheartened and question why I wanted to work in statutory social work when this is the reality. Yet I have no plans to leave...this is my true vocation.'

Some described feeling ill-prepared for the emotional demands of practice and experienced little formal recognition of emotions in practice. Greater attention to the emotional and psychological demands of the job was identified as important to supporting resilience and retention.

Looking forward, respondents identified a number of needs and priorities. Broadly, this included:

- better preparation: specifically, more direct practice experience and greater access to quality statutory learning opportunities
- more support from employers in supporting transition into practice, including a more developmental first year
- better communication between education and employers
- less time on paperwork and more time with service users
- improved communication, partnership and respect across health and social care
- a more supportive professional/ regulatory body
- an improved post-qualifying learning framework, including structured time and support for learning in practice.

SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

This report presents a snapshot of NQSW experiences within the first year of qualifying as a professional. It provides important baseline data for the project team to dissect and analyse over the next five years. The findings here on aspects of NQSW knowledge, skills and competence provide a number of avenues for the team to measure, trace and explore over the course of this study. The project will build incrementally with data continuously synthesised from ethnography, focus groups, individual interviews and fixed-point online surveys.

Key messages from this phase of the project are provided below under thematic headings used in the online survey. The project team felt this would aid the reader at this stage, as the volume of data collected is vast and remains subject to analysis. Future reports will provide more synthesised data under new thematic headings (as we expect new themes to emerge).

It should be noted that themes relating to previous work experience, education and induction will not feature in subsequent reporting. The project team are satisfied that these areas have been explored adequately in the first wave of data collection. This will result in a shorter online survey provided to NQSWs in subsequent waves, with fewer questions asked about these areas in focus groups and individual interviews too.

Routes into social work

Crucially, the majority of NQSWs entered social work education with some sense of what social work is and what social workers do. Motivations to enter the profession seem to reflect embedded values of social justice, compassion and desire to support service users. The majority appear to come with previous experience of working in social care fields. Some came with lived experience of care, fostering, other social work contact / intervention. Only a small minority entered social work education without any social care experience.

Education

On the whole, experiences of previous social work education are rated positively. In respect of improvements, some NQSWs felt that HEIs could place more emphasis on preparing students better for practice placements by providing more practical / specialist inputs on key areas of social work practice. Other NQSWs felt that focusing on specialisms would prepare them better for respective roles in criminal justice, children's services and adult social work.

Current employment

NQSWs seem to spend the majority of their time on report writing and entering case notes. Around a third have some form of workload protection, with a third unsure if they do. Just under half report caseloads of between 11-20. Just under half report to be holding cases relating to child protection, sexual offending and adult protection. Indeed, whilst these findings might seem concerning at first glance, the majority of NQSWs said they felt workloads were manageable and appropriate for their level of expertise. Levels of confidence here were surprising, but we found nothing significantly negative in responses given by NQSWs.

Induction

Around 60% said that induction was unstructured; however, there seemed to be a degree of consistency in what NQSWs experienced, ie periods of shadowing, agency visits, reading documents, corporate introductions, etc. Average periods of induction ranged from 1-2 weeks. Mixed responses here reflect the absence of a nationally agreed framework of induction for NQSWs in Scotland.

Professional confidence and competence

The majority of NQSWs reported strong levels of confidence and competence across four broad domains: skills, knowledge, self-efficacy and professional values. Working with other professionals and time management emerged as skills exercised with most confidence. Human development and statutory codes of practice emerged as areas of knowledge where most confidence was expressed. Remaining calm and using coping abilities emerged as key aspects of self-efficacy. Honesty, openness, empathy, respect and anti-discriminatory practice emerged as professional values NQSWs felt most able to demonstrate. We found consistency in levels of confidence and competence across all domains no matter what experiences these NQSWs previously had in education and employment prior to qualification. In many ways, this did not surprise us: previous studies tend to show high levels of confidence among young professionals as they settle into their chosen career (within the first year). Indeed, the findings here do provide a crucial baseline for future waves of data collection where we intend to trace and map changes over time.

Formal supervision

Experiences of supervision were, on the whole, reported positively by NQSWs. The majority seemed to receive regular supervision where they felt supported. The majority agreed that managers gave them 'good advice and guidance'. Over half received supervision lasting between 60-90 minutes. However, the majority of NQSWs

did suggest that the main focus of their supervision was workload management. A significant proportion of NQSWs felt that supervision requires more formal arrangements for protected time, with structure of sessions to include more space for critical reflection and discussion of personal issues.

Informal support

NQSWs were unequivocal that informal support from colleagues and peers was exceptionally important to them at personal and professional levels. Responses suggest that NQSWs felt slightly more supported by colleagues than managers (despite positive responses emerging for managers in the previous section on supervision). Particular emphasis emerged on learning from colleagues and peers – seen as critical and important for NQSW development. Professional advice and emotional support emerged as strong themes in the data.

Professional learning and development

Most learning opportunities at the post-qualification stage for NQSWs seem to involve a combination of shadowing colleagues, training provided by employers and self-directed study (reading journal articles, for example). NQSWs identified a need for more practical knowledge relating directly to their current role (ie risk assessments, legislation and social work interventions). Most NQSWs appeared satisfied with the quantity and quality of training offered to them. Most felt supported (by managers) to pursue learning opportunities. A significant proportion felt that time for learning and development should be protected and resourced by employers. There was a tendency amongst NQSWs to focus on acquiring knowledge and training that relate more directly to their current area of practice, be it children's services, criminal justice or adult social work.

Professional identity

This was – for all intents and purposes - a very complex area to explore with NQSWs. The literature on professional identity in social work is still in its infancy. However, what emerged here was a sense that professional identity for NQSWs is shaped by a number of things: self, employers, the profession itself (a collective identity), colleagues and external influences (particular from other professionals and media sources). Translating the concept of professional identity into practice, many NQSWs referred to having autonomy, specialist knowledge, professional values, ability to make complex judgements, etc. Articulations of professional 'purpose' featured strongly in the majority of responses. A number of NQSWs expressed concern that their sense of professional identity was challenged by how they were treated by NHS staff who perceived

them as not having equal status to health professions. However, NQSWs were clear that professional identity would be strengthened by better public understanding of social work, better understanding amongst NHS staff, and the provision of robust career pathways for staff to specialise (as they do in health and other professions).

Developing leadership

This was another complex area for NQSWs to consider. The majority (93%) had not engaged in 'leadership activity' since taking up employment. Many NQSWs did not see leadership as being critical to their daily role. A more traditional sense emerged that leadership is something done by those at the top of a profession, not for those still finding their feet.

Anything else?

When invited to discuss additional matters of relevance, key themes included: education, transitions, austerity, workload, integration, identity and emotions. In essence, a large proportion of NQSWs expressed confidence in their role and contribution while also expressing concern about the challenging circumstances and climates in which they work.