Social work fast-track programmes: retention and progression

Final Report

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Contents

Acknowledgements

List of Tables

List of Figures

Executive summary

Background

This final report presents a summary of findings from a longitudinal study (2017-21) of social workers trained via the two fast-track child and family social work programmes – Frontline and Step Up to Social Work.

Recruitment and retention continue to be challenging for children's social work. New models of initial social work education have been developed, to address both recruitment and retention problems, and concern about the quality of training and recruits. These new models include fast-track work-based routes to qualification.

Frontline was designed to attract graduates with strong academic records and excellent interpersonal skills who may not have considered social work as a career to come into statutory child protection work in local authorities. It offers a distinctive training model as it is heavily practice-based, using a systemic theoretical model and two specific evidence-based practice approaches (motivational interviewing and a parenting programme).

Step Up to Social Work was designed to attract high-calibre career changers to an employment-based, intensive route into child and family social work. Its aim was to strengthen the relationship between social work educators and employers via a coordinated training model, delivered at regional partnership level and focused on enabling social work graduates to be practice-ready on qualification.

Aims

The aims of the study, as set out by the Department for Education, were to investigate some longer-term employment outcomes (up to early 2021) for Frontline cohorts 1 to 5[1] and Step Up to Social Work cohorts 4 and 5[2]. The longest follow-up is 5 years for Frontline (Cohort 1) and 3.5 years for Step Up (Cohort 4). The key outcomes are employment destinations, rate of career progression, and retention (or its reverse, attrition) within child and family social work. The research questions are as follows:

- What are the employment destinations and trajectories of fast-track graduates after they complete Step Up or Frontline programmes?

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[1] Cohort 1 qualified as social workers in 2015 and each subsequent cohort one year later.
[2] Cohort 4 qualified in 2017; Cohort 5 in 2019.

- What are the retention / attrition rates within social work over time for each of the fast-track cohorts?

- What are the destinations of fast-track candidates who complete the programmes but leave the profession? And what are their reasons for leaving?

- Are fast-track graduates who enter social work progressing to supervisory or leadership roles and if so, how quickly?

- What are the push/ pull factors affecting retention / attrition in child and family social work amongst fast-track graduates?

- Did the experience of working through the pandemic affect intentions to stay in social work?

- What are employers' experiences of employing child and family social workers who have qualified via fast-track programmes?

The report presents findings from:

- Frontline cohorts 1 to 5, which comprised of students between six months and 5 years post qualification.
- Step Up cohorts 4 and 5 at between six months and 3.5 years post qualification.

The already-published longitudinal study from Smith et al (2018) covers outcomes for Step Up cohorts 1 and 2 three and five years after qualifying.

This final report focuses on data collection from Summer 2019 to March 2021, to build on and – with a few exceptions – refrain from repeating findings from the interim report which presented data for the period up to Summer 2019 (Scourfield et al., 2020).

Method

Participants from both programmes, including those who stayed in child and family social work and those who left the profession, were invited to complete an online survey each year. The survey questions covered current work role, some organisational aspects (e.g. caseload, supervision), job satisfaction, and stress. The first questionnaire, six months after social work qualification included more questions than subsequent ones. A sub-sample of respondents were invited to participate in a semi-structured telephone interview.

The numbers responding to each survey ranged from 34 to 212, with response rates ranging from 30% to 82%. Response rates tended to be higher in the earlier years of

the study, with lower response rates during the COVID-19 pandemic, when it was agreed to be inappropriate to issue the same number of reminder emails to non-respondents. In the case of social workers qualified via the Frontline programme, survey data came from Frontline's own surveys. For Step Up, surveys were distributed directly by the project research team.

Over the whole project, 98 telephone interviews were conducted with social workers qualified via fast-track programmes, including some repeat interviews over time and some people who have left the profession. In this report, we present findings from 23 interviews with Frontline graduates (15 female, 8 male), 4 of which are repeat interviews, and 27 interviews with Step Up graduates (14 female, 13 male), 3 of which are repeat interviews. Also presented in the report are findings from interviews conducted in 2020-21 with employers from 21 English local authorities. These interviews explored their experience of employing fast-track trainees as social workers.

To estimate attrition rates from social work, fast-track graduates who did not respond to the surveys were looked up in the publicly available Social Work England register (Health and Care Professions register for earlier time points). Those whose names were not on the register were assumed to have left statutory social work in England. Attrition rates were worked out by combining the register results with responses from the surveys. Analysis of data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) Destination of Leavers from Higher Education 2016/7 and already-published results from this same data set (Skills for Care, 2018) and the HESA Graduate Outcomes Survey (Skills for Care 2021) were used for comparison with mainstream programmes from across England or with social workers from all routes.

Data collection was paused for six months from March 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. This did not affect the delivery of the project on the original timescales. Questions were added to the 2020 surveys and interviews about the experience of working through the pandemic and whether it had affected the intention to stay in social work.

Findings

Destinations and early experiences of social work

Six months after qualifying, both fast-track programmes appear to have reasonably low attrition rates:

- Ten percent of 2017 Step Up graduates (Cohort 4) and 15% of 2019 Step Up graduates (Cohort 5), were not in statutory social work roles in England.

- Of Frontline graduates, only one per cent of those gaining a social work qualification in 2017 (Cohort 3), two per cent of those qualifying in 2018 (Cohort 4) and less than one per cent of those qualifying in 2019 (Cohort 5), were not practising social workers. However, unlike for other routes into social work, Frontline participants are still formally engaged in the Frontline programme six months after social work qualification, so a low attrition rate would be expected.

- HESA data on all-England social work graduates from mainstream post-graduate programmes show that 22% did not categorise themselves as social workers at six months post-qualification. Some of these would no doubt be intending to practice as social workers but not yet sought or found employment. This information is not directly comparable with our study but it does suggest that fast-track attrition rates are likely to be lower than those for social workers trained via mainstream routes after six months.

Supervision was rated as 'very good' or 'good' by 71% of Frontline Cohort 5 respondents. Eighty-one per cent of Step Up Cohort 4 respondents and 85% of Step Up Cohort 5 indicated that supervision was 'good 'or 'very good'. Between 8 and 9 out of 10 respondents felt supported by their manager to either a great or moderate extent, for both programmes.

The average caseload for all social workers at all career stages is 16.3 (Department for Education, 2021). The most common caseload for social workers trained via fast-track programmes, around six months after social work qualification, was 13-16, although joint most common for Step Up Cohort 4 was 17-20. The proportion of respondents carrying relatively low caseloads six months after qualification increased with each successive cohort. For Frontline, 21% of Cohort 3 reported having a caseload of 12 or less, compared to 25% of Cohort 4 and 34% of Cohort 5. A similar pattern was seen in Step Up data: 29% of Cohort 4 indicated a caseload of 12 or less, increasing to 44% of Cohort 5. Several interviewees perceived their demanding caseloads to be problematic. It should be noted that work conditions for newly qualified social workers, such as caseloads and supervision, are the responsibility of local authorities and not the fast-track programmes.

Interview findings from fast-track-trained social workers and their employers perceived qualified social work to be a major step up from initial training in terms of volume and complexity. From Frontline trainees there was a sense of disappointment in the reality of local authority practice, in contrast to the unit structure and theoretical model on which their training was based.

Retention / attrition

It is not possible to present findings on retention in child and family social work specifically, as the follow-up methodology in this report depends on professional

registration and this does not indicate field of practice. We also cannot be sure that all who are on the register are actually practising. Because of this limitation, we refer to *attrition* from statutory social work in England throughout this report, rather than retention. By attrition we mean qualified social workers not working in a protected title role in England, as detected on the professional register.

In this final report, we have revised our approach to estimating attrition (see section 4.0). This means that some of the results reported in the interim report previously were slight underestimates of attrition from fast-track graduates. The attrition results for all cohorts across all waves are therefore presented in this report.

Eighteen months after social work qualification, the rate of Frontline graduates not working in a statutory social work role in England (either with children or adults) were 8% for Cohort 2, 16% for Cohort 3, 12% for Cohort 4 and 11% for cohort 5. After three years, 19% (Cohort 3), 22% (Cohort 2) and 36% (Cohort 1) had left. After four years the attrition rate was 15% (Cohort 2) and 32% (Cohort 1) and after five years the attrition rate for Cohort 1 was at 36%, suggesting some movement in and out of the profession rather than simply a cumulative attrition.

For Step Up Cohort 4, the attrition rate from all statutory social work 18 months after qualifying was 13%, rising to 17% after 2.5 years and then falling to 12% after 3.5 years. Previous studies of Step Up cohorts 1 and 2 have found an attrition rate from child and family social work specifically of 15% and 20% respectively at three years post qualification (Smith et al., 2018). For Cohort 5, the attrition rate was 15% at six months post qualification and 12% at 18 months.

Data for the general workforce are only available at 15 months post qualification, from the HESA Graduate Outcomes Survey. These suggest that, for all social workers in England – i.e., not just child and family social workers and qualified via all routes - attrition from the profession is 18%. The HESA survey is not directly comparable to our study, because of methodological differences (see section 2.5). However, their finding does suggest that contrary to what some critics of fast-track programmes have assumed, there is no evidence that attrition rates for fast-track-trained social workers at 18 months after qualification are higher than they are for social workers trained via mainstream programmes. The situation at later points is not known, because of the lack of comparative data.

The vast majority of graduates who responded to the surveys from both Step Up and Frontline (all cohorts studied to date and all time points) were social workers working with children and families, rather than adults. Of those in child and family social work, the majority were working in children in need or child protection teams. For those trained through Frontline, the proportions working in these settings generally reduced

over time in each of the cohorts. For those from Step Up Cohort 4, the proportion in these teams increased at 18m post-qualification and then decreased at 2.5 years.

Of the social workers trained via Frontline from all cohorts who responded to the surveys, a substantial number had moved to a different local authority from where they had trained. However, movement away from the host local authority appeared to be more marked in the earlier cohorts. For Cohort 1 only 25% reported working in the host local authority at 2.5 years, whereas at the same time point the percentages for later cohorts were 37% for Cohort 2, 48% for Cohort 3 and 45% for Cohort 4. A large proportion of Step Up-trained social workers (60%) were still in the local authority where they had trained at 2.5 years post qualification and the majority of Step Up respondents (53%) were still in the local authority where they had trained, even after 3.5 years.

Many of the employers interviewed expressed concern about the impact on local retention of the Frontline recruitment model which had initially sought applicants from across the UK and then allocated them to areas. However, the match for regional preference has improved over time and this improvement was noted by some employers interviewed. Employers were positive about Step Up's regional approach which has always attracted applicants with strong local ties who then stay in a local authority longer term. Between seven per cent (Cohort 2) and 15% (Cohort 1) of social workers trained via Frontline told us the experience of working through the pandemic had made it more likely that they would leave social work. Of those trained via Step Up, 17% (Cohort 4) and 23% (Cohort 5) reported that this experience had made them more likely to leave the profession.

The challenges of working from home during lockdown were the physical frustration of being stuck in a small space for work and spare time; work-life balance; difficult emotional content coming directly into the worker's family home; isolation from colleagues; and loss of informal learning and an emotional safety valve. The benefits mentioned were the practicality of arranging online meetings, including with people at a geographical distance and, paradoxically, work-life balance was also mentioned as having improved for some. Clearly there was a range of different individual circumstances.

Other pandemic-related challenges mentioned were access to personal protective equipment, added bureaucracy due to risk aversion, increased caseloads because of colleagues' absence, reduced face-to-face interaction with families, and feeling as though children's services were the only service still operating.

Progression

Thirty-eight per cent of social workers from the Step Up programme who responded to the survey 3.5 years after qualification had progressed beyond entry grade. Employers interviewed tended to see these progression levels as in line with expectations. For Frontline we have longer follow-up data. By 5 years after social work qualification, 73% of the survey respondents in social work reported they had progressed beyond entry grade practitioner posts.

Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction results are presented for participants 18 months and 2.5 years post qualification. Intrinsic job satisfaction was high for social workers trained via both programmes. At least 70% were satisfied with all of the intrinsic factors: relationships with colleagues, their own accomplishments, developing skills, having challenges, the actual tasks done, the variety of these tasks and opportunities to use their initiative.

Satisfaction with extrinsic factors (material work conditions) was lower for both programmes, although the majority of respondents were satisfied with most extrinsic factors and especially job security, for which satisfaction was highest. The lowest satisfaction was for public respect for social work – less than 50% were satisfied with this for both programmes. Results at 2.5 years were quite similar to those at 18 months, however there was an increase, in both groups, in satisfaction with the number of hours worked.

Reasons for leaving

Longitudinal analysis of the same individuals over time – collating both fast-track programmes together to increase statistical power – found that the two factors most strongly associated with retention or attrition were intrinsic job satisfaction and support from the local authority. This finding highlights that there is much a local authority can do, even within external constraints, to improve social workers' experience of their employment.

Qualitative findings from social workers interviewed, including several who had left the profession, emphasised the importance of meaningful, rewarding social work, but also highlighted the importance of extrinsic factors such as caseload sizes and the number of hours worked. The most frequently cited reasons for leaving in the free-text survey responses were stress, mental health and emotional burden (Frontline) and stress and caseload (Step Up).

Where survey respondents recorded being in alternative careers, most were in the broad fields of health, social care and education, for both programmes, with those trained via Step Up staying especially close to social care.

1.0 Main report - Introduction

Initial social work education in England has been subject to substantial change over the last couple of decades. A major change in 2003 was a shift to a graduate level entry requirement, in line with a more general upward trend in the qualification base for a range of professions – an obvious comparison being nursing. Over the intervening years, there have been a number of initiatives to improve social work graduates' readiness to practise and strengthen professional development. These have included the work of the Social Work Reform Board, changes in the regulatory arrangements, the establishment (and subsequent demise) of the College of Social Work, the launch of Teaching Partnerships from 2015, the establishment of specialist regulator Social Work England from 2019, the creation of a series of frameworks designed to set the expected standards of good practice at differing career points, including knowledge and skills statements, and the initiation of new entry routes into the profession, such as apprenticeships and fast-track programmes.

Retention in particular is currently challenging in children's social work in England. Latest figures show a vacancy rate of 16.1% and a full-time equivalent turnover rate of 13.5% - this is, in fact, down from 15.1% in the previous years (Department for Education, 2021). Fast-track programmes are one response to these problems, and to concerns from the Government and their advisers about the consistency and relevance to practice of university-based courses (e.g., Narey, 2014; Department for Education, 2016). For child and family social work specifically, the two fast-track routes are Step Up to Social Work (since 2010) and Frontline (since 2014) which are specialised for child and family social work, as opposed to mainstream social work programmes which prepare students for all areas of social work.

The Department for Education describe the two fast-track programmes in the following terms.

1.1 Frontline

Frontline is a two-year, fast-track training programme targeted at bringing high performing graduates with leadership potential into child and family social work. The Department for Education began working with Frontline in September 2013 to deliver the first cohort in July 2014. Frontline then won a contract to supply a national fast-track entry programme that recruited and provided participants with a two-year regulator-approved training course, leading to a postgraduate social work qualification within a year and a Master's degree (MA) within two years. The Frontline Programme accepts applications every year. The first cohort was delivered in 2014 and worked with 17 local authorities in London and Manchester. Frontline has expanded into a national programme, partnering each year with ~70 local

authorities who host units of participants to deliver the programme. As the programme has expanded geographically, capacity to allocate applicants to preferred regions has grown.

Training comprises an intensive 5-week Summer Institute followed by placement in a student unit in a local authority alongside ongoing academic input delivered in the unit, with the aim of theory-practice integration. It offers a distinctive training model, being heavily practice-based and promoting a specific theoretical model and two evidence-based practice approaches. Each unit is led by a consultant social worker who leads casework with the trainees. Students qualify as social workers after a year, having successfully attained a Postgraduate Diploma and registered with Social Work England. Most make a commitment to practise for a further year, with the opportunity to complete a Master's degree. Frontline training also includes a leadership development programme, as developing future leaders of the profession is an additional aim.

1.2 Step Up to Social Work

Step Up to Social Work (also referred to in this report for brevity as 'Step Up') is a tailored training programme which provides successful trainees with a Postgraduate Diploma in social work (but no Master's qualification), alongside intensive hands-on experience, within 14 months. It has been specifically designed for high-achieving graduates and career changers, who already have experience of working with vulnerable children, young people and families, to train to become qualified social workers.

Step Up is a distinctive programme because it is employer-led, i.e. council employers work with universities to shape the course content and syllabus. It provides intensive, hands-on practitioner input alongside academic learning, at an accelerated pace (compared to non-fast-track traditional routes). The programme is designed to enable coursework and practical experience to happen simultaneously. The Step Up to Social Work programme accepts applications every two years. At inception in 2010, Step Up operated in 42 local authorities; now 136 of England's 152 local authorities host the programme for cohort 6. This equates to 89% coverage of local authorities in England. Some local authorities in Step Up regional partnerships provide additional academic input for graduates beyond their initial programme, although this is not a national expectation or part of what the Department for Education fund, so for the purposes of this report we are treating it as a 14-month programme.

For both of the fast-track programmes, demands on the individual are rigorous and the level of commitment expected from students is high (Smith et al., 2013; Maxwell et al., 2016).

1.3 Existing evidence on retention and progression

Following discussion with the Department for Education and the Research Advisory Group, this report does not include a full literature review of published commentary on fast-track programmes. Rather, what follows is a focused and brief summary of some relevant published research on retention and progression, especially for fast-track programmes.

In terms of evidence on the retention and progression of graduates from all routes into UK social work, Curtis, Moriarty and Netten (2010) analysed data from the Labour Force Survey which found the average working life of a social work practitioner (all service user groups) to be only 7.7 years, compared with estimates from previous studies of 25 years for doctors and 15 years for nurses. There is no more recent UK study that we are aware of that estimates the working life of a social worker.

A number of studies have explored factors associated with workforce retention, with both individual and organisational factors being identified (e.g., McFadden et al 2015; McFadden et al 2019). With respect to individual factors, the attitudes and perceptions of child welfare workers, such as job satisfaction, and stress tended to have more influence on turnover than demographic predictors, which have small or negligible effects (Kim and Kao 2014). Various organisational factors have also been associated with social worker retention including supervisory, organisational and co-worker support (DePanfilis & Zlotnik, 2008; Kim & Kao 2014, McFadden 2015; McFadden et al 2019). These factors have been identified as important to the retention of the general social work workforce. There is, however, little evidence about what factors are important in the retention of the specific group of social workers who have qualified through fast-track programmes.

Earlier studies (Smith et al., 2013; 2018) have investigated the extent to which graduate entrants onto Step Up to Social Work have followed the expected path into professional practice, in terms of programme completion, retention and progression. Step Up participants were followed up as long as five years after qualification (Smith et al. 2018).

For the first two Step Up cohorts in the studies by Smith et al. (2013; 2018), the great majority completed the programme successfully and moved into posts in child and family social work (Cohort 1, 87%, n=185; Cohort 2, 93%, n=227). Three years after qualifying, most of these were still known to be practising in equivalent posts (Cohort

1, 85%, n=161; Cohort 2, 80%, n=212). Figures were only available for the first cohort at the five-year post-qualification point, but at this stage, 73% were confirmed as still employed in child and family social work. For Step Up there appear to be relatively good completion, 'conversion' and retention rates; compared to the 78% figure of those completing mainstream postgraduate social work qualifying programmes who then take up jobs as social workers within six months of graduation (Skills for Care, 2018).

Surveys undertaken with the first Step Up cohort and a comparison group (of social work practitioners qualifying from traditional routes at approximately the same time) indicated little difference between the two in terms of continuity, with 39% of the Step Up respondents and 35% of the comparators remaining in their initial post three years after qualifying (Smith et al., 2018). Interview findings showed that a minority of Step Up-trained social workers interviewed felt that they had progressed into senior roles more quickly than expected, and this was supported by employers who clearly believed that this group did have the potential to gain promotion relatively early in their careers; and in some cases, were able to point to examples of rapid progression.

In relation to those who leave social work, interview findings from these previous Step Up studies identified a number of different contributing factors, including lack of 'fit' with the role, changing personal circumstances, 'moving on', and adverse experiences on the programme. However, the relatively infrequent occurrence of such problems did not appear to be indicative of fundamental programme flaws, however difficult the challenges may have been in a small number of cases.

No independent research has been published to date on retention or progression for Frontline graduates, although the Frontline organisation has published data in a retention briefing (Frontline, 2019). Based on the organisation's own surveys, this showed the retention rate in social work to be 80% across all cohorts, with 74% in local authority children's services. The independent evaluation of the Frontline pilot (Maxwell et al., 2016) focused on practice skills, demographics and experience of the programme.

1.4 Aims

The aims of this study, as set out by the Department for Education, were to investigate the longer-term outcomes (up to March 2021) for Frontline cohorts 1 to 5 and Step Up to Social Work cohorts 4 and 5. The follow-up times ranged from 18 months to 5 years for Frontline and from 18 months to 3.5 years for Step Up. The key outcomes were employment destinations, rate of career progression and retention (or its reverse, attrition) within child and family social work. The findings

have been reported in two stages. The results up to Summer 2019, which was roughly the mid-point of the study, have already been published in an interim report (Scourfield et al., 2020). As explained below, this report builds on that previous report, including findings from Summer 2019 onwards, with a few exceptions where earlier findings need to be repeated.

1.5 Research questions

This report addresses the following research questions. We note in brackets the data sources for answering each question. Research methods will be introduced in the next section of the report (2.0).

- What are the employment destinations and trajectories of fast-track graduates after they complete Step Up or Frontline programmes? (public register and surveys)

- What are the retention / attrition rates within social work over time for each of the fast-track cohorts? (public register and surveys)

- Are fast-track graduates who enter social work progressing to supervision or leadership roles and if so, how quickly? (surveys)

- What are the destinations of fast-track candidates who complete the programmes but leave the profession? And what are their reasons for leaving? (survey and interviews)

- What are the push / pull factors affecting retention / attrition in child and family social work amongst fast-track graduates? (survey and interviews)

- Did the experience of working through the pandemic affect intentions to stay in social work? (survey and interviews)

- What are employers' experiences of child and family social workers who have qualified via fast-track programmes? (interviews)

2.0 Method

2.1 Online surveys of fast-track graduates

Social workers qualified via fast-track programmes were invited to complete an annual online survey beginning six months after qualification (Table 2.1). The first survey, after six months, included more questions than subsequent survey waves, to provide a picture of the first year in practice but avoid the burden on practitioners of repeated detailed surveys. For the Frontline programme, social workers from cohorts 1 to 5 were captured. The Department for Education commissioned the research to cover cohorts four and five of Step Up to Social Work. Longitudinal findings from cohorts 1 and 2 have been published by Smith et al. (2018). Results from survey waves that are shaded in Table 2.1 were presented in our interim report (Scourfield et al., 2020). While these findings have mostly not been repeated, results where a longitudinal view revealed interesting findings are presented here.

Table 2.1: Fast-track programme cohorts and timetable

Frontline							
Cohort	Date of social work qual	Data Point & Survey 6m after social work qual.	Data Point & Survey after 18m	Data Point &Survey after 2.5 years	Data Point & Survey after 3 years	Data Point & Survey after 4 years	Data Point & Survey after 5 years
1	Sept 2015			March 18	Sept 18	Sept 19	Sept 20
2	Sept 2016		March 18	March 19	Sept 19	Sept 20	
3	Sept 2017	March 18	March 19	March 20	Sept 20		
4	Sept 2018	March 19	March 20	March 21			
5	Sept 2019	March 20	March 21				

Step Up to Social Work				
Cohort	Date of social work qual.	Data Point & Survey 6m after social work qual.	Data Point & Survey after 18m	Data Point and Survey after 2.5 years	Data Point and Survey after 3.5 years
4	Mar 2017	Sept 17	Sept 18	Sept 19	Sept 20
5	Mar 2019	Sept 19	Sept 20		

Survey waves that are shaded have been previously reported (Scourfield et al., 2020)

2.2 Tracking social worker employment

The Step Up graduates' employment profile was identified using survey responses (through this study) and non-respondents were looked up in the public Social Work England (SWE) or Health and Care Professionals Council (HCPC) register of social workers. Frontline already identify the destinations of their graduates via six-monthly questionnaires. To avoid survey burden and therefore potentially a very poor response rate, Frontline graduates were not contacted separately from the follow-up surveys issued by the Frontline organisation. Instead, we added questions to Frontline's own survey and received an anonymised data set for analysis. Frontline staff also looked up survey non-respondents in the SWE/HCPC register on behalf of the research team. Table 2.2 below shows the response rates for the surveys. These only cover respondents who had qualified as social workers. Although it was the original intention to consider people who had left the programme before completion, we were unable to obtain reliable and consistent data on these individuals across both programmes. For Step Up to Social Work we had no information on such people, so this aspect could not be achieved.

It is not possible to present findings on retention in child and family social work specifically, as the follow-up methodology in this report depends on professional registration and this does not indicate field of practice. We also cannot be sure that all who are on the register are actually practising. Because of this limitation, we refer to *attrition* from statutory social work in England throughout this report, rather than retention. By attrition we mean qualified social workers leaving the profession, because we can be sure that if people are no longer on the register then they are no longer practising in a job with the protected title of 'social worker' in England.

To give an idea of expected response rates, some published rates from other comparable surveys are 37-52% for Step Up to Social Work cohorts 1 and 2 (Smith et al., 2018) and 29-44% (Hussein et al., 2014) and 37-51% (Carpenter et al., 2012) for previous surveys of newly qualified social workers. The average response rate for online surveys of the broadly comparably occupational group of health care professionals is only 13% (Cho, Johnson and Van Geest, 2013). It can be seen that the response rates from the fast track-trained social workers reduced in Autumn 2020 (Step Up and Frontline) and March 2021 (Frontline) - see Table 2.2. These survey waves took place during the COVID-19 pandemic and it was deemed inappropriate to issue the same number of reminder emails to non-respondents.

In places throughout the report, comparison is made with two surveys run by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA). Firstly, there is the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education for 2016/7. This survey is non-mandatory and is sent to all graduates six months after leaving higher education. For 2016/17 it had a response rate of 71% for graduates from all degree subjects. The survey data

included the number of graduates who were employed as social workers or in social care related fields and where they found employment. We most often make comparison with published aggregate results for social workers qualified via mainstream programmes (Skills for Care, 2018), but for one specific comparison we refer to the research team's own analysis of individual-level HESA data for 2017 graduates. This data set is smaller than that used by Skills for Care (n=2125, compared with n=3000) as the criteria for inclusion of programmes were apparently different - we only included programmes coded under 'social work' – however, we have no reason to think it is not representative of the population of mainstream social work programme graduates who have responded to the HESA survey.

Secondly, we have drawn upon results from the Graduate Outcomes Survey which has replaced the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education Survey. It is undertaken 15 months after graduation. The first and most recent set of results for social work relate to people graduating after August 2017 and are published by Skills for Care (2021). These results include all social work graduates together and do not differentiate those completing fast-track programmes from those completing mainstream programmes. The response rate for all degree subjects was 53%.

Table 2.2: Survey sample size and response rates

Fast-track programme	Cohort number (start date) [a]	Date cohort achieved social work qual.	n started programme	n (%) achieved social work qualification	n (%) responding to 2017 survey	n (%) responding to 2018 survey	n (%) responding to 2019 survey	n (%) responding to 2020 survey	n (%) responding to 2021 survey
Frontline	1 (2014)	2015	104	100 (96%)	N/A	82 (82%)	71 (71%) [e]	50 (50%) [e]	49 (49%) [e]
	2 (2015)	2016	124	114 (92%)	N/A	81 (71%)	62 (54%)	57 (50%) [e]	34 (30%) [e]
	3 (2016)	2017	155	145 (94%) [b]	N/A	99 (68%)	68 (47%)	90 (62%)	55 (38%) [e]
	4 (2017)	2018	282	253 (90%) [b]	N/A	N/A	155 (61%)	150 (59%)	122 (48%)
	5 (2018)	2019	336	316 (94%) [b]	N/A	N/A	N/A	185 (59%)	168 (53%)
Step Up to Social Work	4 (2016)	2017	458	435 (95%) (423[c])	212 (50%)	171 (40%)	200 (47%)	197 (47%)	N/A
	5 (2018)	2019	550	539 (501) [d]	N/A	N/A	217(43%)	180 (36%)	N/A

[a] Frontline cohorts are classified by the year in which the Frontline participants commenced the programme

[b] includes a handful of deferrals from a previous cohort

[c] the number that consented to be contacted for evaluation purposes

[d] the n of graduates whose names and contact details were confirmed to the research team

[e] survey was in fact conducted in the previous September

2.3 Qualitative interviews

Semi-structured telephone or video interviews were conducted with social workers from each programme in each year of the study and with social work employers from both programmes in 2020-21.

A total of 98 interviews with fast-track graduates were completed, between six months and 3 years post social work qualification (see Table 2.3). Twenty-one people were interviewed on more than one occasion at different points post social work qualification, therefore the total number of individuals interviewed was 80. This included 40 from Frontline (30 female and 10 male) and 40 from Step Up (31 female and 9 male).

Table 2.3: Characteristics of all social worker interviewees across both interim and final reports

Frontline	Working as social workers	Have left social work
Cohort 2	0	4
Cohort 3	9	3
Cohort 4	11	1
Cohort 5	11	1
Repeat interviews	5	3*
Sub-total	36	12
Step Up to Social Work	Working as social workers	Have left social work
Cohort 4	13	12
Cohort 5	9	3
Repeat interviews	13	0
Sub-total	35	15

*Three participants had left social work since being previously interviewed.

Of the 98 total interviews, 48 were reported in the previous interim report (Scourfield et al., 2020), whilst the remaining 50 will be reported in this final report. This includes 23 interviews with Frontline graduates (15 female, 8 male), 4 of which are repeat interviews, and 27 interviews with Step Up graduates (14 female, 13 male), 3 of which are repeat interviews. See table 2.4.

Table 2.4: Characteristics of social worker interviewees included in this report

Frontline	Working as social workers	Have left social work
Cohort 2	0	0
Cohort 3	0	2
Cohort 4	8	1
Cohort 5	11	1
Sub-total	19	4
Step Up to Social Work	Working as social workers	Have left social work
Cohort 4	9	3
Cohort 5	10	5
Sub-total	19	8

A total of twenty-one semi-structured interviews were carried out with employers of social workers qualified via the two fast-track programmes. Seventeen interviews were conducted with respondents who had employed social workers qualified from both Frontline and Step Up to Social Work and four interviewees had experience of employing social workers from only one of the fast-track programmes (Step Up only = 3, Frontline only = 1). The interviewees included Directors of Children's Services (n=5), workforce development managers (n=5), executive directors (n=2), principal social workers (6) and heads of training, support and other services (n=11).

There were two routes for recruiting employers for interviews. Firstly, from our survey results we identified local authorities who either employed social workers qualified via both programmes or had a cluster of employees from one. We approached equal numbers of employers for each programme. Secondly, we contacted the workforce lead and regional leads for the Association of Directors of Children's Services, who passed on the invitation to take part in an interview. The interviews were completed via Microsoft Teams, between November 2020 and April 2021. On average, each interview lasted 43 minutes. A total of 29 interviewees took part, with seven group interviews (2-4 participants) and fourteen individual interviews. The interviews aimed to obtain views on employers' experiences of employing social workers qualified via fast-track programmes and ascertain their views on their progression and commitment to child and family social work.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. All participants have been given pseudonyms to preserve their anonymity. The findings from the employer interviews are presented in just three of the chapters – those focusing on early experiences of social work, retention / attrition and career progression.

2.4 Data analysis

Analysis of interview data was managed within the qualitative software package, NVivo. A number of a priori codes were agreed by the research team, early in the study, based on the interview schedule, and transcripts were analysed according to this thematic framework. Interview transcripts were coded by one member of the research team. For the social worker interviews, 28 codes were generated, ordered hierarchically within four key themes: programme and preparation for practice; first experiences in post; coping and resilience; and commitment to social work. For the employer interviews, 24 codes were generated, ordered hierarchically within the key themes of: destinations and early experiences of fast-track social workers; experiences and views on the fast-track programmes; employers' experiences of social workers in the job in the longer term; retention and progression; and reasons for leaving the social work profession.

Most of the quantitative data in the report are presented as descriptive statistics only, generated by Stata and Excel software. Statistical tests are used deliberately sparingly, as over-use can lead to false positives. Where cohort comparisons were tested statistically, chi-square tests were used for categorical data with a significance threshold of 0.05.

Levels of stress were measured for both Step Up and Frontline Cohorts 5 at six months post-qualifying, using the twelve-item General Health Questionnaire (GHQ – 12; Goldberg and Williams, 1998). This is a validated and well-established self-report instrument which was scored using the bi-modal scoring method with a threshold of four for clinical levels of stress.

Most of the quantitative analysis of surveys and register tracking was conducted on each wave and cohort separately. The exception is the analysis of which factors are associated with retention 2.5 years after social work qualification - see section 2.4.1 below. Most of the analysis uses data right up to the most recent relevant survey wave, with some results previously reported in Scourfield et al. (2020) omitted to avoid repetition. However, two analyses were conducted in 2020, so draw on data from the first few years of the study only, and not on every wave up to the end of the study. These are content analysis of free text data on alternative careers (section 7.1.3 and 7.2.3) and the longitudinal analysis of factors associated with retention, as explained in the following section.

2.4.1 Longitudinal analysis

Longitudinal analysis was conducted on factors associated with retention (see section 4.3). Whilst the whole project is longitudinal, this analysis was distinct in two ways. Firstly, data were organised so that career trajectories were examined for the

same individuals over time – as opposed to each wave being reported separately which is the basis of much of this report. Secondly, data on both programmes were combined to increase sample size and statistical power.

Analysis was carried out to explore factors relating to the retention of social workers at 2.5 years post qualification. This used data taken at the survey six months post qualification and 2.5 years post qualification. In light of data availability for the various cohorts at the time this analysis was conducted - Summer 2020 - this process was carried out using data for only Step Up Cohort 4 and Frontline Cohort 3. The datasets could only be combined where respondents could be identified across both six months and 2.5 years surveys. This resulted in a dataset of 188 individuals, 99 from Step Up Cohort 4 and 89 from Frontline Cohort 3. Of the 188 individuals in the survey, 145 (77%) were working in a children's social worker role at 2.5 years, while 43 (24%) were not.

The six-month surveys were used to measure factors relating to the social worker and their working life in the first year post qualification. Factors assessed included both personal and organisational factors as well as their reflections on what they thought of the fast-track scheme. Bivariate analysis was used to explore the relationship between each of these factors and the likelihood that they would still be a children's social worker two years later. For scale data, means and confidence intervals were provided while for categorical data, chi-square tests were used to look for significant relationships.

2.5 Comparing different social work programmes

There cannot be a like-for-like comparison of different social work programmes. The structure of programme delivery is different. Frontline, as an organisation, is a single provider of its own programme, whereas the Step Up to Social Work programme has multiple university providers, as with mainstream (non-fast-track) programmes. The Frontline programme lasts for a full year after qualification as a social worker, so the comparison of time points is problematic. Some regional Step Up programmes also continue to offer additional support beyond what is usually expected in the first year of qualified practice, but this is not standardised across England.

Both fast-track programmes are exclusively at postgraduate level, whereas mainstream programmes exist at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. The fast-track programmes have tax-free bursaries of £18-20,000 to cover living expenses and no fees charged to students despite the much higher training costs (Cutmore and Roger, 2016). Conversely, students on mainstream programmes are charged fees and they must apply for bursaries, which are set at a substantial lower level. These financial differences affect the student market for different programmes.

Mainstream programmes also do not specialise in social work with particular service user groups but offer a generic qualification, albeit often with selection of a specialist route and associated placement in the final year. Mainstream social work programmes do not train people so specifically for statutory roles but would expect their social workers to be employed in a range of settings, including voluntary sector projects where protected title posts are relatively less common. We should note that this last observation is based on the authors' experience of mainstream programmes rather than any more objective evidence.

By necessity, the approach taken for the dissemination of surveys and follow-up of non-respondents was different for the two fast-track programmes. Due to the differences in survey distribution (mentioned in section 2.2) the Frontline surveys have historically had response rates higher than those for Step Up. That can be seen in the earlier waves of the survey, although it should be noted that this pattern has been challenged by the pandemic, where a decision was taken by Frontline not to do as much chasing of survey responses, to avoid burden on the social work workforce. The response rate is therefore lower in 2020-21. The historically higher response rate from Frontline respondents is to be expected, as they are either still undertaking the Frontline programme (six months after social work qualification) or, for later waves, may have a certain sense of social obligation to the organisation that trained them, whereas Step Up respondents are surveyed by people with whom they have no connection. For Step Up respondents, the research team used chase-up mechanisms which achieved a response rate within a similar range to that found in previous studies (see section 2.2). Although we note Frontline's historically higher response rates, the research team have no way of establishing whether the responses are more representative of either programme's graduates.

When it comes to looking up non-respondents in the public register, for data protection reasons it was not possible for the research team to have access to identifiable data from Frontline; therefore Frontline have looked up non-respondents in the SWE/HCPC register.

As Frontline is a single national programme, the research team were able to obtain anonymised demographic data on the whole cohort, whereas for Step Up graduates, demographic data were only available for survey respondents. Therefore, demographic results are only used in a limited way in this report. They are used in longitudinal survey analysis (section 4.3) where data from both programmes were combined. In that analysis, selected demographic variables (age, gender and parents' higher education) that have suitable data distribution were considered alongside other individual and organisational variables as to whether associations can be seen with retention in social work. Other demographic variables had cell sizes too small to allow for bivariate analysis. In Appendix 3, respondent demographic profiles are presented for the first wave of the study surveys for each

cohort. Note also that demographic profiles of the two programmes have been previously published for earlier cohorts (Smith et al 2013; Maxwell et al 2016).

Some survey questions were not used for both programmes. The number of jobs applied for was not relevant to Frontline, where there is a default offer of employment in the authority where you were trained. Also GHQ-12 results are not available for Step Up Cohort 4 because of an error made by the research team in the online questionnaire. GHQ-12 results are therefore presented for only Cohort 5 of each programme. In Appendix 3 there are some additional results, not highlighted in the main report, some of which are only available for one programme only or only presented for one programme where for the other programme, response frequencies were less than five so could not be reported, following Department for Education guidance, to prevent disclosure.

In almost all of this report, Frontline and Step Up results are reported separately. The exceptions are the longitudinal analysis of retention factors (section 4.3) and the pandemic working experience in Chapter 8.

It should be noted that at most time points no comparison at all is available with social workers who have qualified via mainstream programmes. The exceptions are from HESA survey data where retention rates can be estimated for mainstream social work programmes at six months after qualification (Skills for Care, 2018) and all social workers at 15 months after qualification (Skills for Care, 2021). HESA estimates are only available for different cohorts of students and there are no mainstream cohorts for whom we have both the six-month and 15 month estimate.

However, there can be no direct like-for-like comparison of the estimations of attrition in this report with HESA surveys for a number of different reasons.

- Our method for calculating attrition using the professional register assumes that those registered have not left practice whereas in fact someone may have their name on the register as a legacy from when they were practising, even though they are not now.

- Even using survey data only is not a like-for-like comparison with HESA data, as our surveys and the HESA surveys serve different purposes, so may have unknown differential response rates from specific occupational groups.

In making sense of any apparent differences between fast-track and mainstream training routes, it is important to bear in mind two points noted above: firstly, graduates of mainstream social work programmes are likely to consider a wider range of social work roles that do not use the protected title, beyond statutory services; and, secondly, the Frontline programme and *some* regional Step Up arrangements continue support to newly qualified staff, on top of standard assessed

and supported year in employment (ASYE) provision, for a year after social work qualification.

2.6 The current report

In consultation with the research funders and the project's Research Advisory Group, it was decided not to repeat all findings from the published interim report (Scourfield et al., 2020) In addition, it was decided to focus this report on priority research questions, with other results presented in the appendix.

In a change from the previous report, we are relying less heavily on the term 'fast-track graduates', as there was a view that this might be taken to imply relative youth, which may not be a fair impression of research participants. Instead, where relevant we also refer to participants as 'social workers' or 'trainees', often clarifying which programme they qualified from, or, in other places, 'respondents' or 'interviewees' as appropriate to research method (survey or interviews). There are, however, still places where 'graduates' is the best term – when whole cohorts are being referred to, including those who have left social work.

In another change from the interim report, we have not included any Frontline interviewees who left before the programme finished. The project lead researcher was contacted in 2019 by two former Frontline participants who had left the programme before qualifying as social workers but had heard there was a follow-up study going on and wanted to be interviewed. At the time this offer was accepted, as recruiting Frontline-trained interviewees who had left social work was rather slow, and both individuals were interviewed. On reflection, we have decided it would not be right to include these interviews and have contacted the individuals concerned, to explain and apologise. The reason for this decision is that trainees who had not qualified via fast-track programmes were not equally available to approach for both programmes and as far as possible we have tried to treat the two programmes in the same way.

Another difference between this report and the interim one published in 2020 is that extra questions were added to both survey questionnaire and interview schedule in 2020-21 to ask about the impact of the pandemic on intention to stay in social work.

To explain the terminology used about social work qualification, because the Frontline programme continues for a year after awarding of professional social work qualification, we used the term 'licence to practise' in the interim report, to distinguish between point of social work qualification and point of completing the Frontline programme (one year later). However, due to feedback on the interim report and the need for consistent terminology, in this final report we just use the term 'social work qualification'. Readers of the report need to be aware that 'qualification' and

'qualified' in the report refer only to professional qualification and not completion of the Frontline programme.

3.0 Destinations and early experiences of social work

3.1 Frontline destinations and early experiences

3.1.1 Survey and tracking results

Table 3.1 below shows the results for which type of team the Frontline survey respondents were currently in across all waves of the study. Most respondents were working in children in need or child protection teams, although the proportions working in these settings generally reduced over time in each of the cohorts. One exception was Cohort 2 at 2.5 years after obtaining their social work qualification, where more respondents were working in an 'other' role than in a children in need or child protection team. On inspection, these 'other' roles were in fact mainstream children's social work (e.g., locality team), rather than specialist positions. We did not reclassify them, as the scope of these teams was clearly not thought by respondents to quite fit the questionnaire categories. When surveyed again six months later, the proportion of respondents working in children in need or child protection teams in this cohort had slightly increased, only to slightly decrease again by the fourth year of qualified practice. Cohort 3 saw a slight increase in the percentage of respondents working in children in need or child protection teams between 2.5 and 3 years post-social work qualification but the response rate had reduced during the pandemic, so we need to be circumspect in drawing any conclusions from this result.

Table 3.1: Type of team – Frontline respondents

Time since social work qualification	Adoption, fostering, leaving care, looked after teams	Assessment, Access, MASH teams	Child in Need/ Child Protection Team	Other, e.g. Adolescent Team, Children with Disabilities Team, Youth Offending Team	Total n
Cohort 1					
2.5 years	9%	7%	66%	27%	74
3 years	10%	7%	54%	28%	67
4 years	*	*	47%	33%	30
5 years	16%	*	47%	31%	32
Cohort 2					
18m	10%	14%	57%	19%	76
2.5 years	16%	13%	32%	38%	57
3 years	26%	13%	36%	26%	39
4 years	20%	*	33%	33%	30
Cohort 3					
6m	6%	19%	66%	9%	99
18m	*	22%	58%	14%	60
2.5 years	16%	22%	39%	22%	76
3 years	16%	11%	43%	30%	44
Cohort 4					
6m	8%	12%	67%	13%	155
18m	9%	14%	61%	16%	140
2.5 years	14%	17%	44%	25%	109
Cohort 5					
6 m	6%	14%	72%	8%	185
18m	12%	16%	58%	14%	159

*Values less than 5 are not reported and all ns are therefore removed other than row totals

Of the 316 respondents in Cohort 5 who achieved a social work qualification in 2019, ten had dropped out of social work by the time of the survey six months later, so 97% were still in social work practice. As with previous Frontline cohorts, this is a much higher proportion in social work six months after gaining a social work qualification than for all social workers in England, where 78% of those qualifying in 2017 from mainstream postgraduate programmes were social workers (Skills for Care, 2018). However, this is not a like-for-like comparison, as the Frontline participants are still engaged with the Frontline programme for a further 12 months after qualifying as social workers, so we would expect the attrition rate to be very low.

Much of this chapter focuses on the experience of being a newly qualified social worker. It should be noted that work conditions for this group of staff, such as caseloads and supervision, are the responsibility of local authorities and not the fast-track programmes.

Of the general population of child and family social workers during the whole of their ASYE, 18-26% have caseloads of 21 or more (Johnson et al., 2020). The average caseload for all social workers is 16.3 (Department for Education, 2021). Survey respondents who had trained through Frontline were asked about caseloads six months post-social work qualification. Results for cohorts 3 and 4 have been previously published but throughout this chapter they are reproduced in tables alongside the new results for Cohort 5, but with much of the commentary focusing on the new findings.

Responses on caseloads are presented in Table 3.2. As with previous cohorts, the largest proportion of Cohort 5 respondents indicated that they had a caseload between 13 and 16, indicated by just over a third of respondents. However, the responses show an increase in the percentage of lower caseloads in later cohorts over time, with 21% of respondents from Cohort 3 indicating a caseload below 12 when six months qualified, increasing to 34% for Cohort 5, two years later. Likewise, there has been a decrease in the proportion of respondents indicating higher caseloads, with 11% reporting caseloads over 21 in the most recent cohort (5), compared to 20% two years earlier (Cohort 3).

Table 3.2: Caseload – Frontline Cohort 5 respondents, 6m after social work qualification

Caseload	Cohort 3	Cohort 4	Cohort 5
8 or less	5%	5%	5%
9 – 12	16%	20%	29%
13 – 16	37%	34%	37%
17 – 20	21%	25%	18%
21 – 24	17%	13%	7%
25 or more	*	4%	4%
Total	99	135	185

* values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than column totals

The percentage of Frontline Cohort 5 six months into the job who have caseloads of 21 or more (11%) is lower than for the general population of child and family social workers during the whole of their ASYE (see above), although the numbers of cases per worker would be expected to increase towards the end of that first year.

Two questions were asked about supervision: how often it takes place and how respondents rate its quality. The Local Government Association 'Standards for employers of social workers in England' require that 'Supervision takes place at least

weekly for the first six weeks of employment of a newly qualified social worker, at least fortnightly for the duration of the first six months, and a minimum of monthly supervision thereafter'[3]. Responses to how frequently Frontline Cohort 5 respondents received supervision are shown in Figure 3.1, alongside earlier cohorts. About a third of Cohort 5 were receiving fortnightly supervision.

Figure 3.1: Frequency of supervision. Frontline respondents 6m post qualifying

	Cohort 3 (n=99)	Cohort 4 (n=155)	Cohort 5 (n=185)
■ Supervision frequency once every two weeks or more often	42%	34%	32%
■ Supervision frequency once every three to four weeks	36%	47%	48%
■ Supervision frequency once every five to six weeks	15%	12%	12%
■ Less than once every six weeks	5%	6%	6%
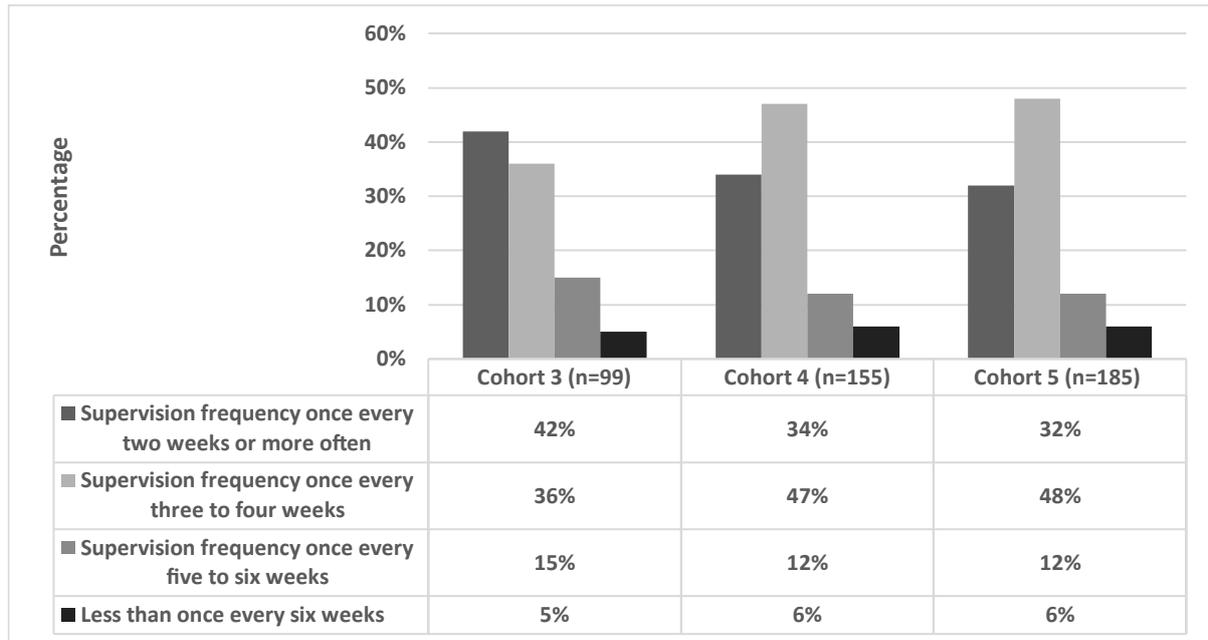
Respondents were also asked to rate the quality of the supervision they had received (Figure 3.2). Over 70% of Frontline Cohort 5 respondents indicated that the supervision was either good or very good. This was a lower percentage of respondents than for cohorts 3 and 4 where it was 77%. The percentage who indicated that the quality was poor or very poor, was very similar to earlier cohorts at 19%.

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[3] Local Government Association standards for employers of social workers in England

Figure 3.2: Quality of supervision. Frontline respondents 6m post qualifying

	Cohort 3 (n=99)	Cohort 4 (n=155)	Cohort 5 (n=185)
■ Supervision quality good or very good	77%	77%	71%
■ Supervision quality poor or very poor	18%	18%	19%
■ Don't know or not applicable	5%	5%	9%
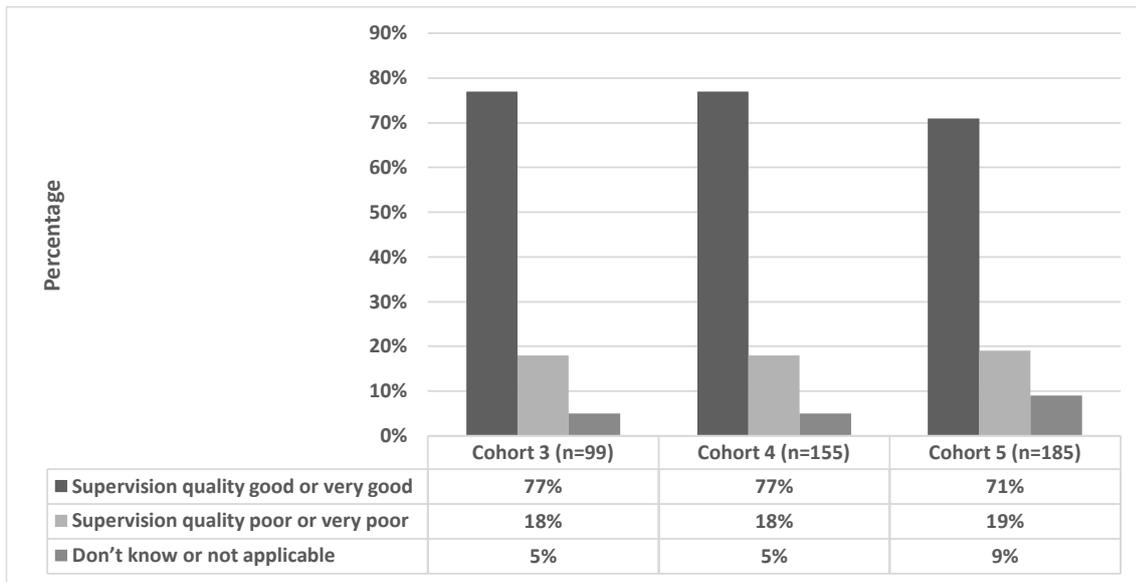
Frontline-trained social workers were asked whether they felt supported by their line manager and by the wider local authority. The results are presented in Figure 3.3 and 3.4 respectively. Similar to previous cohorts, 86% of Cohort 5 respondents indicated that they felt supported by their manager, either to a great or moderate extent. Likewise, attitudes to support from the local authority were similar to previous cohorts, with 67% indicating they felt supported to either a great or moderate extent (does not quite match percentage in figure because of rounding).

Figure 3.3: Perceived support from manager. Frontline graduates, 6m after social work qualification

	Cohort 3 (n=99)	Cohort 4 (n=155)	Cohort 5 (n=185)
■ Supported by your manager to a great extent	50%	56%	49%
■ Supported by your manager to a moderate extent	38%	30%	37%
■ Supported by your manager to a small extent	10%	13%	11%
■ Supported by your manager to no extent	*	*	*
■ Don't know	0	*	*
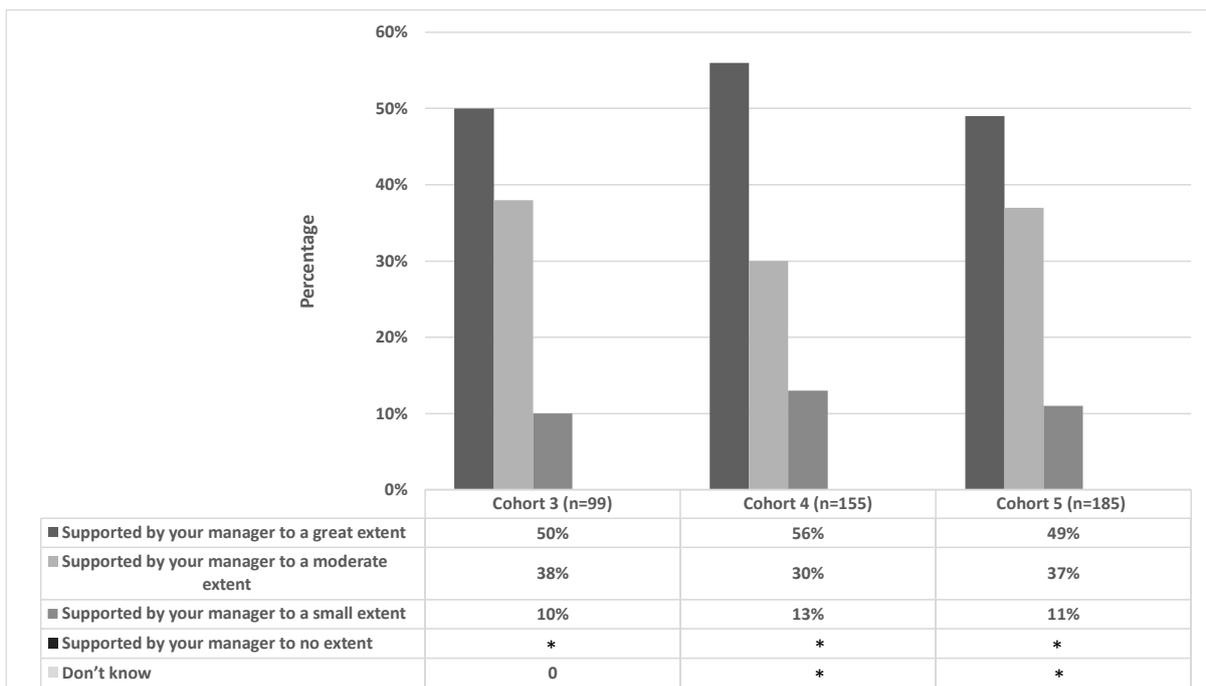
Figure 3.4: Perceived support from local authority. Frontline graduates, 6m after social work qualification

	Cohort 3 (n=99)	Cohort 4 (n=155)	Cohort 5 (n=185)
■ Supported by your LA to a great extent	21%	23%	20%
■ Supported by your LA to a moderate extent	47%	47%	47%
■ Supported by your LA to a small extent	24%	27%	25%
■ Supported by your LA to no extent	8%	*	6%
■ Don't know			*
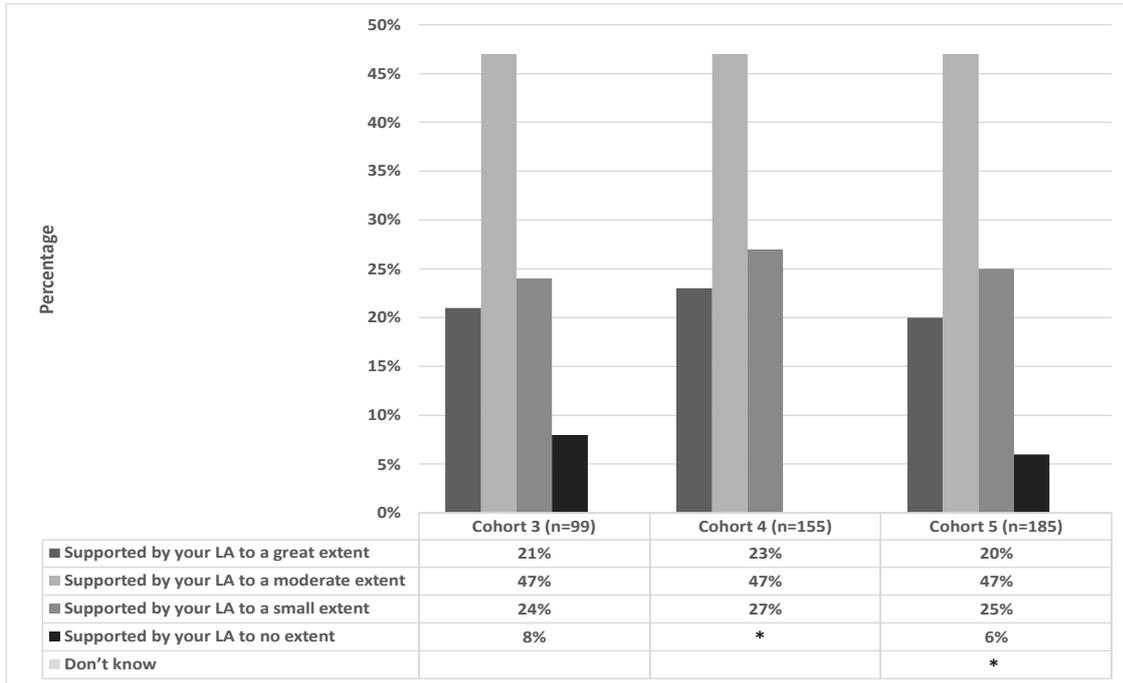
Levels of stress were also measured at six months post-qualifying for Frontline Cohort 5, using the GHQ–12. Data were available for 150 social workers from this cohort, of whom 54 (36%) scored above the clinical threshold for high levels of stress. This score was similar to those identified in previous studies, for example Carpenter et al (2015) in which between 33% and 40% of newly qualified social workers surveyed one year into employment scored above the clinical threshold.

Table 3.3 shows Frontline-trained social workers' intention to stay in social work at six months after social work qualification (but while still enrolled on the Frontline programme), for Cohorts 3, 4 and 5. The responses were broadly similar across the cohorts.

Table 3.3: Frontline survey respondents' likelihood of continuing to work as a children's social worker at six months post-social work qualification

Response	Cohort 3 n = 99		Cohort 4 N = 155		Cohort 5 n = 185	
	n	%	n	%	n	%
Very likely	43	43	82	53	76	41
Moderately likely	29	29	40	26	66	36
Slightly likely	17	17	21	14	25	14
Not at all likely	5	5	6	4	7	4
Don't know	5	5	6	4	11	6

3.1.2 Insights from qualitative interviews with Frontline graduates

In general, Frontline interviewees were very positive about their training. However, the degree to which they felt prepared for practice varied. There was a general sense that on-the-job experience was the best preparation for moving into full-time practice. For example, one interviewee explained that he felt more prepared than other social work graduates from 'traditional routes' on his first day as a qualified practitioner as a result of this practical experience, and another thought that the Frontline model, where students were already members of a wider team in the same authority, contributed to a sense of belonging because: 'it develops that support and those relationships that you might not get if you were going in as a completely new person' (Tasha). However, some experienced difficulty adjusting to real-world practice in the second year of the programme, largely relating to the increased volume of work and number of cases:

> 'When I was completing my ASYE I found that very, very challenging, very overwhelming at times. There seemed to be a huge increase in work, so I'd gone from working in a Frontline unit of four participants, where we would do lots of group work, we would have support from our consultant social worker. […] I then went into an environment where you perhaps had a caseload of 25 children, where quite a lot of the cases were very complex.' (George)

> 'I'd say, after the first year I didn't feel that equipped. […] So, the second year has been a bit of a baptism of fire, because I've been given what has been really a full caseload and have been learning very much on the job and picking things up as I go.' (Millie)

Some participants suggested that the Frontline programme could ease the transition by encouraging co-working with other teams towards the end of the first year, and by focussing on time and case management skills.

Caseloads were also described by some interviewees as being unmanageable when newly qualified, with them being expected to take on caseloads at least as high as more experienced workers:

> 'I had a higher caseload than the average UK social worker and nominally that was my first day in life as a social worker and they gave me all these really complex cases.' (Jack)

Although there was evidence of struggles, some spoke of positive early experiences where managers had supported them by increasing their caseload incrementally and some were successfully managing high, complex caseloads with emotional support and supervision from managers:

> 'Good supervision is the key […] with supervision every month you know where each child is going in terms of what you're worried about and you get to discuss that, and that does help.' (Benjamin)

For many social workers qualified via Frontline, there was a strong sense of a disconnect between the programme and the realities of social work, where some experienced a decrease in support once they were 'outside of Frontline's ecosystem' (Jack). Two graduates described their experience of the gap between the programme and day-to-day practice:

> 'In second year, there's just a complete disconnect where I don't think Frontline had any interest or even awareness of what was going on for us in our particular local authority in terms of the ASYE learning and continued development.' (Anna)

> 'The second year felt like we were dropped off a cliff. It went from being very supported […] to being in a local authority that didn't keep doing Frontline.' (Sara)

This appeared to be exacerbated by a disconnect between the Frontline programme's ethos and local authority culture, particularly where local authorities did not use systemic approaches. Some described positive experiences of 'synchronicity' (Matt) between the two, especially where local authorities had previous Frontline cohorts, but more described dissonance, e.g., 'I think some of the content they teach doesn't quite merge so well with the way the local authority wants to train you' (Anna).

In two cases, this seemed to have contributed to participants' motivations to leave, as one interviewee stated:

> 'I have a great deal of respect for Frontline as a model. I really enjoyed the teaching, I found it transformational. I think it's exactly the sort of teaching we need for social work. But, my challenge was… integrating that into the everyday practice I see in local authorities.' (Millie)

Although interviewees were generally very supportive and positive about the Frontline programme's vision, some suggested that it should be more realistic about the transition into statutory practice. Many pointed to a broader disconnect between the idealism of the programme which aimed to train 'the picture perfect social worker' (Daniella) and the realities of the job:

> 'Frontline presents a really idealistic image of social work […] in the statutory local authority settings where they are quite set in their ways, they're often quite risk averse [with] a lot of different procedures and processes to follow.' (Callum)

3.1.3 Insights from employers

Employers of those who qualified via Frontline reported mixed views on social workers' early experiences in the job. Many felt that Frontline students were nurtured and received intensive support as part of their first year in the programme which gave them a good grounding for learning and practice. The following data excerpts are examples of positive comments about Frontline trainees.

> 'Frontline is high in [use of] resources. But the benefits are that we get three social workers after 12 months on our ASYE that are probably far more advanced in knowledge and understanding of social work than traditional route students.' (Deborah)

> 'I think it works in a sense that it enables us to bring along practitioners who have got experience in other careers. They bring something new to the role. We've had people [from] education, health, youth offending. They bring a different element to it. They also have done qualifications previously and seem quite confident in that area.' (Helen)

This however was sometimes seen as a double-edged sword because a supportive environment enabled students to thrive and become reflective social workers, but the approach was also seen as 'hand-holding', which could create difficulties in the students' second year, echoing some of the comments above by social workers trained via Frontline. Those employers who viewed the programme as 'a real element of protection' reported that students experienced a limited caseload in their first year in order to find time and space to reflect on practice more.

> 'Frontline was set up [with students] working in pods, it felt very isolating for them. They weren't part of the social work teams as the Step Up programme students are.' (Carrie)

According to some employers, the 'manageable caseloads' in the first year of the Frontline programme created an inaccurate impression of the nature of child and family social work and could cause anxiety and difficulties among NQSWs when transitioning into practice:

> 'Some of that's quite difficult when they come into a real day-to-day reality of holding caseloads, having to prioritise at work different levels of responsibility. We do think, sometimes, that doesn't get them ready for what social work looks like, as such.' (Deborah)

> 'I think you go on a placement and you're in a unit, but I don't think it quite prepares you for not being a student, so when you're not a student, suddenly you're autonomous, you are responsible for your caseload.' (Celestine)

The challenge of making the transition from the training unit – a small group of trainees, discussing cases intensively together and led by a consultant social worker - into the more general social work office has been noted previously (Maxwell et al 2016; Dartington Social Research Unit 2017).

When reflecting on how Frontline-trained social workers integrated into their teams, several interviewees suggested that there had been tension and difficulties building relationships with colleagues with their first Frontline cohorts.

> 'I think the Frontline students had a different kind of demeanour and were viewed differently, and that might have just been the group that we had. But they didn't integrate as well'. (Anna)

Several employers talked about Frontline's emphasis on leadership and management skills. Some felt this created a certain type of self-image which did not match the typical portrait of newly qualified social workers and sometimes did not help Frontline social workers to fit into a team smoothly.

> 'You know Frontline tells those people that they're the elite. It makes out to them like they're Royal Marines as opposed to they're kind of bog-standard army, navy etc.' (Dan)

> 'I think one of the negatives of Frontline was that it sold itself as a fast-track, we're going for the best, and before you know it you will be a social work manager. And, actually, we did have Frontline social workers telling other students that they were better than them, that they were on a different programme

because they were more experienced and they were destined for better things, which didn't endear themselves to being part of a team.' (Carrie)

Despite some tensions with team integration, the leadership focus of the programme was considered as a positive factor by some interviewees. It was suggested that the programme had a clear ethos all the way through from the recruitment process onwards, which was helpful for the participants: 'I think there's also something about Frontline, that being very transparent right from the front that it's a leadership programme' (Abjol).

Those who had long-term experience of working with the Frontline programme highlighted that the programme became more inclusive over time.

> 'Initially, it was hard for other people who felt that [Frontline] people were coming in were better. But I think that has changed significantly over time, so they're just seen as other social workers. It's more inclusive.' (Saanvi)

Nearly all the interviewees stated that the social workers qualified via Frontline demonstrated very strong knowledge and personal skills such as confidence and value-based practice, which were critical to becoming a successful social worker.

> 'It's very value-based, behaviour-based. […] I think you've got that instilled confidence practitioners coming with the right values, behaviours and attitudes about social work practice. Which I don't think you'd always necessarily get through other routes.' (Deborah)

Based on some of the employers' experiences, the quality of students and the nature of Frontline training convinced their local authorities to continue their partnerships with the fast-track programme.

> 'It's been generally, very positive. [We have] a clear plan within the authority to continue with Frontline programme, because they produce very good quality graduates.' (Helen)

> 'I think the benefit that we've seen is it's that homegrown, so you are able to grow your own social workers. So, we're able to instil some of the behaviours and values that we believe in […], and able to get that as part of our workforce.' (Deborah)

3.2 Step Up to Social Work - destinations and early experiences

3.2.1 Survey and tracking

Attrition and retention rates are reported more fully in Chapter 4, for several time points. At six months post-qualification, the overall number of those graduating from Step Up Cohort 5 and not in social work roles in England was 75 out of 501 (15%). This is calculated from a combination of survey responses and looking up non-respondents in the public SWE register (see Table A1.2 in the appendix and Table 4.5).

This is a slightly higher rate of drop out at this stage post qualification than Step Up cohort 4's ten per cent. HESA statistics show that 22% of those qualifying in 2017 from mainstream postgraduate programmes were reported as not being social workers at six months after graduation (Skills for Care, 2018). As noted on p.30 of this report, this rate is not directly comparable, however we could conclude it is very unlikely that Step Up trainees' attrition from social work is higher than for mainstream programmes.

The proportion of Step Up Cohort 5 survey respondents reporting at 6m post-qualification that their current roles were in children's social work was very high, as with the previously reported results for Cohort 4. For Cohort 5, 192 out of 207 responding (93%) were in a children's social work role, and 8 (4%) in an adult social work role. Of these, 189 (91%) were working full-time and 18 (9%), part-time.

Table 3.4 below lists the types of social work team that social workers trained via Step Up were working in, when asked in successive surveys. Around half of respondents were working in children in need or child protection teams in the most recent surveys.

Table 3.4: Type of team: Step Up survey respondents

Team	Cohort 4			Cohort 5**
	6m qualified	18m qualified	2.5 years qualified	6m qualified
Adoption, fostering, leaving care or looked after team	28 (14%)	19 (15%)	33 (22%)	32 (15%)
Assessment, Access, MASH teams	31 (16%)	18 (14%)	25 (17%)	29 (14%)
Child in Need / Child Protection Team	110 (56%)	83 (64%)	70 (48%)	109 (52%)
Other, e.g. Adolescent Team, Children with Disabilities Team	27 (14%)	10 (8%)	19 (13%)	39 (19%)
Total (100%)	**196**	**130***	**147**	**209**

* Percentages do not add up to 100 because of rounding
** Due to a typographical error in the 18-month survey sent to Cohort 5, it was not possible to be certain of the time-period covered by the respondents' answers and so the decision was taken to not report these findings

The survey asked about caseloads at six months post-qualification, and the numbers and percentages of respondents with different caseloads are shown in Table 3.5. Cohort 5 respondents generally reported lower caseloads than Cohort 4, with 44% of respondents having a caseload of 12 or less in Cohort 5 compared to 29% in Cohort 4, two years earlier. This was a similar pattern to that shown for later cohorts qualifying via Frontline. The percentage of Step Up graduates at six months post-qualification with caseloads of 21 or more (10%) is lower than for all ASYE child and family social workers in England, of whom 18-26% have caseloads at this level (Johnson et al., 2020).

Table 3.5: Caseload. Step Up respondents, 6m after social work qualification

Caseload	Cohort 4	Cohort 5
8 or less	7%	18%
9 – 12	22%	26%
13 – 16	24%	27%
17 – 20	24%	18%
21 – 24	12%	6%
25 or more	9%	*
Don't know	*	*
Total	**196**	**207**

* values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than column totals

The survey also asked how frequently the respondents received supervision and responses to this are shown in Figure 3.5. As noted above, the expectation is that newly qualified social workers will have supervision fortnightly in the first six months

and at least monthly thereafter. Eighty-six Cohort 5 respondents (42%) indicated that they were supervised at least fortnightly.

Figure 3.5: Frequency of supervision. Step Up respondents 6m post qualifying

	Attrition at 6 months	Attrition at 18 months	Attrition at 2.5 years	Attrition at 3.5 years
■ cohort 4 (n=435)	10%	13%	17%	12%
■ cohort 5 (n=501)	15%	12%		
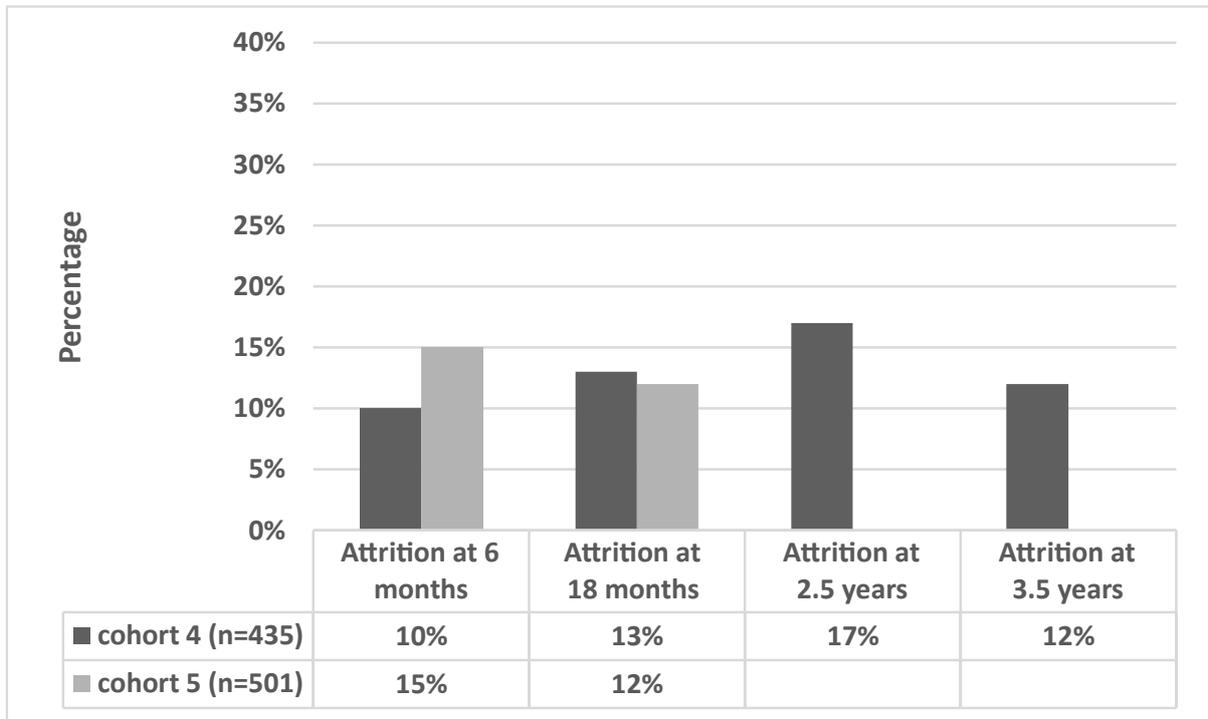
The Step Up respondents' ratings of the quality of supervision are shown in Figure 3.6. More than four out of five Cohort 5 respondents rated the quality as good or very good, as with previously reported results for Cohort 4.

Figure 3.6: Quality of supervision. Step Up Cohort 5, 6m post qualifying

	Cohort 4 (n=195)	Cohort 5 (n=206)
■ Supervision quality good or very good	81%	85%
■ Supervision quality poor or very poor	18%	12%
■ Don't know or not applicable	*	*
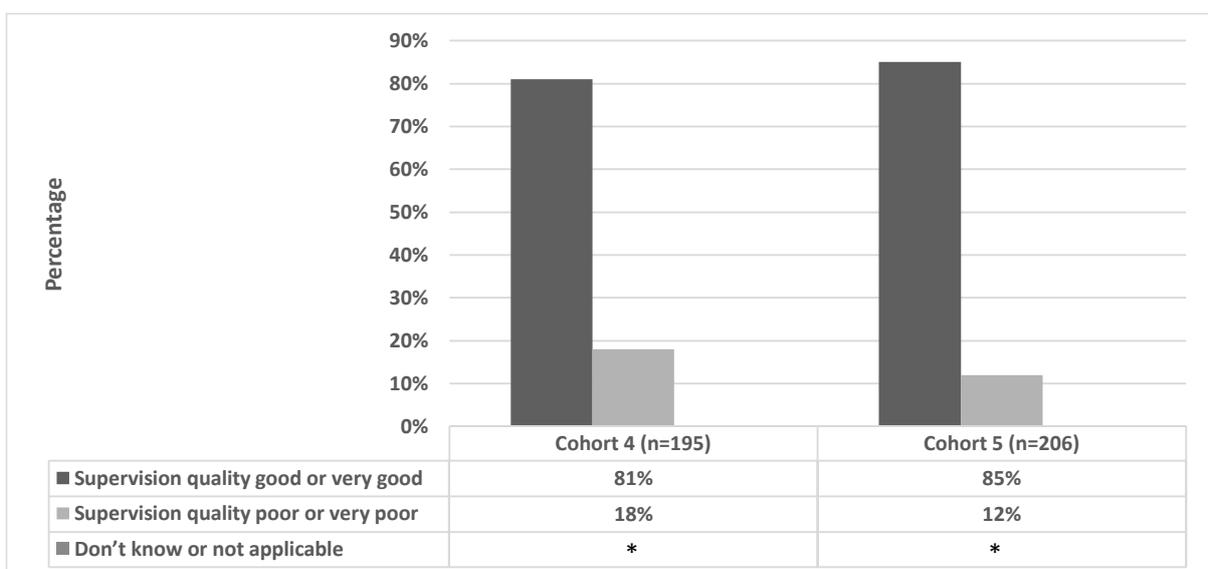
The survey also asked whether the social workers felt supported by their line manager and by the wider local authority. The results are presented in Figure 3.7. Half of Cohort 5 felt supported by their line managers 'to a great extent', which was in line with previously reported results.

Figure 3.7: Perceived support from manager and Local Authority. Step Up Cohorts 4 and 5, 6m post qualification

	Cohort 4 (n=195)	Cohort 5 (n=206)	Cohort 4 (n=194)	Cohort 5 (n=206)
	To what extent do you feel supported by your line manager		To what extent do you feel supported by your LA	
■ To a great extent	50%	55%	24%	26%
■ To a moderate extent	36%	31%	46%	46%
■ To a small extent	11%	13%	25%	23%
■ To no extent	*	*	*	*
□ Don't know	*	*	*	*
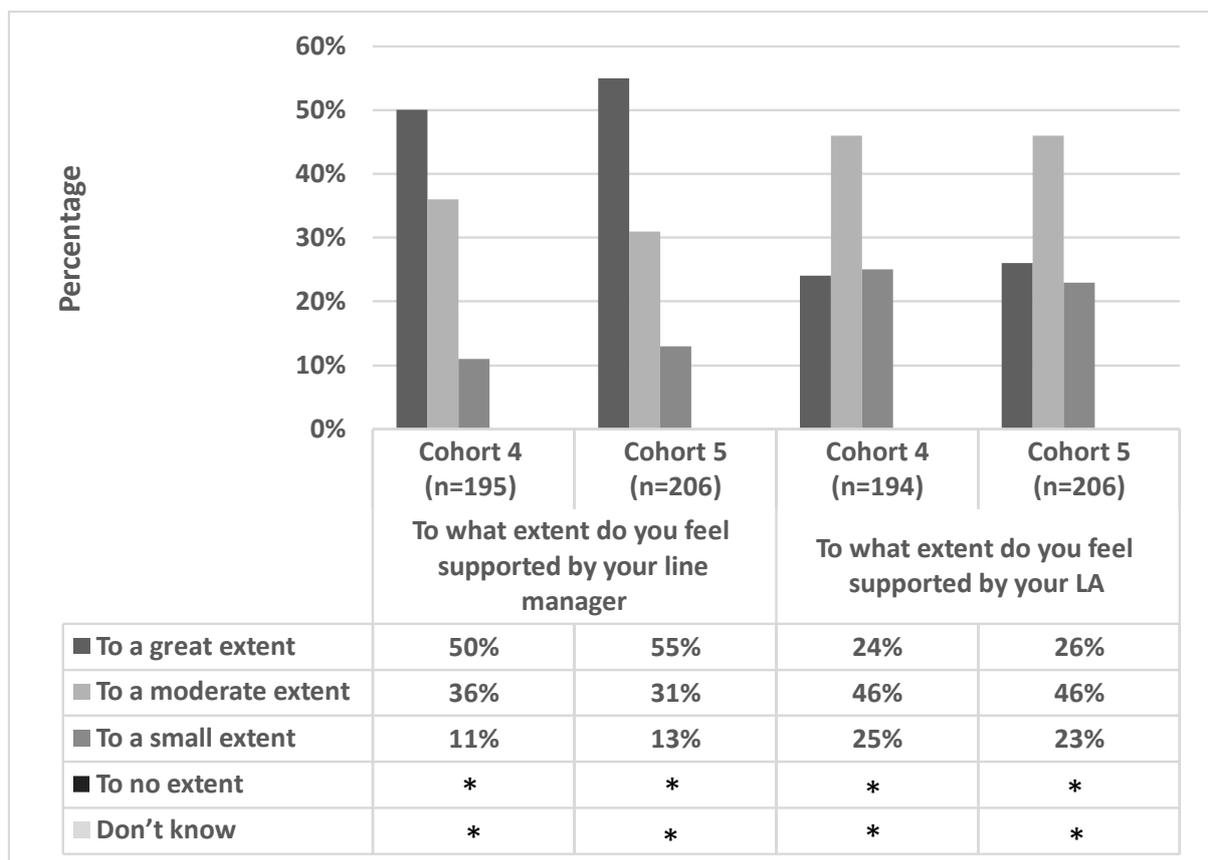
Levels of stress were also measured at six months post-qualifying for Step Up Cohort 5, using the GHQ-12. Data were available for 203 graduates, of whom 67 (33%) scored above the clinical threshold. Again, these scores were similar to those identified in previous studies (e.g., Carpenter et al, 2015).

Table 3.6 shows Step Up-trained social workers' intention to stay in social work, at six months after social work qualification. There was little difference between the two cohorts.

Table 3.6: Step Up survey respondents' likelihood of continuing to work as a children's social worker at 6m post-qualification

Response	Step Up Cohort 4 n=212	Step Up Cohort 5 n=217
	%	%
Very likely	68	71
Moderately likely	14	13
Slightly likely	*	5
Not at all likely	6	5
Don't know	*	*
Missing	8	5

* values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than column totals

3.2.2 Insights from qualitative interviews with Step Up graduates

Most Step Up interviewees acknowledged that qualified practice was intensive, compared with training on the Step Up programme, but the overall impression from the interviews was that participants did not feel overwhelmed.

Mixed findings were reported regarding the transition from Step Up to employment. This was related to the manner in which the transition was managed by the local authority. Variation was also noted in the process, with some participants having to negotiate a formal recruitment process, while others had more informal arrangements. These processes and subsequent offers of employment were sometimes poorly communicated, resulting in periods of unemployment and uncertainty.

Generally, participants were more likely to report positive early experiences where they secured a post in the team where they had been placed during their training. One participant described the transition as 'seamless', stating,

> 'I'd got to know everybody, built up a rapport with the managers, colleagues etc., so it felt flawless to me going into full-time practice.' (Sana)

Another described how securing employment in the team where she trained had developed her confidence and prepared her for the transition into a permanent role:

> 'I didn't find it overwhelming. I just got on with it. My supervisor dropped me in the deep end. At first, I was 'Oh my god, what am I doing?', but I had the right support. And because he had that approach, I wasn't scared to join the team as a qualified social

worker because I'd worked on that team for a hundred days. And with the ASYE you're still protected, so I just carried on with my job.' (Louise)

Confidence was also associated with the increasing independence awarded throughout their placements. Whilst the placements were viewed as intense experiences, they were considered by the social workers interviewed to be essential preparation for the demands of the job, as one explained:

'What Step Up did was prepared me for the volume of work in social work because it really puts you through your paces and kind of tests your resilience with managing working at quite a fast pace.' (Chelsea)

However, others perceived a 'disconnect' between the training and the realities of practice:

'I think you need a bit more realism in what the life of a social worker entails. you might start off with the protected caseload of 12 or 14. […] But as soon as that protection is gone, the real caseloads are given to you […]. The realities are that the caseloads are just way too high and people have to be prepared for that.' (Eddie)

The discrepancy between the protected caseloads while on the Step Up programme and those in the first year of employment appeared to shape early experiences. Participant accounts could be categorised into three groups. The first group had caseloads that gradually increased over the course of the ASYE. The second group described their caseloads as never having been as low as expected for the AYSE year. A third group reported having caseloads higher than those of more experienced colleagues, Eva being an example:

'I've got a really high caseload, much higher than what I should have, considering I'm part-time. On the course they're supposed to stagger it so that it goes up gradually. But mine is the same as full-time social workers who have been there years, so I'm not finding it great.' (Eva)

Where steps were taken to reduce caseload, this was primarily around being more efficient rather than reducing the number of cases. This reflects findings that social worker wellbeing may be overlooked in favour of maintaining the flow of work (Rose and Palattiyil 2020), as Tracy described:

'Until about three weeks ago, I actually had 40 children, which was more than my other colleagues. They [said] OK we're going to work with you to reduce your caseload. The way they did that was to insist that I got a couple of assessments done.' (Tracy)

The third group had been given more cases and/or increased levels of complexity than expected at this stage but felt well supported by their managers. Some had developed strategies to manage the workload during this transition period, including being honest with managers about what could be achieved, learning to prioritise, and accepting that the to-do list would never be done. Regardless of individual experiences, it was clear that struggles to cope with caseloads in the first year of practice were not just about numbers but also about complexity, local geographical demands affecting travel, and management support. This supports findings from the Department for Education's longitudinal study of child and family social workers in England where nearly half of social workers reported job-related stress linked to the demands of the role high caseloads (Johnson et al 2019).

3.2.3 Insights from employers

Most employers were positive about the Step Up programme, particularly as it helped them to 'grow-their-own' social workers, enabling seamless transition into posts. Findings revealed that employers perceived students' older ages, their educational background and previous work experience to be associated with their successful transition into child and family social work practice:

'The candidates for Step Up obviously tend to be that little bit older and have a little bit more experience and are a little bit more used to studying and, indeed, have a better understanding of the workplace. So I think they come from a slightly elevated position as a result of all of that.' (William)

'They tend to be older. So, they've got more life experience which makes a massive difference.' (Alex)

Specific aspects of programme delivery associated with placements were highlighted, such as familiarisation with the organisational structure and workforce, where the transition into employment was perceived be 'fairly smooth because they're just changing status for, effectively, rather than, you know, changing completely' (Harriet).

'In my experience the Step Up graduates definitely integrate well into the organisation. And I think that's due to the way that it's set

up, so it's very similar to our normal student population. So, there doesn't seem to be that difficulty in them actually coming into a team where they're a student or newly qualified.' (Sophie)

Employer interviewees reported that Step Up students demonstrated a preference for remaining in their placement team. However this was not always possible due to the recruitment policy and the availability of posts.

Some employers highlighted a discrepancy between Step Up student qualifications and employment prospects and their motivation to remain in social work. According to employers, this was associated with their difficulties with developing resilience and managing job-related stress:

> 'Our experience has been that they struggled somewhat once they went into a qualified social worker role. I don't know if it's because they didn't have that innate desire to do social work. We had one leave half-way through the year because she became very anxious and saw risk everywhere. [She] lacked resilience and the skills to keep herself well at that time.' (Anna)

According to Smith et al.'s (2019) study of 42 early career social workers' orientations to practice and career development in England, some newly qualified social workers appeared to be more sensitive and less prepared for the role prior to training. However, this was not found to be associated with increased likelihood of wanting to leave social work (Smith et al. 2019).

4.0 Retention / attrition

For both fast-track programmes, in calculating attrition from social work from surveys we have relied on the respondents reporting themselves as being in 'non-social work', 'other' and 'further study' roles, checking these are unique responses and do not overlap with respondents also reporting being in social work roles. In fact, when individual responses are examined, some respondents selecting 'non-social work role' or 'other' were working in the wider social care field, although frequently not in a statutory role. On balance, we decided to take at face value the self-reporting of 'non-social work' or 'other' roles as the most defensible strategy, rather than interpreting individual responses.

If we add these survey results to the look-up of non-respondents in the SWE/HCPC register (see Appendix 1), we can note an overall rate of graduates confirmed as not being in statutory social work roles in England – i.e., they have either reported in the survey they are not in a social work role, or their name does not appear on the SWE/HCPC register.

4.1 Frontline retention / attrition

4.1.1 Results from surveys and tracking

Here we present results from all study waves, so that a longitudinal picture can be seen. We go beyond the focus on the initial six-month time point after qualification that was reported in the previous chapter, to consider up to five years post social work qualification in the case of the earliest cohort. The first five cohorts of Frontline gained their social work qualification (and started employment as qualified social workers) in 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 respectively and then finished the full Frontline Master's programme a year later. Survey respondents' employment status in social work is presented in Table 4.1 below. These categories are not mutually exclusive, so the same respondent could select multiple categories (e.g. further part-time study combined with a children's social work role).

Table 4.1: Frontline survey respondents' employment status, 18 months to 5 years post-qualifying

Time since social work qualification	Current Team					n
	Children's social work	Adult social work	Non-social work role	Further study	Other	
Cohort 1						
2.5 years	72%	*	23%	6%	7%	82
3 years	69%	*	24%	6%	13%	71
4 years	60%	*	34%	6%	0%	50
5 years	55%	*	37%	14%	*	49
Cohort 2						
18m	88%	*	6%	5%	*	81
2.5 years	75%	*	20%	18%	8%	60
3 years	72%	*	19%	16%	*	57
4 years	82%	0%	12%	15%	*	34
Cohort 3						
18m	84%	0%	13%	13%	0%	70
2.5 years	78%	0%	19%	13%	*	88
3 years	67%	*	24%	25%	5%	55
Cohort 4						
18m	86%	6%	10%	7%	*	152
2.5 years	80%	*	18%	21%	*	122
Cohort 5						
18m	91%	*	10%	8%	*	168

* values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than row totals
Rows may not add up to 100% as some participants were in multiple categories

Table 4.2 below presents the estimated attrition rates for Frontline graduates. These are conservative estimates, as we do not know if all who are listed on the SWE/HCPC register are currently practising. As explained in section 2.2, to present an estimated attrition rate is more accurate than any attempt at a retention rate. This is because we are reliant on the SWE/HCPC register, but being on the register does not necessarily mean currently practising.

Some changes have been made to the attrition results published in the interim report. In the interim report, the survey response of 'non-social work' only was used to calculate attrition. On reflection it was decided that this was too limited, and respondents reporting 'other' jobs or further study who had not also reported being in one of the other categories were added to the tally of respondents classed as not in social work. The previously used method had under-estimated the attrition. As noted above, the role categories in Table 4.2 were not mutually exclusive. Because of this, the cells in Table 4.2 below cannot be straightforwardly mapped on to Table 4.1.

Table 4.2 – Frontline graduates' attrition rates from social work in England

Time since social work qualification	N of graduates	Non-respondents not on SWE/HCPC register	Survey respondents not in social work [a]	Attrition from social work
Cohort 1				
2.5 years	100	*	22	25% [b]
3 years	100	12	24	36% [b]
4 years	100	13	19	32%
5 years	100	15	21	36%
Cohort 2				
18 months	114	*	7	8% [b]
2.5 years	114	8	16	21% [b]
3 years	114	12	13	22%
4 years	114	11	6	15%
Cohort 3				
18 months	145	12	11	16%
2.5 years	145	9	19	19%
3 years	145	9	19	19%
Cohort 4				
18 months	253	10	20	12%
2.5 years	253	18	23	16%
Cohort 5				
18 months	316	17	18	11%

[a] Maternity leave from social work post not included
[b] Calculation has changed since interim report, so that attrition is higher than previously reported
* Values less than 5 are not reported

Interestingly, the results seem to suggest some movement in and out of the profession over time rather than simply a cumulative attrition. The HESA Graduate Outcomes Survey at 15 months after qualification shows that for all social workers in England, attrition from the profession is 18% (Skills for Care, 2021), so ostensibly higher than it is for Frontline at 18-months after social work qualification. However, this is not a like-for-like comparison for a number of different reasons, as explained in the methods section (see section 2.5). What could be said is that, contrary to what some critics of the programme have assumed, attrition from Frontline at the 18-month timepoint is very unlikely to be higher than it is for mainstream programmes. Beyond the 18-month time point there is no comparator available with graduates of mainstream social work programmes.

When comparing different cohorts, at the 18-month time point there is a mixed picture, with the attrition rising for cohort 2 and then falling with subsequent cohorts. At 2.5, 3 and 4 years, however, we see a steady reduction in cohort attrition rates over time, as shown in Figure 4.1.

Figure 4.1 Frontline rates of attrition from statutory social work in England, by time point

	Attrition at 18 months	Attrition at 2.5 years	Attrition at 3 years	Attrition at 4 years	Attrition at 5 years
cohort 1 (n=100)		25%	36%	32%	36%
cohort 2 (n=114)	8%	21%	22%	15%	
cohort 3 (n=145)	16%	19%	19%		
cohort 4 (n=253)	12%	16%			
cohort 5 (n=316)	11%				
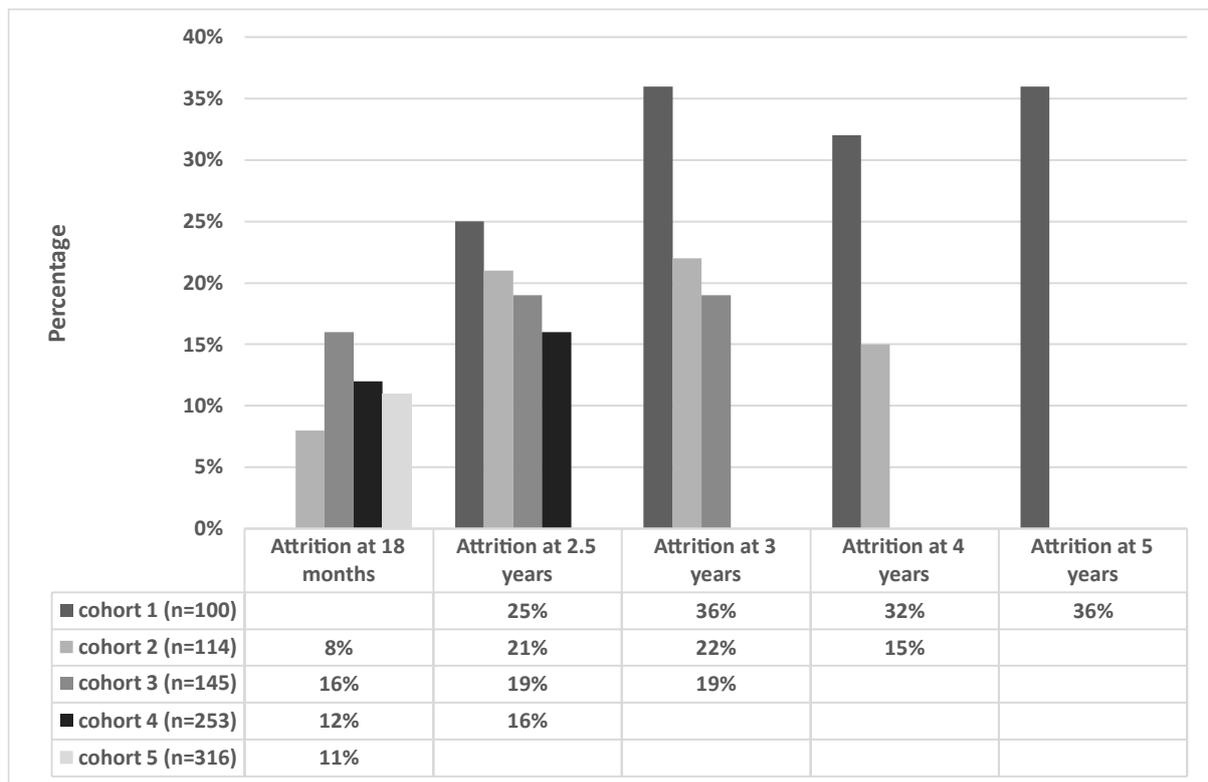
It is not possible to produce the overall rate of retention in child and family social work specifically, from whole cohorts including non-respondents, as where the same name as a fast-track graduate appears on the SWE/HCPC register, it is not possible to know which field of social work they are in. However, if the survey responses above in Table 4.1 are representative of all Frontline graduates on the SWE/HCPC register, we could estimate the percentage in an adult social work role to be no more than a maximum of seven per cent (i.e., adults' social workers as a percentage of all social workers – calculations from the data behind Table 4.1).

Location of employment was calculated only from 18 months post-social work qualification onwards, because at 6m after social work qualification, Frontline trainees are still enrolled on the Frontline programme so would not have moved local authority. The proportion of respondents in cohorts 1, 2, 3 and 4 working in local authorities reduced over time. After finishing the programme, there was substantial movement away from the original Frontline host local authority to other local authorities (Table 4.3). However, movement away from the host local authority

appeared to be more marked in the earlier cohorts. For Cohort 1 only 25% reported working in the host local authority at 2.5 years, whereas at the same time point the percentages for later cohorts were 37% for Cohort 2, 48% for Cohort 3 and 45% for Cohort 4.

Table 4.3: Survey respondents' employment location. Frontline cohorts 1-5

Time since social work qualification	Employed in a local authority: n (%)	Employed in same LA as for Frontline programme: n (%)	Total n
Cohort 1			
2.5 years	53 (65%)	25 (31%)	82
3 years	40 (56%)	18 (25%)	71
4 years	26 (52%)	11 (22%)	50
5 years	23 (47%)	9 (18%)	49
Cohort 2			
18 months	70 (88%)	61 (76%)	80
2.5 years	39 (65%)	22 (37%)	60
3 years	39 (68%)	21 (37%)	57
4 years	22 (65%)	9 (26%)	34
Cohort 3			
18 months	58 (83%)	47 (67%)	70
2.5 years	65 (74%)	42 (48%)	88
3 years	36 (66%)	18 (33%)	55
Cohort 4			
18 months	127(84%)	106 (70%)	152
2.5 years	91 (75%)	55 (45%)	122
Cohort 5			
18 months	154 (92%)	120 (71%)	168

4.1.2 Insights from qualitative interviews with Frontline graduates

Many interviewees expressed interest in wanting to move away from their statutory social work roles and into alternative, but related routes. For example, a number of interviewees spoke of their desire to train to become systemic therapists, which had stemmed from their Frontline training, which specialises in systemic practice:

> 'Frontline teach three models in the first year - systemic, motivational interviewing and parenting interventions – which resonated with me… And I am now thinking about going on to do the systemic qualifications. Because, looking into the future, I think systemic family therapy might be something that I'm

interested in, because I don't, see myself doing front line child protection work forever. Maybe a few more years but I don't think much beyond that.' (Alexis)

One social worker had already started their systemic therapy training, funded by their local authority, whilst others considered it to be difficult to do alongside their current role due to the amount of work and cost associated:

> 'Another path that's come to me since I've done Frontline is systemic family therapy, I really enjoyed the systemic part of the Frontline programme. So, I have considered potentially in the future, depending on finances and stuff, because it's quite difficult to pay for course and stuff and work at the same time.' (Jo)

In addition to the systemic route, there were other social worker interviewees who wanted to move into other parts of the family justice system, such as working for Cafcass as a guardian, becoming a family barrister or working for the family drug and alcohol court. Many interviewees trained via Frontline discussed the longevity of the profession and did not see themselves staying where they were, particularly those who were working in child protection teams:

> 'I did lots of thinking about my role within social work and I thought, well, actually, no, do I want to work as a social worker? I really enjoyed my training, this is something I see as a long term career, but perhaps just not in the child protection role.' (Tom)

> 'From a personal level, managing work and family, I find that although I would really want to stay in social work, I don't think I could stay in child protection social work long term if I really wanted to balance that with being with my family, because there just aren't really part time positions, there isn't flexibility. And, I think, from what I see from colleagues, it's not just that I have a family, it's the emotional toll and the strain, especially when it's busy.' (Jennifer)

4.1.3 Insights from interviews with employers

Six local authorities were satisfied with the retention rates, suggesting that the students' preparedness for practice played significant role. Several employer interviewees prefaced what they said about retention rates from Frontline-trained

social workers with comments about the high standard of qualification and high calibre of these social workers.

> 'It feels like the success rate is probably greater. And as I say, they come out more ready for practice, rather than some of the students who we've had through the undergraduate routes.' (Helen)

> 'They were very committed to building a relationship with the families. More caring in some aspects, but obviously had come through a very highly supported route.' (Megan)

That said, nine employers expressed concerns around the retention rates of Frontline-trained social workers, highlighting the high proportion who were leaving their local authorities once they had completed the programme:

> 'I think our biggest issue with Frontline, I think the teaching's really good, the support's quite good. We can't retain them. We just can't. We've tried – I mean, I think, counted, we've had (number) students over – since 2014, and we have retained 12.5%.' (Sophie)

> 'We've just tracked back over the last three cohorts of Step Up, Frontline and HEI. Our Frontline experience gave us a 25% retention rate on the placements that we offered, which bearing in mind you've also got to employ a consultant social worker means that it's quite an expensive route for social work employers.' (Mary)

> 'We might be useful to provide their placement, but their intention may always have been to get qualified and then say, 'Thank you very much,' and shoot off straight back to where they originate. And that's both inconvenient for us in the context of us constantly struggling to recruit enough staff and it's a really lousy return on our investment. Particularly Frontline, it's an expensive model for local authorities that are using it.' (Dan)

There are a range of personal, programme-related and workplace-related reasons that could influence the social workers' decision to leave. Findings presented in this section are also explored in Chapter 7 on 'reasons to leave'. Interviewees suggested various barriers to retaining Frontline trainees in social work. The issue of expectations not meeting the realities of practice was highlighted in Chapter 3.

Another theme from interviews was a perception that trainees' backgrounds gave financial flexibility and connections to other career opportunities:

> 'I think one of the challenges, particularly with Frontline, is that it tends to attract people who are financially comfortable, and so they're able to have more choices in terms of employment opportunities thereafter.' (Divine)

> 'So I think that's probably one of the reasons they leave the public sector and go into private sector. They've already got established relationships and contacts in those communities and often it's used as a stepping stone to a leadership position.' (Celestine)

Seven employers reported that one of the most critical factors which had a negative impact on retention was placing of Frontline social workers in a different geographical area from where they were based when they applied. This was mentioned in the quotation from Dan above and is further illustrated in the following interview excerpts:

> 'I think most of the people who have moved away is the relocations we've had. A high percentage of them that have left the authority was likely to be because they've relocated to […] for two years and then they've gravitated back to where their family networks are, and their friends.' (Abjol)

> 'The biggest bit of feedback about the programme really is that they don't place locally, and therefore they support the placement, they do the roles, but inevitably they… lose the applicant afterwards.' (Sarah)

> 'Some people move for geographic reasons, because they want to be closer to partners, etc. Some of them want to be closer to their families, I think. In this period of COVID, we lost quite a few people, which is just quite sad for us because we've invested a lot, it's quite a labour-intensive programme for a local authority as well. Frontline has a very clear model which, they expect partners to follow – it's interesting, for a systemic organisation, as Frontline purports to be, they expect the system to fit around them. It's "interesting".' (Bethan)

This low retention rate in the local authority where they were originally placed has negative affected the partnership between the authority and Frontline in two that we interviewed, e.g.:

> 'What we've found difficult with the programme– we stopped using them for the last two years - is that the way that it's set up, it works in the first year but in the second year it doesn't. We find it so hard to retain the graduates on the programme. […] We've had some difficulty in our teams, but we just couldn't support another unit, not knowing that they were going to not stay. It's just too hard, really.' (Sophie)

Some employers, however, commented that the Frontline programme recruitment policy had changed over time, to become more regional, with positive implications for retention, as well as allowing more diversity:

> 'Because there was no rhyme or reason as to who ended up in what unit, which mean that people had to relocate completely from family, friends, connections etc. […] I think that recently changed, so what they're focusing more on regional recruitment, which means that people don't have to uproot.' (Saanvi)

Other positive comments were made about the Frontline programme's willingness to adapt to feedback from local authorities:

> 'I think it's improved. They've brought in the Firstline Leadership programme, they're currently looking at how can they enhance the offer to Heads of Service and Service Leads. I think there was some concern at the beginning that there wasn't the right level of support put in place for Managers who were going to get Frontline students in the second year. They might not have had the training that the consultant social workers had. But that was then offered for all managers who had taken on Frontline students.' (Deborah)

> 'I've seen them grow over the years, and I've found them very approachable. If there's ever been any concern, they've been straight there for us. […](Gillian)

The importance of a sense of an ongoing Frontline community was highlighted in the evaluation of the pilot (Maxwell et al 2016) with some participants suggesting that they would endeavour to retain these links once qualified, via the Frontline fellowship

scheme. The continuing support offered post qualification was commented on positively by some interviewees:

> 'Frontline, it is such a strong offer. It's been well thought through from beginning to end. It's considered as a family essentially, that's the basis - we are a family of professionals and we're going to stick together, and we're meant to be change agents. They see themselves as that.' (Divine)

> 'Just thinking about […] those networks, those ongoing support that they get beyond doing their Frontline programme, [is] there any consideration of putting something in place for Step Up. Why does Step Up end here but Frontline continues?' (Celestine)

As noted earlier, some Step Up regional partnerships do offer additional support to Step Up graduates in the first year of practice, on top of usual ASYE provision, but this is not a core expectation.

4.2. Step Up to Social Work retention / attrition

4.2.1 Results from survey and tracking

The percentages of social workers qualified from Step Up Cohort 4 who are employed in different social work and non-social work roles at each wave of the survey are shown in Table 4.4. The six-month survey results are not included in the table alongside other waves as the question structure was different, so the results are not directly comparable, but we note that 88% of Step Up Cohort 5 survey respondents reported being in children's social work in and less than 5% in adult social work.

Table 4.4: Step Up respondents' employment status, 18 months to 3.5 years post-qualifying

Time since social work qualification	Current Team				
	Children's social work	Adult social work	Non-social work role	Further study	n
Cohort 4					
18m	76%	6%	6%	15%	171
2.5 years	74%	5%	7%	19%	201
3.5 years	81%	9%	10%	0%	197
Cohort 5					
18m	87%	*	6%	*	180

* values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than row totals
'Other' category not presented in table, as all values under five
Rows may not add up to 100% as some participants were in multiple roles

By combining SWE/HCPC registration and survey data, the Step Up Cohort 4 attrition rate from social work in England was 12% at both 2.5 and 3.5 years. Table 4.5 summarises the attrition rates from social work for Step Up graduates. As noted in Chapter 2, there are no directly comparable data on graduates of mainstream programmes, however looking at the HESA Graduate Outcomes Survey, we can say that attrition rates from Step Up trainees are at least very unlikely to be higher than they are for the graduates of mainstream social work programmes at 18 months after qualification.

As noted earlier, some changes have been made to attrition results published in the interim report. In that report, 'non-social work' only was used to calculate attrition. On reflection it was decided that this was too limited, and respondents reporting 'other' jobs or further study who had not also reported being in one of the other categories were added to the tally of respondents classed as not in social work. The previously-used method had under-estimated the attrition. Because the role categories in Table 4.4 are not mutually exclusive, and ns are suppressed, the cells in Table 4.5 below cannot be straightforwardly mapped on to the previous table. Figure 4.2 shows the same attrition rates but arranged by time point.

Table 4.5: Step Up Cohorts 4 and 5 attrition rates from social work in England

Time since social work qualification	N of graduates in study	Non-respondents not on HCPC / SWE register	Survey respondents not in social work role	Attrition from social work
Cohort 4				
6 months	435	30	13	10%
18 months	435	28	29	*13%
2.5 years	435	33	41	*17%
3.5 years	435	34	20	12%
Cohort 5				
6 months	501	66	9	15%
18 months	501	44	15	12%

* Calculation has changed since interim report, so attrition is higher than previously reported

Figure 4.2 Step Up rates of attrition from statutory social work in England, by time point

	Attrition at 6 months	Attrition at 18 months	Attrition at 2.5 years	Attrition at 3.5 years
■ cohort 4 (n=435)	10%	13%	17%	12%
■ cohort 5 (n=501)	15%	12%		
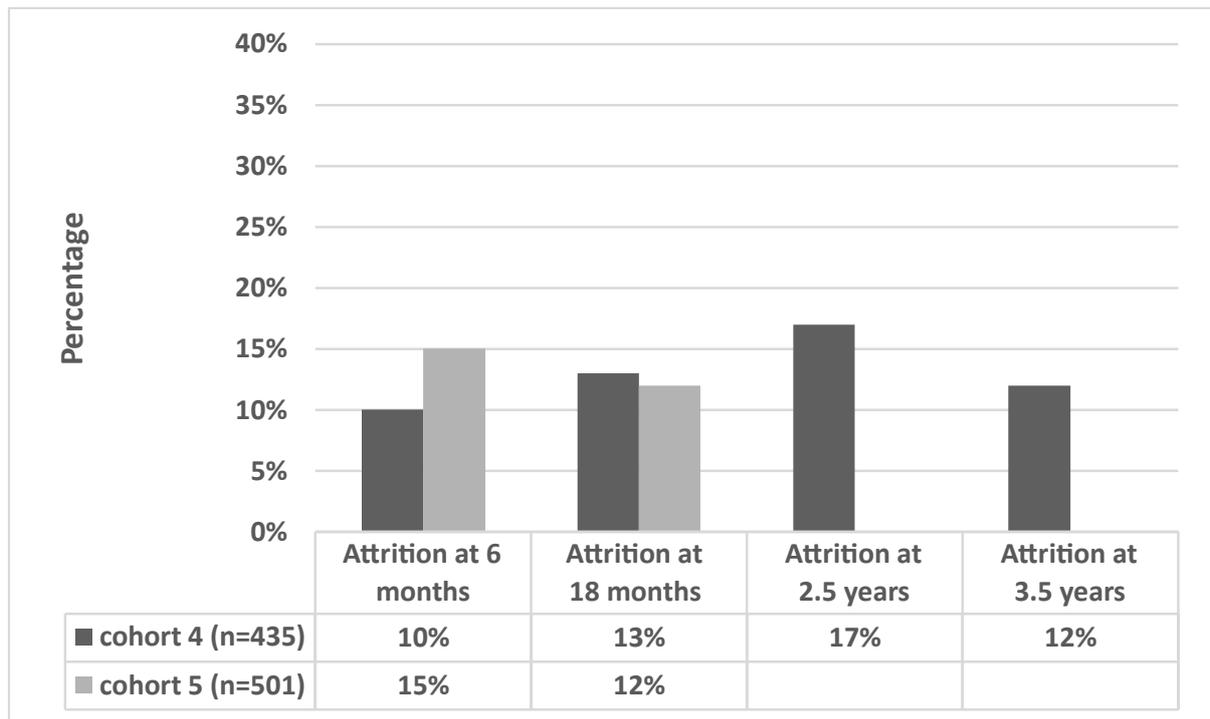
As noted earlier, it was not possible to produce an overall rate of retention specifically in child and family social work from whole cohorts.However, assuming that survey results were representative, amongst those still in social work roles, the rate of Step Up graduates in adult social work was 5-7% at 18 months after qualification, 6% at 2.5 years and ten per cent at 3.5 years (calculations based on Table 4.4 and data behind it).

The proportion of respondents in Cohort 4 that were working in local authorities reduced over time. There was also some movement away from the original host local authority where respondents were placed for Step Up training, to other local authorities (Figure 4.3). However, the majority of respondents were still in the local authority where they had trained, even after 3.5 years.

Figure 4.3: Survey respondents' employment location: Step Up cohorts 4 and 5

	employed in LA cohort 4	employed in Step Up LA cohort 4	employed in LA cohort 5	employed in Step Up LA cohort 5
■ 18mths (cohort 4 n=172) (cohort 5 n=180)	91%	73%	89%	73%
■ 2.5 years (n=201)	89%	60%		
■ 3.5 years (n=197)	83%	53%		
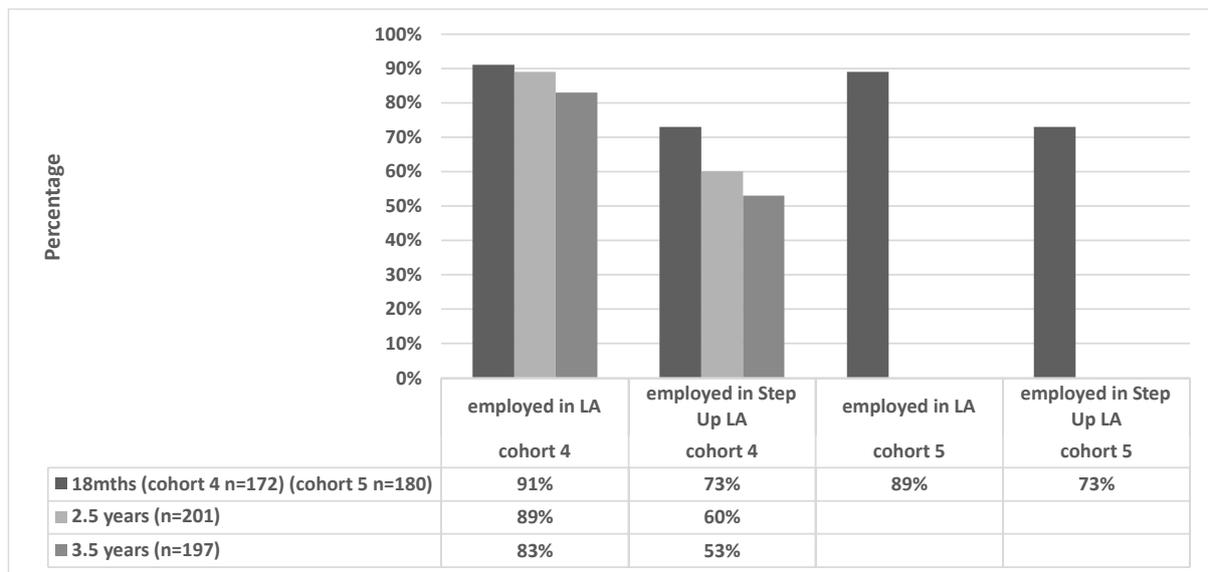
4.2.2 Insights from qualitative interviews with Step Up graduates

Some Step Up graduates were unsure of where they saw their career going, and explained that this was largely related to personal and family commitments, as one stated:

> 'Within the next sort of three to five years I might be thinking of having a child myself. So I want to be in a position where I can work part-time and know that I'm going to be home at a certain time, so I'm just figuring that out.' (Genevieve)

Others were considering leaving to explore other avenues that they had an interest in, e.g., therapeutic roles, and some because they felt their role was not sustainable beyond that of a couple of years due to the pressure and lack of opportunity:

> 'I don't know how long I would personally be able to sustain this. I think whilst I'm in a good place, for me it makes sense to look for something else. My worst case scenario would be that I find it so stressful that I think, oh, okay, I need to leave work and then not have something else to fall back on.' (Anita)

I feel, and I know a lot of my colleagues feel, that after a few years of being in social work you can end up being fairly de-skilled- that's the word people use. You just become an assessment machine. You just pump out assessments and care plans and that's it. There's not so much opportunity for learning and developing new skills.' (Louis)

4.2.3 Insights from interviews with employers

Eighteen employer interviewees reported that their experiences of retention in social workers qualified via Step Up were very positive and overall, they were confident that the staff were committed to their local authority and the regional partnership arrangements were well regarded.

'I prefer Step Up to other models because you place people where they're going to remain. I suppose that makes it different from the other programme. Because if we're investing in people we want to retain them'. (Anna)

'Step Up has been significantly more successful than any of the other routes into social work, certainly for us, anyway. And, I think part of it has been about the successful approach in terms of a regional partnership approach to this programme.' (Carrie)

'In terms of Step Up programmes, we've had 86% retention rate, which is excellent.' (Mary)

Another reason for maintaining a good retention rate for social workers trained via Step Up was the location of social workers and workplaces. It was argued that recruiting those who lived locally was proven to be one of the key reasons for good retention rate.

'The key bit is to have the people that live locally. [...] They're invested in the local area and we support them then through. We've seen some really good retention down that route.' (Sarah)

'I think the other thing is about where people's home links are. And I don't know how we overcome that, but if people have home root links to [...*Name of area*] then I think they'll want to stay. Because I think it's about career, raising your family, putting down roots, buying a house.' (Mary)

'Because they've come with us and they've started up with us.
But it is like a grow-your-own. So, they will want to stay with us.
(Gillian)

In addition to this, several interviewees suggested that in line with other factors an existing ability to cope with stress at work and resilience could contribute to remaining in social work.

'They've actually showed they can complete a course under
quite stressful situations, because it is a very demanding course
from what I can understand. So I think that shows an ability to
work under pressure and shows that they have some resilience.'
(Megan)

Only two interviewees thought the retention rates of social workers trained via Step Up were the same as among social workers from other routes. One commented that for those who did leave, this appeared to be largely due to personal circumstances:

'Just the same. It's the same as the others. It seems to be life
events that intercede and move people on.' (Grace)

On the whole, impressions of long term employment of social workers qualified via Step Up to Social Work were very positive. Some employers suggested that employing graduates from the Step Up programme was a safe option as it often led to long-term commitment from the social workers.

'They are very, very committed. […] In terms of like retention I
think over the years we've probably lost about three, and that's
because they've moved but we would like to keep all of them,
and some of them now, some are managers, ASWs, they're in
bespoke posts.' (Alex)

As noted above, a lot of employers reflected on retaining the Step Up-trained social workers because of the programme's regional recruitment approach. Some interviewees described Step Up students as older, with more family responsibilities and ties than those from mainstream undergraduate degrees and thus they tend to find long-term employment locally. This was seen as the most common factor which helped to retain social workers qualified via Step Up:

'They're going to want to stay because they're not going to want
to move the kids out of school. They've got parents, relatives
round here.' (Nick)

'One of the strengths of the Step Up programmes is that the candidates are usually a little bit older, have experience in either other studies or other employment and have a higher level of resilience than BA students. [These] are coming when they're still only 18, 19 and their first experience of what the job is actually like is being on placement - which for some of them can be a little bit of a shock.' (Megan)

A further interesting point raised by several employers was the high calibre of social workers and a record of good achievement during their studies. This quality was seen to be associated with a blend of having two placements in one place and a set of professional skills which make a highly skilled social worker as a result.

'As a common theme, the majority do seem to do well. But I think that's because the difference with Step Up is, they have two placements with one local authority, compared to other students that don't. […] they've got to have a high level of motivation skill and aptitude and resilience, to stay within that programme, as well. And they're all really good skills for social work that we're looking for. So I think having two placements makes a massive difference to that programme. (Grace)

4.3 Longitudinal analysis of factors associated with retention – the two fast-track programmes combined

Longitudinal analysis was conducted on factors associated with retention. As noted in the methods section (2.4.1), this analysis is distinct from the rest of the report insofar as: (1) data were organised so that career trajectories could be examined for the same individuals over time and (2) data on both programmes were combined to increase statistical power. Data were used on 188 individuals from Frontline Cohort 3 and Step Up Cohort 4 who had completed surveys at both 6m and 2.5 years post social work qualification.

A sample of 188 is relatively small for inferential statistics, so statistical power to find significant associations will be limited. To assess the representativeness of the sample used for the longitudinal analysis, we compared the demographic profile of the respondents in that sample at 6m with the respondents for whom we did not have any follow up data two years later. We found there were no statistically significant differences between these groups for gender, age and caring responsibilities. There was a significant difference in ethnicity for Frontline graduates only - respondents not in the longitudinal sample were more likely to have non-white ethnicities. There was also a significant difference, for Step Up graduates only, in

parents' higher education background - respondents not in the longitudinal sample were more likely to have parents who had not been to university. We acknowledge therefore that the longitudinal sample is not representative of the respondent cohorts in all aspects.

The following factors were considered at six months:

Personal Factors -
- Demographic factors – data distribution was sufficient for analysis of only gender, age, caring responsibilities and parents' higher education. For other demographic variables, cell sizes were too small.
- Job satisfaction – total scores were calculated for both intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction (see chapter 6), with higher scores indicating greater levels of satisfaction (Dyer and Hoffenberg 1975).
- Well-being – GHQ-12 score was calculated using the scoring system 0-0-1-1 (GL Assessment 2021), with higher scores indicating lower levels of well-being.

Organisational Factors – Several factors associated with the quality of work environment were considered, including caseload, supervision frequency, perceived quality of supervision and perceived support from line manager and local authority.

Social workers' reflections on the fast-track scheme - this was a measure of how well they perceived the fast-track scheme to have prepared them for their work.

4.3.1. Demographic factors

Table 4.6 presents the relationship between demographic factors and the likelihood of still being a children's social worker at 2.5 years post qualification. As can be seen, a higher percentage of male graduates in this longitudinal sample were still working as children's social workers, 86% as compared to 75.5% of female graduates. However, this difference was not statistically significant, and the analysis would have to be repeated with a larger sample to be certain of an effect. Looking at the association with age, those between 30 and 39 were the most likely to be no longer be working as a children's social worker, but again the differences were not statistically significant. The difference in retention according to whether or not respondents had a parent with higher education was small and non-significant in statistical terms, as was the difference in retention between those with caring responsibilities and those without.

Table 4.6: Demographic factors and associations with being a children's social worker at 2.5 years post social work qualification

	Children's social worker n =145	Not a children's social worker n =43
Gender [a]		
Female	76%	25%
Male	86%	14%
Age [b]		
29 or under	77%	23%
30 to 39	73%	27%
40 or over	82%	18%
Parents have a degree [c]		
No	76%	24%
Yes	80%	20%
Caring responsibilities [d]		
No	78%	22%
Yes	76%	24%

[a] Pearson $X^2(1)=1.60$, $p=0.21$; [b] Pearson $X^2(2)=0.99$, $p=0.61$; [c] Pearson $X^2(1)=0.36$, $p=0.54$; [d] Pearson $X^2(1)=0.06$, $p=0.80$

Values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than column totals

4.3.2 Social workers' views on preparation for practice

Six months after qualifying, graduates were asked how well they thought the fast-track scheme had prepared them for employment. Table 4.7 shows the numbers and percentages of social workers who thought their programme had prepared them well or not well, according to whether or not they were still working as a children's social worker two years later. A slightly smaller percentage of those who indicated that the scheme had prepared them well were still working as a children's social worker, however the difference was very small and not statistically significant.

Table 4.7: Impressions of fast-track scheme and association with being a children's social worker at 2.5 years post social work qualification

Whether social worker thought the fast-track scheme had prepared them well for employment [c]	Children's social worker n =145	Not a children's social worker n = 43
Fast-track scheme prepared social worker well or very well	77%	23%
Fast-track scheme prepared social worker not well	81%	19%

[c] Pearson chi^2(1) = 0.14 p=0.71
values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed

4.3.3. Factors associated with their work at six months post qualification

Table 4.8 shows the relationship between factors associated with work at six months post qualification and the likelihood of a graduate still working as a children's social worker at 2.5 years. Only one of these factors, 'perceived support from the local authority', was statistically significantly (at the 0.05 level) related to the likelihood of still working as a children's social worker at 2.5 years post-qualification. Among those who indicated at 6m that their local authority was supporting them to a great extent, 94% were still working as children's social workers two years later. However, among those who did not perceive this level of support, only 75% remained as a children's social worker. The figures also suggest a relationship between perceived line manager support and retention, with 85% of those who perceived their line manager supported them to a great extent, remaining as a child social worder compared to 74% of those who did not perceive this support. However, this relationship was not statistically significant, and would need to be repeated with a larger sample to be sure of the effect.

There is no obvious relationship between caseload at six months and retention. When considering this it is important to remember that where larger caseloads are given this may be because the graduates appear to be coping well. Slightly higher percentages of those who rated to the quality of their supervision highly and who indicated it was more frequent, remained in child social work, however the differences were relatively small and not statistically significant.

Table 4.8: Association between workplace support and being a children's social worker at 2.5 years post social work qualification

	Children's social worker n=145	Not a Children's social worker N=43
Caseload [d]		
12 or less	79%	21%
13 - 16	81%	19%
17 - 20	68%	32%
21 or more	87%	13%
Frequency of Supervision [e]		
Every two weeks or more frequent	81%	19%
Once every three weeks or less	77%	23%
Quality of Supervision [f]		
Good or very good	80%	20%
Not good or not very good	76%	24%
Line Manager Support [g]		
Line manager supports to a great extent	85%	15%
Line manager does not support to a great extent	74%	26%
Local Authority Support [h]		
Local authority supports to a great extent	94%	6%
Local authority does not support to a great extent	75%	25%

[d] Pearson $chi^2(3)=4.11$, $p=0.25$; [e] Pearson $chi^2(1)= 0.40$, $p=0.53$; [f] Pearson $chi^2(1)=0.30$, $p=0.59$; [g] Pearson $chi^2(1)=3.08$, $p=0.08$; [h] Pearson $chi^2(1)=6.29$, $p=0.01$
Values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed

4.3.4. Job satisfaction

The distribution of intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction scores at six months post qualification both for those who remain as children's social workers two years later and those that do not are illustrated by the box plot in Figure 4.1 which shows the distribution of scores. Half the scores are within the boxes, with the median indicated by the horizontal line. The 'whiskers' above and below the boxes show the upper and lower quartiles. The circles indicate outliers. The exact median and mean values are provided in Table 4.9.

As explained in 6.1.1, intrinsic factors refer to satisfaction with the nature of the job itself, the nature and variety of tasks, their own accomplishments and relationships with colleagues. Extrinsic factors refer to hours of work, pay and working conditions, job security, the quality of management and supervision and ease of travel to work. Each item is a 5-point scale from very dissatisfied through to very satisfied. The combined intrinsic satisfaction score has a minimum of seven and maximum of 35

and the combined extrinsic satisfaction score a minimum of ten and maximum of 50. Higher scores mean higher satisfaction.

For both measures, the mean scores are higher among those who remain as children's social workers two years later. The contrast is particularly high for intrinsic job satisfaction and the confidence intervals of the mean show that this is statistically significant. For extrinsic job satisfaction the difference is not statistically significant.

Figure 4.4: Box plot showing the distribution of intrinsic and extrinsic job satisfaction at six months post qualification by whether or not participants remain as children's social workers two years later
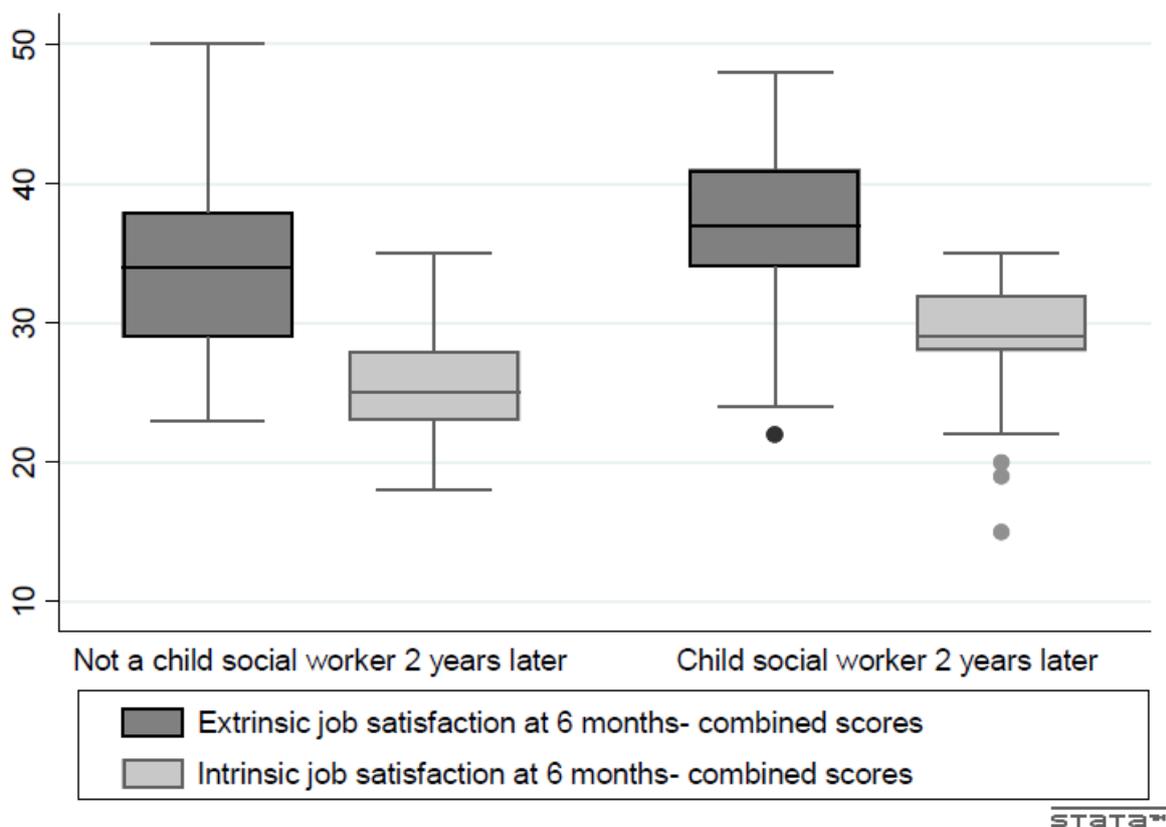
Note: dots denote outliers

Table 4.9: Mean scores for job satisfaction scales

	Children's social worker 2 years later			Not a children's social worker 2 years later		
	mean	st.dev.	confidence interval	mean	st.dev.	confidence interval
Intrinsic job satisfaction at 6m	29.3	3.6	[28.6 30.0]	25.2	4.0	[23.5 26.9]
Extrinsic job satisfaction at 6m	36.6	5.6	[35.3 37.9]	33.9	6.5	[31.0 36.7]

Note: Extrinsic job satisfaction scores are higher than intrinsic job satisfaction scores because they are calculated from a 10-item measure rather than a 7-item measure.

4.3.5 Well-being

Well-being at six months post qualification was measured using the GHQ-12 scale. As noted above, higher scores denote more stress. The minimum score is zero and the maximum 12, with four considered the clinical threshold for high levels of stress. Unfortunately, complete GHQ data were only available for a small proportion of the entire dataset: 53 graduates out of the 188, of whom 12 (22.6%) were no longer working as children's social workers two years later. Figure 4.5 provides a boxplot showing the distribution of the GHQ-12 scores among those 53 graduates, according to whether or not they remained working as a children's social worker. Mean and median scores are shown in Table 4.10.

The findings show lower GHQ scores at six months post qualification among those who do not remain in social work, however the finding was not statistically significant. This may be because of the small sample size, and therefore the analysis would need to be repeated with a bigger sample to be sure of the effect.

Figure 4.5: Box plot showing the distribution of GHQ-12 score at 6m post qualification by whether or not participants remain as children's social workers two years later
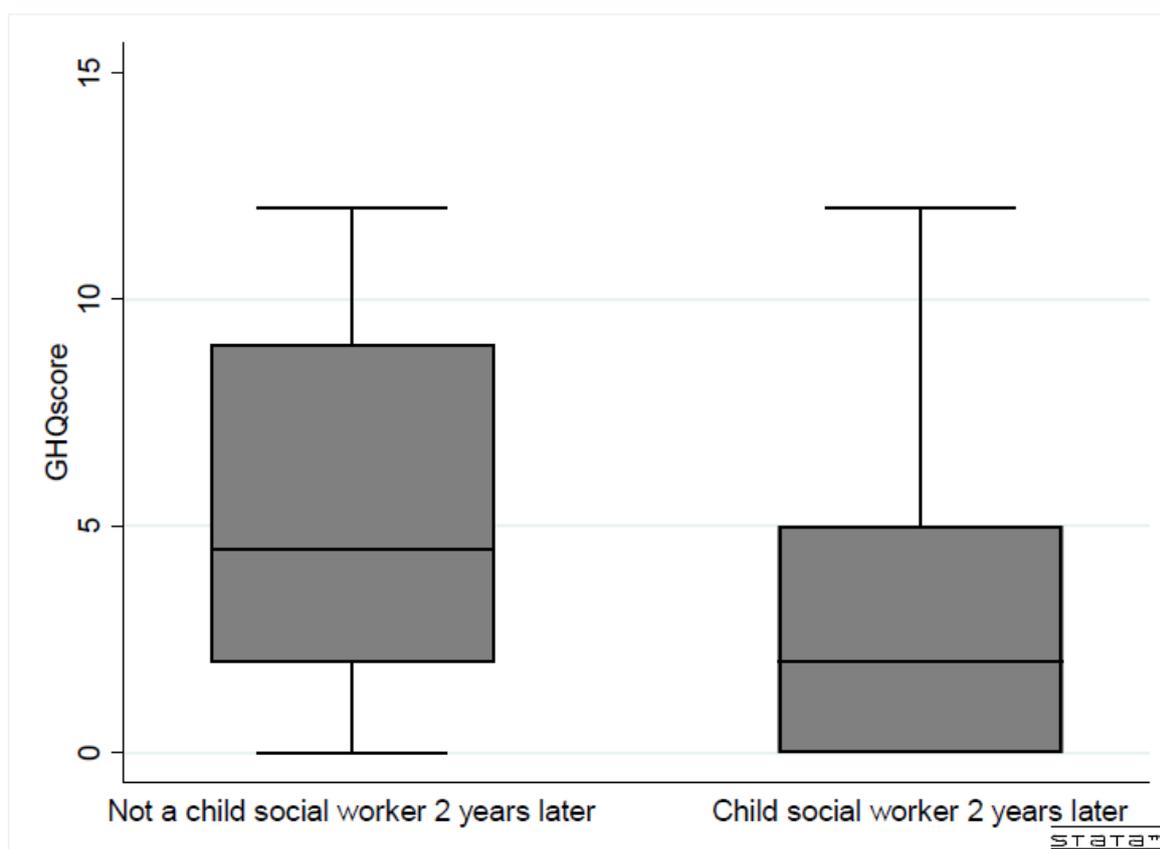
Table 4.10: Mean and median scores for GHQ-12

	mean	st.dev.	conf. interval	median
Children's social worker	3.0	3.6	[1.9 4.2]	2
Not a children's social worker	5.6	4.0	[3.0 8.1]	4.5

4.3.6 Discussion of combined longitudinal analysis

This analysis found a statistically significant association between two factors and the retention of fast-track trainees in social work: perceived local authority support and intrinsic job satisfaction. Some additional factors, including line management support and well-being, may also be associated with retention, however it was not possible to be confident of these effects with the size of the sample available. The relationship between perceived local authority support and retention was stronger than any other organisational factor, including line management support. This is an interesting finding, and one that could benefit from being explored further.

It is also of note that intrinsic job satisfaction was more strongly associated with retention than extrinsic job satisfaction. Intrinsic job satisfaction concerns the

worker's attitude to the job itself and the way they are doing it, such opportunities for initiative and skills development, and the nature and variety of tasks carried out. In contrast, extrinsic job satisfaction refers to the wider working conditions including factors such as income, job security and physical conditions (Carpenter et al 2003).

That intrinsic job satisfaction is more strongly associated with retention than extrinsic satisfaction is a novel finding. Relatively few studies have considered these concepts in social work. Of those that have, we see findings that support the idea that intrinsic satisfaction is important. Coffey et al (2004) found that intrinsic job satisfaction was correlated with lower well-being in a sample of social workers (all types). Carpenter et al. (2015) found that intrinsic (but not extrinsic) job satisfaction predicted high self-efficacy in child and family social workers.

5.0 Career Progression

5.1 Introduction

Changing the training model for some would-be social workers might change the profile of applicants, and indeed is explicitly the intention with Frontline – to bring career-changers with strong academic backgrounds into the profession. A changed profile of trainees could result in a different orientation to career progression. Opportunity for promotion may also be a factor in retention, although we note that in the longitudinal study by Johnson et al. (2020), only six per cent of respondents saw this as the primary factor keeping them in social work. We note the obvious caveat that career progression does not equate to quality of social worker.

This chapter contains data from both survey and employer interviews. There is unfortunately no comparison available for social workers qualified via mainstream non-fast-track programmes. We introduce the chapter with some contextual views from the interviews with employers.

Employers interviewed expressed very positive views on collaborating with fast-track social work routes which created a diverse and dynamic working environment. This is not to say that interviewees necessarily preferred fast-track routes over the mainstream degrees. Several said that the most beneficial working environment was a mixture of social workers from various programmes and some resisted the idea that fast-track-trained social workers were different.

> 'There's a place for each, they're slightly different from each other, but neither Step Up nor Frontline have a monopoly on the quality of practice or the quality of social workers that they produce.' (Saanvi)

> 'I know there's thoughts about high-flying graduates and people that come into the fast-track roles but I haven't found that to be the case, really. […] I haven't noticed, a difference between a student from a university, a Step Up student and a Frontline student in terms of where their life is and where they've come from. I don't feel there's any more privilege or anything like that around it.' (Abjol)

When it came to discussing progression of fast-track graduates, several employers suggested that local authorities needed more monitoring strategies to be introduced and applied. This would help workforce leads to observe the career routes of their social workers including those from fast-track routes.

'As part of the Step Up plan I think DfE need to be thinking about how those partners think beyond "we've trained, we've recruited", and the board steps away and then moves on to the next lot, but there's nothing to monitor and track how those students are getting on. Half the local authorities probably couldn't even tell if they've still got their Step Ups from whenever. You think well surely, it's great that we've got them into the workforce, but have we been tracking them? So, from inception we should be really clear that how many people have we put in from Cohort 1 Step Up back in the days. Where are they now?' (Celestine)

5.2 Frontline - progression

5.2.1 Frontline survey results on progression

There was evidence of career progression from the survey responses. From the first Frontline cohort, surveyed at five years, 24 out of 33 (73%) who answered the question had been promoted beyond basic social work grade. Numbers are too small to report, but this cohort included team managers, assistant team managers, consultant social workers, senior social workers, and other senior roles.

Table 5.1: Progression in child and family social work from 2.5 years – Frontline

Time since social work qualification	Team Manager / Assistant TM	Senior social worker	Social worker	Consultant Social Worker	Other	Total (100%)
Cohort 1						
2.5 years	*	16%	80%	*	*	**64**
3 years	*	26%	62%	9%	*	**58**
4 years	10%	35%	32%	16%	6%	**31**
5 years	27%	27%	30%	6%	9%	**33**
Cohort 2						
2.5 years	0	*	92%	*	*	**53**
3 years	0	15%	80%	*	*	**40**
4 years	7%	37%	40%	13%	*	**30**
Cohort 3						
2.5 years	0	19%	73%	*	*	**75**
3 years	*	28%	60%	*	*	**43**
Cohort 4						
2.5 years	*	20%	77%	*	*	**109**

* Values less than 5 are not reported and therefore all ns removed other than row totals

5.2.2 Frontline – qualitative insights into progression

With regard to career aspirations, one Frontline graduate stated that they were being promoted to the role of senior social worker soon, whereas most considered themselves as early in their social work career and therefore wanted to gain further experience for at least the next two years before they saw themselves as progressing further:

> 'For now I think I'm definitely still very early on in the career Specialising in this area with disabilities [and] I think there is so much I still need to learn. So, yes, I think in the next few years I'll probably try and focus on just developing in this particular role. But, after that I will definitely hope to stay in a social work arena but I want to try some different things.' (Anna)

As for career aspirations, these were many and varied. One interviewee said they valued work-life balance above promotion but most had ideas about progression, even if this was into jobs that were different but not necessarily any more senior. There was a group of interviewees who saw their future in mainstream local authority

children's services work, being practice educators for example, and eventually consultant social workers or team managers. One said, 'My career goals are to progress through the levels and the sky is the limit - I wouldn't say no to being director' (Benjamin). The majority of interviewees saw themselves moving aside into different, albeit allied, roles. Systemic therapy was a popular option, which ties in with the Frontline programme training model. Some spoke of specialist roles, for example with looked-after children or residential care for parents whose children are at risk of becoming 'looked after', or a move into Cafcass or youth justice. Others saw social work education and research as future routes. Only two who were currently in practice spoke of moving out of social work – one into family law and the other into teaching.

Employers had mixed responses about progression in social workers trained via Frontline. When it came to a discussion around a timeline of progression to senior roles, some interviewees talked about individual characteristics and personal circumstances and how those two factors shaped social workers' career decisions and choices.

> 'We haven't seen any difference of progression compared to other [routes]. I think it's down to the individual, isn't it? In terms of their characteristics, their drive.' (Deborah)

Some employers suggested that the progression of social workers trained via Frontline was similar to colleagues from other social work routes, although it should be noted that some interviewees had little direct experience of working with Frontline programme, so their views were presumably based on impressions from elsewhere.

> Interviewer: 'What about progression? You mentioned that one person is progressing quite well, so would you say their progression rates are different from the traditional route students?'
> Steve: 'Well, it's a bit early to say. I would probably say no. […] They've branched out into more specific areas of social work and taking on other responsibilities but then the amount of time that they've been here we would be expecting that anyway really.'

> 'I think they probably have done, although not many of them have actually moved into senior roles here, but I think elsewhere probably yes, they have done.' (Saanvi)

Others believed that the nature of the Frontline qualification helped the social workers to progress and had positive impact on other colleagues in their teams:

'I know Frontline also sets out to create leaders for the future, and I think (…) they did bring some leadership in the way that you can be a leader with your peers.' (Bethan)

'They've obviously got a far greater knowledge […] and resources, and they've done all the networking so they can hit the ground running.' (Alex)

5.3 Step Up to Social Work – progression

5.3.1 Step Up to Social Work survey results on progression

Survey questions were asked of Step Up graduates about promotions. At the 18-month qualified time point, the vast majority in Cohort 5 who responded to the question (97%, n=150) were still in positions as entry grade social workers, as would be expected. After 2.5 years, 12% (n=18) of Step Up Cohort 4 respondents are senior social workers and 84% (n=125) are in entry grade positions.

By the 3.5-year time point, whilst almost two-thirds (63%, n=99) are still working as entry grade social workers, 30% (n=47) of Cohort 4 are senior social workers and the number of those working as team managers, assistant team managers or consultant social workers has increased to nine (6%). Overall, 37% (n=58) have progressed beyond basic grade by 3.5 years since qualification.

These results have not been presented in a table as there were too many values less than five that could not be reported.

5.3.2 Step Up to Social Work – qualitative insights into progression

During the interviews with Step Up graduates, there was a mixture of reasons associated with their desire to stay or progress within the sector. Only one graduate spoke of a promotion (to be a senior social worker), who was a repeat interviewee and therefore had been qualified longer than some of the other graduates we interviewed. For others who were still in the early part of their social work career role, including those who had previous experience in related areas prior to qualifying, felt they were not yet experienced enough to be considered for a promotion and implied that they wished to remain where they were for another couple of years to build their confidence. However, several graduates referred to a reluctance to take on a senior role since that would mean losing the direct work with children and families that they enjoy, as these examples illustrate:

'I'd like to just progress really. I'd like to maintain working as a social worker, and I'd quite like to look at practice education. I don't want to go away from the hands-on though. I don't want to go into management where you don't get any contact with any children or any families.' (Sally)

'I know that I want to remain in a type of position that means I would still be working with children and families, so I don't have any intention to go on to a kind of manager type role. But to go onto a more senior role within social work would be something that I would hope to achieve.' (Alex)

Findings from the employer interviews about promotion and career progression since qualification suggested the majority of interviewees were satisfied with the progression levels of the Step Up-qualified social workers, seeing them as in line with expectations. Employers tended not to speak of quicker progression among Step Up-qualified social workers compared to those qualified via other routes but saw this commonality as a positive thing.

'The ones that have progressed, they've progressed in a time-scale that I would expect other social workers to progress to that level; […] They don't seem to stand out. Once they qualify, they are very well respected as workers, but they're certainly not progressing any quicker than other social workers.' (Grace)

'I don't think we could say, looking at our workforce, that they've been stepped-up quicker than anybody else has.' (Deborah)

Nonetheless, some Step Up-qualified social workers managed to achieve impressive performance and demonstrated high aspirations in terms of progression. This was often said to be associated with personal circumstances and characteristics.

'Step Up has been such a good success, really, for us, and for the partnership. We've had some really good students that have come through, and they've stayed with us as well. We've recruited them, been on ASYE, and they've stayed, and they've started to develop their career with us as well.' (Grace)

Whilst individual career trajectories differ, according to some of the interviewees, social workers trained via Step Up were more academically driven than graduates from other routes which would potentially lead them towards the academic positions rather than practice.

’They don't seem to fast-track through their careers. What I have seen more is their aspirations are more academic. So some have come in and kind of decided after a while to go on and do PhDs and look at other opportunities rather than stay within social work.' (Grace)

Impressions of Step Up-qualified social workers' qualifications and progression were very positive. Employers highlighted such factors as skills, competence and motivation responsible for Step Up social workers' 'potential to move to senior social worker roles and the maybe progress onto become managers and things' (James).

6.0 Job satisfaction in social work

6.1 Frontline

6.1.1 Survey responses

Responses on job satisfaction for one of the Frontline cohorts (Cohort 3), at 18 and 2.5 years qualified, are presented in figures 6.1 and 6.2 below, separated into intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsic factors refer to satisfaction with the nature of the job itself, the nature and variety of tasks, their own accomplishments and relationships with colleagues. Extrinsic factors refer to hours of work, pay and working conditions, job security, the quality of management and supervision and ease of travel to work.

The majority of respondents reported that they were 'satisfied' or 'very satisfied' with intrinsic factors, their relationships with fellow workers; with the nature and variety of the work they were doing; having challenges to meet; being able to use their initiative and develop their skills; and with their own accomplishments. These findings are very similar to a survey of 175 child and family social workers at a similar stage of their careers (15-18 months after qualification) who were starting an Early Professional Development (EPD) programme (Carpenter et al. 2013). In that study, which used the same measure, the proportions with high intrinsic satisfaction were almost as high 18 months later. When the Frontline Cohort 3 graduates were surveyed 18 months later, the results were again similar, as shown in figure 6.1.

A majority of Frontline respondents were satisfied with most of the extrinsic aspects of job satisfaction, notably job security (see figure 6.2). Nevertheless, over a third (39%) were dissatisfied with the number of hours they were required to work when surveyed at 18 months post qualification. When surveyed 18 months later, however, the participants were less likely to indicate that they were dissatisfied with the number of hours they worked. Slightly more of the respondents were dissatisfied with public respect for their work than were satisfied with this. This is in keeping with other studies (Carpenter et al 2013) which have found social workers are likely to indicate that they are dissatisfied with public respect for their job. Overall, nearly eight in ten respondents reported that they were satisfied, or very satisfied with their work in general.

In comparison, social workers responding to the EPD survey mentioned above were less satisfied with salary (42% vs 76% for Frontline) and job security (81% vs 95%), which may reflect employment conditions in 2010. Both groups were 15-18 months post qualification. EPD graduates came through traditional university undergraduate and postgraduate programmes. However, a high proportion were similarly satisfied

with their work overall, management and supervision, and physical work conditions. The proportions of dissatisfied responses were likewise around 40 per cent for the number of hours of work and public respect for social work. The only significant change in EPD respondents at follow up was in opportunities for advancement which dropped from 57 per cent satisfied to 36 per cent. At 2.5 years post qualifying, the Frontline participants were even more likely to indicate that they were satisfied with opportunities for advancement.

Figure 6.1: Frontline Cohort 3 at 18 and 2.5 years qualified – intrinsic job satisfaction
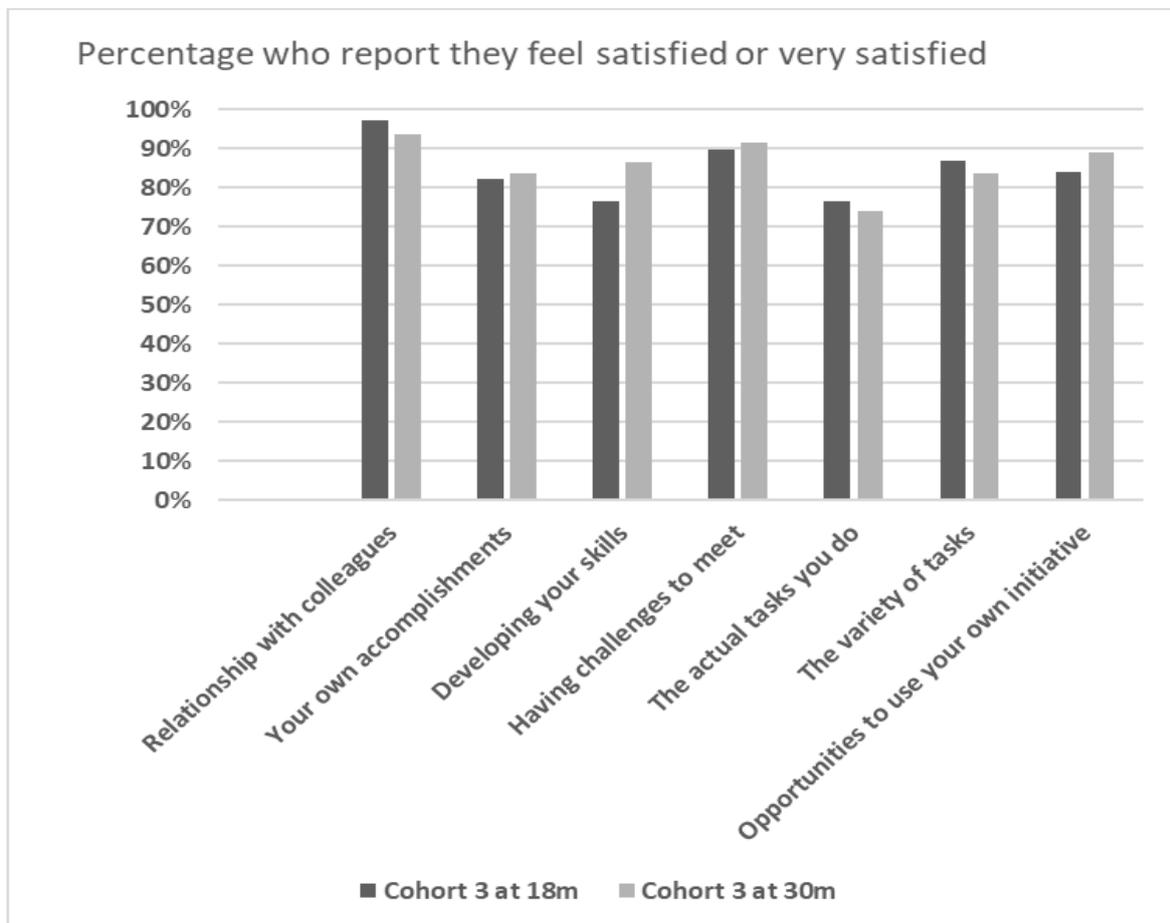
Figure 6.2: Frontline Cohort 3 at 18 and 2.5 years qualified – extrinsic job satisfaction

Percentage who report they are satisfied or very satisfied

Cohort 3 at 18m   Cohort 3 at 30m
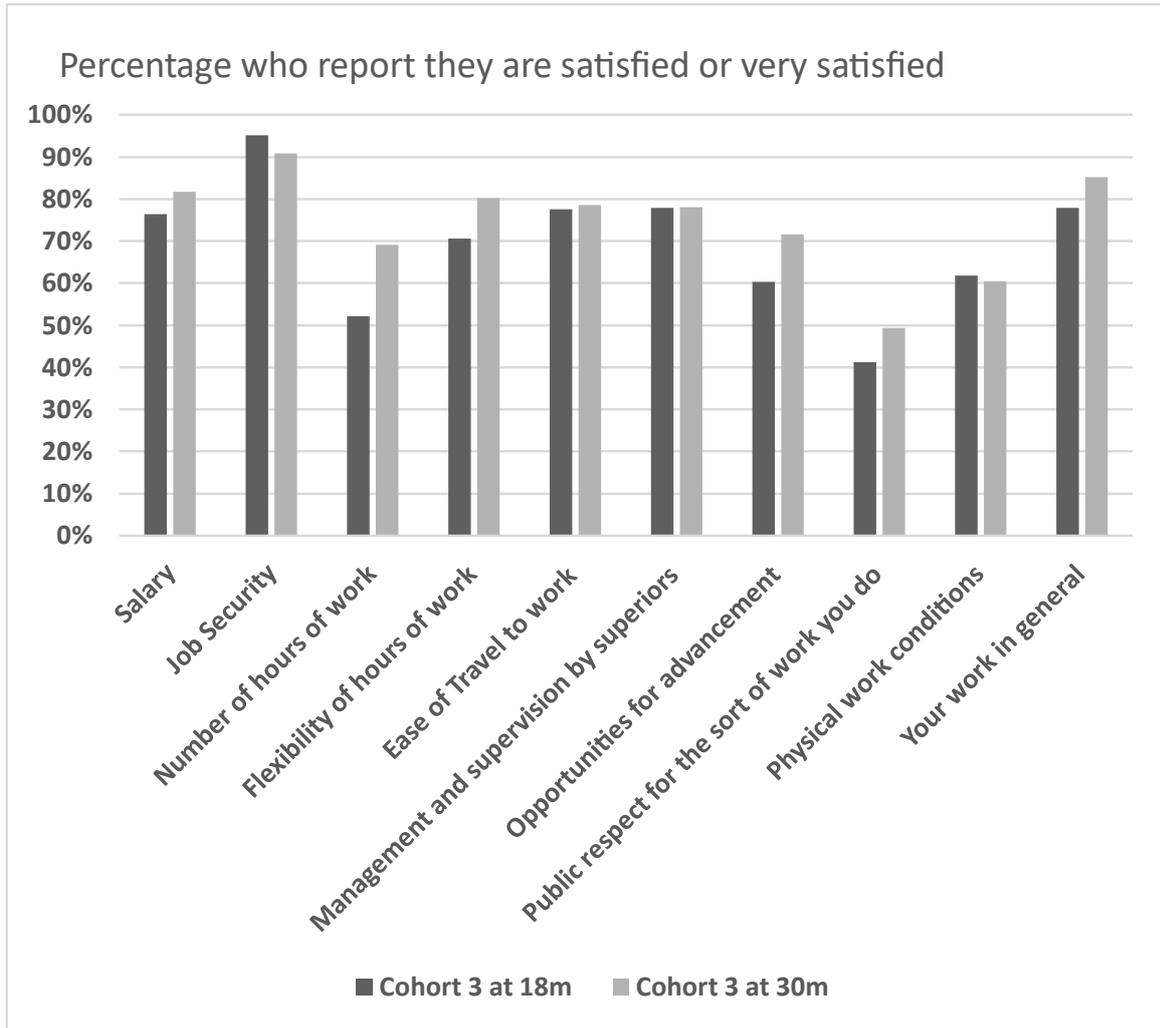
6.1.2 Insights from qualitative interviews with social workers

Job Satisfaction - Positives

The interviewees trained via Frontline spoke of various reasons for experiencing job satisfaction in their child and family social work role. Predominantly, it was around the work they do with children and families; the variety of work that social work offers them; and working within a positive team culture. These findings support those of Ravalier et al (2021) who highlighted the significance of social worker resources, including the rewarding nature of child and family social work, the ability to make a positive difference to children and families, and the receipt of peer and management support. With regard to working with children and families, Frontline interviewees referred specifically to the building of relationships and how important that is in being able to understand what families' needs are and helping them to make changes. It was also described as important to job satisfaction:

'It's relationship-based work, which is what I love to do. So going in, finding out about people, empowering those people and then seeing what happens. You can't control what anyone does you can only guide or use your relationship to build them up to do what they feel is best. That's what's exciting, you're never forcing anything to happen, it's quite freeing, really, that's what's keeping me in it, definitely.' (Maya)

'I like building those relationships with the families, because you're working with them for many months at a time. You do get to really know them and you can really build those relationships, and I think it's that relationship building that helps them make changes.' (Tasha)

Furthermore, a number of social workers trained via Frontline saw their job as being worthwhile and rewarding when witnessing positive outcomes in families and evoking change from the work they have done. For some Frontline interviewees, this experience outweighed some of the challenges of the role and was the main thing keeping them in social work:

'I really enjoy the work that I do, and when there are positive outcomes it makes it all worth it. And, even though those are few and far between and, you know, most of the time you feel like you're banging your head on a brick wall or moving in the direction you want them to, those small snippets where you help a family and you see them go through that cycle. It's a positive outcome, so rewarding and trumps any of the more challenging times.' (Alexis)

'I think it's being able to build the relationships and seeing people at what is often one of the most difficult time in their lives. But when given the opportunity people can do quite incredible things and are able to make amazing changes. Yes, I think that's probably what makes it worthwhile.' (Lisa)

Despite interviewees saying that direct work with families and 'making a difference' is their most preferred part of social work (see also Ravalier et al. 2021), some explained that opportunities to do this kind of work were sometimes limited, particularly in child protection teams, and therefore they had moved to work in a different team within child and family social work that allowed for more direct work:

'I think when I'm able to make a difference, families where you can see it and you can see the change happening that's, obviously, quite good. I wouldn't say it happens often but it's good when it does. The new job is going to allow me to do work that I'm really going to enjoy, and the change work is what I enjoy within social work and at the moment I don't get to do a lot of that. So, being able to do what I really, really like makes me more committed to staying and developing in that area.' (Daniella)

'It was very much fighting to keep your head above water and we didn't have time or resources to do meaningful work with the families. That was part of the reason that I thought, I need to get away from this for now. So, in this job that I'm in now it seems like workloads are much more manageable. The families that I've been allocated so far seem to be a good range of complexities and different levels of social work [need] -, so it's going to be a good range of experience. There's definitely a lot of evidence that what you're doing is actually contributing to that child or young person's life and the family's life.' (Anna)

The range of experiences that social work gives them was another 'pull' factor for Frontline-trained social workers to stay in social work. For example, some spoke of enjoying the variety of work they encountered such as taking on other roles like educational support and as mental health advocate, whilst others enjoyed the face-paced and unpredictable nature of the work that makes it interesting and thought provoking:

'I really like the analysis. One of the reasons for going into social work is people are endlessly interesting and no day is ever the same, you meet lots of different families. I really enjoy getting to know a family, trying to understand what the challenges are, what the strengths are, how to work with a family and get the best out of the work with them.' (Millie)

'I think it's also constantly challenging and constantly changing and it keeps you on your toes. For me that variation in the work and the fast pace of working in a child protection team, I really enjoy that, because you're constantly learning. You're constantly thinking about ways you could have handled things better.' (Megan)

In terms of the team culture, Frontline graduates explained how important a collaborative team was for them to feel supported and satisfied with the work that they do, particularly given the emotional strain that can be felt from the role:

> 'We have a really good team, so the way we get through it is just a really bad sense of humour with my colleagues and just laughing and joking and making sure we call each other and check in and things like that.' (Sara)

> 'The team are so supportive … when you're on duty and in the office together, everybody is so caring for one another. There is a proper team spirit If you need two social workers to go out together there is the sense of togetherness…. we're there to support these children and we work together to do that. I like that part of the job.' (Jo)

The emotional support that many graduates felt they got from their colleagues, also transcended further for some respondents, who talked about the support they received from their managers as making a difference to how happy they were in their role: 'My current manager who has just been amazing in terms of the support that she's given, I suppose, not just in terms of work but in terms of that emotional support' (Tim). In particular, what made a difference was having a manager who was approachable, listens and offers advice:

> 'I think also what's helped has been support from good managers in my local authority, I've been fortunate enough to always have very good managers who have really given me advice and guidance.   Managers who have been very accepting and valued my view and opinion, which has made me more confident to make suggestions about decisions that are going to be made instead of just waiting for those decision to be made.' (Callum)

Job Satisfaction – Negatives

One of the main challenges that Frontline interviewees experienced in their roles was a lack of time. Some interviewees mentioned feeling overstretched and stressed over the amount of work they had to get done and referred to statutory time scales such as care proceedings and court hearings taking precedence over other work. For some, they felt dissatisfied that they had to then neglect time spent directly with families:

'The biggest challenge for me has been when I'm so overstretched I just feel like the quality of the work with families and intervention that I can put in place massively decreases and then I feel like I'm not doing my job properly and I'm not doing it justice. It's almost like a disservice to the families.' (Alexis)

However, the workload was not just associated with having a high number of cases, but rather the complexity of cases which would increase the volume of work and cause some graduates to feel overwhelmed. The 'heavy' workload also saw some Frontline graduates considering moving to different teams or local authorities due to the struggles, associated mental health issues, and finding it to be an unsustainable job when having your own family, as two interviewees implied:

From a personal level managing work and family, I find that although I would really want to stay in social work I don't think I could stay in child protection social work long term if I really wanted to balance that with being a family.' (Jennifer)

It's very demanding in terms of time. This might be a bit [*Local Authority*] specific, but our caseloads are ridiculously high in the assessment teams, which has been commented on by Ofsted. And, that essentially means that very rarely will we finish work on duty before 8 o'clock. For me, it's not a bother because I haven't got children or things that I need to be doing outside of work. But it is very time consuming and getting things done in timescales when you've got such high caseloads is difficult.' (Benjamin)

Other challenges mentioned by Frontline graduates were the emotional strain, difficulties with decision-making, and how they sometimes felt like risk-assessors rather than social workers. Further frustrations associated with these challenges, came from feeling unsupported in their role, through either a lack of managerial support or a lack of resources, particularly around funding:

'I think it's dealing with the system failure, or the lack of resources and the lack of ability to do the job you want to do, I think is so difficult. And, seeing families, you know, you're dealing with children of parents who grew up in the care system knowing that the cycle is being repeated because nobody has the resources to put in the support that's needed and we're just putting plasters on things. That was definitely, I think, the hardest part of social work.' (Lisa)

6.2 Step Up to Social Work

6.2.1 Survey responses

Findings on Step Up Cohort 4 graduates' job satisfaction are presented in Figures 6.3 and 6.4. On almost every issue, the majority of respondents were satisfied or very satisfied. The exceptions were public respect for their work (as social workers) and number of hours they were required to work, where the majority were dissatisfied. The satisfaction levels for intrinsic factors were high.

Figure 6.3 Step Up Cohort 4 at 18 and 2.5 years qualified: Intrinsic job satisfaction
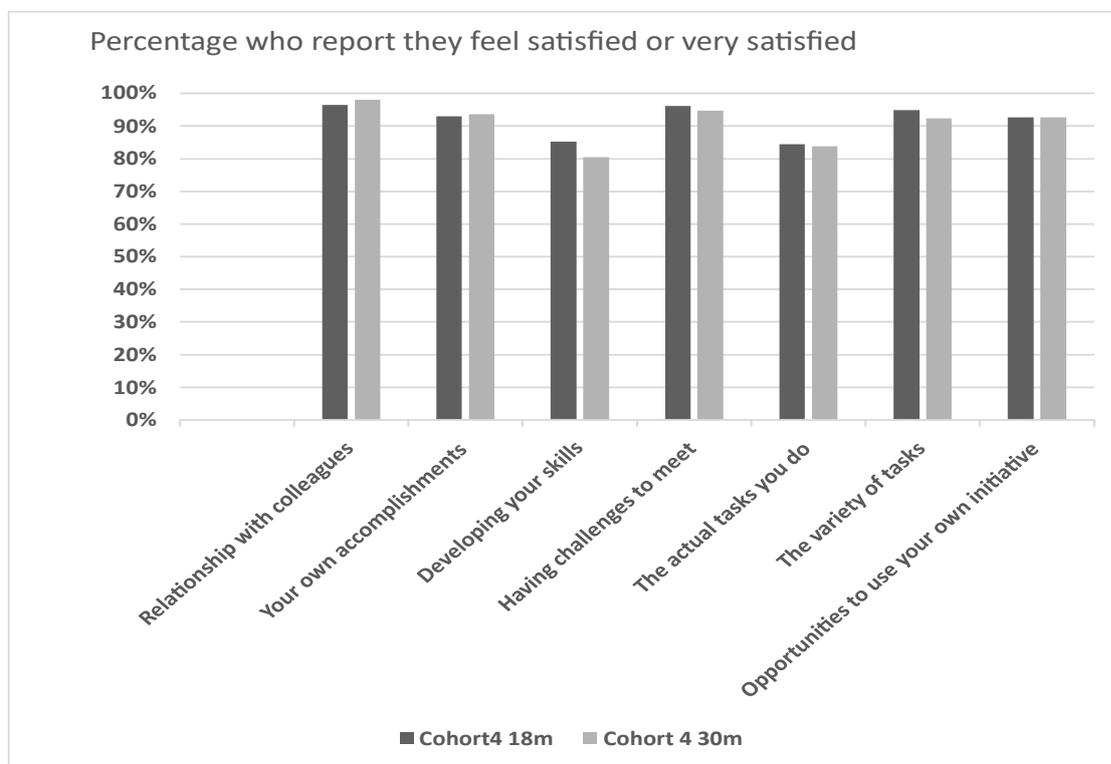
In comparison to the child and family social workers in the Early Professional Development Programme mentioned above, a higher proportion of Step Up respondents gave satisfied or very satisfied ratings for intrinsic satisfaction, again using the same measure (Carpenter et al. 2013). For example, 92 per cent of Step Up respondents were satisfied with their own accomplishments compared to 83 per cent EPD respondents; and for satisfaction with the actual tasks of social work, the figures were 85% vs. 70%. The responses for the current Step Up participants at 18 months are similar to Step Up Cohort 1 (n = 61) surveyed by Smith et al., (2018) three years after qualification.

Figure 6.4 Step Up Cohort 4 at 18 and 2.5 years qualified: Extrinsic job satisfaction

Percentage who report they feel satisfied or very satisfied
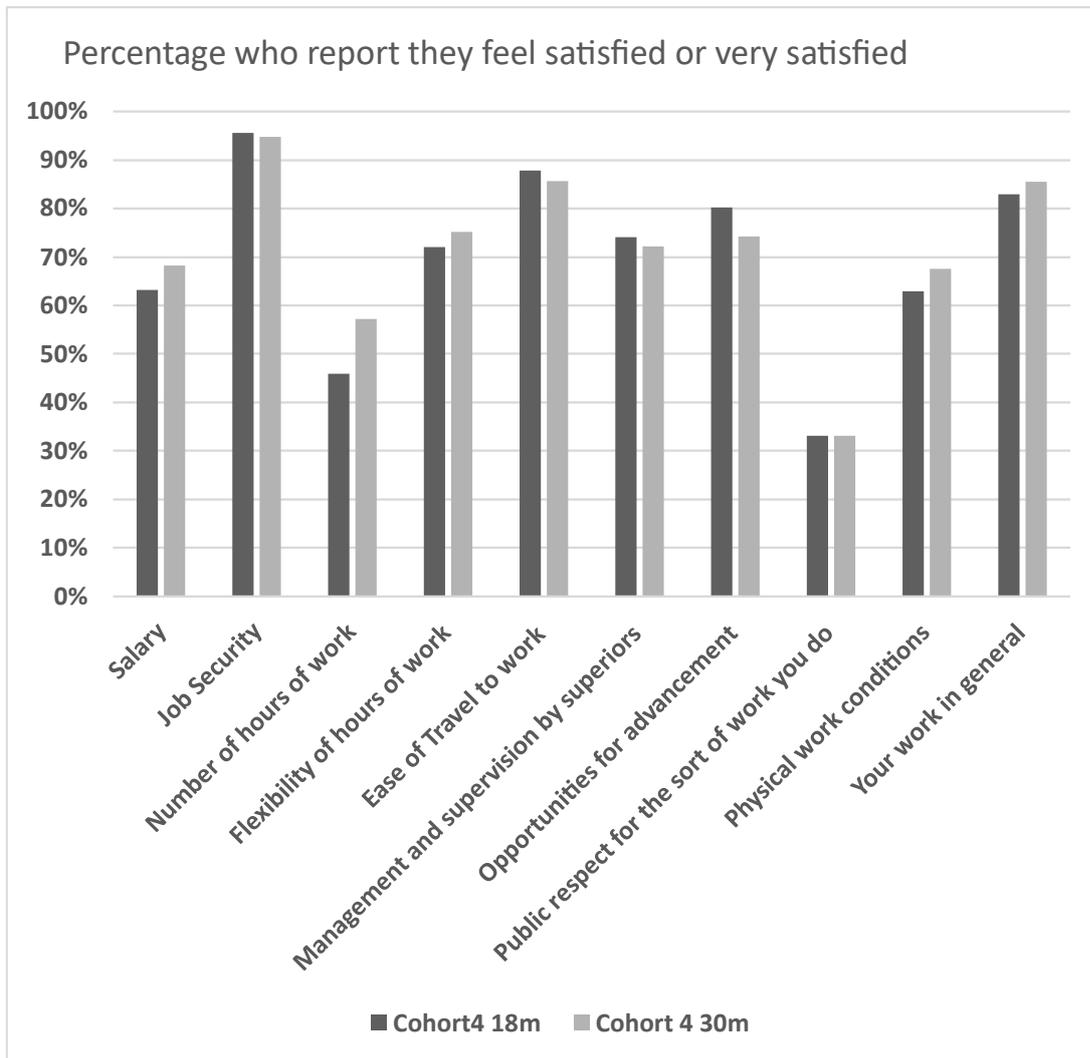
Step Up respondents were generally more likely to be satisfied with extrinsic factors than the EPD respondents, notably for salary and job security. A considerably higher proportion were satisfied with opportunities for advancement compared to EPD respondents (80% vs 60%). In contrast, the three-year follow up of Step Up Cohort 1 (Smith et al. 2018), reported only 55 per cent being satisfied with such opportunities.

6.2.2 Insights from qualitative interviews with social workers

Job Satisfaction - Positives

When asked about what they enjoyed about their social work role, most Step-Up-trained social workers spoke about their direct work with children as their main reason to continue working in this role:

'Nearly always the children and young people. Sometimes they're really annoying, but most of the time it is them that are enjoyable. So it's a bit clichéd, but it's true. Being able to go on journeys with people and being able to see them grow, to challenge them, to give people that perhaps haven't had a lot of faith put in them. And I see that more in this role than I did in my previous role. Working with children and young people in care, you certainly get a lot of opportunity to have those experiences. And that's the main reason I'm here and that's certainly the thing I enjoy most about it.' (Louis)

The satisfaction that the social workers attributed to working with children and families was the building of relationships with them over time and the feeling of improving outcomes for vulnerable children: 'it's so engaging, it's so stimulating, and you can really feel that you're supporting change and making things different for children' (Eleanor). Of particular importance for some was directly knowing that they had made a positive difference to families lives, as one interviewee explained:

'It's the people and their families. I actually had someone call in when I was on duty the other day and speak to another worker to say I would like you to tell Robyn's manager that she's the only person in the last 10 months that has got back to me and done what they said they would do, and so I'm phoning in to complement or whatever for feedback. And then I was at work last week, and one of the ladies from reception downstairs came up with a box, and it was a bouquet of flowers and a thank you card from one of the families I've been supporting, so that's what I like. I know that I'm doing a good job if that's the feedback I'm getting from them.' (Robyn)

In addition to working with children and families, interviewees trained via Step Up also spoke about the importance of their colleagues and the support they provide: 'what really keeps me coming back every day is the team. The team that I'm in is very supportive because I suppose we are all in the same boat' (Tracy). Most spoke about the support with the day-to-day aspects of the role, however there was also mention of the team culture that existed beyond that, where colleagues were a source of expertise for each other as well as a sanctuary of escape from the emotional toll of the role, as one explained:

'The other social workers on the team, they've all got a different area of expertise from, you know, like working in prisons, drug and alcohol, nursery nurses, and all that sort of thing, and having

all that range of experiences and just being able to go 'oh, Ali do you know stuff about homelessness because I'm not too clear about the process on that?' and they're like 'oh yeah, Louise, I've got this resource and that resource.' […] And I think being able to have a team that you're able to do that with, as well as have a bit of a laugh with at times, because what we deal with isn't a barrel of laughs all the time, and being able to have that I think that's the best team culture that you can have.' (Louise)

Lastly, a key feature for whether social workers were happy in their role was down to having understanding and supportive managers, who were approachable in nature:

'You know, my sort of direct manager and director are very good. They're easy to talk to. They listen. They get stuff done. They're knowledgeable. They're kind of all the things you want in a sort of management team' (Eddie).

Perceived support from managers seemed to affect whether interviewees saw themselves remaining in their current team or seeking a role in a different team, with some explaining that they had experienced differences in management styles in previous roles which made a difference to their job satisfaction. Of particular importance was taking shared responsibility for decisions, so that social workers did not feel sole responsibility, as one interviewee explained:

'We are so well supported. We have regular supervision. We share concerns. We're able to reach out and ask for advice and support, and decisions are made in a group. So they listen to what we're saying, but those decisions are made with the support of managers. We share that responsibility, which really helps.' (Eleanor)

Job Satisfaction – Negatives

 A main influence on the job satisfaction of social workers qualified from the Step Up programme was not having the necessary time to complete all allocated tasks. Some reported having to work additional hours to fit everything in, or felt they had no choice but to neglect other valuable aspects of their job, such as the direct work with children:

'Whatever the local authority tries to do, it always comes back to time. Whether that's caseload, the expectation of the electronic recording system, the way they expect you to conduct review meetings and the work that's involved before and after. For me

94

the biggest challenge is not having enough time. My worry is that our time isn't spent on the most important things and it is distracted by other stuff. More organisation or procedural, and less about the child.' (Louis)

Having to work additional hours made for a difficult work-life balance, particularly when coupled with experiencing emotional pressure and a lack of managerial support, as some graduates disclosed. For some interviewees who had family commitments, it was felt that such an imbalance was not sustainable:

'From a personal perspective, I just feel [the job's] not sustainable. I don't know if it's more so for me because I've got a young child. Even if I didn't have a young child, the only way I would keep on top of it is by putting in an extra 10 hours on top of what I'm already contracted to do. I just feel you'd constantly playing catch up. You know, nobody says to you at the end of the week "Oh, I saw you logged in at night, I can see an extra 10 hours, make sure you take the day off."' (Anita)

The pressure of time was often associated with the complexity of cases 'because you might have a severely autistic child, but then it's not just that, it's also that the parents have got drug and alcohol dependency and the other children have suffered because of it' (Eddie). Other interviewees reported feeling the pressure of wanting to ensure that families are given the time and support they need and that this was difficult to achieve:

'Because you're working with families, it's their lives. It's not like you're going into work and doing a nine to five job. Sometimes what's really stressful is that what's very important to them isn't so important to you because you've got another thing kicking off in another case. I find that very difficult because I don't want to let them down. I feel pressure from professionals to make sure that I'm a good social worker for them, I feel very pressured from the families because I want to be able to support them in the way I can, and I feel pressure on myself to do the job well. I think it's quite a lot to put on one person. And if you think about them all at the same time you're just going to break.' (Louise)

7.0 Reasons for leaving

There is inevitably some thematic overlap between this chapter and earlier chapters, especially Chapter 4 that is one focused on retention / attrition. However, this chapter presents results from some specific parts of our data set: free-text survey responses - both about reason for leaving and alternative careers - and insights from qualitative interviews specifically with those who have left social work.

7.1 Frontline

7.1.1 Survey responses

If respondents to the surveys were no longer in a social work role, they were asked to outline their reasons for leaving the profession. The free-text responses from twenty-seven Frontline graduates from cohorts 1 and 2 gathered from the 2018 survey were summarised in the interim report (Scourfield et al., 2020). To try and avoid double-counting responses from the same people in multiple waves of the survey what are reported here are the responses from the 2020/2021 surveys from survey respondents in cohorts 3 to 5. Across these three cohorts, 51 respondents outlined reasons for leaving social work. These were coded into main categories of reasons for leaving, which could overlap because an individual could cite more than one reason.

The most often cited reason for leaving, mentioned by 18 out of 51 respondents, was issues related to stress, mental health challenges or the emotional burden of social work. Twelve respondents' reasons for leaving were related to taking up roles in allied fields (including NGOs abroad). Decisions to take up these positions were often linked to beliefs that the new roles would provide more opportunities and time for direct work with children and families than statutory social work in a local authority setting. Workload, both in terms of hours worked and caseload, was cited as a reason to leave by ten people. Seven respondents highlighted issues related to organisational/management factors. Five people described work-life balance as being a contributor to their decision to leave. Three respondents linked their decision to personal issues. A further three described the lack of resources to offer families and too little time to do direct work as contributing to their decision. Two people said that they had left to pursue further study, whilst one was taking a break.

A selection of quotations from Frontline graduates' free-text survey responses follows with some of the fuller and more complex responses selected. These have not been attributed pseudonyms as with the qualitative interviews:

'It was not how Frontline envisioned, or what I signed up for. Change isn't promoted within families. Ticking boxes to say a child has been seen is what it is in reality. I spent hours working with families from my own time because it was impossible to do anything else. I wanted to make children's live better. It was not sustainable, I was commuting over an hour each way, working 15-hour days unpaid overtime and never seeing my own child. The system sucks, is not fit for purpose and is failing families.'

'I felt that the local authority was not very supportive or well organised. I was disappointed by the level of support I received as a student social worker and ASYE; this could be seen as quite irresponsible considering that students/newly qualified social workers were expected to deal with complex cases with minimal support and guidance, therefore not always providing the families with the best support, and also placing these workers' wellbeing at risk.'

'I also have a general feeling that this is the case in many local authorities, which does not allow for effective systemic social work and second order change or for the wellbeing of practitioners. I have not known a work climate before where it was expected that workers, including those who are experienced and talented, will have to take sick leave. I feel the structure of children's social services needs change to promote a healthier work-life balance for workers to support their wellbeing and also promote best practice.'

7.1.2 Insights from qualitative interviews with Frontline trainees who had left social work

There were four interviewees who had left child and family social work, two of which were previously interviewed when still in their child and family social work role but had since left the profession. Their reasons for leaving varied, yet all were centred around individual life choices and/or how they felt their own values aligned with the social work practice they encountered. For example, one individual, previously been interviewed whilst in a social work role, is now working as a systemic practitioner whilst also studying part-time to become a systemic therapist. Despite having enjoyed her statutory social work role, she felt that the demands were too much alongside studying:

'I'm currently studying at [*name of place*] as a systemic
psychotherapist, and it was a better fit at the time. Because
being a looked-after children's social worker was very intense. I
guess I felt guilty, because I wanted to give everything I could to
the young people, and I knew that I'd be away [on my course]
every Tuesday morning.' (Lizzie)

She went on to explain that she has stayed working in same local authority where
she completed the Frontline programme due to their outstanding Ofsted report. She
attributed her desire to become a systemic practitioner to the local authority's and
Frontline's embedded systemic work which was in line with her personal values and
the way she wanted to practice. Had the local authority not been systemically
focused she explained:

'I don't think I'd have stayed at all, because I think there's
something that's quite oppressive in traditional social work,
where it's more "We're going to do this to the family", as opposed
to a collaborative process that involves everybody.' (Lizzie)

The three other respondents also spoke of restrictive processes, poor practice and
bureaucracy associated with child and family social work and how it influenced their
decision to leave. Two of the leavers were either working for or considering working
for a charity where 'there is no working with resistance and there are no statutory
time pressures and targets. So, it's not like I need to see all the children every two
weeks and put a note on the system to reflect that, it's a bit more informal and
flexible in that way and family led' (Erin). This individual explained how much she
enjoyed working with families when in her statutory role, and was told by colleagues
she had 'real strength' in her relationship-based working, yet the involuntary nature
and bureaucracy of the work had meant that she found the work difficult:

'I definitely didn't have a negative experience in social work and
in my team. Overall, I really enjoyed the Frontline programme
and I enjoyed my time as a social worker in the team. Ultimately,
my values or my career aspirations just didn't quite line up with
the statutory element of what we had to do. I felt it quite
restrictive and a little bit box ticking sometimes.' (Erin)

Another explained that her reason for leaving was a lack of accountability from her
local authority for the poor practice she witnessed. She would consider returning to
child and family social work in a different local authority that had a better reputation
and where she could be confident that she would receive support:

> 'I do see things that I think are risky and dangerous practices. And, I feel uncomfortable working amongst that and have struggled to see how I can then bring my learning and my practice into that working culture and organisation.' (Millie)

Despite the variation in their social work experiences since qualifying, all leavers interviewed spoke of an excessive workload and associated stress. For some they felt their future work-life balance would suffer if they continued in their role and explained that this was a major factor in their decision to leave:

> 'I remember just thinking, if we had children I don't want to have to decide between picking up my children or letting a family down because of my own family situation. It just felt like I wouldn't be able to meet either my family's needs or the needs of families I would be working So, in the process of thinking about leaving I was thinking, we've not got a house, we've not got children yet, and I'm pretty confident that the work itself is going to get more difficult [and] I'm going to continue to struggle with the various things that I am at the moment.' (Rob)

7.1.3 Alternative careers

For survey respondents who have left social work there are some data available on alternative careers, in a free text box. We identified 100 unique jobs that participants in Frontline cohorts 1-4 had moved on to, up until March 2020. This does not equate to 100 individuals, as a few people had more than one job over this time. We have done some categorisation of these 100 jobs, although it should be noted that this is not a very precise process and some interpretation is inevitably required of information which was sometimes very limited.

We considered whether or not the alternative jobs moved into would be classed as within the broad field of health, social care or education. To draw boundaries narrower than this would involve too much researcher interpretation. Of the 100 jobs, we judged 68 to be in these three broad fields.

Of those working in this broader field, we estimated 44 to be in direct practice roles and 14 to be in management, policy or research. Many of the direct practice roles were quite closely allied to children's social care – for example 'systemic therapist' 'safeguarding officer', and 'working with girls in gangs'. Some roles were lower status than social workers – e.g. support workers, teaching assistants, perhaps suggesting a desire for more direct engagement with children and families and possibly less responsibility – something that emerged in some interviews. Five jobs used the term 'social work' or 'social worker' but these respondents had also reported being in non-

social work or 'other' roles; where these alternative jobs were described, it was clear that these were not statutory social work roles.

Twenty-five of the 100 jobs were categorised as clearly outside of health, social care and education. For a further seven it was not clear. The 25 included nine civil service posts in departments not directly connected to children's social care. Four other Frontline social workers had moved into policy posts in the Department for Education but we classed these as in the broad field of health, social care or education.

Evidence from the general population of social work qualifiers shows that many of those not in social work are also in allied fields. In the analysis of HESA data by Skills for Care (2021), ten per cent of social work qualifiers were working in other social-care-related roles and one per cent in health-related roles 15 months later, which adds up to the majority of those not in social work roles.

7.2 Step Up to Social Work

7.2.1 Survey responses

Respondents were asked to outline their reasons for no longer being in a social work role. For Cohort 4 these were collected at 18 months, 2.5 years and 3.5 years post qualification with the results for 18 months and 2.5 years being reported in the interim report. In the final wave of surveys, responses were also collected from those in Cohort 5 at 18 months post qualified.

At the 3.5-year time point, 18 respondents from Cohort 4 provided information on their reasons for leaving. Of the reasons provided, issues related to workload were most commonly cited (n=8) followed by issues related to stress/mental health (n=6). Five people gave reasons related to management/organisation; three highlighted issues related to work-life balance; whilst two reported personal/family commitments as reasons for leaving. In outlining their view of the unrealistic expectations of social workers one respondent stated:

> These include working regular 10 hour days, if not longer. An unmanageable caseload, inability to take annual leave and constant anxiety.

Nine respondents from Cohort 5 described their reasons for leaving social work. Three reported that they had left for other opportunities in allied work, with one stating that the benefits included better work-life balance and pay. In common with the responses from Cohort 4, stress/mental health; management/organisation;

workload; and personal/family commitments were also cited as reasons for leaving social work.

7.2.2 Insights from qualitative interviews with Step Up trainees who had left social work

There were seven interviewees qualified via Step Up who had left child and family social work. Their reasons for leaving included workload, stress, bullying, seeking promotions and/or better pay, personal circumstances (such as a bereavement) and a desire to work in a different area of social work (e.g., with adults). For example, one leaver explained:

> 'I haven't had any promotions in my previous role and moving to this [*adults' social work*] role it was, I guess, a promotion. Obviously separate because it's not Council, it's NHS. But the job I'm in now is [pays] about £11,000 a year more than what I was on in my last role.' (Chelsea)

Chelsea explained her difficulties in progressing in her previous child and family social work role, stating that there were a lot of hoops she would have to jump through. This puts 'a lot of pressure on workers in an already quite demanding job, to try and manage that alongside having your caseload, which is obviously increasingly complex and ever-growing'. Such hurdles meant that alongside a high workload, it became a push factor to seek employment elsewhere for two of the leavers interviewed.

The 'ever-growing' caseloads become a recurring theme with those who had left their child and family social work role, which was putting additional pressure on personal circumstances such as family life. Holding a high number of caseloads often amounted to having to work excessive hours due to staff shortages and associated bureaucracy, meaning that these individuals reported increasing stress levels and a lack of work-life balance as either the single most influential factor to leave, or by very least, a contributing one:

> 'A lot of it always does come down to stress and workload. But it's kind of a vicious cycle, because when you struggle with staff retention, you then struggle more with staff retention, because the people are off or you've not got enough people in the team, then it makes the workload and the stress worse for those that are there.' (Robyn)

> 'I thought I was just being worked way too hard, for what I was earning and I was just working evenings, weekends, so I just thought like what's the point?' (Kara)

> 'It was just impossible to juggle the workload and no support to actually consider it because I was not only doing my own workload, which was well over my hours, but then people were going off sick or on leave and because I was a reliable pair of hands, I was being tasked with everybody's stuff as well. So [I was] just completely overwhelmed with work and no support to manage it I suppose.' (India)

Despite some interviewees raising concerns over their workload with their managers in an attempt to either change their decision to leave, or at very least, reduce the stress caused from excessive working hours, the feedback they received was not necessarily supportive or indicative that change could happen:

> 'I felt disappointed because I'd spoken to my managers and senior management and directors about my experience and what I felt needed to change. We'd been through OFSTED and all these issues with staff retention, but they just weren't taking on board anything I was saying. I was disappointed that they didn't bother to try and keep me. I just don't feel that I was valued or respected as a practitioner. They just pushed and pushed to get as much as they could out of me.' (India)

Nevertheless, most leavers had experienced enjoyment in their previous role, particularly around the direct work they did with children and families. This suggests a possible reluctance to leave for some interviewees, which could have been changed if the workload and associated stress could have been reduced:

> 'It's not like I didn't like the role – I really loved the role. …there was part of me that was a bit sad about not working with children and maybe not staying a bit longer.' (Chelsea)

> 'Even though I did really enjoy it, and I really did, it was so busy and so, so much work that I got to a point where I felt like I couldn't handle it anymore. I just needed to take some time out for myself. I just took a bit of a break, kind of tried to reassess and work out what my next step would be.' (Matilda)

7.2.3 Alternative careers

As explained in section 7.1.3 above, free-text responses were examined on alternative jobs for survey respondents leaving social work. This is not a precise analysis and involves some interpretation from the research team. For Step Up to Social Work, fewer trainees had left social work than was the case for Frontline, mostly due to less time having expired since qualification.

Of those Step Up survey respondents who completed free-text responses about alternative careers, thirteen were in adult social care roles. These may possibly be a more attractive alternative for Step-Up-trained social workers than for those qualifying via Frontline, who if they move out of children's social work, seem more likely to stay working with children and families, but in non-social work roles. A further 53 alternative roles were listed by Step Up respondents. Of those, 51 were in the broad fields of health, social care or education, one was 'full-time mother', and one was clearly outside of those fields. Seven of the 51 were in management or policy roles and the rest in direct practice. Almost all were in roles closely allied to children's social care, e.g., 'child welfare therapist', 'family intervention team key-worker', 'early help worker'.

8.0 Working through the pandemic

Doing social work in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, with repeated lockdowns, risk to frontline staff, considerable pressure on families and restrictions on what kind of practice is allowed, is bound to be challenging. The survey of UK health and social care staff (mostly social care staff and social workers) by McFadden et al. (2020) showed a range of concerns, including worries about safety, difficulties of managing childcare and home schooling, and personal stress; alongside a mixture of positive responses and frustrations with how employer organisations had responded to the situation and communicated with staff. However, a comparison using data from that 2020 study and another cross-sectional study in 2018, and applying propensity score matching to account for differences in group composition, found quality of working life and mental well-being to be significantly higher during the pandemic (McFadden et al., 2021).

Questions were therefore added to our 2020 surveys and interviews about the experience of working through the pandemic. Although these questions focused on the impact of this experience on retention specifically, inevitably study participants ranged more freely in their answers. The following chapter therefore presents views on working through the pandemic from social workers trained via fast-track programmes. Because the issues faced by practitioners were not distinctive to any particular training route, we have not separated out the findings from graduates of the two programmes. The challenges are likely to be similar to those faced by social workers trained via mainstream university programmes.

8.1 Survey results

The survey questions related to the pandemic were only sent to Frontline cohorts 1 and 2, in September 2020. As noted elsewhere in the report, response rates were lower during the pandemic than in previous waves, so samples are smaller and caution is needed in interpreting the results. Table 8.1 presents the survey results. Of the Frontline respondents, just over half of the respondents from Cohort 1 reported working as a social worker during the pandemic, compared with nearly eight in ten of Cohort 2. In both cohorts, the majority that had worked during the pandemic stated that the experience had not affected their intention to stay or leave social work. In Cohort 1, an equal percentage of respondents (15%) said that the experience had made it more likely they would stay in social work as said it had made them more likely to leave. Compared with Cohort 1, fewer respondents from Cohort 2 reported that the experience had made a difference to their intention to either stay in social work or leave.

In both Step Up cohorts, surveyed in September 2020, nine out of ten respondents reported being in a social work role during the pandemic. The majority in both cohorts reported that working through the pandemic had made no difference to their likelihood of remaining in social work. Higher percentages reported that the experience had made them more likely to leave the profession than reported the experience had made it more likely that they would remain in social work.

Some Frontline respondents provided additional responses to optional open text questions. The challenges of remote working; fewer opportunities for team support; and less direct work with families were identified as issues. This is particularly significant given that direct work and the receipt of peer and management support have been identified as important resources for social worker wellbeing (Ravalier et al 2021).

Step Up respondents highlighted increased work stress; increased workloads, including staff turnover; a lack of available support services for families due to pandemic restrictions, with one respondent describing their team as the 'only service left standing'; a lack of protection for staff, including issues around personal protective equipment (PPE); and the impact of reduced face-to-face visits on work with families. This reflects findings from Martinez-Lopez et al (2021) who found that 69% of their sample of 273 social workers in Spain reported that issues around PPE during the first wave of the pandemic, were directly linked to worker levels of stress and anxiety. In this Spanish study, 82% had been forced to work remotely and 80% stated that they had not felt recognised by their organisation for their work.

In terms of the impact on their work environment and in particular home working, some Step Up respondents found it a generally positive experience, for example in relation to keeping up with administrative tasks and overall work-life balance. However, others stated that they had found working mainly from home a lonely and isolating experience. Remote working led to disconnection from the team as well as the erosion of the office-home boundary which are important factors for social worker resilience (Cook et al 2020). As one participant described, working from home meant bringing 'traumatic and challenging work into my home [impacting on] on my ability to switch off'. The lack of public and organisational recognition of social workers' work during the pandemic was noted by several respondents. Regarding those who had left or were planning to leave social work, findings were mixed. Some stated COVID had further compounded issues around stress, workload, and other factors, which were already making them consider a career change while others said that they had reached the decision prior to the pandemic.

Table 8.1 Impact on retention of working as a social worker through the pandemic

Working as a social worker through the pandemic	Frontline Cohort 1 n = 49	Frontline Cohort 2 n = 34	Step Up Cohort 4 n = 197	Step Up Cohort 5 n = 180
Worked as a social worker	53%	79%	91%	91%
Did not work as a social worker	47%	21%	9%	9%
Impact on retention of working through the pandemic				
It made no difference	69%	89%	76%	68%
It made me more likely to remain in social work	15%	*	7%	8%
It made me more likely to leave social work	15%	7%	17%	23%

* Values less than five not reported so all ns removed other than column totals

We also compared job satisfaction before and during the pandemic. This involved using total scores, separately for intrinsic and extrinsic factors, and comparing the results from section 4.3 with survey data from September 2020 and March 2021, so not necessarily the same individuals. Data generated during the pandemic from the two fast-track programmes were combined, as we have done throughout this chapter and in section 4.3. It was not the same Frontline-trained social workers whose data were used as in Table 8.1, however. This is because no job satisfaction data were available from Frontline respondents in September 2020. Instead, we use the Frontline job satisfaction data from March 2021, only for those reporting that they were working in children's social work who had completed every question (likewise Step Up, with data from September 2020). For the pre-pandemic picture we used only those in children's social work at 2.5 years post-qualification (from section 4.3). The results can be seen in Table 8.2. We see that extrinsic job satisfaction scores are almost the same before and during the pandemic. For intrinsic job satisfaction, confidence intervals only just overlap, showing that the level is very close to being significantly lower during the pandemic.

Table 8.2 Comparison of job satisfaction before and during the pandemic

	Timing of surveys	n	mean	st. dev.	95% confidence interval
Intrinsic job satisfaction	Pre pandemic	97	29.33	3.58	[28.61, 30.05]
	During pandemic	348	28.18	4.19	[27.73, 28.62]
Extrinsic job satisfaction	Pre pandemic	74	36.61	5.57	[35.32, 37.90]
	During pandemic	348	36.64	5.19	[36.09, 37.18]

This analysis has its limitations. As noted, these are not necessarily the same individuals and the duration since qualification is not identical for the pre-pandemic and during-pandemic groups. As noted earlier, McFadden et al (2021) conducted a more sophisticated analysis on the effect of the pandemic of social workers' mental well-being and quality of working life, using propensity score matching as a method for dealing with differences in group composition at different time points. That study found both mental well-being and quality of working life to be significantly higher during the pandemic (2020).

8.2 Interviews with social workers

There were a range of views on the experience of working through the pandemic from social workers. When asked if the experience had affected her career plans, one respondent described the work as fundamentally rewarding:

> 'I don't think the pandemic has really influenced it much, because I was still doing a job that was quite focused on kids anyway, so it does feel like I was getting satisfaction from helping people while we're all going through this.' (Anna)

Tim took the more pragmatic view that the pandemic had not influenced his motivation, as there are always challenges in social work: 'if it's not the pandemic there is normally something else'. A couple of interviewees said the pandemic had not affected their motivation fundamentally, but that did not mean it had been a positive experience:

> 'I still want to be a social worker, but I just really dislike working from home.' (Benjamin)

> 'If this was some indefinite arrangement it might make me rethink what I want to be doing, but it's not bad enough that I'm pressing the ejector seat.' (Jack)

Problems experienced from pandemic working included the physical frustration of being stuck at home and the additional paperwork:

> 'I get up out of my bed, I walk about five feet to my desk, I sit there and I make phone calls and write reports. And the aspects of the work that I really don't like, i.e., the kind of bureaucratic nonsense, have just been accentuated.' (Jack)

'I think at the start […] there was this, sort of, classic local authority response to new and unknown risk of just sudden very high levels of contact with families, a lot more forms to fill in, etc., and trying to do that whilst working from home just seemed like a complete nightmare to me.' (Callum)

A few interviewees mentioned increased caseloads, with one explaining this was due to colleagues shielding, although high levels of absenteeism are not unusual in social work. One interviewee worried that the children she was working with may not be safe. Louise felt the pandemic had probably affected her motivation to stay in social work, because of the increased workload:

'I still have days where I just love my job and I wouldn't want to do anything else, but then in this pandemic, I've had days where I'm like, what is this job, what are we doing, I feel very overwhelmed. Caseloads have gone up; more stress has obviously happened for everyone and that means that the stress is being put on social workers more because of the pandemic.' (Louise)

These findings align with those from Hussein (2018), who revealed that higher levels of engagement with work and the receipt of administrative support had the largest impact upon burnout for child and family social workers. Hence, Louise went on to describe the negative influence of increased bureaucracy on direct work with families:

'There was a lot of admin they wanted us to do, and then that hinders the fact that your main focus should be working with families instead of filling out paperwork.' (Louise)

The manner in which increased workloads and bureaucracy intersected with issues such as a change in personal circumstances was highlighted in wave 1 of the Department for Education's longitudinal study (Johnson et al 2019) of local authority child protection social workers.

Several interviewees commented on missing out on informal learning in the office and the emotional safety valve of having people who understand the work to discuss it with:

'The really important part is when you're sitting in the office you hear about other people's work with families. You overhear phone calls, you overhear discussions with managers where you

> hear the decision making, the thoughts, the seeing how other
> social workers react to things.' (Lisa)

> 'It was much better when we were in the office and […] at least
> you could speak to somebody about it the next day who would
> get where you're coming from. Because now I will typically tend
> to speak to friends, family or my partner about these things, but
> they don't quite get it so it's not the same emotional support as
> we were getting before.' (Callum)

One interviewee, Paul, said he was inclined 'not to stay in social work, I think it's affected my motivation overall'. He went on to explain that when working from home he had missed the shared learning and emotional support from having colleagues around him:

> 'For example, [I was] dealing with some really horrible sexual
> abuse; it's very common for me to be sat up in my attic, which is
> where I work, having some pretty horrendous conversations
> about horrible stuff that's gone on. And I just hang up the phone
> and I'm just sat there by myself and I'm, like, 'OK then, what do I
> do with this information I've just received?', What I really need in
> that moment is to be able to turn to the person next to me, or
> someone in the team, or someone I can trust, and just bend their
> ear for five/ten minutes and process what I've been through.
> And, for me, that deals with it, I'm fine after that.' (Paul)

This highlights the importance of those occasions that occur naturally in the office, when a more experienced worker may 'naturally fall into conversation with a new colleague' to offer them support (Cook et al 2020:264). Paul said the situation had improved once he had been allowed back into the office part-time. He noted the importance of some face-to-face contact with colleagues, saying that 'communication is not all verbal, is it?'

Lisa also spoke about the lack of separation between work and home life, saying 'it's just that home is no longer a safe place' because social workers have to absorb a lot emotion, including anger, from families and 'there is something about being shouted at when you're sitting on your sofa at home'. She said that all her colleagues had struggled with this. These challenges of pandemic working are of course not in any way unique to fast-track social workers. Jennifer commented on work-life balance, saying 'I'm spending more time dealing with other families and kids than necessarily spending it with my own'. Similar findings have been reported by Martinez-Lopez et al (2021) in their analysis of the predictors of burnout in relation to the pandemic. Of

273 social workers in Spain, 82% cited difficulties managing the care of children and elderly relatives during the first wave of the pandemic.

Although findings demonstrated the pandemic posed challenges, there were also more positive accounts. For example, Sara quite liked adapting to a new style of contact with families:

> 'It's affected my motivation to life and I've found it very draining. But, would I not do social work because of the pandemic? No. I think, if I was being completely honest, the first lockdown when we all had to do video calls and we all had to knuckle down and it was quite a new territory, although it was difficult with little ones around and trying to do calls like this with children at home, it was a different way of working and I quite enjoyed that.' (Sara)

Like many people in many different jobs, some appreciated being able to attend several meetings in a day across a wide area, in a way that was not possible before the pandemic. It is possible that different opportunities for direct work with children and families may have served as a counterbalance to the challenges of working from home and emotional exhaustion linked to the pandemic (Martinez-Lopez et al 2021). Hence, Maya commented that she felt lucky compared to other people she knew with different kinds of jobs, because she had experienced more face-to-face contact with people:

> 'I've had more socialising than anyone I know, because I'm a social worker, as in work socialising, actually seeing people face to face, in the office or on visits or whatever.' (Maya)

Some improvements in the wider system affecting children's social care were mentioned, such as better collaboration with schools.

8.3 Summary

The challenges of working from home were the physical frustration of being stuck in a small space for work and spare time; work-life balance; difficult emotional content coming directly into the family home; isolation from colleagues; and loss of informal learning and an emotional safety valve. The benefits mentioned were the practicality of arranging meetings, including with people at a geographical distance and, paradoxically, work-life balance was also mentioned as having improved. Clearly there was a range of different individual circumstances.

Other pandemic-related challenges mentioned were PPE, added bureaucracy due to risk aversion, increased caseloads because of colleagues' absence, reduced face-to-face interaction, feeling as though children's services were the only service still operating.

Whilst home working is still a feature of routine social work, local authority employers need to pay careful attention to staff well-being and attempt to mitigate some of the challenges described. Mitigations could include, for example, organising peer support groups to reproduce some of what is gained by informal office interactions, as well as good quality and regular supervision from line managers. As McFadden et al (2020) note, regular and frequent communication is needed to increase personal and professional connection whilst working at home.

9.0 Discussion

An interesting picture is painted by our study, much of which is very relevant to all child and family social work, but some of which is distinctive to fast-track training routes.

Probably the most important headline finding is the attrition rates. Comparison of our findings with HESA survey data suggests that at 18 months after social work qualification, the attrition rate in English social work (all areas) for fast track trainees is very unlikely to be higher than it is for graduates of mainstream social work programmes. This is perhaps contrary to what some critics of fast-track programmes have assumed, although the situation at later time points is not known, because of the lack of comparative data.

Movement away from the original host local authority is quite substantial for Frontline, albeit this has reduced with cohorts over time. The early Frontline national recruitment model had worked against retention within local authorities, as most employers saw it, although more recently, changes have been made to the recruitment approach and a higher proportion of Frontline applicants are now satisfied with their location. There is also some evidence of movement away from original host authorities for Step Up, but employers we interviewed were very positive about Step-Up-trained social workers, specifically on the grounds that they are recruited locally and so stay local.

A gap between Frontline training and the reality of qualified practice emerged from the qualitative data. Both a theory-practice gap and a student caseload / qualified caseload gap can of course be experienced between social work degree and first year in qualified practice for any social work graduate. However, both social worker and employer interviewees spoke about a distinctive Frontline experience of this gap. This was connected to the training model's relatively intense consideration of cases in a small team (unit) and application of systemic theory. The perceived issue was a mis-match between the training model and the reality in the employing local authority.

Rates of promotion have been noted, but it is difficult to take much from these as we have no comparator for mainstream training routes. Smith et al (2018) in their follow up of Step Up Cohorts 1 and 2 found little difference in progression between Step Up and mainstream graduates 3 and 5 years after qualification. Most of those in child and family work are in children in need or child protection teams. For Frontline cohorts, the proportions working in these settings tended to steadily reduce over time. For Step Up, there was a mixed picture over time, but a reduction by the end of the study.

What we have learned about the rewards of the job and the challenges experienced does not seem to be particularly distinctive to fast-track trainees.

The proportion of social workers from both fast-track programmes with caseloads of more than 21 at six months after social work qualification was lower than for the general population of newly qualified social workers in their first years of employment, but it would be expected that caseloads would pick up towards the end of that first year, so this is not really a like-for-like comparison and the fast-track trainees are being surveyed specifically at the six-month point. Social workers from both programmes cited caseloads as significant pressures in the qualitative interviews.

Whilst most rated their supervision positively, between 12% Cohort 5 (Step Up) and 19% Cohort 5 (Frontline) rated it as poor or very poor. Between 11% and 18% were being supervised only every five to six weeks or less, which is clearly not as frequent as national guidance recommends. Supervision did not however emerge strongly from the qualitative interviews as a problematic issue, but those who got good, supportive supervision said it was very important.

The majority who had been social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic told us the experience had not affected their intention to stay or leave social work, but an important minority of between 5% and 23% (varying across cohorts and programmes) reported that it had made it more likely they would leave. This finding may be similar or different from other English social workers, but we do not have this information.

Findings on alternative careers for those who trained on fast-track programmes but then left social work suggest that, in line with HESA survey results on all social work graduates, most were working in allied fields. The qualitative findings from Frontline trainees and some employers suggested that some feel pulled towards more direct work with children and families than they feel able to get from statutory social work. Some Step Up trainees also spoke about direct work in interviews.

The analysis we did that put together survey responses from the two programmes to trace the same individuals over time found that the only two factors statistically significantly associated with retention were perceived support from the local authority and intrinsic job satisfaction. Considering these alongside the qualitative findings, social work interviewees made reference to aspects of extrinsic job satisfaction such as caseload, working hours and support from managers as well as intrinsic factors such as meaningful and rewarding work, direct work with children and families, variety, relationships with colleagues and frustrating bureaucracy. It may be that support from local authority is being interpreted loosely in the survey to include the quality of the social work expected.

It would be unwise to take away any impression that extrinsic factors such as pay, caseload and hours are not important, but the apparent importance of intrinsic factors may point to the influence on staff satisfaction of the quality of social work practice, in keeping with the emphasis of some other commentary on contemporary children's services (e.g., Munro, 2011). The finding would suggest that workplace attention to improving intrinsic job satisfaction would not be wasted and would not just be a sticking plaster, assuming there is also some attention to extrinsic factors. This fits with other research findings from the social work workforce (McFadden et al., 2015; Hussein, 2018; Ravalier et al., 2021) and highlights that there is much a local authority can do, even within external constraints, to improve social workers' experience of their employment. A recent systematic review on workforce interventions (Turley et al., 2020) found some tentative support for approaches taken at an organisational level to improve workforce well-being, as opposed to interventions aimed at individuals, although better evidence is needed. Organisational interventions such as good supervision that is focused on the quality of practice would mean placing an emphasis on intrinsic job satisfaction.

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Appendix 1 – Follow up of survey non-respondents

Tables A1.1 and A1.2 present the results of looking up non-respondents in the public SWE/HCPC register. By 'non-respondents' we mean people trained via fast-track programmes who did not complete the survey (response rates are presented in Table 2.2).

It should not be assumed that having your name on the SWE/HCPC register necessarily means current practice in social work. For many individuals this will be the case, but it is possible to still have your name on the register but to have in fact recently left a social work post. It is also possible to make a decision to continue being registered whilst not being in a practitioner role - e.g. some of the authors of this report would be in this category, as social work academics. Also, for people with common names, it cannot be certain that the person listed on the register is the same individual. Tables A1.1 and A1.2 are rather complex but it is important to present the detail of the tracking, so that the attrition rates presented in the report can be understood. Information already presented in the interim report it is not repeated.

Table A1.1: Follow-up of non-respondents, Frontline cohorts 1-5

Cohort number	1	1	1	1	2	2	2	2	3	3	3	4	4	5
(Time since social work qualification)	2.5 years	3 years	4 years	5 years	18m	2.5 years	3 years	4 years	18m	2.5 years	3 years	18m	2.5 years	18m
Survey non-respondents** whose names appear on SWE/HCPC register	14	17	36	35	28	43	47	70	59	46	81	89	111	131
Survey non-respondents** whose names do not appear on SWE/HCPC register	*	12	14	15	*	8	13	12	12	7	9	10	18	16
Survey respondents	82	71	50	50	81	61	57	35	69	90	53	150	128	162
All graduates	100	100	100	100	114	114	114	114	145	145	145	253	253	316

* values lower than five not reported
** Non-respondent category includes some individuals who had opted out of further contact with Frontline

Table A1.2: Follow-up of non-respondents - Step Up to Social Work Cohorts 4 and 5

	Cohort 4		Cohort 5	
	2.5 years post qualification	3.5 years post qualification	6m post qualification	18m post qualification
Non-respondents whose names appear on the SWE/HCPC register	201	204	219	277
Non-respondents whose names do not appear on the SWE/HCPC register	33	34	66	44
Sub-total	234	238	285	321
Identifiable survey respondents answering question about current employment	201	197	216	180
Total surveys sent	402	392	494	456
Grand Total (all graduates)	435	435	501	501

Appendix 2 – Questionnaires

The Step Up to Social Work questionnaires have been provided here as examples. The same questions were integrated within Frontline's existing questionnaires for participants and fellows.

Initial Survey

Fast Track Destination Survey

The Department for Education have funded us to study the retention and progression of fast-track social work programme graduates, from 2017 to 2021. People in the social work sector and in Government are keen to know what people are doing in the years after completing their fast-track programme - for example, how many of you are still doing children's social work, how many are working in other sectors?

We are interested in your retrospective views of your qualifying programme, whether you are currently working in social work or another field, your career aspirations and your current practice. The questionnaire includes measures of job satisfaction and general health. You have been asked to take part because you completed your qualifying programme this year. We hope you will also be willing to take part in an annual survey for the next two years.

 The survey should take just 20 minutes of your time.   Your answers will be treated confidentially and only two researchers will see your individual responses linked to your name. Aggregated results will be published in a report but again no-one will be individually identifiable. If you offer to take part in a telephone interview, we may follow that up with you.

Our Privacy Statement provides detailed information on why we collect this data and who we share it with. It also explains your rights under GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018).

Please work through the survey question by question. If you miss one of the questions, a red note will appear above it asking you to complete that question before moving on to the next page. You can save your responses to complete the survey later.

If you have any questions or concerns relating to this survey, or the wider study, please email Nina Maxwell at MaxwellN2@Cardiff.ac.uk.

Thank you in advance for your time and support.

Survey ID

Information needed to assign you a personal identification code for the follow-up survey.

We begin by asking you four questions which will help us to match your responses on the next occasion. The information about your personal details will be stored securely on a password protected server at Cardiff University and will be anonymously processed by the researchers. Cookies, personal data stored by your Web browser, are not used in this survey.   At the end of the study, a thoroughly anonymised data set will be deposited in the UK Data Archive for re-use by researchers in future. We will take care to remove any information which could possibly identify you or your place of employment.

Q1. What are the FIRST two letters of your FIRST (given) name? e.g. If your first name is JAne, you should write JA.

Q2. What are the LAST two letters of your LAST name? e.g. If your last name is SmiTH, you should write TH

Q3. What is the DAY of your birthday? e.g. if you were born 08 May 1967 you would enter 08. Note: Please make sure you enter the 0 as well.

Q4 What is the MONTH of your birthday? e.g. if you were born 19 May 1967 you would enter 05. Note: Please make sure you enter the 0 as well.

A. Background information

Q5 Gender

○   Male

○   Female

○   Other

○   Prefer not to say

Q6 How old are you?

○   16-24

○   25-29

○   30-34

○   35-39

○   40-44

○   45-49

○   50-54

○   55-59

○   60-64

Q7. Ethnic group. Please choose one option that best describes your ethnic group or background.

○   White

○   White - Irish

○   White – English, Welsh, Scottish, Northern Irish, British

○   Irish Traveller

○   Gypsy or Traveller

○   Other White background

○   Black or Black British – Caribbean

○   Black or Black British – African

○   Other Black background

○   Asian or Asian British – Indian

○   Asian or Asian British – Pakistani

○   Asian or Asian British – Bangladeshi

○   Chinese

○   Other Asian background

○   Mixed - White and Black Caribbean

○   Mixed - White and Black African

○   Mixed - White and Asian

○   Other mixed background

○   Arab

○   Other ethnic background

○   Not known

Q7a. Do you have a disability?

○   Yes

○   No

Q8. Do your parents or guardians (e.g. whoever were your primary carers when you were growing up) have any higher education qualifications, such as a degree, diploma or certificate of higher education?

○   Yes

○   No

○   Don't know

Q9. Do you have day-to-day caring responsibilities for any of the following in your family? (Please choose all that apply). This means any type of looking after or caring that you might do.

☐   Young people / children

☐   Other relatives / friends

☐   None of the above

B. Qualifications and experience

Q10. In addition to Social Work, what other qualifications do you have? Please tick all that apply and provide details of subject and place of study.

☐   Diploma or certificate

_____

☐   First degree (e.g. BA, BSc, MBChB, MEng)

_____

☐   Professional qualification (e.g. ACA, Charted Institute of Marketing)

_____

☐   Postgraduate diploma or certificate (including PGCE/PGDE)

_____

☐   Higher degree, mainly by taught course (e.g. MA, MSc, MBA)

_____

☐   Higher degree, mainly by research (e.g. PhD, DPhil, MPhil)

_____

☐   Other qualification, please give details

_____

Q11. If you were in employment before you began the Step Up to Social Work programme, what sector did you work in?

○   I was not in employment

○   Accounting

○   Administrative

- ○ Arts and design
- ○ Business Development
- ○ Community and social services
- ○ Consulting
- ○ Education
- ○ Engineering
- ○ Entrepreneurship
- ○ Finance
- ○ Healthcare Services
- ○ Human Resources
- ○ Information Technology
- ○ Legal
- ○ Marketing
- ○ Media and Communications
- ○ Military and Protective Services
- ○ Operations
- ○ Product Management
- ○ Purchasing
- ○ Quality Assurance
- ○ Real Estate
- ○ Research
- ○ Sales
- ○ Support

C. About your Social Work qualifying programme

Q12. In which local authority did you complete the Step Up to Social Work course?

Q13a. How well did the bursary pay for your living expenses for the 14 months of the programme?

- ○ Very well

○   Well

○   Not very well

○   Not at all

○   Can't tell

Q13b. How well did the Step Up to Social Work programme prepare you for employment?

○   Very well

○   Well

○   Not very well

○   Not at all

○   Can't tell

Q14. Date you successfully registered for the HCPC? Please enter as MM-YYYY, i.*e. if you were registered in May 2017 you would enter 05-2017.*

Q15. How many jobs did you apply for after finishing the Step Up to Social Work programme?

Q16. Are you currently working as a social worker?

○   Yes

○   Not yet but I am planning to in the future

○   I am not intending to work as a social worker

Skip To: C If Q16. Are you currently working as a social worker? = Yes
Skip To: Q16a If Q16. Are you currently working as a social worker? = Not yet but I am planning to in the future
Skip To: Q16a If Q16. Are you currently working as a social worker? = I am not intending to work as a social worker

D. Employment as a social worker

Q17. Please indicate what you are currently doing:

○   Children's social work role

○   Adults' social work role

○   Other, please give details

Q18. Date started post as a qualified social worker? Please enter as MM-YYYY, i.*e. if you started your post in September 2017 you would enter 09-2017.*

Q19. Which local authority or children's trust do you work in?

Q20. What is your current job title? If your job title is not listed, please select the nearest equivalent.

○ Social worker

○ Senior social worker

○ Consultant social worker

○ Independent review officer

○ Assistant team manager

○ Team manager

○ Service manager

○ Principal social worker

○ Head of service

○ Assistant director

○ Director

○ Other

Q21. Which of the following best describes the team you are currently working in?

○ Access/MASH Team

○ Assessment Team

○ Child in Need / Child Protection Team

○ Children with Disabilities Team

○ Looked After Team

○ Adoption Team

○ Fostering Team

○ Leaving Care Team

○ Adolescent Team

○ Youth Offending Team

○ Other, please give details

Q22. Is this post?

○ Full-time

○   Part-time

Q23. Please provide an estimate of your current caseload:

○   8 or less

○   9 - 12

○   13 - 16

○   17 - 20

○   21 - 24

○   25 or more

○   Don't know

Q24. In terms of your career goals/aspirations, where do you see yourself in 3 years' time?

○   Child and family social worker

○   Child and family social worker in a specialist role

○   Social worker with adults

○   Manager in social work

○   Alternative career (outside social work)

○   Other, please give details

○   Prefer not to say

E. Supervision

Q25. How frequently, if at all, have you received supervision in your local authority since you started this post?

○   Once every two weeks or more often

○   Once every three to four weeks

○   Once every five to six weeks

○   Don't know

Q26. Please rate the quality of the supervision you have received in your local authority since you started this post?

○   Very good

○   Good

○ Poor

○ Very poor

○ Don't know

○ Not applicable

Q27 To what extent, if at all, have you felt supported by the following since you started this post:

Q28. Your line Manager?

○ To a great extent

○ To a moderate extent

○ To a small extent

○ To no extent

○ Don't know

Q29. Your wider local authority?

○ To a great extent

○ To a moderate extent

○ To a small extent

○ To no extent

○ Don't know

F. Job Satisfaction Scale

Q30. Please indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with your:

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Don't know	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Salary	)	)	)	)	)
Job Security	)	)	)	)	)
Number of hours of work	)	)	)	)	)
Flexibility of hours of work	)	)	)	)	)
Ease of travel to work	)	)	)	)	)

129

Management and supervision by your superiors

Relationship with fellow workers

Opportunities for advancement

Public respect for the sort of work you do

Your own accomplishments

The physical work conditions

Developing your skills

Having challenges to meet

The actual tasks you do

The variety of tasks

Opportunities to use your own initiative

Overall satisfaction with work, support and training receive from your employers

Q31. How likely, if at all, do you think you are to continue to work as a children's social worker in six months' time?

○ Very likely

○ Moderately likely

○ Slightly likely

○ Not at all likely

○ Don't know

Skip To: F If Q30. How likely, if at all, do you think you are to continue to work as a children's social worke... = Very likely
Skip To: F If Q30. How likely, if at all, do you think you are to continue to work as a children's social worke... = Moderately likely
Skip To: F If Q30. How likely, if at all, do you think you are to continue to work as a children's social worke... = Don't know
Skip To: Q31a If Q30. How likely, if at all, do you think you are to continue to work as a children's social worke... = Slightly likely
Skip To: Q31a If Q30. How likely, if at all, do you think you are to continue to work as a children's social worke... = Not at all likely

Q31a. If you are slightly likely or not at likely to be working as a children's social worker in six months time, do you think you will be looking for a job:

○ Within another area of social work

○ Outside of social work

○　　　Other, please give details

Display This Question:
If 30a. If you are slightly likely or not at likely to be working as a children's social worker in s... = Outside of social work

Q31b. As you are likely to be looking for a job outside of social work in the next year, please rank the following reasons from most important (1) to least important (7) by dragging and dropping the reasons into your preferred order:
_____Social Work is just not the right type of job for me
_____Social Work is not compatible with family or relationship commitments
_____I have found one or more of my colleagues difficult to work with
_____I have alternative career plans
_____I am not making the best use of the skills or experience I have
_____I don't like the culture of local authority social work
_____My fixed term contract ends soon

Display This Question:
If 30a. If you are slightly likely or not at likely to be working as a children's social worker in s... = Within another area of social work

Q31c. As you are likely to be looking for a job in the next year, please rank the following reasons from most important (1) to least important (6) by dragging and dropping the reasons into your preferred order:
_____I would like a job in a specialist area of children's social work
_____I am looking for a promotion
_____My job is not compatible with family or relationship commitments
_____I have found one or more of my colleagues difficult to work with
_____I am not making the best use of the skills or experience I have
_____I don't like the culture of local authority social work

G. General Health Questionnaire

We would like to know if you have been affected by any of the following issues over the last few weeks. Please answer ALL the following questions by clicking the option you think applies to you. Remember that we want to know about present and recent complaints, not those you had in the past. Have you recently:

Q32. Been able to concentrate on whatever you're doing?

○　　　Better than usual

○　　　Same as usual

○　　　Less than usual

○　　　Much less than usual

Q33. Lost much sleep over worry?

○　　　Not at all

○ No more than usual

○ Rather more than usual

○ Much more than usual

Q34. Felt that you are playing a useful part in things?

○ More so than usual

○ Same as usual

○ Less than usual

○ Much less than usual

Q35. Felt capable of making decisions about things?

○ More so than usual

○ Same as usual

○ Less capable than usual

○ Much less capable than usual

Q36. Felt constantly under strain?

○ Not at all

○ No more than usual

○ Rather more than usual

○ Much more than usual

Q37. Felt you couldn't overcome your difficulties?

○ Not at all

○ No more than usual

○ Rather more than usual

○ Much more than usual

Q38. Been able to enjoy your normal day-to-day activities?

○ More so than usual

○ Same as usual

○ Less able than usual

○ Much less able than usual

Q39. Been able to face up to your problems?

○ More so than usual

○ Same as usual

○ Less able than usual

○ Much less able than usual

Q40. Been feeling unhappy and depressed?

○ Not at all

○ No more than usual

○ Rather more than usual

○ Much more than usual

Q41. Been losing confidence in yourself?

○ Not at all

○ No more than usual

○ Rather more than usual

○ Much more than usual

Q42. Been thinking of yourself as a worthless person?

○ Not at all

○ No more than usual

○ Rather more than usual

○ Much more than usual

Q43. Been feeling reasonably happy, all things considered?

○ More so than usual

○ About the same as usual

○ Less so than usual

○ Much less so than usual

H. Final questions

Please could you provide us with a personal email in case you decide to leave your current post. We will only contact you at this email if we cannot reach you at your

work email when we do the follow-up survey in a year's time. We won't attach your name to your answers when analysing the data.

Q44 Please enter an alternative email here if you have one and if relevant.

Q45 Approximately how long did it take you to complete this survey (excluding interruptions)? Please enter number of minutes.

 We would like to talk to some Step Up graduates about their employment experiences in more detail. Would you be willing to take part in a telephone interview at some point over the next year? If so, please check the box below and make sure you leave a private email address in the box above.

○ Yes

○ No

  If you would be willing to take part in an interview please provide us with a personal email address:

Display This Question:
If Q16. Are you currently working as a social worker? = I am not intending to work as a social worker
Or Q16. Are you currently working as a social worker? = Not yet but I am planning to in the future
Q16a
Q16a. Could you please tell us briefly about why you are not currently working in a social work role and whether you intend to seek a social work role in the future?

End of Block: Background information

Start of Block: Leaver interview
Display This Question:
If If Q16a. Could you please tell us briefly about why you are not currently working in a social work role and whether you intend to seek a social work role in the future?   Text Response Is Displayed

Q16b. We would like to invite you to take part in a telephone interview so we can find out a little more about your decision to leave social work or any alternative plans you have. The interview is confidential and will be used to inform us about the career destinations of Step Up to Social Work graduates.

 If you would be willing to take part in an interview please provide us with a personal email address:

Annual Follow Up Survey

The Department of Education have funded us to study the retention and progression of fast-track social work programme graduates, from 2017 to 2021. People in the social work sector and in Government are keen to know what people are doing in the years after completing their fast-track programme - for example, how many of you are still doing children's social work, how many are working in other sectors?

 To ensure we're clear about what time frame you are answering about, please answer the questions about what you were doing on the 3rd September 2018. Please note, this is not about the specific activities you are undertaking just on that day, but rather what type of job or further study you were employed in as of this date. So if you are about to change roles, please put what you were doing on the 3rd September, not what you will be doing later.

The survey should take just 10 minutes of your time.

 Your answers will be treated confidentially and only two researchers will see your individual responses linked to your name. A completely anonymised version of the data set, from which no-one will be identifiable, will be deposited in the UK Data Archive for researchers to use in future. Aggregated results will be published in a report but again no-one will be individually identifiable. If you offer to take part in a telephone interview, we may follow that up with you.

Our [Privacy Statement](#) provides detailed information on why we collect this data and who we share it with. It also explains your rights under GDPR and the Data Protection Act (2018).

If you have any questions or concerns relating to this survey, or the wider study, please email Nina Maxwell at MaxwellN2@Cardiff.ac.uk.

Thank you in advance for your time and continued support.

Survey ID

Information needed to assign you a personal identification code for the follow-up survey.

We begin by asking you four questions which will help us to match your responses with other occasions. The information about your personal details will be stored securely on a password protected server at Cardiff University and will be anonymously processed by the researchers. Cookies, personal data stored by your Web browser, are not used in this survey.

Q1 What are the FIRST two letters of your FIRST (given) name? e.g. If your first name is JAne, you should write JA.

Q2 What are the LAST two letters of your LAST name? e.g. If your last name is SmiTH, you should write TH

Q3 What is the DAY of your birthday? e.g. if you were born 08 May 1967 you would enter 08. Note: Please make sure you enter the 0 as well.

Q4 What is the MONTH of your birthday? e.g. if you were born 19 May 1967 you would enter 05. Note: Please make sure you enter the 0 as well.

A. Employment

Q64 On the **3rd September 2018**, were you in employment in the local authority where you participated in the Step Up to Social Work Programme?

○　Yes

○　No

Display This Question:
If On the 3rd September 2018, were you in employment in the local authority where you participated i... = No
Q65 On this date, were you employed in a local authority setting?

○　Yes

○　No

Q39 **B. Please indicate what were you doing on the 3rd September 2018**

Q49 **Further study**

○　Full-time

○　Part-time

○　None

Skip To: Q38 If Further study = None
Skip To: Q62 If Further study = Full-time

Q71
Further study
　What is the name of the course you are studying?

Q72 What institution are you studying at?

Q70 What was the main reason for embarking upon further study?

Q38 **Children's social work role**

○　Full-time

○　Part-time

○　None

Q80
Children's social work role
  Please write the name of your main employer on this date:

Q42 Please write your job title on this date:

Q41 Which of the following best describes the type of team you were working in on the 3rd September 2018?
1.   ▼ Access/MASH Team .. Other

Q42 Please select from the drop down list what best describes the seniority of the role you were in on this date:
2.   ▼ Social Worker ... Other

Q43 **Adult's social work role**

○   Full-time

○   Part-time

○   None

Q44 **Adults' social work role**
Please write the name of your main employer on this date:

Q45 Please write your job title on this date:

Q46 Please provide the name of team you were working in on the 3rd September 2018:

Q47 Please select from the drop down list what best describes the seniority of the role you were in on this date:
3.   ▼ Social Worker ... Other

Q48 **Non-social work role**

○   Full-time

○   Part-time

○   None

Display This Question:
If Non-social work role = Full-time
Or Non-social work role = Part-time

Q50
Non-social work role
  Please write the name of your main employer on this date:

Q51 Please write your job title on this date:

Q69
Which of the following best describes the function of the role you were in on the 3rd September 2018**?**
4.   ▼ Accounting   ... Other

Q41 Please select from the drop down list what best describes the seniority of the role you were in on this date
5.   ▼ Social Worker   ... Other

Q74 Does the role you were in on this date require the following?

	Yes	No	Don't know
A social work qualification	)	)	)
HCPC social work registration	)	)	)

Q56 **Other, please specify**

Q57 Other

○   Full-time

○   Part-time

○   None

Q75 **C. Additional information**

Is there anything you would like to add about what you're doing now?

Q68 **F. Job Satisfaction Scale**

Q70. Please indicate how satisfied or dissatisfied you are with your:

	Very dissatisfied	Dissatisfied	Don't know	Satisfied	Very satisfied
Salary	)	)	)	)	)
Job Security	)	)	)	)	)
Number of hours of work	)	)	)	)	)
Flexibility of hours of work	)	)	)	)	)
Ease of travel to work	)	)	)	)	)
Management and supervision by your superiors	)	)	)	)	)
Relationship with fellow workers	)	)	)	)	)
Opportunities for advancement	)	)	)	)	)
Public respect for the sort of work you do	)	)	)	)	)
Your own accomplishments	)	)	)	)	)
The physical work conditions	)	)	)	)	)
Developing your skills	)	)	)	)	)
Having challenges to meet	)	)	)	)	)
The actual tasks you do	)	)	)	)	)
The variety of tasks	)	)	)	)	)
Opportunities to use your own initiative	)	)	)	)	)
Overall satisfaction with work, support and training receive from your employers	)	)	)	)	)

Q72. How likely, if at all, do you think you are to continue to work as a children's social worker in six months' time?

○ Very likely

○ Moderately likely

○ Slightly likely

○ Not at all likely

○ Don't know

D. Final questions

Please could you provide us with a personal email in case you decide to leave your current post. We will only contact you at this email if we cannot reach you at your work email when we do the follow-up survey in a year's time. We won't attach your name to your answers when analysing the data.

Q40 Please enter an alternative email here if you have one and if relevant.

Q41 Approximately how long did it take you to complete this survey (excluding interruptions)? Please enter number of minutes.

We would like to talk to some Step Up graduates about their employment experiences in more detail. Would you be willing to take part in a telephone interview at some point over the next year? If so, please check the box below and make sure you leave a private email address in the box above.

○ Yes

○ No

If you would be willing to take part in an interview please provide us with a personal email address:

Skip To: End of Survey If Condition: If you would be willi... Is Displayed. Skip To: End of Survey.

Q62 **Details on your decisions**

We'd really value some additional information as to how you came to your decision. Please provide this below (if you have already given us this information please enter 'N/A').

Q53 What was your main reason for leaving your local authority?

Q54 What was your main reason for leaving social work?

Q55 How likely are you, if at all, to re-enter the profession at a later date?

○ Very likely

○   Moderately likely

○   Slightly likely

○   Not at all likely

○   Don't know

Q13b We would like to invite you to take part in a telephone interview so we can find out a little more about your decision to leave social work or any alternative plans you have. The interview is confidential and will be used to inform us about the career destinations of Step Up to Social Work graduates.

If you would be willing to take part in an interview please provide us with a personal email address:

Appendix 3 – Other results

The following are survey responses, analysis of which are not included in the body of the report. These are reported here for completeness, but do not include items that contain information that may be disclosive. Where numbers are less than 5 the result will not be reported.

Frontline additional analysis

Table A3.1: Frontline survey respondents' demographics (gender, age, ethnicity, parent's higher education, caring responsibilities, disability)

Variable	Response	Cohort 1 n=82[1] %	Cohort 2 n=81[1] %	Cohort 3 n=99[1] %	Cohort 4 n=155[1] %	Cohort 5 n=185[1] %
Gender	Female	76	75	76	78	84
	Male	24	23	23	19	16
	Other	0	0	0	0	0
	Prefer not to say	0	*	0	0	0
	Missing	0	0	*	8	*
Age[2]	16-29	74	69	73	61	66
	30-39	17	23	22	26	22
	40-49	*	*	0	*	8
	50-59	*	*	0	*	*
	Missing	6	*	5	8	3
Ethnicity	White	85	85	89	85	82
	Black	*	6	*	*	5
	Asian	*	*	*	*	5
	Mixed	9	9	5	8	7
	Other	*	0	*	0	*
	Unknown	0	0	0	0	0
	Missing	0	0	*	3	*
Parents' higher education	Parents have a degree	63	65	63	53	45
	Parents do not have a degree	37	35	31	39	53
	Don't know	0	0	*	*	0
	Prefer not to say	0	0	*	4	*
	Missing	0	0	*	3	*
Caring responsibilities	Primary carer	0	*	*	6	11
	Secondary carer	*	*	*	*	*
	None	95	91	94	89	84
	Prefer not to say	*	*	0	*	*
	Missing	0	0	*	3	*
Disability	Disabled	*	*	12	5	6
	Not disabled	98	95	87	92	93
	Missing	*	0	*	3	*

* values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than column totals

[1] n is for the first survey in this study. ns vary slightly across variables, because of missing data

[2] Ages for Frontline participants have been adjusted to reflect age at 6-months post qualification for all cohorts to enable comparison between cohorts

Missing data represent a small number of cases where it was not possible to match ID to link to demographics and cases where age was missing

Table A3.2: Frontline survey respondents' qualifications prior to social work training: first degree and additional degree type

	Cohort 1 n = 82	Cohort 2 n = 81	Cohort 3 n = 99	Cohort 4 n = 155	Cohort 5 n = 185
First degree	%	%	%	%	%
BA	73	65	66	65	61
BSc	17	25	22	22	31
MA	0	6	*	5	*
Other	9	*	7	5	5
Missing	*	0	*	*	*
Additional qualification					
Bachelors		*	0	*	0
Masters		30	15	23	17
Other		7	*	5	*

* values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than column totals

Table A3.3: Frontline survey respondents who have left social work - Professional registration required for non-social work roles and likelihood of returning if left profession

	Frontline 2019 surveys (cohorts 1-4)	Frontline 2020 surveys (cohorts 1-5)
Professional registration for non-social work roles		
Don't know	*	*
Required	*	13%
Not required	74%	86%
Likelihood of re-entering social work if left profession		
Not at all likely	26%	18%
Slightly likely	44%	37%
Moderately likely	19%	25%
Very likely	*	15%
Don't know	0%	*
Total	27 (100%)	73 (100%)

* values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than column totals

In the 2018 and 2021 data, cell sizes were too small to be reportable

Step Up additional analysis

Table A3.4: Step Up survey respondents' demographics (gender, age, ethnicity, parent's higher education, caring responsibilities, disability)

Variable	Response	Step Up Cohort 4 n=212	Step Up Cohort 5 n=217
		%	%
Gender	Female	85	92
	Male	15	8
	Other	0	0
	Prefer not to say	0	0
Age	16-29	29	29
	30-39	44	41
	40-49	18	23
	50-59	9	6
Ethnicity	White	86	80
	Black	5	9
	Asian	*	5
	Mixed	*	*
	Other	*	*
	Unknown	0	*
Parents' higher education	Parents have a degree	45	38
	Parents do not have a degree	55	62
	Don't know	0	0
	Prefer not to say	0	0
	Missing	*	*
Caring responsibilities	Caring responsibilities	46	51
	None	54	49
	Prefer not to say	0	0
Disability	Disabled	5	11
	Not disabled	94	89
	Missing	*	*

* values less than five are not reported and therefore all ns removed other than column totals

Table A3.5: Step Up survey respondents' qualifications prior to social work training

Response	Cohort 4 n=212	Cohort 5 n=217
	%	%
Diploma or Certificate	10	12
First Degree	49	54
Professional Qualification	5	*
Post Graduate Certificate or Diploma	8	16
Higher Degree (Taught)	9	9
Higher Degree (Research)	0	0
Other	7	7

* values less than five are not reported and therefore all ns removed other than column totals

Table A3.6: Step Up survey respondents' employment before the Step Up programme

Response	Cohort 4 n=212	Cohort 5 n=217
	%	%
Administrative	*	*
Arts and design	*	*
Community and social services	51	43
Consulting	0	*
Education	22	23
Entrepreneurship	*	*
Finance	0	*
Healthcare Services	5	10
Human Resources	0	*
Not in employment	*	*
Legal	*	*
Marketing	0	*
Media and Communications	*	*
Military and Protective Services	*	*
Operations	*	*
Research	0	*
Real Estate	*	0
Sales	*	*
Support	11	10

* values more than zero but less than five are not reported and therefore all ns removed other than column totals

Table A3.7: Step Up survey respondents' career aspirations at 6m post social work qualification

In terms of your career goals/aspirations, where do you see yourself in three years?	Cohort 4	Cohort 5
Alternative career (outside social work)	5%	6%
Prefer not to say	5%	*
Social worker with adults	6%	3%
Child and family social worker	31%	39%
Child and family social worker in a specialist role	38%	35%
Manager in social work	9%	19%
Other	7%	7%
Total	n=196 (100%)	n=207 (100%)

* values less than five are not reported and ns therefore removed other than column totals

Table A3.8: Step Up survey respondents that have left social work - Professional registration required for non-social work roles and likelihood of returning if left profession

	Step Up 2019 surveys (cohort 4)	Step Up 2020 surveys (cohorts 4+5)
Professional registration and social work qualification for non-social work roles		
Required	*	29%
Not required	77%	71%
Total	n=13 (100%)	n=28 (100%)
Likelihood of re-entering social work if left profession		
Not at all likely	33%	31%
Slightly likely	*	35%
Moderately likely	*	19%
Very likely	43%	*
Total	n=21 (100%)	n=26 (100%)

* values less than five are not reported and all ns therefore removed other than column totals

Table A3.9: Social workers trained via Step Up to Social Work - date successfully registered

Response	Step Up Cohort 4 n=212		Response	Step Up Cohort 5 n=217	
	n	%		n	%
March 2017	8	4	Feb 2019	*	*
April 2017	60	28	March 2019	8	4
May 2017	79	37	April 2019	64	29
June 2017	33	16	May 2019	116	53
July 2017	14	7	June 2019	10	5
Aug 2017	5	2	July 2019	7	3
Sept 2017	*	*	Aug 2019	5	2
Oct 2017	*	*	Sept 2019	*	*
May 2018	*	*			
Not	7	3	Not	*	*
Missing	0	0	Missing	*	*

* values less than five are not reported

Table A3.10: Step Up survey respondents' - number of jobs applied for after finishing the programme

Response	Step Up Cohort 4 n=212		Step Up Cohort 5 n=217	
	N	%	N	%
0	11	5	11	5
1	142	67	157	72
2	34	16	27	12
3 or more	25	12	22	10