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# Post-Qualifying Social Work - Evaluation Project Stage II

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# PQ EVALUATION PROJECT STAGE I



## FINAL REPORT to the Partnership Board December 2007

Tracking the needs of newly qualified social workers to identify the elements of induction that best support initial professional development in the workplace

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## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

Our grateful thanks must go first of all to the participants who completed questionnaires or interviews in the course of this study. Their honesty, openness and willingness to give of their time and to share their experiences has afforded the research team an opportunity to present what we hope is a vivid and arresting picture of what it is like to be a newly-qualified social worker in a statutory team, and the pressures that exist within large organisations for those line managers who hold supervisory responsibility for them. It has been a privilege to be offered such insight into the lives of those who work 'on the front line'.

We should also like to thank Tina Wilkinson, our first research assistant, for her help in undertaking the initial interviews and her contributions to the Interim Report, and to all the members of our Reference Group who attended meetings and provided comment and feedback on the paperwork and processes in the early stages of the study.

Thank you also to Maryann White for her help in transcription, which is never an easy task.

Lastly, we would like to thank the Partnership Board for providing the inspiration and funding for the project.



## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Executive Summary provides a very condensed record of the principal aspects of the study, its findings, conclusions and recommendations. The full text which follows the summary provides more data and a wider, more comprehensive discussion of the issues which have emerged, set within contemporary research evidence.

### **SUMMARY INTRODUCTION**

Our evaluation project has grown from the established collaborative relationships which already existed in the far south-west, through the Peninsula Child Care Programme Partnership, in which local stakeholders – agencies as well as post-qualifying programme providers – have taken part, over a number of years. The stimulus for the study was provided by the convergence of important changes in 2006/07 to both qualifying and post-qualifying education and training in social work, with the first graduates emerging from new qualifying degree programmes, which have outcomes linked to national occupational standards, and the implementation by the General Social Care Council of its revised PQ Framework predicated on employer needs and workforce planning, and which stipulates a first PQ ‘consolidation module’.

The project has been designed to focus on the experiences of those who are in the first twelve months since qualification and is in two stages, which will run consecutively. The first stage (Stage I) has been commissioned by the Peninsula Partnership, to investigate what newly-qualified social workers (NQSWs) know and do on entering first employment, identifying the elements of induction that best support professional development in the workplace and the ways in which staff are prepared for the consolidation module of the revised PQ framework. Stage II, which commenced in October 2007 has been funded separately by Skills for Care, and will follow a cohort as they complete the PQ Consolidation Module, to identify the key elements of consolidation that contribute to on-going development and service improvement.

It is intended that the outcomes from the Stage I evaluation, presented here, should make a strong contribution to the evidence for ‘what works’ in making the transition from qualification, into employment, through induction to produce a confident and competent practitioner in work with children and families.

### **SUMMARY STUDY DESIGN & METHODS**

A mix of methods has been used to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. Consideration from a number of different perspectives has provided the opportunity to compare and contrast findings, and to add validity, depth and understanding to the personal and professional development of the newly-qualified social workers. A number of findings emerged from the quantitative data gathered from questionnaires in the first stage of the study (see Appendix 1), which formed the basis for the Interim Report (June 2007). Qualitative data were subsequently collected from two sets of face-to-face, semi-structured interviews with line managers and newly-qualified social workers, at 6 months and 12 months into first employment. Fuller details of the study design, sample, processes and analysis are set out in the body of this report.

## **SUMMARY CONCLUSIONS**

The conclusions have been drawn from a synthesis of both the early questionnaire data and the subsequent qualitative data which emerged from both sets of interviews. Four key themes for the development of newly-qualified social workers have been identified as follows:

- **Developing confidence and job satisfaction**

All of the newly-qualified social workers felt that they had grown in confidence, that they enjoyed at least some aspects of their current posts and that they wanted to stay in the profession. However, worryingly, none saw their long-term future in local authority employment, citing the level of bureaucracy and the limited amounts of 'hands on' direct work with service users as their principal reasons for looking elsewhere.

- **Working within the organisational structures**

Importantly, the NQSWs were faced with a considerable amount of organisational turbulence, with agencies in the midst of a vast workforce re-modelling agenda, which was compounded by high volumes and rapid turnover of their workloads, in teams which were often not at full strength. There was what was experienced as a rising tide of bureaucracy, which continually threatened to overwhelm them, in what most described as a 'tick box' culture. Systems took the NQSWs away from direct work with service users from which they derived most job satisfaction. Agency processes and procedures were often experienced as bureaucratic, hierarchical and 'managerialist'. At times, roles and responsibilities within the organisation were opaque and communication within and between levels appeared confused or was absent. . Meanwhile, line managers had concerns about the level of analysis that the NQSWs brought to their assessment and reporting activities

- **Finding support and in-house training**

The NQSWs very quickly discovered a tension between 'ideal' and 'real' practice, and many wrestled with the dual aspects of care and control. The ease with which they were able to move through this transitional phase was variable, depending on their individual skills and abilities to develop a range of coping mechanisms and the extent to which their needs were met by what the organisation had to offer by way of support. In times of emotional exhaustion, NQSWs looked for more support from the organisation, particularly through formal supervision, which they considered could be improved in many respects. NQSWs undertook a wide variety of training, very often as a reward or welcome respite from their normal workload. They were generally satisfied with what was available to them, although there did not appear to be any clear process for access to a co-ordinated programme of events.

- **Progression and career pathways**

Disappointingly, there appeared to be little interest in promotion. NQSWs and first line managers held a number of negative perceptions of the kind of people who take on the more senior roles within their organisations. First line managers understood their role as one in which they were isolated and marginalised within the organisation, with little provided to support them in developing the staff for whom they held supervisory responsibility or to meet their own needs for professional advancement, whilst still being held accountable for meeting front line agency performance targets. There was much confusion and uncertainty about how the

revised post-qualifying (PQ) framework was being implemented and most particularly about who should undertake the consolidation module and when. These negative perceptions of the organisation were some of the most worrying findings to emerge from the study

## **SUMMARY RECOMMENDATIONS**

Six principal recommendations are made: some are practical recommendations to improve existing processes and procedures or suggestions to meet gaps which have been identified. The final recommendation is concerned with the way in which agencies are organised in a more strategic way.

### Recommendation 1

#### **Securing a base for confident practice**

Initial confidence on entering the workplace was noted to be higher where the social workers' prior work experience and final placement had taken place in a setting similar to that of their first employment. If there was continuity of local authority throughout this period as well, workers had the advantage of already being familiar with the people, the patch and the paperwork with they would be expected to work. With these preliminary experiences gained, NQSWs could 'hit the ground running'.

### Recommendation 2

#### **Using personal development plans to integrate qualification and first employment.**

Personal development plans are produced at the end of qualifying training for each new graduate and exist as a ready tool to make an immediate link between the national occupational standards assessed on qualification and the workplace and should be used by managers and training departments as the 'benchmark' from which to track individual progress and professional development.

### Recommendation 3

#### **Co-ordinating and standardising the agency induction package**

Three important elements have been highlighted by the research data:

- (a) Better co-ordination of corporate induction with that specific for NQSWs
- (b) Standardisation of an agency-wide induction package to cover the initial year in post, so that individual experiences are not so variable and do not depend so heavily on the specific skills and knowledge of particular managers. Some specific suggestions for inclusion in the package were indicated in the Interim Report and are itemised in the full recommendations. (*See p. 47*)
- (c) An improved focus on continuing professional development through the use of personal development plans on entry to first employment and greater attention to written materials and guidance around registration and post-registration training and learning opportunities, to develop a culture of on-going learning at both the individual and organisational level.

### Recommendation 4

#### **Developing analysis skills**

The need to enhance skills in analysis, not only for NQSWs but across the workforce, has been clearly identified. Opportunities should be taken by line managers to model good practice as part of supervision discussions. Action learning sets could also be used as a forum in which to draw on case study examples to hone

skills. It might also be beneficial to encourage some linking back to staff from local qualifying programmes who could make appropriate contributions in this area.

#### Recommendation 5

##### **Improving and up-dating the skills and knowledge of line managers**

Line managers have identified for themselves a range of gaps in their knowledge and skills. Areas for specific attention have included:

- Up-dating on requirements and occupational standards for the new degree;
- Familiarisation with graduates' personal development plans;
- Re-fresher training to up-date knowledge to encourage and improve the use of evidence and value base of social work in supervision discussions.
- Further training opportunities in supervision skills; management of a child care team; and in skills to support NQSWs through transitional development, including for instance, time management, managing change, managing stress and team leadership.

#### Recommendation 6

##### **Improving the organisational climate**

Newly-qualified social workers have reported feeling 'right at the bottom' and 'powerless individuals' within their organisations. Line managers have referred to being 'very much in the middle of the sandwich' and 'stuck in a rut'. With poor perceptions of those in senior positions and little interest in moving away from direct involvement with service users, promotion does not seem to be providing attractive opportunities to move on up through the organisation. A good deal of stagnation therefore seems to pervade the organisational culture. Where there is a lack of movement within and between organisational levels, understanding and appreciation of different roles and responsibilities may be adversely affected undermining the confidence of staff and increasing feelings of division.

The ability to retain qualified staff is particularly important for organisations that invest heavily in preparing people to undertake particular roles and which might then reasonably be expecting to benefit from that investment over a period of time. The lack of interest of all those interviewed in remaining long-term in local authority employment must therefore be of deep concern and ways in which these negative perceptions can be reversed clearly need to be found.

The research findings have suggested a number of positive steps that could be taken to improve the organisational climate into which the newly-qualified social workers become socialised and established in their first year.

##### **(a) Clarifying the expectations of newly-qualified social workers about the intended roles and tasks in local authority employment**

New graduates do not appear to have a sufficiently clear understanding of the role of a qualified social worker in local authority settings. Dissatisfaction arises from access to less 'hands on' direct work with service users than had been expected and resentment at those tasks reporting and administrative tasks, which take them away from this contact. Helpful strategies to clarify expectations might include:

- a clearer agency marketing and recruitment strategy which focuses on the application of professional social work skills to assessment, analysis, monitoring and managing, rather than involvement in practical tasks with service users

- consideration of how the various forms and reporting requirements could be integrated more closely into everyday work, so that they become a useful tool, rather than perceived as an extraneous burden. Specifically, are there ways in which more use can be made of additional business resources to assist social workers with some of the administrative tasks which could perhaps be delegated to other types of worker, as is the case for qualified teachers?
- Workloads are strongly skewed towards the assessment and case management of 'safeguarding children' cases which means that caseloads are predominantly 'heavy end', with few opportunities to directly engage in rehabilitative or therapeutic work. There may be some merit in re-assessing the way in which caseloads are managed but even if this bias cannot be adjusted, it is important that it receives appropriate recognition.

### **(b) Supporting the emotional needs of newly-qualified social workers**

The study has revealed quite clearly some of the anxieties and stresses experienced by newly-qualified social workers, at different times and in different ways, throughout the first year in post. The need for a range of mechanisms and sources of support to meet their emotional needs in the early stages of post-qualification development has been identified. Specific suggestions have included:

- Identifying a named 'buddy' or mentor to be part of the initial welcome and share the support load with the line manager during the first six months;
- Using supervision for reflection, discussion of practice experiences and to establish an appropriate work/life balance, particularly for those with other caring responsibilities
- Recognising transitional change and its additional stresses and support needs
- Developing engaged coping mechanisms to maintain a sense of personal accomplishment and job satisfaction;
- Using action learning sets as an extended, safe environment for appropriate release of anxiety and anger as an alternative strategy to sickness absence in managing stress.

Line managers have a key role to play in ensuring that the emotional needs of newly-qualified social workers are met and training that will enable them to carry out that role is a necessary precursor to each element of this recommendation.

### **(c) Improving communication, cohesion and retention of newly-qualified social workers**

Ways need to be found to re-engage practitioners and managers in developing a commitment to the agency. The creation of pathways through which they can see opportunities for progression and advancement have a positive contribution to make. Using learning as a tool with which to bind what are currently disparate parts of the organisational together is an idea, drawn from those associated with the 'learning organisation', and could be employed to advantage. Structures within which upwards movement is actively promoted will improve cohesion between different organisational levels and enhance the knowledge and understanding that different workers have about roles and responsibilities, Confused and conflicting messages should be minimised and the early confidence of NQSWs promoted and developed. From the research data, specific suggestions for improving communication and cohesion have included:

- Ensuring that the training/staff development unit personnel are more visible to assist with induction processes and offer support to line managers;

- Developing agency-wide discussion forums to support and develop best practice amongst first line managers;
- Developing action learning sets, based either within teams or bringing together those with specific common interests from different teams, organisations and professions;
- Providing frequent opportunities for shadowing or co-working with either a more experienced member of staff or someone in the 'tier' above, to gain insight into different roles and responsibilities. More formal secondments for agreed periods of time to a different role, team, or district may also have beneficial effects.

**(d) Making use of the PQ framework to develop career pathways**

A clear framework for professional development, linked to national standards, has long been available in other professions such as nursing and teaching but social work has been slow to take up the challenge of life-long learning. Career pathways, linked to job descriptions and specifications could now be implemented through the revised PQ framework. If they are to fulfil their potential for newly-qualified social workers, entry level 'specialist' PQ programmes, especially the first (consolidation) modules, need to be integrated into agency policies and procedures, with clear specifications in terms of selection criteria, processes and timetables, together with the resources available to assist teams to release nominated staff and cover their absences. Where these arrangements can be clearly articulated and promoted to all staff, on-going development becomes a routine part of everyday practice within the organisation. PQ outcomes can be used as part of supervision and performance management at the individual level and more strategically, as part of the framework for addressing the recruitment and retention needs of the agency, across all levels within the organisation.

## INTRODUCTION

This evaluation has grown from the established collaborative relationships which already existed in the far south-west through the Peninsula Child Care Programme Partnership, in which local stakeholders – agencies as well as post-qualifying programme providers – have taken an active part, over a number of years. Its findings are just one of many influences which are part of the complex interactions implicit in such collaborations and although the final recommendations may not be immediately implemented by all partners, the broadest intention has been to stimulate debate, to trigger reflection and to seek to increase a more general, questioning and ‘evaluative’ way of thinking and working. Weiss (1989) referred to this approach, as the ‘enlightenment function’ of evaluation, through which:

‘... people learn more about what happens in the program and afterwards. They gain a better idea of program strengths, fault lines, opportunities for improvement. Old myths are punctured, issues previously unrecognized come to the fore. As a result people think differently .... Although they may not *do* anything different for a while, the shift in thinking can in time have important consequences for the eventual actions they take’.

## BACKGROUND

The stimulus for the study has been provided by the convergence of important changes in 2006/07 to both qualifying and post-qualifying education and training in social work, with the first graduates emerging from new qualifying degree programmes, which have outcomes linked to national occupational standards, and the implementation by the General Social Care Council of its revised PQ Framework, predicated on employer needs and workforce planning and which stipulates a first PQ ‘consolidation module’.

The project has focussed on the experiences of those who are in the first twelve months since qualification and is in two stages, which will run consecutively. The first stage (Stage I) has been commissioned by the Peninsula Partnership, as a pilot programme, to investigate what newly-qualified social workers know and do on entering first employment, identifying the elements of induction that best support professional development in the workplace, and the ways in which staff are prepared for the consolidation module of the revised PQ framework. Stage II commencing in October 2007 and funded by Skills for Care, will follow a cohort as they complete the PQ Consolidation Module, to identify the key elements of consolidation which contribute to on-going development and service improvement. It is the impact on service improvement, achieved through induction and consolidation together that will be the outcome of most interest and use to employers in supporting, developing and retaining a qualified workforce.

Outcomes from the Stage I evaluation should make a strong contribution to the evidence for ‘what works’ in making the transition from qualification, into employment, through induction to produce a confident and competent practitioner in work with children and families. Findings will form the basis for key issues for discussion between all stakeholders in developing and improving existing provision

and seeking new avenues for the future delivery of education and training to support the on-going professional development of social workers. The revised PQ framework has a central part to play here and it has been timely to gather evidence to influence decisions about the style, content and delivery of induction and consolidation training for those engaged in post-qualifying work with children and families, particularly in areas such as child protection.

## STUDY DESIGN & METHODS

### DESIGN

Stage I has used a mix of methods to obtain both quantitative and qualitative data. Consideration from a number of different perspectives has provided the opportunity to compare and contrast the findings, and to corroborate and enhance their validity.

Before commencement of any activity, a detailed project submission was made to and approved by the university's Faculty Ethics Committee. Agencies identified possible participants from amongst their newly-qualified social workers (22), line managers (19), and training and staff development managers (6). All were invited to complete an initial postal questionnaire, which was distributed at the end of January 2007. Those who returned completed questionnaires, and indicated a willingness to be interviewed, were then followed up through two, more in-depth face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, of between 1 and 1.5 hours duration, carried out by the project's researcher during April/May 2007 and in October/November 2007. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Themes were identified from the interview material which were then coded manually to build up categories which were sorted, compared and refined.

#### Study sample and participant response rates

Category	Total		Returned Questionnaires		Interviewed	
	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage	Count	Percentage
<b>Newly-qualified social workers</b>	22	100%	13	59%	4	31%
<b>Line Managers</b>	19	100%	10	53%	4	40%
<b>Training/Staff Development Officers</b>	7	100%	2	29%	N/A	

The key findings presented in this report have emerged from analysis of the qualitative data from the two sets of interviews with NQSWs and line managers, at 6 months and 12 months into first employment undertaken in April/May 2007 and October /November 2007 respectively.

A number of findings also emerged from the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires in the first stage of the study in January/February 2007, which formed the basis for the Interim Report (June 2007).

The conclusions, presented as four key themes in this report, have been drawn from a synthesis of both the early questionnaire data and the subsequent qualitative data which emerged from the interviews. The four key themes are as follows:

- Developing confidence and job satisfaction
- Working within the organisational structures
- Finding support and in-house training
- Progression and career pathways

## **PARTICIPANTS**

From the total of 22 newly-qualified workers employed at the start of the study by the three participating agencies, the final sample comprised 13 newly-qualified social workers. 31% (4) were male; 69% (9) were female.

It is recognised that students registering for social work courses are predominantly 'mature students' and our sample reflects this general position with nearly half (46%) over 45 years of age. A similar number were aged between 25 – 34, with just one below 24 years.

At the time of completing the initial questionnaires, nearly two-thirds of the group were in the first six months of employment. All were employed in local authority fieldwork teams - 77% in long-term work and the remainder in short-term teams. 85% had full-time, permanent contracts; one had a full-time temporary contract and one had a permanent part-time contract.

All except two were subject to probationary periods, which ranged from 3 – 6 months' duration. The two who indicated no probation had more than 4 years' pre-qualifying experience in their local authority, were seconded, and may not have regarded themselves as 'new to post'.

From a total of 19 line managers of newly-qualified social workers in participating agencies, the final study sample comprised 10 participants from a mix of agency fieldwork teams, engaged in either short-term (40%) or long-term work (60%). There were 4 men and six women. All the line managers had been qualified for four years or more. 70% had more than 10 years post-qualification experience and two had more than 20 years. However, the majority (60%) had been in their current agency post as manager for less than 4 years and only one had been a manager for longer than 10 years. One line manager was in the first year in post. All held line management responsibility for between 5 – 8 qualified social work staff.

Seven staff in a training/staff development role were invited to complete questionnaires and the final study sample comprised two respondents.

## **LIMITATIONS**

The study has followed the processes as laid out in the proposal documentation with two minor deviations. Firstly, it was the intention at the beginning of the study to include a focus group with service users and carers to gather their perceptions of the services delivered by the newly-qualified social workers. Access to contact details was sought through participating social workers and line managers, which produced too few (1) nominees for an appropriate focus group to be convened and sadly, it

has not been possible therefore to include this perspective in our findings. It may be that a future project could look more creatively at alternative approaches to the involvement and participation of service users and carers in evaluation studies. Secondly, for us, there was a change of research assistant during the course of the study so that the two sets of interviews were carried out by different researchers, which does have the potential to introduce some additional inconsistency between the first and follow up sessions. In mitigation, the interviews were semi-structured around agreed schedules to which both researchers adhered closely and analysis has been carried out by an otherwise consistent research team.

The principal limitation of the study lies in the sample size. Given that, on average, over 100 students graduate each year from the nearest qualifying social work programme, it was surprising that the three local authorities participating in the study were able to identify only a small number (22) of newly-qualified recruits in 2006. The limited size of the sample does mean that it is not possible to generalise the findings with any statistical validity or reliability, beyond the boundaries of this particular study. Nevertheless, as the themes which have emerged are consistent across our own sample and supported by our own experience and knowledge of both local and national contexts of social work education and training over many years, we are confident that the conclusions are robust and no appreciable conflict would be found should a larger sample have been interrogated.

In addition, there is a good deal of resonance with evidence from research on similar topics, undertaken by other groups with a range of professions, both in the UK and wider, to which reference is made throughout the report. It is acknowledged that particular elements of the far-south west – its geography, situation and certain demographic characteristics – may have a particular influence on the findings and it would be interesting to undertake a further comparative study utilising the same ‘tools’ and methodology in one or two contrasting areas to get some measure of these effects. It is worth noting that the funding of Stage II by Skills for Care has allowed for some further investigation of the possibilities in this regard.

## FINDINGS

The themes extracted from the interview data have been grouped together under seven broad headings, and are reported in this 'findings' section. Their implications for practice, for agencies and for further action are considered in more detail in the subsequent section headed 'discussion', which also incorporates the main themes from the Interim Report, prepared for the Partnership Board in June 2007.

The findings from the interviews are reported below in the following sequence:

- Aspects of confidence and job satisfaction
- The 'reality shock'
- Workloads and time management
- Coping with stress, emotion and exhaustion
- Support for practice
- Support for learning
- PQ, promotion and career progression

### **Aspects of confidence and job satisfaction**

All those interviewed felt that they had grown in confidence, that they enjoyed at least some aspects of their current posts and wanted to continue being a social worker, even though the initial year had been a tough experience

'I feel I can start to catch up with myself, finally after 10 months.' [NQSW]

'I guess the stuff I enjoy the most is getting stuck in with families.' [NQSW]

'I would say I've gained loads of confidence in, I think just in my own ability to be okay, to be good at what I'm doing...' [NQSW]

However, the majority did not see their long-term future in statutory work for a local authority. This applied particularly to those who were in posts involving a high turnover of short-term initial assessment work (e.g. helpdesk, advice and assessment team)

'... a lot of the innovative work isn't being done by local authorities, it's actually being done by Barnardo's, NCH, stuff like that and certainly I would like to get more into therapeutic work...' [NQSW]

'..I think after I've done a bit of time in a county team, I'd like to go and work in the voluntary sector and actually be able to do a bit more direct work with children.' [NQSW]

### **The 'reality shock'**

There was a real sense of tension, clearly expressed by the NQSWs, between the ideals with which they had entered the professional training and the daily reality of the work which was increasingly required of them by their agencies as qualified social workers. They struggled with a number of elements of the role for which they had not really felt fully prepared, although there was a recognition that no training, however comprehensive 'could really prepare you for this job ever'. For example:

- Being individually accountable;  
'...but ultimately as a student, you're not responsible.... when you come back here qualified, you're given a caseload and that's the difference, you are responsible and the buck stops with you and that leaves a different feeling inside...' [NQSW]
- Balancing care and control;  
'It hasn't been easy over the last six months and I've realised what people, like, they really do hate you as well. You turn up and there's no way of sugar-coating what you've got to say and to work with people that absolutely detest the ground I walk on has been a real experience.' [NQSW]
- Taking a 'care management approach', in which they would be managing and monitoring, rather than 'doing';  
'... more of your time is sat behind a desk phoning or organising ..... it's not so much about direct work with people, its more about managing the case, outsourcing resources and bringing in services to meet the needs and managing it.' [NQSW]

Further, meeting agency performance indicators, NQSWs believed imposed unrealistic deadlines and timescales on their work, to the detriment of the quality of the services which they were able to offer to their service users. In these circumstances, they felt that agency policy sometimes took precedence over good practice.

'I'm struggling with it at the moment if I'm honest. The reasons I came into social work are still very much there in my value base. I'm finding it conflicts with the position of the local authority. You know, I've got a case at the moment .... I know the decision is about long-term budgeting, so it's kind of frustrating really that you are constrained by policy rather than good practice.' [NQSW]

'..for instance, I don't have a lot of direct time to work with families ... so I think in that aspect, our families, they are getting very tight management, but that's what I am. I'm a care manager. I'm not kind of a 'hands on'. I'm not there.' [NQSW]

### **Workloads and time management**

All saw the main task of social work as 'direct work with service users' and anything which took them away from this resulted in feelings of dissatisfaction and resentment. The increasing demands of record keeping were a particular target for vehement criticism

'...you spend all your time thinking about how you're going to get through this [IT] system and how to record it and make a square peg fit into a round hole.' [NQSW]

'I didn't want to be a typist ... I didn't train to do that...' [NQSW]

'...it's not that I haven't done the work, the work has been done, I just haven't got the bloody time to write it all up every day.' [NQSW]

These perceptions may be due in part to the newness of agency IT systems, which are still in the early stages of implementation and experiencing a variety of 'teething problems' or something more fundamental about the design of systems which are not seen as a helpful part of ordinary work but as an additional burden.

All of the NQSWs said they were holding large workloads almost from the first day, and felt increasingly over-burdened with little time to stand back, reflect or engage with up-to-date research or other work-related literature.

'... there are just not enough hours in the day to do it. I think it's too much.' [NQSW]

'And I mean at my highest I was carrying 22 when I was newly qualified, with 8 of those being child protection and not a lot of regular supervision, not a lot of anything.' [NQSW]

'I can honestly say since qualifying ... I haven't looked at a single paper, a single piece of research .... in the field ... it's very limited ...you don't have the range of journals available to you...and more importantly, it's time.' [NQSW]

Managers recognised the sheer volume of work, which was more often than not compounded by staff shortages, but felt that arrangements were in place to protect newly-qualified staff from particular types of work in the early stages of their employment, whilst recognising that the level of referrals in some settings meant that the ideal position was not always achievable. Further, some of the managers spoke about situations in which they had continued to provide protection, in the face of pressure from newly-qualified staff themselves, asking to take on more complex work at an earlier stage than would normally be expected, thus exposing themselves to extra stress

*'It's difficult to allocate work because there's pressure all the time for people to take cases on before they've actually completed the relevant training but we do try to resist that as much as possible.'* [Line Manager]

*'We've protected the staff quite a lot in terms of caseload, so experienced staff would get the child protection cases, court cases, S47 enquiries. We wouldn't give that to newly-qualified staff at all.'* [Line Manager]

*'After 6 months, you get newly-qualified workers saying I'd like to do a bit more ... I think you have to watch they don't run before they can walk. I had one who wanted a bit more but then found it a bit too much so we had to pull back and do it more slowly.'* [Line Manager]

Although they managed to make visits and attend meetings, NQSWs felt there was insufficient time in the normal working week in which to complete all the tasks demanded of them particularly report writing, to the standards which they felt were required and to which they themselves aspired. It was hard to find a balance between what they wanted to do and the more pragmatic approach of managers to complete the reporting forms 'in a way that works for you' and to move on.

'...you can't get the things that need to be, done like your recording, your reviews and all bits like that....' [NQSW]

'Because I make time [for report writing] other things come and go. I'm not going to hand in a poor quality piece of work ....I'm not prepared to do that.' [NQSW]

### **Coping with stress, emotion and exhaustion**

Managers felt that the NQSWs had generally fitted into the teams well and were progressing satisfactorily, while the social workers interviewed referred repeatedly to the emotional demands of the job, and the stress which this engendered. A

comment from one manager illuminates part of the context within which these rather different perceptions co-exist

*'I don't tend to see it as my business to sort of pry really ... occasionally somebody will come to me and say So and So is really struggling. You don't necessarily know, otherwise, to be honest. I'm stuck in here and it all goes on out there and you don't necessarily know. And then I might have a special word .... But I don't tend to push it to be honest. I'm not a counsellor at the end of the day.'* [Line Manager]

Those social workers with large child protection caseloads felt high levels of stress and vulnerability, which led them, at times, to feel overwhelmed by the task. The NQSWs often reported how these pressures percolated into their personal lives and most had depended on their partners to talk issues through, in times of particular stress. They sometimes had difficulty sleeping and some were deeply angry about the pressure of work. Three of the four had had periods of sick leave.

*'When I had a bit of time at Christmas, I just shut down completely. I didn't go to parties. I didn't do anything.'* [NQSW]

*'... there's plenty of days when I'm laying in bed and I'm worrying and I've got that knot in my stomach, and what I don't like about his job is that no matter how much you do, you can never do enough ... and that is kind of hard to live with...'* [NQSW]

Managers did recognise the high emotional demands of the work and how often unresolved levels of stress resulted in sickness absence. But they also saw their role as one in which they needed to find a balance between sufficient challenge to develop confidence, whilst also maintaining an acceptable level of protection. They sometimes had to be tough to encourage independent decision-making.

*'They're pretty big decisions and I ...keep pushing him to make that decision. He kind of wants me to make that decision for him... but at the end of the day he's the one [as a qualified worker] that has to stand up and be counted.'* [Line Manager]

*'People have picked up work they've not been able to handle and have gone off sick and the problem's compounded itself really.'* [Line Manager]

*'When people get upset about cases, you kind of think, well at least you're living it but there's a level for that because you just destroy workers if they take everything on board. There is a balance because you don't want tough, mechanistic kind of people to do this job. Partly my role is to explain processes and what we might do next and explain procedures. And that helps I think.'* [Line Manager]

Managers often felt a lack of support too, and their response to dealing with their own anxiety and stress had been similar to that of other workers within the organisation.

*'It was lack of support .... I said I was struggling at work ... and actually they didn't listen. So the only option I had left was to go off sick because that's the way I managed to get [my issues resolved].'* [Line Manager]

### **Support for practice**

Social workers offered positive comments about the importance and value of good support and having this available to meet their needs in managing their new roles.

Nearly all referred to an 'open door policy', which was seen as helpful, and all felt that their managers were generally accessible for day-to-day guidance on practice issues

'I went and talked to my boss and said 'Look, I can't cope with this anymore. You've got to tell me how to sort this out' So we broke it down and said, this is what we need to do. So it became a very practical task which helped.' [NQSW]

'My manager is quite accessible. When he's here he's got quite a good open door policy so we kind of just all appear in his doorway.' [NQSW]

However, when consideration turned to arrangements for more regular, formal supervision, the opinions of social workers and managers began to diverge. Social workers had particular criticism of the case focus of supervision, the lack of time and priority given to ensuring sessions actually took place regularly and the increasing demand to audit a number of files in detail, expressed rather memorably, by one social worker who felt that '*supervision is changing from supervision to snoo supervision*'. They did acknowledge however, some of the organisational pressures and the problems faced by their managers.

'My supervision has been all very case focussed.' [NQSW]

'Well, it's the time particularly reflecting on cases. What I don't get from supervision is that critical reflection....' What we do is, we review the cases very quickly to see if there's any more space to fit some more cases in...' [NQSW]

'... but even then the workload was horrific and she didn't have 5 minutes for me. She was really conscious that she didn't have but we were like passing ships in the night.' [NQSW]

Managers described rather different arrangements, in which they invited supervisees to set their own agenda for each session, and actively encouraged social workers to prioritise their personal and development issues

*'We do have an agenda.... so you know, it's not just about coming in and talking about the cases and the other things are an afterthought. It is the other way around and I do consciously do that.'* [Line Manager]

*'It's quite interesting, asking them what they want out of supervision. They say it's for me to make sure I'm doing my cases right and no matter how much I try to pull that out a bit more, that's all they can give you.'* [Line Manager]

Managers often felt 'very much in the middle of the sandwich' within their organisations. On the one hand they felt relentless downward pressure to meet the targets set by senior managers, who were often not situated nearby, nor readily available to offer support and guidance to those in the first line manager roles, and on the other hand they described difficulties in the way that the staff for whom they held responsibility perceived their role.

*'And unfortunately, I do know that there are senior managers who just want to see progress on the job that's done regardless of what the cost is because they're ruled by government targets and they've got pressure from above.'* [Line Manager]

*'People kind of see me – I'm in my little room here and individuals come in and talk to me, but they don't, kind of, get the sense of, you know, the range of demands ....from management above and all the sort of statistical stuff and checking up, monitoring .....mostly social workers are not really interested in that and they don't really know why you have to do it really.'* [Line Manager]

Although divided on a range of issues in terms of style and content, NQSWs and line managers did find complete agreement on the central importance of supervision as a mechanism for workplace support.

Additionally, social workers went on to describe a number of other sources to which they turned for informal support, guidance and advice and here 'the team' was the most often-quoted repository of safety and nurture

*'Yeah, brilliant, yeah, I will say the one thing that seems to hold social services together is the team, the team camaraderie, the support that everybody gets, you do feel part of something.'* [NQSW]

*'Yes, I'm well supported and although the rest of the team aren't social work qualified, they're great....'* [NQSW]

Managers recognised the importance of their role in the team culture and gave time and consideration to ways in which this was developed, monitored and maintained

*'I am a very strong believer in that if you sort of support the people that you work with, then you know they will work well with you back. It's a two way process.'* [Line Manager]

*'We do have a sense of 'team-ness' and doing things together and people knowing - I suppose one of my measures of it would be, kind of, I can go out there and ask any worker to name two or three cases on anybody else's caseload and they'd be able to do that. And I think that knowledge then allows you to support more doesn't it?'* [Line Manager]

In one agency, periodic action learning sets had also been introduced as an additional mechanism, specifically for the support of NQSWs. At the start of employment, only a small minority of the NQSWs had taken up the opportunity to attend. By contrast, at the time of the follow-up interviews, some six months later, all participants were blocking out this time in their diaries and making arrangements to ensure their attendance.

*'...that's been really good. You know, a few of us get together and talk about where we are and how practice relates to university or how it doesn't quite often.'* [NQSW]

*'I'm part of the action learning sets for newly qualified social workers this year, so I'm part of that and that's been quite helpful as well.'* [NQSW]

Further suggestions which came up in the interviews for additional workplace support included mentoring, shadowing and co-working. None of these appeared to form part of any established agency process and the opportunities available appeared to be dependent rather more on either individual managers or the self-motivation of staff

*'...so with new workers we can buddy them up with someone else so that they can shadow; we do joint working as well so that they can develop their skills.'* [Line Manager]

'...because I do have these skills gaps that I've identified myself ... and I've been asking and asking to co-work and shadow a case going to court, so that I can at least have that experience.' [NQSW]

### **Support for learning**

All the newly qualified social workers were enthusiastic about taking on new tasks, developing new areas and continuing to learn. A great deal of practical, task-based and information training was available and all of the NQSWs had attended a variety of in-house courses, which overall, they felt were of good quality, relevant and helpful. These early training courses were generally linked to the agency's induction requirements and preparation for taking on more complex, child protection and court work. No-one referred to a structured programme of training and social workers reported a variety of arrangements for getting on to a course, primarily related to individual initiative and motivation to seek out the necessary information, usually via the agency's intranet.

'The foundation stuff is all induction stuff but everything after that is I've put myself forward.' [NQSW]

'I would say that some are less relevant than others but overall there's a good level of training offered. It's a bit hit and miss who gets on it and who doesn't ...and it's well you pick up the phone and find out what's on and you go and hassle your manager to give you a signature.' [NQSW]

There was a sense in which attending training appeared to offer a welcome respite from the normal office pressures and workload. However, there did not appear to be any clear process or procedure for release or backfill when social workers were attending training events and so they often returned to increased work pressure:

'But in doing that [training] there's the other part of you that's worrying because all your work is building up. You know, when you come back off a week's course, there's 150 e-mails and everything has kicked off and everything is a concern, you're working late every night that week just to unravel it...' [NQSW]

'Then you start back peddling and taking work home and then you start getting snotty e-mails, going this IA [initial assessment] is overdue.' [NQSW]

When managers were asked about the social workers' strengths and limitations, analysis came up in all the interviews as being something that was problematic. Interestingly, there was a feeling amongst the managers that this was a common difficulty, not one simply confined to those who were newly-qualified. Few strategies appeared available to meet the gaps identified.

*'..and what they struggle with is the understanding of what we need in terms of assessment. Needs, outcomes and analysis and they struggle big time with that and they've always asked for additional training on that.'* [Line Manager]

*'I've not come across one yet that has an understanding of what I mean when I say analysis. You know they'll gather lots of information but there's no professional analysis there. It's almost like they're afraid to put the, you know afraid to on the final touches on something just in case they put it wrong.'* [Line Manager]

The lack of support for their own learning and development was clearly an area of concern for managers. None of those interviewed had had any basic management skills training, apart from short courses about supervision and implementing agency personnel policies, such as monitoring sickness and absence and managing grievances and disciplinary procedures.

*'I don't think there is a very good programme really for managers, one minute you're a social worker and the next minute you're a manager and you're expected to get on with it ...'*  
[Line Manager]

*'It sounds a bit negative but that was my experience, yeah, you just get a new office and you just get on with it.'* [Line Manager]

*'Some of it [training] it's a bit too removed, some of it's a bit too corporate as well really.'*  
[Line Manager]

They wanted their skills to be formally recognised through specific accredited training, linked to some sort of national standards for social care managers. In the absence of anything else, several expressed an interest in shadowing a manager prior to undertaking a management role.

*'I'd probably want to choose who I shadowed I think, quite carefully. I think that probably is an idea that I ought to follow up. Certainly every time I come round to appraisal now and they ask that sort of question...'* [Line Manager]

### **PQ, promotion and career progression**

Two of the managers interviewed had not been aware of the post-qualifying (PQ) consolidation module being offered to social workers and two felt it was too soon to offer training to workers in their first year.

*'I would question why somebody, who's just got out of university, needs to go back and train further .... If the consolidation module is about sort of demonstrating that you've consolidated your knowledge, well how does someone do that between July and October ...'*  
[Line Manager]

This contrasted with the guidance which had been given to a number of newly qualified social workers to maintain a seamless continuum from qualification into post-qualifying learning and development. Much confusion and uncertainty existed amongst social workers and managers alike about how PQ was being implemented in the agency, and most particularly about who should undertake the Consolidation module and when.

*'In fact, I got very cross, because we get conflicting information. When we first started, in fact part of the corporate induction was saying as you're newly-qualified, because you've just come out of education, get yourself on your PQ stuff straight away because you're still in the flow. But if you ask a practice manager, No, No, you need to wait a year or two. Get some practice under your belt before you take that.'* [NQSW]

There was little interest in promotion from any of those interviewed, because of the removal of 'hands on work'

*'I would say to some extent what I miss, I have missed going out to visit people in their own homes and stuff. But the next layer up, what I see is that they're just that little bit more removed from interaction, dialogue with people.'* [Line Manager]

*'I still quite like going out on the occasional visit .... I quite like the sort of drama that you get occasionally at meetings with service users.'* [Line Manager]

Social workers and first line managers also held a number of negative perceptions of the kind of people who take on the more senior roles within their organisations

*'Tends to be the people who are no good at their job who are promoted.'* [Line Manager]

*'And I think to push yourself on through management you have to be wanting to control things, and maybe it's those people that go into those kinds of jobs because it's less enabling.'* [Line Manager]

*'What I expect as a newly-qualified worker in any job I've been in, I want firm leadership. I want leadership from the front basically and I don't see it. I think how the hell did you ever get to be a manager...'* [NQSW]

Managers regretted the absence of a clear career development pathway for social workers. They felt that a structure within which upwards movement was actively promoted would improve the cohesion between the different organisational levels and enhance the knowledge and understanding that different workers had about roles and responsibilities, as well as the opportunities and constraints within which the agency as a whole was operating.

*'I think there is a need for personal development stuff, you know, what's the next step as a social worker, what direction do you want to go in and for some training to be available to pursue that. I think some sort of 'aspiring management training' would be useful.....having the opportunity to take students, to assist in the manager's absence, some supervision of un-qualified staff...'* [Line Manager]

*'We need a new structure, building in maybe, a senior practitioner, the process of feeding people through that.... something like that would help to encourage people to move on and to develop...'* [Line Manager]

*'Working for a local authority isn't giving me what I want to feel to be honest. I would like to feel that there was good career progression, good opportunities, comparable income levels...'* [NQSW]

With no clear stepping stones out of their current position within the organisation, some simply admitted to being stuck in a rut

*'I mean, I've been doing this job for such a long time, you probably get stuck in a rut don't you really, I think I probably am. I think people see me as [someone] who stays over there and is a safe pair of hands.'* [Line Manager]

## DISCUSSION

'The money is part of it. Of course it is. It's a job. But I wouldn't be doing it for the money I get paid if I didn't actually want to try and make a difference to people's lives. Because I do. And that's the thing that holds me to the job, it's the people that I work with... the variety... the chance to try and make a difference, but recognising that the majority of the time, it's unlikely to.'

Social worker, 12-months post-qualification

The short quotation above is a 'snapshot' of the feelings of one recent entrant to the social work profession that could equally speak for many.

The interviews carried out for this study have revealed a journey through change, across three inter-related dimensions – personal, organisational and professional - each of which has influenced the growth and development of the newly-qualified social workers (NQSWs), creating rewards as well as tensions as they took on their first professional posts in front line teams in local authority agencies.

**The personal dimension** has been one in which the NQSWs launched themselves into a new career, carrying with it all the enthusiasm, hopes, expectations, fears and trepidation, of that new beginning. The students emerging from their final placements found that the learning was not over and the transition to the workplace, carrying not only full responsibility for a social work caseload but also an organisational identity, was stressful and demanding of personal resources.

**The organisational dimension** has been one in which change is almost endemic at all levels – structural and procedural – as the old social services departments metamorphose into services for children and young people and embrace the government's relentless legislative agenda to re-organise delivery and improve children's social care.

**The professional dimension** has been no less beset with change. The impetus for the study itself was the convergence in 2006 of important and far-reaching changes to both qualifying and post-qualifying education and training and in 2007, of particular relevance here, we have seen a review of roles and tasks of social work and the publication of a set of national induction standards for the children's social care workforce (CWDC, 2007).

We explore the outcomes from the questionnaires and interviews in relation to these three dimensions.

### THE PERSONAL DIMENSION

This dimension considers how the NQSWs managed their transition into the workplace from the personal perspective. The questionnaire data highlighted some of the important links from their final placements and how these contributed to initial confidence. The NQSWs very quickly discovered a tension between 'ideal' and 'real' practice, and many wrestled with the dual aspects of care and control. The ease with which the NQSWs were able to move through this transitional phase was

variable, depending on their individual skills and abilities to develop a range of coping mechanisms and the extent to which their needs were met by what the organisation had to offer by way of support.

### **Transitional change**

The stresses involved in resolving the conflicts between the professional ideals, with which NQSWs left their training and entered employment, and the daily reality of work as a qualified social worker, as well as accepting the demands of the organisation to meet its targets and performance indicators, should not be underestimated, (See Stalker et al, 2007; Takeda et al, 2006). This process of transition, from one state to another, as social workers become socialised and established in the workplace is broadly represented in the diagram below:



For some, transition is a pragmatic step which can be taken at an early stage. One social worker said 'Since it's not making me jump up and down any more, I guess I've grown up. I'm just going to work with what I have, keep a lid on and roll with it really.' Others, who consider that more is at stake, are likely to take longer and need more support before they are able to come to terms with the changes that are necessary for them to become fully socialised into the social work profession and feel more at ease within the agency. Stalker and colleagues (2006) noted that those workers who were able to employ active, engaged coping mechanisms, such as problem solving, seeking social support and the expression of emotions, were more likely to maintain a sense of personal accomplishment and job satisfaction, even though they might also be experiencing high levels of stress and emotional exhaustion. By contrast, disengaged strategies such as problem avoidance, wishful thinking, social withdrawal and self-criticism, had a negative effect on levels of satisfaction. It is likely that in this state, workers will resort to 'going off sick' as the only solution. Passage through this period of transition will be most effectively managed for NQSWs by an organisation which recognises these overlapping phases of development; has a range of strategies to provide social support during transitional change; and offers training to enable managers to meet the emotional needs of their staff and helps them to develop engaged, coping mechanisms in this early phase of their post-qualification development.

### **Initial confidence from placement**

At the beginning of the study, initial confidence was noted to be higher where the social workers' prior work experience and final placement had taken place in a setting similar to that of their first employment. If there was continuity of local

authority throughout this period as well, workers had the added advantage of already being familiar with the people, the patch and the paperwork with which they were required to work. Closer liaison between programmes and placement providers, together with a more focused matching of students' particular areas of interest in their final year of training, should therefore produce dividends for employers in developing and retaining staff with these preliminary experiences already gained, who could be expected to 'hit the ground running' immediately after qualification. Indeed, the importance of practice placements in influencing employment choices has been well reported by Roche and colleagues (2006) in their Midlands case study on workforce intelligence.

### **Facing reality**

On qualification, the NQSWs were generally confident across the range of national occupational standards, but most particularly in their skills to build relationships and work with people, including service users, colleagues and other professionals. From the questionnaire data it is clear that these are the elements on which they placed the highest value.

Almost immediately, the NQSWs began to deal with the 'ideal/real' tension that they felt as they faced the day-to-day realities of being a social worker - managers wanted not the perfect piece of considered reporting as they had expected, but one that was completed on time; they now held final responsibility for unpopular decisions; caring was good, but the control aspects of the job meant that they were often not liked by the service users they worked with; in some situations, having come to a decision in a particular case, the agency did not always support them in the way that they felt was warranted. In the opinion of the NQSWs, budget management, together with the achievement of performance targets and deadlines, rather than best practice predicated on service user need, often appeared to be of more importance, in opposition to their concept of the professional value base of social work. All of this was hard to accept and they blamed the organisation.

### **Coping with stress and the work/life balance**

Most of the NQSWs struggled, at times, to manage the duality of their role: balancing their personal involvement in people's lives with the ability to stand back, make judgements and reach often hard decisions. They found that it was difficult to leave their cases and concerns for service users behind at the end of the working day. Their feelings of anxiety percolated from work into their personal lives, giving rise to increased levels of stress, particularly for those who were alone, whose partners were working abroad, or who were caring for young children. The extra burden of stress brought into the workplace by those in caring professions, who also have caring responsibilities but are unsupported to carry out the emotional work involved in their family situations, has been reported by Wharton & Erickson (1995), and the findings here show a close correlation with those outcomes. There is also some evidence that balancing the different sources of stress has a particularly negative effect on job satisfaction for women. As the vast majority of social workers are women these findings might be considered particularly pertinent. They could be used to support a reappraisal of the extent to which appropriate measures are in place within employing organisations to support NQSWs who are in this position.

The feelings of stress and anxiety that the NQSWs reported throughout the interviews are no surprise for those joining a new profession. It was clear that, in some cases, the NQSWs needed understanding, help and support to establish an appropriate 'work/life balance' if they were not to be overwhelmed by the stresses that they experienced. The 're-balancing' mechanisms have been more fully reported in relation to other professions, such as nursing (Gerrish, 2005; Mooney, 2007; Maben, 1998) and teaching (Parkinson & Pritchard, 2005) but rather different pressures and working practices seem to apply to the newly qualified staff in these occupations. For example, nurses do not bear case responsibility for individual patients in quite the same way as social workers and to some extent, the wearing and removing of a uniform, coupled with the 'hand over' to another team at the end of each shift defrays some of the burden in a way not available to social workers. And for teachers, since the introduction in 1999 of a probationary year, a 20% workload reduction has been obligatory for the first twelve months, and all qualified teachers are provided with 10% non-contact time for planning and assessment. Of additional significance is that teachers are not expected to carry out a range of specified clerical duties, including data input, photocopying and filing. By virtue of the range of settings and types of work involved in social work, a more complex picture emerges which militates against an analysis of time and tasks in quite the same way as that applied to teachers. Although there has been a recent review of the roles and tasks of social work, (GSCC, 2007) rather broader, less specific definitions have been used. These broad definitions provide an opportunity for greater flexibility which can foster innovation and creativity, but local interpretation is also involved, and it remains to be seen just how the recently announced pilot programme for a probationary year for social workers in children and families settings will be defined and implemented at local level.

### **Sources of support**

Recent studies (Stalker et al, 2006; Takeda et al, 2005) have shown the importance of having a range of *different* sources of support available within the organisation to assist social workers to deal with the oscillating levels of stress and exhaustion engendered by their work, whilst also retaining job satisfaction. Although it is clear that some of this support was found in supervision, the NQSWs also sought a safe place in which to discuss their work and their emotional responses to it, which as the interviews revealed, varied from frustration right through to anger, at times. Bednar (2003) noted that faced with high levels of stress and anxiety, it was particularly important for workers to feel that they had permission to express angry feelings appropriately, and there is even some evidence to suggest that there is a negative effect on outcomes for service users where anger remains contained within the individual worker. The action learning sets have much to recommend them in this context. Arrangements are fixed in advance, and they provide a safe place for the expression of emotions, giving access to the social support of peers, removed from individual workplaces, enabling NQSWs to consider themselves and their own needs in an appropriate environment.

## **THE ORGANISATIONAL DIMENSION**

In this dimension, the organisational climate into which the NQSWs were recruited is considered. The data reveals a number of issues which contributed to feelings of

confusion and loss of confidence for the NQSWs as they progressed through their first year. Importantly, they were faced with a considerable amount of organisational turbulence. Agencies themselves were in the midst of a vast workforce remodelling agenda, developing new kinds of organisations, linking more closely to education and health, employing new kinds of workers, in new kinds of roles. As if this wasn't enough, the NQSWs also had to contend with the volume and rapid turnover of their workload, in teams which were often not at full strength, or were being led by temporary or newly-appointed managers. There was also what was experienced as a rising tide of bureaucracy, which continually threatened to overwhelm them, in what most described as a 'tick box' culture. Systems took them away from direct work with service users, from which they derived the most job satisfaction, and there was resentment. At times, roles and responsibilities within the organisation were opaque and communication within and between levels appeared confused or was absent. In these circumstances, NQSWs looked for more support from the organisation, particularly through formal supervision, which they considered could be improved in many respects. Meanwhile, managers had concerns about the level of analysis that the NQSWs brought to their assessment and reporting activities.

It should be noted here that the study itself took place within the context of one agency's concurrent re-organisation, job evaluation and pay review, which inevitably produced some disruption and in places had a negative effect on morale.

### **The pressure and volume of work**

Much of the tension expressed by NQSWs arose from the procedural arrangements within the organisation, and their effect on workload management and day to day practice. It is interesting to note, in line with the findings of Stalker and colleagues (2006), that whilst service users certainly provoked anxiety for the NQSWs, this did not translate into the same feelings of stress and frustration that the NQSWs experienced as a result of the competing pressures and demands of the organisation. Without exception, it is these tensions which resulted in most irritation, frustration and lack of satisfaction. As a result of long-standing policies based on the purchaser provider split and a number of high profile child protection inquiries, the workload of the NQSWs in this study was strongly skewed towards the assessment and case management of 'safeguarding children' cases. This has left social workers with predominantly 'heavy end' caseloads, with few opportunities to directly engage in rehabilitative or therapeutic work. The effect on individuals of the relentlessness of that burden, acknowledged by one manager in the interviews, may not always be fully recognised and taken into account by those in senior posts.

At the start of employment, the enthusiasm and personal commitment of all those interviewed could not be doubted, but the organisation's response to their willingness to 'go the extra mile' exasperated and at times appalled the newly-qualified workers. They found themselves making huge personal commitments within an organisation which did not appear to reciprocate in its commitment to them. On the contrary, the organisation made demands, many of which took them away from the direct contact with service users which provided them with the greatest satisfaction in their new jobs. The sheer volume of work shocked some NQSWs. Overtime was reported as commonplace, or rather a simple necessity if the work allocated was to be completed. The speed with which cases were opened and closed, and the short time-scales for the completion of initial assessments, left the NQSWs wondering if

they would be able to cope. The pressure of work was compounded by difficulties with recruitment, retention and sickness absence across the front line teams. Although they understood some of the reasons for these difficulties, the newly-qualified workers did not see the organisation taking any action to address these shortages, or to ameliorate the effects on those staff who were at work, and so felt, in many cases, simply left to cope by senior managers who knew they would not desert their posts. One social worker expressed this as 'being expected to do an awful lot more than you are paid to do because you care about people' and went on to characterise the profession as 'a powerless, oppressed, disadvantaged group of people', valued neither by those who received their services nor their employers.

### **Communication and cohesion**

The interviews gave rise to a general picture of agencies as organisations in which there was no clear understanding between different levels of staff about roles and responsibilities. This in turn gave rise to a range of confused or conflicting messages, serving to undermine the confidence of staff and increase the feelings of division between social workers and their managers, amplifying the conditions in which dissatisfaction can thrive. The NQSWs were clear about their own place within the organisation, and frequently referred to being 'powerless individuals' and 'right at the bottom'. Managers felt one step removed from the 'real social work task', separated off in their offices and often unaware of 'what goes on out there'. One manager referred to an attempt to organise an agency-wide discussion forum to bring first line managers together, but this foundered when it failed to attract the support of senior management. This outcome left the first-tier managers isolated, horizontally from each other, and vertically from the tiers both above and below them, which led them to feel not only detached from the organisation but also unsupported within it. Indeed, they felt 'very much in the middle of the sandwich'.

The Interim Report highlighted a further missed opportunity to make links within and across organisational levels, in the apparent invisibility of training/staff development personnel in both direct contact with NQSWs and in the guidance and support which first line managers considered was available to them in managing the induction processes. The data suggested that the early employment experiences of NQSWs in relation to a number of processes, policies and procedures could be improved through some more central confirmation and co-ordination with corporate induction processes, alongside the development of a standardised, agency-wide 'induction package' specifically for NQSWs, so that the experiences of individuals are not so variable and do not depend so heavily on the specific skills and knowledge of particular managers.

### **Bureaucracy**

Once allocated a caseload, the burden of recording was also an issue for all of those interviewed. This was easy to understand in terms of the sheer volume of work and the rapidity with which initial assessments had to be completed but dissatisfaction seemed to go beyond these boundaries. Whilst there was recognition that performance indicators were necessary to properly monitor the progress of cases, the NQSWs viewed the completion of prescribed forms and the 7-day deadline for reporting as an unacceptable constraint on their professional decision-making, and by implication on their abilities to meet the needs of service users. The NQSWs felt there was a lack of trust implied in the proliferation of systems geared to measuring

and monitoring their work in ways that were often experienced as bureaucratic, hierarchical and 'managerialist', and in which completion of forms appeared to be an end in itself. Further, it appeared to be a process completely separate from what they considered to be the 'real' work, involving direct contact with service users. This mind-set is exemplified by one worker's comment that 'I've done the work, I just haven't written it up', as though the two elements could be considered quite separately. When managers took what they perceived to be a pragmatic approach and urged the NQSWs to steer a middle course between preparing the 'perfect' report and one which answered the questions but was also completed on time, the NQSWs felt completely let down.

Similarly, agency IT systems came in for repeated criticism when these aspects of workload were considered. The NQSWs had good computer literacy and IT skills, sufficient to cope with the technical aspects of form-filling, but resented the time that they needed to spend 'in front of the screen' and therefore removed from direct contact with service users. There was a sense in which NQSWs interpreted the focus on 'ticking boxes' as an attempt to control their work, to limit their autonomy and professional freedom. As one manager noted, although the forms and processes have the potential to provide a helpful framework within which to structure their work, it was clear that few NQSWs recognised any of these advantages, and most simply found the systems cumbersome and this aspect of their work a time-consuming burden that was, again, disconnected from the 'real social work task'.

It is worth noting that the IT systems were new and various 'teething problems' may have had an adverse impact on the general perceptions of the systems, their flexibility and usefulness. However, all NQSWs in the study had attended training and it is perhaps rather disappointing that the potential benefits of the new systems had not been transferred more positively from the training days into the workplace.

### **Supervision**

Supervision has been identified by all participants in the study as a key learning and support mechanism which agencies are required to have in place for all NQSWs. Although it is clear from the interviews that managers thought that they made space on the supervision agenda for social workers to reflect on their practice experiences and personal development, it is equally clear that the NQSWs either did not, or could not take up the opportunity offered to meet their needs and as a result, they left supervision feeling dissatisfied and to some extent, unsupported. The Interim Report has already noted the small minority of managers who attached any importance to the integration of social work theories, methods and values into supervision discussions, as well as the paucity of up-to-date knowledge amongst managers about social work training and the post-qualifying framework and this may have contributed to their reluctance, not simply to make space, but to actively take the lead in these discussions, as the NQSWs may have been expecting. It is also worth noting that only a small minority of managers identified the use of service user/carer feedback to newly-qualified staff as a significant component of supervision, with the majority omitting this altogether. This would appear to be a missed opportunity for ensuring that the views of service users and carers are taken into account in the provision of services to meet their needs, as well as the professional development of social workers, both of which are central aspects of current government policies and GSCC requirements and standards. Each of the

NQSWs interviewed was also very aware of the downward pressures on line managers to monitor and meet agency performance targets, which led some of the social workers to feel constrained in the amount of time they demanded from their managers, in order that supervision should not interrupt the 'more important' management tasks.

Taken together, these factors militate against a wholly satisfactory experience of supervision for NQSWs. It would appear that, individually, managers and social workers are aware of the value and importance of good quality supervision, and they do appear to share a vision for what should be included. The interviews certainly provide evidence of the existence of pockets of good practice, but very much dependent on the personal characteristics, skills and abilities of individual members of staff. In order to be truly effective, the elements of such practice should be the benchmark to which there is commitment throughout the organisation. At the moment, this organisational benchmark, involving appropriate time, resources, procedures and training, is not sufficiently visible to provide the support needed by staff, in the midst of their day to day work, to prioritise supervision and so ensure its consistency, quality and effectiveness.

### **Improving analysis**

In terms of organisational demands on its NQSWs, it is no surprise that one of the key problems identified for practice was analysis, which gave rise to most concern for managers, as an enduring weakness, not only of newly qualified staff but throughout the workforce. NQSWs were considered by managers to have good narrative skills, but were judged to be struggling to take the last step, identifying and owning properly argued conclusions. Analysis is a complex skill and one which would reasonably be expected to be honed over time, through the synthesis of existing knowledge and increasing practice wisdom, as staff settle into their new posts. Given the endemic nature of this gap, it may be beneficial for agencies to give consideration to a number of on-going strategies to support skills development in this area. With suitably trained and supported managers, critical thinking skills, together with discussion of social work models, methods and theories, could become part of the enhanced supervision already suggested for NQSWs. In addition, learning set sessions could include a focus on skills development, perhaps through links back to those staff from local qualifying programmes who could make appropriate contributions.

## **THE PROFESSIONAL DIMENSION**

The professional dimension focuses on how the changes to qualifying and post-qualifying training have been transferred into the workplace for the NQSWs, and how their initial welcome and induction packages were managed. The experiences of this induction period amongst NQSWs in the study were extremely variable, within and across organisations. All were keen to continue their learning, and all had been offered and attended in-house training to develop their skills, primarily in court work, child protection and associated issues such as domestic violence and drug and alcohol misuse.

A different picture emerged, however, amongst the line managers (whose job it was to support the NQSWs in their first twelve months) who reported extremely limited, task-focused training opportunities for their role, which had been taken up in a very 'piecemeal' fashion. There appeared to be very little awareness of the revised PQ framework amongst the NQSWs and managers alike, which was further compounded by a lack of information about its implementation in the agency. No-one made any links between PQ and development pathways, or career progression and promotion. Given that the revised PQ framework only became fully operational in September 2007, together with the background of organisational turbulence that we have already seen, it is perhaps no surprise that the policies and practices involved in successfully embedding the required 'learning culture' within local authority organisations are not yet in place, and the NQSWs therefore found an often confused and conflicting picture about what was available to them at various stages in the workplace.

### **Integrating qualification and employment**

It is a requirement of the new qualifying programmes, at both degree and Master's levels, that all graduates to the social work profession should be provided with a personal development plan (PDP) at the end of their training, which identifies areas of particular strength and those for further on-going development. As already identified in the Interim Report, none of the NQSWs had been asked about their PDP by their employers, nor had they sought out opportunities themselves to make any use of it. There are opportunities for these plans to be actively integrated into the initial 'welcome' process and to act as a ready 'tool' to be woven into supervision, development and performance management processes across the agency thereafter.

### **Specific induction for newly-qualified social workers**

The first element of professional development delivered for the NQSWs was the agency's welcome and induction package. As detailed in the Interim Report, experiences of these processes were extremely variable. Firstly, co-ordination of corporate induction with that specific to NQSWs needed to be better managed, together with the development of an agency-wide package specifically for NQSWs. Suggestions for the 'package' included the provision of written procedures manual(s) in addition to web-based materials; a case-free, introductory period of up to three months, with opportunities for extended shadowing and co-working; more frequent supervision (e.g. at fortnightly intervals during the first six months in post) with more time devoted to reflection on practice experiences and personal development; and a clear definition of caseload and protection, with transparent mechanisms for starting and finishing. It will be particularly important to establish a 'normal' caseload if arrangements for a reduced workload, to parallel arrangements for newly-qualified teachers, are to be introduced as part of the recently announced pilot 'probationary year' for NQSWs in children and families settings. Almost foreshadowing this announcement, it should be noted that when line managers were asked to quantify a 'normal' workload for a qualified social worker, all found this difficult to answer. The 'case' seemed to be used as the measure and a fairly wide range of numbers emerged of between 10 – 18 cases (average 15 children) in long-term teams and 8 – 15 cases (average 12 children) in short-term work. No doubt there will be further national guidance in relation to the probationary year initiative, and it will be extremely important to review and evaluate its outcomes locally.

## **Roles and tasks**

All those interviewed saw the main task of social work as 'direct work with service users'. This definition may have been true in the early 90s, but given the evolution of social work through community care and the purchaser/provider split, it is somewhat surprising that these new graduates to the profession should still cleave to this primary understanding of their role. The NQSWs wanted to have direct, 'hands on' involvement with service users, and anything which took them away from that, such as data input, forms and reports, resulted in some measure of resentment. It is noteworthy, in this respect, that *none* of the NQSWs interviewed was planning to remain with their current local authority employers in the longer-term. All cited less bureaucracy and more 'hands on' direct involvement with service users as their principal reasons for looking elsewhere for their employment in the future. It has already been noted that teachers are not required to carry out a range of specified clerical and administrative tasks, such as data input. One of the managers interviewed considered that there was scope for additional help, from the organisation's business resources, to be made available to lessen the administrative load for social workers, and it will be interesting to see how the recent review of roles and tasks for social work will be interpreted, and whether any improvement to workloads can be found in this way. A *Community Care* survey, open to all qualified social workers, carried out in 2005, found that 80% of respondents considered reducing the administrative burden should be a priority for the workforce review which was being undertaken at that time. However, the roles and tasks review also emphasised the requirement for qualified social workers to demonstrate effective record-keeping, to use their records as the basis for the review of progress, and as a way of gathering evidence from which to learn from practice. Viewed in this way, perhaps the systems could become less of a bureaucratic exercise and rather more a fully integrated part of professional practice.

## **In-house training**

One aspect in which NQSWs felt generally well-supported was in the range and quality of in-house training courses that were available to them, outside their standard induction programmes. It has already been noted that attendance at training days appeared, on one level, to be used as a welcome break away from normal workloads. This approach is given some weight by the work of Takeda and colleagues (2005), which has suggested that one way in which organisations can create a satisfying organisational climate and reward social workers is by offering frequent conferences, seminars, workshops and training programmes. Further, management research, reported by Stalker and colleagues (2007), describes a 'mastery orientation' which involves establishing goals that focus on developing competence, gaining skill and doing one's best. Those with a strong 'mastery orientation' tend to work hard when dealing with heavy workloads, and also gain satisfaction from the effort that is required to meet their own standards. Workers focus on what they can control, such as improving their skills, and are more able to persist in the face of difficulties. The goals associated with a strong 'mastery orientation' are clearly reflected in the NQSWs enthusiasm and commitment to taking on new work, further learning and developing skills but it appears that greater care needs to be taken to ensure that these qualities are successfully fostered and reflected in reciprocal support from the organisation.

In addition, however, the lack of support for their own learning and development was clearly an area of concern for managers. None of those interviewed had had any basic management skills training, apart from short courses about supervision and implementing agency personnel policies, such as monitoring sickness and absence and managing grievances and disciplinary procedures. They wanted their skills to be formally recognised through specific accredited training, linked to some sort of national standards for social care managers. Managers had previously identified a number of gaps in their knowledge and skills. These included up-dating on requirements and occupational standards for the new degree and students' personal development plans; re-fresher training to up-date knowledge and skills to improve engagement with the evidence and value base for social work in supervision; and finally, specific skills training, for instance in managing stress, managing change and team leadership. In the absence of anything else, several expressed an interest in shadowing an existing manager prior to undertaking a management role themselves. This would also make a positive contribution to establishing more vertical cohesion between agency tiers of management.

### **PQ, promotion and career progression**

When asked about the new PQ consolidation module, the only thing to emerge with any clarity from all of the interviews was the level of confusion surrounding not only those to whom it was applicable but also the timeframe in which it should be undertaken. These mixed messages again gave rise to feelings of frustration and even anger. Although they readily took advantage of the in-house training opportunities, which are largely unaccredited and un-assessed, the NQSWs interviewed were predominantly pre-occupied with 'just getting on with the job' in this first year in post. They did not want to be disadvantaged in taking up development opportunities but neither did they feel that they were wholly ready to embark on an extended course. Concerns were expressed about the lack of back-fill and cover when they were absent on training courses and, historically, this issue has been one of central concern which has limited the take-up of previous PQ-accredited programmes. One of the major changes to the revised PQ framework is the requirement for the active involvement of local employers in the approval of individual programmes, through regional planning forums, to ensure that programmes are closely linked to agency workforce development plans. If they are to fulfil their potential, entry level 'specialist' PQ programmes, especially their first (consolidation) modules, need to be integrated into agency policies and procedures, with clear specifications in terms of selection criteria and processes, together with the resources available to assist teams to release nominated staff and cover their absences. Where these arrangements can be clearly articulated and promoted to all staff, on-going development becomes a routine part of everyday practice within the organisation. Used as part of supervision and performance management, the PQ framework links to workforce planning needs, taking account of individual continuing professional development (CPD), aspirations, and particular areas of interest, and leading, over time, to a recognised award, based on national occupational standards for the social work profession. The integration of learning into all levels of professional activity in this way is a key pre-requisite to underpin the creation of a 'learning organisation', and there is much scope to develop these approaches in a more strategic way, using PQ outcomes linked to levels within, and even across, agencies and professions. At the very least, such arrangements should make a substantial contribution to improving the internal agency communication and

cohesion which the NQSWs and their managers who were interviewed felt was missing.

The NQSWs and managers were all interested, then, in developing skills and learning, and the need for registration and post-registration training and learning (PRTL) was acknowledged and welcomed as part of what was required to define the social work profession. However, the NQSWs felt that a higher profile and more attention could be given throughout their induction to requirements for continuing professional development and planning for post-registration training and learning. Given the interest in activities to support continuing development, the lack of interest in promotion was very disappointing. Progression pathways and opportunities for promotion are vital elements of continuing professional development, that have benefits for the organisation in terms of its recruitment and retention, as well as for each member of staff in supporting individual stimulation, job challenge and positive growth, in a satisfying organisational climate. Ways need to be found to engage practitioners in developing a commitment to the agency, and the creation of pathways through which they can see opportunities for progression and advancement in a positive light. Indeed, qualified social workers are still in short supply and new graduates know that they can be 'choosy' about work. It is likely that as CPD, PRTL and PQ take a higher profile on the agenda for the development of the social work profession, NQSWs seeking first employment will interrogate employers more closely about what the agency has to offer. Clear pathways for advancement and progression will be powerful tools in the agencies' ability to attract and retain the best NQSWs. Professional development is no longer a choice, either for individual social workers, or for the organisations that employ them.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the study has revealed a picture of NQSWs in the midst of personal, professional and organisational change, with areas of success and satisfaction, set against those which were disappointing, challenging and stressful. On the one hand, the NWSQs found that their decisions were rarely clear cut and that in effect, they were 'brokers' in shades of grey, often seeking the 'lesser of two evils' for those with whom they work, and in which more often than not, they were required to become the organisation's rationing agents. They needed help to feel at ease, to confidently draw on their knowledge and skills, to meet the organisational demands. On the other hand, and despite being asked to manage constantly increasing, large and complex workloads, NQSWs remained committed to their work and found satisfaction in helping service users for whom they felt they could make a difference. The importance of this 'sense of mission' or commitment to the work has been well-documented (Bednar, 2005; and Jones, 2001; Stalker et al, 2006) and it is this central value which time and again seemed to carry them through recurrent episodes of stress, anxiety and emotional exhaustion.

The key themes presented in this report have emerged from analysis of the qualitative data from the two sets of interviews with NQSWs and line managers, at 6 months and 12 months into first employment undertaken in April/May 2007 and October /November 2007 respectively. A number of findings also emerged from the quantitative data gathered from the questionnaires in the first stage of the study in January/February 2007, which formed the basis for the Interim Report (June 2007). The conclusions which follow have been drawn from a synthesis of both the early questionnaire data and the subsequent qualitative data which emerged from the interviews. Four key themes for the development of newly-qualified social workers have been identified as follows:

- Developing confidence and job satisfaction
- Working within the organisational structures
- Finding support and in-house training
- Progression and career pathways

### **Developing confidence and job satisfaction**

We have seen that as they reached the end of their first twelve months in post, all of the NQSWs interviewed felt that they had grown in confidence, that they enjoyed at least some aspects of their current posts and that they wanted to stay in the profession. However, none saw their long-term future in local authority employment, citing the level of bureaucracy and the limited amount of 'hands on' direct involvement with service users as their principal reasons for dissatisfaction.

The NQSWs who participated in the study had followed a variety of qualification routes into first employment and, although it was certainly not our focus and the sample is in any case too small from which to extrapolate any binding outcomes about qualification routes *per se*, it is interesting to note that two-thirds of those who had followed an undergraduate route were seconded by their employers whilst none

was seconded to the Master's programme. Whilst it might be assumed that secondment would be associated with early confidence in first employment, which takes place in already familiar agency surroundings, the data analysed here does not support this assumption. In fact, not only is there a lack of correlation between the levels of confidence identified (either by NQSWs or line managers), and secondment, the reverse may actually be the case, since two-thirds of those who were most confident had been supported by bursary on a Master's programme and two-thirds of those who were least confident had been seconded. Irrespective of qualification route, initial confidence on entering the workplace was noted to be higher where the social workers' prior work experiences and final placement had taken place in a setting similar to that of their first employment. Indeed, if there was then continuity of local authority throughout this period as well, workers had the added advantage of already being familiar with the people, the patch and the paperwork with which they would be expected to work. With these preliminary experiences already gained, such workers might reasonably be expected to 'hit the ground running'.

The areas of practice, taken from the National Occupational Standards for Social Work, in which the NQSWs indicated that they felt most confident were generally linked to skills in helping, advocacy, networking and promoting development and change and it is not difficult to imagine how these areas resonate with the personal attitudes and values which attracted the NQSWs to the social work profession in the first place, and which will certainly have been fostered and promoted throughout their training. However, the views of line managers reflected a greater emphasis on the agency's statutory requirements and the day-to-day pressures of the work. For example, the five main areas identified by line managers as those where staff were likely to be least confident were generally those areas in which, as students, the NQSWs may have had more limited opportunities for development, such as contributing to the management of resources and services, responding to crises, managing complex ethical dilemmas and assessing and managing risks. Analysis was one of the key problems giving rise to most concern for managers, as an enduring weakness, not only of newly qualified staff but throughout the workforce. NQSWs were considered by managers to have good narrative skills, but were judged to be struggling to take the last step, identifying and owning properly argued conclusions. Given the endemic nature of this gap, it might be beneficial for agencies to give consideration to the development of specific training in this area.

On entering the workplace, the Personal Development Plans (PDPs) with which all NQSWs now exit their professional training courses, should be available to provide a ready 'tool' to make an immediate link between the national occupational standards assessed on qualification and the workplace. However, none of the line managers who took part in the study were even aware of the existence of PDPs which explains the absence of discussion about (or any use of) them as the NQSWs entered first employment. There is a missed opportunity here to include PDPs as an active part of the 'welcome' process, first supervision and later for them to be woven into development and performance management processes across the agency.

The NQSWs entered induction with commitment and enthusiasm but quickly realised that however well prepared they had felt while in the student role, nothing could quite prepare them for the 'reality shock' of practice as a qualified professional social

worker. They variously needed time, and a range of social support mechanisms to come to terms with the plethora of competing demands from the sheer volume of work and the emotional stresses engendered, through budget management, performance targets and deadlines, to developing a range of coping mechanisms and establishing an acceptable work/life balance. Most of the NQSWs struggled, at times, to manage the duality of their role: balancing their personal involvement in people's lives with the ability to stand back, make judgements and reach often hard decisions. Feelings of anxiety percolated from work into their personal lives. The extra burden of stress brought into the workplace by those in caring professions such as social work, who also have caring responsibilities but are unsupported to carry out the emotional work involved in their family situations, should not go unacknowledged. Passage through this transitional phase, as NQSWs became socialised and established in the workplace needed managers who could meet the emotional needs of their staff and help them to develop engaged, coping mechanisms in the early phase of development, post-qualification. Although pockets of good practice undoubtedly exist, line managers identified for themselves gaps in their knowledge and skills in managing staff through transitional change and the emotional impact of the work, and the need for further training and development opportunities was clearly identified.

All of the NQSWs interviewed saw the main task of social work as 'direct work with service users'. Given the evolution of social work through community care and the purchaser/provider split, it is somewhat surprising that these new graduates to the profession should still cleave to this primary understanding of their role. As exposure to social work in local authority settings is also a requirement for some part of their qualifying placements, it is doubly surprising that there appears to be such a stark disjunction between the expectations of the NQSWs and the work which is actually required of them. However it is clear that if NQSWs are to be encouraged to maintain their commitment, then they need to feel a high level of job satisfaction and the single most important aspect in securing this for the NQSWs was their ability to have direct, 'hands on' involvement with service users. Anything which took them away from this consistently resulted in some measure of resentment and even anger.

### **Working within the organisational structures**

The NQSWs first experience of the organisation was through its 'welcome' processes. Here, the NQSWs attached high importance to a first day meeting with their line manager and personal introductions to members of the team in which they were going to work, as well as to other relevant professionals and local resources. These early opportunities to meet people were valued above the physical environment or the provision of equipment such as desks and computers, which were not always ready for the arrival of new staff. Guidelines for 'best practice' in the introduction of NQSWs to the workplace might include for instance, ensuring that the arrival of a new member of staff is expected by the whole team, including reception, clerical and administrative staff; ensuring the presence of a manager on the first day to make introductions; identifying and preparing another team member to act as 'buddy' or mentor to facilitate settling in; and preparing a programme of wider orientation, both within and beyond the immediate team/organisation, including arrangements for visits and introductions to other managers, team members and resources.

Following these 'welcome' arrangements, the NQSWs embarked on the agency's induction package. Experiences of these processes were extremely variable and the need for a more standardised approach emerged very clearly. Firstly, co-ordination of corporate induction with that specific to NQSWs needed to be better managed, together with the development of an agency-wide package specifically for NQSWs. Suggestions for the 'package' included the provision of written procedures manual(s) in addition to web-based materials; a case-free, introductory period of up to three months, with opportunities for extended shadowing and co-working; more frequent supervision (e.g. at fortnightly intervals during the first six months in post) with more time devoted to reflection on practice experiences and personal development; and a clear definition of caseload and protection, with transparent mechanisms for starting and finishing.

Although service users certainly produced anxiety for the NQSWs, adapting to the procedural arrangements within the organisation was the area which consistently gave rise to most irritation, tension and stress. Agency processes and procedures were often experienced as bureaucratic, hierarchical and 'managerialist'. The sheer volume and speed of 'turnaround' of work could be overwhelming as well as the burden of recording to meet the short timescales and deadlines for the completion of initial assessments. IT systems and form filling appeared to limit autonomy and professional freedom. Because sitting in front of a screen took them away from the 'real work' with service users, none of the NQSWs recognised any of the advantages of the new IT systems, nor their potential to provide a helpful framework to structure everyday work.

Early confidence was undermined to some extent by an apparent lack of clear understanding between different levels of staff about roles and responsibilities within the organisation and this gave rise to a number of confused or conflicting messages, which exacerbated the feelings of division between social workers and line managers. Social workers felt 'at the bottom' of the organisation and although there was some sympathy for the position of line managers, there was no real understanding of their role. For their part, line managers felt 'in the middle of the sandwich', caught between the needs of the NQSWs for support and development and the demands of senior management to meet deadlines, budgetary requirements and performance targets.

### **Finding support and in-house training**

All of the NQSWs were keen to continue their learning and development and a number of different mechanisms for support were available, although a significant theme to emerge across all the elements that were examined was the variability of the experiences which the NQSWs reported, suggesting a lack of clarity about policies and procedures.

Reference has already been made to the importance for newly-qualified staff of access to a *range* of different sources of support, at different times, as they move through induction, transition and beyond. An early theme, which has remained constant throughout the study, was the central importance for NQSWs of the people who are part of their team, networks and management structures, in helping them to settle in and develop confident and competent practice during their first twelve

months in employment and plenty of opportunities to build relationships and networks should be made available to them.

As part of the early introduction to the workplace, a named 'buddy' or mentor drawn from the team was seen as a particularly helpful way in which the 'gap' between formal supervision sessions – be they fortnightly or monthly – might be bridged and the support load, which might otherwise fall entirely to a line manager, shared. NQSWs also suggested extended shadowing and co-working arrangements to support them in developing new areas to which they may not have been exposed as students, for instance in child protection procedures and court work skills.

In addition, the NQSWs placed value on the social support they derived from the action learning sets in one agency, as they progressed through the transitional phase of their early post-qualification development. The learning sets have much to recommend them in providing a safe place in which the NQSWs were able to discuss their work, in which they felt they could express their feelings and draw on the support of a wider group of peers, not necessarily based in the same workplace, who could bring different perspectives and fresh ideas.

It is no surprise that good quality, planned supervision which takes place on a regular basis is an important learning and support mechanism. In the early stages of employment, the NQSWs indicated that they would like supervision to take place fortnightly during the first six months, with less time spent on caseload management and more time devoted to mentoring and personal support. Although it is clear from the interviews that managers thought that they made space on the agenda for social workers to reflect on their practice experiences and personal development, it is equally clear that the NQSWs either did not, or could not take up the opportunity offered to meet their needs and as a result, they left supervision feeling dissatisfied and to some extent, unsupported. A combination of factors may be influencing these different perceptions. Gaps have already been identified amongst managers in their up-to-date knowledge of social work training and the post-qualifying framework, alongside which only a small minority attached any importance to the integration of social work values, methods, theories, or feedback from service users/carers, into supervision discussions. For their part, the NQSWs were very aware of the downward pressures on their line managers to monitor and meet agency performance targets, which led some of the social workers to feel constrained in the amount of time they demanded from their managers and the quality of discussion that they felt prepared to initiate. The interviews did, however, provide evidence of pockets of good practice but rather than providing the agency 'benchmark', these appeared to be much more dependent on the personal characteristics, skills and abilities of individual members of staff. Commitment throughout the organisation to a benchmark involving appropriate time, resources, procedures and training is required to enable staff, in the midst of their day-to-day work, to prioritise supervision and so ensure its consistency, quality and effectiveness.

In-house training courses were available to all of the NQSWs and were taken up, often as a reward or welcome respite from the daily pressures of the workload. The in-house courses were generally information-based and mainly linked to the agencies' induction requirements to prepare the NQSWs for taking on more complex, child protection and court work. A consistent and equitable process for

nomination and attendance did not appear to be in place, which meant that arrangements for release and backfill were also rather piecemeal, with the result that the NQSWs often returned from training courses to increased work pressures.

The NQSWs were generally satisfied with the content, relevance and quality of the training offered to them. Although a large number of in-house training courses was available, a range of omissions or gaps in provision have been identified during the study. Importantly, none of the NQSWs mentioned any courses during induction to assist them to develop skills in areas such as time management, managing change or coping with stress. Where the organisation recognises the anxieties and stresses associated with transitional changes in early professional development, it may be beneficial to offer specific skills training, aimed at both NQSWs and line managers, in these areas.

### **Progression and career pathways**

The final theme concerns the continuing professional development (CPD) of the NQSWs and a culture of learning within employing agencies. The NQSWs and managers were all interested in developing skills and learning, and the need for registration and on-going training and learning was acknowledged and welcomed as part of what was required to define the social work profession.

To support this development, the NQSWs felt that a higher profile and more attention could be given throughout their induction to CPD and planning for PQ training. The questionnaire data revealed the low priority given by over half of the line managers to the learning and development needs of their NQSWs and as already noted, personal development plans were completely absent from the agency welcome processes and first supervision sessions for any of the NQSWs. A further concern was the absence from written induction materials of information about the GSCC registration, post-registration training and learning (PRTL) and post-qualifying (PQ) framework requirements. Information about CPD, PRTL and PQ might be expected to be available from the agencies' training departments but the Interim Report has already highlighted the apparent invisibility of agency training/staff development personnel, both in direct contact with newly-qualified social workers, and in the guidance and support line managers considered was available to them in managing the induction processes.

Following on from this initial gap, much confusion and uncertainty then arose amongst social workers and line managers alike about how the revised post-qualifying (PQ) framework was being implemented in the agency and most particularly about who should undertake the first consolidation module and when. Some managers were unaware of the existence of the module while others felt that it was too soon to offer PQ training to workers in their first year. This contrasted with guidance which had been given to a number of NQSWs to maintain a seamless continuum from qualification into post-qualifying learning and development.

The recently announced pilot probationary year for NQSWs in children and families settings is a new initiative which should provide a more standardised approach to social work induction on a national basis and depending on the way in which it is implemented, has the potential to make an important contribution to initial professional development. It will be particularly important to establish a 'normal'

workload if arrangements for a reduced workload, to parallel what is available for newly-qualified teachers, are to be introduced. From our questionnaire data, when line managers were asked to quantify a 'normal' workload for a qualified social worker, all found this difficult to answer. The 'case' seemed to be used as the measure with a fairly wide range of numbers emerging, from between 10 – 18 cases (average 15 children) in long term teams, and 8 – 15 cases (average 12 children) in short-term work. Arrangements for the probationary year are due to be in place for September 2008 and no doubt there will be further national guidance in due course and it will be extremely important to review and evaluate its outcomes locally.

It was disappointing to note that there appeared to be little interest in promotion, primarily perhaps because of the implicit removal of 'hands on' direct work with service users, but it was clear that NQSWs and first line managers also held a number of negative perceptions of the kind of people who take on the more senior roles within their organisations. These negative perceptions of the organisation were some of the most worrying findings to emerge from the study. First line managers understood their role as one in which they were isolated and marginalised within the organisation, with little provided to support them in developing the staff for whom they held supervisory responsibility or to meet their own needs for professional advancement, whilst still being held accountable for meeting front line agency performance targets. In these conditions, gaps open up, which in extremity, become voids through which communication no longer occurs; a fragmented organisation becomes established; and staff feel ignored, neglected and unvalued.

Ways need to be found to re-engage practitioners and managers in developing a commitment to the agency and the creation of pathways through which they can see opportunities for progression and advancement in a positive light would make a robust contribution to restoring a satisfying organisational climate. Using learning as a 'tool' and central theme with which to bind disparate organisational units together is an idea drawn from those associated with the 'learning organisation'. Gould (2000) discussed ways in which these ideas, originally based in business management theory, might be translated into strategies for the development of social work practice by focussing on the team as the primary context for learning, which supports a reflective cycle of action that becomes part of everyday, professional activity. In this way, learning, training and development are not discrete and separate from practice but rather fully integrated within it. We have seen that NQSWs placed high value on members of their teams as well as on learning and development, and it is not difficult to imagine that team-based activities could be promoted as primary learning opportunities, including for instance, presentations to team meetings; sharing learning from external events; co-working with team colleagues; and importantly, sharing between teams through lots of opportunities for informal contacts, as well as workshops, seminars and secondments across the agency. Another important element from learning organisation theory which could enhance the workplace culture is the value accorded to practice knowledge, which may already be held by expert practitioners within individual teams but is often unacknowledged. Recognising and recording its existence, actively building an agency 'knowledge bank' and promoting it as a practice resource within and between teams as well as with senior managers will provide a further mechanism through which different elements of the organisation become 'networked', so that cohesion and communication, horizontally between peers and hierarchically between levels, is

enhanced. 'Learning organisations' thus challenge people to look at their own work and role rather more broadly, to develop their knowledge and skills for the benefit of all, rather than avoiding change by stagnating, and taking refuge 'in a rut'. The organisation itself develops its own irresistible forward momentum, in which the whole workforce has an investment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

The initial themes which were reported in the Interim Report in June 2007 have now been brought together with the findings from the interviews, to produce six principal recommendations. Some are practical recommendations to improve existing processes and procedures or suggestions to meet gaps which have been identified. The final recommendation is concerned with the way in which agencies are organised, in a more strategic way. The evaluation findings and recommendations are intended to stimulate, inform and influence the way in which partners can work together to improve the induction of newly-qualified social workers, with the ultimate aim of developing and retaining a stronger, better qualified workforce, capable of contributing to the delivery of better services.

### Recommendation 1

#### **Securing a base for confident practice**

Three factors have emerged as influential from pre-qualifying and qualifying experiences to provide a secure base for confident practice in newly-qualified social workers:

- Experience of work with children and young people before undertaking professional training;
- Opportunities to work in a local authority fieldwork team during professional training;
- Undertaking a final period of practice learning in a setting similar to that of their first employment. If there is continuity of local authority throughout this period as well, workers will have the added advantage of already being familiar with the people, the patch and the paperwork with which they are required to work.

Closer liaison between programme and placement providers, together with a more focused matching of students' particular areas of interest in their final year of training, could produce dividends for employers in developing and retaining staff with these preliminary experiences already gained, who could then reasonably be expected to 'hit the ground running' immediately after qualification.

### Recommendation 2

#### **Using personal development plans to integrate qualification and first employment**

Personal development plans are produced at the end of qualifying training for each new graduate and exist as a ready 'tool' to make an immediate link between the national occupational standards assessed on qualification and the workplace. There are opportunities for these plans to be actively used as part of the initial 'welcome' process and then woven into supervision, development and performance management processes across the agency.

To integrate the qualifications more closely into employment, newly-qualified social workers could be required to produce their personal development plan on entering

employment as part of the transfer of baseline information about present strengths and areas for development, to underpin their initial induction training and development plan within the agency. Line managers need to be aware of the plans and familiar with the six key roles and twenty-one national occupational standards against which graduates will have been assessed as competent at qualification. Line managers and staff development/training personnel should ensure that they ask to see the PDP and NQSWs should be ready to discuss its contents with their line manager as part of their initial supervision arrangements.

### Recommendation 3

#### **Co-ordinating and standardising the agency 'induction package'**

The data suggest that some more central confirmation and co-ordination of a number of processes, policies and procedures in relation to the early employment experiences of social workers is needed, since at the moment these appear to rest primarily with individual line managers.

Three important elements highlighted for consideration are:

- (a) Co-ordination of corporate induction with that specific to NQSWs
- (b) Standardisation of an agency-wide induction package to cover the initial year in post, so that the experiences of individuals are not so variable and do not depend so heavily on the specific skills and knowledge of particular managers.

Specific suggestions for the package have included:

- Written procedures manual(s) in addition to web-based materials, which are not always seen as readily accessible or digestible;
  - Case-free, introductory period of up to three months, with opportunities for extended shadowing and co-working. This is seen as particularly helpful in areas to which NQSWs may not have been exposed as students, for example, child protection procedures and court work.
  - A clear definition of caseload and protection, with transparent mechanisms for implementation and ending. If the forthcoming probationary year is to reflect the model for newly-qualified teachers, then a baseline for an 'average' social work caseload will have to be found from which to calculate a reduced, protected workload in the first year.
  - More frequent supervision (e.g. at fortnightly intervals during the first six months in post) with more time devoted to reflection on practice experiences and personal development. Line managers will need to be appropriately supported and prepared to prioritise appointments and create a supportive atmosphere in which to undertake supervision. They will also need to be prepared to take the lead in discussions which draw on models, methods, theories and social work values so that supervision is a properly satisfying experience for NQSWs.
- (c) Improved focus on continuing professional development through the recognition and use of personal development plans on entry to first employment and greater attention to registration and post-registration education and training to develop a professional culture of on-going learning, at both the individual and organisational level.

#### Recommendation 4

##### **Developing analysis skills**

The need to enhance skills in analysis, not only for NQSWs but across the workforce has been clearly identified. Analysis is a complex skill and one which would reasonably be expected to be developed over time, through the synthesis of existing knowledge and increasing practice wisdom, as staff settle into their new posts.

Opportunities should be taken by line managers to model good practice as part of supervision discussions. Action learning sets could also be used as a forum in which to draw on case study examples to hone skills. It might also be beneficial to encourage some linking back to staff from local qualifying programmes who could make appropriate contributions in this area.

#### Recommendation 5

##### **Improving and up-dating the skills and knowledge of line managers**

Line managers have identified for themselves a range of gaps in their knowledge and skills which could usefully be addressed if they are to be in the best position to provide the welcome, supervision and support that they would wish, in line with agency expectations, for all newly-qualified social workers.

Areas for specific attention have included:

- Up-dating on requirements and occupational standards for the new degree qualification;
- Familiarisation with graduates' personal development plans and arrangements to actively seek them out in early supervision sessions with NQSWs;
- Re-fresher training to up-date knowledge, e.g. research, evidence-based practice and issues of current debate in child care, to encourage and improve the engagement of managers with the evidence and value base of social work, particularly in supervision discussions. This should then assist NQSWs with reflection, evaluation and analysis;
- Further training opportunities to develop knowledge and skills, particularly in supervision and management of a child care team. In addition, if line managers are to be equipped to support NQSWs through the transitional phase of their early professional development, they have identified further training requirements to address skills gaps, for instance, in assisting with time management, managing change, managing stress and team leadership.

#### Recommendation 6

##### **Improving the organisational climate**

Newly-qualified social workers have reported feeling 'right at the bottom' and 'powerless individuals' within their organisations. Line managers have referred to being 'very much in the middle of the sandwich' and 'stuck in a rut'. With poor perceptions of those in senior positions and little interest in moving away from direct involvement with service users, promotion does not seem to be providing attractive opportunities to move on up through the organisation. A good deal of stagnation therefore seems to pervade the organisational culture, which in turn rapidly stifles

innovation, new ideas, individual aspiration and ultimately, job satisfaction. Where there is a lack of movement within and between organisational levels, understanding and appreciation of different roles and responsibilities may be adversely affected and confused and conflicting messages abound, undermining the confidence of staff and increasing the feelings of division between those social workers and line managers who should be working together, in a supportive and consultative environment.

The ability to retain qualified staff is particularly important for organisations that invest heavily in preparing people to undertake particular roles and which might then reasonably be expecting to benefit from that investment over a period of time. The lack of interest of all those interviewed in remaining long-term in local authority employment must therefore be of deep concern and ways in which these negative perceptions can be reversed clearly need to be found.

The research findings have suggested a number of positive steps that could be taken to improve the organisational climate into which the newly-qualified social workers become socialised and established in their first year.

**(a) Clarifying the expectations of newly-qualified social workers about the intended roles and tasks in local authority employment**

Existing arrangements between qualifying programmes and agency placement providers do not appear to have provided new graduates with a sufficiently clear understanding of the role of a qualified social worker in local authority settings. A constant, clear and recurrent theme to emerge from the study is that of dissatisfaction amongst NQSWs arising from access to less 'hands on' direct work with service users than had been expected and resentment at those tasks, for instance, reporting and administrative tasks, which take them away from this contact.

Agencies might like to consider a clearer marketing and recruitment strategy which focuses on the application of professional social work skills to assessment, analysis, monitoring and managing, rather than involvement in practical tasks with service users, so that new employees have well-founded and realistic expectations of their first posts.

It may be helpful to consider how the various forms and reporting requirements could be integrated more closely into everyday work, so that they become a useful tool, rather than perceived as an extraneous burden. There are two issues of direct relevance which might be considered here. Firstly, are there ways in which the rationale for the design of new IT systems can be better presented in the training already offered so that with better understanding, the system might be more readily accepted by the social workers who use it? Secondly, are there ways in which more use can be made of additional business resources to assist social workers with some of the administrative tasks which could perhaps be specifically identified and delegated to other types of worker, as is the case for qualified teachers?

It has been noted that workloads are strongly skewed towards the assessment and case management of 'safeguarding children' cases, which means that in statutory teams, social workers hold predominantly 'heavy end' caseloads, with few opportunities to directly engage in rehabilitative or therapeutic work. There may be some merit in re-assessing the way in which social work caseloads are managed

across the organisation but even if this bias cannot be adjusted, it is important that it receives appropriate recognition and is taken into account by those in senior posts.

### **(b) Supporting the emotional needs of newly-qualified social workers**

The study has revealed quite clearly some of the anxieties and stresses experienced by newly-qualified social workers, at different times and in different ways, throughout the first year in post. The need for a range of mechanisms and sources of support to meet their emotional needs in the early stages of post-qualification development has been identified.

Specific suggestions to meet the emotional needs of NQSWs have included:

- Identifying a named 'buddy' or mentor in the same team to be part of the initial welcome process and to bridge the 'gap' between supervision sessions, be they fortnightly or monthly during the first six months. This mechanism would also allow the burden of support, which might otherwise fall entirely to a line manager, to be shared;
- Using supervision for reflection, discussion of practice experiences and evaluation of personal effectiveness.
- Using supervision to establish a work/life balance. Newly-qualified social workers identified family and friends as a particularly important source of support, and supervision should be used sensitively by line managers to promote an appropriate work/life balance, particularly for those with other caring responsibilities;
- Recognising transitional change and its additional stresses, as part of the induction year, during which newly-qualified social workers come to terms with the conflicts between their professional ideals, their organisational identity and the daily reality of work as a qualified social worker, and become socialised and established as competent and confident members of their teams:
- Developing engaged coping mechanisms as part of the social support needed to encourage newly-qualified social workers to maintain a sense of personal accomplishment and job satisfaction;
- Using action learning sets as an extended, safe environment for appropriate release of anxiety and anger as an alternative strategy to sickness absence in managing stress;
- Providing reward through frequent opportunities for training, workshops, seminars and conferences as part of a structured personal development plan

Line managers have a key role to play in ensuring that the emotional needs of newly-qualified social workers are met and training that will enable them to carry out that role is a necessary precursor to each element of this recommendation. *(See also Recommendation 5)*

### **(c) Improving communication, cohesion and retention of newly-qualified social workers**

Ways need to be found to re-engage practitioners and managers in developing a commitment to the agency. The creation of pathways through which they can see opportunities for progression and advancement have a positive contribution to make.

Using learning as a tool with which to bind what are currently disparate parts of the organisational together is an idea, drawn from those associated with the 'learning organisation', which has already been discussed. Structures within which upwards

movement is actively promoted will improve cohesion between different organisational levels and enhance the knowledge and understanding that different workers have about roles and responsibilities, as well as the opportunities and constraints within which the agency itself operates. Confused and conflicting messages should be minimised and the early confidence of NQSWs promoted and developed.

From the research data, specific suggestions for improving communication and cohesion have included:

- Ensuring that the training/staff development unit personnel are more visible to assist with induction processes and offer support to line managers for its co-ordination;
- Developing agency-wide discussion forums to support and develop best practice amongst first line managers;
- Providing action learning sets, based either within teams or bringing together those with specific common interests from different teams, organisations and professions;
- Providing frequent opportunities for shadowing or co-working with either a more experienced member of staff or someone in the 'tier' above, to gain insight into different roles and responsibilities. More formal secondments for agreed periods of time to a different role, team, or district may also have beneficial effects.

#### **(d) Making use of the PQ framework to develop career pathways**

A clear framework for professional development, linked to national standards, has long been available in other professions such as nursing and teaching but social work has been slow to take up the challenge of life-long learning. Career pathways, linked to job descriptions and specifications have been hard to find until now. The introduction of registration and re-registration requirements have been an important development and the new initiative to implement a 'probationary year' must be seen as helpful in standardising expectations for new employees and employers alike. In addition, the revised PQ framework is now fully operational and offers agencies a process through which they could make the links between individual development and agency workforce requirements.

If they are to fulfil their potential for newly-qualified social workers, entry level 'specialist' PQ programmes, especially the first (consolidation) modules, need to be integrated into agency policies and procedures, with clear specifications in terms of selection criteria, processes and timetables, together with the resources available to assist teams to release nominated staff and cover their absences. Where these arrangements can be clearly articulated and promoted to all staff, on-going development becomes a routine part of everyday practice within the organisation. PQ outcomes can be used as part of supervision and performance management at the individual level and more strategically, as part of the framework for addressing the recruitment and retention needs of the agency, across all levels within the organisation.

In partnership with universities, there is the potential for agencies to develop a matrix of courses and programmes which will integrate individual professional aspiration with that set out in the agency workforce plan, to achieve service improvement.

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### EXTRACT FROM THE INTERIM REPORT PRESENTED TO THE PARTNERSHIP BOARD IN JUNE 2007

## DATA & FINDINGS

### **SECTION 1: PRE-QUALIFYING & QUALIFYING EXPERIENCES**

*To what extent do pre-qualifying and qualifying experiences inform and influence the early confidence of newly-qualified social workers?*

#### **Prior experiences**

Only one of the newly-qualified social workers had had no pre-qualifying experience of social care work. Nearly two-thirds (62%) of the study group had had more than four years' experience, prior to undertaking their qualifying programme. The majority (69%) had experience of paid work in a local authority setting, providing services which included social care, personal support, advice and guidance to a range of client groups. Just over half (54%) had experience of working with children and families, while the remainder had worked in a variety of mental health and learning disability settings.

#### **Qualifying experiences and placements**

The majority (69%) had followed an undergraduate programme whilst 31% had undertaken a programme at Master's level. 67% of undergraduate students were seconded to their qualifying programme by their employer; none was seconded to the Master's programme. A wide variety of training placement settings was represented in the study group, with most (77%) managing the expected generic mix between adults and children's services across the two or three years of their training. All but one (92%) had at least one local authority placement, although these were not necessarily in child care, fieldwork teams. More 'specialist' areas included youth offending (4/13); fostering (3/13); education (1/13). 62% spent less than half of their placement time in children's services.

Line managers were asked about their knowledge of new degree programmes and their familiarity with the requirements and standards for qualification. Just over two thirds (70%) said they were not familiar with the practice requirements against which newly-qualified workers will have been assessed. Of the three who were aware, they had been informed either through the process of having students in the team (2) or by seeking out information for themselves (1). None of the line managers had received any information from universities or employers. However, 80% said that their teams had offered placements in the last two years and all of these managers had had active involvement with students on placement in the team, including providing feedback (3); contributing to evidence for assessment (3); and contributing to the identification of learning needs and personal development planning (2).

### **Initial confidence on qualification**

Looking at a 'confidence index' in which newly-qualified workers scored their level of initial confidence against 16 of the competences identified in the National Occupational Standards for social work<sup>1</sup>, (using a scale from 1 = *not at all confident* to 10 = *very confident*), a top and bottom quarter of the total group were identified. The top quarter (3/13) had the highest aggregate scores across all 16 competences and were identified as 'most confident'. The bottom quarter, (3/13) with the lowest aggregate scores, were identified as being 'least confident'.

All of those at the top, who felt the most confident, had undertaken more than 50% of their placement days in child care work and had a final placement compatible with their area of first employment. All of those in the bottom quarter (3/13), who felt least confident, had undertaken only one placement, amounting to less than 50% of total placement days, in child care work and came from background experiences exclusively in adult services, which they had then chosen for their first placement. None of this bottom quarter came from the Master's programme.

When asked about the experience, skills and knowledge that they felt were most useful to them in their initial posts, those who were most confident regularly mentioned:

- Prior experiences of relationship-building with children and young people
- Practical, direct work with the particular client group
- Using agency processes and systems, e.g. undertaking initial and core assessments, on placement
- Having a sound understanding of assessment, the law and legal processes
- Being organised and able to manage their own time
- Having report writing and presentation skills

Of those who were least confident, the areas that they identified as being helpful to their development were:

- Good training once in post e.g. in agency systems and processes
- Management support, through supervision, offering developmental feedback
- Opportunities for shadowing experienced workers

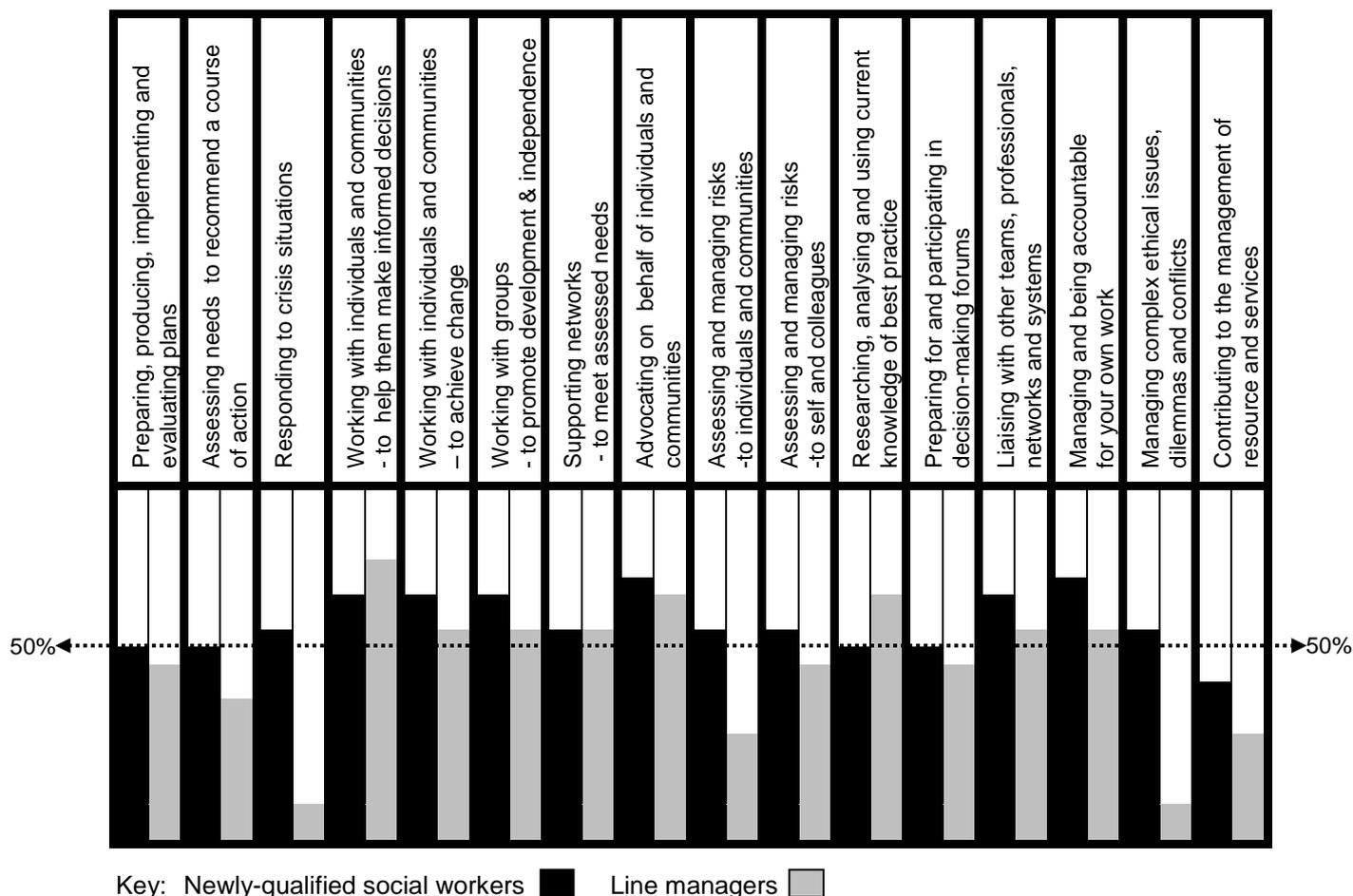
Interestingly, only one social worker mentioned analytical abilities as an important element in their work.

As well as asking each social worker to indicate their level of confidence as above, line managers were also asked to comment on the level of confidence they would expect from their newly-qualified staff, using the same competences extracted from the National Occupational Standards for social work and a scale of 1 – 10 for each. A score of 6 or more has been used to indicate confident or very confident and the responses from newly-qualified social workers and line managers are compared in the table below:

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<sup>1</sup> 28150 Requirements for Social Work Training DH (July 2002) [www.doh.gov.uk/qualityprotects](http://www.doh.gov.uk/qualityprotects)

## Confidence of newly-qualified social workers and line managers against National Occupational Standards



A mixed picture emerges with 50% or more of the social workers feeling confident or very confident across all but one of the standards, while the results from line managers indicated low expectations of confidence in nearly one-third of the standards assessed at qualification. There are five areas of most contrast in which fewer than 40% of the line managers felt that newly qualified social workers were confident. These included assessing needs to recommend a course of action (40%); assessing and managing risks to individuals and communities (30%); managing complex ethical issues (10%); and responding to crises (10%). There is agreement between line managers and social workers that contributing to the management of resources and services is an area where newly-qualified social workers have less confidence (30% and 46% respectively). However, at the other end of the scale, line managers agreed with social workers in the high levels of confidence they felt in helping individuals and communities to make informed decisions (80%) and advocating on behalf of individuals and communities (70%). In addition, social workers registered high levels of confidence in managing and being accountable for their own work (77%); liaising with other teams, professionals, networks and systems (69%); and working with groups to promote individual development and independence (69%). The one area which is curious is in researching, analysing and using knowledge of best practice, where social workers (54%), who might

reasonably be expected to be up-to-date in this area, felt less confident about their abilities than their managers (70%).

## **SECTION 2: WORKPLACE PREPARATION**

*What impact does the physical workspace, the provision of equipment and early support arrangements have on the ease with which newly-qualified workers settle into their first post?*

The vast majority of newly-qualified social workers (77%) felt that the preparation of the workplace for their arrival had been satisfactory or better. However, only 46% actually had all the expected office equipment in place on arrival and it took several weeks for some staff to be allocated a desk (23%); a personal computer (23%); or a mobile telephone (23%). Well over half (60%) of those who gave the highest scores - indicating a well-prepared workplace - did so despite having various pieces of equipment missing on arrival. By contrast, the data sets show quite clearly that all of the newly-qualified social workers valued people as the greatest repository of welcome and support in the early days in their new workplace. The team, colleagues, a named buddy/mentor, knowing others in the team or the proximity of other newly-qualified staff, were all mentioned as important factors in creating a welcoming and helpful environment.

*"It was nice to know I was expected – Reception knew I was coming and they had my name" (... a newly-qualified social worker)*

### **Changes and improvements**

When asked about ways in which improvements in the reception and integration of newly-qualified staff into the workplace could be made, suggestions included:

- More frequent supervision (4/13)
- Less cases, with their suitability vetted by managers (3/13)
- Allocation of a named team member as initial mentor (2/13)
- A pre-planned induction and training timetable available on Day 1 (2/13)
- Introduction to other managers, areas and teams within the locality (1/13)

## **SECTION 3: INDUCTION & AGENCY TRAINING**

*What is offered in agencies, by whom and when, to make the link between qualification and the first year in employment?*

Newly-qualified social workers and line managers were asked about a number of elements of induction including the availability of written documentation, processes and procedures - both corporate induction and that specific to social workers - as well as about training events and courses.

### **Written information for induction**

In relation to corporate induction and general 'welcome' to the wider organisation, newly qualified social workers were asked if they had received a written induction pack containing the following range of information:

- Named person responsible for induction programme
- Organisational structure chart

- Personnel policies and procedures
- Pay, pension and financial policies and procedures
- Codes of conduct
- Performance management arrangements
- Agency Procedures Manual(s)
- Registration and re-registration requirements of professional body
- Professional development opportunities including post-qualifying awards

Nearly two-thirds (62%) of newly-qualified social workers reported that they had not received a written pack, and of those who did (38%), this did not necessarily contain all of the above elements, with the following gaps identified overall:

- 67% had no agency procedures manual(s)
- 77% had no performance management information
- 92% had no information about professional body registration
- 92% had no information about professional development or PQ

### **Corporate induction**

Just over half of the group (54%) had attended a corporate induction event of between ½ day - 2 days duration and of the type provided for all newly- appointed staff across the agency. Specific issues for newly-qualified social workers were not included in these more general sessions. Corporate induction was generally undertaken within the first six months of employment (71%) but two social workers did not attend until they had been in post for more than 9 months.

### **Programmes of induction for newly-qualified social workers**

Turning to line managers, when asked to identify the main aims and purposes of induction, the majority highlighted the following:

- To meet policy and procedures requirements (60%)
- To undertake orientation to the district, resources and other professionals (50%)
- To monitor and evaluate ability to undertake the full professional role (50%)
- To arrange training, taking account of what is available matched to individual learning needs (50%)

They were also asked about the content of a 'standard induction programme' for newly-qualified social workers. Orientation and shadowing other staff were included by all managers; training events by 90%; workload protection by 80%; additional supervision by 60%; and a written induction pack by 40%, with a further 20% referring to web-based materials. Only 30% of managers mentioned learning sets or other peer support groups and a very small proportion (20%) made reference to the use of a formal, named mentor. Given the focus that managers gave to the meeting of policy and procedures as one of the main aims of induction, there appears to be some dissonance with the picture which emerges of the delivery of the induction programme, where 60% do not consider a written induction pack to be part of the programme, and a further 20% rely on internet access for the provision of this material, and this in circumstances where, as has already been noted in Section 1, nearly a quarter of the newly-qualified social workers did not have a computer allocated on arrival.

However, all of the newly-qualified social workers had been offered and undertaken some formal training since starting employment. Overall, the amount of induction/early training attended or planned varied widely between individual staff and is summarised in the following table:

### Training Undertaken or Planned in the First 12 Months of Employment

Stage Months in Post	Training Attended or Planned		Predominant Course Titles/Content
	Range (For the Group)	Average (Each worker)	
1 – 6 months	5 – 25 days	7 days	Corporate induction IT / Management Information Systems Child Protection – Foundation/Level 1 Domestic Violence Learning sets
7 – 11 months	0 - 9 days	4 days	Court Skills Child Protection – Level 2 Domestic Violence- Impact on children Learning sets

### The Staff Development/Training Unit

Asked about the staff development/training unit, 69% of the newly-qualified social workers had had no direct contact and this position is also reflected in the line manager group, all of whom felt that they held personal responsibility for the induction processes for newly-qualified staff. Only 20% of managers reported involvement of the training unit in planning and setting up an induction programme, although half of the managers did acknowledge the involvement of the training unit in delivering events and courses. All of the managers felt that they held sole responsibility for tracking progress, monitoring outcomes and achievements, identifying future needs and making arrangements to meet the on-going needs of their newly-qualified staff.

### Changes and Improvements

Asked about improvements for induction programmes, suggestions from line managers included:

- Structured use of extended shadowing, to build confidence in working within systems, teams etc.,  
*One manager commented ... 'I believe it (induction) would be improved by having a complete absence of case responsibility .... three months would be ideal'.*
- Establishing a county-wide, standardised process so that the experience is not dependent on individual managers
- Central co-ordination by the training/staff development unit  
*A manager commented.... 'it would be good to have a central co-ordinator for this, in the training unit'*
- Early familiarisation with agency processes and procedures  
*A manager commented ... 'It's imperative that newly-qualified workers have had their main/last placement in a "district office. Those who do not encounter huge problems ....we cannot allocate cases for at least three months, which in itself undermines the worker's confidence'.*



### **A 'normal' caseload**

Line managers were asked to quantify a 'normal' caseload for a qualified worker and all found this difficult to answer, with 40% making no response. Of those who did answer, all used 'cases' as the measure and a fairly wide range of numbers emerged:

- 10 – 18 cases in long-term team; average 15 children
- 8 – 15 cases in a short term team; average 12 children

### **Protection**

All line managers (100%) said that they protected the caseload of newly-qualified workers. By contrast, nearly half of the newly qualified social workers themselves (46%) reported the absence of any workload protection, with a further 8% who didn't know whether there was or not. The remainder (46%) were able to confirm clear workload protection arrangements.

Where protection was in place for newly-qualified social workers, specific areas were identified in which either, they would not work at all, or would not work alone. There was a good level of agreement between what was reported by social workers and line managers in relation to protected areas, which included child protection, adoption and court work. Areas in which the newly-qualified would not work alone included S47 investigations, areas of high risk and more complex child protection cases.

The majority of the newly-qualified social workers with workload protection (67%), thought that this was implemented as a result of the agency's policy for the induction period of newly-qualified staff, while one third of the group felt that the decisions about workload were made on an individual basis, from appraisal, supervision and in accordance with developmental needs. Two-thirds (67%) of social workers with a protected caseload, were unclear about the length of time that protection would be held in place. Of those who could confirm a timescale, one worker thought protection would last for 12 months; and one indicated protection for 6 months. Conversely, all line managers saw protection as a staged process, building up gradually to a full caseload at the end of the first year in employment. There was however, no clear agreement across the group of line managers about the mechanisms and timescales for this staged process and none mentioned an overall policy, despite over half of them having indicated that 'newly qualified' was a recognised status within the agency.

### **Support in developing confidence**

A variety of support arrangements was offered by managers to move staff on and develop confidence, including shadowing, co-working and completion of certain in-house training courses, e.g. Child Protection Level II, Court Work Skills, before undertaking work in specific, predominantly legal, areas. This is largely confirmed by the types of training previously listed by social workers as already undertaken or planned in the first 12 months of employment, in Section 3 (p. 14). It is also worth noting that shadowing, co-working and good training were the elements that the less confident workers identified in Section 1 (p. 10) and felt would be most helpful to their development.

## SECTION 5: SUPERVISION & SUPPORT

*What is supervision? How, when and why does it take place and what part does it, and any other resources, have to play in supporting and developing a newly qualified social worker?*

### **Formal, planned supervision**

All staff, and indeed a variety of government reports arising from child abuse tragedies, highlight the centrality of good quality supervision on a regular, planned basis as a key element in securing safe social work practice. All of the newly-qualified social workers reported that formal, planned supervision took place with their line manager, in the manager's office and the basic patterns were as follows:

- **Frequency**  
69% had monthly sessions; 23% were fortnightly, with one newly-qualified social worker reporting a disrupted pattern owing to the lack of a permanent manager over several months.
- **Duration**  
All had a minimum of 1 hour but nearly two-thirds (62%) had up to 2 hours for each session. All sessions were planned at least 4 weeks in advance, so that all except two felt able to prepare sufficiently.
- **Content**  
Asked about the focus of supervision, all (100%) cited case discussion and caseload management. One mentioned training and personal development and one referred to a 3-month appraisal.
- **Satisfaction**  
Just over half of the newly-qualified social workers (54%) were satisfied with the supervision arrangements offered to them. All but one of those who expressed dissatisfaction (38%) wanted supervision to take place more frequently, suggesting a fortnightly basis for at least the first six months and for more time in each session to be devoted to reflection, and personal issues such as the consideration of the impact of the work, work/life balance, and stress management.

Line managers were asked in more detail about what occupied significant time in supervision and the following results emerged:

### Time spent by line managers on supervision tasks

Workload Management	Allocation	General Administration	Promotion of Values	Personal Support, Mentoring, Feedback	Evaluation of personal effectiveness	Consultation/ Mentoring	Application of Theory, Models, Methods	Identification of Learning Needs	Professional Development	Use of Service User/carer Assessments to Provide Feedback
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■
■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■	■

Key: Significant time ■ Little time ■ No time ■

All managers identified workload management as the single most important element of supervision. The provision of mentoring, personal support, in terms of the impact of the work, together with feedback and evaluation of personal effectiveness were also significant elements for 70% or more of the line managers. This contrasts rather starkly with the view of one-third of the newly-qualified social workers, who felt that this area needed greater attention and cited its lack as the main cause of their dissatisfaction with the supervision arrangements offered to them. The elements identified as occupying least time were general administration (30%), the promotion of social work values (30%), and the application of models, methods, theories and approaches (20%).

### Additional sources of support

In addition to formal, planned supervision, newly-qualified social workers were also asked to consider a range of sources of support, guidance and advice available to them, and to score the importance they attached to each using a scale from 1 – 10, where 1 = not at all important and 10 = very important and the results are recorded in the table below.

### Number of social workers rating each source of support, guidance and advice as important or very important

Source of support	Not important / Fairly important (Score 1 – 5)	Important / Very important (Score 6 – 10)
Formal, planned supervision	1	12
Colleagues in same team	1	12
Other professionals	1	12
Colleagues elsewhere in same agency	3	10
Friends and/or family	3	10
Peer/student from qualifying programme	8	5
Tutor/teacher from qualifying programme	12	1

These results further confirm the earlier assertion that newly-qualified social workers consider formal, planned supervision to be the most important support mechanism

available to them. Equally important were other members of the same team in which they work and perhaps more surprisingly, other professionals. The support of friends and family was seen as equally important as other colleagues in the organisation. Lastly, all rated tutors or teachers from the qualifying programme as least important to their workplace development, underlining again the gap which appears to open so quickly between training as an academic exercise, which then ceases to have much relevance to workplace activities.

## **SECTION 6: INITIAL PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT**

*To what extent do employers engage with newly-qualified social workers in personal development planning? Is the graduate 'Personal Development Plan' a useful tool in making the connection between qualification and the workplace?*

### **Personal Development Plans**

It is a requirement of the new qualifying programmes, at both degree and Master's level, that all graduates to the social work profession should be provided with a personal development plan (PDP) at the end of their training, which identifies areas of particular strength and those for further on-going development.

Over half of the newly-qualified social workers (53%) did not have or could not remember having a PDP. Of those who did (46%), the strengths highlighted at the point of qualification most commonly included communication skills (5) and interpersonal skills (2). The further learning needs most often identified in the PDPs included managing stress (2); and building practice experience in child protection and anti-oppressive practice (2).

None of the newly-qualified social workers had been asked about their PDP by their line manager, supervisor or agency training/staff development unit, and of those who had a PDP, none had sought out opportunities themselves to make any use of it. However, just under half of the newly-qualified social workers (46%) felt that it was a potentially helpful tool but that it needed to be valued in the workplace if it was to be truly useful. Two newly-qualified social workers commented as follows:

*'It would be helpful if the manager asked to see it'  
'[It could be used as]... a full part of supervision'*

### **Improvements**

Asked what would improve induction processes, all the line managers (100%) felt that there needed to be a closer integration between the end of qualification and first employment. The most frequent suggestions for improvements included:

- Up-date / refresher training on qualification requirements for line managers
- First employment in a setting similar to that of the final placement
- A planned, standardised induction package specifically for newly-qualified social workers, setting out a clear, itemised schedule of activity
- An introductory period, with suggestions of three months duration, in which there would be no case responsibility for newly-qualified staff:
  - to establish familiarity with forms, processes and procedures
  - to provide time for orientation and familiarisation with the locality
- Extended shadowing and co-working arrangements throughout induction, to build confidence in more complex areas

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