

“we’re helping
to support
newly qualified
social workers”

**research report examining activity supporting newly
qualified social workers in the north west**



introduction

This report provides a summary of the findings of a small scale, 'snapshot' piece of research, carried out in August and September 2010 by staff in the School of Social Work at University of Central Lancashire on behalf of Skills for Care. After a brief sketch of the policy context, the research looks exclusively at experiences in the adult care sector, with regard to the Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) programme in Cumbria, Lancashire, Greater Manchester, Merseyside and Cheshire. It largely focuses on local authorities, although some contact was made with two large independent sector organisations.

research approach

The research team comprised the following:

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The aims of the research were to:

- gain an overview of the regional situation
- enable the sharing of ideas and solutions to common issues and challenges
- highlight further areas for regional development.

These aims were achieved via the following objectives:

- providing a brief review of existing evidence
- arriving at an understanding of current provision in the North West
- establishing benchmarks around that provision
- investigating case studies
- analysing data
- reporting and disseminating findings.

The investigation involved the following stages:

stage one: review of existing evidence

This included discussion with Skills for care to provide a brief overview of some of the emerging literature and policy around NQSWs

stage two: understanding the services and setting benchmarks

This initially consisted of five, one-to-one personal interviews with social work staff with responsibilities for NQSW processes (typically staff development roles) in their organisational settings. These provided detailed information on organisational activity and challenges. They also provided an opportunity to understand optimal practice. The selection of one-to-one



interviews was made to represent a geographical range of small to large statutory and some Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector agencies. Also, a further 26 local authorities were contacted for telephone interviews with key respondents, following the same interview schedule used in the one-to-one contacts. All these organisations were also invited to submit relevant documentation to illustrate their approach.

stage three: case studies

Following a review of stage two, the project developed a number of case studies. The intention was to illuminate the range of positions organisations ‘were at’. From this range the intention was to draw out lessons about organisational achievement, resistance and drivers around NQSW, as well as insights about developing good practice in this regard.

stage four: data analysis and report writing

This brought together the data collected in the first three stages. The case study material on page 8-12 illuminates aspects of good practice and lessons learned from all of the staff and organisations contacted.



policy background and relevant research

The NQSW scheme is a national programme designed to provide support in the social worker’s first year in practice. Promoted by Skills for Care and the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC), the NQSW model aims to provide a reliable, good quality learning opportunity for new social work staff. That opportunity in turn has four main features, with implied questions for all those involved (and thus of interest to this research):

- induction – what are the characteristics of a good quality induction package?
- supervision – how might new social workers be best supported through supervisory structures?
- developmental support – what are the key knowledge and skill areas that first year social workers should engage with?
- foundation for career – how does the first year in practice help form the foundation for a long career and continuity of service?



At present this national programme appears not to have been developed consistently; a picture already evident in the North West of England and elsewhere (see for example, *Hampshire County Council, 2009*). CWDC has commissioned a national evaluation on NQSW, which will report in September 2011.

Skills for Care (2009a) has looked at people who use services, and carer perspectives on NQSW and found some remaining doubts about confidence in newly qualified staff:

“we want social workers to still have the aspirations and values they started with as students. We come across student social workers in classrooms and they come across as enthusiastic and positive. But sometimes when we see social workers in practice they seem to have lost this. For instance, the decisions of funding panels can knock the confidence of novice social workers who might be proposing what they think is the best package.”

As for the views of newly qualified social workers themselves, the recently released *SCIE document (May 2010)* offers its own view of training priorities for new starters and can be compared and contrasted with the above four aspects of NQSW. The SCIE document emphasises the need to:

1. manage the transition between education and practice
2. improve the teaching of theory
3. recognise the critical role of practice placements
4. measure ‘preparedness’ using self-efficacy and role clarity
5. strengthen inter-professional working
6. compare and learn from the outcomes of other vocational programmes
7. recognise and handle problems with particular programmes.

These views point much more clearly at the connection between qualifying education and employment. They also remind us that the answers we get are very much dependent on the questions we ask about that connection and the training needs of early career social workers.

In August 2010, CWDC published its review of the first year (2008/09) of its children’s workforce NQSW programme. Decidedly mixed results appear in the research, with 58% of respondents satisfied with the NQSW programme but the remainder not. Barriers noted included time release for staff (and co-ordinators), quality of supervision by line managers and high caseloads. 22% of social workers had dropped out of the scheme. Of course events have overtaken this report following the announcement on 16/11/10 that the government would no longer fund workforce development activity through the CWDC.

It also appears that the plans to introduce the Assessed Year in Employment in 2016 after a four year trial, have been brought forward to 2012 by the Social Work Reform Board (*Community Care 12/11/10*).

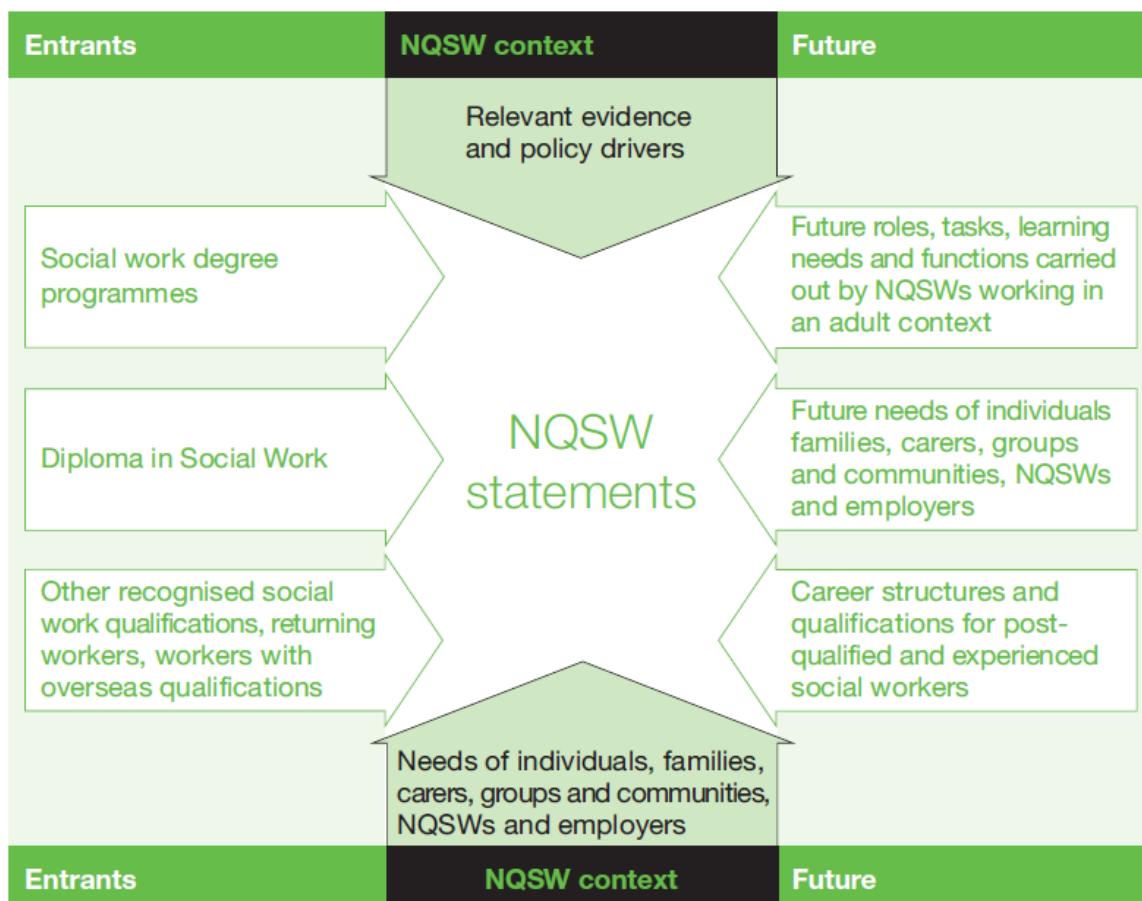


According to *Skills for Care's* (2010) most recent interim evaluation, the NQSW framework on the adults' side is also facing challenges. Areas where practice appears positive in this report include supervision – where approximately three quarters of respondents said they had regular supervision. 69% had their manager's full support in accessing the NQSW framework and 66% had personal development plans in place. However, the research also raised concerns in some key areas: the lack of connection to the Post Qualifying (PQ) award and specifically the consolidation module, the complexity of the NQSW outcome statements and protected workload time (34% receiving no time at all). Suffice to say that our localised research looking at the North West paints a broadly similar picture of the implementation of the NQSW framework.

Clearly, with budget cuts affecting the public sector generally, there are taxing times ahead, all the more reason to welcome SCIE's new web resource for NQSW's linked directly to the outcome statements, which can be found at www.scie.org.uk/publications/nqswtool/index.asp.

In the light of the above context, this research is timely. It provides a picture of the views and experiences of local employers and staff faced with what might be occasionally competing perspectives. The focus of the study also highlights tensions when a student social worker makes the transition to work immediately following qualification and when they are offered the NQSW programme in their place of work.

This transition and its possible tensions are captured in this diagram:



(*Skills for Care 2009b*)



findings of the current research

Having provided the context and explained the rationale for this research, its findings are now summarised using a series of tables and diagrams as well as text summarising data.

engagement with NQSW in the North West of England

Table 1 provides data on North West local authorities and their level of engagement with NQSW at the time of the research.

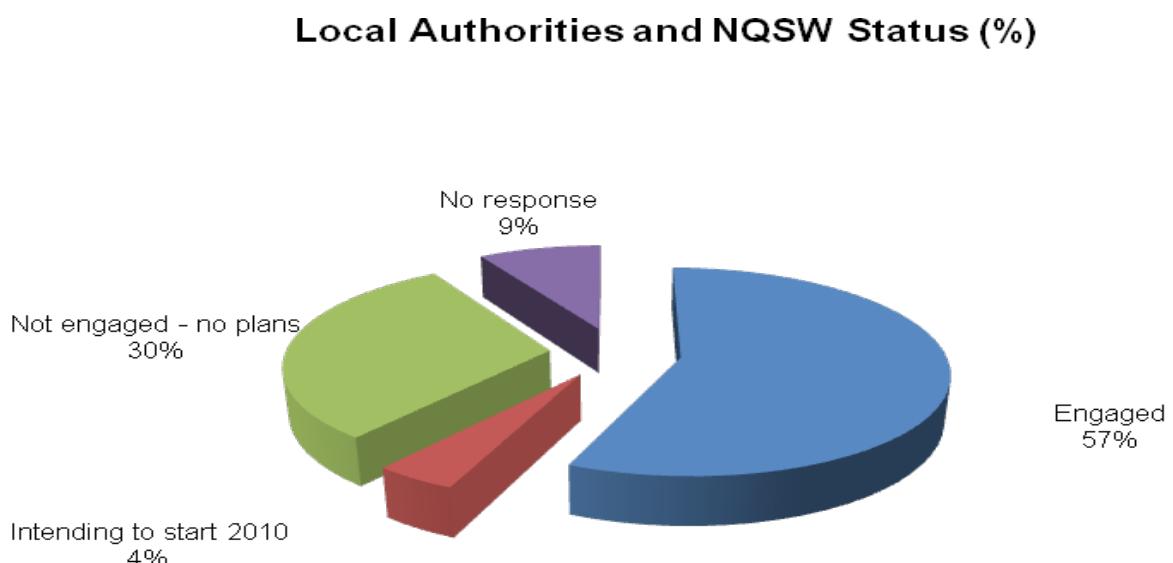
table 1: state of engagement

local authorities currently engaged (13)	not currently engaged (8)	not interviewed
Blackburn with Darwen	Bury	Sefton
Blackpool	Halton	Wigan
Bolton	Lancashire	
Cheshire East	Liverpool	
Cheshire West and Chester	Manchester	
Cumbria	Oldham	
Knowsley	Rochdale	
Salford	St Helens	
Stockport		
Tameside		
Trafford		
Warrington		
Wirral		

The above table can be accompanied by pie charts for clarity. Diagram 1 (on page 6) offers information from table 1 in a different fashion and offers a percentage estimate of authorities intending to engage with the NQSW. A broad brush stroke would suggest that around two thirds of local authorities are, or will soon, be engaging with NQSW programmes. The research team also contacted two large, social worker employing agencies from the Private, Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector – neither of whom were currently engaged with the NQSW programme (Creative Support and Integrate).



diagram 1: engagement with NQSW programme and intention to commence



The next table summarises the findings on non-engaged authorities and completions.

table 2: authorities not currently offering the NQSW programme

local authority	description of current position
Halton	Plans to embark on the programme in the coming year
Lancashire	Some funding from Skills for Care, not yet running programme due to reorganisation / changes
Manchester	Some funding from Skills for Care, not yet running programme due to reorganisation / changes and static workforce
Bury	Some funding from Skills for Care, not yet running programme due to reorganisation / changes and static workforce
Liverpool	No plans - static workforce
Oldham	No plans - static workforce
St Helens	No plans - static workforce
Rochdale	No plans - major reorganisation and static workforce



table 3: numbers of NQSWs completed (as at September 2010)

local authority	numbers currently enrolled	completed
Blackburn with Darwen	0	5
Blackpool	0	13
Bolton	2	2
Cheshire East	5	0
Cheshire West and Chester	5	0
Cumbria	3	1
Knowsley	2	0
Salford	14	0
Stockport	7	0
Tameside	5	2
Trafford	3	7
Warrington	0	10
Wirral	2	2
Totals	48	42

comments of those engaged

Having provided an overall sense of engagement with the scheme, the next findings refer to those authorities which have started their version of NQSW. Table 4 lists those authorities and their qualifying comments in the right hand column and is concerned with decisions regarding whether or not the NQSW programme is mandatory:

table 4: comments from engaged authorities

all NQSWs go through the programme	not sure / unclear	not applicable
Blackburn with Darwen	Lancashire	Liverpool
Blackpool (as part of induction)	Trafford	Oldham
Cheshire East	Manchester	St Helens
Cheshire West and Chester	Halton	Bury
Cumbria (now mandatory)	Sefton	Rochdale
Knowsley	Wigan	
Salford		
Tameside		
Bolton*		
Warrington*		
Wirral		
Stockport (not mandatory but encouraged)		



what has worked well for those engaged?

The very existence of the NQSW was generally endorsed as being useful – the process being broadly well received and perceived as both timely and appropriate. Looking at the level of each individual organisation, two factors were highlighted about its implementation ‘on the ground’:

First, the supportive role of external facilitation (of the NQSW process and candidates) was noted. Second, the presence of group learning and peer support were considered to be important. It should be noted that some of the respondents were organisationally removed from the fine grain pragmatics of the delivery, so could not provide us with valid information about this question. One authority alone also mentioned that using direct observation and shadowing was really useful when supporting NQSWs. With these caveats in mind we can summarise the findings about what worked well here with some illustrations from the data.

- **shining a spotlight on the unique needs of NQSWs**

For example: “if it’s done nothing else it’s encouraged us to focus on people when they first start... we’re almost putting them under a spotlight in a positive way, looking at them particularly.”

- **enabling local authorities to find ways of providing NQSWs with time out for reflection**

For example: “I’ve looked at the examples of evidence they were proposing to put in the records of achievement and I think all of them benefited from having to take time out reflect on their practice, relating it to current policy and legislation and reflecting on research. Some people weren’t very good at that and they had to rehearse the reflection process in order to produce something meaningful.”

- **enabling line managers to identify areas for improvement about training**

These reflections were about the different mechanisms being used by local authorities to identify significant gaps in knowledge and any training needs of NQSWs, who were then able to access relevant training. Some also noted that it was important to have a link with training and operational aspects of the organisation, with protected budgets for training. This also implied protected learning time in operational settings and matters such as workloads and backfilling for staff on training events. A number of local authorities mentioned that social work degree courses do not necessarily equip NQSWs fully with knowledge and understanding of current challenges and new ways of working, so they were able to access additional training for these purposes. An illustration is given here of this management reflection about training.

Example from one authority

“there had been some concern about NQSWs being asked to do specific safeguarding work that they shouldn’t really have been taking on at that stage in their career. In the first NQSW group cohort it was identified that one person needed training around suicide, risk assessment and safeguarding. They were able to clearly identify these gaps in knowledge as an issue and then arrange attendance on relevant one-day training events.”



successful implementation

Here we return, for emphasis, to the two implementation factors about success (the importance of external facilitation and group learning with peers). A number of local authorities employed external facilitation, which seemed to ‘kick-start’ the process, especially until operational managers were more ‘up-to speed’ with the process. There was a repeated theme that peer learning was useful, as it offers support for those in ‘the same boat’ and it allows exchanges about learning in different settings. This reduces the isolation of individual learners and provides them with opportunities for vicarious learning about operational settings other than their own. Variations on this theme about implementation are provided below:

aspects of programme delivery

The main components of the successful NQSW programme were identified as:

- group support (some with, mostly without, action learning sets)
- external input
- bolt-on to induction procedure
- workload relief
- supervision and line manager sign off.

These aspects are illuminated with examples below.



■ group support (action learning sets)

A key element of the NQSW model is the facilitation of Action Learning Sets (ALS). A small number of authorities (Blackburn with Darwen and Salford) used this model. Blackburn used their funding to pay for an external mentor, a practice educator who had previously worked with the authority. She was used to provide ten, monthly ALS group sessions, which were in addition to the supervision NQSWs received. The mentor also acted as a consultant in the development of the project and helped staff identify how practice matched to outcome statements which it was felt the line managers did not have time to do. The workforce development officer described the role as “**very successful**” and “**very good value**” however the mentor was not re-commissioned for the next cohort due to funding shortages.



- **group support (not action learning sets)**

Eight of the 14 authorities stated that they ran group sessions but did not define them as Action Learning Sets. Tameside was typical: the coordinator had not undertaken the facilitators' training and did not feel confident using ALS, instead they had compiled their own programme which was described as "more on reflective learning, using different tools for reflective learning, to look at work they've done and matching to outcome statements". One respondent felt that they had received a lack of guidance and clarity about how to run the sessions, and also on how implement the programme overall. As a result, the group sessions felt to be lacking a purpose. Later sessions had improved and the agenda of one future group was to look at the outcome statements in more detail.

"no, we didn't use the formal format, it depends what you call action learning, I suppose we may have done it in a diluted way but we didn't use that formalised process" (Bolton)

- **external input (e.g. external mentors, higher educational institutes)**

Wirral paid for a freelance practice educator to support the first NQSWs they had, in year one. She was employed to support the NQSWs, and to help them compile portfolios which met the outcome statements. As there were only two NQSWs in the cohort, it was felt that there was no opportunity for group work such as ALS. The staff development team manager we spoke to explained that whilst the mentor had been "**great**", they planned to change the model for coming year and new NQSWs, by utilising the programme at a nearby university - 'Professional practice in social work with adults'.

- **'bolt-on' to induction procedure**

In authorities such as Cheshire East and West, the respondent detailed how the NQSW programme functioned well as a 'bolt-on' to the existing induction procedure for new social workers. In Cheshire, NQSWs attended six group sessions in addition to the induction package which had been in place in the authority for many years and it was felt that the two had "**meshed together well**".

- **workload relief**

Respondents spoke of an 'expectation' or recommendation that NQSW staff may get a reduced caseload, but noted that in reality this may not have happened. In practice, respondents said that this took the form of reduced caseload and / or time off for training and development negotiated with individuals' supervisors and colleagues, as this quote illustrates:

"we do have a recommendation that people have shadowing time but we weren't prescriptive about it, we left it to people to negotiate with colleagues on other teams. We wanted any individual learning needs to be identified in a personal development plan" (Salford)



Another authority reported that their first cohort of NQSWs had not always had protected time for training and development, and changes were implemented for the second cohort, with suggestions for supervisors about how they could be achieved:

“what the first group have actually started doing as the notion of the 10% came in late for them - and they’re coming to end of the year and they need to put their portfolio together - so what they are doing is booking a room and those that want to can work together, and with the new ones we can say this is what you should get and this is what you should be getting and the supervisors can help it happen, so as to allow them the developmental time that they need. And they shouldn’t have the big caseload to start with”. (Trafford)

■ **supervision / line manager signoff**

The majority of authorities (nine of the 13 authorities) had a system of line managers being responsible for the signing off of the portfolio. There was some contrast in approaches to this, for example in Tameside, assistant team managers look at the evidence in the portfolio and make a judgment call, however they stated that this stage of the process was more of a learning experience than quality control work. In Blackburn a panel had been convened which was described as “not too much of an academic thing, but more of a quality check”.

the challenge of implementation

Clearly, even for those organisations well engaged with NQSW, a number of challenges arose from attempts to implement and continue NQSW programmes in the region. This section reports back on the nature of these challenges and tries positively to look at how some local authorities have overcome obstacles and found paths forward with NQSW.

■ **complexity**

There were a number of views expressed related to the complexity of the NQSW process as a whole. For some the NQSW framework Resource Pack (www.skillsforcare.org.uk/socialwork/newlyqualifiedsocialworker/NQSW_resource_pack.aspx) was seen as too complicated and many struggled to understand the process at a deep level. For others the ‘mechanistic’ requirements made it difficult to comfortably translate into the complexity of contemporary social work practice. Local authorities were all too aware of the significant challenges from the broader national context of social work and local organisational change - and how they affected the move into NQSW processes:

“Blackburn have found that the significant challenges of restructure, the personalisation agenda and management changes have been impossible to predict but have provided a backdrop of change for the NQSW process. The original paperwork was seen as less than ‘user-friendly’ and so Blackburn worked on an in-house version where the outcome statements were adapted into a checklist and made into a more workable format. In these challenging scenarios, striving to simplify procedures where appropriate is positive - as is making connections with existing structures and Blackburn are currently exploring the possibility of connecting the enabling others PQ module with a function of support for the NQSWs.”



■ organisational factors

A persistent thorn in most organisations' side was the issue of how hard it was to introduce innovations of this magnitude within overstretched teams – themselves located within hard pressed organisations. The 'change fatigue' expressed by several respondents was seen as a genuine strain in implementation of NQSW programmes. In particular, the issue of how far the NQSW process was 'owned' by local middle managers appears to be a decisive factor in how successfully the programmes were deployed.

"Tameside found the NQSW process difficult at first, especially around the need for mechanisms to spread workload out when required. This was particularly pronounced in a hospital team which carried three NQSWs – and where their line manger was a nurse. So a hospital social worker acted as a supervisor from within the team and this has worked well for the NQSWs - as well as helping the supervisor's own professional development. However, more broadly a common issue is the lack of time for people given by the line mangers."

■ compatibility

Most respondents appeared aggrieved at the lack of transparency with the degree of 'fit' with existing structures. Thus, how the adult NQSW framework fitted with PQ structures and the consolidation module of the specialist award structures was seen as lacking in clarity and problematic with existing PQ processes. However, some organisations found ways through this. It is interesting to note that whilst some local authorities connect progression into some of these NQSW and consolidation processes others (e.g. Cheshire) are concerned that the removal of such a process will reduce the 'carrot' required to retain staff.

Parallel issues of compatibility include how NQSW fits with existing induction processes and how different these two processes were to become, including the Common Induction Standards (CIS) standards. Similarly the Assessed Year in Supported Employment (AYSE) was a cause for concern for a number of respondents who worried that this new process might not gel with those in existence.

discussion

impact of organisation

This research suggests that the localised nature of success and achievement is a key factor in the outcomes for NQSW processes. As such, this report can not, with certainty, provide a single answer to establishing and improving NQSW programmes in the North West. It seems clear that local solutions will be the most effective; solutions that take into account the strengths - and areas in need of development - in the local organisation. A surprising number of local authorities were struggling to get NQSW off the ground because of internal restructures and competing strategic priorities.



That said, some recurring positive themes suggest that some areas are important to consider in promoting NQSW programmes:

- external facilitation
- tailoring to the unique needs of the NQSW
- providing space for reflection and completion
- linking into training and induction programmes
- manager commitment and support
- group learning.

fitting in to other structures

Another recurring theme from the respondents was the almost universal desire for NQSW to fit more transparently into existing PQ structures. Some authorities had worked hard to ensure this processes fitted into their arrangements for induction (and the Common Induction Standards), progression and consolidation. It is to be hoped that the forthcoming Assessed Year in Supported Employment (and new arrangements for PQ) help employers make sense of the interlinking networks of continuing professional development that are emerging. The NQSW framework Resource Pack was not always seen as helpful in this regard.

range of benefits

It was generally clear that the NQSW process was welcomed amongst the respondents – casting a much needed and long overdue light upon the NQSW's particular circumstances. NQSW affords a clear rationale for professional development, illuminates the issue of quality for line managers and provides a vehicle for workload relief and reflection at a crucial time in a social worker's professional career.

conclusion

This report provides only a brief snapshot of the development of NQSW programmes in the North West adult statutory sector. It has provided an opportunity to be heard for the voices of those who are working to improve learning opportunities for beginning social workers through the NQSW process – and also for those who are working within complex circumstances in pursuit of this aim. The project team would like to thank all those who took part for their time and honesty in sharing their situations in this important development.



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