

Post Qualifying Learning in Social Work in Scotland

A Research Study

May 2019



The research team

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

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Executive summary

This national research study into post qualifying learning for social workers in Scotland was undertaken by the Craigforth social research company in 2018/19. The research was commissioned by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) to inform the recommendations of the National Health and Social Care Workforce Plan Part 2. The study aimed to:

- develop a robust understanding of the extent and features of post qualifying learning undertaken by social workers in Scotland from employer and practitioner perspectives
- identify changes and developments in post qualifying learning that may be required to meet current and future employee needs
- seek employer and practitioner views about the value and nature of Scotland's proposed post qualifying framework for social workers.

Methods

The research drew on quantitative and qualitative evidence from social work local authority and third sector workforce development staff, practitioners and managers using three complementary methods.

- An online mapping survey with 32 responses from local authority and third sector learning leads to establish a baseline of current social work post qualifying learning activity and expenditure in Scotland.
- Telephone interviews with 25 social work learning leads to gain a greater in depth understanding of the nature of post qualifying learning in each locality.
- Seven focus groups with 57 front line local authority social workers held in urban, rural and island locations across Scotland to explore practitioner perceptions of current and future post qualifying learning.

Findings: local authorities

Mapping the learning

Qualified social workers engage in a very wide range of learning activity but provision was often described as inconsistent and piecemeal and lacking in overall strategic direction and coherency. Respondents informed us that workforce development budgets had been cut severely over the



previous ten years, with subsequent reduction in learning opportunities and infrastructure, as well as the ability of authorities to release social workers to attend learning programmes. Rural and island authority social workers encountered particularly acute challenges in facilitating staff learning due to travel and time costs incurred. Health and social care integration was said to offer positive opportunities for multidisciplinary learning, but was also described by some practitioners and learning leads as contributing to increasing fragmentation of social work services, with a resulting loss of influence on learning priorities and expenditure within larger corporate and integrated budgets. Partnership with other learning providers, especially Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), was valued, but the development of integrated approaches to learning was believed to be constrained by factors such as limited training budgets, short staffing and, for some authorities, distance from academic institutions. The importance of opportunities for distance learning, remote collaboration and the use of up to date learning technology was stressed, especially by participants in more remote and island locations, but local provision and uptake varied considerably between local authorities.

Budgetary and staffing constraints were said to have had a particularly negative impact on smaller local authorities that now lack staff with dedicated workforce development responsibilities. Many local authorities have, nevertheless, continued to find ways to develop creative and innovative learning approaches, opportunities and resources. However, many of these promising activities are happening in relative isolation, with duplication of effort and resources, and insufficient collaboration and sharing of developments and ideas.

The practitioner's experience

Practitioners placed a high value on learning but access to relevant qualifications and training varied greatly within, as well as between, local authorities and services. They emphasised the importance of 'on the job' learning, whether through self-directed reflection, study and research, or opportunities for practice discussions with colleagues in team meetings, in practitioner forums and, more informally, during the working day. However, these opportunities were said to be increasingly limited by workload and staffing pressures. Regular supervision from a skilled team manager that encompasses personal and professional development was regarded as an essential element of post qualifying learning by many respondents. Team managers appeared to have a crucial role in enabling access to learning but inconsistencies in supervisory support and behaviours were identified by both newly qualified and more experienced practitioners even where there were coherent and apparently well-implemented local workforce development strategies in place.



Development and career progression

Social work post qualifying learning, unlike that of many professions, is not linked to career progression. The lack of a career structure was said by many respondents in both frontline and management roles to act as a disincentive to staff development, and impact negatively on morale, recruitment and retention. A small number of local authorities have developed, or are developing, their own learning pathways, specifying necessary learning for social workers at different stages of their careers; employees in these authorities welcomed the clarity and consistency that this more structured and consistent approach to career-long learning is bringing.

The move from frontline practitioner to manager was seen as a particularly significant one, requiring greater attention to preparation for the role, and more support for ongoing management and leadership learning than is often currently available. Many respondents told us that there are few opportunities for experienced practitioners to progress unless they take on management roles, resulting in a continuing loss of expertise to frontline social work practice. Recognition of achievement for post qualifying award holders was said to be variable, and authorities offering higher salaries to employees with awards reportedly attract social workers from rural, island and smaller authorities, causing local skill and service shortages.

A post qualifying framework for practice in social work

Over three quarters of the learning leads surveyed, and most practitioners, were in favour of the introduction of a post qualifying framework. Key features of an effective framework were identified as transparency, equity, portability, congruence with social work values, integration with other frameworks and pathways, relevance to current practice, and demonstrably improved outcomes for service users and carers. Potential perceived benefits included a higher priority for social work learning, enhancement of professional standing and identity, positive impacts on recruitment and retention, improved workforce skills, increased employer accountability, and greater consistency, choice and quality of learning. However, concerns were expressed about whether the framework will be sufficiently resourced, how career progression will be recognised and rewarded and who will be accountable for its implementation. The importance of a streamlined approach that is not overly burdensome and incorporates an emphasis on practice based learning as well as academic qualifications was emphasised.



Findings: third sector organisations

The four third sector organisations that participated in the research also reported significant loss of learning and development capacity due to budgetary cuts. They told us that they regularly lose their substantial investment in social workers' early career learning to higher paying employers. Third sector employers appeared to be particularly active in promoting partnership working, both to increase learning opportunities for their staff and as a means of income generation. Coherent learning strategies, directly linked to service need, were rather more evident than in local authorities. Nearly all were supportive of the introduction of the framework but there was also doubt, and some confusion, expressed about its relevance to social workers who are not employed in statutory roles and therefore are not required to register with SSSC.

The way ahead

The research found a widespread desire to take a fresh look at social work learning and to engage in a debate about how best to support the development of meaningful strategic approaches and learning pathways that recognise and develop social work expertise and leadership at every level. The focus of this research has been on the post qualifying learning of employers and social workers, mainly in local authorities. The development of a Post Qualifying Framework for Social Workers in Scotland will require a collaborative approach involving HEIs, NHS, SSSC, Social Work Scotland, and other learning partners as well as social work employers to explore how best to develop a more effective, integrated, whole-system approach to career-long learning.

The current state of social work post qualifying learning is the result of a complex interaction of existing and historical financial, structural, geographical and cultural influences. Whilst there is no 'quick fix' to the barriers and gaps identified in this research, there is much good practice to build on. The research therefore recommends the following actions designed to bring about realisable transformational change in social work post qualifying learning in Scotland.

1. Develop a post qualifying framework for practice for social workers, drawing on these research findings, and continuing consultation with a range of stakeholders, including HEIs, employers and practitioners, to identify advanced practice roles and meet current gaps in social workers' opportunities for career-long learning and development.
2. Improve the quality, consistency and relevance of post qualifying learning so that social workers, whatever their social work specialism, are supported, through practice based development,



supervision and more formal learning activities and programmes, to learn throughout their careers.

3. Address inequalities of access to learning for social workers in different parts of Scotland, taking account of the particular challenges experienced by practitioners and employers in rural, remote and island locations, the third sector and smaller local authorities.
4. Build local and national networks that will enable local learning experiences and successes to be evaluated and communicated across the sector, with the potential for the development of shared national resources for, and approaches to, post qualifying learning in Scotland.



1. Introduction

The focus of this report is a national research study into post qualifying learning for social workers in Scotland. The study was commissioned by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) to fulfil three main aims:

- to develop a robust understanding of the extent and features of post qualifying learning undertaken by social workers in Scotland from employer and practitioner perspectives
- to identify changes and developments in post qualifying learning that may be required to meet current and future employee needs
- to seek employer and practitioner views about the value and nature of Scotland's proposed post qualifying framework for social workers.

The research was undertaken by the research company, Craigforth, during 2018/19. It builds on a body of previous research, including recent research studies into PQL and career pathways in Scotland that have identified considerable gaps in our knowledge about the nature, scope and quality of PQL, and about pathways for professional development and career progression in Scotland (Gillies, 2014, 2015).

The purpose of this research is therefore to develop a more robust understanding of the current extent and nature of PQL undertaken by social workers, and to look ahead to explore what the profession requires to be in place in the future. This Scotland wide mapping of learning activity focuses on social work employers. It involved approaches to all 32 local authorities, an NHS Board that provides social work services and a sample of third sector organisations that employ social workers. The research also asked practising social workers to think creatively about how PQL and opportunities for career progression could be improved locally and nationally, and to highlight examples of effective learning and development activity in their locality.

Background to the research

The research was commissioned in 2018 at a time of significant public sector transformation in health and social care. Key drivers for these changes include the integration of health and social care services through the Health and Social Care Delivery Plan (Scottish Government, 2016a), the development of National Health and Wellbeing Outcomes (Scottish Government, 2015), the National Strategy for Criminal Justice (Scottish Government, 2016b) and a new Mental Health Strategy (Scottish Government, 2017a). Delivering service transformation on this scale requires a highly skilled and motivated social services workforce with



access to relevant learning opportunities, qualifications and the capacity to support social workers at all levels to respond effectively to new challenges.

Scotland's recent National Health and Social Care Workforce Plan Part 2 (Scottish Government, 2017b) provides a response to these far-reaching changes, recognising the need to improve local and national workforce planning. At the same time, it acknowledges the challenges inherent in developing a national strategy for workforce planning, especially in relation to the different approaches taken to PQL in the NHS and social care. These differences were also highlighted by Gillies (2014) along with evidence of a considerable variation in PQL arrangements for social workers in the UK's four nations. Recommendation 7 of the Workforce Plan proposes the development of 'training and education proposals that will better enable a flexible, confident and competent workforce with relevant and appropriate qualifications' (p.6). This theme also necessarily runs through SSSC's Learning Strategy 2017-20 (Scottish Social Services Council, 2017) which articulates SSSC's continuing ambition to lead, support and develop learning across the social services sector.

The findings of this research will inform the implementation of the Workforce Plan and SSSC's Learning Strategy. More specifically, they will assist in the development of a professional framework for social work, a further recommendation contained in the National Health and Social Care Workforce Plan Part 2. A national professional framework for social work is seen as one way to address shortfalls in the numbers of qualified specialist social workers, such as Mental Health Officers (MHOs) and practice educators, as well as a perceived dearth of other career development routes, including those into more senior positions. At the time of writing, SSSC is consulting on draft professional frameworks for social care and social work. Any new framework must take into consideration a range of existing frameworks and ongoing developments, including the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF); the Review of Social Work Education (Scottish Social Services Council, 2018) and the implementation of new Health and Social Care Standards in Scotland (Scottish Government, 2018). The research also intersects with other ongoing SSSC research initiatives, particularly in relation to the learning trajectories of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) (Grant et al., 2017) and the potential introduction of a supported and assessed year for NQSWs (Craigforth, research in progress).

In summary, this research has been undertaken at a time of considerable flux and change in health and social care, and therefore, inevitably, in the working lives and learning journeys of social workers. Gillies (2015) emphasised the need for accurate intelligence about career patterns for social workers in Scotland and recommended a systematic review of existing PQ activity. The purpose of this research is to draw on employer



intelligence and understandings to provide this baseline information, and to consider options for change, in particular the introduction of a coherent national PQ framework that spans the entirety of social workers' careers.

The current framework for post qualifying learning

Social workers in Scotland undertaking statutory social work roles are required to register with SSSC. There is no requirement for social workers in non-statutory roles, for example some posts in the third sector, that do not require a social work qualification to register, although practitioners may choose to do so. Registered social workers are required to undertake 15 days/90 hours Post Registration Training and Learning (PTRL) over three years, including at least five days training and learning in relation to assessing risk to vulnerable groups. Social workers are expected to keep a PTRL record of achievement, which may be randomly sampled by SSSC. Newly qualified social workers (NOSWs) are required to undertake and evidence 24 days/144 hours training and learning in their first year of employment. There is an expectation that PTRL activity is wide-ranging, comprising formal learning but also 'learning as it happens' through, for example, reading, shadowing, experiential learning and continuous critical reflection on practice.

There are a number of other sector-specific frameworks, tools and scaffolding for learning that support social workers' learning in practice that intersect with the PRTL requirements. These include the Continuous Learning Framework (CLF) which sets out personal and organisational capabilities required for learning and SSSC's 'Step into Leadership' pathway. Gillies (2015) found that social workers in Scotland are motivated to participate in a wide range of PQL in ways that considerably exceed the minimum registration requirements. However, her exploration of post qualifying learning and development for social workers found 'a somewhat mesmerising array' of in-house, mostly unregulated and non-assessed employer initiatives sitting alongside assessed, bespoke qualifications, such as the MHO award, and Child Protection Certificate, mostly delivered by Higher Education Institutions' (HEIs) (2015, p.8).

Structure of this report

This report sets out the background to this research before describing the methods used to access the perspectives of learning and development providers, social work managers, and front line practitioners. The findings are then presented thematically, combining qualitative and quantitative data drawn from a national survey, interviews with learning and development leads and Chief Social Work Officers (CSWOs) and focus groups with social work frontline practitioners and managers. The report ends with a broad-based discussion of current and future social work PQL and recommendations arising from the research.



Note on terminology

To preserve anonymity, the local authority and third sector organisations whose employees have contributed to the research are not identified in this report. For consistency the following terms will be used to describe local authorities with differing population sizes.

- **Large local authority:** Local authority area with a population of over 200,000.
- **Medium sized local authority:** Local authority area with a population of more than 100,000 and less than 200,000.
- **Small local authority:** Local authority area with a population of less than 100,000.

In addition, where relevant, we refer to local authorities' geographical characteristics: urban, a mix of urban/rural, rural, rural/remote and island. To maintain anonymity and simplify the text 'local authority' is used to refer to all local authorities that provide social work services in Scotland, including NHS Highland. Third sector organisations are referred to by their function (eg children's services, residential provision, foster care).

For ease of reference, and to maintain confidentiality, all survey and interview respondents, who had varied roles and job titles within their organisation, are described as 'learning leads'.

See also the Glossary of Terms at the end of this report.



2. Research methodology and methods

Methodology

The research uses a mixed methods methodology suitable for studies that seek to explore and explain complex social phenomena (Creswell, 2009). By combining quantitative and qualitative data collection and analysis, the research aims to improve our understanding of the prevailing context for, and features of, social work PQL in Scotland from employer and employee perspectives. Its design is sequential, building on survey-based collection of quantitative data about the prevailing nature and extent of PQL, with subsequent interviews and focus groups that sought to explain, expand upon, and encourage dialogue in relation to the study's quantitative findings.

A mixed methods approach also offers the opportunity to incorporate and integrate breadth and depth within a single study. Since the research aimed to take a Scotland-wide approach to PQL, breadth of geographical and service coverage was a priority for the mapping element of the research (see also research limitations, below). A more exploratory, open-ended, interpretive methodology was required, however, to elicit practising social workers' views of the value, nature, challenges and future direction for PQL. This combination of documenting change and other measurable factors, whilst simultaneously capturing in depth experiences and expectations, can be viewed as being particularly well attuned to research into the complexity and diversity of social work practices and institutions (Bronstein and Kovacs, 2013).

Research design

Three research methods were employed, designed to gather a range of qualitative and quantitative data from employers and practitioners.

- An online mapping survey of social work learning leads to establish a quantitative baseline of current PQL activity, strategy and expenditure, and a qualitative overview of key achievements and challenges.
- A follow up telephone interview with survey respondents to gain a greater in depth understanding of the nature of PQL in each locality, and views on future PQL developments.
- A series of seven focus groups with front line social workers held in a mix of locations across Scotland. The aim of the focus groups was



to enable an in-depth exploration of the experiences and expectations of practitioners.

These three approaches to understanding PQL learning are described in more detail below, followed by an explanation of the limitations to this research.

The researchers were accountable to a Research Advisory Group (RAG), chaired by an SSSC Learning and Development Manager, and comprising representatives from frontline social work practice, local authority workforce development, SSSC and the Scottish Government.

Mapping survey

The mapping survey was designed in Survey Monkey in consultation with the RAG and piloted by its members. The survey questions are summarised in Appendix 1.

The survey link was distributed by email to the following organisations.

- The 32 local authorities and NHS Trust that provide statutory social work services in Scotland. Social Work Scotland (SWS), the professional leadership body for social work and social care in Scotland, undertook to send the survey to all members of its Learning and Development Practice Network.
- Nine third sector organisations in Scotland that are known to employ social workers. Seven relevant organisational contacts were identified by SSSC and two further recipients by the research team. All the organisations provide services to children and families, and one has a youth justice role.

Employers that did not respond to these first approaches were contacted directly by phone and email by the researchers who made strenuous efforts to ensure that all identified employers had the opportunity to contribute to the research. At least two approaches were made to each employer. Twenty-eight of 33 possible statutory providers responded to the survey (88% response rate), 22 of whom completed the whole survey. Of the five statutory providers that did not respond, two were medium-sized and three were small local authorities. Four third sector employers responded to the survey (44% response rate). A further three did not take part because they had few or no social work staff or lacked a current learning lead, and two did not respond to interview requests.

The survey respondents had diverse roles. Twenty-two had roles in learning and workforce development, and eight were local authority CSWOs or senior managers, one was an adult protection co-ordinator and



one a frontline social worker. CSWOs mostly responded on behalf of smaller local authorities without learning and development staff, although some larger authorities were also represented by senior managers. Four authorities were in predominantly urban areas, seven in rural locations, three were island authorities, and 14 covered a mix of urban and rural areas. Three third sector organisations had a UK wide remit and one a more local remit. All were based in Scotland's central belt.

Telephone interviews

Each survey respondent was contacted and asked if they would be willing to expand on their responses in a telephone interview. The development of the interview topic guide (see Appendix 2) was informed by survey responses and consultation with the RAG. In the case of non-completion, the researchers contacted learning leads directly by phone or email or, where there was no nominated lead, the CSWO or other relevant senior manager. Interviews were recorded to ensure accuracy of researchers' note-taking but were not transcribed.

Participants were sent an information sheet about the research and a consent form which clarified the ethical basis of the research (see Research Ethics, below). One participant asked not to be recorded, and all others agreed to a recording being made. Twenty-one organisations providing statutory services took part in interviews (64% response rate). Most of the local authority participants were the same individuals that responded to the survey, but in three instances a different employee chose to be interviewed. Eight local authorities that responded to the survey did not respond to interview requests, and one local authority that took part in an interview did not complete the survey. All four third sector employers that completed a survey were interviewed (44% response rate).

Focus groups

The function of the local authority focus groups was to ensure that the researchers heard from practitioners and first line managers in a range of different locations, stages of career development and social work specialisms. Seven focus groups were held in different parts of Scotland, drawing on a different population of respondents from those who took part in the survey and interviews. Focus groups were recorded to ensure accuracy of facilitators' note-taking but were not transcribed.

Four focus groups were grouped by specialism/stage of learning.

- Children and families.
- Adult care.



- Mental health.
- NQSWs.

Three focus groups were based in a single local authority.

- A large urban local authority.
- A large mixed urban/rural authority.
- An island local authority.

Two further focus groups, one for criminal justice social workers and one for social workers in a large rural authority, were cancelled by employers due to staff absence in one instance, and insufficient numbers in the other.

A total of 15 local authorities and 57 participants took part in the focus groups between December 2018 and February 2019. The groups comprised between five and 17 participants, with an average of eight in each group. Participants were all qualified social workers, with between two months and 38 years of PQ experience. The composition of the focus groups and topics discussed are summarised in Appendix 3.

Data analysis

Data analysis combined basic statistical analysis of quantitative data from the survey, and thematic analysis of qualitative data from the survey, interviews and focus groups (Braun and Clarke, 2006). In view of emerging complexity of inter-relationships between themes, analysis of interviews and focus groups, use was made of mind mapping techniques suitable for rapid analysis of qualitative data (Burgess-Allan and Owen-Smith, 2010).

Research ethics

Craigforth adheres to the Ethical Guidelines of the Social Research Association (SRA, 2003) in relation to its obligations to research participants, colleagues and funders, as well as to society. The company is registered under terms of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) with robust measures in place to ensure that it complies with regulation requirements. These are the key commitments that related to this research.

- All information provided by individuals to the survey, during interview and in focus groups to be anonymised in any reporting of the research. Neither names and employing organisations nor



locations of participants to be shared with SSSC or in any verbal or written reporting.

- All records made in the course of the research, whether written or recorded, to be held securely in password-protected locations and destroyed on acceptance by SSSC of the final report.
- Participants in interviews and the focus groups were provided with information about the research and asked to complete a consent form before taking part. Any participant wishing to withdraw at any point during the research was informed that they were free to do so.

The strong commitment to confidentiality and anonymity that underpinned this research was important to ensure that the findings represented as realistic a picture as possible of PQL – its challenges and barriers as well as its achievements – in Scotland. An inevitable cost of this ethical undertaking is that the research is unable to report in detail on any of the very creative and positive developments we heard about during the course of data collection. This report outlines some examples of these activities but does not attribute them to the people and places that made them possible.

Research limitations

Three important limitations to this research are described below. They relate to challenges experienced in identifying key respondents, under-representation of some social work specialisms in the research and recognition of the wider context for post-qualifying learning in Scotland.

Identification of key respondents

An important early step in this research was the identification of key individuals in employing organisations who would be able to respond knowledgeably to questions about the current state of, and future opportunities for, PQL for social workers in their organisation. It was observed regularly by participants during the course of the research that this would have been a straightforward matter four or five years previously since all but the smallest organisations had at least one, and often a team of, workforce development staff. In 2018, however, finding the 'right' person to send the survey to, or to interview, was frequently problematic. There were a number of reasons for this, described in some detail below because, collectively, they have something important to say about the positioning, priority and extent of social work PQL activity in Scotland today. The main challenges related to:



Data protection issues

The GDPR came into force just as the research began in May 2019. One unintended consequence of this legislative change was that we were not provided with the contact details of the survey respondents identified by Social Work Scotland, and so were unable to follow up non-responders by making direct contact with them. In addition, partly due to organisational changes described below, it appeared that some of the Social Work Scotland contacts had retired or moved into a new post. An increasing concern with data protection has also led organisations to exercise extreme care about making email addresses or other contact details available to callers or on websites. These two factors contributed to considerable difficulty in locating the most appropriate people to approach to discuss learning and development in some organisations.

Organisational change

Major organisational changes brought about by the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014, which integrated health and social care services in adult care in Scotland, were still being consolidated in local authorities and HSCPs during the life of the research. Learning and development arrangements were, as a result, frequently in flux. Some recently appointed respondents had limited knowledge of PQL in their locality. In addition, a range of new organisational structures had been implemented in response to health and social care integration, often with the result that learning and development functions had been split between different departments and teams with variable communication between them, especially between adult care and children's services. In these circumstances it could be difficult for a single survey or interview respondent to provide a comprehensive picture of current PQ activity in their local authority.

Increasing austerity

Budgetary cuts, we were told, had had a particularly severe impact on learning and development capacity. In small authorities, in particular, there was often no one individual with designated learning and development responsibilities. In these circumstances, we interviewed a service manager or CSWO where possible, but, in other instances, were unable to identify anyone from local authority or third sector organisations to respond to the survey or interview request. Reduced staffing also affected some practitioners' ability to attend focus groups. For example, in one large rural/remote authority, restrictions on travel, coupled with pressure of work, led to the cancellation of a focus group.

Under-represented social work specialisms

The research aimed to involve social work practitioners from diverse social work specialisms. Although practitioners from a wide range of



practice contexts took part in this research, the perspectives of social workers from some specialisms, notably criminal justice and residential social work, are under-represented in the findings.

The wider context for post qualifying learning

The remit of this research was to map employer activity, and practitioner perspectives in relation to the provision of PQL in Scotland. However, the post qualifying social work landscape is an expansive one that involves close co-operation between employers and, amongst others, HEIs, third sector and private learning providers, service user and carer groups, SSSC, Social Work Scotland and local learning partnerships. Since the perspectives of these important PQL partners have not been sought during the course of the research, its findings are, inevitably, only able to represent a partial view of the full range of PQL activity and interactivity in Scotland.



3. Mapping post qualifying learning

Key findings

- Social workers engage in a very wide range of formal and informal learning activity. The nature and extent of provision varies considerably between employer and location in ways that cannot easily be explained by geography, service demand or population size alone.
- Cuts in training budgets have resulted in a prioritisation of learning focused on risk and public protection. Conversely, other aspects of PQL are receiving less attention, especially research, analysis of practice and improvement methodologies.
- Post qualifying awards are generally valued by social workers but access to qualifications is limited by budgetary cuts and competing pressures, especially high workloads. These constraints impact on local authorities' to fulfil legal duties in respect of MHO services, student practice learning and other important social work roles.
- There is considerable local innovation in approaches to practice based, informal learning, but there is duplication of effort, and opportunities for sharing this learning more widely are often lost.

One of the main aims of the research was to provide an overview of the extent and nature of social work PQL in Scotland. This information was gathered through survey, interviews and focus groups, and is summarised below in relation to three overlapping and inter-connected forms of learning.

- Qualifications and awards.
- Non-assessed learning programmes and training courses.
- Learning through everyday practice, including supervision and self-directed learning.

Since there are considerable differences between PQ activity in statutory and third sectors, this is mostly mapped separately below.



Qualifications and awards

Local authorities

There is a range of qualifications that may be made available to social workers in Scotland, most of which are offered by HEIs. The SSSC approves and quality assures some of these qualifications, including the MHO award, CSWO certificate and practice learning qualifications. Local authority survey respondents identified those that they most frequently fund for their staff (see Chart 1). The figures provided do not correlate precisely with those held by SSSC for a number of reasons, including unfinished and postponed study, issues relating to the uptake of the CSWO certificate and learning leads' variable knowledge of advanced qualifications (see also, Methodological Challenges).

All but one of the local authorities surveyed offered the MHO Award. Most authorities also offered opportunities to undertake child protection and, to a lesser extent, adult protection certificates. Other quite frequently cited qualifications included SVQ Level 4 qualifications and practice learning qualifications at SCQF levels 10 and 11.¹ Other Masters level (SCQF 11) qualifications were less likely to be available; those listed in survey responses were almost all in the field of criminal justice. We heard in focus groups and interviews that budgetary restraint had reduced access to programmes leading to a qualification in most localities. Conversely, we also heard that some local authorities had insufficient applicants for the more substantial awards, such as the MHO and practice learning programmes. These variations are discussed in more detail below, using the MHO Award as an example.

A number of other qualifications were also identified, of which the most frequently mentioned were in dementia studies, management and leadership, child care and family permanence. Focus groups also emphasised the relevance of shorter forms of assessed PQL, such as training in the use of the Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LSCMI) by criminal justice social workers.

The example of the MHO Award

An MHO is a specially trained social worker employed by a local authority with legal duties in relation to people with a mental disorder. Local authorities, through their CSWOs, have a duty to appoint a sufficient number of social workers to discharge MHO functions under the Mental Health (Care and Treatment) (Scotland) Act 2003. This duty provides the sole current statutory driver, beyond PRTL requirements, for post qualifying social work learning, and helps to explain the high priority the

¹ 'Practice learning qualification' is used here to denote both the PLQ (Social Services) and PDA(PL) SCQF Level 10 and 11 awards for practice educators (see also Glossary).



Award was given by almost all the local authorities in this study. Despite this legal requirement, and evident commitment to the role and its further development displayed by MHOs, there is a national shortfall of MHOs (Social Work Scotland and Care Inspectorate, 2017). This research heard about a number of different barriers to embarking on and completing the MHO Award.

- A lack of funds for sufficient trainee places to meet practitioner demand. For example, in one medium-sized mixed urban/rural local authority, there were said to have been 15 applicants for the single MHO Award programme place offered the previous year.
- Conversely, applicants not coming forward for training because increasing workloads and organisational change were making it hard for social workers to fulfil the high demands of learning programmes. These factors also sometimes prompted temporary or permanent suspension of MHO Award studies.
- A reluctance to release social workers because of high workloads and lack of backfill to cover absence.
- Concern that, once qualified, a valued practitioner would be promoted out of the team or move to another local authority which offered higher pay to MHOs.
- For rural/ remote, and island local authorities, the high personal, professional and financial costs associated with travel and time away from the workplace to attend HEI learning programmes.

The identified barriers highlight challenges related to recruitment, retention, career progression, organisational change, funding and support. While these factors relate specifically to MHO PQL, they illustrate the kinds of complicated and diverse issues that arise in many other areas of social work PQL.



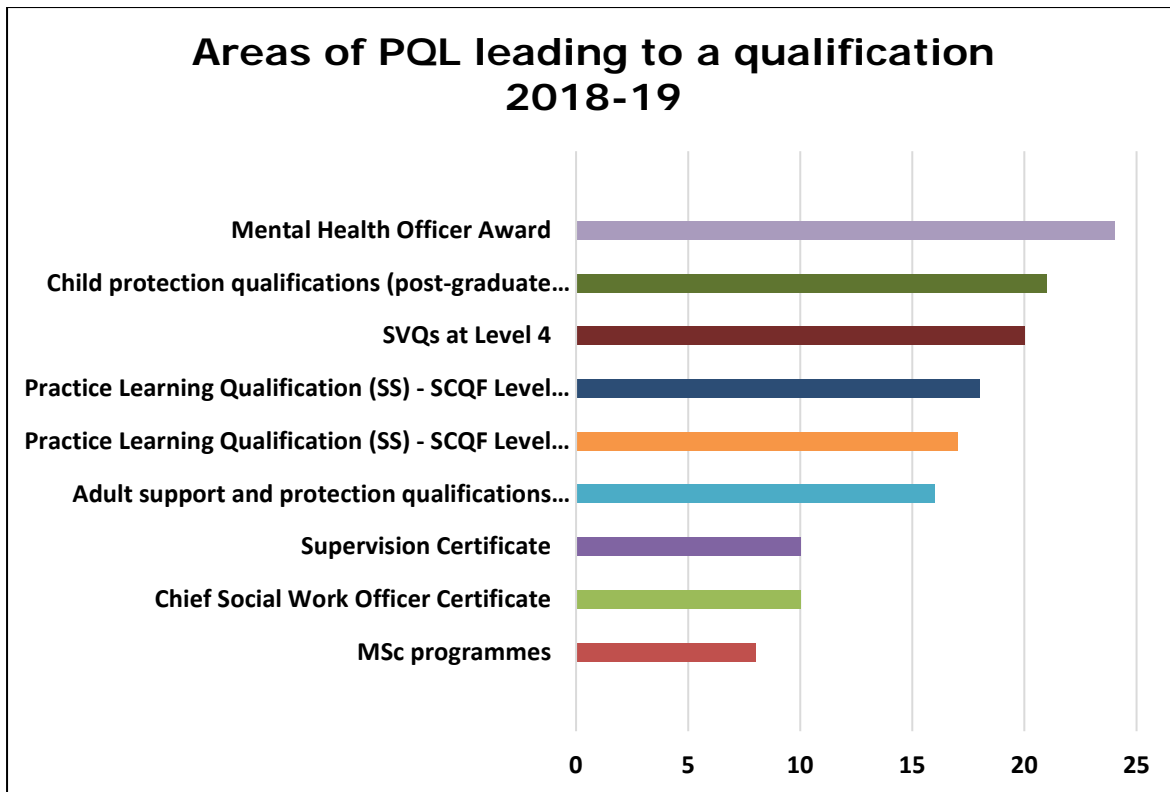


Chart 1: Local authority survey responses: PQL leading to a qualification (n=25)

Third Sector

Two of the three third sector organisations that took part in the survey identified practice learning qualifications as being available to their staff, reflecting the important role of this sector in offering student placements on qualifying social work degree programmes. One also identified awards in child protection, leadership and management and SVQs at Level 4. One agency required staff to identify their own training needs, and source training individually. Funded Masters Degrees were not available to their social work staff.

Non-assessed learning programmes and training courses

Local authorities

PQL is delivered in many different ways by local authorities and by partner organisations, such as the NHS and third sector agencies. Chart 2 sets out the most frequently referred to training courses and learning programmes in the survey. Child protection training was most frequently identified, and other forms of learning related to public protection were also prioritised, including adult support and protection, and risk management and assessment. Significant priority is placed on management and leadership learning and on recent policy developments,



notably self-directed support. In contrast, there was relatively little attention to research, analysis and improvement methodologies. These differences were also largely reflected in interviews and focus groups, although practitioners also stressed that training delivery tends to be front loaded, during the NQSW year and shortly afterwards, with decreasing numbers of developmental opportunities later on in social workers' careers.

Chart 2's aggregation of data from all surveyed local authorities in Scotland conceals a considerable diversity in social workers' access to PQL, and in how local authorities determine priorities and allocate resources to meet their workforce learning needs (see Chapter 5). Survey respondents noted a diversity of other learning opportunities that were made available to staff in different local authorities. Key practice areas included dementia, autism, addictions, working with children and families, and equality and diversity. Various forms of skills based training were also on offer in some local authorities, including conflict resolution, court skills and motivational interviewing.

Third Sector

Responses to this question were too few to draw any reliable conclusions about learning priorities, although it was notable that three of the four organisations offered learning related to stress management, which was not prioritised in local authorities.



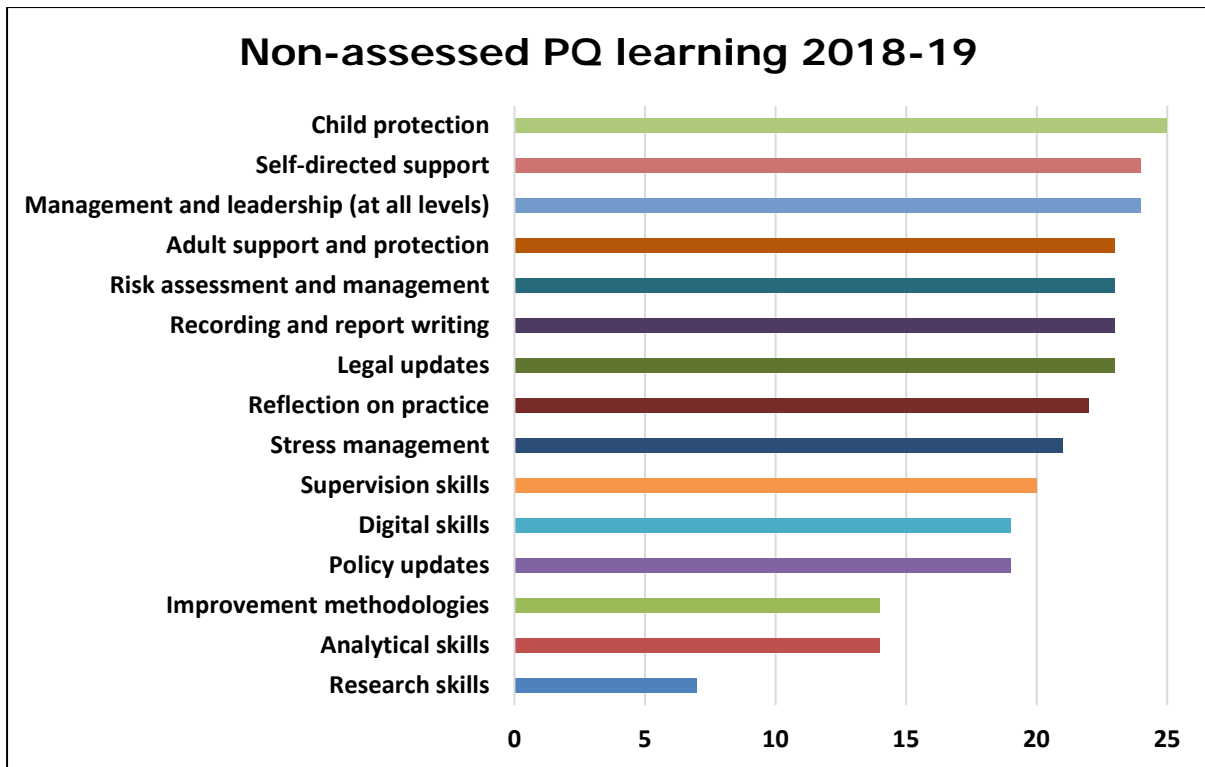


Chart 2: Survey responses: Non-assessed training courses and learning programmes offered by local authorities (n=25)

Learning through everyday practice

Whilst it is relatively straightforward to identify and quantify the range of taught awards and local learning programmes available to social workers, it is evidently more difficult to map the very wide range of informal learning that social workers engage in ‘on the job’. Social workers may also have other more or less formal learning opportunities including shadowing, mentoring, team discussions and peer supervision (see Chapter 5). Alongside these more measurable processes are opportunities for continuous learning through practice – described by one learning lead as ‘learning as and when’. These include more continuous, often unseen, processes of individual critical reflection on practice, of reading and accessing information online as well as informal, everyday interactions with colleagues, service users and carers. Many local authorities were finding creative ways to support these activities, including the use of SSSC’s Open Badges, regular late office opening to support staff development, practitioner forums, development of e-learning resources and arrangements to enable staff debriefing after significant incidents. Table 1 summarises the types and range of activities identified by local authorities in survey and interview responses.



Learning support/ resources	Examples
Individual	Study leave Protected time Participation in policy and practice development Practitioner research Practitioner training Visits to other services Attending local and national conferences and forums
Peer to peer	Workplace shadowing (in agency and multi-agency) Mentoring (eg NOSWs) Peer supervision and support Buddying arrangements CPD drop-in sessions
Group learning	Practitioner forums Staff development days Group supervision Facilitated team development (eg Affina ² Team Journey) Feedback to teams about research projects, conferences attended Use of team meetings for focused discussions, inviting guest speakers etc Bespoke training days for teams Delayed office opening Debriefing after significant incidents Career development sessions PRTL groups Action learning sets Lunchtime wellbeing sessions
Online learning resources	E-learning modules and simulated activities Signposting online resources Online staff learning portal/ platform/ forums/ practice exchanges Subscriptions to eg Care Knowledge Access to online discussion forums e.g. Yammer Webinars Use of and development of customised SSSC Open Badges Online communities of practice eg IRISS, Social Services Knowledge Scotland (SSKS) Computer rooms and training to improve digital literacy
Hard copy resources	Signposting hard copy resources eg books Money for books Locality newsletters

Table 1: Learning supports and resources identified by local authorities in survey and interview responses (n=25)

² The Affina Team Journey is an online team assessment and development tool for team leaders to use with their teams. See also: <https://www.affinaod.com/team-tools/affina-team-journey/>



The forms of informal learning supported by local authorities were, like other aspects of PQL, found to be highly diverse, with no evident pattern relating to geography, population or social work specialism. For example, smaller authorities in more populous localities appeared to be just as likely (or unlikely) to invest in online learning resources and programmes as more rural and remote areas. Learning leads' responses suggested the important role of local learning cultures in the extent to which this kind of everyday learning is facilitated, although, without more detailed research, respondents' assertions about the existence of 'good' or 'poor' learning cultures in their organisation, or parts of their service, were difficult to substantiate. Issues about the extent to which social workers are able to take advantage of these kinds of learning opportunities are discussed later in the report (see Chapter 7).

There was some evidence that the small number of third sector organisations that participated in the research were more likely than statutory bodies to provide support intended specifically to promote self-directed workplace learning. For example, one employer gives workers:

'... a three day learning commitment... the emphasis is that this time is for self-directed and informal learning including shadowing, visits to other services, self-study etc.' (Learning lead, third sector, survey)

In summary, this analysis of survey and interview responses provided a wealth of information about the quantity and diversity of learning opportunities available to social workers in different parts of Scotland. Whilst there were commonalities, especially in the priority accorded to learning related to public protection, learning leads' responses revealed considerable variation between authorities that could not be explained by geography, service demand or population size alone. There was also evidence of a good deal of duplication of time, expense and effort, for example, in the development of online resources and learning approaches that could potentially be shared and used more widely in Scotland and further afield. In the next section of the report we continue to explore these differences by examining the costs of PLQ activity.



4. Costing post qualifying learning

Key findings

- The cost of local authority post qualifying learning tends to be subsumed within corporate and integrated budgets. In some local authorities this has resulted in a reduction of senior managers' influence over social work PQL priorities and expenditure.
- Island and rural/remote local authorities have added time and travel costs associated with learning that add significantly to PQL budgets.
- The costs of social workers' learning in the third sector are mostly not distinguished from those of other employees.
- Budgetary constraint has had multiple impacts on social workers' access to learning and ability to engage in CPD. Loss of workforce development staff has damaged local learning infrastructure and strategy, as well as the capacity to provide PQL, especially in smaller local authorities.

The research aimed to collect and analyse data about the costs of PQL in Scotland. Local authority survey respondents were asked for data about their expenditure on social work PQL in 2017-18 and their budgets for 2018-19. Most (70%) responded that they had details of expenditure for learning leading to a qualification and more than half (57%) said that they were able to put a figure on learning through non-assessed training courses (see Chart 3). However, in interviews the majority of learning leads explained that it was difficult for them to estimate past expenditure or predict future budgets for learning with any degree of precision. This was because social work learning costs tend to be subsumed in an overall social services budget that covers the much larger social care workforce as well as social work. It has also become difficult, in an increasingly multi agency environment, for local authorities to identify the costs and benefits of training provided by, with or for other agencies, such as the NHS and, for criminal justice social workers, Community Justice Scotland.

Local authority learning leads described how their overall budget for social work PQL is often held by several different budget holders, split between adult, children and family services, and sometimes held wholly or partly by other services such as criminal justice. In six of the 20 authorities in our interview sample, learning and development budgets are held



centrally, so that bids for funding are made to a corporate council pot with a range of other competing priorities, such as education and housing. Some of these arrangements included the allocation of indicative funding for social services, and sometimes specific forms of social work PQL, such as the MHO Award.

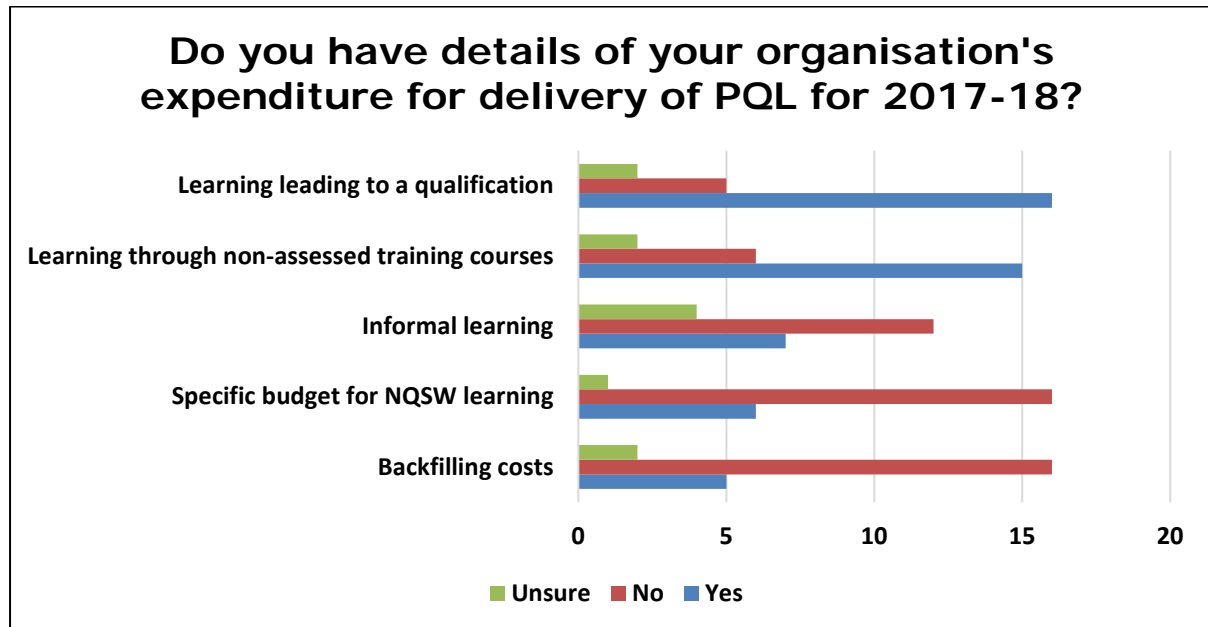


Chart 3: Survey responses: Local authority expenditure on social work PQL 2017-18 (n =23)

Local authorities were most likely to be able to put a figure on learning leading to specific qualifications, such as the MHO Award or practice learning qualifications. Per capita cost varied greatly with local authority location, so that it could, we were told by island authorities, cost two or three times as much for them to support the achievement of a single MHO Award as an authority situated close to an HEI or other learning provider due to their considerably greater travel and accommodation costs. Although the lack of comparable data made it difficult to draw definitive conclusions, it appeared there were also disparities in expenditure, staffing and availability of learning opportunities that were less easily explained by geography, service demand or population differences. This is an aspect of PQL in Scotland that would merit more detailed research with a small number of local authorities.

A minority of local authorities referred to more quantifiable, but limited, funds set aside to meet additional training requests and, in one reported instance, a 'personal spend' for each social worker of £500 to meet their individual learning and development needs. Only five of the surveyed local authorities could put a figure to backfilling costs to cover those absent on learning programmes, although we heard during interviews and at focus groups that these costs are often a significant factor in decision-



making about whether or not staff can be released to undertake an award.

None of the third sector organisations that took part in the research had a specific social work learning and development budget. For the most part, their social workers tended to be treated similarly to other staff members. If they were in a service, such as foster care, that required SSSC social work registration, they would generally be given support to meet the requirement to evidence their PRTL, but the costs of this form of PQL activity were not estimated.

For the most part, local authorities do not generate income through learning and development activities. For example, when they invite employees from other organisations to their own training events, they do not usually charge them. However, all the employers we surveyed also have the potential to generate income through fees payable by SSSC for hosting and assessing students on practice placements during their qualifying social work degrees. There was much variation within local authorities and the third sector in how this fee was used; sometimes the student's practice teacher or team was given a percentage of the fee and/or a proportion might be allocated to 'a learning pot' for all staff. In some local authorities the fee was not ring-fenced for learning activity.

All the employers interviewed highlighted the impact of past, continuing and expected budget cuts and austerity on their learning and development capability. The impacts were multiple, related first to increasing staff workloads, decreasing time for learning activity of all kinds and lack of backfill to cover attendance at training courses. Learning and development budgets had been severely reduced over the past decade, making it increasingly difficult to fund learning opportunities for social workers. The impact of these cuts was evident throughout the research findings, in particular, decreasing access overall to qualifications, and both internal and external training (see Chapter 5). Practitioners at focus groups also described a growing trend of expecting social workers to fund some learning opportunities themselves.

As highlighted earlier, decreasing budgets have also resulted in dramatic reductions in, and sometimes complete loss of, social work learning and development teams, as this learning lead explained in an interview response:

'Budgets are not only about how much we spend on delivering training courses and learning programmes, but about the resources available to provide the infrastructure within which learning and development happens – the discussions with staff, the involvement in workforce planning that enables the identification of priority learning. I once had a team of workers, now am a singleton worker – on a single day I might be



attending a strategic management meeting at one moment, and then at the next be making sure that a trainer has the equipment and a suitable room for moving and handling training.’ (Learning lead, medium-sized urban/rural local authority, interview)

Large urban local authorities had, by virtue of the greater size of their training teams, been ‘cushioned’ to some extent from service cuts (learning lead in large urban local authority). Nevertheless, even where learning and development teams had been retained, they were now much reduced in size. One urban interview respondent explained that its local authority team had been reduced by 50% in recent years, whilst there had been no reduction in demand for learning opportunities. Overall, ‘doing more with less’ was highlighted as the most significant challenge for nearly all local authorities and half the third sector organisations in the survey and interviews. Given these concerns about shrinking budgets, how are employers responding to these challenges? In the next section of the report we report on employers’ evolving learning and development strategies.



5. Post qualifying learning strategies

Key findings

- Organisational change, especially health and social care integration, has contributed to flux, fragmentation and piecemeal development of social work learning activity in many local authorities.
- A minority of local authorities and all the third sector organisations reported well thought out learning strategies to identify social workers' PQL needs and meet service demands. Many local authorities reported obstacles to cohesive strategy development.
- The majority of local authority employers have selection criteria and processes in place for some or all PQ awards. These varied considerably between employers, partly because of diverse geographical, recruitment and retention contexts.
- Less than half the local authorities had strategies in place to evaluate the outcomes of PQL. Evaluation of the impact of learning on social work practice, and on outcomes for service users and carers was acknowledged as very important but is often neglected because it is difficult and time consuming.
- Partnership with a range of learning providers is valued. Budgetary, geographical and market-driven forces can limit the development of an integrated approach to PQL between employers and HEIs.
- PQL increasingly takes place in multi-disciplinary contexts, with many practice benefits, but a predominance of shared learning can contribute to a loss of professional identity and a dilution of learning specific to the social work role.

Strategic development

Just over half of the local authorities (57%) and one of the four third sector indicated that they had a written strategy for social workers' PQL in their survey responses. Follow-up interviews, however, suggested that this question had no easy or straightforward answer. Respondents described the evolution of more or less formal pathways, plans, frameworks and employee selection processes that together guided their approach to training and learning. Lack of a written strategy did not in



itself indicate an absence of planning, nor did the presence of one guarantee a coherent approach, usually because strategies were out-dated, fragmented and/or not fully adhered to. In most local authorities, structural changes brought about by health and social care integration were reported as resulting in increasing divergence in strategic development in different services. As a learning lead explained during an interview:

‘Overall, the picture is complicated – a jigsaw – but parts do come together in a Learning and Development Action Plan which sets out aims and concrete actions to meet organisational, legal etc requirements that have to be met.’ (Learning lead, medium-sized rural local authority, interview)

This respondent’s preparation for the interview had involved discussions with six different colleagues, underlining the complexity of many local authorities’ learning and development provision. Strategies also often evolved in pockets, one large urban local authority learning lead describing how their children and family social work induction policy was ‘well advanced, well supported and sophisticated’, whereas induction for criminal justice and adult care social workers was organised locally with no council-wide policy. This was explained as a response to high turnover and frequent waves of recruitment in children’s services. Authorities with small workforces sometimes reported a greater ability to respond to individual learning needs without the need for formal strategies, although this was acknowledged to cause potential difficulties with equality of opportunity.

The majority of local authority respondents described their learning strategies as being in a state of flux for a variety of reasons. These included organisational and staff changes related to health and social care integration, shifting policy imperatives and budgetary restraint. A learning lead summed up the current state of PQL in her organisation in this way:

‘We have a healthy learning culture and lots of opportunities but not a cohesive strategy across services.... We are still, to some extent, working with a “traditional” model whereby there is a mix of essential specialist, mostly post graduate qualifications – MHO, practice education, child protection, adult support and protection – and then a broader mix of more ad hoc learning opportunities to meet specialist needs. It’s not a big mess but it’s not cohesive.’ (Learning lead, medium-sized urban local authority, interview)

It is beyond the scope of this report to provide a detailed analysis of the many approaches to strategic development that we encountered in this research. Instead we focus on five interrelated aspects of PQL strategy emphasised by research participants.



- Identifying learning needs.
- Accessing learning opportunities.
- Evaluating learning.
- Learning in partnership.
- Organisational structures.

Identifying learning needs

Supervision, usually by a line manager, has long been regarded as having a dual function, in identifying and supporting the fulfilment of personal development needs as well as day to day case management. Nearly all (96%) of local authorities and all four third sector organisations who responded to the survey reported that they had a supervision strategy for their social work staff. Supervision is generally linked with some form of staff appraisal and the formulation of a personal development plan (PDP) carried out on a bi-annual or annual basis with the social worker's manager. Personal development planning aims to provide opportunities for reflection and identification of achievements and for engagement in dialogue about personal, educational and career development. Most (87%) local authority survey respondents confirmed that their social workers had PDPs, as did all four third sector organisations. Many learning leads explained how this knowledge, combined with feedback from team meetings, managers and other sources is intended to feed into workforce planning processes, for example:

'We are reviewing our system to make sure that PDPs gather information about different needs to influence future plans – we are looking to improve that link. Team meetings should have learning and development on the agenda, and this is also a way to gather information about emerging needs.' (Learning lead, medium-sized urban local authority, interview)

A minority of local authorities had established mechanisms to make systematic use of this intelligence to help develop learning pathways for social workers and other employees (see Chapter 8). However, evidence from interviews with local authorities suggests that these feedback mechanisms are not universally in place, and, even where they exist, may rely on individual line managers' interest, availability and commitment. A tendency to accept these inconsistencies between managers as inevitable was evident in some of our interviews with learning leads. The insufficiency, and in smaller authorities, the absence of dedicated workforce development staff also limits some organisations' capacity to make good use of this intelligence. Barriers related to lack of strategic links between different levels of service planning and disconnects between



more centralised and increasingly dispersed locality services were also noted. The focus groups identified wide discrepancies between social workers' experiences of supervision and personal development planning, sometimes within the same local authority service, or even team (see Chapter 7).

There was evidence from third sector survey responses and interviews that rather more cohesive learning strategies were in place than in the local authorities. For example, this learning lead described the ongoing development of more strategic approach to learning in her organisation:

'We have clearer and more structured mandatory training informed by a needs analysis – it's highly organised. We've had a cultural shift in management. We're now more strategic and focused about identifying relevant learning opportunities. We have to demonstrate that any given learning opportunity is relevant to children and families – will make a difference.' (Learning lead, third sector, survey)

Accessing post qualifying learning

The majority of local authorities (74%) had in place some form of selection process for certain qualifications, notably the MHO Award, practice learning qualifications, and child and adult protection certificates (see Chart 4). Again, there was variation between employers. For example, some learning leads described the process as one of 'self-selection' by the individual in discussion with their team manager, who might or might not support their need for training. Sometimes selection was primarily determined by team managers who, when learning opportunities become available, have the facility to nominate social workers who they believe to be ready to undertake a learning programme. In contrast, other local authorities advertise opportunities to undertake some or all qualifications to all relevant staff and select applicants to interview through written application. Whatever the chosen selection system, team managers usually had a significant role in identifying the social worker's readiness for learning. For example, one PQL selection process involved:

'...a readiness for study meeting with applicant and team manager. This is used to explore learning needs and the manager's understanding of and commitment to space and support needed by the social worker.' (Learning lead, medium-sized urban/rural local authority, interview)

About two thirds of the local authority employers set criteria for access to all or some of these programmes. However, the weight given to competing considerations – experience, individual and team capacity, equality of opportunity, relevance to role, and service needs – varied markedly. Sometimes selection was closely tied to prior identification of learning need through supervision and professional development



planning, whilst these mechanisms were not referred to by other local authorities. As identified earlier in relation to the MHO Award (see pp.18-19), although there was competition for PQ awards in some authorities, demand for awards in some local authorities was declining due to increasing workloads and the impact of organisational change:

'Times have changed – we don't have as many people coming forward for PQ learning programmes – they have their heads down. Enormity of change and extent of workload are both significant factors. You need time and energy to sustain involvement in learning programmes such as MHO or practice learning.' (Learning lead, medium-sized rural local authority, interview)

In more remote and island areas the requirement to be away from home for an extended period for some awards was also cited as a factor in deterring social workers from travelling considerable distances to attend longer and more demanding learning programmes.

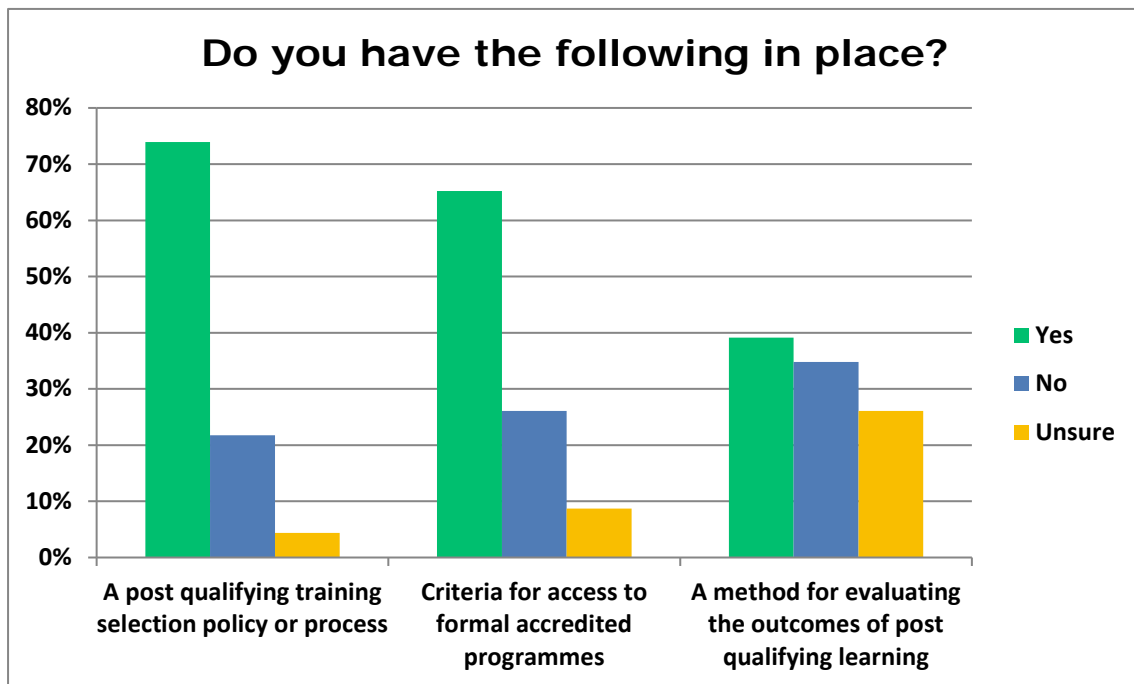


Chart 4: Local authority survey responses: Access to and evaluation of PQL (n = 23)



Evaluating learning

The importance of demonstrating a clear link between learning, quality of practice and the experiences of, and outcomes for, service users and carers was regularly highlighted by learning leads. However, there was near-universal acknowledgement that employers' current methodologies for establishing the value of learning were inadequate, as described by this learning lead:

'[We evaluate] really poorly is the quick answer! Evaluation is not necessarily achieved in a consistent way beyond a tokenistic appraisal through evaluation forms after a learning event. We need more focus on impact in the workplace and on perceived improvement in skills and knowledge.' (Learning lead, large rural local authority, interview)

Kirkpatrick's Levels	Evaluation measures	No of LAs	Examples of methods used
Level 1	Reaction to learning	17	End of training day evaluation forms, employee forum participant feedback
Level 2	Participant learning	14	Supervision, action learning sets, follow up evaluation, PRTL, reflective journals, assessed learning programmes
Level 3	Change in learner behaviour	6	Open Badges, staff appraisal, QA processes, practice assessment (eg MHOs, practice educators), research and evaluation
Level 4	Impact on service	3	Systematic methodologies to measure impact on service users and carers, learning audits

Table 2: Survey and interview responses: Local authorities' use of different evaluation methods, based on Kirkpatrick's evaluation levels (n = 20)

Only nine local authority survey respondents reported that a mechanism was in place to evaluate the outcomes of PQL, with the remaining 14 either unsure or lacking an evaluation method. Table 2 provides a more detailed breakdown derived from local authority interview responses, setting out the use of evaluation methodologies in line with Kirkpatrick's



four levels of training evaluation, (Kirkpatrick, 1994). The main focus of current evaluation lies at Level 1, in methods that assess the extent to which learners find their experiences enjoyable, engaging and relevant. Most local authorities also look to identify participant learning, though this aspect of evaluation was acknowledged to be inconsistently drawn on to inform planning for future learning. Changes in learner behaviour and, in particular, impact on service users and carers, are more complex to measure. Learning leads identified lack of time, poor linkage between evaluation findings and workforce development planning, and insufficient knowledge about methods as significant barriers to improving evaluation. All four third sector organisations identified their use of evaluation methods as sitting at Levels 1 and 2.

Learning in partnership

Some aspects of PQL were delivered entirely by local authority or third sector organisations, but there was also significant collaboration between organisations with common learning goals. Although it was said that training events were now increasingly likely to be provided in-house, they were also sometimes shared with third sector and other partners on a reciprocal basis, arrangements that partly stemmed from lack of resources to pay for external trainers, as this third sector learning lead explained:

‘The amount of money available has dropped massively over recent years. This means that we need to be creative – we do lots in-house, including extensive induction training, we get colleagues in from other agencies, do swaps etc.’ (Learning lead, third sector, interview)

Health and social care integration was also generally said to have increased the amount of multidisciplinary learning, particularly between NHS and local authorities for adult care social workers and within local authorities for children and family practitioners, especially between education and social work services. This conveyed many advantages in terms of multidisciplinary working, although we also heard concerns that, in mixed groups, the social work voice and professional identity risked becoming diluted. A learning lead feared that:

‘We may be going so far down the line of collaborative, integrated learning that [social workers] are losing opportunities to take part in their own professional discussions – without this they will never have the opportunity to learn how to be a social worker.’ (Learning lead, medium-sized urban local authority, interview)

In focus groups, MHOs also told us that multidisciplinary learning could be over-clinical and geared more to health professionals’ than social workers’ learning needs.



Chart 5 sets out the most frequent partnership arrangements identified in the survey, with, once again, themes relating to public protection being particularly evident. Similar partnership patterns were evident for third sector organisations. The important role of HEIs and specialist partnerships, such as Community Justice Scotland for criminal justice social workers and the Centre of Excellence for Looked After Children in Scotland (CELCIS) was also evident, though varied from one local authority to another.

Survey returns did not explicitly identify the importance of Learning Network West (LNW), a multiagency partnership in the west of Scotland that supports learning and development, including delivery of the MHO Award and the Professional Development Award in Practice Learning (PDAPL) at SCQF 10. However, LNW's role in promoting partnership learning practice became more evident in the interviews and focus groups, as did that of the Tayforth Partnership, another regional partnership that offers the PDAPL. In interviews, the benefits of partnership with other local authorities were highlighted, although there was generally felt to have been a recent reduction in collaborative working relationships between authorities. Some leads wished to renew these working relationships, to share learning and reduce duplication of effort, and there was some evidence that this was becoming more possible as restructuring related to health and social care integration begins to bed in.



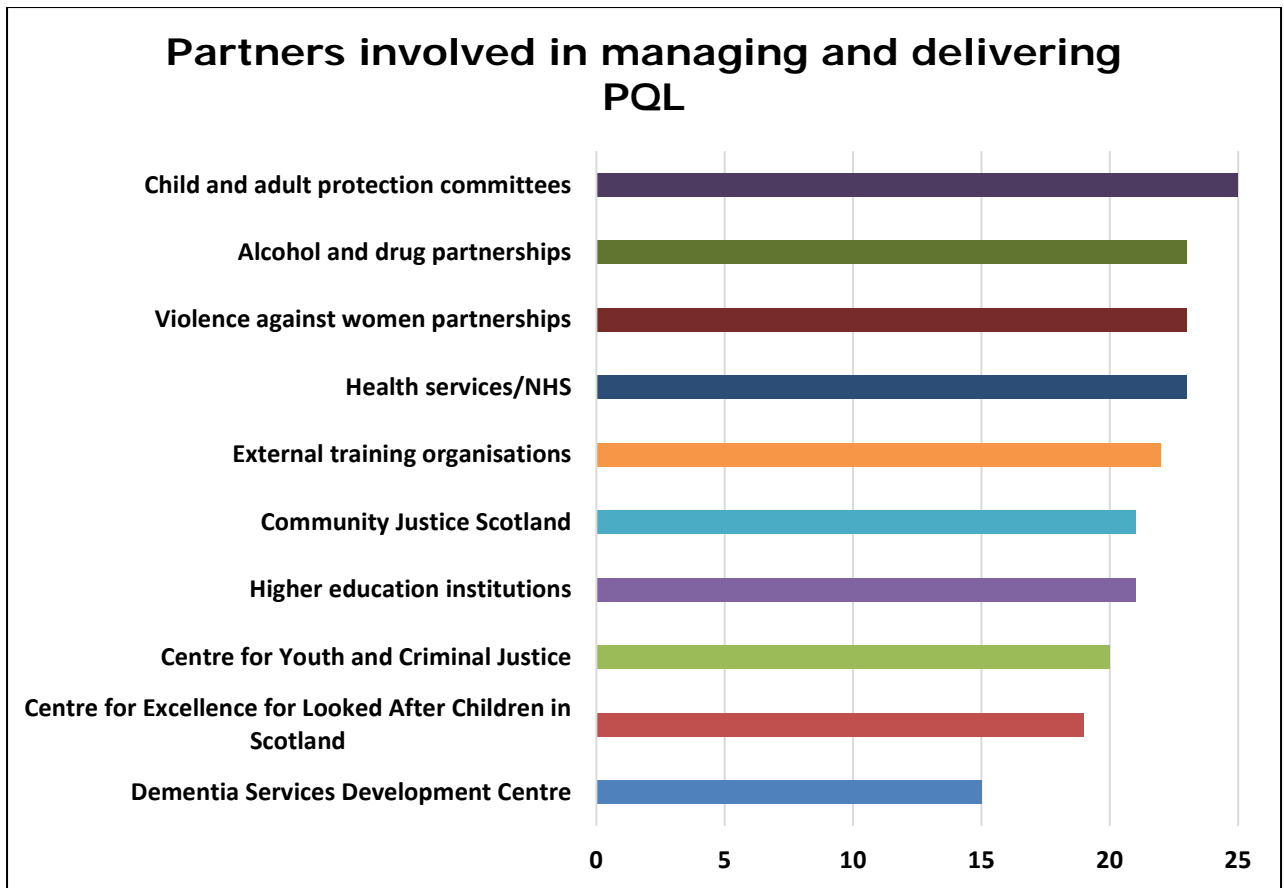


Chart 5: Most frequent local authority learning partners (n = 25)

Organisational structures

Social work and social care learning and development teams and personnel, where they exist, are configured in a very wide range of different ways in different local authorities. In some, learning and development staff have responsibilities in relation to the whole social work workforce, whilst in others roles are split in variable ways between different parts of the social work service, taking on a specialist function in relation to children and families, adult care or criminal justice (or some combination of these services, sometimes with other HSCP or council services).

Some very positive stories of collaborative working between staff in different services were told to us during interviews and in focus groups, but we also heard workforce development in children and family and adult care social work described as 'two completely different worlds'. This varying permeability of boundaries between different branches of a social work service was evident in one of the focus groups, where social workers from one authority had regular contact with, and access to, learning opportunities across the whole social service, and social workers from another said they had little or no contact with other social work specialisms.

Another learning and development model described to the research team has council-wide workforce development staff sitting together in a single corporate team. Learning leads suggested that this configuration conveyed benefits in terms of communication with colleagues across a range of services. However, social workers' particular learning needs could be submerged by other corporate priorities, as this learning lead explained with respect to children and family services:

'One of the challenges we have is to meet statutory training needs are met, but we need to almost go over another hurdle to get other training and learning we feel that social workers need - for example, conferences and online learning. I am sure other local authorities have the same issues; where social work used to be the main priority, we now have to fight that wee bit harder.' (Learning lead, medium-sized rural authority, interview)

As identified earlier, a parallel process can operate in HSCPs, where social work forms a small part of the workforce but yet has roles and responsibilities that give rise to distinctive learning needs. A focus group participant explained:

'We need to justify our needs to a corporate body that doesn't understand statutory function and makes our learning and development needs feel like an add-on, unimportant.' (MHO, medium-sized urban/rural authority, interview)

It is not possible to make any definitive judgement from the research findings about the impact of these differing structural arrangements on social work PQL. However, given the frequent references we heard to a 'fragmented' and 'inconsistent' approach to learning and development in local authorities, it seems likely that these structural discontinuities may well have a negative impact on learning culture and opportunities for some social workers.



6. Post qualifying learning and career development

Key findings

- Social work PQL is not linked to a clear structure for career progression, which acts as a disincentive to staff development and impacts negatively on morale, recruitment and retention in local authorities.
- A small number of local authorities are putting learning pathways in place for the workforce, a development viewed positively by employees who took part in this research.
- Local authority NQSWs had variable experiences of supervision and support in their first year of practice. NQSW status is ambiguous in the third sector, and this can cause confusion for both employers and practitioners.
- The jump from frontline practitioner to first line manager is perceived as a significant one for which there is often insufficient preparation. Aspiring and current managers require more time and support to develop and consolidate management and leadership skills.
- There are few opportunities for experienced practitioners to progress unless they take on management roles, so that expertise is continuously lost from frontline practice. Local authorities that offer higher salaries attract social workers from the third sector, and smaller local authorities causing skill and service shortages, as well as loss of employer investment in PQL.

A central aim of this research is to explore the relationship between PQ learning and career development for social workers. This arises from long-standing concerns about the lack of a national career-long social work learning strategy. This part of the report sets out research findings relating to:

- career progression
- Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs)
- recruitment and retention.



Career progression

Almost all learning leads in local authorities identified the lack of an explicit link between PQL and career progression. At the same time, many also recognised underlying, and often unspoken, assumptions about the qualifications that tend to support a move into a promoted post:

‘There is a well-trodden path of undertaking Level 11 Awards – child protection, adult protection, MHO Award, practice learning qualifications – as a precursor to a promoted post.’ (Learning lead, medium-sized urban/rural authority, interview)

Some focus group and interview respondents saw the attainment of PQ awards as providing important evidence of higher-level reflective thinking, critical analysis and leadership skills. However, it was rare for these qualifications to be specified by local authorities as requirements for moving into a management role. They are also not specifically designed to support candidates to develop leadership and management capabilities. In addition, at a time when there are significant succession concerns about MHO and practice education capacity in Scotland, concern was raised about loss of trained MHOs and practice educators to management roles in which it was often hard to maintain specialist responsibilities.

Most local authorities, as well as third sector organisations, also recognised the considerable leap from frontline practice to team manager role. A move to a first promoted post was described as an important stepping stone in a social worker’s career, but was often made without sufficient preparation and support:

‘There is no specific training for that first senior social work stage – the worker often has learnt from what previous managers were like – which is not always the best way! There are two aspects to this – potential managers need to be prepared for the first step in career ladder and, once you’re in post, what is available to you? What do you need to do the job?’ (Learning lead, large urban local authority, interview)

A number of ways of enabling social workers to bridge these dual gaps – the step up to management and the development of management and leadership skills once in post - were described in local authority and third sector interviews. These local responses included temporary attachment of a practitioner to a practice-related project or management post, ‘stretch assignments’ that added additional leadership challenges to existing roles, management induction training and access to a variety of existing HEI management qualifications. SSSC’s online resource, ‘Step into Leadership’, was also regarded as a useful resource by members of one focus group.



A very regular observation was that management structures had become much flatter in recent years, limiting opportunities to support experienced practitioners to remain in skilled frontline practice. The near-disappearance of senior practitioner roles in many localities was regularly noted as having restricted career progression to 'staying where you are or climbing the management tree'. A handful of mostly larger local authorities had retained their senior practitioner roles, and, where they existed, learning leads and practitioners saw these as a key step in career progression.

Three local authorities that took part in the research had developed, or were in the process of developing, learning pathways for their social workers (and sometimes also the wider social care workforce). One learning lead described the way in which these structured pathways, which set out learning in relation to induction, mandatory learning and specialist pathways, 'make concrete links between expectations of learning and stage of career'. Practitioner feedback heard at one of the focus groups was appreciative of the clarity and structure this development was beginning to bring to their current and future learning. Other local authorities and third sector organisations also described forms of structured induction, identifying elements of required learning. However, though some forms of training were frequently described as 'mandatory' (for example, core knowledge of child and adult protection), there was no common definition of mandatory learning across different employers. Employers also varied in the extent to which they checked and recorded whether mandatory training was completed.

Newly Qualified Social Workers

The introduction of an NQSW year is widely seen as an opportunity to start to build a more structured, consistent approach to career development. All local authority survey respondents currently had social workers undertaking their NQSW year. However, less than half of these authorities had an overall strategy or plan for NQSW learning. An NQSW strategy was more likely to be in place in larger than smaller local authorities. When numbers of NQSWs in the workforce were typically very low, for example in island local authorities, strategies were more likely to be described as 'tailor-made' to individual NQSWs:

'We construct a package around the individual worker – offer sound induction, help with PRTL. The first year is crucial – NQSWs have a sponge-like quality – they really want to learn...This year is an opportunity to support the development of basic values and ethics.'
(Learning lead, island authority, interview)

Nearly all local authority survey respondents (87%) reported that they supported their NQSWs with a mix of formal and informal learning



approaches. Almost 70% also said that NQSWs each had an individual PDP. Learning leads described a variety of approaches to NQSW learning. Three authorities provided year long, mandatory structured programmes offering a combination of group learning, mentoring, peer support and information sessions. An added benefit of these programmes was said to be that they encouraged increased NQSW recruitment from HEIs. At the other end of the spectrum, NQSWs were said to receive very similar levels of support and have access to the same range of learning opportunities, as other new employees from different professional backgrounds. Spanning these two divergent approaches, a range of less intensive arrangements to support NQSWs were in place, including:

- NQSW induction programmes
- opportunities to shadow experienced social workers
- NQSW forums and information days
- buddying and mentoring arrangements
- regular individual meetings with learning and development staff.

Most local authorities said that they offered NQSWs more frequent supervision than established workers, typically every 1-2 weeks, especially at the start of their NQSW year. NQSWs, especially in rural and island local authorities, were often already known to employers, as social care workers or students on practice placements, and sometimes both. This would seem to convey some advantages for the NQSW, since they would be familiar with the authority's working environment from day one of their NQSW year. However, in one local authority focus group NQSWs who had undertaken work based distance learning social work degree programmes, or had previously been employed by an authority, said that they lacked the support that NQSWs who were new to the local authority benefited from. If replicated in other local authorities, this lack of equity is of considerable concern. It will be important for the ongoing evaluation of local authority pilots that are trialling a supported and assessed NQSW year to explore these differences in NQSWs' experience of workplace support.

Altogether, 10 local authority NQSWs took part in the focus groups, five of whom were in a dedicated NQSW focus group. It was evident that the quality and frequency of support received varied greatly between these NQSWs, sometimes suggesting a mismatch between learning leads' perceptions about the high quality of NQSW support on offer and the realities of practice. Once again, the findings stress the key role of team managers, and, for these NQSWs, the importance of access to a supportive team manager, who offers regular supervision, clear guidance and constructive feedback (see also Chapter 7).



Third sector responsibilities for recently qualified social workers were described as rather more complex and ambiguous since not all their social workers are in roles that carry statutory responsibilities. NQSWs that are not in, for example, fostering or adoption roles, have the choice whether or not to register with SSSC, and, if they do so, are required to fulfil PRTL requirements to complete the NQSW year and continue to be registered. NQSWs were described as benefiting from similar levels of support with their learning and development as other third sector staff. If they were in a role with statutory duties then support would be given to meet PRTL requirements, although social workers sometimes found it difficult to find sufficient evidence to meet the requirements in their substantive posts, and some third sector organisations said that they lacked experience in supporting PRTL achievement. One respondent also identified confusion and anxiety about registration as a significant issue for NQSWs in the third sector, who may feel driven to move into local authority employment because of concerns about the impact of non-registration with SSSC on their career progression.

Recruitment and retention

Concerns about recruitment and retention threaded through many interview and focus group discussions about learning and career progression. Four key concerns were raised repeatedly.

- Lack of sufficient succession planning to respond to an ageing social work workforce, and, in particular, the continuing loss of experienced social workers, including those in management positions, MHOs and practice educators. One learning lead noted that the largest age category in the social work workforce in their large rural authority is the 55+ years age group.
- Difficulties recruiting social workers, including senior managers, especially to the most rural and remote areas.
- Problems retaining staff, with high staff turnover particularly prevalent in third sector organisations and island, rural and smaller local authorities. A significant driver was said to be differential pay rates including the payment of increments for some qualifications, such as the MHO Award, by some local authorities but not others.
- Increasing reluctance of trained practice educators to supervise students on placement because of competing work pressures and the lack of protected time and, in many local authorities, an absence of financial or other recognition.

One response to these pressures has been the strategic development of learning and development capacity in order to attract and retain social workers, especially NQSWs. For example, one large rural local authority



had made a concerted effort to increase its numbers of trained practice educators and therefore student placements. This in turn had had a positive impact on recruitment because many of these students then took up employment in the local authority. Two other local authorities described how their well- developed NQSW support encouraged direct recruitment of social workers from local HEI programmes.

Practitioners in focus groups told us that their decisions about the availability of learning opportunities, especially advanced qualifications, was a factor in decision making about seeking – and leaving – employment. However, attracting early career social workers and offering them high quality learning opportunities also has penalties for the organisation if, having acquired experience and qualifications, practitioners rapidly move on to employers that pay them higher salaries. A third sector learning lead explained how:

'...we are used regularly as a training ground for statutory social workers. Students come to us on placement, maybe start their career with us, but move on to better-paid jobs in the statutory sector. So we are regularly sending out confident social workers into statutory services, and constantly losing skilled workers. The voluntary sector offers some fantastic opportunities but there is no acknowledgement of the costs that we incur.' (Learning lead, third sector, interview)

For local authorities, loss of qualified specialist staff was described particularly acute in relation to providing an MHO service, especially in small, rural and island local authorities. The loss of investment in a newly trained MHO to a higher paying authority was damaging to service provision as well as to the learning and development budget. In contrast and illustrating significant variations between local authorities with apparently similar characteristics, one island authority reported that one of their challenges lies in having such a low turnover of social workers that few opportunities for career progression ever become available.



7. The experience and value of learning

Key findings

- Social workers place a high value on learning but access to PQL varies greatly in relevance, quality and extent between and within employers.
- Practitioners identified key elements of effective PQL, including regular high quality supervision and personal development planning, protected time for PRTL, effective information sharing, equitable access to career long development opportunities, formal and informal learning with peers and fair reward and recognition for additional responsibilities, such as practice education and the MHO role.
- It is increasingly difficult for practitioners to take time to reflect on practice or engage in self-directed activities due to high workloads and staff cutbacks and vacancies.
- Team managers play a crucial role in supporting practitioner learning and enabling access to PQL and career development opportunities, but there are inconsistencies in supervisory approaches and behaviours between and within local authorities, services and even teams.

The main emphasis of previous chapters has been on the responses of learning leads to the survey and follow-up interviews. In order to gain a better understanding of the strengths, challenges and impact of PQL, we now turn to the experiences of the frontline local authority practitioners and managers who attended the seven focus groups, considering the impact of learning on social workers and on the service they provide to service users and carers.

What's important to practitioners?

Practitioner experiences of PQL were highly diverse, sometimes even within a single local authority. Many practitioner accounts of the day to day barriers they encounter to learning reinforce those already highlighted in this report, including increasing workload, rising staff vacancies and lack of backfill to cover absence. Participants also described the negative impacts of low morale on motivation to learn in some teams



and services, and a sense of guilt about 'going off to do training when you know everyone else has to cover your workload'. As well as challenges and barriers, focus group participants were also able to identify examples of learning approaches and experiences that had a positive impact on their practice.

Learning approaches that work

Focus group participants' views about 'what is working' for them in terms of learning and development are summarised below, alongside some of the barriers that need to be overcome to make these approaches effective.

1. Regular, planned and well-structured supervision, providing a balance between case management and opportunities to reflect on personal and professional development and learning needs. Social workers talked about the value of having 'the space to think. You are doing, doing, doing all the time'. In practice, the frequency, amount and quality of supervision appeared very variable and was perceived to be more dependent on the enthusiasm and commitment of individual managers than organisational policy. 'What you really need', said one social worker in a focus group,

'...is a good manager who gives you time to study, who provides supervision, who engages with your development – supervision is not just about talking about cases'.

Whether this was achievable was said by some practitioners to be 'the luck of the draw' with striking variations in practitioner experience between and within local authorities. Some social workers were appreciative of the use of a supervision tool to support a consistent approach, although too much prescription was also said to risk supervision becoming overloaded with managerial imperatives that precluded sufficient focus on practitioners' critical reflection and personal and professional development.

2. Appraisal and personal development planning processes that are more than 'a paper exercise', are integrated into supervision processes, and feed into organisational learning strategies. In the NQSW focus group, practitioners described problems relating to continuity with their qualifying learning. For example, none were familiar, or ever been asked to share with their supervisor, the 'Individual Learning Plans' that should accompany new social workers from their qualifying programme into their first employment. Overall, there was evidence that, for experienced as well as newly qualified practitioners, in some local authorities



personal development planning had 'fallen by the wayside' over recent years.

3. Protected time to undertake and evidence PRTL. Most of NQSWs, as well as more experienced social workers, struggled to fulfil their PRTL responsibilities. As an experienced children and families worker put it, 'we all probably breathe a sigh of relief when the PRTL is not asked for when we renew our registration'. It was thought by some that PRTL requirements could be fulfilled in a more streamlined and less onerous way, enabling the recording of 'practice as it happens'. Current arrangements tend to rely on individual practitioners' efforts to set aside time to reflect on practice and keep up to date with research and literature. Several practitioners described these as activities they usually could only pursue out of office hours. A comparison was made in one focus group between the regular 'in-service days' for teachers' continuing professional development, and the lack of dedicated time set aside for social work learning and development activity.
4. Up-to-date information about local and national learning opportunities, shared through, for example, online portals and supervision. It was said that, in some local authorities, access to learning relied heavily on 'word of mouth' or 'serendipity', with important information not reaching front line practitioners or getting lost in a welter of emails.
5. Access to a range of useful learning opportunities, tailored to practice and learning needs. A focus group of children and family social workers described key features of a recent effective learning event as having been up to date, locally relevant, applicable to practice, involving a range of participants with complementary backgrounds and delivered by a skilled facilitator with a practice based understanding of social work role and responsibilities. However, access to local training courses and other learning events was said to be limited by lack of availability, due to over-subscribed courses, workload pressures, lack of workload cover and/or a dearth of relevant opportunities, especially for more experienced staff. Some specific unmet learning needs were also highlighted including learning about changing law and policy, management and leadership skills, and mental distress.
6. Equitable access to learning, including to PQ awards such as MHO Award, practice learning qualifications, and adult and child protection certificates. Whilst practitioners and managers regularly spoke of the benefits of 'spending time in an academic environment, re-invigorating your thinking, and bringing that back to practice', all focus groups had concerns about lack of equity of access to qualifications between local authorities and between different



geographical areas. Some programmes formerly offered by HEIs were not currently taking place, so the number of PQ opportunities had decreased and/or participants now had to travel further to attend workshops. The structure of certain programmes with, for example, mandatory single recall days added to the already considerable time commitment required of participants in the island focus group. Local delivery of programmes by HEIs and other learning providers was particularly appreciated by local authorities and practitioners outwith the central belt.

More generally, access to learning was often not seen as fair or transparent, with discrepancies in access noted between children's and adult services, and practitioners in adult care often finding themselves at a disadvantage in relation to colleagues in the NHS in terms of the extent and quality of training on offer. For example, an MHO focus group participant reported self-funding a course that is fully funded for colleagues in the NHS.

7. Fair reward and recognition for added responsibilities such as practice education and MHO duties, which in many local authorities were said to be running on the 'goodwill' of practitioners (see also Chapter 6).
8. Practitioner forums and team/service development days were highly valued when in place. These opportunities to, for example, hear speakers from different organisations, engage in case analysis, take part in discussions with HEI colleagues and share learning experiences with other professions were much appreciated, but only said to be available in pockets, to some practitioners in some authorities.
9. Peer support, mentoring and supervision: The importance of peer to peer reflection and support, facilitated by a collaborative learning culture, was referred to in all the focus groups. It was crucial, social workers at one focus group said, to find, 'a safe place to find your feet, to share experiences, just to talk'. For one adult care team, mutual support was facilitated by an informal arrangement that encouraged social workers to meet over a cup of tea at the end of the working day. The importance of co-location to organisational learning cultures was described in another focus group, whereas home and agile working were identified as potential threats to this everyday sharing of expertise and support. The value of broadening knowledge by, for example, co-working with and shadowing colleagues was also highlighted, though, like many less formal aspects of learning, was observed to have become more difficult to arrange because of increasing workload pressures and staff vacancies.



10. Career-long developmental opportunities: As noted earlier, the existence of transparent, clear learning pathways was viewed positively, as was a range of less formal developmental support from team managers and workforce development staff. Supports put in place for NQSWs could also be effective in providing a focused and structured early career pathway, although this was not the case for all NQSWs. More experienced social workers appreciated opportunities for 'stepping outside your comfort zone' to test out capabilities in new roles, through, for example, practitioner training, undertaking small-scale research projects and secondments to different teams. However, many social workers echoed the views of learning leads, noting the 'fractured and piecemeal' evolution of qualifications and the lack of a 'natural flow to career progression', including opportunities for practice development and leadership that are not tied to progression to a management role.

The impact of learning

The ten themes identified above convey the importance placed by focus group participants on learning. Although this research did not set out to evaluate the impact of learning on service users and carers, practitioners' accounts of day to day practice also emphasised the value of high-quality learning, and the consequences of neglecting this essential aspect of professional life on their practice. Some learning, in particular training for the MHO role and practice education, has an evident impact on practice delivery, firstly fulfilling vital statutory requirements in mental health, and secondly ensuring that new social workers can gain practice experience and join the workforce. However, we also heard more everyday stories about impact, about, for example, the importance of social workers having a thorough knowledge of legal rights and local services so that they can provide accurate information to service users and carers. Other practice stories gave an account of valued training in conflict resolution that supported an NQSW to reflect on a challenging home visit, and a child protection course that reminded a social worker about the importance of stability and the quality of parenting in his ongoing work with a family. These are all crucial reminders of the purpose of social work learning – to make a difference to the lives of service users and carers.



8. A post qualifying framework for social work practice?

Key findings

- Over three quarters of the learning leads surveyed, and most practitioners were in favour of introducing a post qualifying framework for social workers in Scotland.
- Key features of an effective framework were identified as transparency, equity, portability, congruence with social work values, integration with other frameworks and pathways, relevance and its ability to make a positive impact on outcomes for service users and carers.
- The main benefits were seen as a framework's potential to: improve the consistency and quality of PQL, enhance professional standing and identity, improve recruitment and retention, develop workforce skills and increase employer accountability for learning.
- Doubts included: whether a framework would be sufficiently resourced, how progression would be recognised and rewarded, additional workload implications and who would be accountable for the framework's implementation.

Scotland's National Health and Social Care Workforce Plan Part 2 recommended the development of a national professional framework for social work and social care. Such a framework is seen as a means of providing workers with:

- choice and opportunity in accessing high quality, relevant learning throughout their career
- a structure to PQL that is flexible, and responsive to different ways of progressing a career in social work
- advanced knowledge and skills to take on complex work and new roles
- confidence in the professional contribution of social workers and social work
- a culture of collaborative, continuous learning and improvement.

(Scottish Government, 2017b)

These broad aims appear to be congruent with many findings from this research about the direction in which employers and practitioners believe that social work PQL needs to be moving. This final findings chapter reports on participants' views



about the value of a national 'Post Qualifying Framework for Social Work', its potential benefits, drawbacks and eventual form.

The value of a PQ Framework

Most survey respondents (77%) thought that post qualifying learning would be well supported by a post qualifying framework, whilst six (23%) were unsure. Local authority practitioners and managers in the focus groups were also positive, with the most enthusiastic tending to be NQSWs and other early career social workers. There was also general agreement among more experienced workers, although they also were most likely to express some concerns about a framework's implementation in practice. Combining local authority and third sector data, respondents saw a framework as having the potential to:

- provide a structured framework for career-long progression
- improve the consistency, choice and quality of learning
- enhance workforce skills and knowledge so that service users and carers get a better service
- place a greater priority on learning and development
- improve the profession's standing, status and credibility, contributing to a renewal of professional identity
- enable increased recruitment and retention of social workers
- strengthen governmental and employer accountability for PQL.

Table 3 provides examples of a representative range of participant responses about the value of a PQ Framework from the survey, interview and focus groups.



Table 3: The value of a post qualifying framework for social work

'A professional framework would give social workers credibility and consistency across the country.'

(Local authority children and families social worker, focus group)

'It would be fairer, take away the lottery element for access. It would ensure that someone else other than you is responsible for your development.'

(Local authority adult care social worker, focus group)

'A framework would be very beneficial for staff morale – it would help retain staff as well as help staff move on. It would give the profession more recognition.'

(Local authority children and families social worker, focus group)

'As a student and on placement things are very structured, but, post qualifying, social workers have much less support. A framework would help with this.'

(Third Sector learning lead, interview)

'A professional PQ framework would assist employers to budget for post qualifying learning and development opportunities, as well as reinforcing the necessity as well as value of ongoing CPD for individual workers and the service as a whole.'

(Local authority learning lead, survey)

'I am in my fifth year as a social worker. I am looking for some new direction. I need a career path.'

(Local authority children and families social worker, focus group)

'It would give us back up to point to post qualifying requirements when I go to my colleagues for budgetary support.'

(Local authority learning lead, interview)

'We need to support good CPD learning for the profession that keeps social work at its heart rather than segregating it into areas. Social workers are working in integrated settings – they need support to be social workers wherever they are working. It is hard for social workers to know what learning and development to invest in when there is no agreed or recognised, shared understanding of postgraduate learning.'

(Local authority learning lead, interview)

'There is a need for a more structured approach to what qualified staff could, should learn.'

(Local authority learning lead, interview)

'It could help bring us back to basics. Why I'm here, why I'm a social worker.'

(Local authority adult care social worker, focus group)



Questions and doubts about a post qualifying framework

All the respondents who were unsure, as well as some of those who expressed positive views about a PQ framework, raised some doubts and questions about the feasibility and impact of implementing the framework. Above all, as one learning lead emphasised, 'it must be useful – and not just a lot of extra work for no purpose'. These were the main questions practitioners wanted answers to.

- Will the framework be sufficiently well resourced to make it happen in practice?
- Will social workers be given sufficient time to engage in enhanced learning and development activity?
- Will the framework focus on academic qualifications to the detriment of recognising and tracking experiential learning through practice?
- Accountability – will it 'have teeth'? And who will take responsibility for its implementation?
- How flexible – or prescriptive – should the framework be?
- How generalist – or specialist – should the framework be?
- How will achievement of qualifications be recognised and rewarded?
- Could the framework prove divisive, creating hierarchies and so damaging professional identity?
- Do we already have too many frameworks? How will this new framework integrate with other frameworks, such as the CLF?
- Can the framework be made to work for such a geographically diverse nation?

For those respondents who were unsure about the framework, doubts centred mainly around the diversity of social work practice and, in the current financial climate, the risk of (learning lead, interview). Suggested alternatives to a national framework included the introduction of non-mandatory good practice guidelines and making better use of current frameworks, such as the CLF, in concert with the SSSC Codes of Practice. A learning lead also pointed out that the uncertain status of social workers in the third sector raises questions about a PQ framework's relevance for social workers who are not undertaking functions that SSSC defines as statutory:

'It needs to be clear who the NQSW requirements, continuing registration and planned PQ framework are actually for. Otherwise this causes anxiety and confusion especially for NQSWs – and means that we lose staff.' (Learning lead, third sector, survey)



Table 4 provides a representative selection of participants' concerns and questions about the introduction of a PQ framework from all data sources.

Table 4: A post qualifying framework for social work practice?

'But would the responsibility just get left with staff?'
(Local authority adult care social worker, focus group)

'On who is the onus, the duty to make what is agreed in the Framework happen?'
(Local authority criminal Justice social Worker, focus group)

'If it's too time-consuming and clunky, it will make it harder to retain staff.'
(Learning lead, interview)

'I would not like to see any development that impacts on work capability by imposing a further layer of mandatory expectations.'
(Local authority children and families social worker, focus group)

'If a professional framework could be individualised it could be useful; it would not be useful if too prescriptive.'
(Learning lead, survey)

'We must not lose generic skills, we need those in the islands in a small workforce. We must retain that ability alongside specialist working.'
(Local authority social worker, focus group)

'I would not want a new industry created around establishing a new framework that becomes more of a chore than useful for social workers and their practice.'
(Learning lead, interview)

'I would not just want to see a mimicking of NHS bands and hierarchical structures. As social workers, that would not be congruent with our values. Whether you're a manager or not, you're still a social worker.'
(Local authority MHO, focus group)

'It also needs funding. We can't upskill staff without sufficient resources.'
(Learning lead, interview)

'It would need to be hand in hand with a look at standardising pay across local authorities.'
(Local authority MHO, focus group)



What should a post qualifying framework look like?

Research participants also turned their attention to what a PQ framework should look like in practice. Table 6 sets out the key principles that were most often referred to during focus groups and interviews. There was broad agreement about most principles, but there were conflicting views about two particular aspects of any framework.

- Local flexibility and individual approaches vs. certainty and consistency.
- A generic approach vs. specialisation.

As one learning lead summed up:

'There is a difficult balance between a useful framework and something that is too prescriptive – it has to be flexible and meaningful'.

In focus group discussions we noted some differences between the views of early career social workers, who were most likely to be in favour of consistency and clarity, and those of more experienced workers who were wary of over-prescription and were looking for a more flexible approach to career progression. Experienced social workers were also more likely to favour a strong generic basis to the framework, whilst many of the NQSWs emphasised the need for familiarisation within their specialist role before learning more about other social work services. These differences may partly reflect the changing configuration of social work practice, with, as described earlier, increasing separation between more specialist children and family, adult care and criminal justice services in local authorities. Several learning leads emphasised that an important first step for developing a framework is to:

'...capture what is considered to be mandatory, core, general, specific, intensive, leadership and management training across Scotland'. (Learning lead, local authority, survey)

It was also suggested that the framework needed to incorporate organisational as well individual responsibilities for its implementation:

'There is a role for part of the framework covering organisations so that it's not all focused on the individual – the support of the organisation is important too.'
(Learning lead, third sector, interview)

This research suggests that, despite the very creative development of learning pathways in some localities, we are still a long way from establishing a broad consensus about what social workers need to know, when they need to know it, and how locally and individually this should be determined. The current national consultation about the nature and implementation of the framework will inevitably open up some fundamental debates about the changing role, priorities and identity of the social work profession in modern day Scotland.



Table 6: Principles for a PQ framework for social work practice	What does this mean?
Outcome focused	Evident benefits for service users and carers. Demonstrably improves practice.
Career long	'An enduring thread' from student to CSWO Seamless, and closely integrated with existing frameworks eg CLF.
Equity of access	Equally accessible to different localities, contexts roles, career pathways, employment status, sector. Incorporates a range of learning styles.
Purposeful, practice focused and portable	'Weaves in and out of social workers' lives' Straightforward ways of capturing learning. Links to supervision, PDPs. Capable of capturing day to day learning. Moves with the social worker.
Local flexibility	Achievable in all localities. 'Island-proofed', 'Rural-proofed'. Different learning approaches: 'near and distant', face to face/blended/online.
Future proofed	Built-in sustainability. Linked to succession, recruitment, retention changing service user and carer needs.
Consolidates professional identity	Supports professional identity, role and values. Values all staff, supporting leadership at all levels. Broad understanding of social work/social justice.
Clear and consistent	Clarity of expectations, transparency, accountability. Shared understanding of generic/mandatory/specialist learning. Entitlement to relevant learning opportunities.



Advanced practice

One very clear message that has emerged from this research is the importance of not seeing career development as a purely unidirectional, linear matter of progressing through successive management tiers. A career framework should incorporate an understanding of the importance of nurturing expertise at all levels:

'We need to support social workers who become more experienced to stay and support others' development. Social workers have three level of practice: consolidation; fully accountable; expertise. Social workers should be the experts in practice; team leaders the experts in leading practice; senior managers the experts in holding the boundaries of practice in their part of the organisation.' (Learning lead, small urban/rural local authority, interview)

Many local authorities provided examples of ways in which they support experienced practitioners to take on roles that promote new learning and renew enthusiasm, such as mentoring and practitioner training. Additional payments for MHOs and practice educators can provide an acknowledgement of advanced practice, though, as reported earlier, many experienced social workers do not receive financial recognition for their implicitly advanced role in practice.

Whilst there was interest in developing the advanced practice role, supported by sufficient resource and staff capacity building, participants displayed less enthusiasm for creating a plethora of new qualifications. Misgivings included the time and heavy academic commitment associated with undertaking many PQ awards, and, for some, issues related to current delivery, including market-driven fluctuations in HEIs' ability to offer awards, limited accessibility for rural and island locations and variable levelling against the SCQF. Instead, although not ruling out the development of carefully targeted qualifications, most respondents tended towards a broader approach to skill and knowledge development that brings academic and practice based opportunities for progression closer together:

'The question is how to support talented people to develop skills – these are the advanced practitioners of tomorrow. This is especially important in a rapidly aging workforce – we need new talent. There is scope for development of an advanced practitioner role if it is seen as supporting a talent – an educational pathway or perhaps a progression to prepare able staff for leadership and management.' (Learning lead, large rural authority, interview)

'We need opportunities for good social workers to become really good social workers and to offer support to enable them to continue to develop. It is generally the case that people will pursue learning in areas that they find interesting: more specialist awards would support social workers to be stretched in their roles.' (Learning lead, island local authority, interview)

Where specific qualifications or learning paths were discussed, advanced qualifications in leadership and management were seen as the main priorities. The crucial role of team managers as gatekeepers and supporters of learning also suggests the need for a greater focus on improving the quality of supervision and



on embedding local learning cultures in teams and services. There was interest in finding more practice based, modular means of delivering new learning opportunities, for example by working together with HEIs and learning partnerships to offer selected elements of practice learning qualifications as standalone learning opportunities, and making better use of, and sharing in the development of, up to date distance learning and conferencing resources.



9. Conclusions and recommendations

'Social workers are involved in a wide variety of post qualifying learning activity, motivated by both personal and professional circumstances that go well beyond minimum registration requirements. They are discouraged by lack of support and recognition, competing pressures and financial considerations.' (Gillies, 2015, p.28)

Findings of this research, undertaken three years after Brenda Gillies wrote these words, paint a very similar picture of the state of PQL in Scotland. Our conversations with practitioners, managers and learning leads have identified a sometimes bewildering array of creative and productive learning opportunities and approaches, and much enthusiasm for learning. However, the words that we heard used most often about this jigsaw of energetic and often very skilled activity were 'fragmented', 'piecemeal', 'ad hoc' and 'inconsistent'. Whilst there is a backbone of well-established accredited programmes such as the MHO Award and practice learning qualifications, social work learning has evolved in a myriad of different ways in different localities in Scotland. Whilst some of these observed local differences can be explained by service demand, geography and demographic diversity, others seem more closely related to a shifting interaction of financial pressures, staff losses and rising workloads coupled with divergent employer priorities and sweeping organisational change. This fragmentation has contributed to the near-impossibility of estimating how much employing organisations invest in social work learning. These costs are rarely ring-fenced and nearly always subsumed within much larger budgets for employee learning and development.

Since Gillies undertook her research, local authorities have been undergoing major organisational change arising from health and social care service integration. Although these changes have brought about opportunities in the form of multi-disciplinary collaboration and learning, they have tended to further fragment and dilute social work learning and development. A very wide range of structures have emerged in response to integration, sometimes centralising workforce development in corporate council teams and sometimes dispersing learning and development responsibilities and influence across teams and departments. Relationships within and between workforce development staff in authorities have also been disrupted by these changes as well as the retirement of older, experienced workers, and new networks are taking time to become established.

Budgetary cuts and governmental austerity policies have, we heard, created a particularly difficult environment for advancing learning and development, seen by respondents as 'one of the first areas to be culled' when cuts are made. The consequences of these cuts are evident in the restriction of many developmental opportunities to those that meet local authorities' statutory functions, such as child and adult protection. There is a corresponding lack of opportunity for social workers to develop in other ways, for example, by enhancing their critical reflexivity or research mindedness.



Most local authorities continue to place priority on the MHO Award in order to meet their legislative responsibilities, and, to a lesser extent, on practice learning qualifications. However, social workers' access to these learning opportunities is variable, as is the ability of HEIs to offer the awards when there is low employer take-up, highlighting the influential role of market-driven forces in social work PQL. Financial considerations are also evident in the choices social workers make to leave lower-paying employers for those with more advantageous pay scales. These discrepancies create particular pressures for small, remote and island authorities, where the considerable investment required to support attainment of a PQ award can be rapidly lost when an employee leaves for a higher paid post with another employer. The absence of a coherent national approach to MHO and practice educator provision also continues to be problematic (Learning Network West 2017; Social Work Scotland/ Care Inspectorate, 2017).

There is evidence of creativity and ingenuity in the third sector and local authorities who are responding to reducing budgets by making scarce resources stretch further. The research heard about many examples of innovation and success, from practitioner training, local discussion forums and e-learning developments to imaginative initiatives to recruit and retain social workers and establish learning pathways. The role of experienced individuals in senior management and workforce development roles in initiating and sustaining this activity was very evident. However, there is no doubt that budgetary restraint has resulted in a substantial hollowing out of teams with specific responsibilities for social work learning and development, significantly reducing workforce development capacity and leaving some local authorities with no staff at all. The impact of these losses was found to be far reaching, not only, and most obviously, by reducing social workers' opportunities for and access to learning, but also by damaging the fabric of the wider learning infrastructure, including necessary articulation between assessed learning need, service demand and strategic development.

It is perhaps unsurprising that, where an overall strategic direction for learning is lacking, team leaders have assumed a particularly key role as gatekeepers to learning. Having a manager with a positive and supportive attitude to learning emerges from this research as one of the most significant factors in promoting individual social workers' learning. Considerable local diversity has contributed to creating an uneven playing field for social workers with very variable access to supervision, support, appraisal and, crucially, to career development opportunities. Wilkins et al. (2017) have stressed the importance of high quality supervision for good social work practice, and the need for managers to have access to the training, support and right systemic conditions to make this a reality. Service fragmentation was also said to have resulted in increasing divergence and inconsistencies between adult care, children and family and criminal justice services in local authorities. Most notably, many of the social workers in adult care services who took part in this research reported that integration with NHS services had brought with it a sense of loss of professional identity, and, although they benefit from multidisciplinary collaboration and learning, a dearth of learning opportunities



that enable practitioners to focus on the distinctive roles, responsibilities and values of the social work profession.

Third sector organisations that took part in this research also reported significant loss of learning and development resources, although our sample was too small to draw firm conclusions from the findings. There were, however, important differences from local authorities, in particular, there being, in effect, two different groups of third sector social work staff, those with statutory responsibilities who are required to be registered with SSSC and complete PRTL, and trained social workers who are not in statutory roles, and can choose whether or not to be registered. This situation was described as creating confusion and anxiety, especially for NQSWs, and is an aspect of PQL that requires further research, not least because it calls into question exactly who can be described as a 'social worker' and the extent to which social work can or should be defined by its statutory role. More thoroughly evidenced conclusions can be drawn from our research with the 29 of the 33 statutory organisations that provide social work services in Scotland. However, it is important to note that, for a more complete picture of PQL in Scotland, engagement with a wider stakeholder group is necessary, including learning providers, such as HEIs and learning partnerships, a greater number of third sector organisations and more representatives of criminal justice services, as well as, crucially, service users and carers.

In 2014, Gillies questioned whether the configuration of PQL in Scotland was the result of a national learning strategy that prioritises flexibility, or one 'left largely to develop in an ad hoc system of 'brokerage' driven by practitioner/employer demand and HEI capacity' (p.10). The current situation appears to sit somewhere in between these two extremes, with flexibility legitimately driven by the very diverse geography and demography of Scotland and varied individual learning needs but hampered by a resource-scarce learning environment with fragmented and divergent strategies, structures, cultures and priorities. As a result, there is little consistency of approach to PQL, or about what can be considered to be priority or essential learning in any particular social work role. Fragmentation of learning activity between services and between different parts of Scotland has also led to inevitable duplication and insufficient sharing of expertise and approaches to learning between sectors and localities. As a result, the social work profession finds itself at a considerable disadvantage in relation to other professions, such as nursing and teaching, with their recognised mandatory developmental pathways. This flexibility, it is argued, makes it harder for organisations and individuals to argue for training resources, especially in integrated settings, and impacts negatively on recruitment and retention.

This research found widespread concern about lack of clarity about the current and future direction of learning and development for social workers, about professional identity and about a lack of opportunities for career progression. As a result, there is generally strong support for the implementation of a post qualifying framework for social workers. There is, it seems, a desire to take a fresh look at social work learning and to engage in a debate about how best to support the development of meaningful and realisable learning pathways that recognise expertise and



leadership at every level. The proposed framework has ambitious goals in respect of career-long learning, enhanced professional confidence and the development of a collaborative learning culture. This research makes it clear that, despite great willingness from committed and skilful social workers locally and nationally, these objectives will only be achievable if there is a significant investment in capacity building to ensure that social workers have the time, relevant learning opportunities and recognition required for the transformational change envisaged. The findings of research conducted by Kettle et al. (2017) for Scotland's Review of Social Work Education (SSSC, 2018) supports the argument for centrally driven, whole systems change, underpinned by substantial investment and the full engagement of employers, HEIs and other key stakeholders.

A future-focused PQL framework will require close attention to the changing context for practice to ensure that development of any new advanced qualifications is carefully attuned to the complexity of modern social work as well as evolving service user and carer needs. There is a reluctance to see a framework populated by a proliferation of new qualifications modelled on existing awards. Instead, respondents in this research emphasised the importance of finding more streamlined and effective ways to capture and support learning 'as it happens' in the workplace. A well informed response to the learning needs of social workers in very diverse localities and contexts for practice is also required to ensure equity of access to developmental and career opportunities. A concern, on the one hand, to avoid over-prescription will have to be balanced, on the other, with an evident need for greater clarity, certainty and consistency in social workers' PQL. There are also particular gaps relating to the development of management, supervision and leadership experience and skills. There is evidently much work to be done, but also a sense of hope and expectation arising from this opportunity to step back and reflect how best social workers can be supported to learn, grow and develop their professional confidence and expertise throughout their careers.

Recommendations

The findings from this research indicate that social workers' PQL has been hard hit by budgetary cuts and the austerity policies of central government, with learning and development often an early casualty of economic constraints. Whilst this challenging context has, as we have reported, given rise to some very creative responses to supporting social workers' learning, there is no doubt that the impact of financial austerity on learning and development has been a damaging one. In developing the recommendations listed below, our focus has been on building on existing expertise and on identifying approaches to achieving steady, realisable change within this challenging overall context for social work practice.

1. Developing the Post Qualifying Framework for Social Workers

This research has had the opportunity to consult widely on the value of a PQ framework for social work. The research findings will enable the Scottish Government and SSSC to do the following:



- Draw on this intelligence to further develop the framework, seeking to respond to social workers' questions and doubts about its implementation, including those raised during the research relating to the balance between prescription and flexibility, and between specialism and genericism.
- Identify and work with relevant local authorities to evaluate and learn from the work to develop and implement flexible learning pathways that is already in progress in some parts of Scotland.
- Initiate a dialogue with employers about the potential for more widespread establishment of advanced practice workplace roles that recognise the contribution of experienced social workers, including MHOs and practice educators, and open up the potential for career pathways that retain expertise in practice roles and contribute to enhancing organisational learning cultures.
- Review with relevant stakeholders, including HEIs, other learning providers and employers, the need for development of advanced qualifications. A priority focus should be the development of learning pathways that prepare social workers for leadership and management roles as well as those that enhance the capability of existing managers. Developments should take account of varied geographical needs, and the need for flexible, modular, blended approaches to learning.
- Ensure that the new framework is integrated with other existing frameworks to create a streamlined and seamless structure for the learning journey from qualifying study through the entirety of the social workers' career.
- Put into place an evaluation programme that will enable the impact of the framework's introduction to be measured against the baseline mapping achieved by this research as well as the framework's principles and intended outcomes. This programme should dovetail with evaluation of the effectiveness of planned changes to PRTL, currently under development.

2. Improving the consistency and relevance of PQL

The research identifies the need to improve the consistency and relevance of social workers' PQ learning and career development opportunities in Scotland. The following key actions are likely to be coordinated by SSSC in conjunction with Social Work Scotland, the NHS, HEIs and employers in all sectors.

- Seeking to improve, in collaboration with employers and other learning partners, the consistency and quality of social work supervision, learning from good practice, sharing resources and improving access to qualifications, and individual and collaborative learning opportunities, that support good quality supervision within supportive learning cultures.
- Initiating a dialogue between NHS, SSSC and employers about the learning needs and career opportunities for adult care social workers in HSCPs with



the aim of ensuring that practitioners are able to access learning that supports the building of professional identity and skilled social work practice.

- Evaluating and addressing the variability of NQSW experience, including NQSWs who have undertaken work based qualifying degrees, and social workers in the third and private sector.
- Working towards reaching an agreement with the sector about shared definitions of mandatory learning for social workers at different stages of their careers, drawing on existing best practice, and aiming to achieve a more consistent, transferable and equitable approach to learning.
- Developing national resources that help social workers and their supervisors to track and record in situ practice based learning in a streamlined way, creating greater integration between, PRTL and staff personal development planning.

3. Making learning opportunities more accessible

There are discrepancies between levels of access to learning for social workers in different parts of Scotland. SSSC should collaborate with stakeholders to:

- improve capacity to make use of up to date digital technology and the expertise of HEIs and other learning providers to develop a national approach, to promoting, sharing and evaluating good practice in online and blended learning, and remote conferencing and collaboration
- review the delivery of current and developing PQ Awards to ensure that they are 'island-proofed' and meet the needs of a wide range of social workers, including those in rural and remote locations
- work towards a cohesive, integrated approach to provision of PQ Awards, including practice learning qualifications and the MHO Award, with the aim of ensuring greater equity of access and a more strategic approach to ensuring that there are sufficient numbers of appropriately qualified staff to meet national and local service demands
- explore discrepancies in access to PQ Awards to understand and seek to address the reasons for a high level of variability of social workers' access to learning in different local authorities.

4. Sharing the learning

Many creative developments in PQL are taking place in Scotland, but they are often not shared widely leading to duplication of effort and the loss of opportunities to share new ideas and expertise with the wider workforce. This research suggests that the following actions could positively contribute to improvements in sharing learning:



- SSSC to work with employers, HEIs and other partners to identify and share developing practices, resources and opportunities for ongoing collaboration. This could lead to national development, or redevelopment, of resources that could be shared across the workforce. Examples of ongoing developments in PQL that would benefit from wider sharing and potentially the creation of learning resources with national applicability include online learning resources, platforms and approaches, methodologies for the evaluation of learning, effective approaches to supporting everyday practice learning and research-mindedness, and NQSW support pathways.
- Social work employers to be encouraged to identify and publicise a named learning and development contact to facilitate collaborative activity, research, evaluation and more widespread sharing of resources and learning opportunities.



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Glossary of terms

Chief Social Work Officer (CSWO): A qualified social worker with a legal duty in respect of a local authority's statutory social work functions, providing a focus for professional leadership and governance for the local authority.

Continuous Learning Framework (CLF): A non-mandatory framework that sets out the shared commitment to lifelong learning required of social service workers. Developed by the SSSC in 2008, it aims to improve outcomes for people using social services in Scotland.

Continuing Professional Development (CPD): Assessed and non-assessed study or other learning which is undertaken by workers to help them to improve their practice. This is a requirement of registered social service workers in order to maintain registration.

General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR): European Union directive, enforced in May 2018 that has replaced previous data protection legislation, harmonising data privacy laws across Europe.

Health and Social Care Partnership (HSCP): A body formed as part of the integration of services provided by Health Boards and Councils in Scotland. Each partnership is jointly run by the NHS and local authority.

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

Institute for Research and Innovation in the Social Services (IRISS): A Scottish charitable company, based in Glasgow, Scotland, that supports the social services workforce in Scotland to generate and make use of knowledge and research.

Island local authority: Local authority area entirely comprising islands (all with a population of less than 30,000).

Large local authority: Local authority area with a population of over 200,000.

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

Level of Service/Case Management Inventory (LS/CMI): Case management tool and assessment tool that measures risk and need factors for young people and adults that offend.

Medium-sized local authority: Local authority area with a population of more than 100,000 and less than 200,000.



Mental Health Officer (MHO): A specially trained social worker who has the training, education, experience and skills to work with people with a mental disorder. MHOs work for the local authorities who have legal duties under mental health law in Scotland.

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

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

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

Post-registration training and learning (PRTL): Requirements for the training and learning of the social services workforce in Scotland. Newly Qualified Social Workers are required to undertake at least 24 days of training and learning in their first year of qualified practice.

Professional Development Award (Practice Learning) Level 10: Qualification that enables social workers to assess and support the learning of others, and is also required by supervisors and assessors of social work students on practice learning placements [see also Practice Educator, Practice Learning Qualification (Social Services)]

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

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

Research Advisory Group (RAG): A group convened by the SSSC that oversaw this research, and to which the Craigforth researchers were accountable.

Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF): The national qualifications framework for Scotland.

Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC): Governmental organisation based in Scotland that registers, regulates and promotes the learning of the social services workforce in Scotland.



Small local authority: Local authority area with a population of less than 100,000.

Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE): London based organisation that aims to improve the lives of people of all ages by co-producing, sharing and supporting the use of the best available knowledge and evidence about what works in practice.

Social Services Knowledge Scotland (SSKS): Online resource, funded by the Scottish Government, that provides learning and information sources to assist social service workers to use knowledge evidence in their practice.

Social Work Scotland (SWS): Professional leadership body for social work and social care. SWS works to influence policy and legislation and to support the social services workforce in Scotland.

Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE): Learning requirements that each programme of qualifying social work education in Scotland must meet.

Step into Leadership: An online portal developed by the Scottish Social Services Council to support the development of leadership skills at all levels across the workforce and to develop citizen leadership skills

<http://www.stepintoleadership.info/>



Appendix 1: Survey topics

- Demographic and organisational information
- Current post qualifying learning delivered
- Support for workplace learning
- Access to learning resources
- Evaluation of learning
- Learning partners
- Learning strategies
- NQSW learning
- Successes and achievements
- Views about the introduction of a PQ Framework in Scotland
- Views about further developments required in Scotland
- Any other comments



Appendix 2: Interview topic guide

1. Overall, how would you describe your organisation's strategy for social workers' post qualifying learning?
2. Can you tell us more about the budget for post qualifying learning in your organisation? How easy is it to access this information?
3. How are your organisation's social workers supported to engage in learning?
4. How are social workers selected to take part in learning programmes and formal qualifications?
5. What is the role of post qualifying learning in staff career progression? Is there a place for an advanced practice role/ qualifications?
6. What is your organisation's approach to NQSW learning?
7. How do you work with partners in other organisations?
8. What are the main successes/ achievements of your organisation's approach to post qualifying learning?
9. What do you see as the main challenges in post qualifying learning for the social work workforce?
10. How does your organisation evaluate learning outcomes?
11. What future developments would you like to see in SW post qualifying learning?
12. Is there a role for a Professional Framework, and if so what might it look like in practice?
13. Is there anything else you would like to add?



Appendix 3: Focus group composition and topic guide

	Gender	SW specialism	Ave no. of years since qualification	Social work role	% of total
Female	39				68
Male	17				32
Specialism					
Children and Families		19			33
Adult care		32			56
Criminal Justice		4			7
Other		2			4
Length of qualification					
Less than a year			10		18
1-3 years			6		11
4-6 years			7		12
7-10 years			6		11
Over 10 years			27		48
Social work role					
Front line practitioner				41	71
Manager				16	27
Other				1	2
Other roles					
MHO				13	
Practice educator				7	

Composition of focus groups by gender, social work specialism, length of qualification and social work role.



Topic guide

Preliminaries

- Recording of demographic information.
- Consent form completion.

Introduction

- Welcome, introductions and brief explanation about background to the research.
- Explanation of format of session; outlining of main topics.

Topics

1. Perceptions of PQL including:
 - value and benefits
 - issues/challenges/barriers
 - impact on career progression
 - impact on service delivery – lives of service users and carers
 - any best practice examples, innovation etc.
2. Changes and developments needed to meet current and future needs PQL including:
 - gaps in current provision
 - are advanced qualifications required (including management qualifications)?
 - the value of a PQ framework – potential benefits and potential drawbacks?
 - what might a PQL framework look like in practice?
 - priorities for PQL in the future.





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