

# **Newly qualified social workers**

A report on consultations with newly qualified social workers, employers and those in higher education.

CWDC Research Team  
January 2009

## **Acknowledgements**

The research team wish to thank the following for expertly facilitating the consultations with newly qualified social workers, employers and representatives of higher education institutions:

John Barlow, Sue Brook, Claire Chamberlain, George Christian, Sue D'Authreau, Liz Garrett, Janette Goodchild, Ro Gordon, Ann Harrison, Nicky Horn, Yvonne Nolan, Maureen O'Callaghan, Brian Paget and Claire Richards.

The team also wishes to acknowledge the contribution which Priya Lall made to the analysis of the transcriptions of these consultations.

# Contents

## Part 1

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Section 1 | 5 |
|-----------|---|

## Part 2

|           |   |
|-----------|---|
| Section 2 | 8 |
|-----------|---|

|           |    |
|-----------|----|
| Section 3 | 20 |
|-----------|----|

|           |    |
|-----------|----|
| Section 4 | 35 |
|-----------|----|

## Part 3

|           |    |
|-----------|----|
| Section 5 | 41 |
|-----------|----|

|           |    |
|-----------|----|
| Section 6 | 49 |
|-----------|----|

|           |    |
|-----------|----|
| Section 7 | 60 |
|-----------|----|

## Part 4

|           |    |
|-----------|----|
| Section 8 | 64 |
|-----------|----|

|           |    |
|-----------|----|
| Section 9 | 74 |
|-----------|----|

|            |    |
|------------|----|
| References | 75 |
|------------|----|

## **PART 1: Background to the study**

# Section 1: Background

## Purpose

In early 2008 CWDC consulted with Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) who were working with children, young people and their families, as well as with employers of NQSWs and representatives of higher education institutions (HEIs) who provided training courses. The consultations were designed to inform the development of a pilot programme to support NQSWs. The pilot programme is intended to provide funded support to new staff; to provide clear expectations around what should be achieved in the first year of employment; and to strengthen the current arrangements for supervision. It was, therefore, important to understand and collate the experiences and perspectives of existing NQSWs and their employers.

## Methodology

The consultation activities were advertised from mid-December to mid - January in *The Guardian*, *Community Care*, *Children and Young People Now*, and other trade press, as well as on CWDC's website and through the networks of CWDC's Regional Development Managers. The events were also promoted and publicised through the General Social Care Council (GSCC) and the British Association of Social Workers (BASW).

On-line surveys were conducted with NQSWs and their employers during January and February 2008. The content of the questionnaire was developed by CWDC policy and research staff, discussed with the GSCC and agreed with key partners, including the Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF). The content and format of the questionnaire were also checked by an independent expert. The surveys were completed by 502 NQSWs and 47 employers.

In addition to completing the questionnaire participants were invited to attend one of a series of consultation events. Participants registered for the events via the CWDC website. A total of 415 NQSWs attended ten consultation events in London, Bristol, Birmingham, Nottingham, Cambridge, Leeds, Manchester and Newcastle. In addition 58 individuals representing 47 employers attended four consultation events in Bristol, Leeds, London and Manchester. CWDC decided that NQSWs and employers would receive payment for completing the on-line survey and for attending the consultation events. While Payment for research participation has raised ethical concerns, especially as it may be viewed as an inducement to adopt a particular view, this was judged to be outweighed by evidence that monetary payment for research is essential in certain circumstances to attract participation. (See,

for example, Bentley and Thacker, 2004 and Wertheimer and Miller, 2008.) Invitations to take part in the consultation process were also sent to every HEI on the GSCC approved list and, as a result, 57 individuals from 39 HEIs attended four events in London and Leeds.

The events consisted of a series of workshops that were facilitated by independent, skilled facilitators, all of whom were social workers or had an excellent knowledge of the profession. The workshops provided the opportunity to explore the areas covered in the on-line surveys in more depth, as well as opening the consultation to those in HEIs. The workshops were digitally recorded with the permission of all those who attended and the recordings transcribed by an external agency. This helped to ensure that all comments (positive, neutral and negative) were captured and available for the analysis. A team of CWDC staff and an external reviewer then analysed the survey data and extracted the main issues from the transcripts of the events. This allowed the key findings to be identified which were then available to inform the discussions on how to shape the pilot programme which was launched in September 2008. The transcripts were then subjected to a detailed and thematic analysis which is reported, along with the survey data, in this report.

## **PART 2: The views of Newly Qualified Social Workers**

## Section 2: Survey of newly qualified social workers

This section reports the data collected from the on-line survey conducted with NQSWs during January and February 2008.

### 2.1 Background details

A total of 502 NQSWs working with children, young people and their families took part in the consultation in early 2008. Approximately three fifths had followed the graduate route and two-fifths the post-graduate one (Table 2.1.1)

Table 2.1.1

|                      | N          | %          |
|----------------------|------------|------------|
| <b>Graduate</b>      | 296        | 59         |
| <b>Post graduate</b> | 206        | 41         |
| <b>Total</b>         | <b>502</b> | <b>100</b> |

Not surprisingly most were currently employed in the public sector, with only seven per cent of those taking part working in the PVI sector (Table 2.1.2). They were evenly divided between those who had been employed for less than six months and those employed for longer (Table 2.1.3).

Table 2.1.2 Sector where employed

|                         | N          | %          |
|-------------------------|------------|------------|
| <b>Voluntary sector</b> | 19         | 4          |
| <b>Private sector</b>   | 13         | 3          |
| <b>Statutory</b>        | 468        | 93         |
| <b>Self employed</b>    | 1          | -          |
| <b>Missing</b>          | 1          | -          |
| <b>Total</b>            | <b>502</b> | <b>100</b> |

Table 2.1.3 Time employed

|                           | N          | %          |
|---------------------------|------------|------------|
| <b>Less than 3 months</b> | 68         | 14         |
| <b>3-6 months</b>         | 176        | 35         |
| <b>More than 6 months</b> | 256        | 51         |
| <b>Missing</b>            | 2          | -          |
| <b>Total</b>              | <b>502</b> | <b>100</b> |

## 2.2 Focus of work

The NQSWs were asked to say to what extent (on a scale of all, most, some, not at all) their work focused on specific areas (Table 2.2.1).

**Table 2.2.1 Focus of work**

|  | All          | Most         | Some         | Not at all   | No response | TOTAL |
|--|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|-------------|-------|
| <b>Children in residential / foster care</b>     | 78<br>(16%)  | 93<br>(18%)  | 292<br>(58%) | 38<br>(8%)   | 1           | 502   |
| <b>Preventing children being taken into care</b> | 71<br>(14%)  | 173<br>(34%) | 194<br>(39%) | 63<br>(13%)  | 1           | 502   |
| <b>Supporting families</b>                       | 191<br>(38%) | 200<br>(40%) | 102<br>(20%) | 8<br>(2%)    | 1           | 502   |
| <b>Disabled children</b>                         | 32<br>(6%)   | 9<br>(2%)    | 314<br>(63%) | 146<br>(29%) | 1           | 502   |
| <b>CP S47</b>                                    | 60<br>(12%)  | 160<br>(32%) | 228<br>(45%) | 53<br>(11%)  | 1           | 502   |
| <b>CAMHS</b>                                     | 6<br>(1%)    | 38<br>(8%)   | 391<br>(78%) | 66<br>(13%)  | 1           | 502   |
| <b>Assessment of referrals</b>                   | 140<br>(28%) | 77<br>(15%)  | 163<br>(33%) | 121<br>(24%) | 1           | 502   |

Seventy eight per cent described their work as being all or mostly involved with supporting families, with only two per cent saying that this was not a feature of their work. This was followed by 48 per cent saying they spent all or most of their time on preventing children being taken into care, 44 per cent on child protection work, 43 per cent on assessment of referrals and 34 per cent on children in residential or foster care. Although most had experience of work in relation to disability and child and adolescent mental health only eight and nine per cent (respectively) of respondents said these areas took all or most of their time.

## 2.3. Factors influencing choice of employment

The NQSWs were asked to consider a list of factors and to say to what extent they had taken account of these when seeking employment as a qualified social worker (Table 2.3.1). When the responses 'very much' and 'quite a lot' are combined the key determinant was the type of work, followed by the location, career prospects and employer's commitment to induction and ongoing training and development.

**Table 2.3.1 Extent to which following factors considered when seeking employment**

|  | <b>Very much</b> | <b>Quite a lot</b> | <b>Some</b> | <b>Not at all</b> | <b>No response</b> | <b>TOTAL</b> |
|--|------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| <b>Existing employment</b>   | 131              | 101                | 93          | 176               | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Location</b>  | 192              | 212                | 86          | 11                | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Type of work</b>  | 304              | 157                | 35          | 5                 | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Reputation of employer</b>  | 107              | 198                | 150         | 46                | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Experience of employer through placement</b>                                | 177              | 100                | 60          | 164               | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Salary</b>  | 76               | 224                | 177         | 24                | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Career prospects</b>  | 160              | 222                | 105         | 14                | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Employer's commitment to induction and ongoing training and development</b> | 165              | 202                | 111         | 23                | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Work load</b>   | 89               | 196                | 166         | 50                | 1                  | 502          |

#### **2.4. Prior influences on career choice**

The respondents were asked to say to what extent certain experiences had influenced their understanding of social work prior to embarking on a social work course (Table 2.4.1). Only four respondents (of the 501 valid responses) claimed not to have been influenced by any of these. The biggest influences were 'employment', primarily through experience of social care work, but also from having been a trainee social worker or volunteer. But two-fifths of respondents had been 'very' or 'quite' influenced by their experience as a service user and just over a quarter by their experiences of being a carer.

**Table 2.4.1 Influence of prior experience on understanding of social work prior to course**

|                                  | <b>Very much</b> | <b>Quite a lot</b> | <b>Some</b> | <b>Not at all</b> | <b>No response</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|----------------------------------|------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------------|--------------------|--------------|
| <b>Service user</b>              | 114              | 83                 | 86          | 218               | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Carer</b>                     | 53               | 85                 | 129         | 234               | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Employment in social care</b> | 215              | 118                | 86          | 82                | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Volunteer</b>                 | 109              | 116                | 132         | 144               | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Trainee social worker</b>     | 180              | 62                 | 46          | 213               | 1                  | 502          |

## **2.5 Social work training as preparation for professional role**

While accepting that initial training is not able to prepare people for every task they will undertake as a NQSW those completing the questionnaire were asked to give some idea of how they considered their social work course had prepared them for their current role (Table 2.5.1). A third of these NQSWs thought that their course had prepared them 'fully' or 'quite a lot', but over half thought it had been 'just enough' to allow them to get by and one in seven did not feel it had prepared them at all.

**Table 2.5.1 Social work course as preparation for current role**

|                    |     |
|--------------------|-----|
| <b>Fully</b>       | 12  |
| <b>Quite a lot</b> | 152 |
| <b>Just enough</b> | 269 |
| <b>Not at all</b>  | 69  |

The NQSWs were asked to say which tasks they felt their social work degree had most effectively prepared them to undertake. Of the 502 respondents 479 identified at least one task, with 66 mentioning four tasks. When these were collated placements emerged as the one receiving the most mentions (145). Even though this is not a task and reflects a misreading of the question it is worth recording. The fact that so many 'misread' may indicate the strength of feeling about how useful many felt placements to have been. The actual 'task' which was most frequently identified was 'support to translate theory into practice' (130). The next grouping focused around inputs on understanding

legislation (116), direct work with clients (115) and conducting assessments (112), followed by report writing (58), reflective practice (52), multi-agency work (46) and anti-discriminatory practice (44).

They were also asked to say which tasks they felt the degree had least prepared them to undertake. One in four respondents referred to the courses being too focused on theory at the expense of practice and how this had left them unprepared (to various extents) when they had entered employment. As far as actual tasks were concerned the two most frequently mentioned were 'managing difficult service users' (114) and 'conducting assessments' (113), followed by time / case management (100) and court work (82). Although other areas were less frequently mentioned one in ten of the NQSWs (51) said they did not feel prepared to deal with child protection issues, as well as those who did not feel prepared to deal with the quantity of paperwork (42) or understand policies and procedures (41).

## **2.6 Issues in the first year**

The questionnaire then invited the NQSWs to explore the issues and support they may have encountered in their first year (Table 2.6.1) It was reassuring to find that over four fifths 'always' or 'usually' had supervision sessions organised in advance, although the majority had some experience of these being postponed due to their own (42 per cent) or their supervisor's (51 per cent) work commitments. The majority (51 per cent) also felt that at least at some time they were left to find their own way.<sup>1</sup>

Over half of the NQSWs (54 per cent) responding to the questionnaire believed that their training and development needs were always or usually identified, and a further group of just under 30 per cent of respondents thought they were sometimes identified. Very similar proportions (51 per cent and 32 per cent) said these needs were then addressed. But this left one in six of this group saying that their training needs were rarely or never identified / met. There was less confidence amongst these NQSWs that their training and development needs were priorities. While 37 per cent believed that they were always or usually prioritised and 36 per cent that this sometimes happened, 27 per cent of respondents thought that this rarely or never happened. There was a similar cause for concern about their assessment of the time they had to reflect and learn from their own practice. Twenty nine per cent considered that they always or usually had time for this, 33 per cent that there was sometimes time but 37 per cent said the time was rarely or never available. On a more positive note 70 per cent

---

<sup>1</sup> The numbers saying that supervisions were 'rarely' cancelled or they were rarely 'left to find their own way' have been excluded as this could realistically be expected to happen in any work place

of these NQSWs said they were always or usually able to learn by working with more experienced social workers and a further 19 per cent said this was sometimes the case.

**Table 2.6.1 Support in first year- frequency each item occurred**

|  | <b>Always</b> | <b>Usually</b> | <b>Some times</b> | <b>Rarely</b> | <b>Never</b> | <b>No response</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--|---------------|----------------|-------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|
| <b>Supervision sessions organised in advance</b>                     | 265           | 153            | 45                | 28            | 9            | 2                  | 502          |
| <b>Supervision postponed due to my work commitments</b>              | 3             | 19             | 187               | 198           | 94           | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Supervision postponed due to supervisor's work commitments</b>    | 10            | 58             | 189               | 179           | 65           | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Left to find own way</b>  | 23            | 68             | 166               | 166           | 78           | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Training and development needs identified</b>                     | 98            | 175            | 147               | 64            | 17           | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Training and development needs addressed</b>                      | 84            | 170            | 160               | 66            | 21           | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Able to learn by working with more experienced social workers</b> | 177           | 172            | 97                | 42            | 13           | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Training and development needs prioritised</b>                    | 56            | 129            | 180               | 107           | 29           | 1                  | 502          |
| <b>Time to reflect and learn from own practice</b>                   | 47            | 100            | 166               | 135           | 53           | 1                  | 502          |

## **2.7 Appropriate levels of training**

When asked the extent to which their current employment had provided them with appropriate levels of training on identified subjects, 60 per cent said it had (completely or mostly) in relation to the use of IT and 50 per cent that it had in relation to child protection (Table 2.7.1).

**Table 2.7.1 Extent to which received appropriate levels of training during current employment on these subjects**

|   | <b>Comple-<br/>tely</b> | <b>Mostly</b> | <b>Some-<br/>what</b> | <b>Not at<br/>all</b> | <b>No<br/>training</b> | <b>No<br/>respon-<br/>se</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|---|-------------------------|---------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|------------------------|------------------------------|--------------|
| <b>Child protection</b>                             | 54                      | 196           | 180                   | 38                    | 33                     | 1                            | 502          |
| <b>CAF</b>  | 51                      | 130           | 158                   | 92                    | 70                     | 1                            | 502          |
| <b>Applying<br/>legislation to<br/>practice</b>     | 48                      | 139           | 208                   | 55                    | 51                     | 1                            | 502          |
| <b>Child<br/>development</b>                        | 49                      | 124           | 180                   | 90                    | 58                     | 1                            | 502          |
| <b>Analysis</b>                                     | 37                      | 106           | 189                   | 104                   | 65                     | 1                            | 502          |
| <b>Decision making</b>                              | 46                      | 104           | 181                   | 95                    | 75                     | 1                            | 502          |
| <b>Health and<br/>safety</b>                        | 39                      | 120           | 190                   | 78                    | 74                     | 1                            | 502          |
| <b>Dealing with<br/>aggression and<br/>violence</b> | 19                      | 64            | 163                   | 146                   | 109                    | 1                            | 502          |
| <b>Policies and<br/>procedures</b>                  | 61                      | 138           | 229                   | 44                    | 29                     | 1                            | 502          |
| <b>Use of IT</b>                                    | 117                     | 187           | 140                   | 35                    | 22                     | 1                            | 502          |

However just over a third believed they had received appropriate levels of training in relation to the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), applying legislation to practice, child development and policies and procedures. Just under a third thought they had received adequate training in relation to analysis, decision making and health and safety while only one in six responded that this had been the case for dealing with aggression and violence. Clearly there were NQSWs who thought their training during their employment had been ‘somewhat’ adequate in these areas, but that would not seem to be sufficient in terms of the risks and responsibilities associated with the role of a social worker in a children’s context. And there were also significant proportions replying that the training had not been adequate or that it had not been offered (Table 2.7.2).

**Table 2.7.2 Training inadequate or non-existent**

| <b>Child<br/>protection</b> | <b>CAF</b> | <b>Applic. leg<br/>to practice</b> | <b>Child<br/>development</b> | <b>Analysis</b> | <b>Decision<br/>making</b> | <b>Health and<br/>safety</b> | <b>Dealing<br/>with<br/>aggression<br/>/ violence</b> | <b>Polices<br/>and<br/>procedures</b> | <b>Use of IT</b> |
|-----------------------------|------------|------------------------------------|------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|------------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|------------------|
| 14%                         | 32%        | 21%                                | 29%                          | 34%             | 34%                        | 30%                          | 51%   | 15%                                   | 11%              |

## 2.8 Workload

When asked if their employers operated a workload management scheme just over half the NQSWs replied positively (54 per cent). Two thirds of respondents (66 per cent) thought that their own workload was about right, with 29 per cent claiming that it was too heavy and the remaining four per cent saying that they did not have enough to do.

## 2.9 Probationary period

The NQSWs were asked if they were clear about how their six month probationary period was assessed. While 40 per cent were completely or mostly clear and a further 24 per cent were 'somewhat clear', 36 per cent were not at all clear.

They were also divided in half between those who had received guidance about the standard of the work needed to pass the probationary period and those who had not. Of the 249 who had received guidance most (227) had found it to be, at least, of some help. Slightly fewer NQSWs had received guidance on the scope of the work needed to pass the probationary period (240 of the 502 respondents), although again most found the guidance to be at least somewhat helpful. But again over half of the 502 respondents (261) had not received such guidance.

Those filling in the questionnaire were asked to say how often certain identified assessment methods were used (Table 2.9.1).

**Table 2.9.1 Frequency of assessment methods**

|  | <b>Always</b> | <b>Sometimes</b> | <b>Rarely</b> | <b>Never</b> | <b>No response</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|--|---------------|------------------|---------------|--------------|--------------------|--------------|
| Observation of practice                    | 46            | 152              | 107           | 196          | 1                  | 502          |
| Reflection on practice                     | 92            | 199              | 107           | 103          | 1                  | 502          |
| Achievement of work against set objectives | 95            | 204              | 91            | 111          | 1                  | 502          |
| Achievement against standard               | 85            | 189              | 95            | 132          | 1                  | 502          |

- Observation of practice: Only nine per cent reported having always had their practice observed, and while the majority (n = 259 / 52 per cent) had some experience of it, however limited, 39 per cent had none at all.

- Reflection on practice: Eighteen per cent of these NQSWs said they always engaged in reflecting on their practice, and 61 per cent said it happened sometimes or rarely, while one on five had not experienced it.
- Achievement of work against set objectives: Nineteen per cent of respondents always had their achievements measured against set objectives. While 59 per cent said this happened sometimes or rarely, 22 per cent said it never happened.
- Achievements against standards: Seventeen per cent were always assessed against standards but for 57 per cent this sometimes or rarely happened, and it had never happened for 26 per cent.

When asked to specify any areas on which they would have liked greater clarity during their probationary period just over a third of the 502 NQSWs (n = 181) responded. Of these 159 (88 per cent of those making a comment) said they would have appreciated more information on the structure of the probationary period, 80 wanted more details of the assessment criteria applied to the probation and 70 on expectations of NQSWs.

## **2.10 Contributing to confidence as a NQSW**

These NQSWs were asked to indicate if specific factors had contributed to their confidence as a NQSW (Table 2.10.1). The factor which was identified as most significant was 'working alongside experienced colleagues', which nine out of ten selected. This was followed by three quarters selecting 'supervision', two thirds 'training' and three out of every five selecting 'knowledge of policies and procedures' and 'building on learning from social work degree'. One in five of them identified 'formal assessment / appraisal system' and 'peer induction group', although not all NQSWs would have experience of such a group.

**Table 2.10.1 Contributing building confidence as a NQSW**

|   |      |
|---|------|
| Supervision                                   | 76 % |
| Training                                      | 66 % |
| Working alongside more experienced colleagues | 90 % |
| Knowledge of policies and procedures          | 60 % |
| Building on learning from social work degree  | 60 % |
| Formal assessment / appraisal system          | 21 % |
| Peer induction group                          | 21 % |

## **2. 11 At end of the first year as a NQSW**

The NQSWs were asked to say which of a series of statements best described their feelings as they approached the end of their post-qualification year (Table 2.11.1).

**Table 2.11.1 Feelings of NQSW**

|  | <b>Yes</b> | <b>Percentage</b> |
|--|------------|-------------------|
| Re-enforced belief that social work is right profession          | 217        | 44 %              |
| Still want to be a social worker but perhaps not in this setting | 117        | 23%               |
| Considering alternative career options                           | 49         | 10%               |
| Still learning about the role                                    | 118        | 23%               |
| <b>Total</b>   | 501*       | 100%              |

\* One missing respondent

At least two-thirds remained convinced that they wanted to stay within the social work profession, even if not necessarily in the agency or setting where they currently worked. In reality this proportion

is likely to be higher as some of those who responded that they were still learning about the role were probably not considering leaving the profession! In fact while only ten per cent said they were considering leaving the profession this would represent a significant attrition rate at an early stage in a career.

## 2.12 Other comments

The NQSWs were then invited to submit any further comments which they wished to make on their experienced during their induction year. The majority (435) chose to do so. Table 2.14 summarises the categorisation of these comments recording all areas identified by more than ten NQSWs.

**Table 2.14**

|                                     |           |  |           |
|-------------------------------------|-----------|--|-----------|
| Good support from management        | 139 (28%) | Poor support from management                       | 90 (18%)  |
| Good support from team              | 126 (25%) | Poor support from team                             | 41 (8%)   |
| Good induction                      | 66 (13%)  | No / poor induction                                | 101 (20%) |
| Protected caseload                  | 32 (6%)   | No protected caseload                              | 37 (7%)   |
| Professional development encouraged | 18 (4%)   | Professional development not encouraged            | 24 (5%)   |
| Training encouraged                 | 44 (9%)   | No time for training                               | 5 (1%)    |
| Mentor /buddy system welcomed       | 13 (3%)   | Would have liked mentor / buddy system             | 19 (4%)   |
|                                     |           | Caseload too heavy                                 | 39 (8%)   |
|                                     |           | Complex cases too early                            | 33 (6%)   |
|                                     |           | Course too divorced from practice                  | 43 (9%)   |
|                                     |           | Felt overwhelmed / stressed / left to sink or swim | 54 (11%)  |
|                                     |           | Employers' expectations are too high               | 22 (4%)   |
|                                     |           | Too much administration                            | 16 (3%)   |
|                                     |           | Reflective practice not possible                   | 11 (2%)   |

Many of the comments focused on how well supported they had been by their teams (n =126 comments) and management (n=139 comments), with 41 individuals reporting that they felt supported by both. The following are offered to give a flavour of what they wrote:

I feel that I am a valued member of my team. This has been shown by my case load with regular supervision to ensure that I am managing my work. I have also been encouraged to attend appropriate training. Work colleagues have been extremely helpful and answered any questions I have or pointed me in the right direction for the answer. (The employer) has an induction programme which lasts one year. We meet up and discuss any issues and exchange views/experiences. The induction course has also explained where we fit into the corporation, the management framework and the responsibilities of each employee. This has helped me to feel that I am not alone in my decision making and who I go to depending on the problem I may have.

I have found that I have never been without appropriate guidance and support this is partly due to the team that I chose to work with because my prior knowledge of them led me to think that this would be the case. I also knew the reputation of the local authority and had enough experience of working with them to know that I would feel comfortable with their practices and processes.

There were also positive comments about their employers' training provision (n = 62) and protected caseloads (n=32), as well as references to specific activities and policies:

We have an excellent NQSW training programme which is a massive help. This allows (me) the opportunity to meet with former colleagues and build on confidence. It also helps to get an insight into practitioners' experiences in other areas and fields. The only thing is that this would have been more valuable to be addressed within the university course in order to be better prepared for practice.

I have been given a protected caseload with a few complexities thrown in. I feel fortunate to work for a team who are happy to support me as and when I feel I need it. If it was not for the team I am part of I would have been lost from day one!

The time has whizzed by. It has been varied, challenging, rewarding, frustrating and sometimes stressful - much as I had expected really.

But there were also those who felt unsupported by their management and teams:

I feel I have lacked support at critical times and that despite being told my initial workload would be low whilst I gained experience. Instead it began high and has continued to rise.

I am disappointed with the support I have received and I felt that as a newly qualified worker I should have training identified. I have not been spoken to about my probation period. I feel I have been left to 'get on' with things. It is also hard to find management around to ask questions.

And there were those who had become overwhelmed by their experiences:

I have felt totally unsupported and was given child protection and other complex cases within the first month and expected to get on with it with no guidance as to how to proceed. I was diagnosed with depression and told my manager but neither she nor more senior managers offered me support. I eventually became so ill that I had to take some time off work and now feel I have to leave the service. I enjoy the work but felt completely unsupported and overwhelmed by what I was asked to take on.

I have only been employed in my current job for three months. Since starting the job I have felt that there is a pressure to learn the role quickly and to start managing a heavy case load. I think that this has mainly been due to staff shortages as some staff have left and others have been on long term sick. The absence of experienced colleagues has also impacted hugely on my experiences as I have not had much opportunity to shadow experienced workers. Not having a full team also makes it difficult to ask advice or seek guidance as there is often no one available. I have also had to undertake additional work to cover absent colleagues which has reduced the time I have for my own cases. Overall I feel that I have missed out on the opportunity to have a suitable induction period because of the pressures on the team. I think that ideally it would be more appropriate for newly qualified to have a small work load initially that would increase when both the manager and the worker feel it is appropriate. I also think it is important for newly qualified social workers to have a mentor or an named worker who can share their knowledge and experience.

I frequently found myself in situations and experiences for and about which I was ill-prepared and trained. The worst was, and still is, being expected to grasp complex information/cases and make sound decisions. A case allocated during my first year was on reflection too complex for my experience causing me to feel unconfident having a knock-on effect on my management of other cases. I had to very quickly adapt to this new role whilst working and making decisions which I was often unsure about. My team's expectations of me were quickly high. My confident 'front' often hid anxieties which I found it hard to open up about. I have learned to be more honest about my feelings/thoughts and that it is safe and good to do so. I was and still am shocked and dismayed at some of the abusive behaviour I was and am expected to manage. The level of peer support was high. The year was an incredibly steep learning curve!

## **Section 3: Consultations with newly qualified social workers**

### **3.1 Background**

The views expressed and analysed in this section emerged from the ten consultations held in the early months of 2008 which were attended by 415 NQSWs. Generally these views tended to be more negative than those collected through the on-line survey reported in Section 2. There is some evidence that group processes influence the consensus view expressed, which may not then be representative of respondents' individual views (see Bryman, 2001; Stokes and Bergin, 2006). However the strength of feeling in many groups about some of the areas explored was considerable.

### **3.2 NQSWs' views on the degree course**

The overwhelming majority of participants attending the discussion groups reported that the training provided by their social work degree had failed to prepare them sufficiently to embark on professional practice. This was usually because they considered that the content of their degrees was not well-aligned to practice or was poorly managed and sequenced by the university; less frequently, their complaints were targeted on the actual quality of their courses. Consequently, many participants emphasised the importance of placements in providing the experience necessary to deal with the rigours of social work.

#### **3.2.1 Quality and content of their degree courses**

It was a common complaint that the content of their social work degree modules was often too theoretical with an emphasis on sociological and psychological theories without guidance on their relevance for practice. Others argued that, while their courses were academically rigorous, they were given little guidance on how to write a court report or handle a child protection cases. As one participant said:

I knew all about governments from the 1900s and everything, and I don't use any of the stuff that I used in my degree. And I felt that there was nothing about different religions and cultures. I don't know, you sort of came out of the lesson thinking why on earth did I go to that?

So while many had felt stretched academically, particularly on the MA courses, they did not necessarily feel prepared for professional practice. For instance, one participant reported that she attended a module on mental health yet there had been no mention of the role of social workers or how recent policy changes had influenced their role. Such experiences had left many NQSWs unsure of key aspects of their role as social workers. One respondent said:

To be perfectly honest, I still came out wondering what the hell I do as a social worker.

They also identified specific gaps in the content or quality of their initial training, most commonly around child development, communicating with children and young people, risk assessment, law and court related activities, and substance misuse. While most, though not all, courses had covered theories of child development, many NQSWs said that they had often been discussed in isolation and not linked to social work practice. Some argued that it would have been more useful to learn about early physical development of the child (i.e. when they learn to walk or talk) or how to communicate with a child, particularly in relation to abuse, where any ineptitude could jeopardise a child's evidence. Another participant said:

We had a lecturer who tipped a basket full of Duplo, and the like, on the table and said, 'I want you to spend fifteen minutes playing with these toys so you know what it's like to play with children.'

There were those in every group who reported that they had not received any training on how to present evidence or write court reports, although they had been expected to be able to do so when they started work. Similarly there were those who had been expected to conduct a risk assessment but had not covered the area during their training.

### **3.2.2 Generic versus specialised**

In a number of groups one issue was identified as being particularly significant in relation to the lack of preparation for practice. There were those who believed that the content of degree modules was too 'generic' and failed to focus on specific areas of social work. This frustrated those who knew early in their degree that they wanted to specialise in a particular area or on a specific age group. One respondent reported that most of her contemporaries had known the area of social work in which they wished to specialise and wanted specific and relevant training. Some NQSWs argued that specialisation would have allowed them to feel secure in their knowledge base, whereas they felt that by covering many subjects – in their estimation superficially – they had entered the profession as novices.

This would, of course, have created some difficulties for those who did not want to specialise early in their careers. A few participants said that they benefited from the fact that their degrees were generic because they had not been so sure of where they wanted to practice. There were also participants who had attended degrees which offered specialised training in specific areas of social work. Some argued that these degree courses had concentrated on specific age groups to such an extent that that it would make it difficult to work in another field of social work. For instance, one participant

commented that most of the practical and academic content of her degree had been so targeted on work with children that those who wanted to work in adult social work felt ignored. However some of those who had taken specialist modules on work with children complained that these had failed to cover anything on the linkages with mental health and adult work, despite the relevance of these subjects when assessing the emotional well-being and capacity of parents. As one participant said:

...there was no acknowledgement that there were links to all these different areas. Mental health knowledge or drugs or alcohol misuse would be at all relevant to working with children.

### **3.2.3 Quality of teaching**

Overall most of those attending the groups were not critical of their lecturers and usually attributed their own lack of preparation to other factors. Although those participants who were particularly positive about the level and quality of teaching were most likely to comment that their lecturers had recently practiced social work, or were continuing to practice.

But there were those who attributed the poor quality of their degree courses to low standards of teaching. A common complaint amongst these NQSWs was that many of their social work lecturers had been out of practice for too long and, as a result, had often failed to update their knowledge or approach, even though the role of social worker had changed considerably. The negative perspective of some participants of their lecturers' capacity to practice social work within a contemporary context appeared to have impacted on their ability to learn. As one respondent said:

We're trained by, yes, qualified social workers, but who perhaps haven't practised for ten or so years... And you're presented with quite an idealistic view of what social work should be like, but how can that prepare you for the realities?

A few complained of poor standards which underpinned and which were accepted. One participant reported that teaching standards were so low, even though their course had a national reputation, that students had lodged formal complaints. This resulted in lecturers refusing to teach at one point and telling students that they should be more resourceful since they are doing a Master's degree. Another respondent said that she repeatedly had to deal with lecturers who acted in an abusive manner. She stated:

(A lecturer) started telling me that I didn't know what it was like because I'd never had a social worker when I was a child. And I said, 'Actually I have love. You don't have the faintest idea what you're talking about, so you don't know anything about my life, so can you stop shouting at everyone in class please.' She (the lecturer) burst into tears!

### **3.2.4 Organisation of courses**

There were many comments about how different components of degree courses were not well sequenced. Some NQSWs reported that they had only been able to attend courses, which would have been useful for their practice, after their placements. It was also evident that participants' workload varied considerably throughout their degree. Many of those who had completed an undergraduate social work degree reported that they had not been expected to attend many lectures in their first year but then had to complete complex assignments alongside their final placement in their third year. One NQSW explained:

I did the three year BA and I think that the first year was just a waste of time really; we were in two days a week. I think it could have been fitted into a two year course definitely.... I was lucky because I was getting paid but the people who ... It's a full time course and they've got to do it for three years. I think it could easily have been fitted into two.

On the other hand most of those who had been on MA courses reported having had very heavy workloads. Some believed that they had been expected to do the equivalent of three years' work in two years.

Comments about organisation and sequencing were more frequently made by those NQSWs who had attended recently launched social work degree course. Some had felt that they were treated like 'guinea pigs' because there appeared to be some experimentation with the course content and even with what students had been expected to produce. In one case new modules had been introduced in the third year which students were then expected to attend despite having a heavy workload:

In our third year, they, kind of, had like the Eureka, light bulb moment, and realised that they hadn't instructed us enough, that we had not had enough modules – we had quite a light first year, slightly heavier second year then the third year, they had to literally shoehorn modules in before people went on placement, and it was ...it was absolutely horrific.'

## **3.3 Placements**

### **3.3.1 Availability of placements**

While NQSWs considered that they were reliant on placements to provide them with the skills necessary for their career progression many of those attending the groups reported that they were unable to obtain a placement in an area which interested them or where they felt they needed to gain experience. One NQSW said:

My impression was they didn't have enough placements. It was kind of pot luck really as to whether you got a good experience or not.

This impacted on their experiences in a number of ways. In some cases it meant that they had been unable to obtain a statutory placement. In most of the groups there were those who complained of either not having been able to secure a statutory placement or having had to work very hard to obtain one. This worried many participants as they saw statutory placements as crucial in shaping their career opportunities because of the expectations of employers. There were reports of students having 'struggled' to find a job afterwards because they did not have a statutory placement:

You could have been to a voluntary organisation and had a fantastic time and done some real hard core social work so you know it's not to say that's bad because a lot of it is very, very good work but the establishment want you to have a statutory placement and you're not getting them.

In other cases there were those who had had to start their chosen placements later than expected, which had led to a significant delay in their graduating. Others attributed delayed graduations to difficulties students faced when attempting to balance their heavy workload from a late placement with their need to meet academic deadlines:

In the third year you can't do a big placement as there is no time for study. Many people on my course had to delay their graduation to fit in placement and study.

As a result some students were prepared to accept placements of lower quality or outside their areas of interest just to be able to complete their degree on time:

We didn't get any choice at all in ours. We had to put down our areas of preference, three areas. But we had quite a few people that would put down like looked after children, adoption and fostering, or children's centre, because they wanted to work in children and families. And they got two adult placements.

This worried many respondents as they relied on their placement to gain the necessary skills in the workplace. One participant reported that she felt that she had to 'blag' about her skills during her job interview because she believed that she 'had no idea about social work with children'. Others argued that it adversely affected their ability to find a job as managers would only employ those who had experience of work in their particular field. As one participant said:

I think quality of placements... where they were also impacted upon people getting jobs afterwards because even though you get this general qualification as a social worker there's almost an expectation unless you go into child care where they're desperate for people that if you haven't got any practical experience you don't stand a chance in getting an interview.

Some participants dealt with these issues by finding their own placements through their own contacts, although there were also reports that students who had found their own placements were not then allowed to take them up as they were allocated to other students. In other cases only those who were the most demanding were able to secure the placements they wanted.

### **3.3.2 Quality of placements**

Respondents were usually very complimentary of their placements, often saying that there was a heavy reliance on the placement component of the degree to introduce and develop the skills necessary for social work practice. This is problematic as the quality of the placement is dependent on the environment of their workplace and particular settings and individuals, all of which can vary considerably. As one respondent said:

I think they put too much emphasis on the placement, or relying on the placement to teach you this stuff...And, clearly, that varied depending on which placement you were at, and the quality of the placement certainly varied a lot.

Many NQSWs commented on the way in which the quality of placements varied. It was not unusual for participants to describe one of their placements as having been excellent when their others had been poor. Others reported that they had been given placements in settings where they were not able to work as or with a social worker. For instance, one NQSW's first placement was in an advisory service which offered sexual health advice to people under the age of 25 and where she spent most her placement handing out condoms. Another reported that she had a placement in a school as part of a pilot study:

I wasn't learning anything to do with social work at all. I was being a classroom assistant. And that was my final placement.

This meant that in some cases participants had difficulties meeting their required checklist of 'competences' on which their performance in the placement was assessed. For instance, one NQSW had received low marks because she had only been given access to one service user. She explained:

I couldn't get the evidence to be able to back up my portfolio and I was marked down, because I only had one service user...the people within the placement were defensive about their work and they didn't want you working with their service users, reading their files. So you ended up in a position where you had to try and find work for yourself. And basically, to a degree, you had to kind of make up a lot of the experiences to match the key roles.

Another complaint which surfaced in most groups focused on the quality of guidance offered by some practice tutors, who were unable or unwilling to provide support or supervision. For instance one NQSW who had been on placement in a children's home reported that she received no supervision

from her manager and neither had she been offered any training on dealing with children with behavioural issues. Others commented that their practice tutors had such heavy workloads that it was not possible for them to offer support. For example, one NQSW said that her practice tutor was so busy that she only worked in her department two days a week. After her placement finished, her practice tutor refused to take on any more new students as her own workload was so heavy. This issue raised particular concerns, as many linked the quality of their placement to the ability of their practice tutor to offer guidance.

### **3.4 Induction and the transition into work**

According to guidelines set by the CWDC (2006), all those working with children and young people should be offered an induction period to allow them to become familiar with their setting and the nature of their work. The discussions provided an opportunity for NQSWs to explore how they were transferring their training into professional practice and the support which they were and had received to make the transition.

#### **3.4.1 Positive experiences of induction**

Some participants described their transition into work as being positive. Those who reported having had a positive induction had received some period of formal training which allowed them to reach a better understanding of the nature of their work and their setting. For example, one manager had arranged for a NQSW to take a guided 'bus tour around the borough and to attend various training courses, which made him feel both welcome and valued. Others appreciated the effort which colleagues had put into providing guidance on induction courses and on career development. As one respondent said:

In terms of the social work induction, I was told about that by my manager, said, 'Look I want you to go on this. Before you start any work it would be relevant for you to do this'... in supervision she identified some mandatory induction trainings to do on in the meantime... so she said, 'Pick out the dates that are appropriate for you and you can fit it in and I'll agree them.

They had usually also received a significant level of support from senior members of their team on procedures or good practice. For instance, one participant commented that she had felt ill-prepared to undertake child protection work but had been expected to do so soon after starting. However, as she had regular supervision with her manager and received support from other NQSWs and senior members of staff, her probation period was positive. Experience of good mentoring clearly increased their confidence in their ability to deal with complex cases and challenging situations. It was also

useful to be able to see how their senior colleagues had dealt with different cases as it gave them the opportunity to learn as they were working. One participant said:

I shadowed a case with a very experienced social worker which I found fantastic. I followed this whole case up to the court hearing.

### **3.4.3 Less positive experiences of induction**

It was surprising that in most of the discussion groups a majority of respondents commented that they had not received any formal induction. It was common for participants not to have received any peer mentoring and / or induction from senior colleagues despite promises made when they had been appointed. Many participants had been through a 'corporate induction', which introduced new staff to other staff members and agency and authority regulations and procedures. Many participants thought this was inadequate on its own as a form of induction into social work, but it had been all some NQSWs had received.

Many of these NQSWs described their experience as one where they had been expected to 'hit the ground running', usually having to take on a heavy workload without any preparation. One participant commented that, when she was offered a job, she had been promised a period of induction with a peer mentor and regular supervision. This package failed to materialise yet within a few weeks of starting she had a caseload similar to those held by senior staff. Others complained that they received their formal induction long after it would have been appropriate, due to shortage of spaces on courses or pressures on their teams. One participant reported that she received her induction plan three months after she had been employed. Her induction was designed around meetings with other agencies and co-working with senior colleagues and gaining feedback. However, as she was already working on cases, the induction plan had lost its immediacy and she was struggling with a heavy caseload which, in turn, reduced the amount of time she had available to implement it.

Sometimes the lack of formal induction and support was linked to staff leaving the profession which then resulted in pressures on those who remained. For example, one respondent reported that while it was well known across her authority that induction was poor, many senior colleagues were too preoccupied with trying to cope with their own heavy workload to attempt to improve the situation. This then had a negative impact on the atmosphere at work:

It is this sort of 'dog eat dog' sort of world, and it's not that people are unpleasant or unkind or anything, but it's about surviving and people just trying to survive. I disagree with what you say - about you feel that you get through it....Actually

it's not a good experience if you're there, you don't know what you're doing, you feel unsafe and you feel out of your depth.

Those participants who had previously worked, or been on placement, with the employer where they were now worked were more likely not to have had an induction. They thought that senior colleagues and managers assumed that, as they had worked there, they should know and understand procedures. As one respondent said:

When I qualified I didn't feel like I had any kind of induction, just an assumption that you already knew everything that you needed to know.

Consequently, many did not receive any training or support in terms of their role as newly qualified social workers, despite the fact that they were now required to carry more responsibility and a heavier workload than previously. A respondent said:

I think the expectation is because you've already been on placement, whether it be once, twice or three times, that you're fully equipped. But it's like if you've learnt to drive a car, you may have passed your test but you're going to have to go out and drive on your own. And so that's why people have all these P plates and whatever.

Where a team with which they were familiar had been reorganised in some way during their absence NQSWs felt the absence of induction particularly acutely. For instance, one participant had worked as a social work assistant in her team before going to university. When she returned as a newly qualified social worker, she received no training despite the fact that procedures had changed during her three year absence:

I was kind of left with this assumption that I could just run with it, but actually a lot of the procedures and policies had changed in that time.

Similarly one team had been reorganised six weeks after a NQSW had taken up post and, possibly as a result, most of her senior colleagues were locum social workers from overseas. As a result she had been expected to undertake complex cases and attend court without any training or support. Those NQSWs who had worked as temporary agency workers had also missed out on induction or early support. They speculated that the employers did not see them as a good investment especially as they were being paid temporary rates and seemed to be expected to take on a higher level of work than a NQSW might otherwise have been considered capable of managing.

### **3.4.2 Quality of training and mentorship**

Those who had attended training sessions which were directly related to skills needed for work, such as on communication and report writing, usually commented on how these had increased their confidence. For instance, one participant had been able to practice being cross-examined in court on one training course and described this course as being 'brilliant because one knows what it feels like before you actually have to get in there and do that'. Some participants claimed that their lack of practical knowledge could be partly addressed through peer supervision or mentorship; they were able to improve their knowledge and understanding of social work practice through watching senior colleagues.

While there were those who were positive about the training they had received while on induction there were also those who complained that the quality of these training sessions were poor, particularly where they failed to focus on the challenges which they were facing as NQSWs. There were reports of courses which were repetitive, covering subjects they were previously taught at university when they wanted specific training to deal with the complexities they were facing.

In some cases, respondents received poor or inappropriate mentoring from their senior colleagues. One participant had been allocated a mentor who was working in foster care although she was working in the duty and assessment team. While her mentor provided support in dealing with the stress of her work, she could not offer much practical advice on her caseload. Another NQSW reported that a senior team member with whom she was co-working a case offered her little guidance on court procedures:

In my second week I went to court with the social worker that I was shadowing but didn't really know why I was there and what was going on. And now she's left and I've had to file my final evidence today, and then go to court for it.

## **3.5 Post qualifying training opportunities**

### **3.5.1 Availability of courses**

Post qualification (PQ) training was described by participants as being crucial for gaining the skills necessary for social work practice and professional development. There were NQSWs who worked in authorities which offered a range of post qualification training to newly qualified social workers and some had been assigned individual budgets which covered their courses, material and travel. However, it was evident in all the discussion groups that many NQSWs experienced barriers to attending and completing their post qualification modules, particularly because of the demand from many for too few places. According to one participant, there were only six places available for a post qualification course in the whole of one region. Some local authorities had a policy of allowing only

one person in a team to attend their post qualification programme. This then meant that respondents would be required to wait for long periods of time before they were able to attend a course. For example, one participant was advised to re-apply for her course in a year's time as it was probable that she would not be allocated a place in her first year. Another respondent stated:

Everyone applied in our year were told there were not enough places so you spend a good half day filling in forms putting all the relevant stuff together. In the next six months ...you got more clued up on research and then you are told apply, apply and then you are told *no sorry there is only twelve places*, so what's the point.

As a consequence some teams had long waiting lists and senior members of staff were given priority. For instance, one participant calculated that she may have to wait for almost four years to attend all the necessary courses as there are so many others in her team who also needed the same qualifications. There were real concerns about the impact which this would have on career progression and promotion. One participant stated:

It's a formal requirement to have a PQ, which kind of makes sense, but they haven't got enough spaces on the courses, so they advertise the senior practitioner vacancies and they've got experienced social workers who can not apply because they haven't got the PQ because they didn't get a place on it.

### **3.5.2 Support to attend PQ courses**

There were reports of managers offering NQSWs guidance on the type of post qualification courses to take at a particular time. In light of her own experience one NQSW identified just how crucial this guidance could be:

In the job I've started the manager is really good at telling you about relevant training courses and making sure I am on them so that I feel competent in my skills. In my last job they were quite good at that as well but I had to hunt them out for myself, so it does make a difference if your manager is behind you and pushes for you to go on them.

However many NQSWs had had difficulty accessing information on the availability and relevance of PQ courses and some managers seemed to know very little about the courses on offer and so were unable to offer guidance:

A typical example is you'll get training through and you'll print it out ... you'll take it and say, 'Look, you know, I think this is an area I need to develop in. What do you think?' The line manager doesn't even know what the training has got to offer. So how can they say to you, 'Yeah, that's really good, I think you'd benefit from that'?

Others had been offered little support in securing places on a post qualification course. In some cases this was due to general inefficiency leading to reports of requests being lost. However, some reported that their managers would ignore their request for post qualification training or attempt to discourage them from applying. This worried some respondents as their managers were responsible

for the allocation of places and, in some cases, their feedback was vital for their completion of a module.

### **3.5.3 Training budgets for PQ**

There were NQSWs who had been unable to attend courses because there was not enough money available. One participant could not attend all of the courses required for her post qualification training as each module cost £750, which had made it too expensive for the local authority to provide training for every NQSW. Others complained that their teams were unable to pay for training outside their region. A respondent argued that it would have been better for her to attend a more relevant course outside her region; however her team did not have a budget for travel. Some NQSWs believed that the training budget has been affected by the 'star rating' system assigned after Ofsted inspections. One participant reported that since the authority where she was employed had received a low rating they had been allocating a large portion of their budget to the training of newly qualified social workers, while others based in authorities who had received good assessments noted that their training budgets had been reduced:

This three star system came in, and we got three stars and they slashed the training budget and we had a cracking training budget (that was) the reason why we've got everybody up to a certain level and we were training our own social workers.

### **3.5.4 Workloads and PQ**

Some NQSWs, such as these, said they had faced a difficult choice between managing their caseload and attending PQ courses:

We've avoided training sometimes when we've had too much work, because you've got to have two days out, and we'd be in trouble by the weekend.

It's a choice you have to weigh up as to... (have) increased pressure to sacrifice going on a couple of days training... I think it's just sad that you're put in the position that you have to make those decisions'

While there were reports of managers who did not seem to recognise the time and effort needed to get the most out of a course, and where cases had been allocated while NQSWs were on courses. There were also those who had much better experiences, especially where they had been allocated ring fenced time. For example, when a team allocated a few days study leave a month for members of staff attending post qualification modules.

### **3.5.6 Quality of PQ training**

Those NQSWs who had attended higher level PQ courses which covered specialist areas, such as child neglect, were generally very satisfied. However drawing on all the accounts which were presented during the consultation it was apparent that the quality of PQ courses varied considerably. Sometimes they were said to be too basic, and failed to take into account the knowledge which social workers had acquired through practice:

I've been on some and they've been courses that I thought would help fill the gaps, but then you find out, by having done the job a few months, you've kind of got that knowledge.

You end up going for a day out of the office and actually you find that you come away having learned nothing and feeling as if you've wasted a day'

This worried some social workers who felt that while there were crucial gaps in their knowledge, the courses open to them did not deal with the issues which challenged them most, particularly around issues to do with substance misuse, or at the required level of complexity. Some respondents complained that many courses had now become multidisciplinary in nature, and as a result targeted the needs of those in other professions, while failing to meet those of social workers:

I was sat next to somebody from the police and we were in a session on domestic abuse. And we were having all these debates and going through basic things, so it was a waste of our time us being there, we just had too much knowledge.

There were NQSWs who reported having been criticised by other professionals during multi-agency courses and NQSWs were coming to terms with what sometimes amounted to very negative perceptions of social workers:

You know if you go to them half of the day will be spent social work bashing and you have to defend your profession! You feel like wearing a sign saying, 'I'm not a bad person so can we just do the training and stop talking about this terrible social worker you knew once ten years ago that did this. I am not them and I actually don't really care what they did because it wasn't me'.

### **3.6 Caseloads**

It was evident during the discussions that where support was available from senior colleagues it was appreciated and valued by NQSWs, and such support and guidance also gave them additional confidence to deal with complex cases, as well as the administration which went alongside. Those who felt that they had manageable caseloads had usually been offered guidance and supervision from senior colleagues on complex cases which allowed them to build their confidence. In many instances these NQSWs were able to contact their managers when they needed and had often had

the opportunity to co-work with more experienced colleagues on a wide range of cases. One respondent stated:

I think I was lucky with mine; I did not have any placements during my degree in child care so I was out of my depth completely when I started work as I did not have any child care or social work at all. My manager was aware of this and that is why I get peer mentoring supervision. They also gave me straight forward visits, until I said I had got the hang of things.

Their managers were more likely to monitor their levels of stress and allocate cases accordingly. This is significant as many of these NQSWs had to deal with heavy and complex caseloads for which they felt under prepared and, as a result, often felt extremely vulnerable. This was particularly obvious in relation to child protection cases:

I was going to say, for several months, I had a knot in my stomach and I would wake up and I'd be like, oh no, and the phone would ring and I would literally jump because I'd be like, oh no, I'd not be able to. It really did knock my confidence and it can really break you... Not having the support and your manager not being there when they should be there... That's not good really.

But there were examples where NQSWs had dealt with complex cases without the required level of training or support. There were a number of instances where NQSWs who had not yet registered with the GSCC were handling child protection cases under their managers' names. As a consequence of such experience some respondents felt that there was a failure to take into account their emotional and personal needs or to take account of existing levels of stress when cases were being allocated and that such failure bordered on negligence. When one NQSW said that she felt distressed over her workload her manager said that it would be possible to offer her ten more cases. Others said that senior managers' lax attitude towards their level of stress and their home / family commitments had left them feeling under-appreciated and angry. In some cases, respondents had such a heavy workload that they had either to process cases at home or work late into the evening or weekends:

... in terms of my own commitments, as a parent, as a single mother, there's no consideration in terms of flexible working, in terms of the time that I need to put in. I need to see these children, and balancing that with life, my other life. I just feel like I was sucked into this tornado and just off doing things for work and not doing things for my children.

There were also those who felt obliged to carry heavy caseloads without complaint because their employer had supported them through their degrees. Such experiences led to calls for guidelines which specified, rather than advised, that newly qualified social workers could only be allocated a protected caseload in the first few months and go on to define what a protected caseload should

mean, in terms of number of families or children as well as in terms of complexity:

I got given quite a protected caseload but, actually, the nature of it changed. It started off that way I did laugh at my manager because she said to me, "Don't worry, I'm not going to give you anything to do with court for the first year". My first case, within a couple of months, went to court... But I think even when you try to do protected caseloads, you can't guarantee what a case is going to be like.

## **Section 4: Key points which emerged from NQSW survey data and consultations**

### **Prior influences on career choice**

#### ***In the survey***

- The biggest influences were 'employment', primarily through experience of social care work, but also from having been a trainee social worker or volunteer.
- Two-fifths of respondents had been 'very' or 'quite' influenced by their experience as a service user and just over a quarter by their experiences of being a carer.

### **Social work degree as preparation for professional role**

#### ***In the survey***

- A third of NQSWs thought that their course had prepared them 'fully' or 'quite a lot', but over half thought it had been 'just enough' to allow them to get by and one in seven did not feel it had prepared them at all.
- The activities which NQSWs felt best able to perform were to translate theory into practice, to understand legislation, to work directly with clients and to conduct assessments\*.
- The activities which were most frequently cited as those where they felt least prepared were managing difficult service users, conducting assessments\*, time and case management and court work. One in ten said they were unprepared for child protection work.

\*Conducting assessments mentioned in both categories.

#### ***In the consultations***

- NQSWs were divided over whether they should have been allowed to specialise during their training and whether they have benefitted from generic training.
- There were two factors which emerged in nearly all the discussions which were considered to have had a significant impact on the quality of their training:
  - a) the organisation of the component parts on the degree where they considered that better sequencing would have allowed them to have made the most of their placements.
  - b) the experience of their lecturers where they judged that those who had recently been in practice were able to provide the best preparation for contemporary social work practice.
- Although there was a minority who thought the quality of their initial training had been poor, far more criticism focused more on specific areas where they felt ill-prepared. They described

courses where theories were sometimes presented without guidance on their relevance for practice and those where input was absent or limited on training in practice-related tasks such as writing a court report or handling a child protection case. They identified gaps in their knowledge around child development, communicating with children and young people, risk assessment, law and court related activities, and substance misuse.

- Overall NQSWs were far more positive about their placements during training, specifically in providing the necessary skills for practice. The difficulties which were described usually focused on problems in finding appropriate placements, particularly statutory placements and the variability in the quality and content of placements.

## **Factors influencing NQSWs' choice of employment**

### ***In the survey***

- The key determinant was the type of work, followed by the location, career prospects and employer's commitment to induction and ongoing training and development.

## **Focus of NQSWs' work**

### ***In the survey***

- Seventy eight per cent of NQSWs described their work as being all or mostly involved with supporting families, with only two per cent saying that this was not a feature of their work.
- Forty eight per cent saying they spent all or most of their time on preventing children being taken into care, 44 per cent on child protection work, 43 per cent on assessment of referrals and 34 per cent on children in residential or foster care.

## **Probationary period**

### ***In the survey***

- Only 40 per cent were completely or mostly clear and a further 24 per cent were 'somewhat clear' about how their six month probationary period was assessed, which meant that over a third were not at all clear.
- Only half of respondents had received any guidance on the standard or scope of what would be assessed.

## **Supervision of NQSWs**

### ***In the survey***

- Over four fifths 'always' or 'usually' had supervision sessions organised in advance, although the majority had some experience of these being postponed due to their own (42 per cent) or their supervisor's (51 per cent) work commitments.
- The majority (51 per cent) felt that, at least, sometimes they were left to find their own way.

## **Training and development needs of NQSWs in employment**

### ***In the survey***

- Over half of the NQSWs (54 per cent) thought that their training and development needs were always or usually identified, and just under 30 per cent of respondents thought they were sometimes identified. Very similar proportions (51 per cent and 32 per cent) said these needs were then addressed. But this left one in six of this group saying that their training needs were rarely or never identified / met.
- Thirty seven per cent believed that they were always or usually prioritised and 36 per cent that this sometimes happened, 27 per cent of respondents thought that this rarely or never happened.
- There was a similar cause for concern about their assessment of the time they had to reflect and learn from their own practice. Twenty nine per cent considered that they always or usually had time to reflect and learn from their own practice, 33 per cent that there was sometimes time but 37 per cent said the time was rarely or never available.
- Seventy per cent said they were always or usually able to learn by working with more experienced social workers and a further 19 per cent said this was sometimes the case.
- Sixty per cent said their current employer had completely or mostly provided appropriate training in relation to the use of IT and fifty per cent that it had in relation to child protection. But just over a third believed they had received appropriate levels of training in relation to Common Assessment Framework, applying legislation to practice, child development and policies and procedures. Just under a third thought they had received adequate training in relation to analysis, decision making and health and safety while only one in six responded that this had been the case for dealing with aggression and violence.

### ***In the consultations***

- While some NQSWs had very positive experience of either a formal induction programme and / or very supportive managers and colleagues during their initial period of employment, there were those who had very little or no experience of induction.
- NQSWs who had previously worked, or been on placement, in setting where they were now employed were more likely not to have had an induction. They thought it had been assumed that they should know and understand procedures.
- There was also a great deal of variation over the access which NQSWs had to post qualifying training. While some NQSWs had been supported to attend courses others had encountered problems arising from shortages of places, the allocation of places according to seniority, reduced training budgets and the pressure of their own workloads.
- Those that had attended courses were generally positive about the quality although there were those who found some too basic as post-qualification training and others who had been unable to identify courses which would extend their knowledge on how to handle complex and challenging issues.

### **Workload of NQSWs**

#### ***In the survey***

- Just over half the NQSWs were employed where workload management schemes were in place.
- Two thirds of respondents thought that their own workload was about right, with 29 per cent claiming that it was too heavy and four percent did not have enough to do.

#### ***In the consultations***

- It was apparent that most NQSWs considered they were dealing with complex and often heavy caseloads and the extent to which they felt able to cope was related to the support which they received from colleagues.
- There were NQSWs who gave examples of cases which they had handled where they had felt ill-prepared, unsupported and vulnerable.
- There was support for guidelines on what constituted a 'protected caseload' in terms of both number and complexity of cases.

## **Contribution to confidence**

### ***In the survey***

- The most significant factors which NQSWs identified as having contributed to their confidence since entering employment were working alongside experienced colleagues [90 per cent], supervision [76 per cent] and training [66 per cent].

## **Part 3: The views of those employing newly qualified social workers**

## Section 5: Survey of employers of newly qualified social workers

### 5.1 Background details

Forty-seven employers of NQSWs took part in the on-line consultation, most of them coming from the statutory sector (Table 5.1.1).

**Table 5.1.1 Employers' sector**

|                |           |
|----------------|-----------|
| Statutory      | 40        |
| Voluntary      | 2         |
| Private        | 4         |
| No information | 1         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>   | <b>47</b> |

They were asked to provide details on the number of employees who dealt with services for children and young people. They were split between those employing fewer than 200 such individuals – most of which employed fewer than 50 - and those employing over 200 (Table 5.1.2). All those employing more than 50 were in the statutory sector.

**Table 5.1.2 Number of persons employed by employers to deliver services to children and young people**

| <b>No. of employees</b>     | <b>1-10</b>      | <b>11-20</b>     | <b>21-30</b>    | <b>31-40</b> | <b>41-50</b>    | <b>51-100</b> | <b>101-150</b> | <b>151-200</b> | <b>201-250</b> | <b>Over 250</b> | <b>No info</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|-----------------------------|------------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|-----------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|
| <b>No. of organisations</b> | 9                | 3                | 2               | 1            | 2               | 1             | 2              | 2              | -              | 24              | 1              | 47           |
|                             | 7 Stat<br>2 Priv | 2 Stat<br>1 Priv | 1 Stat<br>1 Vol | 1 Stat       | 1 Stat<br>1 Vol | 1 Stat        | 2 Stat         | 2 Stat         |                | 24 Stat         | 1              |              |

The employers were also asked say how many of these were registered social workers providing services to children, young people and their families. The results are summarised in Table 5.1. 3. Again, and not surprisingly, all those employing over 30 registered social workers were in the statutory sector.

**Table 5.1.3 Number of registered social workers employed to deliver services to children and young people**

| <b>No. of registered social workers</b> | <b>1-10</b>               | <b>11-20</b>     | <b>21-30</b>    | <b>31-40</b> | <b>41-50</b> | <b>51-100</b> | <b>101-150</b> | <b>151-200</b> | <b>201-250</b> | <b>Over 250</b> | <b>No info</b> | <b>Total</b> |
|---|---------------------------|------------------|-----------------|--------------|--------------|---------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------|----------------|--------------|
| <b>No. of organisations</b>             | 13                        | 2                | 2               | -            | 2            | 9             | 3              | 9              | 3              | 2               | 1              | 47           |
|   | 9 Stat<br>3 Priv<br>1 Vol | 1 Stat<br>1 Priv | 1 Stat<br>1 Vol | -            | 2 Stat       | 9 Stat        | 3 Stat         | 9 Stat         | 4 Stat         | 2 Stat          | 1              |              |

## 5.2 Recruitment

When asked to say how frequently they recruit NQSWs 36 of the 47 responded. Most of these (n=23) said they did so when vacancies arose, and 11 - all in the statutory sector - said they did so annually. For two of the private sector employers this had been the first time they had recruited NQSWs. Twenty eight of the employers in the statutory sector and one in the private had trainee posts, although not all provided information on the number of these posts.

Twenty-two out of 47 employers (21 statutory and one private) had targeted specific universities when recruiting NQSWs. Thirty six had regular contact with at least one university, most commonly through a partnership arrangement. But these links were likely to be through personal contacts with individuals or because the university was geographically close. Employers also gave other factors which influenced their recruitment of NQSWs, with two-thirds mentioning the experience of having someone on placement.

## 5.3 Degree as preparation for practice

While recognising that initial training would not be able to prepare NQSWs for every task they would be expected to undertake, employers were asked to say to what extent – on a scale of ‘all of their role’, most of their role, some of their role or none of their role’ - they thought the social work degree had prepared their NQSWs. All but one of the employers answered this question with 11 saying that the degree had prepared their NQSWs for ‘most of their role’, while 35 (or three quarters) replied that it had only prepared NQSWs for ‘some of their role’.

They were then asked to say how well they felt the degree had prepared NQSWs for specific tasks. Their responses are summarised in Table 5.3.1. While there were more respondents who thought that the course had not prepared their NQSWs for specific tasks than those who thought the course

had provided a full preparation, overall the majority thought that the course had provided just enough preparation, leaving a small proportion who thought it had provided quite a lot of preparation. However, one in four of these employers thought the course had failed to prepare NQSWs for decision making and one in five thought this to be the case in relation to analysing information and understanding social work within the wider context of children's services.

**Table 5.3.1 The social work degree as preparation for specific tasks**

|  | Fully | Quite a lot | Just enough | Not at all | No information | Total |
|--|-------|-------------|-------------|------------|----------------|-------|
| <b>Undertaking simple assessments</b>  | 2     | 19          | 22          | 3          | 1              | 47    |
| <b>Writing reports</b>   | -     | 14          | 27          | 5          | 1              | 47    |
| <b>Analysing information</b>   | 1     | 12          | 23          | 10         | 1              | 47    |
| <b>Decision making</b>   | -     | 7           | 27          | 12         | 1              | 47    |
| <b>Communicating with children and young people</b>                              | -     | 10          | 32          | 4          | 1              | 47    |
| <b>Communicating with parents and carers</b>                                     | -     | 14          | 29          | 3          | 1              | 47    |
| <b>Working with professional from other agencies</b>                             | -     | 15          | 27          | 4          | 1              | 47    |
| <b>Understanding social work within the wider context of children's services</b> | -     | 12          | 25          | 9          | 1              | 47    |

Most employers (37 of the 47) responded positively to the invitation to submit comments which would explain these judgements. Despite the generally positive scores recorded in Table 4.3.1 – on the basis that just enough is interpreted 'positively' - most of the comments were generally negative. While there was a small number who wrote that they believed that the degree had improved standards, most pointed to the deficits which they considered existed. Many commented that they felt that there was an over-reliance on the placement experience to provide the depth of knowledge required to practices. There were repeated references to areas of perceived general deficiencies of courses, as well as on specific areas which they thought required more attention. In the former grouping were comments about courses being too generic and isolated from practice and in the

second group were numerous complaints about the standard of report writing, analysis, assessment, understanding of multi-agency approaches and knowledge of legislation and statutory social work amongst NQSWs, all of which was seen to reflect the standards which were accepted by course staff.

Similarly, when asked what other factors they felt were important in preparing NQSWs for their role in their agencies, induction programmes and mentoring / support networks emerged as the two most important factors, although when the responses in relation to experience of statutory child care work and other aspects of practice (including appropriate placements) which they would have expected NQSWs to have had, were merged these covered over four-fifths of respondents. So while it was recognised what they themselves could contribute to the preparation of NQSWs, they certainly wanted the NQSWs to come to them with an adequate level of experience and the majority believed there was room for courses to improve.

#### 5.4 Content of induction year

Employers were asked to identify from a list those activities which featured in their induction processes for NQSWs (Table .5.4.1).

**Table 5.4.1: Activities included in NQSWs' induction processes**

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| Regular supervision sessions   | 45 / 47 |
| The opportunity to learn by working with more experienced colleagues | 43 / 47 |
| Access to PQ   | 41 / 47 |
| A formal appraisal process   | 41 / 47 |
| A personal development plan  | 34 / 47 |
| Courses  | 34 / 47 |
| Time to reflect on work  | 30 / 47 |
| Protected caseload   | 26 / 47 |
| A career pathway   | 19 / 47 |
| Training for supervisors of NQSWs                                    | 10 / 47 |

Those most commonly featured were regular supervision (n = 45) and opportunities to learn from more experienced colleagues (n = 43)<sup>2</sup>, followed by access to post-qualification courses (n= 41) and formal appraisals (n = 41). Nearly three quarters of these employers said their NQSWs had a personal development plan and access to courses, although it would be interesting to discover why the other quarter did not offer these opportunities. Two thirds (n = 30) said they allowed time for reflection; just over half said NQSWs had protected caseloads (n = 26) and two out of five (n = 19)

<sup>2</sup> Although two respondents did not mention that their NQSWs received regular supervision.

respondents identified a career pathway for their NQSWs. However less than a quarter of respondents had provided specific training for their staff on the supervision of NQSWs.

These employers were also asked to provide information on the extent to which specific forms of support were made available to NQSWs during their induction year. Table 5.4.2 records their responses. While over half reported providing daily opportunities for NQSWs to work with more experienced colleagues, just over a third provided daily peer group support. It is probably fairer to examine these on a weekly / fortnightly basis. In this case four out of five provided opportunities to work with more experienced colleagues; just over half provided formal supervision; half provided peer group support, and under a third some form of mentoring. However this means, amongst other things, that just under a half of employers were only providing monthly supervision for their NQSWs, and over a third were not providing any mentoring and one in six did not provide any opportunities for peer group support.

**Table 5.4.2 Extent to which specific types of support were made available to NQSWs in their induction year**

|   | Daily | Weekly | Fortnightly | Monthly | Not at all | No information | Total |
|---|-------|--------|-------------|---------|------------|----------------|-------|
| The opportunity to work with more experienced colleagues* | 25    | 12     | 1           | 7       | 1          | 1              | 47    |
| Peer group support *                                      | 17    | 3      | 4           | 14      | 8          | 1              | 47    |
| Mentoring *   | 5     | 6      | 3           | 16      | 16         | 1              | 47    |
| Formal supervision sessions *                             | 2     | 11     | 12          | 21      | -          | 1              | 47    |

\* It is worth noting that seven employers did not provide any of these on a weekly basis.

There was a similar variation across these employers in terms of days they allocated for training (Table 5.4.3).

**Table 5.4.3 Days per year allocated for training NQSWs**

| No. of days    | No. of employers |
|----------------|------------------|
| 1-5            | 7                |
| 6-10           | 15               |
| 11-15          | 16               |
| 16-20          | 7                |
| 21-25          | -                |
| 26-30          | 1                |
| No information | 1                |

Employers were also asked to identify from a list those issues which they thought should be part of a mandatory training programme for NQSWs during their post-qualifying year (Table 5.4.4). All but one identified child protection, followed by the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), use of IT and health and safety.

**Table 5.4.4: Views on training content for NQSWs' post qualifying year**

|  |         |
|--|---------|
| Child protection                                 | 46 / 47 |
| Common assessment framework                      | 39 / 47 |
| Use of IT  | 39 / 47 |
| Health and safety                                | 39 / 47 |
| Policies and procedures relating to organisation | 38 / 47 |
| Applying legislation to practice                 | 36 / 47 |
| Dealing with aggression and violence             | 33 / 47 |
| Child development                                | 31 / 47 |
| Analysis   | 28 / 47 |
| Decision making                                  | 27 / 47 |

Nearly as many employers included policies and procedures *and* the application of legislation. Slightly fewer, although still a large majority, would include dealing with aggression *and* child development, while three out of five included analysis *and* decision making. They were also invited to specify other training and development opportunities that they regarded as essential for the first year of employment. Despite the fact that 40 of the 47 suggested something there was very little agreement on what these areas should be, with the exception of one in four mentioning 'court skills', and around one in seven mentioning either 'communication and interviewing skills' or 'fostering and adoption procedures'.

## 5.5 Background of supervisors

Employers responding to the consultation were asked to provide some detail on the background of those supervising NQSWs. The results are reported in Table 5.5.1. Just over two fifths (n= 20) of these employers said that more than half of their supervisors were both team managers and experienced social work practitioners, with a further 15 saying they were experienced practitioners. This left 11 employers (as information was not available from one employer) where more than half of the supervisors were not considered to be experienced social work practitioners, six of whom had less than a third of supervisors who were experienced. In one of these agencies over half of their supervisors came from another professional group, although most employers said that less than a fifth were drawn from another professional group.

**Table 5.5.1 Supervisors of NQSWs who were experienced practitioners**

| Experience of these practitioners                    | Number of employers with experienced practitioners providing supervision for NQSWs |        |        |        |      | No information | Total |
|--|--|--------|--------|--------|------|----------------|-------|
|  | 1-10%  | 11-20% | 21-30% | 31-40% | 50%+ |                |       |
| Experienced practitioners                            | 14   | 2      | 5      | 3      | 22   | 1              | 47    |
| Team managers who are also experienced practitioners | 5  | 2      | 2      | 3      | 34   | 1              | 47    |
| Team managers who are from other professional groups | 39   | 6      | -      | -      | 1    | 1              | 47    |

Most employers (29 of the 47) had provided specific training on supervision for the majority of supervisors with a social work background, but six of them had done so for less than one in ten of these supervisors. Where the supervisors came from another professional group they had usually received some training in supervision. One of the problems with exploring this issue through a survey of this type is that it is not possible to assess quality or sufficiency.

## **5.6 Overall views on employing NQSWs**

When asked to record how positive they felt about employing NQSWs the overwhelming majority were very positive (n = 26) or positive (n = 16), which left a small minority who were either neutral about the experience (n= 3) or were negative (n=2). They were also asked to comment on any other issues which CWDC should consider in order to gain a better understanding of the experience of employing NQSWs. Just under two thirds chose to do so. Once again the views they expressed ranged very widely although issues around three main areas were more frequently mentioned. These were the importance of providing robust supervision which supported NQSWs, the challenges of providing protected caseloads, and often the inability to do so because of the pressures this placed on other members of staff, and the lack of available resources to support NQSWs more generally.

## **Section 6: Consultations with employers of newly qualified social workers**

### **6.1. Introduction**

The discussions with the 58 employer representatives<sup>3</sup> who attended the four consultation events covered their views on the degree and how well they thought it prepared newly qualified social workers for their role, as well as exploring their views on induction, supervision and post-qualification training.

### **6.2 Employers' views on the route to qualification**

The three-year degree level qualification in social work was introduced in 2003<sup>4</sup>. In discussions with employers they referred to the high calibre of many NQSWs who were graduating and who showed signs of becoming excellent practitioners in the future. There were also examples of close working relationships between authorities / specific teams and higher education institutions (HEIs) motivated by the expectations expressed by this senior manager:

Because there's obviously concerns if we're getting newly qualified social workers who are trained and have passed the course, have passed their placements, have evidence that they're competent and they're actually not. So for me it's about looking at how we can support the assessment process to ensure that we get better quality to begin with.

The discussions which took place during the consultations did, however, indicate that their employers did not consider that NQSWs were really prepared in terms of understanding the complexity of the families with whom they would be working or able to anticipate the impact of working with some very challenging families. Neither did they think that NQSWs were always clear on the role, purpose or task of the social worker. There were accounts of job interviews with newly qualified social workers where they had been asked about the purpose of child protection and where they had responded in terms of empowering and supporting parents without mentioning the need to make sure that a child is safe and what steps to take if they have any concerns.

When employers were asked about the link between the social work degree and preparation for practice most of the exchanges reflected concerns and dissatisfactions, particularly around areas of knowledge which employers thought were often neglected on courses. They had assumed that NQSWs would have a working knowledge of child development when often they had not covered this

---

<sup>3</sup> From across the 47 employers who had completed the on-line survey reported in Section 5.

<sup>4</sup> In 2003, professional qualifying training for social workers in the United Kingdom changed to a degree in social work. In England, these are approved by the General Social Care Council (GSCC).

on their degree. A similar deficit was identified around analytical assessments and writing court reports. These exercises were described as being very different from the essays and assignments required by HEIs and employers would like to see NQSWs better prepared not least because of the additional pressures the absence of these skills placed on other practitioners:

I don't know what it is, but that seems to be coming back to me from lots of quarters, to a point where the principal care managers are having to spend time having to rewrite bits of reports to make them court ready, when it's not their job and it's not obviously a great use of their time.

It was generally expected that most NQSWs would lack organisational skills to some extent and that the teams had a responsibility to help them to set priorities and manage their time effectively so they did not become overwhelmed. There were debates but no real resolution about the extent to which HEIs or employers shared responsibility for making the link between theory and practice. NQSWs generally seemed to be acquiring knowledge of law in terms of legislation but they were often unable to extrapolate and analyse information that they gathered through assessments and interpret the implications for making recommendations in court reports. Several participants made the distinction between an 'academic' view of competence and that of employers.

They reported that they had to provide a great deal of support as a result of the poor literacy skills of some NQSWs and they usually had examples from NQSWs of higher levels of support being provided by HEIs. As far as employers were concerned it added to their pressures and while there was recognition that in some cases this resulted from a learning need, in many cases it was attributed to an acceptance of a lower standard at degree level. One attendee, who was also the chair of a university's practice quality panel, thought that some of these failings resulted from a failure of courses not always being specific about what was expected of students in terms of meeting deadlines and standards, as well as those things that are more difficult to quantify, in terms of the way somebody behaves and relates to others.

Many employers felt that HEIs had not made sufficient adjustment to reflect those coming into social work at a much younger age. And there were those who did not think that this should be happening:

I would agree with you that you actually should not be able to start your qualification as a social worker until you are 21. In some respects lowering the age limit has done a bit of a disservice to the profession because you are getting newly qualified social workers coming straight out of school, into university and then into the profession when one of the most demanding and one of the most draconian decisions you can make is to remove somebody's child and you're sending a very young looking person to do this.

And another employer who, partly because of the age of many NQSWs but also because of the level of support required by NQSWs, had stopped employing them and was able to do so because of single status, and was able to target and recruit more experienced social workers:

And that's because the amount of support and nurturing that they need, and equally you can't allocate specific work to them.... So when you've got high-level child protection coming through all the time, you want the more experienced workers.

However most thought that the entry age was unlikely to change and that training and support had to recognise and adapt to this.

### **6.3 Placements**

Although there was a great deal of discussion about the final placement, a number of employers wanted HEIs to give more attention to the early placements. They thought that HEIs were happy to settle for placements of dubious quality in order to secure the number required but all that this did was to store up problems for the future. They felt that as employers they were being required to invest heavily in preparing students for their final year placement within a statutory setting and then support them through it in preparation before becoming a NQSW. Because of the investment in partnerships and placements they were more likely to recruit from those students on final year placements, and admitted that often they were conducting ongoing assessment, not in terms of whether they should be qualified social workers, but whether they would employ them:

And when – we found that over – certainly over the last three to four years, that when you recruit the workers that have been final year students with you, because you've already invested in their placement, they're perhaps – they are ahead of those workers that walk in off the street as newly qualified workers from other universities.

The four that we've got in xxx have all had statutory placements and they were ... all able to hit the ground running. They know what's expected, they know what the job is all about.

They were at one in agreeing that a good statutory placement gave NQSWs the edge - as they then had a clear expectation of what to expect and this put them in a better position to practice. While some authorities did not employ a NQSW unless they have done a Level 3 Statutory Placement, with some expecting their seconded students to do three placements that related to Children's Services, other employers admitted that they did not always have any alternative but to employ those without this level of placement experience, even if they would have preferred it to be otherwise:

We haven't even got the luxury to insist on a statutory placement. So long as they're qualified and they're passed the interview, they get the job.

They had experience of NQSWs who either had not had a statutory placement or where this had only been in adult services and, as a consequence, had been required to provide very basic support and information:

It was a newly qualified worker who arrived having not had a statutory placement while she was doing her degree, and very quickly became very overwhelmed, and was tearful and feeling that she'd made a wrong decision really, that social work was not for her. But I was able to negotiate with other teams' managers, encourage her to look elsewhere at the point where she was going to resign, and she did actually move into a different team where she has absolutely blossomed and flourished. So it's about, for me, matching people, personalities, skills, experience to the right team to start to ensure they have a positive experience.

I think it would be absolutely fantastic if we could have NQSWs who had experience of statutory work with children. Many of our social workers come out of universities with a generic degree and they can be qualified without ever having been assessed on their ability to work with children or their ability to put children at the focus of their case work.

This not only puts pressure on team members to give support but potentially could lead to dangerous practice.

#### **6.4 Employers' contact with HEIs**

Not every employer had working relationships with local HEIs but some were intending to develop them in an attempt to counter the difficulties which they were experiencing in recruiting NQSWs who were ready to practice. One training manager had been asked by a colleague to organise a meeting with universities because in one week she had interviewed four newly qualified workers and felt that none of them were appointable. They had not mentioned, or seemed to understand, the significance of *Every Child Matters* or the Common Assessment Framework and all had been judged to be ill-prepared to assume a post as a social worker. The employer thought that to get them to a position where they would be fit for practice would be unfair on colleagues and potentially damaging for clients.

In the consultations with the NQSWs they often expressed their perception that staff in HEIs were out of date with current practice. It may be that the concerns expressed by some employers about the preparation of NQSWs reflected a similar sentiment but it was rarely expressed openly. There was only one example where someone from an HEI had spent any time – one day - in a Team:

I've recently had a member of the university contact me, to want to come in, to a team, because they have felt that they'd lost touch and hadn't understood what actually faced students and newly qualified workers.... the IT systems or even how we managed deadlines and timescales, in terms of capacity and pressure of work. And I think they found it quite an interesting day, because they just came in and chatted with everybody, but they're going to come in and probably shadow work.

However employers from local authorities did not think that the experience of working in their settings was always presented in a positive light by HEIs. They had reports from newly qualified workers, as

well as from experienced workers undertaking PQ, that local authority work was described in terms of restrictions and constraints. This, they felt, had a very negative impact on morale.

## **6. 5 Induction of and support for NQSWs**

### **6.5.1 Background**

The principle of proper induction for new staff is a matter of good management practice<sup>5</sup>. It has been observed that a lack of appropriate orientation programs (sic) is one of the main reasons why people find it difficult to get grounded in a new social work post, to the extent that sometimes people even leave the job at such an early stage'. ([www.appogg.gov.mt](http://www.appogg.gov.mt)). Many employers contributing to this consultation exercise regretted the fact that there had not previously been a coherent, national induction programme. They also clearly saw any process or programme to support NQSWs as part of a wider recruitment and retention strategy. Employers made the link between the difficulties they faced in recruiting and retaining social workers and the deficits they identified in career pathways available to qualified and experienced staff

There was considerable variation in what was available to NQSWs. While there were examples of good practice, alongside a desire to support newly qualified social workers in what was recognised to be a really difficult environment, it was evident that this was not the case in every authority or necessarily even across the same authority. One of the biggest problems faced by some authorities focused on the vacancies which they carried and the number of unqualified social workers they employed. In one authority there was a team where practically all their qualified social workers were newly qualified and as a result they got very little individual support. In terms of recruiting, the children in need teams and the referral and assessment teams were often the ones with the most vacancies because of the nature of the work.

### **6.5.2 Induction, Training and PQ**

Employers were coming to terms with new ways of working in more integrated services and reported that there was sometimes a tension between the needs of the organisation to induct a new member of staff, and the needs of a social worker in terms of becoming a competent and confident social work professional as opposed to a member of the children's services department.

---

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.scie-peoplemanagement.org.uk/resource/docPreview.asp?docid=58>

Many employers suggested that the opportunities to shadow other social workers and to co-work cases should be compulsory parts of any induction programme. As one said:

... because I think learn an enormous amount from working alongside somebody and observe their skills and expertise, particularly confronting people or dealing with challenging and difficult situations like going out on Child Protection visits and how you ask certain questions.

Although there were usually some parts of induction programmes which were compulsory, there were often aspects which were voluntary. This meant that NQSWs did not always get time to attend or chose not to attend which may reflect their workloads and / or lack of support from managers. However many employers shared the view that managers with a practice teaching background were usually more supportive, although they too were subject to the same pressures on their time.

Local authorities have adopted various responses to how they support induction and PQ training opportunities for social workers, with many attempting to absorb CWDC's common induction standards into their practice. While this added to the lack of consistency which was evident across the country this was sometimes seen to have positive features. Where they received support to attend training if they wished to do so it did allow NQSWs to access the support which they felt they needed, particularly as their experience varied widely. Some were judged to be much better equipped than others to practice, either because of maturity or the way that their degrees had linked with practice, especially around the process and content of placements. But even then there was recognition that if the content of a training programme was appropriate and flexible all newly qualified social workers should be engaged.

#### **Work based qualification**

One authority linked with a University to offer a two-year course which was assessed in-house but accredited by the academic institution. In the first year social workers have a 30 per cent caseload which rises to 75 per cent at the end of the first year and moving to 100 per cent at the end of the two-year programme. This is managed by team managers who have a tool for weight load allocation. Social workers have to complete 17 days mandatory training during the two year programme. They are given ten and a half days' study time in each year to work towards the PQ consolidation award and complete their assignments.

#### **Supporting induction**

One authority has a team that was created through Quality Protects money about eight years ago. They have a specific role in terms of the induction all staff and particularly newly qualified social workers. A group based induction programme covers corporate induction as well as issues such as policies and procedures. In addition a practice development worker is based in each district and works alongside newly qualified social workers to

give them specific support in the development of their practice knowledge. This might be in terms of writing a care plan or a court report or conducting assessments developing their practice knowledge.

It was also common for authorities to have an arrangement by which NQSWs came together at regular intervals. This was usually centred on a training activity, as in the examples below, but in some cases it was purely for networking and support.

#### **CPD workshops - 1**

In one authority there is a monthly half day continued professional development workshop for newly qualified workers which focuses on managing the demands of social work but which also allows newly qualified social workers to spend time together.

#### **CPD workshops – 2**

In one authority NQSWs come together each month for a training programme which is specifically tailored to dealing with the first year in practice. This was established to bridge a gap which had been identified between being a student and being a qualified social worker.

#### **Buying in support (1)**

A small unitary authority employed a team leader who had recently retired from the Family Support Centre to support three NQSWs. The intention was to give extra support around specific tasks such as completing core assessments or working with high-end children in need cases to supplement regular supervision.

#### **Buying in support (2)**

An authority had engaged a consultant to run the NQSW support groups partly because of staffing pressures but also for it to be seen as distinct from line management. It is voluntary and in 2007-08 was reduced from ten to eight sessions because of feedback that people were not being released to be able to attend because of issues about workload and other priorities. There were also those that did not want to attend:

So I think there's something about perceived self confidence really, some are desperate for it and others walked in several minutes late and two minutes later put their hands up in the air and said "why do I need to be here". I said "you don't, it's voluntary".

However there were recurring messages about the lack of consistency of what was on offer, alongside the funding restrictions and the failure to establish PQ pathways. These factors were seen to lead to inadequate access to PQ opportunities. This was despite the development of a new framework for post-qualifying social work education which was intended to allow social workers to continue their education and training in a flexible and modular way.

Each region should have arrangements in place to support employers to access PQ programmes for their staff. These arrangements rely on the participation of the universities intending to offer PQ programmes and the existing PQ consortia. In some authorities employers reported that their NQSWs were encouraged to embark on consolidation units six months after taking up post, while in others they were not allowed to do so during the first and, in some cases, the second year. This was driven by available resources, local provision and competing demands. One dimension of the recruitment issue was that while people might want to recruit experienced social workers, teams with a big turnover then tended to recruit a significant number of newly qualified workers which then conspired against managers being able to release them for training and other events.

Other employers admitted that limited resources or the fact that they were very small authorities meant that they did not offer a significant or specialist induction programme. There were also those who had tried various approaches, some of which had worked to some extent but had run into implementation problems because of factors such as limited resources and changing priorities. It was suggested in a number of the consultation events that a national framework would be able to address some of the training deficits. It was also felt that such a framework would also provide clarity over priorities for managers who are faced with balancing the needs of NQSWs against the pressures to ensure cases are allocated.

Most employers' representatives welcomed the common induction standards and found them useful in focusing the induction process. However there was some uncertainty about how any requirements relating to NQSWs which were introduced would link to these and so there was some concern that what had been gained as a result of the standards might be jeopardised. There were also pleas to make any standards mandatory to provide the leverage needed to ensure the support of senior management in teams.

### 6.5.3 Supervision of NQSWs

Supervision of social work is essential at every level but has particular significance for the newly qualified social worker. As a debate in the House of Lords highlighted, in a stretched and understaffed department social work supervision is being eroded<sup>6</sup>. Previously the model of social work supervision which was most widely accepted involved in-depth discussion of individual cases to reach a better understanding of what was going on and what should be the most effective intervention. Lewis (1998) contended that:

Experienced supervisors act as socialisation agents and uphold professional values which emphasize respect for the client ... and as experts, guide the worker in the process of resolving different problems (p. 34).

There was a great deal of discussion amongst employers about the level and quality of supervision which NQSWs needed during their first year and the elements of effective supervision. Most employers would like to see NQSWs receiving supervision every two weeks but admitted that three or four weekly supervision (or even longer) was the reality in many areas. There was the suggestion that it would be possible to make more effective use of the practice teachers / educators because they usually only accepted students from January to June so they could then act as the mentors for less experienced staff. It appeared that supervision was increasingly being seen as the process for meeting targets. Alongside this many of the employers did not think that HEIs were providing NQSWs with a sufficient understanding of what supervision was, what to expect and how to make best use of it. This opened up a discussion about the mismatch which often existed between what some team managers or supervisors expected from those who have just qualified and the extent to which NQSWs were able to live up to that. One of many examples was provided by this employer:

One of the things that people were talking about is that some newly qualified social workers were saying, 'I like my team manager. He/she is great. But, they don't really understand my needs as a newly qualified social worker'. Do you think there is anything you could put in specifically for people supervising as well putting in something for the newly qualified social workers that people who are team managers and supervising newly qualified staff have some specific input themselves? Would that be helpful?

Employers also raised concerns about situations where NQSWs might be supervised by someone not from the same profession because they were working in multi-professional teams; someone may be supporting a NQSW with their case load while somebody else might be supervising day to day work and helping with more practical issues. There were examples of where NQSWs were employed in integrated teams where the managers were not social workers. These managers were often reluctant to provide supervision on certain cases which they labelled as *social work*, and where consultants

---

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.parliament.the-stationery-office.co.uk/pa/ld200607/ldhansrd/text/71008-0013.htm> (October 2007)

were then employed to provide supervision they were often over whelmed and unable to provide it regularly.

Those involved in the consultations wanted to see a commitment to a model of supervision which went beyond task and case management and involved the reflection on learning which was considered to be crucial in the first year. However it was recognised that this was heavily linked to individual team managers and their workloads and responsibilities. So any improvement would also be dependent on guidance and support for the supervisor. These employers expressed an interest in the introduction of specific guidance for supervisors.

#### **6.5.4. Caseloads**

In many previous debates protected caseloads have been linked to the problems which authorities have around retaining staff at the same time as protecting people's caseloads. While there was a general recognition that it was important to moderate the caseloads of NQSWs, both in terms of number and complexity, this was not as easy as it may first appear:

Well, can you define what a reduced caseload is?' I can't get any answers. So I've had to write that bit deliberately fudging it and sort of talking about contained caseloads.

What started as a simple case could become a complex case very quickly. There were employers who had attempted to establish protected caseloads:

#### **What is a 'protected caseload'?**

We have adopted a policy of protected case load for the first six months so the newly qualified social workers don't have child protection cases. I've been doing a piece of evaluation work with managers and newly qualified social workers who graduated last summer to look at the support needs of newly qualified social workers. And from both sides, they've said what they found quite frustrating and actually they would like to be getting on with child protection work and they feel quite disempowered and deskilled in some ways and that they're then junior members of the team, not full members of the team because they're not doing the core work. But what they've said is that they'd like to have a reduced caseload rather than a protected caseload and have good quality mentoring and supervision and the support to be able to manage Child Protection cases, rather than being excluded from that process.

There were also authorities that had introduced some form of workload management which involved weighing cases in some way such as by a point system which was then used to assess caseloads. Others had introduced some form of additional training which NQSWs were required to attend before handling certain cases as in this authority:

### **Steps to taking on child protection cases**

The theory in our setting is the three safeguarding courses, the level one, level two and level three. NQSWs are not supposed to take child protection work until they've completed those.

So while some thought that mandatory guidance on protected caseloads would be useful, far more thought it would be wrong to be too specific. Instead there was general approval for the introduction of a framework which provided guidance on what a protected caseload might look like.

The discussion on caseloads often led onto one around the different needs of NQSWs. One of the issues that emerged from the consultations with newly qualified social workers was that if they had been sponsored or seconded by an authority they felt that it was assumed they did not need an induction as they were familiar with policies and procedures. On the other hand they felt that as they had not worked a social worker before they should be treated no differently from a NQSW who was new to the authority:

### **Returning as a NQSW**

And I think that the other problem we have is related to people who complete the employment-based training, because they come back after the training and the expectation is that they hit the ground running. So their team managers are saying, "Well you've qualified now", and they treat them not like a newly-qualified worker, but as an experienced worker in some teams. They're expected to take up caseloads like everybody else, so they're not given the support. So that's one of the things that we're looking at addressing with our employment-based route newly qualified staff separately. Their needs are very different to somebody new to the department.

Sometimes NQSWs who have taken the employment-based route have been practising for many years prior to qualification and when they returned to work they were often given larger caseloads containing more complex cases. Similar examples were given of NQSWs employed in teams where they did their final placements. Again some direction and guidance on what should be expected of and provided for NQSWs was seen as one way of combating this.

## **Section 7: Key points which emerged from the employers' survey data and consultations**

### **Views on employing NQSWs**

#### ***In the survey***

- The majority of employers were positive about employing NQSWs.
- The main challenges faced in employing NQSWs were identified as providing protected caseloads, the lack of available resources to support NQSWs generally.

#### ***In the consultations***

- Employers referred to the high calibre of many NQSWs who were graduating and their potential to become excellent practitioners in the future.

### **Social work training as preparation for practice**

#### ***In the survey***

- The majority of employers thought that the social work degree had prepared their NQSWs for some but not for most of their role and overall had provided just enough preparation.
- One in four of these employers thought the course had failed to prepare NQSWs for decision making and one in five thought this to be the case in relation to analysing information and understanding social work within the wider context of children's services.
- Specific deficits which were identified NQSWs' knowledge were report writing, analysis, assessment, understanding of multi-agency approaches and knowledge of legislation and statutory social work.

#### ***In the consultations***

- Employers did not consider that NQSWs were adequately prepared to understand:
  - a) the complexity of the families with whom they work or the challenges which would be posed
  - b) the role, purpose or task of the social worker.
- They identified specific gaps in knowledge around child development, analytical assessments and writing court reports.
- There was some concern that not all universities maintained a high standard in relation to the work which they would accept.

- Employers thought that HEIs had failed to take sufficient account of the fact that some trainee social workers were 18 years old.

## **Placements**

### ***In the consultations***

- Many employers thought that they were being asked to shoulder too much responsibility for training social workers during the placement component on the degree.
- While some employers would not employ a NQSW unless they have completed a placement in a statutory setting others reluctantly did so in order to fill vacancies.

## **Induction of NQSWs into employment**

### ***In the survey***

- The induction programmes for NQSWs offered by the majority of employers included supervision, the opportunity to learn from more experienced colleagues and access to post-qualification courses and formal appraisals. Nearly three quarters said their NQSWs had a personal development plan and access to training.
- The majority of employers thought that a mandatory training programme for NQSWs during their post-qualifying year should include child protection, the Common Assessment Framework (CAF), the use of IT, health and safety issues, policies and procedures, the application of legislation, dealing with aggression, child development, analysis and decision making.

### ***From the consultations***

- There was considerable variation over the induction programmes offered by employers, as employers adopted different solutions and support mechanisms.
- There was also a significant level of variation across authorities in relation to the PQ opportunities which were available for NQSWs, with many employers asking for a framework to be produced which would then clarify entitlement.
- Most employers welcomed the common induction standards and found them useful in focusing the induction process but were unsure how they would fit with any requirements which would be introduced in relation to NQSWs.
- Many employers suggested that the opportunities to shadow other social workers and to co-work cases should be compulsory parts of any induction programme.

## **Supervision of NQSWs**

### ***In the survey***

- The majority of employers said that those who supervised NQSWs were experienced practitioners with just over two fifths of employers recording that more than half of their supervisors were also team managers. But nearly one in four employers said that more than half of their supervisors were not experienced social work practitioners. In one case over half of supervisors came from another professional group, although most employers said that less than a fifth were drawn from another professional group.
- Just over half of employers had provided specific training on supervision for the majority of supervisors, but six employers had done so for less than one in ten of these supervisors.

#### ***In the consultations***

- Most employers wanted NQSWs to receive supervision every two weeks but said that it was more likely to be every three or four weeks.
- Many of the employers did not think that HEIs were providing NQSWs with a sufficient understanding of what supervision was, what to expect and how to make best use of it.
- Employers wanted to see a model of supervision beyond task and case management and which offered the opportunity for reflection.
- Employers would welcome the publication of guidance for those supervising NQSWs.
- Only a minority of employers thought that mandatory guidance on protected caseloads would be useful, but there was general approval for the introduction of a framework which provided guidance on what a protected caseload might look like.

### **Pilot programme for NQSWs**

#### ***In the consultations***

- The establishment of Newly Qualified Social Worker status was seen as essential to support and retain inexperienced social workers.
- Most employers welcomed the proposals in relation to the pilot programme for NQSWs, not least because it would mean there would be increased consistency and clarity on the support which NQSWs needed and how this should be provided.
- In particular they thought it would be useful to have a consistent standard in place in terms of the training required to supervise newly qualified social workers in particular.
- Guidance was needed on how induction and PQ linked together and on entitlement to both.
- They considered there to be a real case for both formalised induction and probationary periods that were supported and recognised as a protected time which would need to be well resourced, posts. Standards and indicators would need to be attached to that period of time which covered, amongst other things, training, caseload expectation and supervision.

## **Part 4: The views of Higher Education Institutions**

## **Section 8: The views of higher education institutions**

### **8.1 Introduction**

The representatives of higher education institutions (HEIs) who came together were invited to discuss how effective and appropriate they considered the social work degree to be in the preparation of students. In their analysis they were invited to identify gaps and any areas which were over and under emphasised. Two clear themes ran through these discussions. One reflected the well-rehearsed debate about whether they should be providing something called 'social work training' or 'social work education'. The other was how best to prepare students for the reality of practice, when this may mean they receive little or no induction and have to cope with very high caseloads. The challenge was said to be how best to manage the tension between equipping students with the intellectual skills, at the same time as enabling them to get to grips with the basics needed to practice.

### **8.2 Training or education or both?**

There was a significant variation on how degree courses were shaped and how instruction was delivered. One example was the course where 60 per cent of the teaching was with students intending to work in health and other settings, and where all students followed a core curriculum. Elsewhere education and social work departments were examining common training and mentoring routes in an attempt to break down professional barriers at this early stage, but in so doing faced the challenge of ensuring adequate coverage of the distinct professional knowledge. However there were those in higher education who did not think this was the way forward.

The debate around training and education revolved around the extent to which courses were charged with the task of making NQSWs fit for practice or if their role was to prepare them to be able to deal with any eventuality. By its very nature many thought a three year generic degree would only be able to offer breadth rather than depth and that it should not be expected to produce experienced social workers but rather social workers who were ready to be introduced appropriately into the profession. But the reality was that they faced the difficulty of balancing the appropriate teaching content required to support people to enter adult social care or children's social work, against the need for them to reach an understanding of the needs of all clients of whatever age:

So breadth seems to me to be strength rather than a weakness. On the other hand of course it means that at the qualifying point the extent to which people can hit the ground with any depth of understanding about a specialist field or a particular area of practice like children's work, is inevitably limited and I understood that's what the post-qualified framework was about, it was about them specialising and deepening the foundations of learning that take place within the degree.

There was also a debate amongst those attending these consultations on whether the initial training should remain generic or whether it should be specialist. The fact that *genericism* had long been a contested concept was discussed. While there were those who thought that the requirements around children's service departments (CSDs) required professionals to be trained to work specifically in that environment, far more thought that a generic curriculum should be retained. Those who argued that there should be some element of specialism, ranged from those who wanted separate child and adult courses to those who just wanted an emphasis upon particular areas of knowledge and skills. One of those who came some where in the middle of this spectrum justified his stance by saying:

The last enquiry report I read ...wasn't one that totally hit the headlines and it wasn't one that pilloried the profession or other professions, but it did make the point that social workers and others had failed to talk to the child, and that whole thing about the child being a subject of our relationships is something which repeats itself, as has been consistently, from Maria Coldwell onwards. And I suppose one of the problems is that we tend to deliver a communication skills programme but there isn't, or rarely is, sufficient space to really focus upon what might be required in engaging with children from birth to 18 given that they are differently able and other things.

On balance more argued for the status quo on the basis that even those working in CSDs would be working with adults and that it was important not to lose that professional perspective:

And I think it's important to hold onto that because, otherwise, you create these practitioners who work in silos and it means that working across those boundaries becomes even more difficult. That's my view. I would really strongly wish to hold onto a generic qualifying training. After that, absolutely, let's go into the specialist ongoing CPD, but not at qualifying level.

Possible solutions were suggested, even though no consensus was reached. Whatever the viewpoint it was generally accepted that it was too high an expectation to see a qualifying degree course as capable of equipping people with the degree of specialism which seemed to be demanded by employers. Students should not be expected to emerge from a three year generic or even a specialist degree with the knowledge and skills in every relevant area and that, to a certain extent, the knowledge and skills they had would have would be heavily determined by the experiences they had on placements.

The reported inability of newly qualified social workers to undertake the tasks and roles required of them is frequently cited by employers as a cause for concern. Most of the participants from HEIs were

concerned that employers were expecting NQSWs to be competent in areas such as the completion of court reports or the Common Assessment Framework (CAF) which reflected a very different perception of the underlying purpose of the courses they offered. They did not set out to prepare students to be able to undertake every task expected of a social worker and they disagreed with the school of thought which regarded social work as a very practical profession. That model would favour a degree designed around competences and one intended to train rather than educate which some labelled as heralding the end of social work as a profession:

I think that it becomes an occupation, but as a profession with an identity that might attract people, say, a bright sixth former thinking what am I going to do for my degree? What about teaching? What about a law degree? What about social work? I think if we're selling ourselves short, if you like, as a practical occupation, then they'll say, oh yeah, teaching, oh yeah, law, oh yeah, medicine, and we'll lose, actually, the people who we need if we're going to actually consistently offer the best service to children and families.

The counter-argument was raised in one group but it appeared to be in order to stimulate debate rather than advocate a way forward. The question was asked whether the current curricula in HEIs could be right when so many former students said that while they had learned a great deal of theory on the courses this had not prepared them for the reality of practice. Most of the HEI staff believed this was the result of a mismatch between the expectation of employers and the realities of the social work degree. The importance of maintaining a focus on education was linked to the importance of nurturing the ability to be able to make the kind of judgements social workers have to make in terms of people's liberty and life choices:

You cannot train people to make those sorts of judgements and decisions. You need to educate them to be able to take a broad view and look at all of the aspects of what they need to take into account.

There was a fear that 'original values' of social work, such as empowerment, promoting self-advocacy, self-determination and independence, were being drained out of some students and newer workers because of the absence of a shared philosophy and understanding. Experience led some in HEIs to believe not enough training was done around the radical tradition of social work, so when people entered the profession, they had a limited understanding of what it meant and they were increasingly told by experienced social workers that they would not be able to change things. They were put off practising social work according to the radical traditions they have been taught, but they then struggle to transfer 'theory into practice' when they are told it is not applicable in the 'real world'.

There were also those who thought that usually students coming straight from school on to a degree did not have the maturity to embark on training as social workers and frequently asked them to

reapply in the future. Some HEIs also recognised that some students had been accepted onto courses who were unable cope with the academic requirements at degree level. This meant that some courses were planning to rethink their recruitment strategies and others were redesigning the level of support which they provided, particularly in relation to the completion of written assignments.

### **8.3 Placements**

However important the HEI-based element of the social work degree, students spent a significant portion of their time on placements and the consultation explored how the partnerships work between HEIs and employers worked. As with the courses themselves, there also appeared to be a significant level of variation as far as placement experiences were concerned and the representatives of HEIs also discussed the huge variation in placement experiences of students. They referred to the challenges they faced in finding adequate placements for their students and the solutions which they had adopted.

And we have partnerships, strong partnerships, with five local authorities which translates into joint appointment roles between those local authorities and the university. So we have those local authorities in the classroom every week and then we have the university represented in those establishments. That works very well for us in terms of how we then garner good quality placements in those institutions for the students. So that's been the way that we have done it. Plus, a whole variety of other ways of consulting and using stakeholders in development of our programmes and ensuring quality of our placement provision through practice advisory panels. We've kept that on, as I think most HEIs have after the demise of the Dip SW. So there's a number of ways in which we do that. But it's essential. It absolutely is essential in terms of gaining good quality placements.

Many of those attending these consultations referred to a growing crisis over the provision and quality of statutory practice learning opportunities. Placements were seen to make a significant contribution to the quality of learning and to the quality and confidence of NQSWs, yet in too many cases the quality of placements was judged to fall short of what was required to support the degree:

We have somewhere between 160-200 students a year on first and second practice placements. My colleagues who manage the practice team get desperate and as they get desperate they take more and more risks. And we spend a lot of time in partnership with people across not only the maintained sector but also private and voluntary agencies trying to develop placements and trying to put in the kinds of architecture, the scaffolding that will enable quality to be developed and sustained.

It was not clear how this could be addressed without the resources to create more placements, different learning opportunities or learning sets. They saw the solution in terms of partnership with the field especially as, in their experience, many of the employers who are critical of the quality of graduates were the same employers who should have been offering good placements. But there was one step which could be taken to address the quality and that was to recognise the importance of practice teaching:

Until recently our practice teaching award was 48 points and the new practice teaching award is much less and the expectations professionally on what constitutes a practice teacher now is significantly less than it was a year ago. So there is risk taking going on in different parts of the system. There is a good chance that a student, who the employer wants in a year or two years to be a competent practitioner, is actually being practice taught by somebody who perhaps has not developed their professional self sufficiently to be mentoring somebody who is trying to develop their own professional identity.

The problem of finding enough high quality practice teachers was linked by one attendee to the pressures under which these people worked. Some would not have had a good experience of supervision or of being supported, yet these were the very things which they were expected to offer students (and NQSWs). The challenge was then how to make it possible to give them the opportunity to access what they had missed to secure their support for future social workers. It was the view of one lecturer that one unsupported manager could be responsible for any number of social workers leaving the profession:

I hear my former students say "I've only been doing it for six months and I've had enough." And I think that's a sad reflection of the profession because what we're hoping to turn out is capable, competent social work practitioners. So to hear students saying after six months, "We didn't know it was going to be like this." So I actually tell them how it is because a year ago I was in that position. I'd had enough. And it's been able to say to people, sometimes you need the opportunity to take a step back and rethink. But, if your managers aren't able to do that with them and the organisation doesn't encourage that, then newly qualified social workers will very quickly leave the profession and I have seen it happen.

There needs to be a link between the HEI and the employer that perhaps mean some of the placement reports or the development plans that are written at the end of the second placement could be used as a stepping stone for their personal development plan as a newly qualified social worker, so that they're building on their own existing experience:

It's the Personal Development Plan that should make the link for the student into the workplace. And somebody should ask, the very first day, where is your Personal Development Plan? What are you good at? Where are the areas for development?

There were examples of very different student experiences yet they would be expected to practice at the same level when qualified.

A final year student from one university was doing a final placement in a voluntary organisation where her role consisted of applying for funding, liaising with the Home Office, and helping people think about employment. When compared with other students, although she was very able her experiences were completely different in terms of expectations of most final year placement student. She came off the course with the same qualification and, potentially, would be applying for the same jobs as other people who have had frontline child protection placements in their final year.

HEIs were very conscious that modern social work practice was becoming increasingly complex and challenging. The changing nature of the workforce was becoming another key factor in shaping placements, as increasing numbers of social workers were employed in integrated teams, delivering inter-professional services. Some of those who had experience of students taking placements in schools, for example, described how some had no idea what a social worker did or could be expected to do.

They're not letting the student do too much because they don't know what they should be doing.

This had obvious implications for the role and content of inter-professional education but more immediately those working in these settings needed independence of judgement to allow them to operate without immediate management support and the kinds of professional support networks common in other professions. This, in turn, required them to have well-tuned thinking, analytical and inter-personal skills. As a result of the development of more integrated approaches to service delivery more students were also experiencing a wider range of placements than before. And while this was recognised to have great potential it was also seen to be heavily dependent on the ability of the practice teacher, as well as on the ability of the student and there were reports of successful experiences for all concerned. But there were also reports of some students not wanting to be part of such innovatory practice; sometimes because they saw them as risky and sometimes because they did not see the value of inter-professional placements at that stage in their careers. In the view of HEIs the trend would be heavily dependent on their taking a lead role in the quality assurance of provision.

#### **8.4 HEI and employer partnerships**

There was a reasonably high level of connection between HEIs and employers but in many cases it was only with a minority of those providing placements.

Based on the success of limited involvement some HEIs were planning to increase the involvement of practitioners in their courses. Students were said to value practitioners taking an active part in the curriculum and they wanted to recognise those able practice teachers who were incorporating theory and lifelong learning in their practice. But not every attendee agreed with this. Others argued that it would be too easy for courses to be influenced by current fads and targets instead of focusing on nurturing the attitudes, values and beliefs to prepare students for a professional identity. This involved developing analytic skills so they are not only good practitioners but intelligent minds that can think creatively and who were able to step outside of current thinking and create solutions. A middle ground was held by one course where the representative said they were happy for the academic side to be influenced by practitioners' views. They had established a practice learning team that fed into the academic teaching. They met together on a monthly basis to examine issues which had arisen on placement. Over a short period the group has initiated significant changes around placement opportunities and the written work required of students.

### **8.5 Induction, supervision and the post qualification framework**

It was a concern that some of the issues discussed above originated in the false notion that qualification as a social worker equated with fitness to practice independently and in all circumstances. Induction was seen as a crucial part of what happened next. HEIs accepted that they had a responsibility to produce students who are receptive to new knowledge, who have learned skills and are being able to integrate that into their understanding of the social work task. The reality was that while they thought they were trying to do this they recognised that many social workers did not then go near a university for many years. One solution was seen to be to establish stronger links with employers and support the creation of workplaces as learning organisations. In this respect the proposed NQSW induction pilots were welcomed in terms of helping students make links into the workplace, while providing them with support and training opportunities. The proposal was seen as a much needed step in countering what this tutor identified as the 'exit signs' which too often appeared early in careers:

It's the reality of the accountability that hits them like a brick wall, isn't it? Of course, it is the accountability. Being out there on your own, not being liked, working with people who don't want, necessarily, to see you. All of that is a real pressure for people and they need space in the first year of their working life to adjust to that, to come to terms with that facing reality. And that's, for me, part of that induction year, and that isn't the responsibility of an HEI. We bring them to

the point where they have sufficient knowledge to begin the task, but they are beginners. That's all it could ever be. And that's why it's important for the employers to be organisations in which learning can take place and is valued and people can be nurtured through a range of opportunities and support systems. It isn't just supervision.

There were, of course, complicating factors in preparing students for practice. One was that fact that the nature of the work varied from office to office and from team to team which only served to underline the importance of induction. Social workers starting in more specialist team, such as a looked after care leaving team or a disabled children's team have a very different experience from a social worker starting in a frontline assessment team. Another was the prior experiences of students. There was a recognition that many sponsored and seconded students were, not surprisingly, far better prepared for the realities but then their readiness made it more likely they would be given more responsibilities. Sometimes as a consequence they were either burnt out or became extremely cynical. In order to counter this, HEIs wanted employers to recognise that NQSWs were *beginning social workers* rather than professionals fit for practice in all settings and with all clients.

There were discussions on what the term *beginning social worker* (or similar) might mean and what qualities might be expected of one. The participants questioned whether it was their responsibility to produce safe and competent practitioners. While they agreed that it was their responsibility to do so they regarded it as a shared responsibility. They agreed that a *beginning social worker* should be a safe and a competent practitioner, but that it should be recognised that it was the start of the professional journey and that learning was an ongoing process which also involved the employer.

This debate did lead on to a discussion of the need for closer relationship with practitioners, not least of all to establish their respective roles. If employers want NQSWs to have specific skills when they start work they needed to negotiate how HEIs' theoretical input could be linked into practice on placements, along with the support which they, as employers, needed to put in place in that first year.

One of our employers had learning sets which were morning sessions once a month for the newly qualified social workers within the organisation. And they were able to come together to meet and discuss their issues and it was a safe place, I think, out of the office, away from all of the other people, where they felt they could, actually, express angry feelings if that's what they wanted to do. And it seemed to be that, actually, those learning sets would offer an opportunity to have some input from the universities to try and boost those analytical skills that employers are continually saying are lacking. Kind of risk management, maybe to look at a case study drawn from somebody, to take it apart and put it back together again so that those two things could

come together in a learning set. That, again, is a range of support mechanisms that could be helpful for people.

It was suggested that it should be possible to award academic credits towards the achievement of the PQ consolidation module for these and other in-house events. Some attendees had offered to accredit existing provision but had found that authorities were not interested in paying for it. However a similar scheme had been implemented in another area where the success seemed to hinge on the way that the HEIs and employers involved interpreted the PQ framework where they had used the new framework as an opportunity to do things differently. In view of the time and effort involved HEIs said they would have to charge but had found that too often there was no longer ring fenced money any more for PQ.

Supervision was seen as being integral to this support, but those participating in these consultations thought there was a problem with first line supervision in that in their experience it was coming to mean case management advice rather than a process which examined the impact of the work and the development of the practitioner. It was recognised that while both might be needed it was becoming quite rare to find the latter model in place, even though it was still the model which HEIs prepared students. Yet it was that model which was seen as being critical to understanding the nature and complexity of social work including the tensions and the contradictions involved. It was suggested that the role could be separated, with a mentor figure supporting development and reflection while a line manager dealt with the case management issues. Although it was suggested that there was a pressing need for employers to question the assumption that anybody could become a supervisor because they had so many years' post-qualification experience. In one session it was suggested that HEIs could discuss with employers how, if at all, they might support the supervision of NQSWs and those present were clearly be interested in exploring this further.

When the question of protected caseloads was raised the feeling was that this should be approached in terms of the complexity of cases rather than number of cases, and the support offered in relation to caseloads.

These discussions also covered CPD and the importance of having career pathways in place. This was viewed as one more way in which HEIs and employers could link together; it was suggested that employers should be invited onto courses to talk about career pathways and what that meant for a social worker in their first year. This led to discussion about PQ and when that should start, and if this

should be during or after the first year so that people had a year of practice before they actually did it or whether it should be after the six month probationary period. This, in turn, opened up a debate on how supervision and induction were fitting in to PQ framework and the professional development plans of individuals and how the proposals being discussed in relation to NQSWs would fit with the consolidation module which many HEIs were developing.

## **Section 9: Key points which emerged from consultations with those in higher education institutions (HEIs).**

### **Views on preparing social work students for practice**

- Those in HEIs debated whether the role of the social work degree was to train students for a profession or educate them so they were better able to exercise judgement and apply knowledge.
- They debated whether the initial training should remain generic or whether it should be specialist with more coming down on the side of retaining a generic approach.
- There was concern that some employers expect NQSWs to be competent practitioners without further training and support.
- Some courses were considering rethinking their recruitment strategies and redesigning the level of support in light of the demands being made of them by young undergraduates and those with specific and non-specific learning needs.
- They suggested that the placement reports or the development plans that are written at the end of the second placement should be used as the basis for personal development plans of NQSWs.
- There was a discussion of the opportunities and challenges which were posed by the wider range of placements which students were experiencing in settings where a social worker may not be based and where supervision may be provided by someone from another profession.
- There was a desire to establish stronger links with employers to support:
  - the creation of workplaces as learning organisations
  - those supervising students and NQSWs.

## References

Bentley, J. P. and Thacker, P. G. (2004) The influence of risk and monetary payment on research participation decision making process. *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 30, 293-298

Bryman, A. (2001) *Social Research Methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press

Lewis, S. (1998) Educational and organizational contexts of professional supervision in the 1990s. *Australian Social Work*, 51, 3, 31-39.

Stokes, D. and Bergin, R. (2006) Methodology or “methodolatry”? An evaluation of focus groups and depth interviews. *Qualitative Market Research: An International Journal*, 9, 1, 26-37

Wertheimer, A. and Miller, F. G. (2008) Payment for research participation: a coercive offer? *Journal of Medical Ethics*, 34, 384-392