

## University of Dundee

### Newly qualified social workers in Scotland

Grant, Scott; McCulloch, Trish; Daly, Maura; MacLeod, Marion; Kettle, Martin

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# **Newly qualified social workers in Scotland: a five-year longitudinal study**

**Final Report: July 2022**

Scott Grant, Trish McCulloch, Maura Daly, Marion Macleod, Martin Kettle.

Funded by the Scottish Social Services Council

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## FOREWORD

For all social workers, their early career experiences have a significant impact on their future career. The transition from being a student undertaking their training to starting their first role when qualifying is a key stage for all newly qualified social workers (NQSWS). The experience of support they receive, the first team they work in, the outcomes and experience of the first people they support as an NQSW can really shape the way they practice throughout their career and how long they remain practising.

The current recruitment and retention challenges within social work and the increasing demands on social workers make it even more crucial that we understand the experiences of those NQSWS entering the profession and what could be done to ensure that the support they receive is more effective and what needs to be in place to make sure their experience is consistent no matter which team or area of practice they work in.

In 2016, we commissioned researchers from the University of Dundee and Glasgow Caledonian University to explore the organisational, practical and subjective dimensions of professional social work as experienced by NQSWS over time. This is our first longitudinal study. The final report presents the findings of this unique five-year longitudinal study exploring the experiences of those NQSWS as they progressed in their careers in Scotland.

We believe this report is invaluable for strategic managers with responsibility for the recruitment and retention of social workers and for others whose focus is the design, development and oversight of pre and post qualification social work education.

The quality of the data and the depth of analysis can be used to support improvement across the report's six thematic areas: education, employment, competence and confidence, learning and development, professional identity, and leadership.

The learning from this research has helped inform our work with partners to develop and move towards a supported first year in practice model for all NQSWS.

We hope you will use this report as a platform to further consolidate the necessary structures and supports for NQSWS as they move into their careers supporting some of our most vulnerable fellow citizens.

**Maree Allison**  
**Acting Chief Executive**

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- Jo Moriarty, King's College London
- Billy Fisher, South Ayrshire Health and Social Care Partnership
- Dave Clarke, East Ayrshire Council

We would also like to thank Social Work Scotland, participating local authorities, Chief Social Work Officers, social work managers and most importantly the participants for their time and contribution to this project.

Our project team has changed over the years, and we would like to thank all those who contributed at different stages, including Professor Stephen Webb (GCU) and Lynn Sheridan (GCU).

### **Project team**

- Dr Scott Grant, Lecturer in Social Work, University of Dundee
- Dr Trish McCulloch, Reader in Social Work, University of Dundee
- Dr Maura Daly, Lecturer in Social Work, University of Dundee
- Marion Macleod, Freelance Researcher
- Dr Martin Kettle, Senior Lecturer in Social Work, Glasgow Caledonian University

# **GLOSSARY**

**ECSW**      **Early career social worker**

**NQSW**      **Newly qualified social worker**

**SSSC**      **Scottish Social Services Council**



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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This final report presents the findings of a five-year longitudinal study exploring the experiences of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) as they progress in their careers in Scotland. Commissioned by the Scottish Social Services Council in 2016 and led by researchers from the University of Dundee and Glasgow Caledonian University, this project aimed to provide a broad view of how newly qualified social workers develop as professionals. This research explored organisational, practical, and subjective dimensions of professional social work as experienced by our participants over time.

The size and scope of our study is such that any summary of key findings is not without its challenges. The significant depth and breadth of each thematic area covered in our findings chapters has led to a number of important conclusions being drawn from five years' worth of data. In this executive summary, we aim to provide the essence of each thematic area and key recommendations emerging from our analysis and consideration of findings. In addition to our summary here, we also provide 'ten takeaways' in our conclusion (p154) where we highlight key areas that stood out for us.

### **EDUCATION**

Our findings show that social work education in Scotland is continuing to produce social workers who feel confident and competent in their role and practice. Most participants reported positively on their experiences of education (its quality, breadth and depth), and many felt that the inputs they received helped to prepare them for practice. In particular, the integrated model of classroom-based learning with practice placements was valued significantly by participants in both the first and fifth years of this study. Our findings show that the effects of social work education are felt (and appreciated) long after the point of qualification. Emerging strongly in our findings was just how much placements mattered to participants: their effects and lasting impact on professional development appeared to be significant. It follows that we cannot underplay the importance of maintaining, supporting and resourcing an integrated approach to social work education in Scotland.

### **Recommendations**

- Whilst our study was not focused on the effects of social work education over time, this did emerge as an important area for consideration. Further work is required to understand the long-standing (legacy) effects of social work education on professional development and how to maximise impact here.
- Attention must be paid to resourcing and enhancing the provision

of practice placements in Scotland. Our findings reveal the critical dimension played here by work-based learning as a critical element of integrated modes of professional education.

## **EMPLOYMENT**

Our findings on dimensions of employment are broad. Conclusions from each sub-theme are presented here.

### **Working patterns**

The majority of participants over the last five years have been in permanent posts - working full time equivalent hours, and most are located in areas of Scotland with high urban populations. The number of those in permanent posts has increased over the years, but there has been no significant change to working hours over this period. We found that significant numbers of participants within the first two years of practice were spending substantial amounts of time engaging in work activity outside office hours. This included time spent completing statutory tasks as well as time spent on research relating to aspects of their cases. We also noticed a pattern emerge where a number of staff in children and families had either moved into a different practice area or were thinking of doing so. The reasons for this were mixed (being closer to home; stress; simply wanting a change; poor relationships with managers and teams; seeking more structured work). We found little evidence of participants expressing a wish to leave the profession altogether.

### **Recommendations**

- Employers should recognise that the first two years of practice represent a crucial period of consolidation for new social workers. Knowledge, skills, and experience require space and time to develop and embed in new practitioners. A significant proportion are spending time engaged in unpaid activities to the benefit of employers. The longer-term impacts of this are unknown, but evidence suggests that prolonged working days and nights can lead to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and 'burnout'. That said, we did not find significant evidence of these negative outcomes in the responses we got from participants.
- Reasons for leaving (and wanting to leave) children and families social work need to be examined in more detail. Our findings indicate that this is not isolated to particular areas of Scotland but emerges across different authority areas. We found no evidence of participants moving (or wanting to move) into children's services from other practice areas. But the converse also needs examination: why do some practitioners stay in children and

families social work? How are they supported? How do they manage the nature and complexity of the work they do? What matters here? What makes a difference? Answering these questions will enable us to understand more about how best to support social workers in different areas of practice in Scotland.

## **Agile working**

The majority of participants over the last five years have consistently described 'agile working' in negative terms. Many referred to the added 'stress' of trying to locate and secure a desk or workspace each day. Many commented on the distance between themselves and team members, highlighting the absence of opportunities for informal 'de-briefs' (eg after home visits and meetings) and to have quick chats or discussions about cases. A growing body of research from elsewhere in the UK demonstrates that immediate opportunities to interact with colleagues and managers is important (and in some cases critical) for social workers to help with sense- and decision-making in complex cases. We found very few positive accounts of agile working in our study, most of which seemed to conflate aspects of flexible working, as some participants referred to the benefits of working across different sites to meet their own needs, eg being closer to home.

## **Recommendations**

- The organisational impacts of agile working must be examined more closely in Scotland. Research has shown that in most cases agile working practices have been implemented in response to efficiency savings – mostly around the operational provision of office space, and not in response to the needs of social workers in terms of enhancing their work environment. A growing body of evidence indicates that decisions taken by local authorities to impose environmental restraints on social worker interaction is having a significant effect on important, often critical, communicative mechanisms - only made possible by proximity to, and availability of, colleagues and managers.

## **Workload**

For the majority of participants, workloads have been reported to be appropriate and manageable. However, a proportion felt that workloads made them feel anxious at different points over the last five years. A number of factors must be considered here. First, each local authority will have its own arrangements for the allocation of cases. Second, the needs and complexity of each case will differ and require variable input at different points. In most situations however, research demonstrates that levels of anxiety and stress are not just related to workload itself – it is often this in combination with organisational contexts and lack of support from managers and colleagues that have the most impact on

perceived pressures in practice.

## **Recommendations**

- A consistent and nationally agreed approach to workload allocation and workload management is required across Scotland. We need to consider not just the number of cases held at any one time, but the complexity and amount of time required to address the tasks, actions and presenting issues that social workers face with each allocation. It is unreasonable to assume that equity of workload across a team will result in equity of experience for each social worker.
- To avoid unnecessary anxiety and stress, attention must be paid to organisational contexts and support given to social workers in their everyday work. This includes availability of managers, proximity to colleagues, dedicated admin support and progressive organisational cultures.

## **Supervision**

Most participants on average receive supervision on a monthly basis (although a proportion gradually moved to a gap of between 6-8 weeks as years progressed), lasting for approximately 61-90 minutes. Supervision has continued to be privileged by aspects of workload management for most participants; however, most felt that the frequency, length, content, and quality of supervision was appropriate to their needs. A notable proportion (not the majority) of participants in Year 2 expressed concern with the frequency of supervision received (wanting more) alongside other concerns about feeling unsupported, managers not explaining complex information well and having little time to critically reflect in supervision. However, we suggest here that Year 2 represents a transition point for participants as most emerge from induction periods where they start to engage in more complex work and where caseloads would be rising for some. We found evidence of some anxiety around workloads at this particular stage too – perhaps contributing to feelings of uncertainty and impressions that more support is required. Notwithstanding, we note that anxieties had settled by Year 3 and that most had grown in confidence across a range of dimensions by Year 5

## **Recommendations**

- The first two years of practice must be recognised as a period of transition and consolidation for new staff. Supervision may require different levels of frequency and different modes of delivery during this initial phase of social work careers.
- Supervision should aim for a balance of administration (workload

management), education (focus on professional development) and support (focus on emotional wellbeing) – as indicated by Pitt et al (2021). This would ensure that all social workers received a holistic approach to supervision where a range of important dimensions are covered.

- We need to understand more about the supervisory process in Scotland more generally and build on good practice here. What matters in supervision should be explored at all career stages from newly qualified to more experienced social workers.

## **Peer support**

Peer support seems to be more important and meaningful to social workers than formal support received from managers. This featured across a range of dimensions, from the quality of advice and guidance offered to the ability to express and share emotions relating to work. Participants were clear and consistent in the value, importance, and critical necessity of interacting with peers in close proximity, free from management intervention. These findings reveal a crucial yet underplayed source of support that gets little recognition or encouragement through formal employment mechanisms. An emerging body of research demonstrates that informal modes of support and interactions with colleagues helps social workers to process the complexity involved in cases, as well as providing a crucial platform for open critical reflection. All of which helps in processes of sense- and decision-making in cases.

## **Recommendations**

- Experienced social workers must be given recognition for the role they perform in providing informal advice, guidance, and support. Their activity here is crucial for the professional development and overall wellbeing of newly qualified and early career social workers. Employers are encouraged to consider the benefits of introducing senior practitioner status for experienced social workers – recognising the important part they play in providing peer support to other less experienced staff.
- Mechanisms of peer support must be harnessed and actively encouraged by employers, including the promotion of peer support groups and mentoring. Social workers need time and space to interact without management intervention.
- Employers are advised to consider the wider impact of agile working policies on opportunities for peer interactions between staff – particularly the balance between costs and benefits to staff welfare, productivity, and critical decision-making processes.

## **Impact of COVID-19**

We added a question on working under COVID-19 conditions in Year 5 to gain a sense of experiences during exceptional circumstances; however, this was not within our original aims and objectives for this study. Nevertheless, we found that working under restricted conditions amplified the importance of availability and support from colleagues in close proximity, as well as revealing the significance placed on simply being with service users and sensing the nuance, detail and micro elements that often help to provide a more holistic understanding of circumstances. These findings reflect experiences found in our sister study on the impact of COVID-19 working practices on recently qualified social workers (see McCulloch et al, 2022). Whilst challenging for most, our findings demonstrate that social workers have significant capacity to pivot when required. The only recommendation that we would make here is that further research is conducted on the longer-term impact and effects of COVID-19 on the profession as a whole.

## **COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE**

### **Values**

Most participants report high levels of confidence across almost all surveyed knowledge, skill, and value items. However, across years, self-confidence levels were highest in relation to the application of professional **values**. Most newly qualified social workers appear to enter practice confident in their capacity to practice in value-based ways. Further, confidence in values appears less subject to growth or movement over time than other areas. These findings are supported by our findings on professional identity, which suggest that professional values are a core and steady element of early career professional identity. However, value-based practice is also an area where participants report significant experiences of conflict and struggle, linked to the various organisational, financial, and socio-political conflicts they face in practice. Our findings in this area suggest that professional confidence and competence is often plural, reflecting experiences of both strength and struggle.

### **Recommendations**

- We need to recognise the plural nature of professional confidence and competence across career stages, including through the development of more relevant and responsive supports.
- Professional development activity, and associated practice improvement efforts, need to be more attentive to professional experiences of plurality, and to experiences conflict in

particular.

## **Knowledge**

Participants report good levels of baseline **knowledge** across most areas here. Further, confidence in knowledge development appears to build gradually through practice and over time. However, confidence in knowledge also ebbs and flows, as participants grapple with the challenge and complexities of knowledge into practice. These findings support a developmental approach to professional learning, with more explicit attention to knowledge development across career stages. Further, our findings indicate that knowledge development is supported by opportunities for practice, in its broadest sense, that is, through professional cultures, environments and relationships that recognise and make space for practice as a reflexive interplay of knowledge, values and action. The extent to which opportunities for reflexive practice are routinely available or supported in current practice is unclear and merits attention.

## **Recommendations**

- The first year in practice provides important opportunities for the application and development of knowledge for practice. Activity to develop a Supported First Year should provide explicit attention to and support for this process.
- Attention to knowledge development in the first year of practice should be part of a broader commitment to the development of knowledge-led professional identities, organisations and practice. This requires a re-centering of knowledge in practice and in workforce development strategy.

## **Skills**

Broadly, our findings suggest that most newly qualified social workers enter practice with good levels of professional confidence in respect of most **skill** items surveyed and that confidence in skills develops significantly over time. Again, confidence in skills fluctuates across the first few years, with particular dips noted in Year 2, as participants expand their critical grasp of the social work role and task. Again, these findings underline the significant role of practice, in its broadest sense, in supporting professional confidence in skills. They also underline the importance of supports for skill development beyond the first year of practice.

In common with wider research studies, we found lower levels of professional confidence in relation to research skills. This appears to reflect a longstanding professional ambivalence regarding the relationships between research and practice.



## Recommendations

- Our findings provide continued support for a blended and career-long approach to professional knowledge and skill development. This should combine academic and practice-based learning opportunities and extend beyond qualifying education and the first year of practice.
- We need to understand and address the profession's persisting ambivalence regarding the relationship between research and practice, including through the development of a more applied professional research strategy.

## Self-efficacy

Participant accounts of **self-efficacy** were, again, mostly high and suggest good levels of capacity to handle routine practice challenges. However, self-efficacy rates were significantly and consistently lower, in relation to: (i) working with and through opposition, and (ii) sticking to and accomplishing one's aims and goals. These are new research findings and need to be unpacked in research and practice.

The high levels of professional confidence and self-efficacy reported in this study is a welcome and important finding, particularly noting ongoing and often reactionary debates regarding the preparedness and competence of NQSWs. However, it is also one of the more curious findings, noting the many challenges associated with social work role and task and wider qualitative accounts which document experiences of significant strain and struggle.

## Recommendations

- Knowledge and understanding of self-efficacy measures and their value for professional practice and development is still in its infancy. We need to develop our understanding of these issues if we wish to engage meaningfully in discussion and developments relating to professional confidence, competence, and efficacy.
- Those supporting social workers need to better understand the nature of the opposition and struggles social workers face in their day-to-day practice. This should inform the development of more practical and targeted professional help and support.
- We need to understand the particular needs and challenges early career social workers experience in sticking to their aims and goals, particularly noting recent emphases on outcome-

focused practice and in the context of our findings on professional struggle.

Considered together, our findings indicate that professional confidence and self-efficacy are fluid, in-process and plural outcomes, reflecting the diverse, complex, conflicted and situated nature of the social work role and task. Most social workers find fulfilment, value, and confidence in working with and through complexity and conflict **and** they experience these dimensions of practice as struggle. The balance of strength and struggle appears to differ from person to person however is shaped significantly by the wider organisational and professional environment and associated experiences of support. These findings have much to contribute to our developing understanding of how to better understand, measure and support professional confidence and efficacy in practice.

## **LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **How social workers learn**

In their first year of practice, newly qualified social workers describe spending significant amounts of time learning through **shadowing** other professionals. Further, learning through shadowing emerges as an important mode of learning across the first five years and confirms broader messages in this study and others about the value social workers place on learning with others and through practice (Ferguson, 2021). However, while a few studies explore the merits of shadowing in qualifying learning, we found no research on this topic in the post-qualifying learning literature.

### **Recommendations**

- Our findings support attention to shadowing as an important mode of learning across the first year of practice and in the immediate years following. Ideally, this should be part of more comprehensive attention to the role and contribution of practice- and peer-based learning in early career development.

Beyond their first year, participants describe spending most (formal) learning time on 'in house' training, that is, training provided by their employer. Much of this training appears to be mandatory, generic, and multi-disciplinary. It is generally experienced as beneficial for providing entry level knowledge and induction into an organisation and role but is associated with diminishing levels of satisfaction as social workers progress in their career. Across the five years, least time is spent on learning provided by universities. Our findings also reveal contrasting experiences of learning and training which appears to reflect enduring inconsistencies in organisational and/or employer approaches to and

support for professional learning and development.

The above findings are neither new or unique to early career learning and development. Successive reviews and studies point to an over-reliance on in-house provision in post-qualifying learning and diminishing access to external opportunities and qualifications. Most studies agree that we need to develop more 'hybrid' models of learning that combine in-house provision with a broader range and choice of external and post-qualifying academic qualifications. While there is considerable consensus in this area, including across various commissioned reviews of post-qualifying learning, to date, research recommendations have had minimal impact in practice. This appears to be linked to severe cuts to workforce learning budgets in recent decades and an increasingly marketised higher education learning economy.

### **Recommendations**

- Improving learning and training provision for early career social workers needs to be part of a broader commitment to improving post-qualifying learning for social workers across all career stages. While formal learning and training is only part of this picture, successive studies point to the need to develop, resource, and sustain a 'hybrid' approach to formal learning and development provision, which combines in-house and external learning opportunities and is more clearly linked to career pathways and progression.

Social workers experience and place value on **formal and informal modes of learning**. This finding is consistent across the post-qualifying learning literature and recent studies point to the importance of supporting an interplay between the two. However, learning strategies continue to privilege formal modes of learning, and training in particular.

### **Recommendations**

- We need to develop fuller and more integrative accounts of professional learning that recognise and are responsive to the different ways that social workers learn. As a baseline, this needs to include:
  - (i) learning through formal education and training
  - (ii) work-based learning, and
  - (iii) self-directed learning

We also need to better understand how learning works within and across these domains, including how they interact and come together in practice.

- Developing fuller and more integrative accounts of learning requires a whole systems approach to improvement where learning is understood and supported as a fundamental feature of professional practice, rather than as an adjunct to it. This requires us to recognise practice as an interplay between enquiry, knowledge, values and action, and to develop professional identities, relationships and environments that enable and support that.

## **Learning needs**

Most participants report that they take the lead in identifying their learning and development needs. This appears to reflect good levels of motivation for professional learning and the absence of clear supporting infrastructure and frameworks. Most also report that their employer provides good support for learning, albeit in a context of limited provision, funding, choice, and time. Again, a small but significant minority report a contrasting experience, marked by poor or inconsistent support.

Participants express learning needs that broadly reflect recent policy and practice priorities and recognisable career pathways. There is a strong focus on risk and protection in the first few years and, as they progress in their careers, on external, specialist and award bearing opportunities. Some participants highlight the importance of diverse learning modes and methods, formal and informal, and the need for a more integrative approach.

Overall, professional accounts in this area appear to be constrained by under-developed constructions of learning in practice and limited supporting frameworks. Mostly, this appears to reflect a mix of wider pressures on the profession and sustained under-investment in learning.

## **Recommendations**

- Activity to improve learning and development for social workers needs to look beyond the worker-employer dyad to also recognise the broader professional, organisational, and socio-political contexts of learning and practice and the ways in which each can support and impede learning and development.

The challenge of developing strategic and on the ground supports for this kind of joined up thinking and doing is significant, particularly in climates where there remain incentives to continue to work in silos and in ways that can be quickly seen and measured. However, developing professional learning that is fit for the uncertain, challenging and changing contexts that social workers operate in is unlikely to be

served by piecemeal or quick fixes. As we turn, again, to the development of new frameworks and supports for qualifying, early career and continuous professional learning and development, there is opportunity to develop fuller, more integrative and more evidence-based accounts of what learning for practice is and involves, across careers, and to co-develop strategy and supports accordingly.

## **PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

It is notable that the factors consistently rated as having greatest effect on professional social work identity are not those that are unique to social work. The specific social work factors (registration with the SSSC, having a clear boundary between social work and other professions) were repeatedly rated as having the least effect, while those that are likely to be common to all professions or disciplines were seen as having the greatest impact (autonomy, making complex judgments, application of professional values). Our findings suggest that a substantial majority believed that they were able to demonstrate the application of social work values in their practice, and this was consistent across all the domains cited. When considered alongside the factors participants perceived as having greatest effect of professional identity, this may imply that social workers' sense of professionalism relates to the application of values such as social justice, rights, and inclusion rather than formal recognition through registration, or enhancement of professional skills. Being valued by the general public and respected by other professions was also seen by many as significantly contributing to their sense of identity as a professional social worker.

## **Recommendations**

- More research is needed into the factors influencing professional identity. It is interesting that most participants believed that they shaped their own professional identity. Several other influences (service users, colleagues, and social work education) were perceived as having significantly greater impact than that of employers. It may be useful to explore practical examples of how these various inputs are experienced by early career social workers and how exactly they impact on professional identity.
- Given the prevailing organisational settings in which many social workers are deployed and, indeed, the changes to social work management and delivery likely to be introduced in Scotland in the near future, it would be useful to gather further information as to the relationship between social workers and the other professionals they increasingly work alongside and on how social work is perceived by other disciplines. An improvement strategy would be helpful in relation to this area.

- Public awareness and perception of social work can certainly be improved. Of course, it is likely always to be a small minority of the population who will need social work support, and this will affect general awareness as well as opinion. Promotion of a positive image of social work will be all the more important as a discrete social work identity becomes increasingly diffused in organisational terms. The proposed National Social Work Agency could have a valuable role in this.

## **LEADERSHIP**

Over the last five years there has been a steady increase in the proportion of participants who feel they have an understanding of what leadership means to them at each stage of their career. The majority on average thought that developing leadership capacity was important to their professional role. Across most leadership capabilities, our findings indicate a general increase in opportunities for development, although four out of five participants on average state they had not engaged in leadership activity over the previous year. Support from employers for developing leadership capabilities had increased too, although this only reached 45% by Year 5. The picture here suggests that whilst understandings of 'leadership' and opportunities to demonstrate these capabilities may have increased over the last five years, a significant proportion of social workers are not engaging in activities or opportunities to develop their skills here.

Responses from our participants suggest that it is not an issue which is given significant consideration in supervision, CPD or general organisational culture. In Year 1 more participants (82) failed to answer a question about developing capabilities than those who did (74), which suggests that it was not a matter on which most felt able to comment. The conflation of leadership with management reflected in many of the answers could imply that there has been limited exploration of the differences between them either in pre-qualification training or in the employment setting. However, some of these issues have been recognised in recent developments, such as the revised Standards in Social Work Education (SSSC, 2019) and draft NQSW Standards (forthcoming) where leadership capabilities now feature more prominently.

## **Recommendations**

- Initial steps to enhance and embed understandings of leadership are underway across initiatives to support newly-qualified staff in their first year in practice, as well as introducing concepts at the pre-qualification stage through social work education. Based on our findings that newly-qualified workers gain important skills,

knowledge and understanding through peer modes of learning (mostly from experienced social workers and managers), we suggest that further efforts are required to embed understandings of leadership throughout the whole professional workforce. This extends to organisational cultures and providing adequate opportunities for staff to develop leadership capabilities in their everyday work. Indeed, a significant number of participants mentioned the importance of the availability of structured professional development to the development of leadership capabilities.

- Leadership in social work, as articulated in research evidence, policy documents and by the participants themselves, should include a number of activities. These could involve conducting research; supporting colleagues, volunteers and service users in ways that improve outcomes; acquiring specialist knowledge and expertise in particular areas of social work practice and service development; leading on project development and implementation and contributing to workforce learning. Of course, management skills such as budgetary control and staff supervision remain important elements of good leadership.

# INTRODUCTION

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

Commissioned by the Scottish Social Services Council in 2016 and led by researchers from the University of Dundee and Glasgow Caledonian University, this project aimed to provide a broad view of how newly qualified social workers develop as professionals. This research explored organisational, practical, and subjective dimensions of professional social work as experienced by our participants over time.

An unexpected challenge for the project was the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020. Our data collection in Year 4 was ongoing when the first national lockdown in Scotland was announced in March 2020. Restrictions remained in place as we undertook Year 5 activities throughout 2021. Despite the rapid change to working practices for both social workers and researchers, our study benefited from the fact that our primary source of data collection was online surveys. Our participant interviews however, had to be done remotely under the circumstances. Using technology in this way meant that we could proceed with our data collection schedule as originally planned and ensure that the study had a continued relevance within the current service context. We have published a separate report on newly qualified social workers' experience of practice during COVID-19 (McCulloch et al, 2022).

## Overarching aim

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

## Objectives

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



To address the aims and objectives of this research, the project team designed a programme of work over a five-year period from 2016 to 2021. This included 5 repeat cohort online annual surveys issued to all registered social workers who qualified in 2016, as well as 3 repeat panel interviews with a sample of social workers in Years' 1, 3 and 5. Our section on methodology (p155) gives detail on the research design, structure, data analysis and cohort numbers achieved at each stage.

Our findings will be presented here in a series of thematic chapters covering a wide range of dimensions associated with the reality of being a social worker in Scotland today. Each chapter aims to report on the experiences of social workers over time, highlighting areas of complexity and challenge, as well as areas of strength. In all cases we draw from data seeking to make sense of participant experiences and to generate new insights for the profession to consider by way of recommendations.

The final chapter in our findings section provides a narrative journey of thirteen social workers as they navigate their professional development over the last five years. This chapter presents a thematic consolidation of their stories captured across Years' 1, 3 and 5. Findings in this chapter are tied back to thematic areas located in other chapters, partly reflecting the connections and intersections across a range of findings in this study.

As our study progressed, we noticed a shift in how participants began to view themselves. Self-descriptions of 'newly-qualified social worker' were gradually replaced by 'early-career social worker' around Year 3, and then replaced again by 'social worker' for most by Year 5. This proved a challenge for a research study with 'NQSW' in its title. Indeed, acknowledging a gradual shift in the identity of our participants over time has been a key theme that we explored throughout this research. For the purposes of this report, we decided to mostly use the term 'participants' and social workers in recognition of the fluid nature of professional identities here. Given the breadth and plural nature of experiences we captured over the last five years, we remain cautious about anchoring fixed points of transition for newly qualified staff. That said, our findings do indicate that Years' 1 and 2 seem to constitute a critical period of professional acclimatisation for most, while Years 3 to 4 seem to reflect a period where notions of professional identity, as well as role and purpose, present with greater clarity in responses. Year 5 is when most participants view themselves as fully-fledged social workers, where confidence levels peak across a range of professional dimensions.

## Background

Existing literature and research on how social workers experience their first few years in practice is scarce. Most studies tend to focus on the first year, and most of these concentrate on the transition from education to practice rather than exploring the professional development of social workers over time. Indeed, before we embarked on our research in 2016, the only empirical studies to feature newly qualified social workers in Scotland had been conducted by Marsh and Triseliotis (1996) (as part of a wider UK study) and Grant et al (2014). Both studies focused on notions of 'preparedness' or 'readiness' for practice, and neither extended past the first year of employment. A complimentary study by Welch et al (2014) was conducted at the same time as Grant et al (2014) and focused on first-line managers' views on newly qualified social workers at the time. Both Grant et al (2014) and Welch et al (2014) were commissioned by the SSSC in 2013 to provide information and detail on the experiences of newly qualified social workers and the views of their managers – all of which contributed to a review of social work education and post-qualifying learning at that point. In essence, whilst both studies revealed much about the transition into professional employment for social work graduates in Scotland, the research itself was limited in scope to assess ongoing processes of learning, development and professional socialisation of social workers as they proceed (beyond the first year) in their careers. Moreover, the knowledge we had at this stage told us little about how social workers navigate through challenge and change, and how they develop and grow while negotiating a constantly shifting landscape of policy, legislation and practice.

Indeed, the rate and impact of change in social work over the last decade has been significant. A report by Audit Scotland in 2016 - **Social Work in Scotland** – found that current approaches to delivering social work services would not be sustainable in the long term. Any further cuts to budgets and services would result in failures to meet basic statutory duties. At the core, Audit Scotland (2016) argued that social work departments were facing significant financial challenges and that solutions must be found in working more closely with service providers and people who use services to find ways to ensure best use of resources. Around this time, the Scottish Government had completed a programme of work around the integration of local authorities and NHS Boards following the implementation of the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014. This created 31 'integration authorities' across Scotland, resulting in the creation of a number of health and social care partnerships. Audit Scotland (2016) recognised that this had resulted in 'complex and varied' governance arrangements for social work services. Other changes around this time include a new **Mental Health Strategy 2017-27** (Scottish Government, 2017)

and a **National Strategy for Community Justice** (Scottish Government, 2016) – both of which added to an increasingly complex landscape of service provision, governance, commissioning and delivery expectations.

A national picture was therefore required to help understand how newly qualified social workers traverse a complex and contested landscape of dynamic practice roles and ever-changing tasks, whilst exploring the ongoing development needs of professionals as they progress through their career. A national understanding was sought through our research to provide crucial insights into workforce needs during significant periods of transition relating to wider structural agendas, including service integration and the implementation of initiatives such as personalisation and self-directed support. These concerns helped to shape the basis of our commission from the SSSC in 2016 to explore the experiences of NQSWs across Scotland over time.

In the intervening years, attention to the professional development of social workers has intensified. In 2020, a national NQSW Implementation Group was established to provide recommendations on the design, implementation and delivery of a NQSW Supported Year. Ten early implementation sites have since been established and are now engaged in implementing core elements of a supported year. National roll out is expected to follow shortly. Work is also underway to develop an Advanced Social Work Practice Framework, intended to strengthen the range of professional development opportunities available across Scotland and the structures required to support social work professional development, both now and in the future.

In these respects, the implications of our research also stretch forward, as the future landscape of social work and social work professional development looks set to change significantly in the next few years. In 2021, the Independent Review of Adult Social Care was published. Known as the 'Feely report', the review recommended the establishment of a National Care Service (NCS) in Scotland. In addition, the report recommended the incorporation of a National Social Work Agency (NSWA) as part of this new national service. The Scottish Government's Programme for Government 2021-22 also made clear its intention to bring forward legislation to provide the foundation for these developments.

On the 20<sup>th</sup> June 2022, The National Care Service (Scotland) Bill was introduced to Scottish Parliament. Current plans indicate that adult social work will be removed from local authority control and incorporated into NCS (justice social work and children and families may be inducted later after a period of consultation on the viability of this). It is envisaged this will result in substantial changes to

operational functions within social work, as management and leadership structures change and morph into different configurations and new structures. It will also have impacts and effects across the workforce – with clear implications for future learning and development opportunities, as well as how we support social workers as they progress in their careers. In this transforming context, Scotland will continue to need social workers with the skills, capacity and confidence to work through, and adapt to, periods of change and challenge. Our shared task as stakeholders in the profession is to ensure that social workers are equipped for, and supported in, this ever-changing landscape.

# CHAPTER 1: EDUCATION

## Introduction

Social work education has a long and enduring history in Scotland. Roots are found in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century university settlement movement where volunteers worked with local residents in areas such as Glasgow, Edinburgh and Dundee – largely to address social concerns and to promote community development (Bruce, 2012). Recognition was given to the need for professional education and training of volunteers at the time, and early social work courses were developed by local universities to address this (McCulloch, 2018). Interestingly, these early attempts were strikingly similar to contemporary structures of social work education today: students received a combination of taught elements (mostly drawn from social sciences) and work-based learning (by way of practice placements). As McCulloch (2018: 92) suggests, 'The interdependence of these two functions remains critical [today]'. Following devolution in 1998, a number of institutions in Scotland engaged in periods of reform and change in line with new forms of governance and regulation led by Scottish rather than UK policy. This included the establishment of the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) under terms laid out in the Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001. The SSSC assumed responsibility for approving and regulating education and training for all social service workers in Scotland - including the promotion of post-qualifying education and continuous learning for all relevant staff. In 2003, two documents - **Standards in Social Work Education and Scottish Requirements for Social Work Training** - were conflated to create the **Framework for Social Work Education in Scotland** (Scottish Executive, 2003). The combined document formed the basis for degree provision across all higher education institutions in Scotland at the time. According to McCulloch (2018: 94), this period in the 2000s marked the start of a 'distinctly Scottish approach' to social work education.

However, in 2014 the SSSC initiated a root and branch review of social work education in Scotland, resulting in a series of reports and recommendations (SSSC, 2015; 2016). McCulloch (2018) argues that this appetite for change emerged from the shifting political, economic, and social context in which social work found itself in at the time. The profession was undergoing significant structural and operational adjustment, as many local authorities aligned and integrated with health boards under new modes and methods of governance. In short, the professional landscape for social workers was changing, and the need to ensure new recruits were prepared for this began to feature in discussions about the

extent to which the current model was 'fit for purpose' (Grant et al, 2016).

Published in two parts – and covering two phases of work around education and professional learning from 2014-2016, **The Review of Social Work Education in Scotland** (2015; 2016) found that the current generic model of social work education was indeed 'fit for purpose'. It was acknowledged however, that social work education should be understood more explicitly as 'a foundation for professional learning rather than the completion of it' (McCulloch (2018: 96). The review identified key actions for improvement, including the progression of a 'shared approach' to professional learning; attending to the contributions of universities and practice providers; attention to practice learning; and the development of a supported first year in practice. The central message of the review was that responsibility for professional learning needs to extend beyond the academy, including through the development of a more robust infrastructure for learning in practice (McCulloch and Taylor, 2018).

In perhaps one of the most comprehensive reviews of literature on the design of social work curricula in the UK however, Burgess (2004) found very little evidence of any significant empirical enquiry into crucial dimensions of pedagogy and curricula design (found readily in other professional subjects, such as medicine, law, nursing, teaching). The absence of any notable research on social work education was identified as a starting point for a series of commissioned studies in Scotland during the review period from 2014-2016. These included: a review of approaches to integrated learning in social work education (Kettle, et al, 2016); revised standards in social work education and benchmark standards for newly qualified social workers (Daniel, et al, 2016); and implementing a probationary year for social workers in Scotland (Gillies, 2016). Whilst each commission made a significant contribution to our understanding of the challenges facing social work education in Scotland, the breadth and depth of empirical research on the nature, structure and effectiveness of social work education remains limited. Moriarty and Manthorpe (2014) argue that despite initial bursts of activity looking at aspects of social work education following the inception of the new degree in 2003 (for example, see: Crisp et al, 2003; Braye and Preston-Shoot, 2004; Trevithick et al, 2004; Luckock et al, 2006), the pedagogical architecture of social work curricula across the UK remains largely under-researched.

According to Valutis et al (2012) however, social work education contributes significantly to the professional socialisation of students into the culture, identity, and values of the profession. It performs a crucial function in preparing students to operate within a

professional social work environment. Butler-Warke and Bolger (2020) extend this analysis to argue that social work education brings a range of personal as well as professional gains to those subject to it. They suggest that we have underplayed the longstanding impact on social workers, and that we need to think more broadly about the wider dimensions of education beyond its professional application.

Current issues for social work education in Scotland reflect those outlined above, but centre at the moment on enduring challenges in ensuring good quality practice learning provision - challenges now exacerbated by additional pressures on placement providers linked to the impact of COVID-19. These concerns are significant because our findings here suggest that placements performed a critical function in the education of participants – with both immediate and long-term effects. The legacy of placement experiences feature strongly in responses from Year 1 as well as across responses from Year 5 participants (whom we invite to reflect back). The value of placements, and the whole nature and purpose of integrated learning, emerges with substantial weight in our findings. A key challenge here is that in the absence of adequate practice learning provision, other important issues are side-lined as partners are pressed to prioritise what should be the absolute basics of professional learning provision. We explore these issues and other dimensions of social work education alongside our findings below.

## **FINDINGS**

As newly qualified social workers with less than 12 months in post at the time, participants were asked in first year of this study to comment on their experiences of social work education, as well as giving some indication of previous work or voluntary experience and reasons for wanting to enter the profession. We reported on these findings in our Year 1 report, but we repeat and extend our analysis here. In addition, participants were asked in Year 5 to reflect back on their experience of social work education, and to identify what had been useful to them in their careers over the last five years.

### **PRE-EDUCATION WORK EXPERIENCE**

The online survey in Year 1 of this study presented a number of questions to participants about their previous work experience. The objective here was to reveal characteristics of the sample participants in relation to what experience they brought to professional social work education. We asked questions about

reasons for pursuing social work as a career and types of social care experience gained during paid and voluntary employment. 89% had previous experience of working in social care environments before undertaking social work training. In terms of length of experience, around a third of participants brought over 5 years. Just over a third brought between 2-5 years, with only 9% reporting to have no experience of paid or voluntary experience within social care environments. These figures are unsurprising, as most social work courses require candidates to have some previous experience of paid social care roles, volunteering or personal experience (Cree et al, 2018). However, it does suggest that most participants came with a basic understanding of what supporting professions do. These findings are consistent with other studies which suggest that applicants tend to enter education with a nominal understanding of social work roles and tasks. Indeed, we have tended to privilege previous experience as evidence of 'suitability' for social work programmes; however, research indicates that having previous experience is not necessarily a reliable indicator of future success (Holmstrom and Taylor, 2008). Evidence indicates that prior academic achievement is more reliable at predicting outcomes in social work programmes (see: Holmstrom, 2014). Nevertheless, research in this area is limited and further investigation is required to assess whether previous experience impedes or supports the trajectory of social work students in Scotland.

## **SOCIAL WORK AS A CAREER CHOICE**

Participants in Year 1 were asked to comment in free text boxes on what attracted them to social work as a career. For the majority, clear themes emerged around the importance of aligning the purpose and nature of employment with personal and professional values. As one participant put it:

'Personal values, developed through personal and professional experience, and a desire to build a career on that' (YR1).

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

'Being part of a profession, developing my practice, new challenges, improving career opportunities' (YR1).

'Enjoyed work in social care ... wanted to develop' (YR1).

Some mentioned their own lived experience of social work intervention as being a catalyst, while others referred to being



exposed to environments where values of justice, humanity and compassion helped to shape their development and subsequent attraction to social work as a career. This was captured well by one participant:

'My aunt has been a foster carer for over 20 years. I grew up in a household where social justice and helping others are seen as very important values. I believed that my values and skill set were suited to a social work career.' (YR1)

Others expressed a direct wish to work with specific groups, such as children and young people, substance misuse, and disability. Participants were then presented with a range of statements designed to capture the breadth of social work from a macro (political welfare) endeavour to a micro (supporting individuals) enterprise. Participants were invited to say whether each had a major / minor influence on their decision to enter social work. Three key influences emerged from the data:

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

These findings suggest that motives for entering the profession seem grounded in value-oriented reasons for most. Research demonstrates that where helping or supporting is a perceived function of a professional role in public services, it often attracts people with particular value-based dispositions that align with broader aspirations to 'make a difference' or contribute in some way to improving lives and society as a whole (Audit Commission, 2002). More specifically to social work, research often indicates that motivations for entering the profession are firmly rooted in a desire to improve the quality of people's lives, working in partnership with service users in some way, and for some at least - ambitions to achieve social justice by addressing inequality (see Furness, 2007; Moriarty and Murray, 2007; Facchini and Giraldo, 2013; Duschinsky and Kirk, 2014). Our findings offer further evidence in support of previous work on motivations for entering the profession.

## **ROUTES INTO SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

Around 60% of participants in Year 1 told us they qualified through undergraduate routes. The majority of participants here came directly from college or employment. A minority came directly from school. This may indicate a preference in admission for candidates with some degree of exposure to social care environments - be it

though placements at college or from recent employment in social care roles. As indicated earlier however, previous experience alone is not a reliable indicator of success on a social work programme (see: Holmstrom, 2014).

Around 40% of participants in Year 1 qualified through post-graduate routes. Table 1 below illustrates the spread of degree subjects read at undergraduate level before applying for post-graduate study in social work.

Table 1: Routes into Post Graduate SW

<b>Undergraduate Subject Areas</b>	<b>Total (n=63)</b>
Social Sciences	30
Humanities	23
Other*	10

\*Including community education, residential childcare, health studies, business management, information and library studies, and computing studies.

Table 1 demonstrates that postgraduate social work students come from a variety of disciplinary backgrounds, although we can say that most fall within the bounds of social science and humanities. In terms of undergraduate degree classifications, the majority of postgraduate participants (56.6%) achieved an upper second (2:1), 21.6% achieved a lower second (2:2), 15% achieved a first class, and 3.3% achieved a third. The survey also revealed that 3.3% were admitted to postgraduate courses with ordinary degrees. Across all undergraduate and postgraduate routes, most participants completed their social work education in Scotland (93%). Some participants referred to completing their qualifications in other countries, such as Canada, Nigeria, and the United States.

Cree et al (2018) report that literature on the selection of social work students for undergraduate and postgraduate programmes shows no consensus on which factors are seen to be most important in securing a place. A combination of academic aptitude, previous work experience and demonstration of values or understanding of social work roles, seem to feature in selection processes and procedures across different institutions. Our findings here indicate that a diverse range of people with different types of academic and work experience backgrounds are admitted into social work programmes across Scotland.

## QUALITY OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Reflecting on the 'quality' of social work education received by participants, most in Year 1 reported positively on their time at university. Around 32% described their experience as 'very good', with 54% answering 'good' and 13% 'fair' (only two participants said 'poor' or 'very poor', representing 0.6% of the total Year 1 sample). Just over half reported that classroom learning had prepared them 'well' or 'extremely well' (47% and 7% respectively). However, 22% took a neutral position here, and 22% said it had only prepared them 'slightly', with 2% suggesting 'not at all'. These figures stand in contrast to the number who felt that practice placements prepared them well for practice – approximately 73% (combining those who answered 'well' and 'extremely well' – please see section on practice placements below). These findings suggest that for most participants in Year 1, practice placements provided a better sense of preparation for practice than classroom learning alone. Research on practice placements (see next section) refers to a range of pedagogic benefits gained from work-based learning – particularly the exposure to organisational cultures, methods and processes that can only ever be simulated in classroom-based learning. However, the danger here in privileging work-based learning over classroom-based learning is that we underplay the value, purpose, and benefits of the former as a critical partner in a holistic educational experience for students. The reciprocal synergy between both work- and classroom-based learning is well-established and supported in research (see Kettle et al, 2016).

Indeed, when asked in free text boxes to comment on what was 'good' about experiences of social work education, the majority of participants in Year 1 provided responses that reflected a firm and assured appreciation of the integrated nature of learning, ie combining practical experience with classroom-based learning. Table 2 below illustrates the range of positive aspects of social work education mentioned by participants.

Table 2: Strengths of SW Education

<b>Strengths</b>	<b>Number of times mentioned (n=133)</b>
Quality of teaching and learning, breadth and relevance of learning content with opportunities to integrate theory and practice	63
knowledge, experience and passion of	33

lecturers and tutors, emphasis on applied knowledge	
Quality of support from lecturers and tutors	25
Variety of teaching and learning methods	15
Focus on reflection and critical thinking	9
Peer learning / good relationships	8
Service user and carer involvement	7
Focus on values, social justice and empowerment	6

Our findings here indicate that it is not just the quality, depth and relevance of classroom-based learning that's important, but also having opportunities to integrate and apply this in real world environments. It seems to be that a combination of these pedagogic elements matter most to participants rather than one specific or defined area, or one particular mode of learning. Integrated models of learning are widely supported in research – often preferred in fields where the translation and application of theory into practice is a critical aspect of learning (Kettle et al, 2016). As already mentioned, social work education has a long history of blending theoretical and practical dimensions. Our findings provide further support for the value in sustaining and enhancing this integrated model of education – ensuring that all elements are adequately resourced, administered, and defended by all stakeholders.

## **IMPROVING SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

When asked about potential improvements to social work education, a range of areas emerged as important to participants in Year 1. Most of these items were identified as areas essentially requiring 'more of' in the general course of training. The most significant areas are noted below.

Perhaps reflecting the emphasis put on the value of placements in the previous section, the majority of participants here felt that more emphasis on practice placements is required: 58% 'Strongly Agree' and 28% 'Somewhat Agree'. However, what is meant here by 'more emphasis' is not entirely clear; however, it may reflect something about the importance or purpose of work-based learning in preparing students for the realities of practice. This was followed by a clear majority wanting more emphasis on specialisms (eg children & families, justice social work and adult social work): 60%

'Strongly Agree' and 21% 'Somewhat Agree'. This may reflect something about the acute sense of now working in these areas and feeling that additional knowledge may help in their current roles. Subsequent areas include more input on social work interventions: 47% 'strongly agree' and 33% 'somewhat agree', and more input from practitioners in the field: 44% 'strongly agree' and 37% 'somewhat agree'. Overall, the sense of 'more of' came through strongly in responses to these particular questions. This may indicate more about initial and immediate learning needs of newly qualified staff in particular disciplines rather than specific deficits identified in social work education. At the point of completing our Year 1 survey, most participants would have been adjusting to professional organisational cultures and starting to acclimatise to the demands and challenges presented to them as they start in their careers. Most would have felt unprepared to some degree, so it is perhaps unsurprising to see a sense of 'more of' emerging across responses here.

However, these findings again indicate the importance and value placed on dimensions of integrated learning with a desire for more opportunities for practical application, as well as more emphasis on specialist aspects of different disciplinary areas of social work practice itself. As discussed earlier, the integration of work- and classroom-based learning is overwhelmingly supported by research, but also by our findings here which provide further evidence of the need to maintain and enhance this model moving forward.

## **EXPERIENCE OF PRACTICE PLACEMENTS**

Participants in Year 1 were asked about types of practice placement offered to them during their course. Types of placement were categorised by statutory (local authority) and non-statutory (voluntary and private sectors). Students on qualifying programmes must complete 200 days (or 1200 hours) of practice learning (Scottish Executive, 2003). The total number of days are typically split across two periods of practice placement.

The data gathered from Year 1 participants indicated that first placements were split between statutory (43%) and voluntary/private sector placements (50% and 6% respectively). In terms of practice setting, participants reported that a majority of first placements were located in children's services (45%), followed by adult services (44%) and criminal justice (4%) - with the rest placed in specific projects / specialist teams (such as generic 'duty' teams that cover children, adult and criminal justice provision).

The majority of Year 1 participants did their second placement in a statutory service (64%). The remaining third did their placements

in voluntary / private sector settings (31% and 3% respectively). In terms of practice setting, second placements were split between children's services (46%), adult services (39%), criminal justice (9%), and the rest in specific projects / specialist teams (covering a range of service user groups).

When asked in Year 1 about how well placements prepared participants for practice, the majority (around two thirds) answered positively: 47% said 'well' and 26% said 'extremely well'; around 17% took a neutral position, and 7.5% suggested 'slightly', with 2.7% reporting 'not at all'. These findings are clear: placements are important, valued, and critical to preparing students for the realities of professional social work practice.

Placements enable students to consolidate classroom learning with real world experience, as well as performing a critical - often underplayed - role by introducing students to organisational cultures, processes and 'ways of thinking, performing and acting' expected in professional environments (Wayne et al, 2010: 327). Evidence indicates that outcomes from practice placements point to increased confidence for students across a range of skills, knowledge and practice settings (Fortune et al, 2008). Even in what are thought of as non-traditional social work settings (ie charitable agencies), research indicates that students were able to 'use social work specific skills and knowledge, to develop a professional approach to their work and to practice social work in a 'grass roots' setting' (Scholar, et al, 2014: 1106). But the legacy of placements also matter too – their effects are long-lasting and still felt long after the fact. We explore this in the next section.

## **REFLECTING BACK ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

As indicated earlier, we only ever asked participants about their experiences of social work education in Year 1. This was to gauge experiences that would have been fresh in the minds of participants as they only recently started in their professional posts at that point. The project team felt it would be interesting to return to questions on social work education – particularly the longer-term impact as perceived by participants who would be around five years in post. We decided to add a 'free text' question to the final Year 5 survey inviting participants to reflect back on their social work education and to comment on what they found most useful or valuable to their career over the last five years.

The responses we received in Year 5 were notably positive in relation to the value recognised in social work education. But they were also diverse, highlighting multiple and often different areas as more valuable to some than others. Perhaps unsurprisingly, a

significant proportion of Year 5 participants highlighted the value gained from doing practice placements:

'Placements were the most useful' (YR5)

'The practice placements without a doubt are essential but my first placement was only 60 days but I believe this is now longer which I feel would have been beneficial for me' (YR5)

'Placement experience has been the most valuable. Much of the academic work does not support the reality and challenges of the job' (YR5)

Emphasis on placements was closely followed by attention to the significance of learning around values, ethics and anti-discriminatory practice:

'The focus on values and ethics has always remained important to me. The encouragement to be critical of social policy and legislation. The practice learning opportunities were fantastic' (YR5)

'Reflective practice has been critical' (YR5)

'I draw on my experience and social work training to support my team using SW ethics and values. I consider theories and approaches to meet the needs and reduce risks for the service users the staff work with. My understanding of accountable practice assists me to manage complex cases allocated to staff and ensuring I am informed of changing risks and needs through regular communication' (YR5)

Beyond these areas, multiple and often different areas are identified as useful and valuable, including: 'reflective [and critical] practice'; 'theories of attachment'; 'human development'; 'sociological theories'; 'discrimination and interventions'; 'models of care and support'; 'assessment and risk management'; 'skills-based learning'; and 'research methods and dissertation'. The findings in this area highlight the breadth and diversity of what matters to participants in professional learning and practice.

What is interesting here is the similarities and contrasts between Year 1 and Year 5. Emphasis at both timepoints is placed on the importance and value of practice placements – regarded as critical and crucial dimensions of learning within social work education. The weight of attention in this area suggests that social work education and other stakeholders simply cannot underplay the significance of providing, supporting, and sustaining good quality placements for

social work students today. This mattered to participants in Year 1 of this study, and still matters to participants after five years in practice. The legacy and effects of practice placements go far beyond the prescribed 200 days. We need to understand more about the long-term impact of practice learning on the professional trajectory of social workers.

One area of contrast to emerge however, was a focus in Year 1 on a need for 'more of' in relation to learning around specialisms and social work interventions, whereas participants in Year 5 – looking back – actually valued other aspects more, such as learning about values, ethics and anti-discriminatory practice – essentially dimensions of classroom-based learning that, by Year 5 at least, are recognised as important and valuable to their development as professional social workers. This again lends weight to the importance of integrated models of learning within social work education, and further recognition of the value and synergy of both work- and classroom-based learning. It also shows that by Year 5 most social workers recognise and appreciate the balance social work educators attempt to strike between both dimensions.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

There is nothing in our findings to suggest that social work education in Scotland is failing to produce confident and competent social workers. Quite the opposite. Our findings reveal that the combination of classroom-based learning and practice placements is valued by participants in the first year of practice as well as by the fifth. The impact of social work education was perhaps felt more by participants in Year 5 of this study who, with hindsight, recognise the value gained from experience in the classroom as well as the office. Our findings support Butler-Warke and Bolger (2020) who argue that social work education brings a number of personal as well as professional gains for those who undergo it. Our participants identified a wide range of areas where social work education had been valuable and useful to them – revealing a mix of personal and professional dimensions to their learning experiences. What's clear here is that social work education is not a static process with clear impacts and outcomes, effects are felt long after the point of qualification.

Like other professions in the public sector, social work education has always followed an integrated model of education. One of the primary challenges today is not necessarily with content, curricula, or delivery of social work education (although improvements can always be made here), but more with the flipside of the integrated learning dyad: ensuring that the provision and quality of practice placements is sustained. For a regulated profession where the



promotion of education and training is enshrined in law (Regulation of Care (Scotland) Act 2001), and where other national bodies seek to advocate on behalf of the workforce and support its development (Social Work Scotland; Community Justice Scotland; Scottish Association of Social Workers), it is imperative that collective efforts are made to ensure that the 'shared approach' identified in the recent review is fully realised. If our findings on social work education prove anything, it's that placements matter, their effects matter, and the lasting impact they have on professional development matters.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Whilst our study was not focused on the effects of social work education over time, this did emerge as an important area for consideration. Further work is required to understand the long-standing (legacy) effects of social work education on professional development and how to maximise impact here.
- Attention must be paid to resourcing and enhancing the provision of practice placements in Scotland. Our findings reveal the critical dimension played here by work-based learning as a crucial element of integrated learning.

## **CHAPTER 2: EMPLOYMENT**

### **Introduction**

Local authorities in Scotland have legal duties, responsibilities and functions – all of which mark a dividing line between what statutory and non-statutory services can do and provide. Most social workers in Scotland are employed in local authority social work departments (SSSC, 2021). A minority are employed in non-statutory settings. Each local authority has its own arrangements for the training, supervision, and professional development of its staff. Each local authority also has its own pay, pension, and progression arrangements, as well as its own absence management, welfare, and employee support policies. Each local authority will determine its own staff / client ratios, workload allocation policies, caseload management arrangements and provision of specialist services. Each local authority has its own management and leadership hierarchy, as well as its own organisational identity and culture. Employment practices are shaped, guided and driven by Human Resources or Personnel departments who apply agreed principles on workforce management across all local authority departments.

Unlike other professional groups, such as doctors, police, or nurses, social workers do not work for organisations where employment structures and arrangements are designed to support the primary functions of that particular professional group. Local authorities have different priorities, responsibilities and remits – social work is just one service among many competing for resources, administrative support, and access to training opportunities for its staff. In most cases, social work 'departments' no longer exist in name, as a number of functions now fall under the remit of 'health and social care partnerships' following the implementation of integration arrangements across Scotland in the last few years (underpinned by the Public Bodies (Joint Working) (Scotland) Act 2014).

In Scotland, there are no nationally agreed arrangements for the supervision of staff, or the payment of staff, or the training and development of staff, or provision for the welfare and wellbeing of staff. Apart from statutory duties and obligations placed on every local authority, the only thing that seems to unify experiences of employment is separate codes of practice for social workers and their employers. These only take effect as every social worker is obliged by law to be registered and each local authority is duty-bound to report any breach of these codes.

Claims on the national organisation and leadership of social work functions in Scotland seem to be shared between different

organisations. The Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) is identified as the national lead for workforce development and planning for social work, and Social Work Scotland (SWS) claims to be the professional leadership body, working to influence policy and legislation, and to support the development of the workforce. The SSSC is a non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government, and SWS is a member-led organisation made up of mostly senior managers. However, other bodies have interest here too. Community Justice Scotland (CJS) – another non-departmental public body of the Scottish Government – has very specific privilege over the functions of justice social work within each local authority. CJS is responsible for monitoring, promoting, and supporting improvement in, and keep the Scottish Ministers informed about, performance in the provision of community justice in Scotland. This includes the provision of training and development of the justice workforce, as well as ensuring that each local authority is meeting aims and objectives of the National Strategy for Community Justice (2016). The landscape of social work leadership in Scotland matters because the decisions, agreements and strategic thinking of these groups will have an impact on how staff are guided, supported, and managed at local levels. However, it is worth noting here that concerns about leadership, governance and operational delivery of social work services have appeared in a number of reports, reviews, consultations and evaluations over the years. Most of these concerns also appear in the 'Feely Report' (discussed earlier) and now underpin plans for a National Care Service with a National Social Work Agency incorporated to address these issues.

Local authorities – having no nationally agreed framework or policy on working arrangements for social workers - provide different working environments for their staff. What is clear here is that the employment experiences of each social worker are contingent on a range of variables, including the provision of support, resources, training and development offered by each individual local authority. The national picture is therefore blurred and inconsistent, as standards and practices vary between local authorities (reflected in most findings in this section).

Literature on the nature and experience of employment within social work is vast in terms of themes, topics, and areas of focus. Notwithstanding important differences in legal jurisdictions, policy foundations, provision of education, and organisation of services, we found that research from the four nations of the UK explores an extensive range of issues around working conditions for social workers in each country. Intersecting themes emerge across literature, such as lack of resources, dominant models of managerialism, importance of supervision, workload management, job retention, stress, impact of agile working, and variable support for staff. However, as the scope of literature is so varied in topic

and focus (as well as by jurisdiction), this chapter will draw from a range of material for the purposes of each sub-theme illustrated below.

But front and centre here should be clear acknowledgement that our participants are working in challenging circumstances. Challenges that pre-date COVID-19. Challenges that are long-standing, persistent, and ever-present in the day-to-day work of our social workers. Constant review and restructuring; recurrent budget cuts and resource limitations; a persistent culture of managerialism in local authority structures; the absence of any substantial career pathways; little recognition of informal support provision; absence of national frameworks around supervision and professional development. The picture across Scotland is inconsistent, and this is reflected in the variation expressed in our findings here.

## **FINDINGS**

### **LOCATION OF WORK**

Most participants in each year have been employed by statutory local authorities. This has gradually declined from 95.7% in Year 1 to 82.8% by Year 5. Data indicates that a small number may have transferred to voluntary and 'other' sectors (eg private care providers); however, it should be noted that different participants may have completed our survey each year, and that any perceived drift from statutory social work must be considered with caution here. It may simply be that more participants from voluntary and other sectors decided to complete our survey in later years rather than indicating any significant pattern or issues with retention in statutory social work. Current workforce statistics indicate that the number of social workers on the SSSC register has increased by 3.3% since 2011, and that the number of social workers employed by local authorities has actually increased by 5.8% from the same date (SSSC, 2021).

The largest proportion of participants over the last five years have been based around the central west area of Scotland (average: 29.3%), followed by the northeast (average: 25.5%) and central east (average: 23.8%). The lowest proportion came from the northwest (average: 5.8%). Figures here represent particular concentrations of staff in urban areas, reflecting service needs and demands in highly populated areas of Scotland.

## **AREAS OF PRACTICE**

The largest proportion of participants over last five years have been based in children's services (CS) (average: 52.2%), followed by adult services (AS) (average: 34%) and justice social work (JSW) (8.7%). Between Years' 3 and 4, we noticed a reduction in participants from children's services (56.8% to 43.7% respectively) and a subsequent increase in participants from adult services (27.3% to 40.3% respectively). A small increase in participants from justice social work was also noted (from 7.3% to 10.9% respectively). These findings suggest that a proportion of participants have moved between different practice areas each year, namely from children's services to other areas of practice. Taken together, our findings here suggest that attention must be focused on understanding why a significant proportion of the workforce have moved away from children's services in the first five years of practice. It should be highlighted that we found little evidence of participants wanting to leave the profession altogether, suggesting that any perceived problems with retention in social work perhaps reflect more localised concerns with particular areas of practice rather than the profession itself as a whole.

Most participants (56.9% on average) reported each year that they were not based in integrated or inter-disciplinary teams. We found this surprising given the emphasis on national efforts to implement integrated models within health and social care partnerships across all local authority areas. However, the majority of participants each year have been based in children's services, which is unlikely to be integrated with health or other agencies given the specific nature of work. The same can be said for justice social work. Adult services are more likely to be situated within integrated models, and findings here may reflect this (with around 40% of participants currently based in adult settings).

## **TYPE OF CONTRACT**

The majority of participants over the last five years reported to be on permanent contracts (average: 87.5%). This has ranged from a low of 73.9% in Year 1 to a peak of 96.6% in Year 4. A notable proportion of participants in Year 1 reported to be on temporary contracts (22.5%); however, we presume that a number of these contracts became permanent in Year 2, as numbers on temporary contracts fell to 5.1% at this point and remained around 3.5% on average between Years' 3 to 5. Those on 'other' contracts have fluctuated too, from a low of 1.6% in Year 4 to a peak of 8.8% in Year 5, with an average of 4.8% over the course of the study. Participants were invited to explain what 'other' meant here, and each year participants used terms such as 'secondment', 'fixed

term', 'none' (for those currently registered, but not working) and 'sessional'. However, findings here suggest that the social work profession continues to provide secure and permanent employment for most of its staff.

## **WORKING HOURS**

Most participants over the last five years (average: 83.4%) worked full-time hours (1.0 FTE). This has fluctuated with a peak of 88.4% in Year 1 and a low of 77.8% in Year 3. Those working part-time hours have fluctuated slightly, but most years remaining around an average of 9%. Those on compressed hours have fluctuated too, with a low of 2.2% in Year 1 and a peak of 8.4% in year 3, with an average of 5% overall. Smaller numbers reported 'other' arrangements, mostly related to 'sessional' based hours. Although fluctuation is found here too from a low of 0.7% in Year 1 to a peak of 5.2% in year 3, with an average of 2.5% overall. Again, figures must be read with caution here, as different participants may have completed the online survey each year. Nevertheless, as a snapshot of the workforce over time, our findings do not indicate any significant trend towards more flexible patterns of working – with most continuing to report a pattern of standard full-time hours.

## **MOVING OR CHANGING ROLES**

On average, around 23.7% of participants had moved post or changed jobs in each year of the study. This figure remained broadly stable over the whole five-year period. Very few had been promoted, and most had moved into other areas of social work at the same grade within their own organisation. Reasons for moving over the past five years have been mixed: some sought better practical arrangements (eg being closer to home and family); others mentioned tensions and challenges with managers and teams; some mentioned workloads and stress, and others simply wanted a change or experience of a different service user group. However, qualitative responses over the years have a notable lean towards reporting on unmanageable caseloads, high levels of stress, poor leadership, and poor management – most of which comes from participants either based in, or recently moved from, children's services. As a result, some of these participants moved into other roles within their own local authority. Recent data from Year 5 captures the essence of what other participants have told us over the years:

'Moved from children and families (C&F) into criminal justice for a better work/life balance. C&F remains understaffed with

increasingly unmanageable caseloads. I was working a high level of hours above my contract to be able to complete reports etc and could not get TOIL [time off in lieu for extra hours worked] back as workload was so demanding.’ (YR5)

‘Moved from children and families to criminal justice. Moved because the caseloads, pressure and stress was too much in C&F’ (YR5)

One participant had moved from one children and families team to another in the same authority as a result of poor management within their own team:

‘...over work, burn out, lack of resources and insensitive support from service manager. Now feeling well supported.’ (YR5)

Another participant had moved from children and families into adult social work:

‘Moved to Adult Social Work due to reduce work related stress’ (YR5)

The decision to move into a different role is clearly influenced by a range of personal as well as structural reasons. Our data over the years has indicated that most participants tend to remain in their current post until such time that either personal circumstances change or when conditions of employment become stressful or unmanageable. Sometimes both at the same time. Either way, data over the last five years tends to show that staff from children and families social work seem most eager to shift from their current role into either adult or justice social work posts. These staff often perceive adult and justice social work as being less stressful and more manageable.

Our findings align with existing literature on practitioners who work in children and families social work, where issues around retention, ‘burnout’, stress, and unmanageable workloads are found to be significant and damaging (McFadden et al, 2015; Antonopoulou et al, 2017). Often in children and families work in particular, practitioners engage in a complex process of building and maintaining fragile relationships under strained conditions – a form of ‘emotional labour’ perhaps endured less in other areas of practice, but leading to more pronounced anxieties around risk, uncertainty, and accountability in their cases (Morris, 2013). Alongside caseloads, having little autonomy over work combined with a lack of support and little ‘organisational commitment’ (both to and from the organisation) are thought to contribute significantly to a social workers intention to leave the profession entirely (Webb

and Carpenter, 2012; Shim, 2014). In our case however, we found that practitioners who faced similar challenges tended to either express intention to move, or that action had already been taken (at the point of doing the survey) to transfer into other areas of social work (usually within the same organisation) rather than leave the profession altogether.

## **UNPAID HOURS**

On average, 51.5% of participants report to having done extra unpaid work for their employer over the last five years. This has fluctuated with a peak of 60.7% in Year 2 and a low of 42.1% in Year 5. However, the general trend seems to be an initial rise in the first two years and then falling gradually thereafter (although, it should be noted that Years' 4 and 5 were impacted with changing working practices from COVID-19 restrictions). Later in this chapter we explore workloads and levels of anxiety that seem to be significant for a good proportion of participants within the first two years of practice. It could be inferred (as we suggest with other similar findings) that participants are emerging from periods of initial induction at this point and perhaps being introduced to more or different types of case, some of which involving the application of new knowledge, skills, procedures and understanding – all of which take time and effort to consolidate. For some this could mean spending more time on completing tasks or engaging in further research/learning out with office hours until knowledge, procedures and skills become embedded. In most cases this includes time spent completing case notes, finishing reports, liaising with other professionals (particularly in child or adult protection cases) and updating/sharing information with managers. Indeed, most staff who engage in statutory tasks in addition to their contractual hours should get time back– although some feel that taking this time off is difficult due to other workload demands.

Our findings here align with existing research on working conditions for social workers in the UK, where it is common for practitioners (particularly within children and families) to work beyond their contracted hours (see Ravalier 2018; 2019). However, the prolonged impact of doing so may contribute to significant levels of workplace stress, anxiety, and potential 'burnout' (Kim and Stoner, 2008; Ravalier et al, 2021). This extends to hours devoted to self-directed learning (as discussed in Chapter 2) where significant proportions of participants are forgoing leisure time to engage in learning to enhance their current role. These patterns of 'extra' must be recognised and addressed by the profession.



## **AGILE WORKING**

Over the last five years, around 57% on average report that agile working policies are in place in their organisation. This has increased from 50.7% in Year 1 to 64.9% in Year 5. It perhaps goes without saying that COVID-19 has significantly altered the working landscape for social workers over the last two years. This is perhaps reflected in the figures here where more participants recognised agile working policies in Years' 4 and 5 of this study (both surveys were conducted under national COVID-19 restrictions at the time). Within the last decade there has been a growing body of literature on 'mobilities' within social work, drawing attention to spaces and places in which social work practice is conducted (Ferguson, 2016; Lloyd, 2019). Empirical evidence is emerging about the challenges and opportunities found in adopting and exercising agile working practices within social work, and the impact this can have on decision-making, informal learning, and overall wellbeing (Helm, 2022; Ferguson et al, 2020; Jeyasingham, 2016; 2020). We address these dimensions below.

## **IMPACT OF AGILE WORKING**

In qualitative responses offered in free text boxes within our online survey, agile working consistently emerged as a significant feature of many participants working lives. Most proceeded to describe their experience in negative terms. We noticed very little change in attitudes over the years; indeed, if anything, responses grew more negative over time. Findings over the last five years often indicated that dissatisfaction with agile working is not related to its agility per se, but to limited and limiting forms of 'flexible' working. Where agile working includes access to adequate desk space, work tools, spaces for quiet and concentrated work, and easy access to peer support, agile working is typically experienced (and reported) positively. However, experiences of agile working on these terms were rare. By Year 5, most participants still indicated stress and anxiety over trying to secure a desk or workspace for the day – with most flagging the 'waste of time' experienced each day in doing so. Most present this necessary task as being an additional burden. A number of Year 5 responses referred specifically to the introduction of COVID-19 cleaning protocols around desks and workspaces – all of which adding more work to daily schedules. There has been no indication of any significant shift towards more positive experiences of agile working over the whole course of this study. Recent examples from Year 5 data capture the essence of most experiences we have examined over the last five years:

'Often can't get a desk in my own office where all my files are kept and have to go to another building. We also are not

given laptops or smartphone so can't even do basic things like check emails without a proper computer. Overall it just feels unsettling' (YR5)

'It's another barrier to everyday working - trying to find a space in the office. It also can interrupt choices for informal support and building relationships with peers.' (YR5)

'It is has a huge impact on my day-to-day work: takes 10mins to wipe desk keyboard, telephone and the frustrating part is finding a desk on a busy day.' (YR5)

Our findings align with current research on aspects of agile working where having access to a fixed desk and being close in proximity to colleagues and managers was found to have a significant impact on the working practices of social workers (Ferguson et al, 2020). This also emerged in our study on the impact of COVID-19 on newly-qualified workers who started their professional career during the pandemic itself and where notions of proximity and peer support emerged as critical to their wellbeing and development (McCulloch, 2022).

According to Jeyasingham (2020), the design of office spaces and the provision of digital technologies are less about addressing the needs of social workers and more about responding to local authority budget cuts and efforts to improve 'efficiency'. Attention is drawn here to the impact of agile working on 'sense-making' and communication between staff, with the implication that proximity matters when social workers are trying to understand and reflect on complexity and nuance within a particular case (Helm, 2016; 2017; 2022). This is limited in agile working environments where, according to Jeyasingham (2020: 355), communication is often performed as a 'unidirectional' rather than a 'shared process of sense-making'. Many of our participants over the last five years commented on the lack of immediate contact with peers and managers when arriving back at their offices after home visits. The absence of informal – perhaps crucial – opportunities to reflect with peers is concerning for participants subject to agile working practices in Scotland. Indeed, broader literature on the design of working spaces is clear that organisations who provide fixed places/spaces for their employees often foster better relationships, wellbeing, communication, and team identity (Halford, 2004; 2008). Within social work offices, the provision of fixed desks is recognised as performing a crucial yet underplayed function in the day-to-day work of practitioners (Forrester et al, 2013). The challenge for the profession is being able to harness and replicate 'what works' with agile working practices – recognising that it is not simply the provision of space that matters. Our findings support a growing body of research that demonstrates that it is more about

what these spaces enable and restrict. Social workers need opportunities to communicate with team members; they need ready access to managers and technology, as well as quiet places for concentrated work. Our findings (consistent over the last five years) indicate that agile working models in Scotland are failing to meet the needs of social workers.

## **WORKLOAD**

Caseloads have varied over the last five years - with no specific pattern or trajectory; however, on average, the largest proportion (35.2%) seem to hold around 11-20 cases at any one time, followed by 27.8% holding 21-30 cases and 19.2% holding 31-40 cases. However, we must apply a note of caution here when thinking about volume. A number of variables must be considered, including the type and nature of each case, as well as the complexity of presenting issues, and the levels of urgency and risk involved. All of these factors bear on our weighting and understanding of caseload volume, and therefore make it impossible to assess whether it is quantity or nature (or both) of cases that has most impact on working experiences. Indeed, participants tell us that caseloads and complexity of work are appropriate and manageable in most instances (please see below). Our study was limited in the extent to which we were able to examine the nature and complexity of the types of cases allocated to newly qualified staff, as this was not our primary focus. However, we did find that a proportion of participants felt that workloads made them feel anxious at different points in their career (also below).

On average, around 81.9% of participants over the last five years have felt that cases allocated to them have been appropriate for their level of knowledge and skill. Levels of agreement here have generally increased each year - except in Year 5 where a dip of 2.6% is noted (from 86.2% in Year 4 to 83.6% in Year 5). It follows that levels of disagreement had been reducing here from 7.2% in year 1 to 1.7% in Year 4; however, this jumps to 5.5% in Year 5 (with an average of 4.7% overall). This may reflect something about the impact of COVID-19 on the types of cases allocated to some practitioners during this particular period; however, we are not able to support this with evidence. Those participants who took a neutral position have fluctuated over the last five years from a peak of 12% in Year 2 to a low of 5.5% in Year 5 (with an average of 8.7% overall). What is clear here is that cases allocated to the majority over the last five years are regarded as appropriate to knowledge and skill levels at the point of completing our online survey. Rising levels of confidence across a

range of knowledge and skill domains over the years (see Chapter 3) may go some way to explaining why figures have generally increased here.

Interestingly, around 64.1% of participants on average (over the last five years) have felt confident to take on more complex work. This has generally increased over the years from 60.1% in Year 1 to 75% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement have generally decreased over the years from 20.3% in Year 1 to 8.9% in Year 5 (with an average of 15.3% overall). Levels of neutrality have fluctuated, with a peak of 24.4% in Year 4 and a low of 16.1% in Year 5 (with an average of 20.6% overall). Whilst a proportion consistently took a neutral position here, figures clearly suggest that levels of confidence to take on more complex work seem to increase over the years, perhaps resulting from practitioners gaining more experience and consolidating skills and knowledge over time. But what makes a case complex? We failed to address this question in this study (as indicated earlier), but this area requires further research and investigation to understand dimensions of what participants see as being complex or difficult in any particular case.

On average, around 59% of participants over the last five years agree that workloads have been manageable. This has fluctuated with a low of 48.3% in Year 2 and a peak of 67.9% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated with a peak of 31.8% in Year 4 and a low of 14.3% in Year 5 (with an average of 24% overall). Levels of neutrality have fluctuated too, with a peak of 21.2% in Year 2 and a low of 14.6% in Year 4 (with an average of 16.9% overall). As indicated, the lowest level of agreement here is found in Year 2 where it could be inferred that most newly qualified staff would have completed their induction periods, with some now being allocated more/wider range of cases. The perceived weight of workload is perhaps most acute at this transition point. By Year 5 however, workloads are perceived as manageable by the biggest majority achieved in the study so far, and this is despite operating under COVID-19 restrictions at the point of completing the online survey for that year.

Whilst findings above suggest that workloads seem appropriate and manageable for most, a concern here is that on average around 42.8% of participants over the last five years indicated that workloads have made them feel anxious at points. This has fluctuated from a peak of 48.7% in Year 2 to a low of 37.5% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement have also fluctuated, with a peak of 34.8% in Year 1 to a low of 20.5% in Year 2 (with an average of 28.7% overall). Levels of neutrality have fluctuated too, with a low of 24.1% in Year 4 and a peak of 33.9% in Year 5 (with an average of 28.5% overall). It's clear that levels of disagreement and neutrality slightly outweigh levels of agreement here, suggesting

that workloads for just over half are not causing significant anxiety for a good proportion of the workforce. Nevertheless, the highest level of agreement in Year 2 aligns with concerns in the same year about workloads. This again suggests that a significant proportion of newly qualified staff may begin to feel pressure and expectations by Year 2 as they emerge from induction periods and initial core training; although this seems to resolve as they grow and develop by Year 5 - as anxiety levels seem to reduce over time.

It should be noted that all experiences here are contingent on a range of factors, not least separate arrangements in different local authorities for allocating cases, supporting staff, and providing resources and means to carry our work effectively. All of these aspects will have a bearing on how the weight of work is perceived and experienced by participants. Indeed, research on the relationship between volume of work and levels of stress/anxiety reveals that the nature of individual experiences is more complex and nuanced than a simple causal link. In their study on five local authority social work departments in England, Antonopoulou et al (2017) demonstrate that a range of factors contribute to feelings of anxiety and stress. Social workers who reported the lowest levels of stress were located in organisations where working conditions (fixed desks/work spaces), job satisfaction (regular supervision and controlled caseloads) and employment 'prospects' (opportunities for professional development and promotion) were rated highly. Having clarity over job role, as well as being supported by managers, peers and admin, were thought to be linked to overall satisfaction and ability to work effectively in practice. Antonopoulou et al (2017: 9) argue that 'organisational context' is perhaps the most 'salient element' here – extending the debate beyond locating volume or complexity of cases as the root cause of dissatisfaction and stress in social work practice. Nevertheless, our findings indicate that participants grow increasingly confident in their abilities to take on more 'complex' work overtime, and that caseloads become more manageable – producing fewer reports of anxiety – after the second year in practice. How we support this period of transition between Years' 1 and 2 is crucial for employers to address.

## **SUPERVISION**

Despite the accepted significance of supervision for social workers in practice, there is still little by way of research into this 'critical' interaction between practitioner and manager (Carpenter et al, 2012; Pitt et al, 2021). Our conventional understanding of what constitutes supervision is still largely informed by Kadushin's 1992 article on 'what's wrong' and 'what's right' with social work supervision - developed later by writers such as Morrison (2005),

who attempts to provide an integrated model of supervision which recognises stakeholders, functions and elements involved in the process. Pitt et al (2021) suggest that administration, education and support, ie 'three functions' identified by Kadushin (1992), remain essential to the purpose and process of supervision. Our findings indicate that most social workers experience supervision as having these elements; however, our findings suggest that weight is given to aspects of administration (workload management) over other dimensions of supervision.

Over the last five years, the majority of participants have consistently reported having professional supervision with a manager on a monthly basis (average: 60.6%). This is followed by a significant proportion who report to be subject to 'other' arrangements (average: 31%), which typically includes arrangements for supervision every 6 to 8 weeks. From Years' 1 to 4, figures were gradually tapering down across all categories, ie that periods between supervision sessions seemed to be getting longer. However, Year 5 data demonstrates a slight shift from 'other' arrangements back to monthly contact, which increased from 55% in Year 4 to 61.2% in Year 5. This is perhaps due to the impact of COVID-19 on working practices, with new arrangements for contact and monitoring of activity. Nevertheless, it does seem that the majority of our participants over the years have received supervision on a monthly basis. Very few examples exceeded 8 weeks, and these were typically explained by managers being absent or the result of organisational restructuring at the time.

Before the onset of COVID-19, professional supervision typically took place for the majority within a closed office space. However, by Year 5 the situation had changed significantly as most social workers were now instructed to work from home. In response, we adapted our question on where supervision takes place to include digital options. Unsurprisingly, the majority of participants in Year 5 (79.1%) experienced supervision online via platforms such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams. This was followed by 25% continuing to receive face-to-face supervision within an office space (for those able to engage in hybrid working, eg one or two office-based days) and 8.3% by telephone. 4.1% answered 'other' here, but no participant specified what this meant in practice.

For most (average: 59.6%), supervision typically lasts for 61-90 minutes. This has been fairly constant over the last five years, with no significant increase or decrease. There has been a slight and gradual increase in those receiving 31-60 minutes - from 23% in Year 1 to 29.8% in Year 5, and a gradual decline in those receiving over 90 minutes (from 16.4% in Year 1 to 8.5% in Year 5). Very few participants over the last five years reported having supervision for less than 31 minutes.

Using rating scales, participants were invited to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements on formal supervision:

### **I am happy with the frequency of supervision I receive**

Over the last five years, around 73.8% on average report to be happy with the frequency of supervision they receive. This fluctuated in the first two years with a drop from 77.2% in Year 1 to 66.1% in Year 2. However, this gradually increased to 75.5% by Year 5. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated with a low of 13.8% in Year 1 and a peak of 24.8% in Year 2 (with an average of 17.9% overall). Levels of neutrality have also fluctuated with joint peaks of 9.2% in Years' 2 and 4, and a low of 6.1% in Year 5 (with an average of 8.3% overall). Any variation here may be explained partially by the diverse range of supervisory arrangements in place across local authorities and organisations, as well as own individual preferences for the degree of supervision felt necessary by each participant. Indeed, as highlighted previously, Year 2 participants expressed most anxiety with workloads at that stage in their career. We could infer that many at that point perhaps felt the need for more frequent contact with managers. However, our findings here show that year-on-year clear majorities reported feeling happy with the frequency of supervision they received.

### **I have adequate time to prepare for supervision**

Over the last five years, around 66.6% on average agreed that they have adequate time to prepare for supervision. This has fluctuated over the years with a peak of 72.4% in Year 1 and a low of 61.4% in Year 3. There are no significant patterns here. Levels of disagreement have remained consistent - around 20.6% on average. Those taking a neutral position have fluctuated with a low of 8.1% in Year 1 and a peak of 18.4% in Year 5 (with an average of 12.7% overall). Interestingly, the figure for Year 5 represents the highest proportion ever to take a neutral position - which may suggest that as staff gain experience, they may not require as much time to prepare as perhaps they did as newly qualified practitioners. Some may require no time at all. However, responses here will be contingent on individual circumstances and a broad range of variables that mean we should read these figures with caution.

### **The main focus of my supervision is workload management**

Most participants consistently agreed over the last five years that the main focus of supervision is workload management (average: 71.9%). This had increased gradually between Years' 1 and 3, from

72.4% to 76.1% respectively, but dropped to 64.1% in Year 4 and then rose in Year 5 to 71.4% (closer to the overall average of 71.9%). Levels of disagreement have fluctuated with a low of 11.4% in Year 3 and a peak of 20.3% in Year 4 (with an average of 16.2% overall). Levels of neutrality have fluctuated too, with a low of 9.2% in Year 2 and a peak of 17.4% in Year 4 (with an average of 12.3% overall). There are no clear patterns here and it is difficult to identify any particular trajectory – other than a gradual increase in agreement over the first three years; however, what is clear is that a majority each year agreed that the main focus of supervision seems to be workload management. At first glance this may seem concerning; however, dimensions of what constitutes workload management are complex, nuanced and not necessarily negative for all social workers. We explore this later in this chapter.

### **My manager gives me good advice and guidance**

On average, around 77.7% of participants over the last five years agreed that managers gave them good advice and guidance. This had decreased from 86% in Year 1 to 71.8% by Year 4; however, this had increased to 73.5% by Year 5. Levels of disagreement here have fluctuated between a low of 5% in Year 1 and a peak of 8.2% in Year 4 (with an average of 6.5% over five years). Levels of neutrality have gradually increased from 9.1% in Year 1 to 20.4% in Year 5 (with an average of 15.6% overall). Indeed, as levels of neutrality have increased, it could be inferred that some participants perhaps no longer require as much advice and guidance from managers, as they gain adequate experience, knowledge, and skills over time. Indeed, other findings in this report indicate that levels of confidence and professional autonomy seem to develop incrementally year-on-year – perhaps indicating less reliance on managers for types of advice and guidance that may have been crucial in the first few years of practice.

### **My manager is good at explaining complex information**

Over the last five years, around 68.4% of participants on average agreed that their manager is good at explaining complex information. This gradually decreased each year from 77.2% in Year 1 to 61.2% by Year 5. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated with a low of 12.2% in Year 1 and a peak of 16.5% in Year 2 (with an average of 14.9% overall). Levels of neutrality have increased each year from 10.6% in Year 1 to 22.5% by Year 5. Within these figures, a proportion seem to have shifted from agreement to neutrality over the years – perhaps suggesting that some practitioners no longer require complex information to be explained, as they have gained requisite knowledge, skills, and experience to understand what is presented to them. These findings echo those mentioned above in relation to advice and



guidance.

### **I feel supported by my manager**

On average, around 81.2% of participants over the last five years have felt supported by their manager. Levels of agreement have increased from a low of 77.1% in Year 2 to a peak of 85.7% by Year 5. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated from a peak of 9.2% in Year 3 to a low of 6.1% by Year 5 (with an average of 7.6% overall). Levels of neutrality reduced from a peak of 15.6% in Year 2 to a low of 8.2% by Year 5 (with an average of 11.1% overall). Indeed, while reductions are noted over the years for those who agreed that managers give them good advice and guidance (with growing numbers taking a neutral position), it is clear that most have felt increasingly supported over the last five years.

### **Whilst in supervision, I get sufficient time to critically reflect on practice**

Over the last five years, around 53.1% on average report to getting sufficient time to critically reflect on practice whilst in supervision. After a drop of 9% between Years' 1 and 2 (from 58.5% to 49.5% respectively), levels of agreement have gradually increased in subsequent years from 49.5% in Year 2 to 55.1% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement have reduced over time from 30.3% in Year 1 to 22.5% by Year 5. Numbers of participants taking a neutral position has gradually increased over time from 15.5% in Year 1 to 22.5% in Year 5. This degree of neutrality may indicate something about inconsistency in experiences of supervision - where some sessions may be less critically reflective than others, or that some practitioners may not feel the need (or desire) to critically reflect at all. These findings are difficult to unpick as what constitutes 'sufficient time' and 'critical reflection' will depend on a range of variables for each individual social worker - compounded by different needs and pressures at different points in their career. Our understanding of what actually occurs within the supervisory space is limited, but we explore some of the complexity and nuance around these findings later in this chapter.

### **During supervision, I get time to discuss my professional learning needs**

On average, around 67% of participants over the last five years agree that they got sufficient time to discuss their professional learning needs during supervision. This fluctuated in the first two years but increased from 63.6% in Year 3 to 71.4% by Year 5. Levels of disagreement remained broadly consistent around 19.6% on average. Levels of neutrality also fluctuated in the first two

years but reduced from 15.9% in Year 3 to 10.2% by Year 5 (with an average of 13.4% overall). Levels of agreement, disagreement and neutrality here will be contingent on a range of variables, including different supervision styles and processes within each local authority, different caseload priorities for those in different areas of social work, and the changing nature of individual learning needs over time. However, it appears that most do get adequate time to discuss professional learning needs during supervision.

### **Supervision is a safe space for me to express my emotions**

Most participants over the last five years agreed that supervision is a safe space to express emotions (average: 65.7%). Levels of agreement have remained fairly consistent around the average, with no significant increase or decrease, and no discernible pattern. Levels of disagreement increased slightly between Year's 1 and 2 (from 19.5% to 22% respectively); however, levels decreased gradually to 16.3% in Year 5 (with an average of 19.1% overall). Levels of neutrality have fluctuated with a low of 12.5% in Year 3 and a peak of 18.4% in Year 5 (with an average of 15.1% overall). Marginal shifts between levels of neutrality and disagreement are noted over the years, but no significant pattern is evident here. These findings suggest that the supervisory space is a safe place for most to express emotions; however, our understanding of the impact and effects of this were not explored in this study and would be worthwhile to explore elsewhere to understand how this may benefit social workers as an important dimension of supervision.

### **I am happy with the quality of supervision I receive**

On average, around 66.5% of participants have been happy with the quality of supervision they have received over the last five years. This has fluctuated however, with a decrease of 3.8% between Years' 1 and 3 (from 67.2% to 63.6% respectively), followed by a subsequent increase of some 9.9% between Years' 3 and 5 (from 63.6% to 73.5% respectively). Levels of disagreement have fluctuated too, rising from 18.9% to 20.5% between Years' 1 and 3, followed by a decrease to 16.3% by Year 5 (with an average of 18.4% overall). Levels of neutrality have also fluctuated with a peak of 18.3% in Year 4 and a low of 10.2% in Year 5 (with an average of 15% overall). It seems that levels of disagreement had shifted to more neutral positions by Year 4, and subsequently from neutral to higher levels of agreement by Year 5 - although it is difficult to identify a clear pattern here. A key issue here is that 'quality' will be understood in different ways. For some, quality will mean good levels of support; for others this will mean length and frequency. Each experience will differ according to individual circumstances and the value placed on supervision and what it gives to each social worker at different points and for different

purposes. Nevertheless, if read more broadly as being somehow 'good' or certainly positive in its effects, then it is clear that most have felt satisfied with supervision they have received over the last five years.

## **DISCUSSION**

Empirical research on what actually happens during supervision is surprisingly limited (for examples, see: Bostock et al, 2019; Wilkins et al, 2018). In more recent work exploring dimensions of supervision, Pitt et al (2021) conducted a study involving 56 social workers and 10 supervisors from a local authority in England. With some alignment to our findings, they discovered that most social workers felt that the primary purpose of supervision was accountability through case discussions or workload management - the area most time is spent on. In contrast to other studies which typically report on the dominance and negative impact of caseload management in social work (see, for example: Bartoli and Kennedy, 2015), the social workers in Pitt et al's (2021) study felt that accountability was a positive dimension of their work - an opportunity to 'run things past', discuss and sound things out. Indeed, our findings indicate that whilst most agreed that supervision is focused on caseload management, majorities over the last five years have felt happy with the quality of supervision offered - including the frequency and length of sessions, as well as the general level of support given by managers and opportunities to discuss professional development needs. Support from managers in Pitt et al's (2021) study was reported as positive too - with a particular strength being their 'availability' to staff when required.

However, Pitt et al (2021) found that opportunities for critical reflection were limited due to time spent on being accountable - focusing on actions and tasks rather than examining practice in detail. Our findings show that just over half on average get enough time to reflect in supervision, which suggests - when combined with results from Pitt et al (2021) - that time spent on critical reflection is not widely practiced. However, Pitt et al (2021) make clear that what constitutes 'reflection', let alone supervision itself, is open to wide interpretation. Practitioners may indeed be 'reflecting' when discussing a case with a supervisor - exploring thoughts, actions, and perceptions without consciously framing this exchange as critical reflection. However, our study was limited in scope to fully explore the nature and content of supervision between our participants and their managers. But our findings do indicate that supervision remains an important and critical mechanism for social workers - regardless of career stage.

Pitt et al's (2021) study is important because it is one of the first to

go beyond 'what happens' to 'what matters' in supervision. Their findings challenge assumptions about accountability and reflection, and they ultimately demonstrate that supervisory experiences are more fluid and nuanced than we might think. Our findings here reflect some of the complexity in trying to draw arbitrary lines between, for example, critical reflection and workload management – both of which assume specific processes that may be interpreted by social workers (and their managers) in ways that we have been unable to fully capture in this study. It follows that our findings here represent a starting point for further, certainly deeper research on what occurs within the supervisory space.

## **PEER SUPPORT**

Using rating scales, participants were invited to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with the following statements on peer support from colleagues:

### **I feel supported by my colleagues**

On average, around 91.3% of participants over the last five years said they felt supported by their colleagues. This has fluctuated with a low of 88.6% in Year 4 and a peak of 93.8% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated too, with a low of 0.9% in Year 2 and a peak of 2.7% in Year 4 (with an average of 2.1% overall). Levels of neutrality have also fluctuated, with a peak of 8.4% in Year 4 and a low of 4.2% in Year 5 (with an average of 6.5% overall). It is interesting that levels of agreement fell slightly between Years' 2 and 4, whilst levels of disagreement and neutrality increased during the same period - perhaps indicating that some practitioners felt less supported as time goes on, or perhaps some felt that support was not required and therefore taking a more neutral position in later years. Nevertheless, in Year 5 we see a jump in levels of agreement here to the highest figure achieved across the whole five-year period, and a concurrent reduction in neutrality to the lowest level recorded. This is perhaps due to the impact of COVID-19 and new arrangements for communication and support between team members during this period. However, it is clear that most have felt supported by their colleagues over the last five years.

### **I feel I can express my emotions to colleagues**

On average, around 83.7% of participants over the last five years felt they could express emotions to their colleagues. There is a general upward trajectory in agreement here from 82.8% in Year 1 to 85.4% by Year 5. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated with a peak of 9.3% in Year 3 and a low of 2.1% by Year 5 (with an

average of 6% overall). Levels of neutrality have fluctuated too, with a low of 8.6% in Year 4 and a peak of 12.5% in Year 5 (with an average of 10.3% overall). The highest level of neutrality is recorded in Year 5, which for some might be due to a reduction in face-to-face daily contact with colleagues or perhaps that fewer feel the need to express emotions in this way. However, higher numbers felt they could express emotions during Years' 4 and 5 than any other period (ie between Years' 1 to 3). This may reflect growing bonds and relationships between team members as time goes on, but it could also be due to the impact of COVID-19 and a need to express thoughts and feelings during periods of challenge and change. What seems clear and consistent here is the fact that the majority of social workers feel confident enough to share and express their emotions with colleagues.

### **My colleagues give me good advice and guidance**

Over the last five years, around 92.9% of participants on average agreed that colleagues gave them good advice and guidance. This has been consistently high over the course of this study; although a gradual decrease is noted between Years' 1 to 4, from 92.6% to 89.5% respectively. However, this had increased to 97.9% by Year 5, reaching the highest level achieved over the last five years. Levels of disagreement had increased from 0% in Year 1 to 4.6% by Year 4; however, this had decreased to 2.1% by Year 5. Levels of neutrality have steadily decreased over the years, from 7.4% in Year 1 to 0% by Year 5. Similar to findings above on feeling supported, there is a gradual decrease in agreement here from Years' 1 to 4. But instead of taking a more neutral position over time, it seems that levels of disagreement had increased during the same period. This indicates that a small, but growing proportion felt that colleagues were not giving good advice and guidance to this particular minority; alternatively, as with participants' views about their managers, it could simply reflect a growing confidence in participants own knowledge, skills, and experience – perhaps where advice and guidance is not required or seen to be unhelpful for some. A similar pattern is seen over time with the advice and guidance given by managers (see previous section) where agreement tapers off at points. Nevertheless, key point here is that significant numbers of participants each year have consistently reported that colleagues did give good advice and guidance.

### **My colleagues are good at explaining complex information**

Over the last five years, around 85.1% of participants on average agree that colleagues are good at explaining complex information. This has fluctuated, with a peak of 87.7% in Year 1, reducing to 80.1% by Year 4. Levels of disagreement gradually increased between Years' 1 and 4, from 3.3% to 7.5% respectively; however,

this decreased to 4.2% in Year 5 (with an overall average of 4.7%). Levels of neutrality have fluctuated with a low of 7.5% in Year 2 and a peak of 12.2% by Year 4 (with an overall average of 10.2%). Whilst a majority each year felt that colleagues were good at explaining complex information, a small but growing proportion felt the opposite from Years 1 to 4. Figures would suggest that a growing proportion of participants shifted from agreement to a more neutral stance in later years - perhaps reflecting something about their own growing confidence in skills, knowledge, and experience – perhaps requiring less from colleagues as they develop over time. Another interesting contrast here is that participants have consistently reported that colleagues are better (on average) than managers at explaining complex information (see previous section). This points to the value and importance, as well as the positive effects and impact, of peer interaction. The concern here is that models of agile working may have limiting effects on this (see earlier discussion).

### **I feel I am learning from my colleagues**

On average, around 89.6% of participants over the last five years felt they were learning from their colleagues. This has fluctuated from a low of 86.7% in Year 4 to a peak of 91.7% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement gradually increased between Years' 1 to 4, from 2.5% to 5.6% respectively; however, this decreased to 4.2% in Year 5 (with an average of 3.7% overall). Levels of neutrality have fluctuated with peak of 8.3% in Year 1 to a low of 4.2% in Year 5 (with an average of 6.7% overall). As indicated above with advice and guidance, as well as explaining complex information, small but growing levels of disagreement here may have something to do with increasing levels of confidence around skills, knowledge, and practice experience – perhaps requiring less from colleagues as time goes on. However, Year 5 records the highest level of agreement for the whole five-year period (and with the lowest level of neutrality noted). Year 5 may be distinct due to the impact of COVID-19 and adapting to new methods of practice where colleagues would presumably be learning from each other on how to navigate through systems and processes during periods of change and restriction. But the key point here is that social workers seem to learn from colleagues each year, indicating that this process is consistently valued by the majority of participants. This again highlights the significance placed on interactions with peers in the workplace.

### **Frequency of advice and guidance sought from colleagues**

Clear patterns were identified over the last five years in how often participants sought advice and guidance from colleagues. Those seeking advice or guidance on a 'frequent' basis gradually

decreased from 75.4% in Year 1 to 36.2% in Year 5. Those seeking 'occasional' advice or guidance gradually increased from 22.1% in Year 1 to 53.2% in Year 5. Those who 'rarely' sought advice increased from 2.5% in Year 1 to 10.6% in Year 5. There is clear evidence here of a shift from seeking advice frequently to requiring it occasionally. This seems to fit a pattern expressed above which suggests that perhaps an increase in skills, knowledge, and experience over time results in requiring less from colleagues as participants grow and develop as professionals. However, this does not detract from the importance and value that participants consistently place on the advice and guidance given by colleagues, as well as the learning opportunities experienced and the ability to express emotions to peers.

## **DISCUSSION**

Literature is scarce on what constitutes peer support and what the implications and benefits might be for social work. Some authors have focused on particular dimensions, such as sharing emotions with colleagues – recognised as being valuable and useful for professionals in reducing stress and improving overall wellbeing (Ingram, 2015; Kinman and Grant, 2011; Solomon, 2004). Others have focused on the merits and possibilities of 'peer support groups' for particular areas of practice, eg children and families social work (Dempsey and Halton, 2017).

A study by Ingram (2015) on social workers experiences of exploring and articulating 'emotional aspects' of practice in one Scottish local authority revealed much about the crucial function peer support can play across a range of areas. Drawing from 112 questionnaires and fourteen in-depth interviews, Ingram (2015) found that peer support offered participants valuable opportunities to share expertise and 'practice wisdom' in a generally safe 'unrecorded' environment (ie not minuted like formal supervision). Crucial to this process is proximity, ie 'on-the-spot' advice, guidance and support from colleagues within an office space. This is significant for our findings, as proximity – the ability to interact with colleagues in physical space - is recognised as a challenging under agile working arrangements. Interestingly, Ingram (2015) also found that peer support also provides an important space for exploring issues prior to entering more formal modes of discussion, eg meetings, case conferences and supervision. Ingram (2015: 910) suggests that the benefits of peer support could be an important asset for social workers 'regardless of the quality and content of their supervisory relationships'.

The importance here of proximity, peer interaction and impact on sense making is supported by a range of work by Helm (2016; 2017; 2022) who argues that these dimensions bridge a crucial gap

between individual thoughts and considerations and more formal decision-making arenas. Ruch (2007: 674) suggests that by encouraging collaborative and discursive practices between peers, we create important reflective spaces where 'uncertainty can be safely articulated, thought about and responded to'. Ruch (2007) also argues that what ought to be recognised here is the crucial interdependence between practitioner, team, and organisational context. Learning through others is recognised as being crucial to professional development (see Ferguson, 2021). All of which contributes to an environment where reflective practices may or may not thrive, depending on the quality of relationships between parties and the capacity (and will) of organisations to support these types of informal discursive mechanisms. This will be challenging for employers keen to impose agile working practices and limiting for those already subject to these arrangements.

Much like supervision however, dimensions of informal support from peers within professional social work environments is under-developed across theoretical and empirical literature. But unlike supervision, peer support is under-played in the potential it has to match (or even exceed) formal supervision in the impact it can have on the wellbeing, professional development, and reflective capacities of practitioners as they progress in their careers. Our findings demonstrate that practitioners feel better supported by peers than managers – particularly around the quality of advice and guidance offered, the communication of complex information, and the ability to express emotions in their presence. Formal supervision plays a crucial role for participants (as demonstrated in the previous section), but peer support appears to buttress the capacity of formal supervision to meet the diverse needs of practitioners and should be recognised for the value it brings to the profession – particularly if we continue to adopt limiting forms of agile working practices in future.

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19 ON WORKING PRACTICES**

Given the unfolding nature of COVID-19 and restrictions introduced by UK and Scottish governments across 2020-2021, we believed it was important in our final Year 5 online survey to include a question on the impact of the pandemic on working practices. It should be noted that the question we introduced was designed simply to capture a snapshot of experiences using a free-text box. The aim here was to gain a general sense of how social workers have operated under these unprecedented conditions. We did not have space or scope to explore this topic in great detail within the parameters of our longitudinal work; however, our interview data produced a rich account of experiences, as we collected data here during periods of restriction in Scotland (see p144). The project



team also conducted a separate study on the impact of COVID-19 on working practices (see McCulloch et al, 2022). Nevertheless, across survey responses here it was clear that COVID-19 had a significant impact on experiences of doing social work under restricted conditions in 2021.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the most commonly cited impact of COVID-19 on social work practice was the abrupt move away from face-to-face contact with service users, colleagues, and other services, towards a reliance on virtual and/or online methods. For many participants, this rapid change in modes of contact meant immediate limitations placed on traditional methods of building relationships. Identifying non-verbal cues or spotting something of concern within service user home environments - traditionally picked-up during face-to-face interactions - was difficult for some practitioners under lockdown conditions:

'No face-to-face visits, phone and virtual contact/meetings only. It is difficult at times to truly feel how the person is feeling.' (YR5)

'It's changed the way we do most of our work, video visits with families are tough and it's much harder to build a relationship.' (YR5)

For some, the initial impacts of this were 'massive' and, for most, 'restrictive', impacting particularly on relationships and capacity for 'meaningful' or 'quality' support:

'It has had a massive impact... Less support for families. Having to justify why we need to visit children and having to fill in forms to do this.' (YR5)

'It has been very difficult to have meaningful interactions with service users.' (YR5)

While the impact on face-to-face work emerges here as particularly significant, other responses refer to the effects of working in this way without easy access to support from colleagues and managers:

'Massive [impact]. We were not allowed to see young people for 3 months and had to work in our houses. It caused (and still causes) a large amount of stress. We had to completely adapt our practice overnight and were working without any support from our peers and managers.' (YR5)

'Reduced visits to service users and everything going online - less support from colleagues within an office base.' (YR5)

Other responses refer to creative and adaptive efforts to work within constraints – especially when restrictions eased and efforts to manage infection control increased:

'I have used many alternative means of communication such as WhatsApp and Microsoft Teams for video calls. I have also been more creative and going for walks etc with my clients.'  
(YR5)

'Initially I felt it restricted my ability to visit people which is essential in providing quality service. The vaccine [and] rapid flow testing and access to PPE have assisted greatly, and I have more confidence to carry out my role safely.'  
(YR5 R)

Reduced support from colleagues also emerged as significant for participants. For most, regular access to peer and management support is important to their day-to-day practice and professional wellbeing:

'I've had to change to home working. This is not something I have found to work well in social work. Support for and from my team has been a big part of my social work practice.'  
(YR5)

'My practice remains the same but not being with my team affects my motivation and my mental health.'  
(YR5)

A small number of participants described wider impacts, including an increase in workload, administration, and bureaucracy, as well as difficulties accessing other services and supports for service users and carers. For a minority, impacts were described as minimal:

'It hasn't had a massive impact on my practice - if anything it highlights that families are more resilient than I had previously thought.'  
(YR5)

'None, you have to rise above the challenges as there is a national crisis.'  
(YR5)

A small number of participants highlighted positive impacts in the form of flexible working patterns, improved communication, and professional trust:

'I believe the situation has promoted better communication and joint working.'  
(YR5)

'A realisation by management that work can be done out with the confines of an office environment.'  
(YR5)

In many ways our findings here – albeit a snapshot - serve to highlight a recurring narrative in our findings about the importance of supportive and ‘available’ managers; ready access to peer support, advice, and guidance; provision of adequate technology and administrative support; the need for proximity both to service users and colleagues; and finally, the importance of ‘fixed’ spaces to work in and from. What is less clear however, is what the lasting ‘legacies’ might be of working under these conditions and the longer-term impacts of agile working models more broadly. The experience of working under COVID-19 restrictions has certainly had some bearing on dimensions of our survey findings in this study – particularly responses given by Year 5 participants. We have, where possible, included reference to the potential impact of COVID-19 on findings in the final year of our study; however, we also recognise that COVID-19 may have focused participant attention on what matters and what’s important to them in supporting, guiding, and informing the work they do.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **a) WORKING PATTERNS**

The majority of participants over the last five years have been in permanent posts - working full time equivalent hours, and most are located in areas of Scotland with high urban populations. The number of those in permanent posts has increased over the years, but there has been no significant change to working hours over this period.

Significant proportions of social workers over the years have reported doing extra unpaid hours for their employer either to focus on work-related tasks, such as completing case notes, or to engage in learning activities around topics and issues relevant to their current cases. These extra hours seemed to peak in Year 2 and then taper off by Year 5 (from 60% to 42% respectively). This indicates that the first two years of practice may require additional time and space for knowledge, skills and experience to be embedded into everyday practice – possibly a crucial period of professional consolidation, as new staff begin to emerge from induction activities and begin to take on more or different types of cases.

Perhaps one of the most significant and concerning findings of our study is that a fairly consistent proportion of participants seem to move each year from children’s services into adult and justice roles. Different reasons are given for this, such as stress relating to workload, poor team relations and poor management support.

However, for some practitioners the shift was more practical, eg being closer to home; or developmental, eg gaining new skills and experience in a different area of social work. We found no evidence of any participant moving (or wanting to move) into children's services from other practice areas of social work. And whilst our data showed that a small proportion of participants had moved to the voluntary sector over the last five years (again, a mix of reasons given here), the interesting thing here is that very few participants spoke of leaving the profession altogether – most simply sought 'a change'. However, research from elsewhere in the UK indicates that stress and 'burnout' are particular issues within children and families social work, leading to serious issues around recruitment and job retention across different areas of the country. Scotland has managed to avoid a crisis in job retention and recruitment in this respect; however, our findings indicate that practitioners are more likely to leave children and families than purposefully seek another post within this area of practice.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Employers need to recognise that the first two years of practice represent a crucial period of consolidation for new social workers. Knowledge, skills, and experience require space and time to develop and embed in new practitioners. A significant proportion are spending time engaged in unpaid work and learning to the benefit of employers. The longer-term impacts of this are unknown, but evidence suggests that prolonged working days and nights can lead to increased levels of stress, anxiety, and 'burnout'.
- Reasons for leaving (and wanting to leave) children and families social work in particular need to be examined in more detail. Our findings indicate that this is not isolated to particular areas of Scotland but emerges across different authority areas. We found no evidence of participants moving (or wanting to move) into children's services from other practice areas. But the converse also needs examination: why do some practitioners stay in children and families social work? How are they supported? How do they manage the nature and complexity of the work they do? What matters here? What makes a difference? Answering these questions will enable us to understand more about how best to support social workers in different areas of practice in Scotland.

### **b) AGILE WORKING**

The majority of participants over the last five years have

consistently described 'agile working' in negative terms. Many referred to the added 'stress' of trying to locate and secure a desk or workspace each day. Many commented on the distance between themselves and team members, highlighting the absence of opportunities for informal 'de-briefs' (eg after home visits and meetings) and to have quick chats or discussions about cases. A growing body of research from elsewhere in the UK demonstrates that immediate opportunities to interact with colleagues and managers is important (and in some cases critical) for social workers to help with sense- and decision-making in complex cases. We found very few positive accounts of agile working in our study, most of which seemed to conflate aspects of flexible working, as some participants referred to the benefits of working across different sites to meet their own needs, eg being closer to home.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- The organisational impacts of agile working must be examined more closely in Scotland. Research has shown that in most cases agile working practices have been implemented in response to efficiency savings – mostly around the operational provision of office space, and not in response to the needs of social workers in terms of enhancing their work environment or practice. A growing body of evidence indicates that decisions taken by local authorities to impose environmental restraints on social worker interaction is having a significant effect on important, often critical, communicative mechanisms - only made possible by proximity to, and availability of, colleagues and managers.

### **c) WORKLOAD**

For the majority of participants, workloads have been reported to be appropriate and manageable. However, a proportion felt that workloads made them feel anxious at different points over the last five years. A number of factors must be considered here. First, each local authority will have its own arrangements for the allocation of cases. Second, the needs and complexity of each case will differ and require variable input at different points. In most situations however, research demonstrates that levels of anxiety and stress are not just related to workload itself – it is often this in combination with organisational context and lack of support from managers and colleagues that have the most impact on perceived pressures in practice.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- A consistent and nationally agreed approach to workload allocation and workload management is required across Scotland. We need to consider not just the number of cases held at any one time, but the complexity and amount of time required to address the tasks, actions and presenting issues that social workers face with each allocation. It is unreasonable to assume that equity of workload across a team will result in equity of experience for each social worker.
- To avoid unnecessary anxiety and stress, attention must be paid to organisational contexts and support given to social workers in their everyday work. This includes availability of managers, proximity to colleagues, dedicated admin support and progressive organisational cultures.

### **d) SUPERVISION**

Most participants on average receive supervision monthly (although a proportion gradually moved to gap of between 6-8 weeks as years progressed), lasting for approximately 61-90 minutes. Dimensions of supervision have continued to be privileged by aspects of workload management for most participants over the last five years; however, most over the same period felt that the frequency, length, content, and quality of supervision was appropriate to their needs. Trends suggest that most social workers in the first year get monthly supervision (at least) with a gradual expansion of space between each session for some over the next five years, but generally not exceeding six to eight weeks for most. A notable proportion (not the majority) of participants in Year 2 expressed concern with the frequency of supervision received (wanting more) alongside other concerns about feeling supported, managers explaining complex information and having time to critically reflect in supervision, but we suggest that this is linked to other findings around anxiety with workloads in particular at that stage – perhaps feeling that more contact from managers would help alleviate this. Year 2 for us represents a transition point across a range of areas where initial doubts and anxieties seem to ease as time goes on.

Overall, these findings speak to new and emerging literature on supervision which suggests that workload management in particular needs to be understood more broadly as a process of reflective interaction and discussion, and not as a limiting mechanism of accountability as traditionally thought. Our findings demonstrate

that whilst this dimension of supervision seems to be privileged over others, there is significant evidence here to suggest that supervision is meeting the needs of social workers as they progress in their careers. However, further research is required here – particularly in Scotland where empirical evidence of what actually happens in supervision is scarce.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Again, the first two years of practice must be recognised as a period of transition and consolidation for new staff. Supervision may require different levels of frequency and different modes of delivery during this initial phase of social work careers.
- Supervision should aim for a balance of administration (workload management), education (focus on professional development) and support (focus on emotional wellbeing) – as indicated by Pitt et al (2021). This would ensure that all social workers received a holistic approach to supervision where a range of important dimensions are covered.
- We need to understand more about the supervisory process in Scotland more generally and build on good practice here. What matters in supervision should be explored at all career stages from newly qualified to more experienced social workers.

### **e) PEER SUPPORT**

Informal mechanisms of peer support seem to be more important and meaningful to social workers than formal support received from managers. This featured across a range of dimensions, from the quality of advice and guidance offered, to the ability to express and share emotions relating to work. Participants were clear and consistent in the value, importance, and critical necessity of interacting with peers in close proximity, free from management intervention.

These findings reveal a crucial yet underplayed source of support that gets little recognition or encouragement through formal employment mechanisms. An emerging body of research demonstrates that informal modes of support and interactions with colleagues helps social workers to process the complexity involved in cases, as well as providing a crucial platform for open critical reflection. All of which helps in processes of sense- and decision-

making in cases. Our findings provide strong evidence for employers and policymakers to consider alternative modes of supervision and support – enhancing the traditional worker/manager dyad by recognising the potential for useful and effective professional relationships to be built between colleagues as well as with managers. But key to achieving this is ensuring that social workers can interact with each other in proximity – in spaces dedicated for this. This will be a challenge for employers who adopt agile working practices; however, the benefits and gains of providing this space may actually contribute to efficiency savings by allowing social workers quick and immediate access to advice and guidance, leading to quicker resolution of issues - addressing delays to decision-making and action in complex cases (in short, reducing costs).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Experienced social workers must be given recognition for the role they perform in providing informal advice, guidance, and support. Their activity here is crucial for the professional development and overall wellbeing of social workers in the early stages of their career. Employers are encouraged to consider the benefits of introducing senior practitioner status for experienced social workers – recognising the important part they play in providing peer support to other less experienced staff.
- Mechanisms of peer support must be harnessed and actively encouraged by employers, including the promotion of peer support groups and mentoring. Social workers need time and space to interact without management intervention.
- Employers are encouraged to consider the wider impact of agile working policies on opportunities for informal interactions between staff – particularly the balance between costs and benefits to staff welfare, productivity, and critical decision-making processes.

### **f) IMPACT OF COVID-19**

As indicated, we added a question on working under COVID-19 conditions in Year 5 to gain a sense of experiences during exceptional circumstances; however, this was not within our original aims and objectives for this study. Nevertheless, we found that working under restricted conditions amplified the importance of availability and support from colleagues in close proximity, as



well as revealing the significance placed on simply being with service users and sensing the nuance, detail and micro elements that often help to provide a more holistic understanding of circumstances. These findings reflect experiences found in our interview data (see page 144) and within our separate study on the impact of COVID-19 working practices on recently qualified social workers (see McCulloch et al, 2022). Whilst challenging for most, our findings demonstrate that social workers have significant capacity to pivot when required. The only recommendation that we would make here is that further research is conducted on the longer-term impact and effects of COVID-19 on the profession as a whole.

# CHAPTER 3: COMPETENCE AND CONFIDENCE

## Introduction

For some time, social work education, and to some extent post-qualifying learning, has been dominated by a competence-led frame of reference. This reflects the rise of new public management approaches across education and practice and associated preoccupations with questions of standardisation, measurement, regulation, and control (Lymbery et al, 2000). Over the same period, competence-based approaches have been subject to sustained critique. Essentially, they are judged to be inadequate as a mechanism for both preparing social workers for, and measuring standards across, the diverse, complex, moral, and situated nature of professional learning and practice (Dominelli and Hoogvelt, 1996). Relatedly, many observe that competence-based approaches routinely ignore real world conflicts, including in the form of staff shortages, budgets cuts and cuts to training and research (Klerman, 2009; Moriarty et al, 2011)

Within this contested space, concepts of professional confidence and self-efficacy have become popular and now routinely sit alongside discussions of competence. These newer concepts are judged to be more relevant to fields of practice which require high levels of autonomy, discretion, and creativity and which require self-belief and perseverance in the face of practice challenges (Carpenter, 2015; Bandura, 1997). Accordingly, measures of professional confidence and self-efficacy are increasingly used to inform assessment of competence in social work and related fields. However, some scholars have questioned the relationship between confidence and competence, linked, for example, to findings which show 'inflated' levels of confidence in the early stages of practice that are not necessarily associated with skill levels (Rawlings, 2012, Carpenter, 2015).

Reflecting these developments, reference to professional competence **and** confidence is now commonplace in UK-based workforce development policy and practice. However, the two terms are often used interchangeably and with limited attention to what these outcomes look like, why they matter and how they are best developed in learning and practice (Lymbery et al, 2000; Orme et al, 2009). Discussion in the area is often further complicated by notions of professional 'preparedness' and 'readiness', linked to rising preoccupations with the readiness of newly qualified social workers. Moriarty and Manthorpe (2014) observe that confusion in these areas reflects: a lack of consensus regarding views of education as a development process or as an end-product, over-reliance on practitioner and employer

perceptions of competence, and an associated neglect of attention to the wider contexts and systems of practice that impact significantly on professional and practice outcomes.

With these important cautions in mind, in this chapter we present findings on participant accounts of professional confidence and self-efficacy and how these develop over time. Specifically, we sought to understand perceptions of confidence in relation to the acquisition and application of key knowledge, values, and skills. In respect of self-efficacy, we used a widely adopted self-measurement scale developed by Ralf Schwarzer and Matthias Jerusalem (1995), which assesses perceived self-efficacy across ten items.

The findings reported here should be read alongside those presented across the report chapters. Together, they indicate that professional confidence and efficacy are both outcome and process; they are acquired and developed through multiple, diverse, and overlapping learning and practice experiences; and they are aided by and vulnerable to experiences of complexity, conflict, and context. Those seeking to support professional confidence and efficacy, in learning and practice need to recognise the plural, situated and 'in-process' nature of these outcomes and develop mechanisms of measurement and support that are attentive to that.

## **FINDINGS**

### **PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENCE: KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING**

Across years, participants were asked to rank confidence in their understanding of the seven knowledge items outlined below:

- Legislation
- Statutory and professional codes, standards, frameworks, and guidance
- Theories underpinning understanding of human development
- Theories underpinning understanding of social issues
- Theories of discrimination in contemporary society
- Principles, theories, methods and models of social work intervention and practice
- Principles of risk assessment and risk management

Participants could select from: confident, somewhat confident, neither confident or unconfident, somewhat unconfident, and unconfident.

Overall, and across years, our findings indicate high rates of confidence across **all** key knowledge items. Comparing mean scores across the five years, confidence rates<sup>1</sup> were highest in relation to the following items:

- Statutory and professional codes and standards (90.4%)
- Theories underpinning understanding of human development (89.5%)
- Principles of risk assessment and risk management (86.8)

These are encouraging findings, particularly noting the unease some NQSWs sometimes express relating to knowledge of organisational and statutory procedure and/or risk assessment (Grant et al, 2017). When considered alongside our qualitative data, our findings suggest that, for most, professional confidence in this area increases significantly following entry to practice. These findings, and others, affirm the importance of learning pedagogy that recognises the complementary contributions of academic and practice-based learning opportunities and of pre-and post-qualifying learning.

Participants were least confident in the following items. Though, as is clear, confidence levels in these items remain high:

- Theories of discrimination in contemporary society (79.8%)
- Legislation (82.7%)
- Theories underpinning understanding of social issues (82.9%)

Our qualitative data sheds limited light on the lower rates of confidence reported here, though there is some indication that social workers struggle to confidently synthesize sometimes abstract knowledge and theory with early experiences of practice.

Across years, confidence in knowledge increased for all measured items. However, our findings suggest that knowledge development is not always linear, but often ebbs and flows. For example, in four of the seven knowledge items reported on, confidence grew year on year. However, understanding of human development, social issues, and discrimination each dipped in Year 2 before rising again in Year 3. Similar patterns of fluctuation emerge across items reported on in this chapter. Carpenter et al (2015) report similar dips in the development of confidence and competence amongst NQSWs in England and suggest that this may reflect inflated levels of baseline confidence, linked to limited exposure to the complexities of practice. Our findings broadly support this analysis while making clear that significant knowledge development also

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<sup>1</sup> The percentage of participants selecting 'confident' or 'somewhat confident'.

occurs beyond the first year of practice and across years one to three in particular. This has important implications for how we conceptualise, support and scaffold early career learning and development in Scotland.

Growth in confidence over the five years was greatest in relation to understanding of discrimination, closely followed by understanding of legislation. By Year 5, reported confidence levels were highest in relation to understanding of statutory and professional codes and standards (98.2) and lowest in relation to legislation (90.4%). Lower levels of practitioner confidence in legislation is a theme that runs through the social work research literature (Braye and Preston Shoot, 2016). While our findings show some connect with these messages, they also highlight the importance of asking questions of research findings if we are to understand the fuller picture. For now, we note that most participants report good levels of professional confidence in legislation with clear evidence of growth each year.

The key message here is that social workers report good levels of baseline knowledge across most knowledge areas and that professional confidence in knowledge develops gradually, through practice and over time. Our findings support a developmental approach to knowledge development, with attention to this across (early) career stages. Further, our findings indicate that knowledge development is supported by direct opportunities for practice, in its widest sense, however we need to know more about how social workers develop knowledge over time and what this means for support at different stages in the early career journey. For example, do the positive accounts reported here reflect an active and intentional relationship with emerging knowledge and theory, and the application and development of that through practice? Or do they reflect increased confidence in practice knowledge and an associated distancing from theoretical knowledge and ideas? Limited attention has been given to how social workers develop knowledge in practice, perhaps reflecting social work's practical lean. However, wider research in this area makes clear that excellent professional practice rests on a constant interplay of knowledge, values, and action, with recent studies indicating a need for greater attention to this interplay (Sheppard, 2006; Croisdale-Appleby, 2014).

Fuller detail of our findings in relation to knowledge and understanding is provided in Appendix 1.

## **PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENCE: SKILLS**

Participants were asked to rank how confident they felt across a

range of social work skills, as outlined below. Participants could select from the same range of responses outlined above.

- Manage demands on your own time to prioritise what is important and urgent
- Analyse and synthesise complex information
- Make professional judgements about complex situations
- Exercise assertiveness, power, and authority in ways compatible with social work values
- Produce records and reports that meet professional standards
- Use research skills to inform practice and enhance learning
- Synthesise knowledge and practice
- Work with other professionals and agencies
- Deliver personalised services using outcome-based approaches

The key message from our findings on skills is that, year on year, most participants report high levels of confidence across most skill areas. Comparing mean scores across the five years, participants are most confident in their ability to:

- Work with other professionals and agencies (95.7%).
- Manage demands on time and to prioritise (92.8%).
- Produce records and reports that meet professional standards (89.5%)

Again, these are positive findings. Inter-agency and inter-disciplinary working, for example, are recognized as essential professional skills, reflected in sustained attention to the areas in research, policy, and practice. However, it is important to connect these findings with those presented in Chapter 5 on professional identity, which identifies inter-disciplinary working, specifically in the context of health and social care integration, as a key challenge. Similarly, our findings suggest high levels of confidence in ability to 'produce records and reports that meet professional standards', including relatively high baseline scores. Yet, this is a skill that some studies identify as an area of weakness for some NQSWs (Grant et al, 2017; Welch et al, 2014). We explore these and other dualities in the data below. For now, our findings suggest both confidence **and** struggle in these areas, a theme that runs through our research findings.

Again, the development of confidence in respect of skills emerges as both linear and fluctuating. Reported confidence in social work skills increased steadily year on year in five of nine skill items. By contrast, we found fluctuations for four items, with most dips occurring in Year 2 before rising again in Year 3.

Growth in confidence was greatest in relation to 'making

professional judgements about complex situations', which rose by just under 25% over the five years. Relatedly, by Year 5, reported confidence levels were highest in relation to ability to analyse and synthesise complex information, rising from 88.9% in Year 1 to 98.2% in Year 5. Encouragingly, these findings suggest considerable and developing confidence amongst participants in working with complexity.

Across years, participants were least confident in their ability to:

- Use research skills to inform practice and enhance learning (67.6%)
- Synthesise knowledge and practice (78.4%)
- Make professional judgements about complex situations (81.9%)

Notably, participant confidence in the use of research skills sits ten percentage points below the next lowest mean score, which speaks to a similar skill item, and 28 percentage points below the highest mean score. While our findings show significant growth in this item across the five years - from a low of 58.9% in Year 2 to a peak of 79.6 in year 5, the gap in reported confidence levels between this item and others is striking. This finding is neither new nor unique to this study. As we observe in previous reports, it appears to reflect a persisting ambivalence in social work education and practice regarding the value of research knowledge and skills for practice. As we continue to circle this issue in workforce development policy and practice in Scotland, reflecting, perhaps, a prioritising of other important issues, we should note that our partners in education and health continue to make steady progress in this area, demonstrated in the embodiment of a more integrated professional identity and practice (Taylor, 2015). Fuller detail of our findings on skills is provided in Appendix 1.

## **PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENCE: VALUES**

Participants were asked to rank the extent to which they felt able to apply key professional values. Value items were drawn from the SSSC code of practice (Scottish Social Services Council, 2016) and are outlined below.

- Practice in a manner which reflects anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, respecting diversity within cultures and values
- Promote equal opportunities and social justice
- Practice honesty, openness, empathy and respect
- Protect and promote the rights and interests of people who use services and carers

- Create and maintain the trust and confidence of people who use services and carers
- Promote the independence of people who use services while protecting them, as far as possible, from danger and harm
- Respect the rights of people who use services, while striving to make sure that their behaviour does not harm themselves or other people
- Uphold public trust and confidence in social services
- Take responsibility for the quality of your work and for maintaining and improving your knowledge and skills

Participants could select from a choice of: always, often, sometimes, rarely, and never.

Overall, our findings indicate very high levels of confidence amongst participants in the application of professional values. Based on means scores from across the five years, participants were most confident in the following three items:

- Practice honesty, openness, empathy and respect (99.1%)
- Practice in a manner which reflects anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice (94.5%)
- Take responsibility for the quality of your work and for maintaining and improving your knowledge and skills (93.5%)

Reported confidence was lowest in relation to the following items. Though again, reported levels of confidence in these items remains high:

- Upholding public trust and confidence (84.7%)
- Promoting equal opportunities and social justice (88%)
- Promote the independence of people who use services while protecting them, as far as possible, from danger and harm (89.5%)

Broadly, participant confidence in the application of values appears highest in relation to values over which they feel they have most autonomy and control, ie, practice honesty, openness, empathy and respect; and lowest in relation to values felt to be more dependent on the actions of others, ie upholding public trust and confidence, and promoting equal opportunities and social justice. Again, this finding is supported by our qualitative findings which regularly drew attention to the constraining impacts of the following on professional confidence and competence:

- (i) a lack of respect from others (professionals and publics), and
- (ii) organisational, financial and system constraints



Across items, our findings show very low levels of fluctuation in confidence year on year, suggesting that professional confidence in the application of professional values is strong at the point of entry into practice and less subject to movement across the first five years. Fuller outline of our findings in respect of professional values is provided in Appendix 1.

## **SELF-EFFICACY**

The project team used a widely adopted method of measuring self-efficacy developed by Ralf Schwarzer and Matthias Jerusalem (1995). As outlined, the construct of perceived self-efficacy reflects an optimistic self-belief. This is the belief that one can perform novel or difficult tasks, or cope with adversity in various domains of human functioning. Participants were asked to consider ten items of self-efficacy, outlined below, and rate themselves against a 5-point scale ranging from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree':

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

Again, overall, accounts of self-efficacy were generally high across most items, with two outliers. Comparing mean scores across the five years, self-efficacy rates were highest (percentage selecting 'agree' or 'strongly agree') for the following items:

- I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events (86.5%)
- I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities (81%)
- I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort (77.7%)

Self-efficacy rates were lowest, and significantly lower, for the following items:

- If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want (28.2%)
- It is easy for me to stick to my aims and accomplish my goals (55%)

Agreement with the first statement was low across years with a slight increase year on year, rising from 19% in Year 1 to 37% in Year 5. However, agreement with the second statement was fairly consistent through Years 1-4, suggesting little growth or development in this item over time. The exception to this was in Year 5 when agreement rose by 10.9%. Notably, this increase occurred during COVID-19 when most participants were working from home and in the context of a second national lockdown. Our qualitative data suggests that some participants found it easier to stick to their aims and goals in these circumstances. These findings are new and merit further exploration in research and practice. For example, our qualitative findings suggest that participants experience opposition in multiple forms, including in their work with service users, in their relationship with other professionals and publics, and in their navigation of wider organisational and social systems and structures. However, it is not clear if or how social workers experience support to navigate the different forms of opposition they face. Relatedly, we need to understand the particular needs and challenges social workers experience in sticking to their aims and goals, particularly noting current emphases on outcome-focused practice. For example, what does an outcome-focused approach look like in practice contexts known for uncertainty, crisis and flux? Relatedly, what does good professional support look and feel like in this particular space?

Supervision is a natural space for initial exploration of these issues; however, our findings suggests that supervision provides limited space for this kind of practice-based exchange and support. Further, as we argue in Chapter 2, support with practice challenges need to also extend beyond the supervisory space.

Across years, rates for all but one item of self-efficacy increased. Most significant areas of growth were found in relation to the following items:

- Thanks to my resourcefulness, I know how to handle unforeseen situations, rising by 18.3%
- If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want, rising by 17.3%
- When I am confronted with a problem, I can usually find several solutions, rising by 14.2%

Broadly, these findings, conducted over a five-year period, build on Carpenter et al's (2015) findings which suggest that self-efficacy in NQSWs develops over time. The exception here was in relation to the following item: 'I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities'. Here, levels of agreement fluctuated across years, falling slightly between Years 1 and 3 (from 81.9% to 79.7%), rising again in Year 4 (83.4%), and falling again in Year 5 (77.8%). However, in common with our findings on professional confidence, only four of the ten items show a pattern of linear growth year on year. The remaining six fluctuate, with perceptions of self-efficacy often dipping in Years 2 and/or 3.

Again, these findings suggest that perceptions of developing self-efficacy are not necessarily one-directional. Rather, like professional confidence, self-efficacy appears to ebb and flow as social workers grapple with the changing demands, circumstances, and contexts they encounter in practice. Professional efficacy is then both a process and an outcome. Efforts to measure and support self-efficacy need to reflect this.

The above findings present a positive but mixed picture. Participant accounts of self-efficacy are mostly high, though lower and more variable than those reported in respect of knowledge, values and skills. Further, participants report much lower levels of efficacy, including by Year 5, in two important areas. Our findings suggest growth in self-efficacy across most items measured however many items also show significant fluctuations across years. These more varied results may reflect the more complex nature of what is being measured via this scale and, perhaps, the greater suitability of self-efficacy scales as measurement tool for complex fields of practice. However, further research on measuring and supporting self-efficacy in practice is needed if we are to develop our understanding of these issues.

## **PROFESSIONAL CONFIDENCE AS PLURAL**

Overall, the high levels of professional confidence and self-efficacy reported in this study is a welcome finding, particularly considering wider and often reactionary debates regarding the preparedness and/or competence of both new and experienced social workers. However, it is also one of the curious findings of the study, noting the known challenges, complexities and constraints impacting on contemporary social work practice (Audit Scotland, 2016). For example, participants report high levels of confidence in the delivery of personalised services, while wider research suggests that progress and impact in this area has been slow, with policy

ambition and rhetoric on personalisation outstripping experiences of delivery on the ground (Audit Scotland, 2017). Relatedly, despite high levels of reported confidence across quantitative measurements, our qualitative findings highlight the many challenges participants experience in their daily practice, including, for example, working in just and value-led ways (see also Tham and Lynch, 2001). What should we make of these seeming contradictions in the data? Do they reflect the different data collection methods employed in this study, ie, do participants respond differently to quantitative and qualitative questions in this area? This may be part of the story, in so far as the complexities and conflicts of professional practice were more visible across qualitative responses than quantitative ones. However, having examined this issue closely across the five years, we suggest that these findings speak less to contradictions in the data and more to the routine dualities and conflicts of social work practice. Expressed simply, participants in this study often experience and report more than one thing at the same time. This duality is especially evident across our qualitative survey findings and across responses to our final survey question in particular. Here, we invited participants to comment on 'anything else' that felt relevant to being a social worker today. Across years, responses to this question were distinctly plural, illuminating the highs and lows of being a social worker. Specifically, participants often spoke to a strong sense of professional purpose and reward **and** to the significant constraints they experienced in carrying out their role and purpose. Discussion of constraints typically included attention to managerial, bureaucratic and resource led organizational practices, and/or the significant impacts of austerity, budget cuts and inadequate resourcing on professional identity and practice. In essence, and as the following responses illustrate, most participants described an experience of strength **and** struggle, linked to 'doing battle' in challenging times:

'I love being a social worker, I've worked very hard to get to where I am .... I feel that there needs to be more investment within local authorities to enable them to invest in their workers who work with the most vulnerable in society. I feel social work is now more about case management rather than intervention, and this is great loss... There is a strong, capable and dedicated social work workforce in Scotland, but unfortunately we are being let down by budget cuts and bureaucracy.' (YR5)

'I followed a career in social work with the wish to help and support individuals who struggled to do so themselves. I feel like I have joined the profession at a time where numbers, money and performance are at the forefront of management agenda. Continuing to hold on to my values and to work in a

way that promotes human rights and needs is difficult in this climate. I will continue to hold on to my value base and everything that is important to the people I work with and fight for their needs. I honestly regularly question my career choice due to the bureaucratic culture which I feel myself working in.’ (YR4)

‘I feel that a culture of accountability, professional insecurity and high levels of anxiety means that care and compassion are being squeezed out of the profession. There are amazing social workers working incredibly hard for people but that is despite the system rather than supported by it.’ (YR4)

Again, these findings connect with those reported by Carpenter et al (2015), who found that high self-efficacy amongst NQSWs was ‘unexpectedly associated with high role conflict’. Carpenter suggests that this may reflect the fact that as NQSWs become more confident and competent in practice they are likely to take on more complex work which, in turn, is likely to provide greater exposure to and immersion in professional conflicts. Broadly, we agree. Findings from this study suggest that the development of professional confidence and competence for social work occurs not in spite of experiences of complexity and conflict but **through** these experiences. Further, accounts of practice in these terms are often plural, that is, workers find reward and fulfilment in working with conflict - particularly value-based conflicts - and they experience it as a ‘battle’ or struggle. These findings have important implications for how we understand and support social workers in practice. If being a social worker routinely involves conflict, strength **and** struggle, what does good professional support look like in this space? What are the particular implications for educators, employers, government, and professional bodies as they seek to support the workforce through experiences of conflict, strength and struggle? There is some discussion on the topic of social struggle in the social work literature (Abramovitz, 1998) but much less attention to this issue in discussion of professional support and development, including for newly qualified staff. This is a significant absence. Our findings suggest that social workers need, and would benefit from, more regular and material attention to these issues in practice.

Before moving on, it is important to note that the plural experience described above was not experienced by all participants. Year on year, a minority of participants reported a more singular experience of struggle, linked to a mix of challenging caseloads, high levels of staff absence and inadequate support. Many participants appeared to manage this struggle through moving jobs, while others described contemplating exit from the profession. Our survey method did not allow us to trace individual patterns of exit, nor

does the SSSC's annual reporting on workforce data appear to attend to this. If we wish to maximise professional support and retention amongst social workers, understanding patterns of exit, including the factors which underpin individual decision making in this area, is an important strand.

Building on the above, our findings indicate that efforts to understand and improve professional confidence and competence need to move beyond the worker-employer dyad to also attend to significant issues of context. Findings from this study indicate that social workers enter practice with good levels of baseline confidence and efficacy across most areas, linked to good quality qualifying education and a strong sense of identity and purpose. Further, professional confidence and efficacy is significantly strengthened through early experiences of practice, particularly when accompanied by good quality support and regular opportunities for learning and reflection. However, our findings also make clear that participants experience significant struggles in practice, linked to routine practice conflicts within and beyond social work services. Workforce development strategy cannot eradicate these struggles, but it can identify more practical and tangible supports for social workers as they navigate routine conflicts. This requires more explicit recognition of social struggle and conflict as a fundamental feature of professional practice and accompanying attention to how to support workers as they work within this space.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Most participants report high levels of confidence across almost all surveyed knowledge, skill, and value items. Across years, self-confidence levels were highest in relation to the application of professional **values**. Most newly qualified staff enter practice confident in their capacity to practice in value-based ways. Further, confidence in values appears less subject to growth or movement over time. These findings are supported by our findings on professional identity, which suggest that professional values are a core and steady element of early career professional identity. However, value-based practice is also an area where participants report significant experiences of conflict and struggle, linked to the various organisational, financial, and socio-political conflicts they face in practice. Our findings in this area suggest that professional confidence and competence is often plural, reflecting experiences of both strength **and** struggle. We return to this point below.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- We need to recognise the plural nature of professional

confidence and competence across career stages, including through the development of more relevant and responsive supports.

- Professional development activity, and associated practice improvement efforts, should make room for and be attentive to professional experiences of plurality, and to experiences of conflict, strength and struggle specifically.

Participants report good levels of baseline **knowledge** across most areas here. Further, confidence in knowledge development appears to build gradually through practice and over time. However, confidence in knowledge also ebbs and flows, as participants grapple with the challenge and complexities of knowledge into practice. These findings support a developmental approach to professional learning, with more explicit attention to knowledge development across career stages. Further, our findings indicate that knowledge development is supported by opportunities for practice, in its broadest sense, that is, through professional cultures, environments and relationships that recognise and make space for practice as a reflexive interplay of knowledge, values and action. The extent to which opportunities for reflexive practice are routinely available or supported in current practice is unclear and merits attention.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- The first year in practice provides important opportunities for the application and development of knowledge for practice. Activity to develop a Supported First Year should provide explicit attention to and support for this process.
- Attention to knowledge development in the first year of practice should be part of a broader commitment to the development of knowledge-led professional identities, organisations, and practice. This requires a re-centering of knowledge in practice and in workforce development strategy.

Broadly, our findings suggest that most newly qualified staff enter practice with good levels of professional confidence in respect of most **skill** items surveyed and that confidence in skills develops significantly over time. Again, confidence in skills fluctuates across the first few years, with particular dips noted in Year 2, as workers expand their critical grasp of the social work role and task. Again, these findings underline the significant role of practice, in its broadest sense, in supporting professional confidence in skills. They also underline the importance of supports for skill development beyond the first year of practice.

In common with wider research studies, we found lower levels of professional confidence in relation to research skills. This appears to reflect a longstanding professional ambivalence regarding the relationships between research and practice.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Our findings provide continued support for a blended and career-long approach to professional knowledge and skill development. This should combine academic and practice-based learning opportunities and extend beyond qualifying education and the first year of practice.
- We need to understand and address the profession's persisting ambivalence regarding the relationship between research and practice, including through the development of a more applied professional research strategy.

Participants accounts of **self-efficacy** were, again, mostly high and suggest good levels of capacity to handle routine practice challenges. However, self- efficacy rates were significantly and consistently lower, in relation to: (i) working with and through opposition, and (ii) sticking to and accomplishing one's aims and goals. These are new research findings and need to be unpacked in research and practice.

The high levels of professional confidence and self-efficacy reported in this study is a welcome and important finding, particularly noting sustained and often reactionary debates regarding the preparedness and competence of NQSWs. However, it is also one of the more curious findings, noting the many challenges associated with social work role and task and wider qualitative accounts which document experiences of significant strain and struggle.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Knowledge and understanding of self-efficacy measures and their value for professional practice and development is still in its infancy. We need to develop our understanding of these issues if we wish to engage meaningfully in discussion and developments relating to professional confidence, competence, and efficacy.
- Those supporting social workers need to better understand the nature of the opposition and struggles they face in their day-to-day practice. This should inform the development of more practical and targeted professional help and support.



- We need to understand the particular needs and challenges social workers experience in sticking to their aims and goals, particularly noting recent emphases on outcome-focused practice and in the context of our findings on professional struggle.

Considered together, our findings indicate that professional confidence and self-efficacy are fluid, in-process and plural outcomes, reflecting the diverse, complex, conflicted and situated nature of the social work role and task. Most participants find fulfilment, value, and confidence in working with and through complexity and conflict **and** they experience these dimensions of practice as struggle. The balance of strength and struggle appears to differ from person to person however is shaped significantly by the organizational and wider professional environment and associated experiences of support. These findings have much to contribute to our developing understanding of how to better understand, measure and support professional confidence and efficacy in practice. As Joan Tronto (2021) observes in respect of care more broadly: 'there are not singular but plural answers to questions about what it means to care well'.

# CHAPTER 4: LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

## Introduction

Improving post-qualifying learning and development has long been challenging territory for social work. Social work is a deeply practice-based profession, characterised by breadth, diversity, complexity and uncertainty (Cree and McCulloch, forthcoming); learning for practice is similarly complex. Relatedly, post-qualifying learning often finds itself in the shadows of a spotlight on qualifying learning, particularly in recent years as the profession has sought to raise its professional standing through the creation of new or improved qualifying standards and frameworks. Attention to professional learning as an integrative and career-long phenomena is, arguably, a more challenging entity, particularly noting the multiple settings and lines of governance in which learning and practice takes place.

In most cases, strategic attention to professional learning, pre- and post-qualifying is frequently triggered by perceived failings in practice (McCulloch and Taylor, 2018). In such instances, learning strategy is often mobilised by top-down and partial accounts of what is needed to support improvement or change, often with limited leadership or buy-in from across the profession. Added to this, in a policy arena increasingly characterised by 'transformation' priorities, new initiatives in professional learning typically run alongside other urgent priorities and rarely have time to bed in before a new priority emerges, prompting, often, changes in direction and strategy.

At the time of writing, there is some taking stock of these issues in Scotland. This appears to be linked to sustained attention to issues of learning and development from within the profession and, perhaps, a sense that social work needs to put its professional 'house' in order if it is to take its place in an integrated service landscape and deliver the kinds of service and social transformations envisaged by recent social policy (Gordon et al., 2019).

Against this challenging backdrop, in this chapter we report on findings relating to:

- How social workers learn;
- Participant satisfaction with learning and development opportunities;
- Self-identified learning and development needs; and
- How employers can better support learning and development

Noting the very limited research on post-qualifying learning, particularly in relation to newly qualified staff, our findings provide important baseline knowledge and recommendations while also identifying areas for further enquiry.

## **FINDINGS**

### **HOW DO SOCIAL WORKERS LEARN?**

Participants were asked to rank time spent on the following list of learning activities, ranking these from most time (1) to least time (6) spent since becoming employed.

- Shadowing other social workers / professionals
- Learning / professional development provided by employer
- Learning / professional development provided by university
- Learning / professional development provided by outside organisation
- Self-directed learning at work (eg, reading books, journal articles, research evidence)
- Self-directed learning at home (eg, reading books, journal articles, research evidence)

Importantly, the above is not an exhaustive list of learning activity. It does not, for example, cover learning through practice, peer learning or professional supervision, for example. These processes are reported on elsewhere in this report (see Chapter 2). Responses to this question shed light then on time spent on what might be termed formal modes of learning.

In Year 1, participants report that most time is spent on shadowing other social workers and professionals. For some, this occurs through structured programmes of induction, for others it is more self-directed and ad hoc, often it is both. This was followed by learning and development provided by employers. Participants report that least time is spent on learning provided by universities.

As participants progress in their careers, much less time is spent on shadowing and most time is spent on learning and development provided by employers, closely followed by learning provided by outside agencies (eg, for justice social workers, some risk-based training is provided by the Risk Management Authority). Again, least time is spent on learning provided by universities. This pattern is consistent across Years 2 to 5.

Reported time spent on self-directed learning remains fairly

consistent over the five years, overtaking the process of shadowing after Year 1 but sitting behind learning provided by employers and outside organisations. Participants describe spending more time on self-directed learning at home than at work, often focussed on reading or exploring topics linked to current practice issues.

When asked about the amount of their own time spent on learning and development over the past twelve months, many participants reported spending 10+ hours (an average of 36.2% of participants across the 5 years), with some of this group reporting much more. This was closely followed by those reporting 6-10 hours (an average of 28.4% across the 5 years). There is some drop in these numbers over the five years with the most significant drop in Year 5. This sits alongside a corresponding rise in those who report spending 1, 2-3 and 4-5 hours of their own time over the same period. Across years, higher levels of time spent on own learning was linked to enrolment on credit bearing courses and/or to personal motivation for learning. The significant drop in time spent in Year 5 was linked to constraints on home learning associated with COVID-19.

There is little comparative research data on how social workers learn whilst in practice, reflecting the very limited research literature on this topic generally (Ferguson, 2021). In 2010, Baginsky et al, reporting on the work experiences of social workers in England, found that attending conferences, self-directed study and case discussions were amongst the most common forms of Continuous Professional Development (CPD). More recent English-based studies point to an increased reliance on in-house training provision and diminishing access to external post-graduate opportunities and qualifications (Laming, 2009; Social Work Task Force, 2009; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014). Gordon et al's (2019) recent review of post-qualifying learning in Scotland reports that social workers engage in a wide range of formal and informal learning activity, though notes that the numbers of social workers undertaking external post-qualifying awards is in decline. Importantly, each of these studies, some published more than a decade apart, report severe cuts to social work workforce development budgets and an absence of clear learning and development pathways.

## **EXPERIENCES OF FORMAL AND INFORMAL LEARNING**

Across the five years, on average, 43% agree that their learning is structured. This reduced gradually from 45.9% in Year 1 to 32.5% in Year 4, rising again to 53.5% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement followed an inverse pattern with a low of 24.8% in Year 1, a peak of 37.8% in Year 4, and an average of 30% overall. Levels of

neutrality fluctuated, with a peak of 33.8% in Year 3, a low of 20% in Year 5, and an average of 27% overall.

The wide distribution and fluctuating nature of responses to this question, including the high level of neutral responses, indicates that social workers experience both structured and unstructured forms of learning. Qualitative data suggests that increased levels of agreement that learning is structured in Year 5 was linked to changes in learning associated with COVID-19, ie, an increase in COVID-19 related learning and training and reduced access to unstructured learning modes, ie peer-based learning.

In line with the above, on average, 56.4% agree that most of their learning has been informal. Again, this figure fluctuated over the 5 years, with a peak of 62.1% in Year 2 and a low of 48.8% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement also fluctuated, with a low of 17.9% in Year 2, a peak of 26.6% in Year 3 and an average of 20.4% overall. Levels of neutrality have also fluctuated, with a low of 17.7% in Year 3, a peak of 27.9% in Year 5, and an average of 23.1% overall.

Together, these findings make clear that social workers experience both formal and informal modes of learning, with a clear lean towards unstructured and informal modes. This finding is supported by the extant literature. We also found a slight increase in experiences of formal modes of learning during COVID-19 and a corresponding decrease in access to informal learning in the same period. This appears to be linked to a rise in formal and top-down direction and training associated with COVID-19 and reduced opportunities for peer and office-based learning.

What are we to make of this duality? Do these findings speak to a strength or weakness of professional learning for early career social workers? Our response to this question likely reflects our own conceptions of what matters in early career learning and the value we place on formal and informal modes of learning. The findings from this study and others suggest that both matter and are highly valued by social workers in early career development and beyond (Grant et al, 2016; Welch et al, 2014; Webster-Wright, 2017).

Ferguson's (2021: iii) recent study into how social workers learn through work, takes this a step further and likens professional learning to a complex and enmeshed web, with 'each thread connected to the others as part of the learning process'. Importantly, Ferguson uses the metaphor of a web as 'a reminder that the experience is a whole and should not be fragmented' (p.201). While there is some recognition of learning as a complex and integrative phenomenon in professional learning theory and discourse, most observe that professional learning strategy and

practice is often fragmented and continues to privilege formal and acquisitional modes of learning (Gordon et al, 2019; Ferguson, 2021; Skinner and Whyte, 2004). If we wish to improve early career learning, we need to address this persisting bias in professional learning strategy and practice and develop fuller and more integrative accounts.

## **SATISFACTION WITH LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES**

Participant satisfaction with the **amount** of learning and development opportunities available has consistently reduced each year; from 60.6% in Year 1, to 35.6 in year 4, and just 19% in Year 5. Correspondingly, levels of dissatisfaction increased from 21.1% in Year 1 to 50% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality also increased each year, from 18.4% in Year 1 to 31% in Year 5.

Our qualitative data indicates that COVID-19 has had a significant and adverse impact on experiences of learning in Year 5. However, even accounting for a COVID-19 effect, our findings show a pattern of rising dissatisfaction and ambivalence amongst participants regarding the amount of learning and development opportunities available. Further, our data reveals diverse and often contrasting experiences within cohorts. For example, some participants report regular and supported access to learning and development opportunities while others describe a pattern of having requests ignored or refused. This appears to reflect ongoing inconsistencies in support for learning and development across organisations and teams. Our qualitative survey data also suggests that, as they progress in their careers, social workers want access to (i) more learning and development opportunities, (ii) a wider range of courses and (iii) more role specific, specialised and external opportunities. We return to these messages below.

Across the five years, most participants rate the **quality** of learning and development available as satisfactory or above. On average, 21.4% rated it as 'above average', 59.8% as 'satisfactory', and 18.7% as 'below average'. The proportion of those satisfied or above is at a high in year one (89.8%) though falls steadily to 65.4% in Year 5. There is a corresponding increase in those who rated quality as 'below average' in the same period, rising from 10.2% in Year 1 to 34.5% in Year 5.

Broadly, these findings suggest that most participants are satisfied with the quality of learning opportunities available to them. However, satisfaction diminished year on year. Again, qualitative data in this area highlights different and often contrasting experiences within cohorts, linked to differing experiences of access

to learning generally and to role specific, specialised, and external opportunities in particular:

'My employer has been very supportive of my qualification and is working with me to look at how we as an authority improve our approach to working with individuals with autism.' (YR5)

'I have been looking to do practice educator training for the last three years and this has never been made available to me.' (YR5)

A similar but less positive picture emerged when participants were asked if they were provided with 'adequate professional learning and development opportunities'. On average, 63.8% agree that employers provide adequate professional learning and development opportunities. However, again, agreement with this statement decreased significantly between Years 1 and 4, from 80.7% to 46.9%, before rising to 62.8% in Year 5. Again, our qualitative data suggests that diminishing satisfaction with learning reflects participant desire for a wider range of learning and training opportunities and for more role specific, specialised, and external opportunities in particular. The rise in agreement in Year 5 is more curious given known constraints on learning and development during COVID-19. Our qualitative data suggests that this reflects reduced expectations of employers during this period.

Examined together, our findings indicate participant satisfaction levels are highest in their first year of practice and gradually diminish as they progress in their careers. Broadly, this appears to reflect that in-house, generic, and mandatory learning and development opportunities are experienced as beneficial for providing entry level knowledge and induction into an organisation or role but are associated with diminishing levels of satisfaction as social workers progress in their careers. Diminishing levels of satisfaction with in-house learning appears to be linked to:

- (i) the dominance of this modality in local authority provision;
- (ii) a focus on generic or interdisciplinary training, with limited opportunities for learning tailored to the worker's particular role and area of practice; and
- (iii) limited accompanying opportunities for in-depth or specialised learning, particularly those involving further qualifications and/or associated with career progression.

Relatedly, our findings reveal contrasting experiences of access to and support for a range of learning and training opportunities, which appeared to reflect differences in the value placed by organisations and/or employers on professional learning and

development.

The above findings are neither new nor unique to early career learning and development. As outlined above, for some time now, existing reviews of post-qualifying learning have pointed to an over-reliance on in-house provision and diminishing access to external opportunities and qualifications (Laming, 2009; Social Work Task Force, 2009; Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014). Relatedly, successive reviews have highlighted the importance of developing more 'hybrid' models of continuous professional development that combine in-house and short courses with post qualifying academic qualifications (Moriarty and Manthorpe, 2014). Over the same period, University led post-qualifying learning provision in Scotland has reduced significantly, in response to diminishing investment, an increasingly marketised learning economy and insufficient demand from the field. The distance between research findings in this area and developing learning strategy and practice is significant.

Our findings suggest that improving learning and training provision for early careers social workers needs to be part of a broader commitment to improving post-qualifying learning for social workers across career stages. While formal learning and training is only one part of the 'emmeshed web' of post-qualifying learning, successive studies point to the need to develop and resource a more 'hybrid' approach, which combines in-house and external opportunities which are linked clearly to career pathways and progression.

## **LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT NEEDS**

Across the 5 years, on average, 86.3% agree they take the lead in identifying their professional learning and development needs. This fluctuates very slightly across the five years, with a peak of 89% in Year 1 and a low of 83.6% in Year 4. Levels of neutrality are consistently low, with an average of 11.4% overall. Levels of disagreement are lower still, with an average of 2.5% overall.

Conversely, on average, 23.8% suggest that employers take the lead in identifying professional learning and development needs. This has fluctuated slightly with a low of 20.2% in Year 2 and a peak of 27.9% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement and neutrality are relatively high, with an average of 40% and 36% respectively, with some fluctuations across years.

Unsurprisingly, our findings suggest higher levels of involvement and direction from employers during COVID-19, reflecting an increase in mandatory requirements for practice over this period.



Together, these findings indicate that most participants feel that they take the lead in identifying their learning and development needs. Just under one in four report a different experience, recognising significant leadership from employers. There is little comparative data in this area; however, it would be useful to observe how this compares with the experiences of early career social workers working outside of Scotland and within more structured early career frameworks. Similarly, how do these findings compare with the experiences of other early career professionals? Are the high levels of self-direction reported here particular to social workers and our associated professional development frameworks? Understanding these issues through a comparative lens is particularly relevant in developing contexts of service integration.

To better understand the developing learning needs of social workers, survey participants were invited to identify these through open text responses. Year 1 responses were varied, but responses were broadly framed as wanting 'more'. Specifically, more learning and development opportunities, more practice experience, more role-related training, and more protected opportunities for learning, including self-directed learning and space for independent reading. Interestingly, attention to practice-based learning and self-directed learning was most pronounced in year 1, diminishing slightly thereafter. This may reflect the significance of this transition point for early career learning. Equally it may reflect the adoption of new and perhaps narrower conceptions of learning in practice. Further research is needed to understand these emergent patterns.

Findings from Years 2 and 3 were more focused and tended to focus on a need for training relating to risk and protection, aligned typically to participants' particular role or service area.

This reflects wider research findings which suggest some anxiety amongst some newly qualified staff in working with risk, linked to the complexities of this area of practice and to increased public scrutiny in this area (Grant et al, 2016). Year 2 and 3 responses also conveyed a desire for a wider range of and more in-depth learning opportunities in core practice areas, including across formal, informal, in-house, and external methods:

'I think the learning that I need now, moving on, doesn't come in the form of formal training. I think I need to learn more on the job, I think maybe being better supported in supervision, having a more dynamic team meeting set up, having organised formal interaction between the team, instead of just informal peer discussions, would probably bring me on more, now, than any more training courses' (YR2)

Again, accounts of opportunities for these different modes of learning were mixed, linked to differing levels of employer and/or organisational support for learning and development.

Similar findings emerged from Year 4 and 5 data, though with an increased number of participants expressing a desire for more specialist, in-depth and external learning opportunities. Again, this was mostly linked to core practice areas but with a clear desire to go beyond generic, entry-level, and mandatory provision. Learning needs most frequently mentioned here aligned closely with available provision and included learning/ training opportunities in child-care and protection, adult protection, mental health officer training, and practice educator training. Other individual responses spoke to a desire for in-depth learning related to leadership, joint investigating interviewing and working with risk, complexity, and trauma. The following examples illustrate some of the above:

'The training offered to me was more mandatory training ... I feel I would benefit from more specific training such as trauma-based practice, life story work, etc.' (YR4)

'Training on complex cases i.e. working with children who have experienced sexual abuse.' (YR5)

'I feel that I need to be involved in more multiagency risk formulations and I would benefit from having learning opportunities that use both research, theory and teaching along with something I can consolidate into practice.' (YR5)

Broadly, the expressed learning needs of participants align with dominant practice priorities and available learning and development provision. Specifically, there is a strong emphasis on learning relating to risk and protection, particularly in Years 2 and 3, and on learning and qualifications aligned to core practice areas and career progression. However, there is also evidence that early career learning needs are diverse and diffuse, reflecting the diverse nature of professional practice and the different ways in which social workers learn. To some extent, this diversity appears poorly recognised in existing provision and speaks, again, to the need to develop fuller accounts of and approaches to professional learning that better reflect the breadth and depth of social work's identity and practice.

## **HOW CAN EMPLOYERS SUPPORT LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT?**

Despite diminishing levels of satisfaction with the learning and

development opportunities available, most participants report good levels of employer support for learning and development with, on average, 80.3% reporting a supportive relationship. This figure fluctuated slightly over the years though remained broadly consistent. Again, a significant minority report neutral or poor support from employers, a finding also supported by our qualitative data. The contrasting nature of participant experiences is a recurring finding across our study and one we need to attend to.

When asked how their employer could support their learning and development, responses broadly affirm findings already discussed in this chapter. Across years, participants reiterate a desire for 'more' and 'better' training and access to a wider range and choice of training and learning opportunities. Participants repeat their desire to move beyond 'generic', 'mandatory' and 'in house' training provision, towards more focused and advanced opportunities relevant to their professional role. Again, this appeared to reflect an increase in mandatory, generic, and interdisciplinary modes of learning, and the perceived limits of this for (early career) professional development. As the following participants express:

'Often training is aimed to be multi-disciplinary. This is good in many ways but there should still be some emphasis on social work only training that can be more advanced.' (YR4)

'Develop more specific training for social workers. The multi-disciplinary training can be good but on issues such as child protection or domestic abuse it can be simplified in order to be helpful to each professional. Social workers specific training could be more relevant and advanced.' (YR5)

More broadly, and across years, participants identified that employers can help by providing support, permission, signposting and/or funding to access a wider range of learning opportunities as detailed above. Some participants also highlighted the importance of supporting 'time' for learning, including in the form of 'protected time ... linked to workload management' (YR5).

Across years, a small number of participants noted that some of the challenges experienced in learning and development extend beyond the role and influence of employers, including, for example, issues of range and choice, supporting infrastructure, professional environment, and funding. This connects with findings from across this research study and is picked up by Moriarty and Manthorpe (2014) who note that almost no attention has been given to the broader organisational and socio-political contexts of social work learning and practice and the ways in which each can aid and impede professional learning and development. There is not space

to do justice to this important point here. As a baseline, our findings assert the importance of looking beyond the worker-employer dyad to also recognise the significant aids and constraints located within the professional, organisational, socio-political, and cultural contexts framing early career learning and practice.

The above findings suggest that most participants experience good support from employers for learning and development, however, this is not the experience of all and, as we note in Chapter 3, poor support in this area was felt to impact significantly on perceived confidence and efficacy. In terms of how employers can help, responses reiterate a desire for more learning and training opportunities, access to a wider range and choice of training and learning opportunities, and more support, signposting and time. Relatedly, some participants noted that improving professional learning and development extends beyond the worker - employer dyad and links to wider system, structural and cultural issues, including funding for and investment in professional learning and social work services broadly.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **HOW SOCIAL WORKERS LEARN**

In their first year of practice, newly qualified social workers describe spending significant amounts of time learning through **shadowing** other professionals. Learning through shadowing also emerges as an important mode of learning across the first five years and confirms broader messages in this study and others about the value social workers place on learning with others and through practice (Ferguson, 2021). Notably, we found no research on shadowing in post-qualifying learning though a few studies explore its merits in qualifying learning (Le Riche, 2006; Scourfield, 2018).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Our findings support attention to shadowing as an important mode of learning across the first year of practice and in the immediate years following. Ideally, this should be part of more comprehensive attention to the role and contribution of informal and practice-based learning to professional development in early careers.

Beyond their first year, participants describe spending most (formal) learning time on 'in house' training, that is, training provided by their employer. Much of this training appears to be mandatory, generic, and multi-disciplinary. It is generally

experienced as beneficial for providing entry level knowledge and induction into an organisation and role but is associated with diminishing levels of satisfaction as social workers progress in their career. Across the five years, least time is spent on learning provided by universities. Our findings also reveal contrasting experiences of learning and training which appears to reflect enduring inconsistencies in organisational and/or employer approaches to and support for professional learning and development.

The above findings are not new or unique to early career learning and development. Successive reviews and studies point to an over-reliance on in-house provision and diminishing access to external opportunities and qualifications. Most studies agree that we need to develop more 'hybrid' models of learning that combine in-house provision with a broader range and choice of external and post-qualifying academic qualifications. While there is considerable consensus in this area, including across various commissioned reviews of post-qualifying learning, to date, research recommendations have had minimal impact in practice. This appears to be linked to severe cuts to workforce learning budgets in recent decades and an increasingly marketized higher education learning economy.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Improving learning and training provision for newly qualified social workers needs to be part of a broader commitment to improving post-qualifying learning for social workers across all career stages. While formal learning and training is only part of this picture, successive studies point to the need to develop, resource, and sustain a 'hybrid' approach to formal learning and development provision, which combines in-house and external learning opportunities and is more clearly linked to career pathways and progression.

Participants experience and place value on **formal and informal modes of learning**. This finding is consistent across the post-qualifying learning literature and recent studies point to the importance of supporting interplay between the two. However, learning strategies continue to privilege formal modes of learning and training in particular.

#### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- We need to develop fuller and more integrative accounts of professional learning that recognise and are responsive to the different ways that social workers learn. As a baseline, this needs to include:

- (i) learning through formal education and training
- (ii) work-based learning, and
- (iii) self-directed learning

We also need to better understand how learning works within and across these domains, including how they interact and come together in practice.

- Developing fuller and more integrative accounts of learning requires a whole systems approach to improvement where learning is understood and supported as a fundamental feature of professional practice, rather than as an adjunct to it. This requires us to recognise practice as an interplay between enquiry, knowledge, values and action, and to develop professional identities, relationships and environments that enable and support that.

## **LEARNING NEEDS**

Most participants report that they take the lead in identifying their learning and development needs. This appears to reflect good levels of motivation for professional learning and the absence of clear supporting infrastructure and frameworks. Most also report that their employer provides good support for learning, albeit in a context of limited provision, funding, choice, and time. Again, a small but significant minority report a contrasting experience, marked by poor or inconsistent support.

Participants expressed learning needs that broadly reflect recent policy and practice priorities and visible career pathways. There is a strong focus on risk and protection in the first few years and, as they progress in their careers, on external, specialist and award bearing opportunities. Some participants highlight the importance of diverse learning modes and methods, formal and informal, and the need for a more integrative approach.

Overall, professional accounts in this area appear to be constrained by under-developed constructions of learning in practice and limited supporting frameworks. Mostly this appears to reflect a mix of wider pressures on the profession and sustained under-investment in learning.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

- Activity to improve learning and development for social workers needs to look beyond the worker-employer dyad to also recognise the broader professional, organisational, and socio-political contexts of learning and practice and the ways in which each can both support and impede learning and

development.

The challenge of developing strategic and on the ground supports for this kind of joined up thinking and doing is significant, particularly in climates where there remain incentives to continue to work in silos and in ways that can be quickly seen and measured. However, developing professional learning that is fit for the uncertain, challenging and changing contexts that social workers operate in is unlikely to be served by piecemeal or quick fixes. As we turn, again, to the development of new frameworks and supports for qualifying, early career and continuous professional learning and development, there is real opportunity to develop fuller, more integrative and more evidence-based accounts of what learning for practice is and involves, across careers, and to co-develop strategy and supports accordingly.

# CHAPTER 5: PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

## Introduction

As with other aspects of participant experiences, the unusual circumstances prevailing in the last year are likely to have impacted on the development of professional identity. Major changes to operational service delivery approaches, greatly increased remote working, online meetings replacing face to face contact as well as the demands for support generated by pandemic itself such as its impact on household finances, emotional wellbeing and mental health are likely to have influenced how professional identity is perceived and experienced. The increasing integration of service management across traditional organisational boundaries, with social workers often working with, and being managed by, professionals qualified in other disciplines, could also affect a clear and discrete professional identity among social workers. The recent review of adult care services in Scotland, and the proposals arising therefrom (Scottish Government, 2021) are likely to have wide-ranging implications

Like other study topics, the features of professional identity are not universally agreed. Webb (2015) refers to the 'conceptual ambiguity' characterising definitions of social work identity and argues that it is continually affected by professional and organisational experiences. Research appears to indicate that, similar in a way to concepts of leadership, professional identity is influenced by the organisational context, the operational experience of workers and the culture and values promoted in the workplace. A whole-workforce study conducted in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland (BASW Northern Ireland/IASW, 2020) found that more social workers (25%) saw 'empowerment of service users' as more closely identified with social workers' professional identity than 'having a social work qualification'. This may suggest that values rather than accreditation are viewed as key elements of professional identity (see also Chapter 3). Some of the topics included in this research also explored these issues.

The survey asked participants to indicate the extent to which they agreed with a number of statements reflecting a wide range of qualities, attributes and values associated with professional identity in social work. These encompassed both subjective perceptions and external influences. Among the former were having a clear sense of professional identity and having confidence in carrying out the social work role. The latter group included how learning and qualification were connected to professional identity as well as how employers, service users and colleagues contributed.



Participants were also asked to respond to a number of questions relating to how effectively they were able to apply and uphold social work values in their day-to-day practice. Promotion of rights and social justice, developing trusting and trusted relationships with people who use social work services and practising with honesty, openness, empathy, and respect were examples of the values on which they were asked to respond. They were asked to rank a number of possible influences on their sense of being a professional social worker, some related to professional identity in general, thus applicable also to other disciplines (such as access to professional development opportunities) and some specific to social work (such as being registered with the SSSC). A reasonably comprehensive picture of perceptions, understandings and experiences was therefore obtained. This was supplemented, however, with a series of questions to which participants were asked to respond with free text – what professional identity meant at this point in their career, what restricted, and what would strengthen, their professional identity as a social worker.

## **FINDINGS**

### **SENSE OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

Almost eighty percent (79.4%) on average, over the five years, felt that they had a clear sense of their professional identity. From the outset a clear and substantial majority concurred with this, the level rising in each successive year from 76.2% in Year 1 to 85.4% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement, in contrast, have fluctuated, with no distinct pattern. The variation has, however, been relatively small, ranging from 6.7% in Year 1 to 10.6% in Year 4. Year 5 saw the figure decrease again, to 7.3%, the average over the five years being 7.9%. Levels of neutrality have fallen continuously over the study period, from 17.1% in Year 1 to 7.3% in Year 5, with an average of 12.6% overall. Ambivalence around professional identity has therefore decreased. Increasing numbers of participants therefore indicate that, year on year, they have a better sense of professional identity and assured professional self.

Qualitative data provides a more complete picture, conveying a greater sense of how participants actually understand professional identity. Most equate it with confidence in the skills and knowledge they bring as social workers, as well as having clarity on their role and purpose in practice. A participant from Year 5 summarised it as 'being clear in my role and remit and having confidence to speak my mind and stand up for other people's views' (YR5). Identity for many was consistently associated with the application of social work values. Being respected by other professions was also a key

element in their sense of professional self, as the following quotes demonstrate: 'Having confidence in my role and values. Knowing the families and other professionals I work with understand my role and my values.' (YR5) was how one participant articulated this; another saw 'Being accepted as having knowledge and skills to undertake my role, being respected by others and part of multi-agency working' (YR5) as inherently important.

Advocacy for service users, promoting their rights and advancing social justice was, for some, central to their professional role, as the quote below illustrates:

'Being able to challenge the structural systems that impact on the service users I work with and advocating for them to get the best opportunities possible with the limits of my role.'  
(YR5)

A number of participants each year referred to feeling proud of what they did as a job, and felt that they were achieving a positive impact on the lives of the individuals and families they worked with:

'Being proud of what I do and what it stands for.' (YR5)

'Being proud of and being confident to empower families to make positive change.' (YR5)

Whilst social workers have been clear and consistent on dimensions of professional identity that matter to them and their practice, they are also clear on what restricts and constrains their sense of professional self.

As well as asking about their understanding of professional identity, and how it related to their practice experience, participants were also asked to outline factors that restricted their professional identity as a social worker. Over the five years, responses have been generally consistent. This suggests that little has changed over the period that has resulted in either an increase or a reduction in factors perceived as restricting professional identity. Participants, in each year's responses, frequently referred to managerialism and lack of resources, lack of respect and understanding from other professions (particularly health professionals) and public perception and the absence of clear and conspicuous leadership at national level.

## **STRENGTHENING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

Participants were also asked for their views on what would

strengthen their professional identity as social workers. Findings here have also been consistent over the last five years. As highlighted in our Year 4 report, findings consistently note the importance of addressing internal and external issues relating to the profession. Year 5 is no different, and we have identified the same issues emerging here for participants.

Internally, participants over the last five years frequently and consistently identified a number of factors as being key to strengthening their professional identity. Strong leadership and management, more closely aligned to social work's role, values and responsibilities was seen as important, as was greater autonomy and service user focused work. Greater recognition, representation and support for the profession and its workforce and improved post-qualifying education and training opportunities were also valued.

Externally, participants consistently referred to the lack of clear and public leadership. Many felt that public perception reflected a lack of understanding of social work roles and purpose. Responses here frequently mention a lack of advocacy for the profession itself, with one participant from Year 5 articulating this perception thus, 'I think we need a strong social work only union, like teaching, who will get out there and help support society to understand what we do. To advocate for us, for what we need as workers to do our job and often that is more resources. To have a voice as a profession. This has been especially evident in the last year during Covid' (YR5). Another expressed the following, 'Better representation in the media - social work is to be seen as a profession - the SSSC could do much more to promote this' (YR5).

Others extended the notion of public perception to include recognition from government. It was noted that ministers often commented publicly and positively on the value of other professions, such as health, teaching and the police. The quotes below illustrate the importance placed on this. 'Positive opinion of the role in the public domain. Greater investment and recognition by the government' (YR5) and 'Respect and acknowledgement from government' (YR5).

## **CONFIDENCE IN SOCIAL WORKER ROLE**

On average, 80.9% feel they have confidence in their role as a social worker, rising from 70.5% in Year 1 to 90.2% in Year 5 - though a small dip is noted from 87.5% in Year 3 to 82.7% in Year 4. Probably consistent with this finding was a slight increase in levels of disagreement noted from 5% in Year 3 to 5.3% in Year 4. Notwithstanding this, the general trend is clearly downward,

declining from 9.5% in Year 1 to 0% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality have fluctuated between a peak of 20% in Year 1 to a low of 7.5% in Year 3, with an average of 13.5% overall. These figures would appear to suggest that confidence in the role of social worker seems to increase over time. This is despite the concerns expressed in the qualitative findings about public perception, media representation and respect from other professional disciplines. As Chapter 3 indicates, increasing levels of confidence are found across a range of dimensions over time, but clearly aligned here with an emerging sense of professional self.

## **PROFESSIONAL CONTRIBUTION**

This, again, shows that increasing levels of clarity are experienced in successive years, from 75.2% in Year 1 to 95.1% in Year 5. On average, 85.2% feel clear about their professional contribution as a social worker. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated, peaking at 5.5% in Year 2 to a low of 0% in Year 5, with an average of 2.2% overall. Levels of neutrality have also reduced significantly from 22.9% in Year 1 to 4.9% in Year 5. These figures would suggest practitioners grow increasingly clear about their professional contribution as they progress in their careers, with a clear shift from ambivalence to certainty. The qualitative responses above indicate that this increasingly clarity is coupled with an equivalent clarity about the constraints and restrictions that affect their professional contribution.

## **RESPECT FROM OTHER PROFESSIONS**

Just over half, on average (54.6%) feel respected by other professions. Levels of agreement have fluctuated from a peak of 60% in Year 1 to a low of 50% in Year 3 - increasingly slightly to 53.7% by year 5. This pattern is not consistent with other findings, where positive aspects of professional development and experience have generally shown increases between Years 1 and 5. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated too, from a peak of 22.2% in year 2 to a low of 15% in Year 3, with an average of 19.1% overall. Levels of neutrality also show fluctuation with a low of 21.1% in Year 2 and a peak of 35% in Year 3, with an average of 26.3% overall. Significant proportions either disagree or take positions of ambivalence here. Indeed, whilst majorities agree with this statement each year, there has been no significant shift towards feeling respected by other professions. The opinions expressed above emphasised this clearly. For a significant number, the absence of respect from other professions was also associated with the portrayal of social work in the media, a lack of political support and the perceptions of the public in general.

## **USING RESEARCH, THEORY AND EVIDENCE IN PRACTICE**

This has fluctuated, though within quite a narrow range, over the five years. On average, 73.8% feel that an ability to locate and use up-to-date research, theory and evidence is important to their professional identity. Year 2 saw a low of 68.1%, while agreement in Year 5 reached a peak of 78.1%. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated from a peak of 7.7% in Year 2 and a low of 4.9% in Year 5, with an average of 6.1% overall. Levels of neutrality also show fluctuation, with a peak of 24.2% in Year 2 and a low of 17.1% in Year 5, with an average of 20.1% overall. This last set of data indicates that a significant proportion seems to take a neutral position and that this proportion has been relatively consistent year on year. This may suggest that some practitioners feel or remain ambivalent about the connection between research awareness and professional identity. There is, however, a general upward trend in agreement and a downward trend in disagreement. This is likely to indicate that research, theory and evidence becomes increasingly important to a social worker's sense of professional identity over time.

## **SHAPING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

A high proportion - on average, 82.4% - feel that social work education helped to shape their professional identity. Though the percentage has fluctuated over the years, reducing in the first three years from 84.8% in Year 1 to 77.5% in Year 3, it has subsequently increased gradually to 87.8% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement have also fluctuated, firstly with a leap from 4.8% to 11% between Years 1 and 2 respectively, and then a gradual tapering off to 0% by Year 5. Levels of neutrality have fluctuated with less direction, with a low of 8.8% noted in year 2 and a peak of 13.3% in Year 3, with an average of 11% overall. This may be associated with a greater awareness of how concepts imparted in social work education apply to or explain practice experience. Coupled with the accumulation of skills and knowledge over the years, this leads to a reflexive form of consolidation later where the value of social work education contributes to the conceptual jigsaw of professional identity. This seems to become better understood later in their careers (see Chapter 2).

## **SHAPING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: EMPLOYERS**

Over a third (on average, 69.9%) feel that employers help to shape their professional identity. No clear pattern was evident over the

years, however, with fluctuations over all categories of response. The percentage that agreed fluctuated between a low of 62.3% in Year 4 and a peak of 75.6% in Year 5. Levels of disagreement showed a low of 4.8% noted in Year 1 and a peak of 17.6% noted in Year 2, with an average of 11.5% overall. Neutrality also varied, with a low of 13.9% in Year 3 and a peak of 23.6% in Year 4. The average overall was 18.5%. Indeed, the significant proportions of neutrality here would appear to suggest that some feel ambivalent about the role of employers in helping to shape professional identity although a majority each year do feel that employers do contribute in some way. This might have been a tricky question for participants, as the link between employer and professional identity might not be immediately clear to most.

### **SHAPING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: COLLEAGUES**

Colleagues were important in shaping professional identity. On average, 84.5% agreed that colleagues supported them in this respect. This fluctuated from a low of 81.3% in Year 2 and a peak of 87.5% in Year 3. It is worth noting, however, that the difference between the figures for Years 1 and 5 are negligible (85.7% and 85.4% respectively) and unlikely to be statistically significant. No clear pattern here was discernible in these variations nor did it appear that there were significant correlations with responses to other questions, though the question below in relation to service users did follow a broadly similar range. Levels of disagreement have generally increased from 1% in Year 1 to 7.3% by Year 5, with an average of 4.4% overall. Levels of neutrality have fluctuated slightly around an average of 12.1% overall – only dropping to 7.3% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality have outweighed levels of disagreement over the years, suggesting that a proportion feel ambivalent about the role of colleagues in shaping professional identity. However, whilst a majority each year do agree that colleagues play a part, a small but growing proportion have disagreed with this over the years.

### **SHAPING PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY: SERVICE USERS**

The role of service users in forming professional identity was similarly seen as important. On average, 84% agree that service users help to shape their professional identity. This has fluctuated between a low of 81.9% in Year 1 and a peak of 88% in Year 4 with, again, the difference between Years 1 and 5 being negligible (81.9% and 82.9% respectively). There was no discernible pattern to the responses. Levels of disagreement have increased from 3.8% in Year 1 to 4.9% in Year 5, with an average of 3.8% overall. Levels of neutrality have also fluctuated between a peak of 14.3%

in Year 1 and a low of 11.3% in Year 3, with an average of 12.6% overall. There was no evident pattern to any of the options in this question. Like the previous category, levels of neutrality have outweighed levels of disagreement, suggesting that a proportion felt ambivalent about the role of service users in shaping their professional identity. Though a substantial majority in each year felt that service users did play a part, those disagreeing, though remaining small, formed an increasing proportion of participants over the years.

## **SHAPING MY OWN PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

This received the highest percentage of agreement of all the questions with, on average, 87.3% feeling that they shaped their own professional identity. To this question too, there was no pattern that emerged over the years for any of the options. Agreement has fluctuated slightly over the years, with a low of 86.3% in Year 3 and a peak of 89.2% in Year 4. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated too, with a peak of 2.9% in Year 1 and a low of 1% in Year 4, with an average of 2% overall. Levels of neutrality have also fluctuated with a peak of 12.2% in year 2 and a low of 9.6% in Year 4, with an average of 10.7% overall. As with several previous categories, levels of neutrality outweigh levels of disagreement, suggesting that a proportion felt ambivalent about their own role in shaping professional identity. Though the differences were relatively small, more participants felt that, not only did they have significant part to play on their own part, but that that their personal contribution was more important than those of education, employers, colleagues, or service users.

## **BEING A PROFESSIONAL – WHAT MATTERS**

Understanding that professional identity is a complex dimension of social workers sense and expression of self, participants were asked to rank the following in order of importance in terms of impact on their own sense of being a professional:

- Being registered with the SSSC
- Having autonomy over the work I do
- Having access to continuous professional development opportunities
- Having a clear boundary between social work and other professions
- Having the ability to make complex judgements and decisions
- Being able to apply my professional values

The majority of participants have consistently ranked 'having

autonomy over the work I do', 'having the ability to make complex judgments' and 'being able to apply my professional values' as having the most impact on their sense of being a professional. 'Being registered with the SSSC' was ranked as having the least impact, and this was consistent over the five years. 'Having a clear boundary between social work and other professions' achieved the second lowest ranking in each year. The views expressed in the qualitative element of the survey and quoted above show that not being valued by other professions was a source of concern for participants. There may be some connection between having a clear and distinct sense of the social work role and the ways in which it is perceived by other disciplines and by the wider public. Though opportunities for continuous professional development were mentioned as an important element of developing professional identity, 'having access to continuous professional development opportunities' was not rated in the top three in any year. What appears to be most important for recently qualified social workers is capacity to work independently, having control over organising and carrying out work and being able to assess and intervene with complex situations. The application of social work values to interventions also featured highly. These elements of professional identity are considered more meaningful to recently qualified social workers than occupational distinction, continuous professional development, and being registered with a regulatory body. Nonetheless, qualitative data does indicate that these elements are still seen as being of critical importance. It is possible that the obstacles workers identify to achieving respect, recognition, and professional learning such as resources, public understanding and clear national leadership influences the degree of priority awarded here.

### **TRANSITION FROM 'NEWLY QUALIFIED' TO 'EARLY-CAREER' TO 'SOCIAL WORKER'**

Participants were asked to describe what they would call themselves at the current stage of their careers. This has changed over the five years, with fewer identifying themselves as 'newly qualified social worker' and more as 'social worker' in successive years. In Year 3 exactly half (50%) said 'early career social worker', followed by 'social worker' (38.7%); 6.2% described themselves as 'other', usually because they occupied posts such as 'Social Inclusion Coordinator', and 'advocacy worker' rather than holding a designated social worker post. By Year 3 only 5% described themselves as being a 'newly qualified social worker'. In Year 4, just over half described themselves as 'social worker' (51%), followed by 'early career social worker' (37%), 'other' (10%) and 'newly qualified social worker' (1%). In Year 5, 70.7% now describe themselves as 'social worker', followed by 19.5% as



'early career social worker' and 0% as 'newly qualified', with 'other' at 9.8%. Of course, people with social work qualifications are employed in a variety of settings and there are posts that are open to a range of qualifications.

It is clear that by Years 4 and 5, the majority begin to see themselves as full social workers, though the majority in Year 4 is very small (51%). Year 5 does show a significant rise on the previous year with over two-thirds now describing themselves as 'social worker' without any modifying description. This correlates with data on emerging clarity of role and purpose over the years, as well as consistent growth in confidence across a range of skill and knowledge domains. This would suggest that the development of professional identity is for many an incremental process involving acquisition of skills, knowledge, and experience – resulting in a shift in professional sense of self. Our findings indicate that Year 3 seems to be a turning point where participants feel less like newly qualified staff and more like early career professionals. Year 5 signals a clear break from perceptions of being newly qualified, with most now confident enough to claim full social worker status.

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Firstly, it is important to note that, in common with the responses to many of the other survey questions, Year 5 has shown a significant increase over Year 1 in terms of the responses that reflect positive self-evaluation in a number of aspects of the professional social work role. It is probably unsurprising that greater practice experience and access to both formal and informal skill development opportunities will result in greater confidence and competence, and these will in turn enhance a sense of professional identity. What may be of greater interest are the other factors that recently qualified social workers see as relevant to the forging of their professional identity and the reasons behind these perceptions.

It is notable that the factors consistently rated as having greatest effect on professional social work identity are not those that are unique to social work. The specific social work factors (registration with the SSSC, having a clear boundary between social work and other professions) were repeatedly rated as having the least effect, while those that are likely to be common to all professions or disciplines were seen as having the greatest impact (autonomy, making complex judgments, application of professional values). In contrast, a study of newly qualified doctors carried out for the British Medical Council (2019) found that coaching in the application of pre-qualification learning was of great value in

developing professional identity. Some of the data provided by participants in relation to newly qualified or early career social workers, both in respect of this and other survey topics, might suggest that the relationship between pre-qualification learning and how it can inform practice receives less specific attention from managers in the social work profession, even though a substantial majority of participants saw their pre-accreditation learning as an important factor. A study of recent social work graduates in Israel (Levy et al, 2014) found that a satisfactory supervisory experience was more important to identity formation than professional differentiation.

Our findings suggest that a substantial majority believed that they were able to demonstrate the application of social work values in their practice, and this was consistent across all the domains cited. When considered alongside the factors participants perceived as having greatest effect of professional identity, this may imply that social workers' sense of professionalism relates to the application of values such as social justice, rights, and inclusion rather than formal recognition through registration, or enhancement of professional skills. The **Changing Lives** report (Scottish Executive, 2006) considered whether social workers' roles had now become so diverse that social work could no longer be considered a single professional discipline. It concluded, however, that underpinning values and their practical manifestation in terms of forming and using therapeutic relationships to achieve positive change were common to all effective social work interventions. The responses to the professional identity questions would appear to reflect this view. A study of careers advisers (Neary, 2014), whose roles and functions had similarly diversified over time, indicated that job titles that did not clearly signify their professional accreditation had an adverse impact on professional identity, while continuing professional development specific to their professional discipline had a strongly positive effect. Responses to this study generally reflected similar experiences and views among the social work cohort; it is possible that these factors are important across professions generally and this should be borne in mind when political decisions about future governance and delivery are being made.

Being valued by the general public and respected by other professions is seen by many as significantly contributing to their sense of identity as a professional social worker. In contrast to most of the other findings relating to professional identity, feeling 'respected by other professions' started at a relatively low base (60%, compared to around 80% in relation to confidence, clarity and competence) and was lower in Year 5 than in Year 1. This suggests that practice experience of working with other professions may have a negative impact on social workers' professional identity

over time. This is concerning and worthy of further exploration. Increasing integration often means working and being managed within settings where other professions and organisations dominate numerically, are longer established as disciplines and are likely to have higher public profiles. A study of the effect of placement of social work students in 'non-traditional' agencies (while not being necessarily perceived in a negative way by participants) shows that understanding of professional identity and the discreteness of the social work role are affected by working in settings which do not require specific social work skills or where they are managed by other professions (Scholar et al, 2014). The cultural context of the work setting is likely therefore to affect professional identity. Findings in relation to other professions appear to reinforce this; a review of research into teachers' professional identity (Beijaard et al, 2004) found the prevailing culture and ethos of the school or establishment had a significant influence on how teachers saw their professional role.

Public perceptions were also viewed as important. It is probably true that social work attracts more negative media attention than other disciplines. Olin (2013) pointed out this difference in citing an example of a police officer receiving national media attention for providing assistance to a homeless person while social workers routinely provide this kind of support but are rarely featured in the media because of their work. Public perceptions, however, are possibly less negative than social workers fear. A recent survey conducted in England (Cragg Ross Dawson, 2020) found that public perceptions of social work were generally positive and social work practitioners 'well-regarded'. Similar research in Scotland (McCulloch and Webb, 2020) revealed that the public value the role and impact social services have on society more than we might think.

The climate in which social work operates and social workers are deployed will of course impact on how social workers see their professional persona. Local authority budgets in Scotland have been under pressure for some years and the challenges of delivering effective services during the pandemic has heightened this pressure. Possibly partly because of other services having a higher public profile and, indeed, the relative level of political support, social work services are often given lower priority in terms of protecting budgets and services. This will also affect (and the impact may be even more profound) social work staff working in non-statutory settings as their services may depend on receipt of funds through local authority contracts or procurement. A number of participants saw the availability of resources to carry out their work effectively as contributing integrally to their sense of professionalism.

It is clear that the factors that affect social workers' sense of professional identity has much in common with the factors influencing this in other professions. Again, similar in many ways to other disciplines, the working environment and its prevailing culture is also instrumental. Where it seems to diverge is in the experience of connecting what has been learned before qualification to the workplace setting and the degree of support provided for this in supervision. Of course, the demands of a pressurised workload limit the opportunities for this kind of exploration; there may be issues too in relation to the skillset of first line managers in social work compared to those in other professions where mentoring and coaching appear to feature more prominently.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS:**

The study has identified a number of matters that are important to social workers' sense of professional identity, and what differentiates their skillset, knowledge base and practice experience from those of other professions. Further exploration of these issues would be useful; active steps to encourage positive reinforcement of professional identity are vital if a specific and discrete social work function is to be supported.

- It was evident from both responses and research firstly that social workers, even those recently qualified, may occupy work roles that do not uniquely require a social work qualification or may be differently described, even though a social work qualification is necessary. This is likely to contribute to affect both public awareness of social work and social workers' self-perceptions. It may be appropriate to consider reasserting the 'social worker' designation of posts requiring a qualification and also to highlight the value and applicability of social work skills and knowledge to non-specific posts such as 'family support worker' 'group worker' and 'integration coordinator'.
- Unlike other professions, the connection between pre-qualification learning and operational service delivery does not appear to be particularly well developed. Greater emphasis could be placed on the role of first line managers in enabling recently qualified staff to make these connections. Their role in mentoring newly qualified staff could be more explicitly defined and the supervisory relationship is critical in this.
- More research is needed into the factors influencing professional identity. In view of the previous recommendation, it is interesting that most participants believed that they shaped their own professional identity.

Several other influences (service users, colleagues, and social work education) were perceived as having significantly greater impact than that of employers. It may be useful to explore practical examples of how these various inputs are experienced by early career social workers and how exactly they impact on professional identity.

- Given the prevailing organisational settings in which many social workers are deployed and, indeed, the changes to social work management and delivery likely to be introduced in Scotland in the near future, it would be useful to gather further information as to the relationship between social workers and the other professionals they increasingly work alongside and on how social work is perceived by other disciplines. An improvement strategy would be helpful in relation to this matter.
- Public awareness and perception of social work could certainly be improved. Of course, it is likely always to be a small minority of the population who will need social work support, and this will affect general awareness as well as opinion. Promotion of a positive image of social work will be all the more important as a discrete social work identity becomes increasingly diffused in organisational terms. The proposed National Social Work Agency could have a valuable role in this.
- While trajectories in terms of responses have not consistently progressed in the same direction each year, it is true that, over the five years, the general direction of travel has been consistent. It may be interesting to compare perceptions gained in the first five years of social work practice with the views, knowledge and experience of those who have been qualified for longer, thus establishing whether these general trajectories are sustained or diverged from over time.
- Major changes to how social work is governed and delivered in Scotland are imminent. It is vital that a strong social work voice informs these deliberations. This study and other relevant research should be made available to those developing new operational models. Bodies that represent social workers at all levels should be positively and actively included in formulating policies, strategies and plans.

# CHAPTER 6: LEADERSHIP

## Introduction

The dominating contextual factor in the reporting year 2021 has been the challenge of continuing to provide a reliable social work service in a consistent, responsive, and professional way during a national public health emergency. Restrictions on direct contact with service users and the effective closure of many workplaces has required creativity and innovation in service delivery. Absence of direct contact with colleagues has impacted on team working, which of course is relevant to a number of aspects of the experience of recently qualified staff.

There are, of course, other contextual factors which existed in previous years to a greater or lesser extent. These include prevalence in the community of social and economic factors that might affect the need for social work support, reductions or indeed increases in budgetary provision for social work within local authorities and policy and regulatory drivers, both internal and external. Poverty has increased during the pandemic and while additional funding has been provided to local authorities, this has largely been directed at meeting the additional delivery costs associated with compliance with public health measures and minimising infection risk to staff and service users. Demand for services has consequently escalated across all social work services in the face of the logistical delivery challenges. It is likely that this year's responses will have been influenced by these factors.

As in previous years, participants were asked to describe to what extent their experiences have supported them in developing leadership capacities and preparing them to fulfil leadership roles. The specific elements of 'leadership' on which views and experiences were sought once more were based on the SSSC framework **Enhancing Leadership Capability** (2016a). This sets out a number of attributes, capacities and competences associated with leadership development. The framework is largely based on research and stakeholder consultation carried out for the SSSC in 2016 (George et al, 2016). It should be noted that the qualities identified as valuable to effective leadership in social work are not immutable. Though there is common ground, differences are found in different systems and at different times. Some frameworks, notably those examined within some of the U.S. literature, emphasise more managerial aspects (Fisher, 2009), while others place more importance on a 'compassionate' model of leadership as being specifically relevant to the social work role (Schaub et al, 2021) and suggests that leadership models operating within health services could provide the basis for an effective approach in social

work. Miller et al (2020) recently offered the following definition – ‘Social work leadership: the use of professional credibility, competence and connections to positively influence others in response to the interests and aspirations of people and families. Achieved through coproduction with communities, collaboration with other professionals, and constructive conflict of injustice and inequality, it can be demonstrated through formal roles and informal encouragement of colleagues’. It is interesting that the elements of ‘caring’ and ‘compassion’ are emphasised in recent literature; this contrasts with the more business-oriented models prominent in the 1990s, when the split between purchase and provision of services was introduced and many social workers operated as ‘care managers’ rather than service providers (Department of Health, 1989). Of course, what are viewed as appropriate capabilities for leadership in social work are also influenced by contemporary concepts of leadership in the wider world.

It is evident that participants’ perceptions and responses are influenced both by their operational experience in their particular setting and by their interpretation of the terms used in the questions posed to them in this study. This would be entirely consistent with how the literature presents concepts of leadership. The factors that are likely to influence perceptions are the priorities and values of the organisation in which the respondent is located, the extent to which leadership functions are encouraged, promoted and supported through professional development, supervision and participation in service development activities, and the encouragement given within the organisation for involvement in creative and innovative approaches to service provision.

It is, of course, to be expected that longer, and possibly more diverse and complex, field experience will impact on responses. External factors too, such as higher levels of poverty, staffing levels, changes in policy and new legislation will all have their part to play. The latest findings will be considered in the light of all these circumstances.

## **FINDINGS**

### **UNDERSTANDING OF LEADERSHIP**

Over the period of the study’s operation there has been a steady and significant increase in the proportion of participants who feel that they have a clear understanding of what leadership means to them at this stage in their career, rising from just under 60% (59.9%) in Year 1 to over 80% (82.5%) in Year 5. There has been

a corresponding decline in those who indicated that they did not have a clear understanding or were not sure. Throughout the study period, it is clear that more participants believed they understood the concept of leadership than did not.

## **IMPORTANCE OF LEADERSHIP CAPACITY TO PROFESSIONAL ROLE**

This has been consistently regarded as 'very important' or 'moderately important' by the vast majority of participants. In Year 5, just under 80% of participants chose one of these two options, with under 10% placing little or no importance on this capacity. There has not, however, been a continuous increase in those viewing leadership as very or moderately important. Fluctuations both in these categories and in those options indicating neutrality or disagreement have been evident over time. Year 3, particularly, saw a change from the first two years with both a drop in those seeing it as very or moderately important and an increase both in those seeing it as 'neither important nor unimportant' and of low importance. Though those responses choosing 'very important' reached around 40% in the first year and in the final two years of the study, it declined successively in Years 2 and 3. Taking 'very' and 'moderately' important together, Year 3 saw a low of 68.8%, though the highest combined figure was reported the following year, reaching a peak of 82.7%.

Over the five years however, 78.6% of participants on average thought that developing leadership capacity was important (very or moderately) to their professional role. Levels of disagreement have fluctuated too, being highest in Year 3 and lowest in Year 5 (10% and 2.6% respectively). The average over the five years was 7.6%, which of course represents a relatively small number of individuals, and is less than 10% of the percentage who believe the opposite. Reasons for these variations are not readily identifiable. It is notable that in Year 5 almost as many participants did not answer this question (36) as did (38) which possibly suggests that they did not feel informed enough, or had had sufficient relevant experience, to give an opinion. Indeed, around 40% of participants in total did not give a response to any of the questions on leadership.

Those who expressed a neutral position on the subject also fluctuated, though the fluctuations followed the pattern of those taking a negative position. The highest figure was reached in Year 3 (21.3% - more than one in five participants), falling to a low of 8.6% in the following year (less than one in ten). The figure rose again in Year 5, reaching 18.2%, once more nearing one in five participants. Overall, the average was 13.8%, which again



demonstrated no clear trend, nor any particular correlation with any of the other data gathered from participants. Valuing leadership, therefore, does not appear to be connected to skill development, knowledge acquisition or professional confidence / competence; it also does not seem to reflect experience of supervision.

If leadership is seen as a valuable, or even an essential, part of the social work role, it is interesting that its importance does not seem to be significantly associated with activities and experiences that could reasonably be thought to be intended to encourage its development. It is also possible that participants might not be clear as to what 'leadership capacity' actually means or may hold a wide range of perspectives on this concept. This might go some way to explaining variation in some of the findings highlighted here.

## **LEADERSHIP CAPABILITIES DEVELOPED IN THE LAST YEAR**

Participants were asked about specific aspects of developing leadership capacities – vision, self-leadership, motivating and inspiring others, collaborating, and influencing and creativity and innovation. These were derived from the 2013 research **The Framework for Continuous Learning in Social Services**, developed by the SSSC and IRISS (2014); this had drawn on the **Leading Together** analysis (SSSC, 2010) of how leadership in Scotland's social services was experienced and how it contributed to outcomes. The 2016 **Enabling Leadership** research followed up this analysis with further consultation and refinement of the model (SSSC, 2016b).

Across most capabilities there has been a general increase in opportunities for development over the last five years, though there has been some degree of fluctuation (see below).

### **Vision**

This rose from years 1 to 3, falling in Year 4, but regaining its Year 3 figure in Year 5 (17.5%). This is a significant increase over the Year 1 figure of 10.8% in Year 1. The average over the five years is 15.1%. The joint peaks in Years 3 and 5 of 17.5% suggests that opportunities to contribute and develop in this respect may be limited, or less available to recently qualified staff.

### **Self-leadership**

This has fluctuated over the years. It dropped in Year 2 from the year 1 figure of 55% to its low of 48.3%. It rose again in Year 3 and reached its peak of 65% in Year 5. Overall, the average was

54.2%. This may indicate something about increasing levels of professional autonomy as participants gain experience and take responsibility for a wider range of tasks as they move out of the newly qualified stage in their career.

### **Motivating and inspiring others**

This showed a steady and continued increase over Years 1 to 4, when it reached its peak of 68.4%. A slight dip was noted in Year 5, dropping slightly to 65%. It is possible that increased remote working may have had an impact as contact with colleagues was limited. The average over the five years was 59.1%.

### **Collaborating and influencing**

An increase was shown in successive Years 1 to 3 when it reached 65%. It fell in Year 4, falling again in Year 5 to 52.5%. Again, in Year 5, it is likely that the restrictions required by the pandemic will have reduced collaborative and influencing opportunities. The average here is 58.7% overall.

### **Creativity and innovation**

This has fluctuated over the years, though not greatly. The lowest figure recorded (35.1%) was in Year 1 and it reached its peak of 40% in Year 5, with an average of 38% overall.

## **SUPPORT FOR DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP**

This has shown a significant increase over time, with a clear and steady increase in participants who feel they have been supported to develop leadership skills. Possibly unsurprisingly, the figure was at its lowest in Year 1 at 26.9%. By Year 5 this had risen to 45%. This still, however, represents a minority of participants. Year 5 saw 55% of participants report that they had not been supported to develop leadership capabilities. Though this had declined from 73.1% in Year 1, it is interesting note how high the figure has remained, given that five years after qualification it is likely that some of the cohort will be fulfilling, or aspiring to, leadership roles.

## **FORMAL LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT ACTIVITY**

Participants were specifically asked here about the past year at each point of the study. As has been alluded to, the circumstances prevailing in the final year of this research have been exceptional, and this may have affected the opportunities accessible for formal development activity. Nonetheless, Year 5 showed an increase over

the previous year, rising to 20%. Though there has been a continuous rise over the five years, the final figure represents only one in five of the cohort. This is clearly significantly higher than the Year 1 figure of 6.8%, but again may be concerning for the same reasons as indicated in relation to the findings from the previous question. Four out of five participants state that they have not engaged in this type of activity in the past year, which may have implications for leadership in the profession generally, given that the cohort has now been qualified and practising for five years.

In addition to the survey questions above, participants were asked to contribute their views on what could be done to help develop their leadership skills, by employers or others. It is notable that this question received the lowest number of responses of any of the 'free text' questions in the online survey. Most of the responses received focused on fairly standard elements of professional development such as training, opportunities for taking on greater responsibility, and clear career opportunities and pathways. One participant in Year 5 offered a practical example, 'My employer is good at identifying particular skills in workers and giving them responsibilities to contribute to the learning of the team eg leading on projects or delivering training.' (YR5)

## **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

The findings of the five successive surveys have given a valuable indication of how newly qualified and early career social workers perceive and experience leadership. What is perhaps less evident is the concept of leadership that has informed their responses and how this has been shaped by their experiences in the workplace. Leadership is a critical element of organisational viability and effectiveness (Mastrangelo et al, 2004); while there are processes, cultures and structures that can support this within organisations, personal capacities are also greatly significant.

Though the SSSC has set out its framework for 'leadership capabilities', and the survey questions were based on this framework, the nature of the responses do not convey in any meaningful way that there is a strongly embedded understanding of leadership either immediately after qualification or, indeed, five years later. Year 1 saw 60% (a majority, but not a large one, given the size of the cohort) state that they had a clear understanding of the concept of leadership, though the answers to subsequent questions appear to indicate that many of the participants do not draw a clear distinction between leadership and management. Even by Year 5, though this had risen to 82.5%, a significant minority (17.5%) either did not have a clear understanding or were unsure; in addition, 34 of 74 participants did not answer this question,

when this is factored in 55.5% had no view, were uncertain or did not have an understanding. However, these issues have been recognised and addressed in new developments, such as the revised Standards in Social Work Education (SSSC, 2019) and draft NQSW Standards (forthcoming) where leadership capabilities now feature more prominently here and in plans for the Supported Year in Practice.

Nevertheless, it appears few social workers in the early post-qualification years access many opportunities to develop, exercise or, indeed understand leadership. From the comments given, it does not appear that it is an issue that is given significant consideration in supervision, CPD or general organisational culture. In Year 1 more participants (82) failed to answer the question about developing capabilities than those who did (74), which suggests that it was not a matter on which most felt able to comment. The conflation of leadership with management reflected in many of the answers could imply that there has been limited exploration of the differences between them either in pre-qualification training or in the employment setting. Our findings indicate that further work is required to enhance and embed understandings of leadership across the profession, including experienced social workers (where newly qualified staff will get most advice and guidance in the early stages of their career).

It would be interesting to gather comparative information on experiences across work settings. Large and predominantly hierarchical bodies such as local authorities may differ from smaller community-based agencies in providing opportunities that enhance leadership potential and capabilities. This may be largely pragmatic since the size of the workforce in smaller organisations may necessitate recently qualified staff assuming leadership roles such as training and supporting volunteers or taking responsibility for project management. This approach may, however, be valuable to consider in developing and fostering leadership capabilities within larger organisations with more specialised work roles.

There is little literature or research evidence that specifically focuses on leadership in social work. This contrasts with a wealth of material in relation to other professions such as teaching and medicine. Several decades ago, this may not have been particularly surprising, given its relatively recent status as a professional discipline. It is perhaps concerning that, more than a century after the first certified professional learning was offered at a British university (see Davis, 2008) and more than fifty years after a qualification was required to practise as a social worker, such limited examination of this issue has taken place.

Of course, the 2006 Scottish Government strategy for social work

**Changing Lives** (Scottish Executive, 2006) is likely also to have impacted on how leadership in social work is perceived. It remains the key national policy driver for the development of social work services and the social work profession. Though it included a specific leadership workstream, the nature of effective leadership is not extensively articulated in the report itself. It does emphasize that leaders should be 'enabled and empowered' and advocates 'practice-based careers' that do not necessarily involve line management of staff (ibid: 49). It also argues for a 'leadership and management framework'; that now in use by the SSSC was developed in response as part of the process of implementing the national strategy. Of course, there have been many important changes in systems, structures, practices, and policies since **Changing Lives** was adopted; it may be appropriate to consider how coherent its direction now is in relation to a much changed political, social, and economic environment.

The push towards integration, particularly with health services, the definition of the social work function as set out in **Changing Lives** and the outsourcing of a number of functions previously falling within the remit of local authority social work may also have had an impact on this. In Scotland there is no longer a statutory requirement for local authorities to appoint a professionally qualified director of social work. Only four of the 32 local authorities in Scotland have children's and adults' social work services under a single manager, and only one has a designated director of social work (though in fact this does not include adult services). This may have contributed, in local authorities, to the absence of a clear identification of discrete social work leadership. In the voluntary and community sector work job remits (such as youth worker or family support worker) are often not designated as requiring a specific professional qualification. Identifiable social work leadership may therefore not be visibly demonstrated to those entering the profession in these settings.

Further changes to the delivery of social work services in Scotland are imminent. The establishment of a National Care Service, currently being developed by the Scottish Government (Scottish Government, 2021), may well bring about further disconnection and coherence between social workers practising in children's and adult services. Overarching strategies for public services may also affect how social work is led and delivered in the future. The Christie Commission (Scottish Government, 2011) found that 'failure demand' accounted for 40% of all local government expenditure in Scotland; public services, including social work, were insufficiently resourced to prevent difficulties thus resulting in their being increasingly focused on crisis driven interventions. The diminution of the preventive and supportive role of social work, with adequate staff time to form the kind of relationships with

service users necessary to enable positive and sustainable change, may undermine the potentially pivotal role that social work could have in moving to a less reactive service. This is another factor that is likely to affect understanding and valuing of professional leadership. Proposals are, however, also being developed for a National Social Work Agency (Community Care, 2021). This may offer a focus for social work as a professional discipline in Scotland and facilitate appropriate leadership development opportunities.

Concepts of what constitutes effective leadership have changed over time and this has inevitably influenced the attributes of leadership seen as relevant to social work. As mentioned above, the greater prominence of the care management role for social workers and the procurement function implicit therein led to more business-oriented models. Changes in policy drivers as well as user experience and accumulated objective outcome information has, in recent years, brought about refinements and adaptations to this model. Even within commercial organisations, theories of effective leadership have changed. The concept of 'servant leadership' has become much more prominent, replacing more hierarchical, authoritarian, and paternalistic models. Based around principles such as listening, empathy, foresight and building community (McGee-Cooper and Trammell, 2013), it perhaps reflects social work values more meaningfully than previous approaches. Again, this may indicate that it may be timeous to revisit what effective leadership means in a social work context and how it can support positive and sustainable change among people who use social work services.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

- Initial steps to enhance and embed understandings of leadership are underway across initiatives to support newly qualified staff in their first year in practice, as well as introducing concepts at the pre-qualification stage through social work education. Based on our findings that workers gain important skills, knowledge and understanding through informal learning modes (mostly from experienced social workers and managers), we would suggest that further efforts are required to embed understandings of leadership throughout the whole professional workforce. This extends to organisational cultures and providing adequate opportunities for staff to develop leadership capabilities in their everyday work. Indeed, a significant number of participants mentioned the importance of the availability of structured professional development to the development of leadership capabilities. The 2019 SSSC report 'Post Qualifying Learning in Social Work in Scotland' (Gordon et al, 2019) highlights the limitations, inconsistency, and lack of coherence of what is on offer in many organisations.

- It seems appropriate to continue to review and develop the current framework for leadership in light of greater emerging research knowledge, the major changes to the delivery of social work that have already taken place, and those that are imminent. Sullivan (2016) highlights differences in leadership approaches between those who have social work practice experience and those who have other kinds of backgrounds. And given the probability of adult (if not all) social work services becoming part of a National Care Service, this may be of some significance. Lawler (2007) expressed concern some years ago about the encroachment of 'managerialism' into social work services while also fearing that increasing references to 'leadership' as opposed to 'management' could be interpreted as devolving greater responsibility for service performance to individual practitioners. Some of the ideas put forward in recent initiatives in this area and across the UK, could be seen as including elements of such a model. We need to be clear about what we mean by leadership and the qualities and attributes that are associated with it.
- Leadership in social work, as articulated in research evidence, policy documents and by the participants themselves, should include a number of activities. These could involve conducting research; supporting colleagues, volunteers and service users in ways that improve outcomes; acquiring specialist knowledge and expertise in particular areas of social work practice and service development; leading on project development and implementation and contributing to workforce learning. Of course, management skills such as budgetary control and staff supervision remain important elements of good leadership.

# CHAPTER 7: INTERVIEW DATA

## Introduction

This chapter gives the narrative accounts of thirteen social workers who were interviewed in Year 1 (2017), Year 3 (2019), and Year 5 (2021) of this study. A total of 17 participants were interviewed in Year 1; however, two participants were unavailable in Year 3, followed by two more in Year 5. The research team made multiple attempts to contact these participants by email and telephone, but this was not successful. We know however from the SSSC that all continue to be registered as social workers.

The interviews elicited approximately 250,000 words of data and this chapter only provides a flavour, organised under the main themes covered in the report: employment, education, learning and development, supervision and support, confidence and competence, and professional identity. Because the most recent interviews occurred between March and May 2021, the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown featured very significantly on each of these themes and some of this is introduced towards the end of this chapter.

All participants qualified in 2016. They came from a range of backgrounds, with different experiences of education and employment. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identity of participants and to anonymise the data. Participants were asked broadly similar questions at each time point focusing on dimensions of working life, professional development, and professional identity. Accounts in this chapter focus on responses from 13 participants who agreed to be interviewed at three timepoints in their career.

Table 3: Participant list and areas of practice

<b>Participant</b>	<b>Area of Practice</b>
Safia	Older Adults
Karen	Older Adults
Lily	Hospital Social Work
Mandy	Justice
Lydia	Children and Families
Sarah	Children and Families
Colin	Justice
Myra	Children and Families – moved to different LA - Hospital Social Work
Lesley	Children and Families – moved to different LA – same practice area
Douglas	Children and Families



Tracy	Children and Families – moved within LA to different post, but then left to work in voluntary sector
Donald	Children and Families
Malcolm	Children and Families

Table 3 shows that most participants were situated in children and families social work over the entire five-year period. This is important to highlight from the outset, as elsewhere in this report (see Chapter 2) we have discussed challenges in retaining and supporting practitioners in this particular area of practice.

## EMPLOYMENT

Of the 13 participants interviewed in Year 5, seven were in the same, or very similar, posts as when they started. **Safia** started in an older adults' social work team and has been there ever since. Initially she envisaged moving on within the first year as it was outwith the area where she lived, and she was 'the only person of colour'. However, as she waited for other possibilities, she 'gelled really well' with her team and got settled into the work: 'I would say definitely, I think having like a really good team and knowing what I was doing, being confident in my work meant that I did end up then staying much longer than what I had anticipated.

**Karen** has also been in the same older adult team since qualifying and is 'quite content' with where she is. Her reasons for staying include: her team, which (pre-COVID-19), worked well, was inclusive, and appreciated her life-experience as a newly qualified but older woman; the client base; culture and lifestyle of a rural community; the interdisciplinary, multiagency nature of the work in a small community and the 'camaraderie'.

**Lily** has remained in the same adult hospital social work team. Having recently qualified as an MHO, her role within the team has changed somewhat to incorporate Mental Health Officer (MHO) duties. She 'loves' her job and what has sustained her there is "a very, very supportive team manager, who has been promoting my professional development really since I joined the team"; a supportive team; the multi-disciplinary working, the 'buzz of the hospital'; supporting people through crisis and recovery and seeing positive outcomes.

Months after qualifying on a distance learning programme, **Mandy** moved into a social work post in community justice: 'I have no aspirations. None. I have peaked. (laughter).' She believes the work/life balance, compared to other areas of social work, is better in this field. She enjoys the 'hands-on nature' of her job compared

to her pre-qualifying role in community care where:

'people are very much a number to you...you were seeing people once every six months, sometimes a year, whereas in this post, you're working with that person quite intensely for the duration of their order. And that to me is more like proper social work than other areas.'

Three participants progressed into slightly different roles internally, two within children and families and one in community justice.

**Lydia** views her move after two years, from a long-term team to an initial response team in the same local authority, as a progression as she feels she couldn't do this role without having had the experience of the previous one. She sees herself remaining in children and families and is curious as to what it might be like in a different local authority. She believes 'job retention in social work is not good'.

**Sarah**, who has had two periods of maternity leave, was first in a generic children and families role and is now in a specialist looked after children team within the same local authority and is sustained by 'all the direct work with the families and kind of helping them along the way'.

**Colin's** first post was in a throughcare team supporting people leaving prison to return to the community. After 18 months he was redeployed into a generic team in community justice, where he remains, and views his progression as really positive. He has a good working relationship with his supervisor who supports his development.

**In summary, what sustained the seven workers above in the same/similar posts was supportive colleagues/teams, their developing confidence in and enjoyment of the work - particularly direct work with service users and having managers who understood their developmental needs.**

The remaining six participants moved post within the first five years. Many did so for a mix of reasons. **Myra's** was practical; she left her first post in a children and families team to move to a more specialist hospital-based post in a different local authority, mainly due to the commute. She feels 'really lucky that I have ended up, in an equally stable team and position and much closer to home'. She likes having her 'own desk' as she didn't enjoy the 'hot-

desking' in her previous post. She is very settled and has no intentions to move. **Lesley** also moved local authority for practical reasons and remained in children and families. She sees herself as lucky to have been in a local authority that had 'a really good newly qualified forum where you would meet regularly and you were very protected as a newly qualified worker', which is 'non-existent' in her current authority.

Three workers experienced more difficult starts to their social work careers. In **Douglas'** first two years in a children and families post, the team had several changes of manager and became depleted. The cohesion and support among team members who stayed was good but organisational and managerial support was lacking. This 'destroyed my soul'. Douglas' confidence was really low, and he required counselling:

'really, really hated it... I didn't think that I hated the job – I just think that I hated the environment and the way that I was working, and my own difficulties with how I was feeling in the job... and I felt really quite let down.'

He moved to a specialist young people's team within the same local authority, where his experience is very different:

'I love it...It's absolutely fantastic...it's a big team...we're about 20 members strong, support workers, social work assistants, and social workers... my confidence levels pure sky-rocketed....'

**Tracy** started in a children and families team and describes a reasonable start, the 'best of both worlds' as a few NQSWs joined a really experienced team that was 'quite stable and really supportive'. This initial positivity changed, however, and she describes 'toxic' attitudes and a 'baptism of fire'. She recalls a particularly difficult, verbally abusive family and a manager who was not confident in supporting her, a team that 'fell apart', and workers, especially seniors, who were under-performing and not held accountable. Two years later she secured a more specialist post in a young people's team, going from holding 34 cases to 15, very 'relationship-based' and with 'excellent facilities' for working with young people. She was critical however of the local authority's handling of COVID-19 and in her fifth year secured a similar post with a voluntary organisation which combines consultation with frontline practice and ultimately would like a policy role as she feels policy makers should have more frontline experience. She describes putting in a lot of extra hours into her current role, including weekends and feels like she's 'been in social work forever (laughs)'. She is concerned about the career path for social workers: 'if you don't want to become a senior, you don't want to

become a manager, where do you go?’

**Donald** also started out in a children and families post. He describes in detail the challenges of the first year ‘technically learning how to do the job within the local authority: where is this report, what format is it, how do you do it?’ and a highly complex caseload which ‘overwhelmed’ him. He describes a supportive line manager but a service manager who took a really punitive approach and threatened to report him to SSSC: ‘I was late with case notes and that sort of thing, because I had so much to do’. He had a six-month break for shared parental leave which gave him the opportunity to reflect on the kind of social worker he wanted to be and moved to a children and families team in a different local authority. This has mostly been positive though he continues to experience the challenge of ‘trying to stay on top of cases and stay on top of work’.

**Malcolm’s** trajectory has been the most varied. He was supported on a distance learning programme as an assistant manager in social care as a way ‘of furthering my career, but without any definite sense of direction’ and was promoted to manager on qualifying. After 18 months, he was moved into a mixed post broadly within children and families but with a strategic remit, and, as an experienced worker who believes he is viewed as a ‘safe pair of hands’, has had several subsequent changes at the behest of the organisation:

‘...it’s been very tiring because you never quite feel that you’re on solid ground. It’s continually shifting sands. You always have got that little bit of imposter syndrome... when you feel like you’re not quite up to where you should be and a level of knowledge that, actually, you feel comfortable in doing the tasks etc... I think the other thing on reflection, it’s about that kind of job security aspect because you feel like you’re almost expendable...’

Six participants commented specifically on the challenges of the first two years. Colin viewed this as something you “just you have to go through” but thought that “a slightly different style of supervising at the time might have helped”. He also stresses the importance of having things in place to manage stress outside of work and the importance of reflection and opportunities for further study. Looking back, Lydia says:

‘The first two years, I didn’t really have a clue what I was doing...Although, at the time, I probably didn’t realise I relied a lot on people. I probably thought I was doing great (laugh). But only now looking back, I thought, “Oh my goodness.’

For Mandy, the combination of poor supervision and the newness of the work led to a lot of anxiety in her first two years:

'to come into a new team and every anxiety that comes with meeting loads of new people, trying to learn something... developing new skills, plus having that type of supervision, it was like a whole host of things that I just didn't feel as if I could get past.'

**In summary, the first two years post-qualifying are seen as particularly challenging. Indeed, for three workers who moved due to the difficulties they encountered, it was particularly damaging, causing them to reconsider being a social worker. Fortunately, they found settings where the workload was more manageable, and they felt better supported. What emerges as the chapter progresses is the importance of formal and informal support, workloads that enable value-based approaches and work-settings that inspire confidence and a strong sense of professional identity. These findings align closely with survey participants who also expressed higher levels of anxiety in the first two years of practice (see Chapter 2).**

## **SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION**

Participants in Year 5 were asked to reflect back on their social work education and invited to think about what mattered and what continues to make an impact. Participants came from several different programmes across Scotland. The majority cited placements as the most important aspect of their social work education - the 'real world' (Lesley, Colin) and 'the first time that I actually got to know what a social worker does' (Safia). Myra says her placement experience is what she refers to most in her day-to-day practice but adds 'there's probably theory things and academic things that have engrained their selves into my practice and my knowledge base that I'm not as conscious of and aware of...They're just part of your knowledge'. Lydia and Lily describe being 'lucky' to get the benefit of two statutory placements while Douglas feels 'particularly hard done by' having not had any statutory placements.

Mandy and Malcolm, who were on distance learning programmes, put more emphasis on the academic component, reflecting the fact

that they were already working in practice. Mandy 'didn't ever think I'd ever like journals but come the end of my course I'd enjoyed reading a lot of the evidence-based stuff' while Malcom 'understood the theory base, etc and what the purpose of the course really was'. Tracy also found 'the theoretical aspects and the research aspect' the most important and views that as essential to the risk assessments required for court reports. She feels there should be more focus on values. Others viewed their programmes as 'heavy on theory and evidence-based practice' (Safia), and in practice 'you forget to go back to that often' (Lydia) or practice 'doesn't fit into that social work theory' (Karen). Sarah feels that doing a master's meant 'the four-year (undergraduate) course was crammed into eighteen months'. She feels she had to 'learn quite a lot of the basics of it really' when she got a job.

Most enjoyed their university experience: 'the structure of the uni and the lecturers that I worked with were super... they gave you time and space to create your persona' (Karen) and were 'really approachable' (Safia). Lily also 'absolutely loved the two years at doing my course' although feels it is impossible for any course to fully prepare students for every area of practice. Safia was critical of some aspects of her programme, specifically lecturers who had been out of practice for some time but countered this with the learning she gained from inputs by external practitioners.

### **Theory to practice**

In a follow up question to what they most valued about their qualifying experience, participants were asked about their use of theory and research in practice. The challenges to this included 'time' pressure (Douglas, Lily, Lesley, Mandy) because 'it's just hit the ground running and you're so busy dealing with the day-to-day stuff, the reports, the case notes, the visits, that research really doesn't always come into'. (Lesley). For others it is because the work often doesn't fit the theory (Safia, Colin, Karen) or the resources are not available to intervene in a way that is research evidenced 'so if I'd said for instance, like somebody should go to rehab, if that rehab's not there then they're not going to do it, they can't, they can't give me the money to go and do it' (Mandy). Tracy feels that theory, research and evidence are not promoted in social work teams: 'it should be something that's part of supervision, it should be something that's part of team meetings. It should be something that's focussed in on development days'.

For those supporting students' learning like Karen, there is more likelihood of 'linking into more material than my colleagues do and that keeps it fresh in my brain'. Equally, those who have undertaken formal post qualifying training, as discussed below, described themselves as 'reading widely' (Douglas) and 'buzzing

and full of enthusiasm' (Lydia) and Lydia now provides reflective sessions with newly qualified social workers 'linking cases to research or recent policy'.

There is a sense that theory and research could be applied 'on a subconscious level' (Safia, Tracy) or 'ingrained in you...like two hundred theories that could explain somebody's situation and then it's trying to work with that and get appropriate interventions" (Mandy). Mandy also expressed concern that:

'sometimes you're not choosing the interventions, it's the interventions that are imposed on you, especially working from the court perspective... You know somebody's chaotic, you know somebody can't manage that, but the court's telling you you're doing it, so regardless of what theory you know would work best for that person, or what intervention, this is what you're faced with.'

Sarah provides examples of research she is likely to draw on, such as on attachment and trauma. Myra agrees that she will access research 'if I've got a specific case and something going on and I'm trying to either find out what the best intervention is or find a theory to better understand what's happening'.

**In summary, participants are largely positive about their social work education. Most felt that practice placements had, and continue to have, an impact on their practice today (this aligns with findings in Chapter 1 where the legacy and impact of practice placements is still felt in the fifth year of employment). Those who qualified by distance learning whilst in employment felt that theory and research had more of a lasting impact on them than for those who qualified through traditional university routes. For most, there is a sense in which research and theory are not consciously applied in everyday practice but that workers draw on tacit knowledge, which may be influenced by theories they have learned previously. Most seem to draw on research and theory only when it is necessary to do so, rather than it being embedded in everyday working practices. This however is impacted by time, resources, and team cultures. Some also expressed a view that they do not always have control over their interventions in a way that would ensure their practice is properly research-informed.**

## **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT**

### **Informal Learning**

Participants report that their learning and development over the five years has come from both informal and formal sources, with most privileging the former. Colleagues offer 'the most frequent access to learning and development' (Myra). They are 'the first port of call when workers are unsure of something' (Lesley, Lily, Karen) and have 'consolidated my learning over the last five years' (Safia). Douglas describes a breadth of experience across his team and 'heated' debate that promotes informal learning in a context of 'everyone's smiling, everyone's having a good time'. Lydia reflects on her learning from a mentor while Colin added 'positive supervision' as a forum for learning but reflects on the fact that informal learning is harder to measure.

### **Formal training**

Five participants have undertaken formal postgraduate training. Douglas and Lily have been seconded full-time to do Mental Health Officer training which has developed their confidence. Lily has also undertaken a five-day training course to become a Council Officer, the lead role in Adult Support and Protection investigations which has been 'really beneficial for my professional development'.

Three participants (Lydia, Sarah, Malcolm) have done/are doing a postgraduate certificate in child protection (PgC CP). For Lydia, it was 'the most substantial thing I've done and I've absolutely loved it'. Sarah's preference was to do the Practice Learning Qualification (PLQ) but was required to do PgC CP, due to her 'lack of confidence dealing with Child Protection cases'. Malcolm has already done a postgraduate certificate but is concerned about outstanding training to fulfil his PRTL (Post Registration Training and Learning).

Participants have also undertaken non-accredited training including MAPPA (Multi-agency public protection arrangements) and self-care (Mandy), risk assessment (Mandy, Tracy), child protection/permanency planning and reporting (Donald), assessing contact/infant observation (Myra). Colin, Karen, Lesley have undertaken link-worker training to supervise students and while Colin and Karen intend to progress to the PLQ, Lesley is concerned about her caseload and that she has not yet had enough experience despite being 'one of the more experienced members' of her team.

Myra is hopeful of more 'training opportunities that might start to become available now that I'm sort of settled into a team'. Safia has done 'lots of training' which she has found beneficial 'but



probably not to the same level as actually being able to sit with my team and speak to them'. Several participants (Mandy, Lydia, Tracy, Malcolm, Safia, Myra) were critical of in-house training which 'feels a wee bit thrown together' (Lydia) and 'can be very basic' (Mandy). Colin is more positive about training opportunities afforded him and believes they are 'more beneficial than people often give it credit for' as they allow for periods of reflection.

**In summary, it is apparent that social workers' learning and development is achieved through a mix of informal peer learning from colleagues and from supervision in addition to more formal training opportunities, both in-house and external. Informal modes of learning remain important for most, with formal routes being more valued when the quality and rigour required exceed typical in-house training. These findings align with Chapters' 2 and 4 where participants expressed the importance of informal learning and being in proximity to colleagues for these opportunities to occur. Colin summarises the mix concisely: 'So training, supervision, working with colleagues and experience all kind of facilitate learning on the job for me.'**

## **SUPERVISION AND SUPPORT**

All participants except Lily and Malcom have had regular four-weekly supervision but of varied quality over the last five years. Lily seeks support on a daily basis as her caseload changes quickly and Malcolm is on his eighth supervisor due to changes in role, with periods of no supervisor and other times with two at hand.

Participants were asked how supervision balanced workload management with personal and professional development. For Douglas 'there's no good balance, it's all case discussion... sometimes it feels a bit like a tick-y box exercise'. He describes a conflict of views between him and his supervisor who thinks he is 'too emotionally invested in the young people' whereas he perceives her as 'very distant... prescriptive...no flexibility'. Malcolm has to 'explain a lot' as his supervisors are unclear about his various roles and the competing demands on his time. He had one supervisor who was 'genuinely listening' to him but otherwise it has been 'almost entirely task focused...I don't remember the last time anyone mentioned personal and professional development'. For Safia, the focus on workload suits her 'because what I wanted from supervision was advice and reassurance on the cases'. For Lesley,

80% of supervision is case management with 'a wee bit of time talking about how things are going on a personal basis and ... a bit about development and what you would like going forward'.

Colin reports supervision as positive, allowing him to: 'openly reflect about a case... it really galvanises what you're doing with your caseload and allows you not just to manage your caseload but to learn from it'. Karen can 'talk about what I need to talk about and then we'll bring in the aspects of how I'm engaging, how I'm coping' but adds that she 'loves peer supervision, I love talking to my colleagues'.

Some participants compared previous and current experiences. In Lydia's previous post, supervision was 'very tick box, case led', but now is more nurturing, with the responsibility on her to set the agenda. Casework is discussed and managed collectively across the duty team. Similarly, Mandy's experience of supervision was 'highly critical', which left her feeling 'rubbish', which really impacted her confidence. She was later allocated a mentor which provided 'fabulous support'. She now experiences a good balance: 'having that negative experience to begin with, I go in with my own agenda as well, I'm very much like "this is what I want out of supervision"'. For Tracy, supervision is 'definitely better than my first job, but it's still case management'. She doesn't feel seniors are able to offer 'the counselling that social workers need'. She discusses at length the need for supportive supervision beyond the case management role. She also feels that the development role focuses more on the needs of the service than her needs as a person or professional. Donald likes the approach of his current manager who emails notes ten minutes after supervision and 'will back his workers' decisions, he's trying to develop workers who are really autonomous'. Myra feels supervision has progressed from being more directive as a new worker to being 'a bit of an off-load (laugh)... a more mutual experience', as her confidence has grown.

All participants valued informal peer support over formal supervision. For Douglas 'peer support and that informal supervision is more important to me than the formal supervision'. It is 'really important' to Colin while for Lily 'it is one of the main reasons why I love being in that team so much... we actually probably all know each other's cases, just as well as we know our own because we talk about them all that much'. Mandy relies on peers for support as 'managers are too busy' while for Tracy peers are important as she perceives there to be 'a power imbalance' in her relationship with managers.

**In summary, as with learning and development, the peer support participants receive from colleagues is given significant value. In most cases, participants seem to get more from informal modes of interaction than formal processes of supervision. For most, supervision remains largely focussed on caseload management, with little space dedicated to emotional wellbeing and issues around professional development. These findings align with Chapter 2 where participants expressed similar concerns about the weight given to workload management in supervision; however, most here felt that supervision met their needs. Survey participants also placed significant value on informal modes of support from colleagues – often exceeding that given to formal supervision.**

## **WORKLOAD**

For most participants, administrative demands get in the way of what they like doing most – direct work with people. Colin felt that the time spent on report-writing and assessments curtails 'hands-on work with people' and the research needed to ensure the quality of therapeutic interventions is maintained. He understands the need for accountability and risk assessment, particularly in justice settings, but believes systems could be streamlined to reduce duplication: 'I'm actually fighting to get to my caseload, fighting to get to working with my people, actually getting tasks out the way to go and work with someone'. He believes there is work underway to address this. Lydia agrees that it's 'probably about 30 % spent with families... it doesn't feel right... I feel like I'm doing less social work because you're not getting as much of an opportunity to do that... in this team, you do a lot less face to face and out and about'. She describes child protection work as "processy [sic]" as cases are moved on quickly from her team but believes this is the same for the longer-term team as well: 'as soon as somebody's taken off the register, boom, you get a new case, and it's moved on and that's the processy bit that we do need to get better at' Lydia has 40 plus cases but has had up to 60: 'I spend a lot of my time on the phone or at Team Around the Child meetings or at visits trying to find alternatives to social work being involved and that takes up a lot of our time.'

Mandy feels administrative tasks, 'feeding the beast' are time-consuming and take from time spent in direct work:

'there's definitely no balance, and I don't think there ever will be... it's the nature of social work. You're always covering

yourself. And it's absolutely terrible that we do that. But it's the truth, it's what happens... if it's not written down you haven't done it, you know? I'm very conscious of that.'

She adds:

'a lot of students come into post... come into training, they're very disillusioned to what social work's going to be like for them. I think they think they're going to go out and save the world... And when they're hit with reports and things like that, and you're taken away from the front facing... that's a real struggle for them.'

Tracy reflects that from the time she first started in social work people were 'being worked ragged', unable to claim back additional hours worked, and 'that's still the case...it's not social workers that need to change, it's the environments, it's the cultures that need change'. She adds:

'social workers do all their admin now... they want to get rid of the finance team, like so we have to do this spreadsheet... Like trying to figure out tax, like I'm not an accountant, like honestly, I can't even locate tax on a blooming receipt.'

Her workload has changed from about 34 cases in her first post and 'it was all paperwork... all my time was sat typing'. She felt she was writing reports about families she hardly knew. Her caseload is now 15 and is much more focussed on client contact.

Others experience a better balance. Lesley has 'a relatively high caseload' but believes that ordinarily, the balance between direct work and admin is reasonable. Douglas says it is 50% visits, 50% paperwork which 'feels right'. He describes having a manageable caseload relative to 'the chaotic environment' of his first post and enjoys the voluntary nature of throughcare support, 'very much a support and guidance type of role, which I really like' including supporting young people with college homework, helping access housing, 'what some might say is not social work', although he argues that it is. Lily feels the balance of tasks ordinarily is about right in the MHO role. Karen also describes workload balance 'under normal circumstances' as 'a diary full of visits Tuesday to Thursday and then work from home on a Friday when I would collate all my stuff, make telephone calls, have a really busy day finishing everything off.... I would always be very busy, assessments, new care packages'. Her caseload 'exploded' to 40 plus during COVID-19. Myra's caseload is 'around eighteen or twenty' including Section 23 (disability) assessments, children living at home in need of support, looked after children and child protection: 'No two weeks are the same (laugh) it's always very varied... I would say on

average, it is manageable' although 'sometimes there's just not enough hours in the day'. She feels there is a reasonable balance between admin and direct work but acknowledges there are weeks when: 'admin takes up my whole life... if you keep on top of it, it's okay. But it's when you get yourself behind and you end up playing catch up, then it can become a mountain quite quickly'. For her, the biggest admin task is recording of contacts, particularly for proof hearings: 'that can become really intensive and can almost become like a part time job trying to do it to that standard'.

Donald describes a workload of '28, nearly 30 children last year' which his manager is trying to reduce to around 25. This involves a complex mix of permanence and child protection work and he has 'a lot to cram in'.

Malcolm has an unusual workload which combines strategic (quality improvement /audit and evaluation) with some practice at senior practitioner level. He feels that 'having that one foot in an operational camp is actually quite helpful. I think it just keeps you a bit more in tune with what's happening with people'.

**In summary, for most participants administrative demands have a negative impact on time spent doing direct work with service users, although some have managed to achieve a better balance with this. Interestingly, despite the volume of cases mentioned by some participants, most indicated that workloads were, over the piece, manageable. Discussions tended to focus more on balancing competing demands, rather than expressing notions of stress or anxiety relating to current work (or the volume of it). These findings align with Chapter 2 where most survey participants reported that workloads were manageable and that most felt they could take on more complex work over time. A significant proportion of participants in Years' 1 and 2 expressed the most anxiety over workloads; however, this seemed to ease from Years' 3 to 5.**

## **CONFIDENCE AND COMPETENCE**

Participants generally felt most confident and competent in building relationships and working directly with people (Colin, Douglas, Lydia, Mandy, Lesley, Tracy, Lily), achieved in most cases through processes of assessment and engagement with service users (Safia, Lydia, Lily, Malcolm). Myra is generally confident with cases

but 'there are really complex or challenging cases where I do say to my manager, "I've got no idea what I'm doing with this", and do need a little bit more direction or suggestion or input'. Lily is confident in her new MHO role: 'I actually know a lot more than what I maybe gave myself credit for, just through everyday experience as a social worker'. Myra reflects that the confidence in her everyday work has 'trickled down' from her team of confident, experienced colleagues while Mandy credits a mentor who was a 'fabulous support' prior to which a combination of poor supervision, anxiety of being in a new team with new people and the volume of learning led to her feeling under-confident. Colin's confidence is weakest on 'procedural matters and thoroughly interrogating some of the systems' and this compromises his direct work. Malcom felt that the various systems and processes used in the different sectors he has worked in is 'disconcerting... bruising and pretty tiring because you always feel like you're on the cusp of making some gross error (laugh)... that has taken its toll, I must admit'. Mandy is least confident about her report-writing skills.

Areas of under-confidence for Donald and Karen are linked to value conflicts, with Donald struggling with decisions that impact negatively on families, leaving a sense of 'betrayal' hence him 're-evaluating' himself as a social worker. Karen feels under-confident in managing the 'personalisation agenda' of SDS. 'I find their [service user] rights have diminished and that's where my confidence goes... the push is to personalisation, but you can't do that and then just back off.'

Lack of confidence for Douglas is felt in how colleagues and others perceive him 'I want to be a valuable member of the team. I want people to perceive me as that as well...that's probably my area of least confidence;'. Lydia is concerned that there is a lot she still doesn't know, and this is linked to her under-confidence in 'quite a lot of difficult team dynamics' which impact her assertiveness with colleagues. Lily can feel disempowered in multi-disciplinary team meetings, where medical terminology is used and where other professionals are not clear about the social work role: 'I think it's an assumption that you know what they're talking about, I think that plays a big part. But yeah, I think a lot just don't know what we actually do'. While Tracy feels very skilled in talking to young people, she is less confident 'negotiating things with senior management'. She gives an example of not being consulted on matters pertaining to her work and that leads to under-confidence in being around managers.

**In summary, participants feel most confident and competent**

**in their direct work with people and less confident with some of the systems and processes around this work. However, findings here also reveal the very individual nature of self-perceived confidence and competence, often linked to personal as well as professional dimensions of working life. Our findings in Chapter 3 indicate that confidence and competence must be understood as fluid – often reflecting the complex, conflicted and diverse nature of the social work role. We suggest here that confidence and competence seem contingent on the nature and culture of organisational environments, as well as the quality and proximity of supports made available to social workers in their everyday work.**

## **PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY**

Participants generally struggled in responding to how they understood the development of their professional identity. Douglas feels 'quite a strong sense of professional identity and I'm not really sure why. It's something that I've never really considered, actively... I'm quite proud to be a social worker. I feel that it's a very positive job'. For Mandy, 'I don't know how to articulate it. I guess just being a social worker is just who I am at this point. I don't know how else to explain it...I couldn't imagine doing anything different and I feel like it's what I'm supposed to be doing'. She describes a sense of 'imposter syndrome' at times when she thinks 'oh surely I can't do that. You can't ask me (laughs)' but views this as 'a good thing... you don't want to be too confident'. Myra also describes 'days where you sort of wobble and you think, "Oh, what am I doing here?" and you just get quite stressed and overwhelmed'. Five years on however, she can 'bounce back from that much more quickly... it's probably those little blips that build the confidence up... I would say it's only in the last year or two that I would be really clear in what my role as a social worker is'. Lydia's professional identity has 'changed massively... the first two years, I didn't really have a clue what I was doing...I have definitely become clearer on the purpose of my job, the purpose of my team, the purpose of the organisation'. In his hybrid role, Malcolm feels in 'No Man's Land where you've not quite got the recognition in terms of grade etc... it's difficult to know where to place myself if I'm honest'. Because he didn't work at front line services for very long, he feels:

'without that badge of honour or battle scar or whatever way you want to describe that, you don't necessarily feel like you've kind of come through the proper channel as it were...

Either to progress the organisation or to be considered valid in some ways, you've got to have come through that route.'

Tracy's 'conscious decision to go and do social work' was linked to her personal identity and values. Her identity was eroded in her previous post where she was 'trying to balance all these pots that are overflowing' but in her current post 'it completely flipped for me...I can be like a feminist, I can use my values, I can empower people, I can pick people up, I can help people, I can get the time to do that...'

Several participants considered their professional identity in relation to other professionals, and are concerned that what social workers do is not always understood by others:

'I think social work has always been quite unique, but I think it is in danger of losing its identity at times. And I think sometimes it can be undervalued in the eyes of other professionals... I think at times maybe we're seen as a lesser profession' (Colin).

In the context of the push towards integrated working, Karen felt:

'it seems to be health very much taking control of everything. And it's: 'what do you social workers actually do?' And you have to say: 'you only look at the person from a health perspective'. Health are taking the lead in everything... it just seems to be they're eroding the social work role.'

Lydia expressed this from another angle:

'...the only times I've really struggled with professional identity is when I've been speaking to doctors or paediatricians while we're doing Child Protection medicals. I've felt like at times that they haven't maybe valued my assessment or my input.'

Mandy described a more positive experience of working with another professional where:

'the sheriff looked at me more like a colleague, he didn't look down his nose at me...there wasn't any negative stuff coming from him, and he was very supportive... I felt as if he had my back...my identity as a social worker was strong.'

That said, the context of court work is that 'your cap is in your hand, and I hate that, that really bugs me about the power imbalance' (Mandy).



Mandy expressed frustration with people not knowing what social workers do and the confidence that's required to say 'Well, actually that's not a part of my role'. Douglas agrees that at times 'you're left in that void of doing work that maybe isn't your job or leaving the person to just get further into distress or crisis'. Lydia has 'learnt a lot in terms of my own professional identity over the last year' as her team has become more targeted and focused:

'It has to be purposeful...trying to make sure that what we're doing is for the right reasons because it's really stressful for families having social work involved. Unless it's absolutely necessary, we shouldn't be doing it... It's not about protecting social work, it's about empowering families and doing things slightly differently.'

Lily describes the improved relations with hospital colleagues since she gained MHO status: 'I feel now that there's more of a mutual respect of roles.'

Donald finds the identity of the profession 'frustrating' and undermined by independent advocates and Safeguarders being appointed when social workers have already undertaken assessments and made recommendations: 'Questions are being asked of us that just wouldn't be asked of other professions... what is all the training for? What is all our supervision for? What has the work leading up to this report been for'. He also talks about heads of services being managed by non-social workers who don't have 'the knowledge and the qualifications, really, to do it'.

Sarah loves being a Social Worker and while she might not stay in Children and Families:

'I certainly like being it and whenever anyone asks me, I just say straight away, "I'm a Social Worker," and I love that job and you get often, quite often the eye roll. You know, somebody's got to do it kind of thing. But, no, I've always been quite proud of that.'

**In summary, almost all participants 'love' and 'are proud' to be social workers and have no wish to change career at present. They are concerned nevertheless that the profession and its role and purpose is often misunderstood by other professionals, even within supposedly integrated settings, where social workers might be managed by other disciplines. They also believe they are viewed as a lesser profession" by others in some contexts and point to some of the ways in which social work has become eroded or**

**undermined, as, for example, with the appointment of Safeguarders to fulfil responsibilities that social workers might see as their own area of expertise. However, what emerges here is a sense that professional identity is something that emerges when the distinct role and contribution of social work is recognised and realised – typically by other professionals, eg the sheriff in Mandy’s case and other health staff when Lily became an MHO. Our findings in Chapter 5 indicate that professional identity is a complex area for social workers to articulate clearly – often shaped by a range of internal and external factors. Indeed, there is alignment here between interview participants in this chapter and survey participants in Chapter 5 where having autonomy, making complex judgments, and application of professional values were seen as important to their sense of professional identity as a social worker.**

## **IMPACT OF COVID-19**

As stated in the introduction to the chapter, the timing of the interviews which were conducted between March and May 2021 meant that COVID-19 working restrictions dominated participants’ accounts and a flavour of the pandemic’s impact is presented here under each theme.

### **Employment**

In terms of their work environment, all participants except Lily were predominantly home-based with occasional time in the office for things like ‘duty’ (Safia, Colin, Douglas, Donald, Lydia, Myra), and some additional time in for those living alone or feeling the impact on their mental health. Some home/garden visits for child and adult protection cases and court-ordered contacts were being carried out (Colin, Myra, Lydia, Donald) but most work was being conducted online or on the phone. Not doing direct face to face work was impacting: ‘for all the will in the world, you can’t make that relationship and those bonds with people through a phone...’ (Sarah). Being able to go out and do visits was viewed as a break from home working.

Three participants had no access to their workplace (Karen, Lesley, Malcolm). Karen who lives a substantial distance from her base, could call on others to do visits on her behalf while Lesley could request a meeting room out-with her usual base if it was deemed necessary.

Only Lily has been unaffected in terms of her work base. However, she was not allowed onto wards or into care homes and therefore her contacts were mainly by phone or online and with patients 'who've got a cognitive impairment, it's really, really challenging using a video call'. For MHO assessments:

'it's so important that I've got that person's views...you couldn't consent to a detention without seeing a person, so the staff have been really good at facilitating that for us and making sure we've got the full PPE and social distancing.'

## **Workload**

In addition to how they were carrying out their work via video and phone calls, several participants said it also fundamentally changed their role. Safia described herself as 'just a review machine at the moment because that's a lot of what I'm doing and that really affects my motivation for doing the work' while Lesley described 'just processing reports and case notes' and Lily doing 'a lot of guardianship reports'. For Karen it is 'horrendous' and her confidence 'has taken quite a hit... My ability to do the job hasn't been affected but my ability to put that over to my clients has taken a hammering. I can physically hear 'aw (sigh), not again''. Lydia feels like she's been doing a very different job 'because it's so difficult when you have so little information and you're trying to respond to something, to do that in a different way and trying to do that from a distance'. Mandy describes an online assessment tool developed to use during COVID-19 and 'a lot of paperwork that comes with that'.

In addition to these changes to workload, several alluded to the 'nightmare' (Sarah, Mandy) of home working:

'... being out of the office and working at home, you're left with it in your own head... and you're dreaming about it, and there's no one really around to unload about, that's been really the main stress, rather than the workload, is the actual, the emotional workload. I think it's been far greater for everyone during lockdown' (Donald).

Lesley stated: 'I hate being stuck, chained to a laptop... I enjoy being out and about', while Sarah reflected: 'it's not been an enjoyable year... I'm quite a people person... I've really found it quite difficult not having that colleague support and seeing people in the office'.

Home schooling caused Mandy to 'take time off work, unwell... I had two weeks off with my anxiety, I just couldn't cope with that...'.

Some felt that home working has benefitted both their work-performance and themselves. Lydia has noted a culture shift to recognising 'our more admin type tasks rather than the face-to-face stuff, we're able to do a lot of that from home really uninterrupted' while Douglas 'can do the job absolutely perfectly well with no issues, without having to be in the office every single day' ... I love it. I think it's great,' Malcolm feels 'the majority of my work at the moment, it can be done using Teams' and Colin felt he could 'focus on pieces of work that require focused time'.

Interestingly, it was three of the four men in the study who felt that their 'work/life balance has never been so healthy' (Colin). Douglas, who 'was very much an office bird' is 'really comfortable' and it is easier to walk his dog, take a lunch break, go running and drive less, and for Malcolm 'It's a lot less stressful in terms of my work-life balance. I've got a reasonably young family. So be able to get the kids to school, run back, work...'

Colin acknowledges however that this would be challenging for students or NQSWs who would 'feel a wee bit lost'. Douglas also acknowledges that his is not 'a view that's shared by many, if anyone, in my team. I know certain members of the team have really, really struggled...isolation plays a big part'. He acknowledges overall the impact on team cohesion and 'I think that's a real detriment to students, new workers, ... actually it's a detriment to us all'.

## **Training and development**

In addition to the impact on workload and work practices, participants felt training and development opportunities, formal and informal, were impacted by COVID-19. Donald describes usually well-structured group supervision that has only been managed 'once or twice, but it's not to the same degree. It just doesn't really work across Teams'. In terms of more formal training opportunities, while there have been 'some really good learning opportunities' (Donald), 'virtual learning' is not the same as being away on a training course (Donald, Safia, Myra, Sarah). Mandy and Safia agree there has been learning on adapting tools and techniques for alternative ways of working with people, but 'although we're adapting, it's still not for the better' (Mandy). Karen has 'more time on my hands' to do training because 'they want to keep you busy' (laughs) and uses it as an opportunity to stay in touch with people. Colin was the only participant who thought learning and development has been impacted less than he expected due to a supportive senior, a hard-working learning and development section that has 'improved their online learning resources and they're going to be delivering training in a completely different way from now on in'.

Some participants (Safia, Douglas, Mandy, Donald, Karen) compared their opportunities for informal learning as newly qualified social workers with the absence of those in the current environment, 'the physicality of being able to be with another worker and see how they work and then you develop your own way of working' (Karen). Safia is a mentor for a new worker who calls her several times each day and:

'she's not getting to pick up on all the things that she should've been able to pick up, like I did, when we were in an office environment. Where you're hearing people's phone calls, you're walking into your senior's room... colleagues are sitting right there, you can ask them for help... All the observation work, she's not been able to do any of that.'

Douglas echoes this and reflects on a colleague who would be at 'a completely different level, stage of your journey, if it was normal times'.

### **Supervision and support**

Another area impacted by COVID-19 has been supervision and support. Safia had supervision three times in the past year, mostly because her senior's children are at home. Lydia feels the reduction in supervision and team meetings where cases are discussed is 'because we're all under so much pressure'. Peer support, so valued by participants as discussed earlier, has been hugely affected with, 'everyone feeling a bit more flat and so making a little bit less effort to call each other' (Safia) and 'the person next to you... you actually have to pick up the phone, and that puts you off' (Mandy). Donald describes the difference between being able to check something out with a colleague beside you and 'ruminating about it all day' in his attic:

'And then you go downstairs and you're in the kitchen, and with your family, and it's bizarre, it's really bizarre going from speaking, having a really difficult conversation, somebody's swearing over the phone to you and all that, and then you go down to make a cup of tea and it's like your own family life, it's very strange.'

Sarah echoes this, comparing the support from a colleague following 'an emotional call' with 'sitting at home in your bedroom or your shed, or wherever you're working... and nobody's there. It's quite a vulnerable place to be in such a high stress job'. Lily compares her hospital-based situation to friends' elsewhere who are struggling:

'if you've had a difficult phone call, or a crisis situation that can be really difficult, just having a bit of down time, and having that support from your colleagues... how could you possibly have that at home? It's just awful.'

Malcolm missed 'that kind of camaraderie that comes from the office'. Because he doesn't really belong to a team 'it would be very artificial for me to speak to a lot of those people because day to day we don't really have a lot of need to be contacting them'.

Some have found ways to maintain peer support. Lydia works closely with another colleague and 'even though we're not in the office, we touch base at least a couple of times every day... I think at times, when the team's been a wee bit more fractious, it doesn't happen as naturally'. Myra has a weekly meeting over Teams which started out quite formally with an agenda but has 'transformed a wee bit more into a bit of a coffee morning. But people really prioritise it and people really seem to benefit from it and value it'. Lesley maintains peer support through WhatsApp groups and phone calls. Colin acknowledges that the lack of contact is a concern for colleagues but believes 'we'll adjust to that... get more used to Skyping and doing this (video call) and lifting the phone... I think we'll start to learn how to communicate in a different way.'

### **Professional Identity**

Participants' professional identity has also been impacted by COVID-19 restrictions. While Lydia's team have tried to continue face-to-face work as much as possible, she is concerned that others' professional identity is being impacted by not doing this. She reports also that a lot of people are off sick, not with COVID but with:

'work related or home related stress...And I think people forget as well that lots of people are struggling with it across the country with their mental health at the moment and that happens with social workers too...yeah, a lot of stress'.

Lily agrees that it has caused her to question 'am I being true to my social work values, and the principles of the legislation? Particularly in promoting service user participation'. She describes making life changing decisions:

'when that person had a hearing impairment, and you had your mask on, and they couldn't hear you. Or you couldn't get access to them, and you were really relying upon POA, like telephone calls with family, and nursing staff, and looking at records, and I feel at that stage I felt really anxious and was I... am I being true to my social work role here? Because

I just don't feel like, that person, we've not really got their voice, and advocacy weren't able to have access as well'.

She similarly describes doing reviews of care placements without seeing the person 'but you just adapt to the situation, and you just need to do the best you can, and it's weighing up the person's rights, but against the risk and doing the right thing for the person'.

Regarding the professions who were most valued by the public during the pandemic, Sarah says: 'I don't think people will ever appreciate social work, I think we are one of these professions that are never really going to be appreciated by the public really, are we?' Mandy describes a situation where she 'didn't feel my identity was taken into consideration' when her daughter's school did not give her a 'keyworker' place:

'I says, "listen, I cannot do my job... I'm talking to sex offenders, I'm talking to people with trauma, people who want to kill their selves, and my daughter's kicking about". I cannot do that.'

There is disappointment about key information not being shared which has also impacted workers' identity:

'from March until December (2020), everyone was probably quite hopeful that we would know what was happening and then January came and there's just been this total acceptance of, they're not going to communicate with us, they're probably not being fully honest with us, in terms of other kind of motivations behind some of the decisions' (Tracy).

Several expressed concern about how new working practices might be maintained longer term, with discussion of more hybrid forms of working, and some reporting their buildings were already being used for different purposes (Colin, Safia, Mandy, Karen, Tracy):

'it's looking to be more permanent...and how they could sell buildings and share buildings...which I think is a big loss, because you lose your colleagues, your indirect supervision, that if you've had a difficult day, or you've dealt with a difficult subject, they're there to bounce off of... there might be a lot more trauma coming along to social workers and what would've been usually expelled just by chatting, ranting and whatever else you need, that dark humour that you would probably have in an office that you wouldn't have at home, because you wouldn't say it over a video conference' (Mandy).

Colin who generally supports a more hybrid model believes

'if we're going to go as agile as we've been recently, there needs to be things actively put in place so that we can communicate. And it should be constantly reviewed and improved where necessary, because it would be a huge loss, I think it would have a massive impact if we can't communicate fluently with each other'.

**In summary, COVID-19 restrictions have significantly impacted all aspects of participants' work, particularly the opportunity for face-to-face direct work which is important to them as discussed earlier; some felt it fundamentally changed what work they do on a daily basis. It also impacted participants' working lives in that, with most or all of the working week spent at home, the majority missed informal and formal support from colleagues and managers. Some felt there were aspects of the work that were more easily done from home, but all conceded that home-working would be difficult for very new workers or for students. Some who witnessed what seemed like permanent closures of their workplaces, expressed concern about the direction social work would take beyond this. In essence, experiences of working under COVID-19 restrictions revealed something about the importance and value given to simply being in proximity to colleagues and accessing opportunities for peer support. This emerged strongly in survey participant responses in Chapters 2 and 4 where being close to colleagues mattered for purposes of sense- and decision-making in casework, as well as for learning and development, emotional well-being and general support. Our interview participants certainly felt the acute impact of absence here.**

## **INTERVIEW REFLECTIONS**

The thirteen social workers that we have followed over the last five years have made a significant contribution to our understanding of what happens to social workers as they develop and grow in the early stage of their careers. What emerges strongly from individual accounts is a strong sense of personal and professional commitment to social work. These participants revealed to us that complexity, conflict and struggle - as well as pride, care and



determination, are present in nearly every dimension of their professional lives. Whilst they found it challenging at times, they often found ways to work through it.

After five years they remain driven by values and a sense of duty to their service users. Their skills, knowledge and sense of professional identity seem to develop incrementally over the years. Their perceived sense of confidence and competence grows alongside too. But the trajectory for most is contingent on a range of individual and organisational factors, not least operational arrangements and practice cultures within sites of employment, but also access and proximity to (and quality of) supportive teams and managers. We noticed that anxieties and challenges were felt most by participants located in children and families social work. We also found that the first two years of practice seem to be a period where concerns about workload, support and development are most acutely felt. These findings emerge elsewhere in our study (see Chapter 2).

Participants from across our study have been sustained by work environments that are conducive to good practice, supportive colleagues and teams, opportunities for ongoing learning and development, and practice that is principled and rooted in their values. Those who were not in such environments moved job until they found bases and arrangements that better suit and support their approach to practice. All interview participants have remained in social work.

COVID-19 restrictions have impacted all participants. Many interview participants reflected very honestly about how the impact of home working and delivering services online affected their own confidence and general health, but most expressed concern for newer workers and students in their teams. Those who felt that home-working and different approaches to practice worked for them, welcomed the prospect of more hybrid ways of working longer term.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of our research was to incrementally develop a national picture of how newly qualified social workers experience and navigate their first five years in practice. Our objectives were to (1) examine journeys of professional transition and development; (2) understand how participants experience and navigate a complex, contested and dynamic professional landscape, in relation to professional roles, tasks, structures and settings; (3) understand how participants are supported, trained and developed across diverse practice settings; and (4) identify ongoing professional development needs as social workers progress their careers.

We knew from the outset that achieving the scope of our brief would be challenging: a national mixed-method study framed across five years – the first of its kind in Scotland and the largest published study of newly qualified social workers here to date. The demanding and ambitious nature of our work has resulted in a depth and breadth of findings that contributes new insights, understanding and knowledge about how newly qualified social workers experience the first few years of practice, and how they navigate, negotiate and realise their professional development over time. We believe that our findings reveal much about the complexity, struggle and conflict of being a social worker in Scotland today, as well as the joy, passion and commitment shown across social work careers through the first five years.

Our findings indicate that the first two years of practice are best thought of as a period of professional socialisation and adaption – the first point of transition from education to practice. Newly qualified social workers are making sense of their role, purpose and function as a new member of a profession. This period involves acclimatising to organisational cultures, dynamics, systems and processes. Participants in the first two years are keen to highlight deficits: not enough knowledge, not enough expertise, not enough experience, not enough supervision, not enough advice and guidance. Anxiety levels around workload are high for a good proportion.

Leading into Year 3 and we start to see a levelling out of anxieties and deficits. Confidence levels increase and most feel ready to take on more complex work. This is the second transition point where perceptions of identity and status begin to change. More see themselves as less 'newly qualified' and more 'early career'. We see shifts from 'wanting more' to 'having enough', eg supervision, training, peer support.

Years' 4 and 5 represent a third transition point where identity shifts from 'early career' to 'social worker'. Participants reported confidence across a range of variables. A clearer sense of professional identity, role and purpose emerges across data sets. Many participants at this point are engaging in formal development opportunities: becoming practice educators, link workers, Mental Health Officers and undertaking post-graduate qualifications in specialist areas.

The journey of transition for most of our participants seemed contingent on the opportunities and support made available to them from their own organisations, teams and managers. Individual experiences and trajectories were mostly based on what they were 'allowed' to do rather than what they were encouraged to pursue – as learning and development was driven not by organisations, but by participants themselves. This resonates with Helm's (2022) analysis of the role of individuals in developing their own decision-making abilities and judgements.

What mattered to participants over the last five years was having close and proximal contact with colleagues; having supportive managers; having time and space to critically reflect on practice; having opportunities to seek and pursue learning that suits their own needs and abilities; having ready access to advice and guidance; and having a sense that they are respected, valued and recognised as making a distinct contribution.

An important and recurring theme throughout our findings and associate literature is the provisional nature of professional identity (Scanlon, 2011). As Dent and Whitehead (2001: 11) put it, 'Identity is neither stable, nor a final achievement'. Ibarra (1999) suggests that it is its provisional nature that allows professionals, particularly those in professional education, to exercise agency. She argues that people adapt to new professional roles by having the opportunity to experiment with images that serve as trials for identities that are not yet fully elaborated. Scanlon (2011), in writing about 'becoming a professional' draws on Wenger's (1998) concept of trajectory which suggests that this is an acceptance of the 'on-going-ness' of developing a professional self, identified as being a work in progress, one that has a coherence through time (Fook et al, 2000).

Further, Hager and Hodgkinson (2019) argue that the notion of the professional as 'becoming' offers three insights. Firstly, that professional learning takes place in the interactions between the individual and the learning cultures found in the situations where they live and learn. Secondly, professional learning entails

combinations of change and consolidation, and that these are not linear, but rather will have variations over time, situation and individual. Finally, because learning is relational and is influenced by so many interacting forces it is very much a situated activity, and that situation will depend to a considerable extent on the national context and the professional discourse, as well as on local contexts of practice.

Our participants shared diverse experiences of working, learning, and developing that revealed the situated and contingent nature of their progress over the last five years. Their professional identity revealed itself to be fluid and dynamic yet underpinned by strong values and principles. The project of becoming a social worker for them was ongoing, and for many this persisted and was realised through the struggle, conflict and complexity of everyday practice.

## TEN KEY TAKEAWAYS

Reflecting the wide scope of our brief and topic in this study, our findings, conclusions and recommendations are broad and extensive. By way of truncation, we offer ten key takeaways from our research:

1. The **first two years** of employment represent a crucial period of transition from the point of qualification. Incremental processes of professional socialisation into organisational cultures (ways of being, acting, doing) and methods of working seem to characterise this initial phase. It takes time for new practitioners to feel comfortable in their roles, and we need to acknowledge that becoming a professional is a fluid and plural process.
2. Colleagues and the informal **peer support**, advice, guidance, learning and emotional space they offer cannot be underplayed. The impact and effects of interactions with peers are immediate and long-lasting, with critical implications for sense- and decision-making in practice.
3. **Agile working** reduces opportunities for informal and critical reflections and discussions which impact on sense- and

decision-making in cases. We need to harness the best of flexible working with the best of static / fixed models of working. Proximity to colleagues and managers really matters to social workers and to the quality of practice they undertake.

4. The impact and legacy of **social work education** is underplayed; the integrated model of learning we employ is absolutely critical to helping shape the trajectory of social workers as they develop in their careers. We need to ensure that practice placements are given greater priority in national discussions and organisational strategy. Integrated learning must be understood as two equal and unified dimensions – both requiring resource, attention and commitment from all stakeholders. The impact and effects of this model of learning are significant and long-lasting. And we don't just need more placements, we need our practice educators, link workers and teams to be supported, developed and given the recognition they deserve for the important contribution they make to professional learning and workforce development.
5. Our approach to, and understanding of, what happens in **supervision** is under-developed; we place too much weight on workload management as a negative process and not enough on exploring less obvious dimensions of critical reflection, sense making and ethical judgment intrinsic to case discussions.
6. **Professional identity** is felt (understood) most acutely when the value of what social workers do is recognised, and when the role and contribution is clear. Participants appreciate their autonomy, but unlike their colleagues in education, law or health, they do not have a voice in the profession nor as a profession. Social workers must be empowered and supported to engage in a much broader range of activities outside their statutory duties. Shaping policy and contributing to the public enhancement of the profession must be given attention.
7. **Leadership** is too often conflated with notions of 'management' in the minds of participants. The distinction is

not clear for most. Opportunities to engage in leadership activities are perceived as poor in most sites of employment; however, what constitutes leadership in everyday practice, eg managing conflict or performing advocacy, is sometimes difficult for participants to recognise. We need to support social workers in their understanding of leadership and provide opportunities for activities to be recognised as such.

8. Social workers routinely work with and through **complexity and conflict**. They find fulfilment, value, and confidence in this work and they experience it as struggle. We need to recognise professional practice as a mix of strength and struggle and develop ways to support social workers through this experience.
9. We need a better culture of **learning and professional development** in social work. The options open to most qualified staff at the moment are both limited and limiting. Unlike education, law, and health, social work offers little recognition of experience, and few pathways for specialism in particular areas of practice. This restricts and binds professional identity and professional self. The use and application of research in the profession is also notably poor. Employers, national bodies, academics and policymakers could do much more here.
10. Social workers need their peers, managers and working environments to reflect and demonstrate **support, compassion and encouragement**. Employers need to spend less time on efficiency savings and more time on efficiency investment: maximising the potential, commitment and achievements of the dedicated, passionate and value-led workforce that is revealed through our research. But we also need to look beyond the worker-employer dyad to attend to the economic, social and political contexts in which social work is done.



## METHODOLOGY

Most studies in social work tend to present a static view of the profession from one point in time. Little attention is paid to how and why variables change or not over time. This study employed a longitudinal approach which enabled us to present a dynamic view of the profession with a focus on the professional development of social workers from the point of qualification.

Longitudinal research is defined as 'emphasizing the study of change and containing at minimum three repeated observations (although more than three is better) on at least one of the substantive constructs of interest' (Ployhart and Vandenberg, 2010: 97). Our study used two primary data collection methods: online survey issued at five equidistant timepoints and in-depth interviews conducted at three equidistant timepoints. Our initial research design included focus groups, ethnography and observational analysis; however, the project team felt that the data obtained from these methods was not sufficient to meet the longitudinal aims and objectives of the study itself (see timeline below). The data gathered from our online survey and in-depth interviews enabled us to reach saturation across all thematic areas.

Permission to access participants was granted by Chief Social Work Officers after a presentation by the project team to Social Work Scotland in 2016. Arrangements were agreed with the SSSC to issue survey links and promotional material to participants from their register of social workers. This meant that all social workers who qualified and entered the register in 2016 could be contacted directly through email. The 2016 group were then tracked and contacted each year until 2021.

<b>Project Timeline</b>	
<b>Year 1:</b>	<b>April 2016 to October 2017</b>
	Online survey (T1)
	Individual interviews (T1)
<b>Year 2:</b>	<b>November 2017 to October 2018</b>
	Online survey (T2)
	Focus Groups (T1)
	Observational Analysis (T1)
<b>Year 3:</b>	<b>November 2018 to October 2019</b>
	Online survey (T3)
	Observational Analysis (T2)
	Individual interviews (T2)
<b>Year 4:</b>	<b>November 2019 to October 2020</b>



Online survey (T4)
<b>Year 5: November 2020 to May 2021</b>
Online survey (T5)
Individual interviews (T3)

## Online Survey

The project team developed a questionnaire to be deployed online using a cloud-based survey tool (SurveyMonkey). Internet mediated research is becoming common practice in social science where environmental as well as practical costs must be considered in research design. This method enabled us to sample the total population of registered social workers who qualified in 2016. The SSSC issued a survey link to the same group of participants in each year of the study.

The design of our questionnaire followed a review of literature and consultation with a range of policy, guidance and other documents relating to competences in social work practice. The project team completed a preliminary stage 1 literature review in 2016. Stage 2 of this review was completed in 2018, with the production of a comprehensive literature review authored by Clarke and McCulloch (2018) (see Appendix 1 in our Year 2 report).

Throughout the survey we used a mix of open questions (with free text boxes), rating scales and ranking scales. The application of rating and ranking meant that we could measure and track patterns of change over time across a range of variables. The use of open questions meant that we could analyse qualitative responses alongside quantitative findings to help explore and explain any variations across data sets.

## Year 1 Survey

The total population of newly qualified social workers in Scotland in 2016 was 404. The first online survey (T1) received 157 responses (giving a response rate of 38.8%).

The first survey comprised of 11 sections:

- Section 1 Previous work experience
- Section 2 Education
- Section 3 Current employment
- Section 4 Induction
- Section 5 Professional confidence and competence
- Section 6 Formal supervision
- Section 7 Informal support

- Section 8 Professional learning and development
- Section 9 Professional identity
- Section 10 Developing leadership
- Section 11 Space to add anything else participants would like us to know about their experiences

Sections 1, 2 and 4 were included in the first survey only. This was to ensure that we understood the general profile of our participants, including their experiences of previous work and education, as well as their current experiences of induction and initial socialisation to professional working practices within their first year.

## **Year 2 Survey**

In Year 2 we received 118 responses (giving a response rate of 29.5% - based on a total population of 400). Whilst attrition is to be expected in longitudinal studies, this represented a reduction of 25% in participants. This may be due to a number of issues: practitioners leaving social work altogether (but still on the SSSC register); participants simply choosing not to respond; participants unavailable for other reasons, such as leave, illness or career breaks.

The Year 2 survey (T2) removed sections on previous work experience, education and induction, as these areas were no longer relevant. The following sections were therefore included in each subsequent timepoint in the study (following the same sequence each time):

- Section 1 Current employment
- Section 2 Professional confidence and competence
- Section 3 Formal supervision
- Section 4 Informal support
- Section 5 Professional learning and development
- Section 6 Professional identity
- Section 7 Developing leadership
- Section 8 Space for you to add anything else you'd like us to know about your experiences

## **Year 3 Survey**

In Year 3 we received 120 responses (giving a response rate of 30.2% - based on a total population of 397). This survey followed the same section sequence as Year 2.

However, after discussions with the Research Advisory Group, it was agreed to introduce a question on integrated or inter-disciplinary working as we felt this was an important dimension given national efforts to shift modes of delivery and partnership between health boards and local authority social work departments. The question was designed simply to determine whether participants were based in integrated settings or not. We kept this question in our Year 4 and 5 surveys to assess any potential patterns here.

We also introduced a question asking participants to select what form of words best fits their perceived status at that particular moment, ie newly qualified social worker (NQS), early career social worker (ECSW) or simply social worker. The project team and research advisory group were informed by our practitioner representatives that by this point (Year 3), many participants were identifying less as 'newly qualified' in practice. We agreed that tracking this would be important to see if perceived status changed over time. We included the same question in Year 4 and 5 surveys.

In both cases, new questions introduced in Year 3 meant that we could meet the threshold for including these areas in longitudinal research (Ployhart and Vandenberg, 2010) as we could track patterns across three time points: Years' 3, 4 and 5.

## **Year 4 Survey**

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

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

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

No questions were changed or added in Year 4; however, the project team were conscious that given the unprecedented circumstances and challenges facing the profession at that point, it would be worthwhile adding a question about this in the final survey in Year 5 (see below)

## **Year 5 Survey**

We received 74 responses to our final survey (giving a response rate of 18.8% based on a total population at that point of 392). This represented the lowest response rate achieved so far in this study and a substantial reduction of almost half on our Year 4 figure. This level of attrition is significant and had a bearing on the weight given to data gathered at this final stage. It could be that the impact of COVID-19 and subsequent changes to working practices may have lowered the priority given to completing online surveys in addition to existing online commitments for most social workers under the circumstances. It could also be the onset of survey fatigue – often found in longitudinal work and typically resulting in problems with attrition.

Nevertheless, prior to issuing the final online survey, the project team agreed to include a direct question on the impact of COVID-19 on working practices. Whilst not meeting the threshold for longitudinal analysis, we felt it was important under the circumstances to at least gather a snapshot of experiences – as this might help us to understand and make sense of responses to other questions which may be affected by the broader impact of pandemic restrictions.

The project team also had a discussion around the impact and legacy of social work education on experiences of practice. We decided to include a question inviting participants to reflect back over the last five years to think about what mattered and what continues to make an impact from their social work education. Again, this does not meet the threshold for longitudinal analysis; however, we were able to compare responses in Year 5 to questions asked about social work education in Year 1.

## **Survey Data Analysis**

Quantitative data from each year was analysed by exploring frequencies and patterns over time. Each successive round of data was compared to the last. Qualitative data from each survey was subject to thematic analysis where coding schemes were used to organise data into categories. These categories and codes rarely changed over the course of our study, which enabled us to compare results each year and to consolidate a longitudinal view from Years' 3 to 5.

## **Interviews**

A series of semi-structured interviews were conducted with a sample of participants at three time points: Years' 1, 3 and 5. The value of semi-structured interviews is well-established in social science research. They provide rich levels of data and provide an important counterpoint to other sources of data in a study. Given that our aims and objectives included a range of subjective dimensions, it was important to use a method suitable to extract the type of detail and nuance required to fully explore phenomena in all its complexity.

Chief Social Work Officers supported the recruitment of participants through each local authority in Scotland. In Year 1 we interviewed 17 participants; however, this reduced to 15 participants in Year 3, and then to 13 participants in Year 5. Significant efforts were made by the project team to keep in contact with our panel and to encourage all participants to engage in each time point over the course of the study. Attrition is expected in longitudinal research, and the reasons for this can be mixed. We were unable to establish why four participants chose not to contribute in later years; however, the data we gathered from the remaining 13 participants was rich enough to reach saturation across our thematic areas.

The interview schedule was informed by our initial literature review and our first reading of results from our Year 1 survey. We designed a series of heading questions (below) with a number of supplementary probes. We proceeded with these questions in Year 1 interviews:

- How did you come to be a social worker?
- How are you supported in your role as a social worker?
- What has influenced the development of your professional identity?
- How do you see the next phase of your career developing?

These questions prompted a significant discussion with participants that induced a wide range of experiences and detail to be recorded – areas that our online survey was limited in scope to capture.

In Year 3 we continued asking questions about levels of support, professional identity, and next steps; however, we extended our questioning by focusing on changes since Year 1, and by exploring how participants saw themselves at this stage – following discussions (noted above) around feeling less like 'newly qualified' staff. We also explored experiences of integrated / inter-disciplinary working with all participants here too.

The onset of COVID-19 between Years' 3 and 5 led to discussions about what to ask participants at the final timepoint. We agreed to cover our previous topics around support, identity and working experiences, but we felt it was important to also explore the impact of COVID-19 on their working lives too. This generated significant discussion and subsequent data during our Year 5 interviews in addition to longitudinal topics we had been tracking up to this point.

All interviews were recorded by Dictaphone (when conducted in person), and later over Microsoft Teams due to COVID-19 restrictions. Interviews in Years' 1 and 3 were conducted in the office of each participant. Interviews in Year 5 were conducted online. All interviews were professionally transcribed.

### **Interview Data Analysis**

Taking inspiration from Braun and Clarke's (2013) approach to thematic analysis, we ensured that each batch of interview data (completed transcripts) was subject to the following process:

1. Reading and familiarisation
2. Coding
3. Searching for themes
4. Reviewing themes
5. Defining and naming themes
6. Finalising the analysis

This process was completed on data from each time-point. This enabled us to conduct meta-analysis across data sets in Year 5, arriving at a set of meta themes aligned to our survey findings (see Chapter 7).

### **Focus Groups**

Our initial design for this study included the use of focus groups. This method is an efficient way to generate shared understandings of phenomena. Our plan was to conduct focus groups in Years' 2, 3 and 4.

Year 2 focus groups were completed in November 2017 in three locations. Locations were selected in discussion with local authority learning and development leads. All registered participants who graduated in 2016 were invited by email to attend one of the three groups.

Focus groups took place in Aberdeen, Glasgow and Dalkeith. Groups lasted between 90 and 120 minutes and were recorded digitally. Sign up for the Aberdeen and Dalkeith focus group was slow and there were several 'no-shows' on the day. Reflections on participation suggest that geography, a short sign-up period, and a blanket email invitation may have impacted on response rates. We had 2 participants in Aberdeen, 6 in Glasgow, and 2 in Dalkeith.

For focus groups to be effective, we recognised that we would need to recruit significant numbers to participate in Year 3. However, the challenge here was in maintaining the longitudinal nature of the research by ensuring that we had significant data from at least three timepoints. Given the low numbers achieved at the first attempt, we agreed that this would not be a feasible method to incorporate moving forward. We also felt that data collected from our principal methods (survey and interviews) was sufficient in depth and breadth to address our aims and objectives.

### **Observational analysis**

At the same time as focus groups, we also planned to do three periods of observational analysis in Years' 2, 3 and 4. Observational analysis is drawn from ethnography - a method of observation and immersion widely used in the social sciences to explore and experience phenomena as an active participant in it. We intended for short periods of observational analysis to take place in a representative sample of social work organisations. A member of the research team would spend around ten days in a social work office to observe participants in practice.

We completed two periods of observation. The first took place over 10 days in March 2018 in a local authority setting in the West of Scotland. The second period of observation took place in June 2019, over 10 days, in a local authority setting in the East of Scotland. In each instance, the researcher observed participants in situ, compiled fieldnotes, conducted interviews and captured audio reflections on participant experiences.

However, on reviewing the data gathered, it was apparent that 10 days was not long enough to generate the breadth and depth of data required to triangulate findings with our survey and interview data. The project team agreed that this method, with the limitation of staff time and access to participants over such a short period, would not be useful moving forward.

## **SURVEY PARTICIPANTS**

### **Age**

The greatest proportion of respondents each year have come from the 25-34 years category (average: 43.5%), followed by 35-44 years (average: 26.9%), 45 years and over (average: 24.9%) and 20-24 years (average: 4.7%). There are no distinct patterns within the category of age over the last five years, except with 20-24-year-olds where numbers have decreased gradually (from 12.1% in Year 1 to 0% in Year 5) - however, this is probably due to this group entering the next age category 25-34 years (and respondents from this category moving into the next, etc...)

### **Gender**

The greatest proportion of respondents each year have described themselves as female (average: 79.9%) followed by male (18.3%). An average of 1% preferred not to say and 0.8% preferred to self-describe their gender. There are no distinct patterns here; however, Year 3 stands out as having the highest number of female participants (86.2%) and the lowest number of male participants (10%). Year 3 also had the highest number of participants who preferred not to say (2.5%). No participants in Years' 1 and 2 preferred to self-describe, but this changed in Year 3 where 1.3% was noted. This continued with 1.4% in Year 4 and the same proportion was recorded in Year 5.

### **Ethnicity**

The greatest proportion of respondents each year have described themselves as 'white Scottish' (average: 76.1%), followed by 'other white British' (average: 10.7%), 'white Irish' (average: 4%), 'other white' (average 3.8%), 'African, African Scottish or African British' (average: 2.5%) and 'other African' (average: 1%). All other categories were either 0% or below 1% on average. There are no distinct patterns here; however, Year 5 stands out as having the highest proportion of 'white Scottish' participants of any year (81.7%). The only non-white group to feature in every year of the survey is 'African, African Scottish or African British' (average: 2.5%).



## **Disability**

The greatest proportion of respondents each year have described themselves as having 'no disability' (average: 93.8%), followed by those with a 'registered disability' (average: 3.3%) and those with a 'self-defined disability' (average: 2.9%). There are no distinct patterns here; however, Year 4 had the highest proportion of participants with a registered disability (5.8%) and Year 1 had the highest proportion of participants with a self-defined disability (4.8%). Year 5 has the highest proportion of participants with no disability (95.8%).

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# **Appendix 1**

## **Professional confidence: knowledge**

### **Legislation**

Across years, on average, 82.7% feel confident in their understanding of legislation. This has increased gradually from 74.8% in Year 1 to 90.4% in Year 5, representing a 15.6% increase in confidence. Levels of self-doubt (encompassing those who felt 'somewhat unconfident' and 'unconfident') have fluctuated, falling from a peak of 10.4% in Year 1 to a low of 0% in Year 5 (an average of 4.8% overall). The number of participants who provided a neutral response has also fallen, from 14.8% in Year 1 to 9.6% in Year 5.

### **Statutory and professional codes, standards, frameworks and guidance**

On average, 90.4% feel confident in their understanding of statutory and professional codes, standards, frameworks and guidance. This has increased gradually from 84.3% in Year 1 to 98.2% in Year 5, representing a 13.9% increase in confidence. Levels of self-doubt decreased gradually from 6.3% in Year 1 to 0% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality have fluctuated, with a peak of 9.5% in Year 1 to a low of 1.9% in Year 5.

### **Theories underpinning our understanding of human development**

On average, 89.5% feel confident in their understanding of theories relating to human development. This has fluctuated with a low of 84.8% in Year 2 and a peak of 94.5% in Year 5. Confidence levels fell in this area between years 1 and 2, rising thereafter. Levels of self-doubt also fluctuated, with a peak of 5.4% in Year 2 and a low of 0% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality follow a similar fluctuating pattern, with a peak of 10.2% in Year 1 and a low of 4.4% in Year 3.

### **Theories underpinning our understanding of social issues**

On average, 82.9% feel confident in their understanding of theories that explore social issues from psychological, sociological and criminological perspectives. This has generally increased from 80.3% in Year 1 to 94.4% in Year 5, representing a 14.1% increase in confidence (however confidence dipped between Years 1 and 2 from 80.3% to 71.4%). Levels of self-doubt and neutrality also fluctuated, with both peaking in year 2.

### **Theories of discrimination in contemporary society**



On average, 79.8% feel confident in their understanding of theories of discrimination. Again, confidence levels in this item fell between Years 1 and 2 - from 78.7% to 71.4%, before rising gradually to 94.4% in Year 5, representing a 15.7% increase in confidence overall. Levels of self-doubt also fluctuated, with a significant peak of 12.5% in Year 2 and a low of 0% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality also fluctuated, with a peak of 16.7% in Year 3 and a low of 5.6% in Year 5.

### **Principles, theories, methods and models of social work intervention and practice**

On average, 84.7% feel confident in their understanding of principles, theories, methods and models of social work intervention and practice. This has increased gradually from 80.3% in Year 1 to 92.6% in Year 5, representing a 12.3% increase in confidence. Levels of self-doubt fluctuated, with a peak of 5.6% in Year 3 and a low of 0% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality saw a slight increase of 2% between Years' 1 and 2 from 15% to 17% respectively; however, this gradually decreased to 7.4% in Year 5.

### **Principles of risk assessment and risk management**

On average, 86.8% feel confident in their understanding of principles of risk assessment and risk management. There has been a steady rise over the last five years from 81.9% in Year 1 to 92.6% in Year 5, representing a 10.7% increase in confidence. Levels of self-doubt increased slightly between Years' 1 and 2 from 5.5% to 6.3% respectively; however, this decreased gradually to 0% by Year 5, with an average of 3.8% overall. Levels of neutrality gradually decreased from 12.6% in Year 1 to 7.4% by Year 5.

## **Professional confidence: skills**

### **Manage demands on your own time**

On average, 92.8% reported feeling confident to manage demands on own time and prioritise important issues. This has been consistently high over the years, with a 4.2% increase noted from Year 1 (92.1%) to Year 5 (96.3%). Levels of self-doubt have reduced from a peak of 6.3% in Year 2 to 0% by Year 5. Levels of neutrality have fluctuated, with a peak of 8% in Year 2 to a low of 2.2% in Year 3.

### **Analyse and synthesise complex information**

On average, 87.9% feel confident to analyse and synthesise complex information. This has increased steadily over the years, from 81.9% in Year 1 to 98.2% in Year 5 (representing a 16.3% increase). There is a sustained drop in those taking a neutral

position (neither confident nor unconfident) from 12.6% in Year 1 to 1.9% in Year 5. A similar drop is seen in those who feel 'unconfident', from 5.5% in Year 1 to 0% in Years 5.

### **Make professional judgements about complex situations**

On average, 81.9% feel confident about making professional judgements about complex situations. This has increased steadily year on year, from 67.7% in Year 1 to 92.6% in Year 5 (representing a 24.9% increase). A clear and sustained drop is noted in those feeling 'unconfident' from 15% in Year 1 to 3.7% in Year 5. Those taking a neutral position also dropped from 17.3% in Year 1 to 3.7% in Year 5.

### **Exercise assertiveness, power and authority in ways compatible with social work values**

On average, 84.9% feel confident to exercise assertiveness, power and authority in line with social work values. This increased steadily from 75.6% in Year 1 to 91.7% in Year 4 (representing a 16.1% rise), however dropped back in year 5 to 83.3% (just below the average). Year 5 also showed a marked increase in those taking a neutral position from 6.4% in Year 4 to 14.8% in Year 5. Drawing on connecting qualitative data, lower levels of confidence in this item in year 5 appear to reflect the significant constraints on professional autonomy and practice methods associated with COVID-19 restrictions.

### **Produce records and reports that meet professional standards**

On average, 89.5% feel confident to produce records and reports that meet professional standards. There has been a steady increase in confidence levels from 84.3% in Year 1 to 92.6% in Year 5 (representing a rise of 8.3%). Levels of self-doubt increased initially from 6.3% to 8% between Years' 1 and 2, but this has gradually decreased to 0% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality also fluctuated, from a peak of 9.5% in Year 1 to a low of 4.4% in Year 3. Wider survey findings suggest that participants spend significant amounts of time on report writing and that knowledge and skill development in this area is prioritised.

### **Use research skills to both inform practice and enhance your own learning**

On average, 67.6% feel confident to use research skills to inform and enhance their own learning. Confidence levels fluctuated for this item, falling to a low of 58.9% in Year 2, before rising again to a peak of 79.6% in Year 5. Levels of self-doubt show similar fluctuations, moving through a peak of 16.1% in Year 2 to a low of 3.7% in Year 5, with an average of 10.8% overall. Levels of

neutrality show similar fluctuations, from a peak of 25.6% in Year 4 to a low of 16.7% in Year 5. As we note below, lower levels of professional confidence in this area, alongside high levels of neutrality, suggest a need for attention to social work, and social workers, relationship with research.

### **Synthesise knowledge and practice**

On average, 78.4% feel confident in their ability to synthesise knowledge and practice. This has fluctuated with a low of 68.8% in Year 2 and a peak of 88.9% in Year 5. Levels of self-doubt peaked in Year 2, at 13.4%, but reduced gradually to 0% by Year 5. Levels of neutrality also fluctuated, from a peak of 21.4% in Year 1 to a low of 11.1% in Year 5. As we note above, while our findings show significant growth in confidence in this area. Overall, this remains the second lowest area of professional self-confidence in respect of skills and, coupled with the above findings in respect of research, suggests a need for closer attention to social worker confidence in synthesising knowledge and research in practice.

### **Work with other professionals and agencies**

On average, 95.7% feel confident in their ability to work with other professionals and agencies. This has been consistently high (above 90%) over last five years, increasing incrementally from 93.7% in Year 1 to a peak of 97.2% in Year 4, though dropping slightly to 96.3% in Year 5. Levels of self-doubt have fluctuated with a peak of 2.4% in Year 1 and a low of 0% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality have fluctuated too, with a low of 0.9% in Year 4 and a peak of 3.7% in Year 5. Again, slightly lower levels of confidence in this area in year appear to reflect known constraints on professional practice associated with C19. As we note below, the high levels of confidence in this area are somewhat at odds with the attention given in qualitative responses on challenges of inter-disciplinary working. As we note below, this appears to reflect a duality in participant experiences, where social workers feel **both** confident in this area **and** frustrated by a perceived lack of respect, at times, for others when working across disciplines and in collaborative ways.

### **Deliver personalised services using outcome-based approaches**

On average, 83.1% feel confident in their ability to deliver personalised services using outcome-based approaches. This has fluctuated with a low of 77.5% in Year 2 and a peak of 88.9% in Year 5. Levels of self-doubt have fluctuated with a peak of 7.2% in Year 2 and a low of 1.9% in Year 5. Levels of neutrality have fluctuated too, with a peak of 15.3% in Year 2 - reducing gradually to a low of 9.3% in Year 5.

## **Professional confidence: values**

### **Practice in a manner which reflects anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, respecting diversity within cultures and values**

On average, 94.5% feel able (encompassing 'always' or 'often') to practice in a manner which reflects anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. This has been consistently high over the last five years (always over 90%) with little change around the average. Those who feel able to do this 'sometimes' have fluctuated very slightly, around an average of 5.2%. We found only one response (in Year 2) of 'rarely' or 'never' across the five years.

### **Promote equal opportunities and social justice**

On average, 88% feel able to promote equal opportunities and social justice. This has remained high (though lower than most other items) in the last five years with little change around the average. Those who answered 'sometimes' has fluctuated with a low of 8.9% in Year 2 and a peak of 13.7% in Year 4. Those who answer 'rarely' or 'never' have fluctuated slightly, with a peak of 3.3% in Year 3 and a low of 0% in Year 5.

### **Practice honesty, openness, empathy and respect**

On average, 99.1% feel able to practice with honesty, openness, empathy and respect. This has been consistently high over the last five years (always over 90% and reaching 100% in years 3 and 4). Levels of neutrality have been negligible and there were no instances of any respondent scoring 'rarely' or 'never' across the five years.

### **Protect and promote the rights and interests of people who use services and carers**

On average, 91.2% feel able to protect and promote the rights and interests of people who use services and carers. This has been generally consistent around the average, except Year 4 where it dips to 88%; however, before returning closer to the average in Year 5 at 92.6%. Those who only feel able to do this 'sometimes' has fluctuated over the years, with a low of 7.1% in Year 1 and a peak of 11% in Year 4 (corresponding with the dip in this year from 'always' or 'often'). There are no recorded instances of any respondent scoring 'never' across the five years, and numbers scoring 'rarely' are negligible.

### **Create and maintain the trust and confidence of people who use services and carers**

On average, 91.5% feel able to protect and promote the rights and interests of people who use services and carers. This has been generally consistent around the average, except Year 4 where it dips to 88%, before rising again to 94.4% in Year 5. Those who feel able to do this 'sometimes' fluctuated over the years, with a low of 5.6% in Years 1 and 5, and a peak of 11% in Year 4 (perhaps accounting for the dip in 'always' or 'often' in this particular year). There are no recorded instances of any respondent scoring 'never' across the five years, and numbers scoring 'rarely' are negligible.

**Promote the independence of people who use services while protecting them, as far as possible, from danger and harm**

On average, 89.5% feel able to promote the independence of people who use services while protecting them, as far as possible, from danger and harm. This has been generally consistent around the average; although Years' 1 and 2 were above the average at 90.6% and 91.1% respectively, whereas Years' 3, 4 and 5 were below the average at around 88% each year. Those who feel able to do this only 'sometimes' had increased from around 8% in Years' 1 and 2 to around 11% across Years' 3, 4 and 5. There were no recorded instances of any respondent scoring 'never' across the five years, and numbers scoring 'rarely' are negligible.

**Respect the rights of people who use services, while striving to make sure that their behaviour does not harm themselves or other people**

On average, 93.4% feel able to respect the rights of people who use services, while striving to make sure that their behaviour does not harm themselves or other people. Again, this was generally consistent around the average, except Year 4 where it dips to 91.4%, before rising to 92.6% in Year 5. Those who feel able to do this only 'sometimes' fluctuated over the years. There were no recorded instances of any respondent scoring 'never' across the five years, and numbers scoring 'rarely' are negligible.

**Uphold public trust and confidence in social services**

On average, 84.7% feel able to uphold public trust and confidence in social services. This has fluctuated around the average across the years, with a respective low of 83.3% in Years' 1 and 3 and a peak of 86% in Year 4. Those who feel able to do this 'sometimes' also fluctuated, with a peak of 15.6% in Year 3 and a low of 11.1% in Year 4. There were no recorded instances of any respondent scoring 'never' across the five years, and those scoring 'rarely' fluctuated with a peak of 4% in Year 1 and a low of 0.9% in Year 2.

**Take responsibility for the quality of your work and for maintaining and improving your knowledge and skills**

On average, 93.5% feel able to take responsibility for the quality of their work and for maintaining and improving their own knowledge and skills. This has fluctuated over the years with a low of 90.2% in Year 2 and a peak of 100% in Year 5. The general pattern suggests an upward direction here. Those who feel able to do this only 'sometimes' has fluctuated too, with a joint peak of 7.1% in Years 1 and 2 and a low of 0% in Year 5. While there are no recorded instances of any respondent scoring 'never' across the five years across most items, this is the single item where a negligible average of 0.6% have done so (with a curious peak of 2.2% in Year 3). Those scoring 'rarely' have fluctuated with a peak of 2.7% in Year 2 and a low of 0% in Year 5.