COVID-19 and the impact on Newly Qualified Social Workers



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* identifying and sharing knowledge about what works and what’s new
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* informing, influencing and inspiring the direction of future practice and policy.

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# Executive summary

## Introduction

Restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic meant that social work students completing their courses in 2020 and 2021 have had limited access to practice learning opportunities, with a proportion of placements being suspended and face to face interactions with colleagues and individuals significantly reduced. Social Care Wales (SCW) commissioned the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) to scope the impacts of the pandemic on Newly Qualified Social Workers’ (NQSW’s) practice learning experiences and identify potential areas of support.

This report and recommendations are particularly relevant to:

* Policy leads
* Local authority employers
* Managers and social workers supporting NQSW
* Training and development teams, practice educators, practice learning coordinators, and higher education institutions (HEI).

Qualitative semi-structured interviews with 10 members of staff from local authorities and universities, as well as workshops and interviews with 14 NQSW were undertaken and analysed.

## Key findings

**Positive aspects:** included strong partnerships between universities and local authorities; remote working could be more productive; improving NQSW’s resilience; and better use of technology.

**Good practices in supporting NQSW experienced by participants:** NQSW online workshops; peer support opportunities; alternative and informal forms of online communication; opportunities to meet other teams and services; working pods and multidisciplinary teams; mentoring; and protected time for focused work.

**Challenges in relation to NQSW development:** reduced informal support; limited opportunities to learn from colleagues and for incidental learning; and limitations in learning to undertake assessments.

**Challenges in relation to wellbeing:** difficulties in disconnecting from work; isolation; lack of confidence; and stress due to uncertainty about their future.

**Wider context challenges:** shortage of staff, staff recruitment and retention; inconsistency in approaches across Wales; and the need to improve the national guidance.

**Support needed:** recognising the need for extra learning opportunities; more opportunities for relationship building; building support networks; more opportunities for shadowing colleagues; protected caseload; mentoring; extended induction period; NQSW workshops; and opportunities for reflexive practice.

**Training topics suggested:** included assessments; relationship building and communication with individuals; IT skills; what to expect from and how to make the most of supervisions; managing people (for team managers); wellbeing and self-care.

## Recommendations

A number of recommendations have been identified to supporting NQSW’s wellbeing and improving working conditions. These recommendations are listed below and are relevant to policy leads, local authority employers, managers and social workers supporting NQSW, training and development teams and social work educators.

Recognising the need for further support and extra time for development:

* + **Extended induction periods:** to offer protected time and reduced pressure so NQSW can access further opportunities for development
  + **Protected caseloads:** to allow NQSW to learn gradually and build confidence.

Supporting NQSW’s wellbeing:

* + **Opportunities for reflection:** to develop an awareness of work-related feelings and better understand their practice
  + **Mentoring or ‘buddy’ systems:** to engage in regular reflexive conversations about practice and work-related feelings with someone outside of their team
  + **Peer support opportunities:** to offer a safe space where NQSW can talk
  + **Opportunities for informal support:** taking into account both remote and hybrid working
  + **Support in strategies to disconnect from work.**

Improving opportunities for relationship building:

* + **Providing spaces for formal and informal group interactions**
  + **Opportunities for co-working**
  + **Adopting alternative forms of communication:** to allow spontaneous communication between peers and offer a space for asking questions
  + **Opportunities to meet with and learn about other services**
  + **Interdisciplinary teams or work pods:** to work closely with colleagues from different services and foster a sense of belonging, motivation, and purpose
  + **Encouraging shared working sessions, both online and in person:** This can offer a space for spontaneous interactions encouraging relationship building.

**Extra learning opportunities:** A number of recommendations have been made to support NQSW’s development and increase their confidence in practice. Some of these overlap with wellbeing support, as they have a dual function:

* + **Further opportunities for co-working and shadowing colleagues:** to develop their practice style and professional identity
  + **Opportunities for incidental learning:** spending time with their teams in a shared office environment and offer an opportunity to learn from listening and observing colleagues
  + **Learning (face-to-face) assessments, court work, and other complex tasks:** to allow extra time and co-working opportunities to learn complex work that they may not have had a chance to practice or shadow
  + **NQSW workshops:** to provide NQSW with essential information and training on key processes and procedures. It also offers an opportunity to meet peers and build their support network
  + **Interdisciplinary teams or work pods:** to develop a holistic understanding of cases and better understand the support system
  + **Suggested topics for formal training included:**
    - assessments
    - relationship building and communication with individuals
    - court work skills
    - what to expect from and how to make the most of supervisions
    - managing people/ compassionate management (for team managers)
    - wellbeing and self-care, which includes disconnecting from work and protecting personal time and space
    - IT/digital skills, including basic software as well as specific systems (e.g. case recording)
    - effective ways to engage with individuals and colleagues through online communication.

# Introduction

This report sets of the findings from qualitative research which examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Newly Qualified Social Workers’ (NQSW’s) practice learning experiences. A number of social workers (approximately 180) have completed their qualifications during the pandemic, whilst other social work students at earlier stages continue to pursue the qualifying programmes through remote learning and placements.

Rules around social distancing and lockdowns have meant that students have not had the same placements as cohorts qualifying in previous years. Their placements have often been conducted virtually, some placements were suspended and their timings have been continually disrupted. This has been combined with broader issues such as remote teaching less peer support and learning opportunities to apply theory into application. These students have come through two different routes:

1. BSc Social Work (including via Open University)
2. MA Social Work (including via Open University).

This has primarily affected those who graduated in both 2020 and 2021, and to a lesser extent 2019 graduates. Ensuring that these students have been able to qualify has been a priority for Social Care Wales (SCW), but this has meant making some changes to their course requirements, in particular the length and nature of their placements. While NQSW have demonstrated resilience by qualifying under such difficult circumstances, it is also important to acknowledge that the limited opportunities for practice learning have provided them with fewer opportunities for professional development. Adding to this, NQSW have experienced impacts of the social distancing restrictions and lockdowns on their personal lives making their practice learning unique.

Acknowledging the uniqueness of NQSW experience during the pandemic, SCW commissioned the Social Care Institute for Excellence (SCIE) to undertake this research to further understand the impacts of the pandemic on NQSW’s practice learning experiences and to identify opportunities to provide further support to these cohorts during their first three years of practice.

The agreed objectives of the research were that it should:

* Establish an understanding of how the unique experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic have affected practice learning opportunities
* Identify recommended areas for employers to work with the NQSW in their first three years of practice
* Make proposals for specific training or information that could be developed by Social Care Wales or others to support NQSW
* Set out examples of best practice in supporting NSQWs by employers.

To achieve these objectives, this research adopted a qualitative approach to capture NQSW and other relevant participants’ views on the impacts of the pandemic on NQSW practice learning experiences including key challenges, good practices, and support and training needed. This is further outlined in the next section.

This report is of interest to NQSW and anyone who has a role in their training, development and wellbeing. The findings and recommendations are particularly relevant to:

* Policy leads
* Local authority employers
* Managers and social workers supporting NQSW
* Training and development teams, practice educators, practice learning coordinators, and higher education institutions (HEI).

# Methods

This research adopted a qualitative approach to capture participants views on NQSW's practice learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data collection was undertaken between September and November 2021, engaging with 24 participants from two groups: members of staff from local authorities and universities, and NQSW.

## 2.1 Participants

**Newly qualified social workers:** a total of 14 NQSW engaged in the research. This included five that concluded their qualification in 2021, eight that concluded in 2020, and one who had concluded in 2019.

**Staff members from universities and local authorities:** a total of 10 staff members occupying key roles with an overview and/or direct contact with NQSW participated. Of the 10 staff members there were two programme directors of social work courses at universities, two practice educators from local authorities, four practice learning coordinators from local authorities, and two team managers from local authorities.

## 2.2 Data collection

A qualitative approach was adopted, utilising semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken with staff members, while NQSW were given the option to take part in semi-structured interviews or workshops. Six NQSW chose to engage in two workshops, while eight engaged in semi-structured interviews.

**Semi-structured interviews:** these were one-hour online interviews guided by a set of topic questions covering themes around NQSW learning experiences during the pandemic, impacts on their practice learning, challenges faced, good practices experienced, support and training needs. With the participant’s consent, each interview was recorded for further analysis along with notes taken by the interviewer.

**Workshops:** these were 90-minute sessions where NQSW had the opportunity to discuss their practice learning experiences in groups of three participants. The workshops offered a space for discussion and reflection starting with an introductory activity (ice breaker), followed by a facilitated discussion on practice learning experiences during the pandemic, challenges faced, positive aspects and good practices, support and training needs. The session was concluded with participants defining their top three priorities for support. With the participant’s consent, the session was recorded for further analysis and a second researcher was present through the session for taking notes.

**Informed consent:** all participants were provided with an information sheet containing all key information on data protection, confidentiality, anonymity as well as all the background information on the research and contact details for further information or withdrawing participation. Each participant signed a consent form, and was given the opportunity to ask questions and discuss any issues related to the research prior to their participation. Permission for recording the sessions was included in the consent form and information sheets, but was verbally reiterated at the beginning of each session.

**Language:** all information and consent forms were available in English and Welsh language and interviews were offered with support from a Welsh-speaking translator if preferred. One participant chose this option.

**Analysis:** a thematic approach to analysis was adopted to identify the key themes emerging from all participant groups utilising MAXQDA software to support the analysis. The recordings of each interview and workshop notes were transferred into the software and were analysed through two layers of coding, followed by the definition of a thematic map from which key messages from participants were extracted.

# Findings

In this section, we present the analysis of the interviews and workshops in relation to NQSW's learning experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. The analysis is presented in themes with quotes from interviews and workshops to illustrate how participants have expressed their views. The content covers three key topics – organised under seven headings – representing the positive experiences and good practices in supporting NQSW, key challenges faced by NQSW, and NQSW’s support and training needs.

## 3.1 Experiences of NQSW during COVID-19: positive aspects

In this section, some of the positive aspects of studying and qualifying during the pandemic are described.

**Strong partnership between universities and local authorities:** these existing partnerships enabled a timely response and regular reassessment of the situation. One of the key challenges of the pandemic was in relation to the teaching and practice learning adjustments necessary to keep students safe and to follow social distancing restrictions. As governments and scientists tried to provide guidance to the unknown situation, universities and local authorities (LAs) worked with sometimes very limited information and with a constantly changing scenario to assess their specific situation, implement safety measures, and support NQSW.

“We couldn't sort those things overnight, and we had a long-standing relationship with partners [LAs] (…) neither of the parts could do without each other, yes we were coming from different positions and there were tensions at times of course, but we were all trying to get to the same place (…) so it had to be a partnership approach and there was also the support from Social Care Wales (…). We met with LAs on a weekly basis to assess the situation and make decisions and that made a difference in how we responded to challenges.”

(HEI programme director)

Having a long-term relationship with partners, especially with LAs, facilitated the process of negotiating changes and responding to the challenges as they emerged. Considering the fluidity of the situation which was changing on a weekly basis – particularly in the first few months of the pandemic – having a long-lasting relationship, working closely together and reassessing the situation on a weekly basis were crucial in providing NQSW with support and guidance.

**Working from home can be more productive:** for some participants, one of the benefits of working from home was the ability to focus on tasks for longer without the usual distractions of an office environment. Without colleagues around and with limited options for interacting with other people, NQSW were able to spend more time on tasks and less time on interactions with colleagues. For example, “the efficiency in case recordings and note taking improved” (NQSW) and having more flexibility in their schedule meant that they could have protected time for longer tasks such as report writing.

“They can get a lot more done at home than in the office e.g. notes and completing a report, whereas before they didn’t have the flexibility to [block time] for this.”

(NQSW workshop notes)

Participants also mentioned a number of disadvantages of working remotely. These are outlined in the next section, where challenges faced by NQSW are presented.

**Working from home offers more flexibility:** for some NQSW, working from home provided extra flexibility to accommodate other demands alongside their work.

“some people enjoyed it [working from home], they said (…) that there is much better flexibility if they have child care issues for example.”

(Practice educator)

Not having to commute and having more flexibility to organise their daily schedule meant that NQSW had more capacity to accommodate multiple demands that would otherwise affect their availability to work. Some participants also claimed that this contributed to a better work-life balance, giving them more time to spend with family and personal commitments.

**Improving resilience:** completing placements, achieving their qualification, and starting their first year in practice during the pandemic, demanded from NQSW an ability to adapt to new forms of work and manage their wellbeing. While this was challenging for most NQSW it also provided them with an opportunity to develop skills and improve their resilience that could benefit their careers.

“They had this experience [to qualify during the pandemic] and they will never have it as hard as that year was, and they have done it, they passed it at a good level, and bring on the next pandemic. They have skills that a lot of other social workers who qualified previously would not have.”

(Practice educator)

“There will never be another opportunity like this again. Once we all got past the initial feelings of having been knocked sideways and we realised that that was doable (…) students really started to benefit and realise that (…) some [skills] were transferable to an online setting and I think it [this experience] added something that students probably haven't thought previously.”

(HEI programme director)

Overcoming difficult feelings, transferring skills, adapting their way of thinking and dealing with the contrast between previous expectations and the reality imposed by the pandemic encouraged NQSW to develop resilience to a higher level than previously expected.

**Making better use of technology:** with the need for remote work, NQSW adapted to using online tools for communication and collaboration that has had a positive impact on their practice and skills that can be applied in the future, not only during the pandemic. While NQSW are gradually returning to offices, these technologies are likely to remain as a permanent part of their work as increasingly more LAs adopt hybrid (partly remote and partly office-based) forms of work.

“It gives a lot more freedom, I don’t know why we didn’t do it before. Like if [a family member of a individual] lives in north Wales, instead of a phone call we can now set up a video call and see their face and they can actually be involved with the process (…). And NQSW now have another bit on their tool belt that we didn't realise we had.”

(Practice learning coordinator)

The ability to better engage with individuals' family members who live in other parts of the country and the ability to attend training sessions, meetings and conferences without travelling are some of the key benefits of using online technology for communication and engagement. Participants were keen to emphasise the importance of keeping these tools available to social workers permanently, arguing that the combination of online tools and face-to-face interactions offer great benefits to their practice.

## 3.2 Good practices: ways in which NQSW were supported

Universities and local authorities sought to support students and NQSW in a variety of ways during the pandemic; some of those that were found to be particularly helpful are outlined in this section.

**NQSW online workshops:** some LAs have implemented regular online workshops to provide NQSW with further support and advice on key aspects of their practice. According to NQSW, this was especially helpful to learn in detail how to carry out their daily tasks such as case recording, filling forms, and using systems that were specific to their LA.

“It is great for me, they pitched things differently and what they cover, even though I am a year in, is like gold. So, the newly qualified [social worker] now will have that straight off and that is amazing. They look at stuff like how to write case recording, what particular things to look at in a case recording, individual thresholds on housing conditions and actually bringing real-life photos and generating that discussion about what would you do and what was done.”

(NQSW)

These workshops offered a space for development that was not case-oriented (in contrast to supervisions), giving them the opportunity to focus on their own skills. Moreover, NQSW saw these workshops as an opportunity to get to know other social workers from different teams and to expand their support network.

**Peer support opportunities:** these opportunities emerged from spontaneous initiatives with NQSW forming small groups or, in some places, in larger groups organised by LAs. Despite the variations, these opportunities were crucial to support NQSW’s wellbeing by offering a space where they could “realise that others are also struggling” (NQSW) while also providing a safe space where they were “able to vent” (NQSW workshop notes).

“Sometimes, as a human, you don’t want to admit your vulnerabilities and your nerves [to your manager] because I want to be seen as a practitioner who can do things, I studied for two years so I can do this. (…) it is hard to admit and say ‘I don’t know what I am doing’.”

(NQSW)

As highlighted above, NQSW often don't feel comfortable opening up and discussing their vulnerabilities with managers and senior colleagues. The need to demonstrate their capabilities becomes the priority in their relationship with their managers and this can act as a barrier for wellbeing support.

“I can be vulnerable with them [peers], sometimes you just need someone to offload (…) most times I wasn't looking for direction, I wasn't looking for advice and guidance, I just needed someone to say 'oh I understand you, I had something similar and it is pants'.”

(NQSW)

For participants, the role of peer support is predominantly for dealing with work-related feelings and wellbeing. In most cases, it filled a gap providing crucial support for them to cope with challenges, and develop professionally and personally.

**Alternative and informal forms of online communication with peers:** this can be seen as complementary to peer support opportunities. For many NQSW having consistent contact with peers for gaining advice and emotional support was a key strategy for dealing with the challenges of working remotely. NQSW tended to feel more comfortable with peers allowing them to ask single questions – often considered too insignificant to set a call with their managers – as many times as they need in a day.

“We still do it to this day, sometimes we can have five, six, ten conversations in a day, and they are work-based, sometimes you just need a support.”

(NQSW)

Other participants also highlighted the importance of group chats such as WhatsApp groups for more spontaneous group interactions. These were particularly helpful for them to "ask questions on the group chat" (NQSW) and gain advice from multiple peers, as well as to share their experiences.

“WhatsApp groups for informal chats were popular, and it was a good way to keep in touch without putting pressure on them or making them feel like they were being pestered.”

(HEI programme director)

It is relevant to highlight that participants raised the importance of following confidentiality policies while using group chats: avoiding case discussions and anonymising any personal information.

**Opportunities to meet other teams and to get to know relevant services:** NQSW found it helpful to have opportunities to meet with colleagues and get to know relevant services in detail. This gave them confidence for making decisions about cases and linking in with other services based on individuals’ needs.

“[it was good to be] linking in with other services, find out different things. We have to learn as we go along but it would be easier if the information was readily available and being able to go into services [to get to know them].”

(NQSW)

Inviting colleagues from other teams to provide information about their services was another strategy that participants found useful for getting to know the network. Some LAs set up regular workshops for NQSW – as previously outlined – which also provided a space for colleagues from other services to run sessions and discuss relevant issues such as thresholds, capacity, and referral systems.

**Working pods – children services:** these are child protection multidisciplinary teams formed by practitioners from different services often working together on the same cases.

“Working pods has been helpful – every Wednesday is spent discussing caseloads and it helps to have different views.”

(NQSW workshop notes)

For NQSW, working in pods contributed to better understanding the multiple needs of individuals, and to learning from colleagues from other teams – such as health care. This also helped NQSW to feel more confident as they were able to check in with colleagues, discuss cases, and have access to different views on the same case to build a holistic understanding of individuals' needs. NQSW reported that this strategy made them feel like part of a team, improving their sense of belonging and impacting positively on their wellbeing.

**Multidisciplinary teams – adult services:** these are teams similar to working pods that are formed by multiple professionals but that do not necessarily work together on the same cases. This is more common in adult services where multidisciplinary interventions are less frequent. Although they are not supporting the same cases, this configuration helped NQSW to learn from other professionals and feel more confident about their approach while also promoting integration between teams and improving NQSW wellbeing.

“It is good, I feel more part of the wider team and can get support from different people also learn by seeing different approaches, you definitely learn more.”

(NQSW)

Participants reported that this has helped them to feel more valued and improved their sense of belonging and confidence.

**Mentoring:** has provided NQSW with an important alternative space for discussing issues related to their work, their team, and their wellbeing. In some cases, a reflexive approach was adopted helping to improve their emotional resilience.

“That [the mentoring] has been invaluable because it offered a different avenue of a different way of thinking.”

(NQSW)

Participants highlighted the importance of mentoring in helping NQSW to expand their views of their practice: being able to discuss their practice with someone external to the team, providing them with the opportunity to see things from a different perspective, reflect, and significantly improve their practice. Mentoring was considered an important tool for emotional support and resilience-building.

Reflexive mentoring – as described in the extract below – has the potential to support NQSW to address issues that are related to their work but are at the same time personal and emotional. In some cases, this has been crucial to allow NQSW to better understand their emotions, and address issues that could otherwise be a barrier to their continuity in the profession.

“[the mentor] has been that bit of glue that has helped me to stay in the profession. I spoke to them about different jobs that I had seen advertised and they rightly told me “[don’t make any decision now] just because your grass doesn’t look greener, let's look at what is bugging you and what is making you feel that way because that is what we have control over, rather than applying for a different job and just moving from one situation to another and not addressing why you feel the way you do". So that helped massively.”

(NQSW)

**Protected time for focused work:** for some NQSW, it was particularly helpful to block adequate time slots for complex tasks such as preparing for court cases and report writing. Within this time, NQSW worked in “do not disturb” mode, only replying to essential communications, and this supported greater productivity. The ability to focus on complex tasks also contributed to reducing the margin for error, with more time to think and double-check things – improving their confidence and wellbeing.

“I had the chance to do that [have protected time] and it was great to get more things done and to be able to focus on things that are not easy to do.”

(NQSW)

With remote working becoming a permanent approach – as more LAs are moving into hybrid modes some participants highlighted the importance of initiatives such as protected time for focused work to support productivity and focus without affecting wellbeing.

## 3.3 Challenges in relation to NQSW development

This section presents some of the key challenges faced by NQSW during and after the COVID-19 pandemic. While many of these challenges are related to the pandemic, most of them are likely to remain to a certain extent, after the restrictions are fully lifted, as many LAs are looking into implementing hybrid – partly office-based and partly remote – models of working.

**Reduced informal support:** working remotely and not being in an office environment reduced the opportunities for NQSW to spontaneously ask questions and have conversations about their work. This had a great impact on how they felt supported, and for some, this also affected their confidence and wellbeing.

“If I was in the office I would just pop into manager's office and say 'oh I am struggling with this and I am nervous about this, could you help me?' but when you are working remotely and you are not having daily contact with your manager it is more complicated.”

(NQSW)

“Sometimes you want to run past ideas (…) and say "this happened, I have done this, this, and this, is there anything I missed?" And [before] I could see the manager and gauge what is the best time to pop in and talk, and now you have this thing “should I video call him now?” and I ended up doing is build up a list of things before making a call (…). Maybe that is better for them [managers] but it is less reassuring for me.”

(NQSW)

Online communication is "more clinical" and "you often lose the timing for an important conversation" (practice educator) and NQSW often feel that issues considered minor are not a reason for setting up a call. For NQSW, the lack of informality in online relationships significantly impacted their ability to spontaneously seek advice and support. This also affected their confidence and often they reported feeling alone in their work.

**Limited opportunities to learn from colleagues:** NQSW highlighted the importance of shadowing colleagues as a key element of their practice learning. Participants raised that through shadowing colleagues, NQSW are able to experience different ways of practising – for example how to build a rapport with an individual; how to conduct an assessment – and build their own style and professional identity.

“it was good to see how others were doing, and often I would learn things that I never thought before (…). Sometimes I also saw things that I thought was not good practice but it still helped to understand what I shouldn’t do.”

(NQSW)

As illustrated above, observing colleagues is central to providing NQSW with a reference to develop their own practice style. Opportunities for shadowing have significantly reduced during the pandemic, meaning that NQSW qualifying in this period have had limited experiences and may need extra opportunities to learn from colleagues and develop their practice.

**Limited opportunities for incidental learning:** NQSW reported that a good proportion of their learning happens in a shared office environment, when they have the opportunity to listen to colleagues discussing cases or talking on the phone with individuals.

“That has helped me a lot, to hear other people’s conversation (…), you get to hear how different people are dealing with things, the issues and obstacles they are having and that expands your knowledge, I have learnt so much, even with processes to have someone by your side to say “actually your core group is due”, so it was definitely a challenge to not have these things.”

(NQSW)

As well as providing them with an opportunity to learn from colleagues, incidental learning was also key for receiving informal feedback and reassurance when, for example, they would have “had a difficult phone call with an individual a colleague could talk to them after hearing the conversation and reassure that them saying that they have done a great job” (HEI programme director).

**Limitations in learning to undertake face-to-face assessments:** with most assessments happening virtually, most NQSW have had very limited opportunities to learn how to collect non-verbal information including environmental cues (such as home conditions, cleanliness, objects that indicate individual’s preferences for hobbies) body language, and interactions between family members.

“When you are physically in an environment there are cues, you can make observations and you don’t have to always ask the question, you can see or hear other things happening in the house, it might be children upstairs, or noisy neighbours, you can see if they are managing their home well (…) so there is a lot that you can pick up.”

(HEI programme director)

Restrictions related to the pandemic have limited or, in some cases, deprived NQSW of having face to face assessment experience and developing their observational skills. Some of them "have never knocked at somebody's door" (Practice Learning Coordinator) until recently and have missed opportunities to learn how to collect information and make assessments.

## 3.4 Challenges in relation to wellbeing

Some of the challenges experience by NQSW due to the pandemic directly impacted on their wellbeing.

**Difficulties in disconnecting from work:** most NQSW reported having difficulties in stopping thinking about cases and work tasks outside of working hours. Some used the same room for working and relaxing and found it challenging to unwind and disconnect.

“A lot of them were working in bedrooms and that kind of place, and depending on the nature of the work it could be quite emotional and mentally straining and the impacts on them are significant in terms of having that emotional trauma in their own homes (…). I had to say to one of the NQSW "you have to stop doing child protection work out of your bedroom, that is why you are not sleeping at night because you got all of that trauma that you are dealing with in your day job in the environment where you rest and sleep". I think that is really worrying.”

(Practice Learning Coordinator)

As illustrated above, NQSW often found it challenging to disconnect from work. Furthermore, having to use the same environment to work and relax meant that, in some cases, the emotional weight and trauma of complex cases were associated with their personal environment, triggering stress and anxiety in moments they were supposed to unwind.

NQSW also noted that the commute back home helped them to “leave things behind” (NQSW) and mark the separation between work and personal time. Not having this clear separation meant that disconnecting from work became increasingly more challenging over time.

**Isolation:** Most NQSW had very “limited face to face contact with their team” (Team Manager) and “not being able to be in an office environment meant that they felt isolated at times” (Practice Learning Coordinator). As previously outlined, the lack of informal support and spontaneous interactions further exacerbated feeling of isolation. NQSW raised that these forms of interaction and support were key in helping them to develop a sense of belonging to the team and to feel more connected to colleagues.

“There have been times over the last year or more that I doubted my choice to be a social worker (…). You get this qualification and you register as a social worker and then people automatically look at you as if you are the professional with all the answers (…) having that pressure without nobody to go and say "I am doubting myself today" is really hard, I didn't feel like I could go to my manager and say that.”

(NQSW)

The extract above illustrates one of the consequences of isolation. NQSW often reported that not being able to build meaningful work relationships with colleagues have led them to not feel comfortable sharing their work-related feelings. In some cases, these feelings have accumulated and have significantly affected their wellbeing prompting them to question their ability to remain in the profession.

**Lack of confidence:** reduced practice learning opportunities such as reduced placements and limited opportunities for shadowing and co-working, coupled with the lack of informal support and incidental learning have contributed to NQSW feeling less reassured and "their confidence was affected" (Service Manager). This has also led NQSW to feel unprepared for their practice.

“Found it difficult and felt disappointed that the learning experience was left short. Felt anxious and inexperienced [and unprepared] as a social worker.”

(NQSW workshop notes)

NQSW also reported not having the confidence to deal with the pressures of being a social worker in contexts where less support was available. For example, some NQSW were employed in understaffed services and had fewer opportunities for protected time and caseloads for development having to "hit the ground running" (NQSW) without feeling prepared for it and without further support in place due to lack of capacity in the service.

**Stress due to uncertainty about their future:** during the pandemic, particularly in the first half of the year, universities and Local Authorities worked in partnership to discuss and decide whether student placements should be suspended or continued. Given the unprecedented situation, universities and LAs met regularly to review their approach and make decisions accordingly. While this was seen as the best possible approach to respond to such an unprecedented situation, it has generated high levels of uncertainty and stress for NQSW. This also included uncertainty about their financial situation.

“Some had to finish their placements beyond the time and were not able to be employed in the time they planned.”

(Team manager)

“The hard thing was not knowing what was going to happen and the constant change in the scenario, then also everything else on top of that, being at home and all the other worries.”

(NQSW)

As highlighted in the above extracts, the uncertainty about their future was also combined with “all other worries” in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as financial pressures. As a result, NQSW reported having increased levels of stress and anxiety during this period, significantly affecting their wellbeing.

## 3.5 Wider context challenges

**Shortage of staff, staff recruitment and retention:** a good proportion of NQSW were employed in services with reduced staff capacity due to difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers. This has been – prior, during and after the COVID-19 pandemic – a “major barrier for supporting NQSW properly” (team manager) as it significantly reduces teams’ capacities to offer key support including protected caseloads and opportunities for shadowing and co-working. Participants also reported that in some LAs “mentoring was not happening anymore” (NQSW) and peer support groups “were not a priority” (NQSW) due to the pressures generated by the lack of capacity in some agencies.

“The reason I left children services is (…), because of the rotation, you have seniors who are only three years qualified and that is not ok (…) and working with high caseloads and little support, that is not sustainable. Because the team was so stretched, I wasn’t getting the supervision I thought I should be getting, and on top of that knowing that I was going to have to do the CPEL qualification this year made me decide.”

(NQSW)

The above extract illustrates how reduced capacity on teams can impact the level of support offered to NQSW, compromising working conditions and exacerbating the challenges related to staff retention.

“It seems to be a problem across the board, we always had issues with retention in children services but we never ever had issues with adult services and [now] we got teams in adult services that just cannot employ people, people aren’t applying.”

(Practice learning coordinator)

“We are losing a lot of staff to the health board (…) because they have better pay, better terms and conditions, better support and supervision within the workplace and they work the hours that they are paid to work.”

(Practice learning coordinators)

Issues around staff recruitment and retention have been persistent over the past years with some noting it being aggravated this year.

“Yes, you want fair pay and we all would like a bit more, but you don’t stay in your job because of the money, your stay in your job because it is bearable, hopefully enjoyable.”

(Team manager)

While participants also mentioned pay rates as one of the issues, most of them highlighted the working conditions, including support offered, work relationships, and protected learning opportunities - as key aspects for staff retention.

**Inconsistency in approaches across Wales (during the pandemic):** universities across Wales adopted contrasting approaches to practice learning during the pandemic. Some have suspended or cancelled placements while others carried it on in remote or blended modes.

“We were working with [four universities], university 1 continued with all of their placements, their view was that this is how social work is in practice so students should try to adapt to this as well. But then we had students from university 2 who had their placements cut and we also had students from university 3 who cut their placements as well. The biggest difficulty was that Social Care Wales was not giving any definitive guidance and every university was doing their own thing, and having students from four different universities made life very complicated (…). We were doing weekly catch-ups with students and I was meeting with this student and I saw a message flashing saying that students from that university were being pulled out, so I knew that but I didn’t know if the student knew that. So, I think it was the fluidity of how things were happening that made things more [challenging].”

(Practice learning coordinator)

As illustrated above, the variations in approach during the COVID-19 pandemic increased the difficulties in managing placements and supporting students. For participants, the fluidity in which the changes were happening, given the unpredictable pandemic scenario – was already a major challenge in itself. However, the inconsistency in approaches added an extra layer of difficulty as LAs had to adapt to a different approach and support students differently.

**Need to improve the national guidance for supporting NQSW's current needs:** participants highlighted the need to improve the national guidance to better outline strategies to support NQSW current needs. It was felt that this would help LAs to prioritise key areas of support and make changes to their work routine.

“I know that when it comes to implementing it [strategies for supporting NQSW], it will not happen because LAs have other priorities and those things are easily left to one side, especially in children’s services where things are so rushed.”

(NQSW)

“Sometimes we persuade people to get things in place [to support NQSW], and it doesn’t always happen (…). I think it would be good to have some official guidance that could help us to say “this is important, we need to do this”.

(Practice learning coordinator)

According to participants, not having clear definition of priorities for supporting NQSW, made it more difficult for individuals and teams to negotiate resources and implement strategies for support. In some cases, support strategies were not seen as a priority and NQSW were required to “hit the ground running” (NQSW) working on complex cases in their first few months of practice.

## 3.6 What support is needed?

This section presents participants views on types of support that are key for NQSW development in their first three years of practice. Participants discussed this taking into consideration the context of the COVID-19 pandemic when most NQSW had limited practice learning opportunities.

**Recognising their need for extra learning opportunities:** as previously outlined, NQSW faced a number of challenges that have had a significant impact on their practice learning process and wellbeing. Considering this, participants highlighted the importance of acknowledging the "need for extra support" (practice learning coordinator) and allowing "extra space for development" (HEI programme director) in their first three years of practice.

“For students it has been particularly difficult, particularly in relation to practice learning, it has been really, really hard.”

(HEI programme director)

“It didn’t feel normal, it has affected me and it knocked my confidence.”

(NQSW)

Participants often reported that the reduced opportunities for practice learning, including having a reduced number of days in placement and fewer opportunities for shadowing and co-working with colleagues, have significantly limited their confidence. Some reported that they "did not feel prepared" (NQSW) in their first months of practice. This highlights the importance of acknowledging the need for extra support to ensure that NQSW can access opportunities for development that they may have missed during the pandemic. Some of the key support suggested by participants are outlined below.

**More opportunities for relationship-building (within and across teams):** one of the key challenges reported by NQSW was in relation to the difficulties to build relationships with colleagues in a virtual environment. For most participants, virtual communication is "more clinical" and limited their ability to make informal and spontaneous interactions through which they can get to know their colleagues better. With more LAs moving to hybrid modes of work this is likely to remain a significant issue. Moreover, another possible issue is the fact that increasingly more LAs are adopting “agile working” approaches to office arrangements and may be hot-desking and not sitting with their team.

“Some LAs are already moving to agile working (…) we have some students working on those organisations and we had to address issues of isolation [with them], a small number of cases but I think that is going to potentially increase. So that is a challenge for the future, how NQSW will pick that incidental learning if there is no team room and if they are sitting next to different people every day when they are basically working in hot-desking centres and they come with their laptops and sit next to 'who knows really'.”

(HEI programme director)

As highlighted above, while restrictions related to the pandemic tend to be eased with time, new forms of arranging working environments can have negative impacts on NQSW’s work relationships. This may lead to NQSW feeling isolated and, as highlighted in section 3.4, may negatively affect their wellbeing.

This highlights the importance of creating strategies to support NQSW to build work relationships and improve their sense of belonging to the team and the institution more widely. To address this, some participants have highlighted the importance of having more opportunities for informal interactions and some of the suggestions included working pods and interdisciplinary teams (as outlined in section 3.2), and more opportunities for co-working and shadowing.

The importance of building relationships with colleagues from other teams, or relevant partner services was also considered. For NQSW this is particularly relevant to improve their knowledge on available services and how they operate, providing them with more autonomy to interact with services, confidently discuss cases where appropriate and make referrals. Some NQSW have had positive experiences in getting to know other services by having visitors coming to regular NQSW workshops (as outlined in section 3.2) where they had the opportunity to discuss their service and build relationships.

**Building peer support networks:** for NQSW, having colleagues with who they could rely upon and get support was crucial for their development. This was a key form of support they received during their qualification.

“That was a unique [form of support], like “right I need a phone call” “yeah no problem”, and we would have a catch up (…) and it is having that feeling that you are not on your own, because it was especially hard (…), that impostor syndrome I felt, and to have someone to tap you on my shoulder (…) and [help me to] realise that [other colleagues] were going through just as much hardship and struggle as I was.”

(NQSW)

Building meaningful relationships with colleagues can allow NQSW to discuss subjects that they usually don’t feel comfortable sharing with their teams and managers, but that can have a significant impact on their practice. This type of relationship allows them to be vulnerable with others and receive a level of support that can positively impact their practice and raise their resilience. While this type of relationship is built more spontaneously between peers, employers can provide opportunities for NQSW to meet and encourage the formation of support networks. Workshops, reflexive group supervisions, and co-working were some of the strategies adopted by LAs that participants found useful to connect and build meaningful relationships with NQSW or other colleagues.

**More opportunities for shadowing colleagues:** as discussed in section 3.3, a significant challenge for the recent cohorts of NQSW compared to pre-pandemic was having fewer opportunities to shadow their colleagues while working with individuals. NQSW argued that this is one of the most important parts of their learning process and it is when they can learn from experienced colleagues, reflect on their practice, and build their own professional identity. While shadowing colleagues they also have the opportunity to gain essential skills – including building rapport with individuals, questioning approaches, collecting information, and making assessments – that they would have only have discussed theoretically during their studies.

“I think that for some of them who have had very limited face-to-face experience, I would like to think that the first year in practice would [have] to help them to engage with that face to face [experience to develop their skills]”

(HEI programme director)

In one of the workshop sessions, NQSW have chosen “shadowing opportunities to widen experiences” (NQSW workshop notes) as the top priority for support, while other NQSW frequently mentioned the importance of having more opportunities for shadowing as essential for their development going forward.

**Protected caseload (considering number and complexity of cases):** this was highlighted by participants as an essential support, to allow NQSW to have the space and time needed for their development in the first year of practice. However, in some cases, NQSW did not have the opportunity to work with protected caseloads as a result of a lack of capacity in services – in most cases due to low staffing levels.

“I was doing core groups on my own, two weeks in I was given a caseload and I was like ‘I don't know what I am doing, I am not ready for this’ (…) I was treated as an experienced member of staff. I even had a colleague who was doing section 47 joint investigation without the training.”

(NQSW)

“[in the child protection team] I was working with caseloads of 20-plus kids and that was too much.”

(NQSW)

“And still, NQSW are going to child protection teams that have got no staff and within the first couple of months they got twenty cases, and this is not good.”

(Team manager)

As illustrated above, some NQSW were often working under pressure having levels of responsibility that were beyond their capacity. This highlights the importance of offering NQSW time and opportunities for development – such as shadowing, co-working, training – in their first year of practice and having a protected caseload was considered to be a key condition to allow them to access these opportunities and to gradually build their skills and confidence. Protected caseloads should consider not only the “maximum number of cases but [more importantly] the complexity of the cases assigned to them” (NQSW workshop notes), allowing them time to gain further experience and skills before engaging with complex work such as court cases, chairing meetings, conferences, and complex assessments.

**Extended induction period:** to offer protected time for extra support needs in their first year of practice including training, shadowing, co-working, reflexive mentoring/supervision, personal reading, and for having practical experiences that they might have missed during their placements as a result of lockdown restrictions. This is linked to the issue of protected caseloads, which would enable more induction-related activities to take place.

“They need a longer and more substantial induction period (…) that give them some of those experiences that they have not had, going and spending time in a residential centre for the elderly, or people with disabilities or children, so they are getting a lot more experience in terms of that hands-on working with people, learning to deal with uncertainty and challenge because on a virtual world they have missed out.”

(Practice learning coordinator)

A longer and improved induction period was also raised in one of the workshop sessions and was listed as the top priority for support for that group. For this group, the induction should offer better opportunities for building a relationship with colleagues and to get to know specific systems – such as case recording systems – and processes, particularly the ones that are specifically used by their employers and are not generally known.

In general, participants highlighted that a more robust and extended induction period, along with protected caseloads, would allow NQSW to access the extra learning opportunities needed.

**Mentoring:** as discussed in section 3.2, some NQSW have reported the benefits of having access to mentoring. This can be a key form of support for NQSW that can help them to improve their practice as well as improve their wellbeing.

“[in the service sometimes] you are [encouraged to] think inside a box, whereas the mentor was able to break that down and say "what could you have done different, let's think about it” and really break it down and give the time and space for that thinking to happen, and I think there has been no other opportunity for me to do that outside of the mentoring sessions. And that is going to be valuable for practice going forward, without that you would allow the LAs to really shape your practice.”

(NQSW)

For NQSW, having discussions about their practice that was not focused on their caseloads, giving them a valuable space for reflection that helped them to make better sense of their practice and further develop their professional identity. As well as contributing to the development of NQSW’s skills, mentoring has supported them to significantly improve their resilience and wellbeing.

“People say that [with time] you gain confidence, that you acquire more confidence (…) so confidence is an upwards trajectory, in this job I feel like I am in a cycle, I don't think I am confident, I gain confidence, I stumble upon something (…) and I lose my confidence and it goes around like that. And I soon as I worked that out in my head I thought "this is ok" (…), realising that cycle has helped me in my practice and helped me to stay in my job.”

(NQSW)

Another important aspect of mentoring is supporting NQSW to understand their emotions that are related to their practice. As illustrated above, discussing their work-related feelings can contribute to normalising those feelings, helping them to accept that these are a natural part of their development. This is essential for the development of their resilience and can be a key factor in determining if they will cope with challenges and stay in the profession.

**NQSW Workshops:** workshops have been suggested by participants as an important space for both providing NQSW with essential guidance and training as well as providing a space for NQSW to get to know colleagues and peers.

“Workshops for NQSW [have been important] to discuss the essentials of their practice and go through systems and processes in detail to give them more confidence. It is also key for us to check in with each of them and make sure they are all right as well as give them the opportunity to meet other NQSW.”

(Team manager)

“At the moment I am attending newly qualified workshops once a fortnight and they have been invaluable (…), I met people I didn’t know that qualified from different universities.”

(NQSW)

Both the practice learning coordinators who run workshops and the NQSW who attended them consistently highlighted the value of this initiative and reported significant benefits to NQSW’s practice. This was seen as an important platform for keeping in touch and increasing NQSW’s confidence, by providing detailed guidance and encouraging relationship-building with peers.

**Opportunities for reflexive practice:** as previously outlined, having opportunities to reflect on their practices and work-related feelings have played an important role in helping NQSW to improve resilience and cope with challenges. However, not many NQSW have had the opportunity to work in teams with the capacity and resources to offer these opportunities.

“Everyone knows that resilience is a combination of stuff, some of the things are supervision, team support, your personal stuff and work-life balance (…) [previously] my supervision wasn’t addressing my emotional wellbeing, it was really case led, it was like “have you done this this and this?” it was ticking box exercise. That is not real supervision it is not real reflection. We are talking about really wanting people to be critically reflective on their practice, which is what they are suggesting when we need to do the CPEL [qualification], so you need to prioritise giving social workers the space to do that [reflection] and for that to be inherited in their practice, [but] now you are forcing people to work all the time in situations that are really high stressful, and they are overloaded (…), social workers are leaving the profession, I can’t remember exactly but the life expectancy of a social worker in children’s services is like two or three years. So that is not ok. What can we do as a body that can change that? (…) If they [SCW] want more resilient social workers they need to work with the Welsh Government and prioritise this.”

(NQSW)

Participants expressed in a number of ways that NQSW often “don’t have much time to think” (NQSW) and that their work routine is “very busy” and at times overwhelming. A number of factors contributed to this, with the key ones being lack of capacity within teams, and lack of priority given to reflexive practice. To improve this, participants suggested a variety of strategies (most outlined in section 3.2 and in this section) including extended induction periods, protected caseloads to provide time and space for reflection, coupled with reflexive mentoring/supervision, time for personal reading, and workshops.

## 3.7 Training needs identified

Participants discussed opportunities for training and raised some key themes for NQSW’s development in the first three years of practice. In this section, we present the key themes for training raised by participants that were considered essential for their development.

**Tailored support vs general training packages:** while participants recognised the importance of training packages for NQSW, most of them tended to find it more important to prioritise forms of support that can be better tailored to individuals and groups.

“I think training programmes are ok, I think the issues will have to be dealt with in supervision, coming back to that reflective stage and better identify where they think that their (…) learning is lacking, I think supervision will play a key part and the buddy/mentoring system will give that informal supervision.”

(Team manager)

Participants often emphasised the value of tailored support as the most effective form of support for NQSW. As illustrated above, through supervision, mentoring or buddy systems NQSW would have the chance to reflect on their practice and discuss strategies for their development based on their particular circumstances. This is particularly relevant considering that NQSW coming from different universities had different experiences as a result of inconsistency in approaches adopted nationally (as outlined in section 3.5).

For example, NQSW who had the length of their placement significantly reduced may not have had enough experience with face-to-face assessments and would therefore need more focus on developing skills for collecting information and making assessments of individual's needs. Other NQSW may have had the opportunity to complete their placements but may have not had opportunities to develop interpersonal skills, such as building rapport with individuals, and could benefit from having more opportunities to shadow colleagues interacting with individuals.

Despite the tendency of prioritising tailored support, some participants recognised the importance of training packages for NQSW and suggested some topics of priority for training. Some of the key topics are listed below.

**Assessments, relationship-building and communication with individuals:** taking into account the limited opportunities for conducting and shadowing face-to-face assessments, participants considered relevant training on assessments skills. This could include: building face-to-face rapport with individuals; observational skills; reading non-verbal communication including body language; collecting and interpreting environmental cues; how to ask questions and encourage individuals to engage in conversation; and safety while interacting with individuals.

**IT skills:** with more LAs adopting hybrid approaches to work, online communication tools are likely to become a permanent part of the NQSW work tool kit. Considering this, participants suggested training on new tools for online communication with individuals and collaboration with colleagues, as well as training on specific software utilised by their employers such as systems for case recording.

**What to expect from, and how to make the most of, supervision:** participants often highlighted the importance of high-quality supervision for developing NQSW practice and supporting their wellbeing. While the quality of the supervision is mostly the responsibility of managers and supervisors, participants raised the importance of providing NQSW with knowledge on types of supervision, what is good supervision, as well as how they can actively engage with, and contribute to, improving the quality of the supervision and maximise the benefits.

**Managing people (for team managers)**: for participants, NQSW experiences were greatly impacted by their managers’ ability to nurture, empower and provide good conditions for development. In many cases, the lack of capacity of teams and services was the main cause for poor-quality or infrequent supervision and people management. This led to too little attention being given to NQSW’s wellbeing. However, in some cases, participants identified issues in management style and ineffectiveness in managing teams' relationships and individuals' wellbeing. Based on this, it was highlighted the importance of providing managers with opportunities to develop management skills focused on positive relationships and wellbeing, such as compassionate management and other compatible approaches.

**Wellbeing and self-care:** considering the challenges faced by NQSW and the impacts on their wellbeing, participants highlighted the importance of offering opportunities for self-development. This could include stress management techniques, mindfulness, creating positive habits, and strategies for developing their resilience. It is important to highlight that while training on the suggested themes are useful and can help to support NQSW development, they are in addition to and not a replacement for, those forms of support that can provide them with space and time to reduce the causes of stress (as outlined in section 3.6).

# Conclusion

This research analysed the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on NQSW’s practice learning experiences across Wales. It explored the positive aspects of their development including examples of good practices, outlined the key challenges faced, and considered ideas on key forms of support for NQSW's first three years of practice.

The research utilised a qualitative approach to capture participants’ experiences of the pandemic and identify key impacts on NQSW’s practice learning process. A good range of people working with NQSW, and both universities and Las, were interviewed. It should be noted however, that although 14 NQSW did take part in either an interview or a workshop, recruitment to the project was challenging due to the lack of time that NQSW had. In particular it would have been helpful to talk to more than one NQSW who had graduated in 2019.

The workshops and interviews elicited a good depth of qualitative data and a range of experiences and ideas. It is worth noting that there was a great deal of agreement between the groups regarding the key issues, although they had different perspectives on the wider system. This is of benefit to the implementation of any changes as there is a sense of shared goals and preferred outcomes, even if there may be some differences in exactly how to achieve those.

Participants identified several relevant aspects of their practice learning process that have been significantly impacted by restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic. These aspects were organised under three main headings, as below.

Positive experiences of NQSW during the COVID-19 pandemic: participants identified aspects that have positively affected their practice learning experience, including:

* Strong partnership between universities and local authorities
* Working from home can be more productive
* Improving NQSW’s resilience
* Better use of technology in their work.

Good practices supporting NQSW:

* NQSW workshops
* Peer support opportunities
* Alternative and informal forms of communication – staying in touch with peers
* Opportunities to meet other teams and get to know relevant services
* Working pods – children services
* Multidisciplinary teams
* Mentoring
* Protected time for focused work.

As well as identifying the positive aspects of their development and good practices, participants outlined the key challenges NQSW faced while working towards their qualifications during the COVID-19 pandemic. These challenges affected their development reducing the learning opportunities available as well as impacting on their relationships and wellbeing. Some of the key challenges included.

Challenges to NQSW development:

* Reduced informal support
* Limited opportunities to learn from colleagues
* Limited opportunities for incidental learning
* Limitations in learning to undertake assessments.

Challenges to wellbeing:

* Difficulties in disconnecting from work
* Isolation
* Lack of confidence
* Stress due to uncertainty about their future.

Wider context challenges:

* Shortage of staff, staff recruitment and retention
* Inconsistency in approaches across Wales (during the pandemic)
* Need for national guidance for supporting NQSW's current needs.

Considering the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on NQSW’s development, participants reflected and contributed with their views on responses to NQSW support needs in the first three years of practice. Further opportunities for practice learning, relationship-building and wellbeing support were three of the main themes suggested. These included a range of support strategies:

* Recognising their needs for extra learning opportunities
* More opportunities for relationship-building (within and across teams)
* Building support networks
* More opportunities for shadowing colleagues
* Protected caseload (considering number and complexity of cases)
* Extended induction period
* Mentoring
* NQSW workshops
* Opportunities for reflexive practice.

Complementing this, participants discussed further opportunities for learning and training. A proportion of participants tended to find it more important to prioritise tailored forms of support (such as listed above) over training packages. However, participants still recognised the importance of training and suggested some key topics of training to support NQSW, as listed below.

* Assessments, relationship building and communication with individuals
* IT skills
* What to expect from and how to make the most of supervisions
* Managing people (for team managers)
* Wellbeing and self-care.

# Recommendations

As outlined previously, some of the key impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on NQSW’s experiences are in relation to their practice learning process, relationship building, and wellbeing. These are mainly linked to reduced learning opportunities due to restrictions related to the pandemic and low capacity and high pressure on services due to issues around staff retention and recruitment. These two factors appeared to be underlying most challenges described by participants and have had a great impact on NQSW experience by limiting their development opportunities. To contribute to mitigating and addressing the causes of challenges faced by NQSW, the following strategies are recommended.

These recommendations are particularly relevant to the following groups:

* Policy leads
* Local authority employers
* Managers and social workers supporting NQSW
* Training and development teams, practice educators, practice learning coordinators, and higher education institutions (HEI).

## At a policy level, making NQSW’s wellbeing and improved working conditions a priority

As highlighted by participants, the conditions and the environment in which NQSW are working can directly affect their wellbeing. This was considered to be one of the key reasons for NQSW to leave their jobs or even the profession. Some of the factors contributing to this include: the level of support received; the relationships with colleagues and managers; opportunities for learning and development; and building a sense of purpose and motivation.

While some of the significant underlying capacity issues are not the focus of this report, some recommendations require relatively low levels of resourcing and could improve capacity, if staff remain in post for longer. Those groups supporting NQSW wanted to implement some of the recommendations set out below, but felt they needed a policy steer in order to make a case to do so.

## Recognising NQSW’s needs for further support and allowing extra time for development

This can be achieved by implementing the following strategies:

**Extended induction periods:** to offer protected time and reduced pressure for accessing further opportunities for development such as shadowing, co-working, reflexive mentoring, workshops, and training.

**Protected caseloads:** to allow NQSW to learn gradually and build confidence prior to engaging with more complex cases. This should also give NQSW more capacity to prioritise other forms of support as outlined below.

## Supporting NQSW’s wellbeing

Wellbeing during the pandemic has significantly affected NQSW's practice learning experience. Participants often reported challenges that were directly or indirectly related to work-related feelings and wellbeing. Offering a supportive work environment and opportunities for reflection appeared as key for supporting wellbeing. This could be best supported with:

**Opportunities for reflection:** naming work-related feelings, having awareness of stress and anxiety triggers at work, and building strategies for overcoming feelings, are some of the outcomes that can significantly improve NQSW’s wellbeing and resilience. These opportunities can be offered in different formats and may work differently for each individual. Reflexive mentoring/supervision is one of the strategies that worked well for the majority of participants, but other formats such as peer support and reflexive group discussions were also mentioned.

**Mentoring or ‘buddy’ systems:** having an experienced colleague who is external to their own team to engage in regular reflexive conversations about NQSW’s practice and work-related feelings. This can offer an important space for NQSW to overcome wellbeing challenges and improve resilience.

**Peer support opportunities:** in groups or pairs, these opportunities can offer a safe space where NQSW can talk about their vulnerabilities, share their experiences, receive and give support.

**Opportunities for informal support:** these are types of support that NQSW receive spontaneously while sharing the same space with colleagues. It is an opportunity to ask questions as they emerge, build conversations, receive spontaneous feed-backs and reassurance. These opportunities can be offered in a variety of formats, for example, for LAs operating in hybrid modes (partly office and partly remote-based), managers can make sure that team members are doing the same office hours and working together for most of the day. In a remote working set-up, managers can encourage team members to arrange a regular catch-up video chats to talk about their day and share experiences.

**Disconnecting from work:** working in personal environments at home and working beyond working hours were major barriers for NQSW to disconnect and unwind from work. Offering more office-based opportunities for individuals facing these issues can be effective. If working remotely, offering protected focused time can be helpful in providing a few hours a day with reduced communication, where NQSW can focus on complex tasks. This helps them to complete key tasks and to confidently stop working at the end of the day. This can also be coupled with proactive advice or checklists from mentors, managers, practice educators, HR or occupational health on how to set up their work environment at home in a way to reduce the triggers for stress.

## Improving opportunities for relationship building

With more local authorities moving to hybrid working approaches and agile-working office arrangements, issues around isolation and relationship are likely to remain a key challenge for NQSW. To improve this, we suggest the following strategies.

**Providing space for group interactions:** this could be implemented in a number of formats such as workshops, coffee/tea breaks, reflexive group discussions, and team retreats. This should be offered in a format that encourages informal and spontaneous interactions, as opposed to a more structured activity such as training sessions or meetings.

**Opportunities for co-working:** although this is an effective strategy for practice learning, it can be equally useful in supporting NQSW to get to know colleagues better, to identify individuals' strengths and actively seek support from different colleagues according to specific needs.

**Adopting alternative forms of communication:** group chats, such as WhatsApp, can provide a platform for more spontaneous communication between peers, offering a space for asking questions, gaining support, and getting to know colleagues.

**Opportunities to meet other services:** spending time in other relevant services to provide NQSW with the opportunity to get to know colleagues from other services as well as to learn about the service itself.

**Interdisciplinary teams or work pods:** this is are valuable strategies in providing NQSW with the opportunity to work closely with colleagues from different services and can contribute to increasing NQSW's sense of belonging, motivation, and sense of purpose.

**Encouraging shared working sessions:** this could be through video calls or face-to-face. It consists of NQSW connecting or meeting with colleagues to work together for a set amount of time and informally interacting while working. With no expectations for longer conversations, this can offer a space for spontaneous interactions encouraging relationship building.

## Extra learning opportunities

Considering NQSW's limited access to learning opportunities during the pandemic, further opportunities could be offered to support their development and increase their confidence in practice. Some key learning opportunities are recommended below. However, we highlight the importance of tailoring development opportunities according to individuals' needs designed with their participation.

**Further opportunities for co-working shadowing colleagues:** this is considered one of the main forms of practice learning for NQSW, helping them to develop their practice style and professional identity. As face-to-face work with individuals returns, these opportunities should remain available to NQSW for an extended period.

**Opportunities for incidental learning:** with hybrid working becoming permanent in many LAs, we recommend that opportunities to spend time with their teams in a shared office environment are prioritised. As previously outlined, one way of implementing this is to encourage team members to adopt the same office days/hours to work together in the same environment for most of the day.

**Learning (face-to-face) assessments, court work, and other complex tasks:** NQSW have had limited opportunities to shadow and practice face-to-face assessments and court work. Based on this, we suggest that NQSW are offered extended opportunities for shadowing complex cases, to access extra training including mock courts and assessments, and to have protected time for reading and getting familiarised with complex cases.

**NQSW workshops:** regular workshops can be a valuable platform to provide NQSW with essential information and training on key processes and procedures. They also offer a safe space for NQSW to ask questions that they don't feel comfortable asking more experienced colleagues, and the opportunity to meet peers and build their support network.

**Interdisciplinary teams or work pods:** this is a strategy for developing relationships but it is equally beneficial as an extra learning strategy. Working with other professionals can help NQSW to develop a holistic understanding of cases and better understand the support system.

**Extra training:** to further support NQSW practice learning, we recommend that additional training is made available and NQSW have time ringfenced for it. The themes suggested below are identified as common themes across the majority of NQSW's needs. However, it is important to highlight that training should be delivered along with tailored support to address individual and team specific needs.

Some of the key themes are:

* + Assessments, relationship building and communication with individuals
  + Court work skills
  + What to expect from and how to make the most of supervisions
  + Managing people (for team managers), including compassionate management
  + Wellbeing and self-care, including disconnecting from work and protecting personal time and space
  + IT skills, including basic software, specific systems – such as case recording – online communication etiquette, and effective ways to engage with individuals and colleagues through online communication.

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