



Deacon, Lesley, Phillips, Carrie and Bikova, Zeta (2023) Newly Qualified Social Workers' Perceptions and Experiences of Support during the Assessed and Supported Year of Employment. Project Report. University of Sunderland, Sunderland. (Unpublished)

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Facilitated Practice-based Research (© University of Sunderland) Report

Newly Qualified Social Workers' Perceptions and Experiences of Support during the Assessed and Supported Year of Employment.

Practice Research Project Team consisting of social work practitioners, educators and researchers (in alphabetical order):

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SEPTEMBER 2023

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The purpose of the report is to share findings from a small-scale exploratory research study conducted by a group of practitioners who participated in a Facilitated Practice-based Research project. The aim of the research was to understand how Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) perceive and experience the support given for the first year of the Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE). A qualitative survey was distributed across the region with NQSWs (employed by a NESWA LA partner) invited to participate. Each survey consisted of five open-ended questions giving participants the opportunity to explain their responses, and a total of 23 responses were received.

Conclusions: The perceived *quality* of the supervision received by NQSWs was significant to how much they felt supported, as well as being an important factor in their overall wellbeing. Where NQSWs did not have protected caseloads (or what they perceived to be protected caseloads) this created a negative view of the ASYE process. Finally, NQSWs overwhelmingly perceived the additional paperwork required for the ASYE Portfolio as adding to their workload and pressures.

Recommendations:

- Encourage LAs in partnership to develop Learning Academies, as NQSWs all talked positively about them.
- Encourage LAs in partnership to ensure *quality* supervision above and beyond case management (this is to be explored in further research).
- Encourage LAs in partnership to ensure protected caseloads (i.e. 90%) are being practiced for NQSWs during ASYE.
- Share findings with Skills for Care, especially to highlight concerns about the amount of workload the Portfolio requires.

Introduction: The research topic, which is the subject of this report, emerged through a group of practitioners engaging in a Facilitated Practice-based Research (FPR) (©University of Sunderland) programme with academic educators and researchers from the University of Sunderland. The aim of FPR is to support practitioners to reframe their practice skills as research skills, to complete their own practice-based research. During the programme, the cohort worked together to co-construct, design, implement and analyse a piece of practice research relevant to the organisation which, in this case, was the North-East Social Work Alliance (NESWA) (Deacon, 2023). NESWA are a charitable body that oversee the social work teaching partnership in the North-East of England, which includes all Local Authorities (LAs) and Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) (see Appendix 1 for list of members).

This research project was partly funded by the University of Sunderland, the European Social Fund and NESWA.

Research aim: Two research topics emerged through discussions about current areas of concern for the practitioners in the cohort. The topic, which is the basis of this report, is an exploratory study to understand the experiences of NQSWs across NESWA LAs, during their first year as a social work practitioner, following registration. This is known as the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE).

Research question: how do NQSWs perceive and experience the support given for the first year of the ASYE?

- What type of support do NQSWs receive?
- What, according to social workers, has worked well and what needs development in the following areas:
 - Wellbeing;
 - Staff development;
 - Effective practice?

Participants: Any NQSW (i.e. who qualified in the last 24 months) in one of the NESWA LAs (see Appendix 1).

Literature review: ‘Social Worker’ is a professional title which is protected and only those who have successfully completed an accredited course, e.g. in an HEI or statutory organisation in partnership with an HEI, can use the title. Once this course is successfully completed and a NQSW is registered with Social Work England, they can commence their first year in employment. Historically there has been little consistency in how NQSWs were supported in this first year, and there is relatively little research on this topic.

Research studies conducted before the origin of the ASYE Skills for Care framework explored the general experiences of NQSWs. For example, Hussein et al. (2014) conducted a longitudinal study of 280 social work graduates across the first 18 months of their employment. Their research highlighted the importance of getting it right from the start, e.g. from induction within the organisation, as in effect this sets the tone for the NQSWs’ importance to the organisation. They found that there was correlation between NQSWs who had received proper induction those who gave the maximum score for seeing their manager as supportive. It was also highlighted that 70% of participants in the survey reported not receiving regular supervision. This was further highlighted in Manthorpe et al.’s (2015) study, that when supervision did take place, it was individual case management that dominated, and the social work managers involved in the study reported issues such as personal development as ‘optional extras’ (p.60) depending on time allowing, rather than essential and embedded.

Where NQSWs left the profession, this was perceived by social work managers, in Manthorpe et al.’s (2014) study, as relating to high caseloads. Kinman and Grant (2017) highlight how social workers can be particularly vulnerable to stress and burnout due to the emotional demands of the job. Further to this, Manthorpe et al. (2014) reported organisations struggling to find social workers willing to act as mentors to NQSWs as this was not necessarily reflected in their already high workload. This, as well as time restrictions, meant it was not possible to ensure a focus on quality, in-depth work with NQSWs.

In 2018, the National Evaluation Criteria (NEC) were set up, initially relating only to children’s social workers but they now include adult and mental health social workers. This has now been consolidated into the ASYE which is led by Skills for Care. ASYE is now a national framework aimed at standardising post-qualifying support and training for NQSWs in England, where previously there was inconsistency and disparity. Whilst ASYE is not mandatory it is viewed as ‘good practice’ and is therefore implemented across all LAs in England and is funded by the Department for Education.

According to Skills for Care, the ASYE is a:

12 month employer-led and employment-based programme of support and assessment for newly qualified social workers (NQSW). Regardless of the area of social work practice (adults/children/mental health) or the organisation’s status (statutory/private/voluntary/independent), all NQSWs should be supported through their first year in employment through the ASYE programme. This is certified by Skills for Care.

[\(Link\)](#)

The framework sets out an overview of what is expected of a NQSW in terms of their development in relation to the Professional Capabilities Framework, but the specifics of how this is implemented is, as suggested, employer-led, which means there are variations in application across different organisations.

Skills for Care highlight how the 'Learning Academy' model is being adopted across organisations in the UK, and while there are variations in how individual organisations deploy this, the shared focus is on 'an environment where learning is prioritised and included alongside the day-to-day work' (ASYE annual Report 2019–20 Skills for Care).

Since the emergence of the ASYE, Skills for Care have published an annual report which includes an ASYE survey. At the time of writing, the most recent report covers April 2022 – March 2023 (Skills for Care, 2023). Of the 103 NQSWs who responded, the authors of the report found that they were less positive about the ASYE than assessors. However, due to limitations in the data it was not clear why this was the case.

What is clear is that the experiences of NQSWs relating to Skills for Care's ASYE are relatively under-researched areas of social work practice.

Methodology and methods: Emancipatory Practice Development underpins the research focus of the FPR programme. It emphasises the need for improving practice to be supported by a person-centred approach to access the voice of the person using the service (Deacon, 2022). The term 'service user' is used to refer to anyone who is accessing a service, so in the case of this project NQSWs were the service user. A pragmatic approach was taken (Muurinen and Satka, 2020) to access their voice through the use of a qualitative approach in the first instance (Deacon and Macdonald, 2019). This enables the voice of the service user to come through more clearly, and can be followed up by wider surveys that take a statistical focus to test findings on a larger scale.

A qualitative self-completion electronic survey was decided upon as the most appropriate method. Self-completion surveys are beneficial when participants are geographically dispersed, they enable more potential participants to be reached in a relatively short space of time, are free from variability/influence of interviewers, and the cohort felt it was important to reduce the inconvenience on potential participants due to their roles in front line services (Clark et al., 2021). As the research area is exploratory, with limited existing research available to aid in question construction, the qualitative survey (as well as enabling access to the service user voice) also enabled responses to be driven by the participants rather than the researchers.

Only five open questions were asked to minimise the amount of time needed from participants to complete the survey. These specifically related to expectations of the ASYE in terms of its support of NQSWs. Through pilot testing it was estimated that the survey should take approximately ten minutes to complete. A link and QR code to the survey were then distributed across practitioner networks, e.g. NESWA, and via cohort members to their own networks.

Ethics: Ethical approval was sought and received from the University of Sunderland Research Ethics Committee (application: 018330), as the academic host of the research, as well as from the NESWA management group.

Limitations: The survey was made available for two weeks and was shared via the communication networks of each project team member. This limits its reach to the local region and may limit responses to those connected to the LAs represented in the programme. To ensure confidentiality participants were not asked to name the LA they had experience of, only to confirm they were one of those listed as being a NESWA member (see Appendix 1).

Approach to analysis: Descriptive data is provided concerning which accreditation route the NQSW qualified through, and which area of practice they were in. In terms of the open (qualitative) data, a three-phase qualitative thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke’s (2006; and Clarke and Braun 2013) six-stage framework in each phase: familiarisation, coding, search for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up themes. The three-phase approach was necessary as a quality control measure to enable each member of the project team to engage in thematic analysis, to gain research experience and to share out the work of the project.

In Phase 1 each member of the practice research team was allocated all the data to analyse from at least one open survey question. Each followed the six-stage framework for coding and submitted their findings showing how they had come to decisions regarding identification of themes. In Phase 2 an experienced researcher in the project team conducted a quality assurance check, comparing each team member’s findings to the original data. Following this, in Phase 3 the same researcher conducted an overall six-stage framework analysis to present the overall findings across the project.

Findings: A total of 23 surveys were completed by NQSWs and each confirmed that they worked for one the LAs in the NESWA partnership. Of these, ten worked in Children’s Services and 13 in Adults’. Table 1.1 below shows the accreditation route taken by the respondents.

Route	Number of respondents
BA Hons Social Work	4
Frontline	0
MA Social Work	13
Social Work Apprenticeships	4
Step Up to Social Work	1
Think Ahead	0
Not Answered	1

Table 1: NQSW accreditation route

What is support? The majority of responses highlighted what they often referred to as ‘additional’ supervision, protected caseloads, access to work shadowing, and the ASYE Learning Academy (for Children’s SWs) as relating to *support*. Only two out of 23 participants had negative experiences and emphasised that this related to their caseloads not being protected (P7 and P27). P27 stated ‘Unfortunately very little support has been given’.

Several Children's NQSWs mentioned the existence of the ASYE Learning Academy in their organisation, and all were positive, e.g. P26 stated:

I have been part of the ASYE Academy since I started in September 2022. This gave us the chance to stay in our own little team, gain shadowing experience and co-work cases with an experienced social worker whilst also taking on a few more straight forward cases.

Supporting NQSWs' wellbeing: When specifically considering their wellbeing, supervision was mentioned by almost half of the participants as being significant. This was perceived as needing to be *good-quality* and *regular* supervision if it was to help to maintain good mental-health and wellbeing.

The structure for supervision works well as this affords the opportunity for regular case discussion, reflective supervision and identify learning opportunities. This all impact[s] on good wellbeing by feeling supported and to be able to see development. (P17)

The above quote highlights the importance of supervision including what previously were perceived as extras (Manthorpe et al., 2015). Such supervision was valued by NQSWs from both Children's and Adults' Services, and there were no apparent differences between the different qualifying routes. Closely related to supervision was support from managers, assessors and access to expertise such as lead practitioners. Participants generally felt that they had good access to support and guidance, although one respondent mentioned that having a long-arm experienced practitioner support them was not as helpful as support from the closer team (onsite), and some NQSWs felt that their team manager was not as well-versed in the needs and expectations of NQSWs as more specialist ASYE-focused staff. Peer support was also valued, although at times this was expressed more in terms of a shared negative experience:

Peer support works well, it feels everyone is in the same boat. (P15)

Learning opportunities were valued as a source of good wellbeing, with five participants mentioning training and learning opportunities such as shadowing as a positive aspect of ASYE. One respondent felt that more training opportunities would further improve their wellbeing. Some specifically highlighted the positive impact of being able to pursue further educational opportunities and qualifications and its positive impact on their practice and future career.

Participants referred to the transition from NQSW, particularly if the first six months were spent in an ASYE Learning Academy. Some respondents did not mention whether they were part of an ASYE Learning Academy, but those who did mention an academy-style arrangement were very positive about this format as a source of support and training.

Academy set-up has been superb in my opinion, had the luxury of management support whenever it was needed, regular reflective supervision and learning opportunities with allocated cases. (P18)

Negative impacts on wellbeing: The most frequently reported negative impact on wellbeing was workload (similarly found by Manthorpe et al., 2015), however this included the additional workload imposed by ASYE documentation, which was perceived as being repetitive. No participants cited the ASYE documentation as a useful and supportive process, and four gave very negative responses about the amount and/or complexity of paperwork needed. These NQSWs felt that supervision, performance monitoring and feedback from assessors and managers was far more valuable than completing what they perceived as a 'tick-box exercise'.

The paperwork feels like more of a box ticking exercise to proceed onto the next pay scale when evidence of developmental experience would be clear from first hand working. (P13)

Too much is required in the ASYE portfolio on top of workload pressure even though the workload is protected. (P8)

Where they were respected within organisations, protected caseloads were valued, however six NQSWs mentioned their caseload not being protected, or being too much for an NQSW. According to Skills for Care's ASYE Framework, this should be equivalent of 90% of the caseload of an experienced social worker. Whilst responses were self-reported it is not possible to determine whether the reduced caseload did equate to this. However, whether or not this is the case, the *perception* of a quarter of participants was that this was not happening for them.

Participants also mentioned the wider atmosphere and amount of stress in social work teams as having a negative impact on them, regardless of their own caseload.

Management... seem unaware people are overwhelmed when it is clear to the rest of the team. There is a high level of stress in the team and as a result sickness absence. (P15)

There were no significant differences between responses from NQSWs who had come through different qualification routes (although the sample size was small), but one former apprentice noted that work experience can differ greatly between the different routes into social work, and this is not accounted for at NQSW level.

I would suggest there could be some adaptation to the ASYE for the Apprenticeship route, e.g. to link with progression, given at the starting point of ASYE staff via the Apprenticeship route already have extensive case work experience. (P17)

There were also some concerns from NQSWs about the transitions out of ASYE Learning Academies into permanent roles, specifically when it was perceived as being stressful and rushed.

Look at the transition to allocated teams at six months and support this better (earlier introduction to get to know team and types of work) felt a little rushed with changes at the last minute. (P18)

Discussion: Previous research regarding NQSWs prior to the establishment of the ASYE and ASYE Learning Academies, highlighted concerns that aspects of personal development were seen as ‘optional extras’ (Manthorpe et al. 2015, p.60) by assessors/mentors due to time and workload constraints. The research conducted in this study, although specific to the North-East of England, highlights how important quality supervision is (i.e. outside of just case management) to NQSWs, specific (rather than generic) training and learning opportunities, transitions from ASYE Learning Academy to permanent role and ensuring time and caseloads are protected. There appears to be some inconsistency in how the ASYE framework is applied across the region in terms of how the practice is received by NQSWs.

Recommendations: ASYE Learning Academies – where these were referred to, all responses were positive. These should be further implemented to create focused learning environments across organisations.

Maintaining quality supervision (i.e. more than just case management), mentoring and specific learning opportunities is valued by NQSWs.

Ensure protected workloads are implemented – can a quality control check be conducted to ensure a 90% caseload is being safeguarded for NQSWs? Research tells us that high workloads are already concerning and problematic for social workers, so is the 90% based on this actual (high) caseload or an ideal social worker caseload?

Reconsideration is needed regarding the of the amount of Portfolio work required for NQSWs. Can alternatives be sought to minimise further impacts on workloads?

Further research:

1. This was an initial exploratory study to access the voice of NQSWs and mentors across the NESWA partnership. However responses from mentors were too low for analysis so further research could be conducted with mentors directly.
2. A quantitative survey could be devised to test the findings from this report, across a wider audience of NQSWs within the partnership. This could also be shared across the country to explore similarities/differences across regions.
3. Participants referred to *quality* supervision as being important to help them feel supported and to improve their wellbeing. Further qualitative research (e.g. through interviews) could explore what this supervision looks like.
4. Further research to understand how a 90% caseload is determined could add weight to this area of research – this will enable exploration of variations across LAs and possible regions.

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Skills for Care (2023)

Annual Report

<https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/resources/documents/Regulated-professions/Social-work/ASYE/Child-and-family/Annual-report/ASYE-child-and-family-annual-report-2022-23.pdf>

Survey results:

<https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/resources/documents/Regulated-professions/Social-work/ASYE/Child-and-family/Annual-report/ASYE-survey.pdf>

Skills for Care ASYE Framework

<https://www.skillsforcare.org.uk/resources/documents/Regulated-professions/Social-work/ASYE/The-ASYE-framework.pdf>

All accessed: 19 September 2023

APPENDIX 1

NESWA membership – in alphabetical order

Local Authorities:

Darlington Borough Council

Durham County Council

Gateshead Council

Hartlepool Borough Council

Middlesbrough Council

Newcastle City Council

North Tyneside Council

Northumberland County Council

Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council

South Tyneside Council

Stockton Borough Council

Sunderland City Council / Together for Children, Sunderland

Higher Education Institutions:

Durham University

New College Durham

Northumbria University

Open University

University of Sunderland

Teesside University

APPENDIX 2

Qualitative survey

Please confirm you have had experience in the last 24 months, either as a NQSW or in a role supporting an NQSW (ASYE assessors/mentors, practice educators, team managers, senior social workers, learning and development coordinators).

Yes

No

[if no ticked, thank you for your interest in completing this survey however we are only researching experiences of NQSWs and their instructors / assessors in English local authorities]

What is your role (tick all that apply)?

NQSW

ASYE mentor

ASYE co-ordinator

Practice educator

Team manager or senior social worker

Learning and Development coordinator

Other, please state:

Which area of social work do you work in?

Children

Adults

Both

Please confirm you are either an NQSW or ASYE assessor with one of the following Local Authority organisations listed below:

1. Gateshead Council
2. Darlington Borough Council
3. Durham County Council
4. Hartlepool Borough Council
5. Middlesbrough Council
6. Newcastle City Council
7. North Tyneside Council
8. Northumberland County Council
9. Redcar and Cleveland Borough Council
10. South Tyneside Council
11. Stockton Borough Council
12. Sunderland City Council / Together for Children, Sunderland

Yes

No

[if no ticked, thank you for your interest in completing this survey however we are only researching experiences of the 12 Local Authority organisations in the NESWA partnership]

If NQSW;

Please confirm your accreditation route:

- BA Hons Social Work
- MA Social Work
- Social work apprenticeship
- Front line Social Work
- Step up to Social Work
- Think Ahead
- Other, please state

1. Please tell us about the support you have you been offered as an NQSW. For example ASYE Learning Academy, additional supervision, protected caseload, training.
2. What works well and what needs development in the support of your wellbeing?
3. What works well and needs development in the support of your career development?
4. What works well and what needs development in the support of you becoming an effective practitioner?
5. What do you think would help make things better for you during the ASYE?

If assessor;

1. Please tell us about the support offered to NQSWs in your organisation? For example ASYE Learning Academy, additional supervision, protected caseload, training.
2. What support is offered to you as an assessor of NQSWs?
3. How effectively do you think you are able to support NQSWs to develop their wellbeing, careers and in becoming effective practitioners?
4. What do you think would help make things better for supporting NQSWs?