Further information about holistic assessment against the professional capabilities framework (PCF)

The PCF is a professional development framework for social work. As such it can be used as a diagnostic tool to identify areas for development and support during the ASYE, rather than a list of required ‘competences’ against which evidence needs to be provided.

The assessment of an NQSW's ASYE is based in their practice and is undertaken and owned by their employer. The expectation is that the knowledge and skills gained through qualifying education will be consolidated in the first year of practice, and that specialist knowledge and skills will be developed in relation to the employment setting and service user group. The standards for the assessment are contained in the professional capabilities framework (PCF). The PCF describes the standard for all social workers, from pre-admission to qualifying education through to Principal Social Worker. Therefore, the PCF is relevant not only to NQSWs, but also for the social worker colleagues who will have responsibility for them as an NQSW.

The use of the PCF is pivotal to ensuring the achievement of professional expertise, judgement and confidence which are central to the reforms outlined by the Social Work Task Force and to the recommendations for improvement in professional practice outlined by Professor Munro The holistic assessment of capability signals a shift away from a competence based approach to assessment and demands a new focus on the way that assessment is undertaken.

"Holistic assessment of learning is used where learning or performance objectives are inter-related and complex" according to The College of Social Work's Understanding what is meant by Holistic assessment. This type of assessment is particularly suitable for social work where the development of professional judgement and practice requires the interplay of all the capabilities because only this interaction - this holistic approach - can reflect the complexity of social work practice.

By contrast, the hitherto widely-used competency-based assessment at its most extreme had a danger of becoming a 'tick box' exercise reflecting a reductionist approach. This ignored the dynamic complexity of social work and impeded analytical understanding of professional roles and responsibilities and of the process of professional development.

Who is the assessor

The only formal requirement of eligibility to be an assessor for the ASYE is that he or she should be a registered social worker. In practice, this role has commonly been undertaken by the NQSW's line manager, another more experienced social worker, or by a practice educator. The key requirement is that whoever the assessor is, they
understand the standards against which the NQSW is to be judged, and are able to make accurate, valid and robust judgements. There will be situations where the responsibility for case management and reflective supervision and assessment will be split, because the line manager is not a social worker or for other operational reasons. A number of possible arrangements are shown in the fictional case studies.

**Definition of holistic assessment of ASYE**

The following paragraphs take The College of Social Work's principles for holistic assessment for all levels of the PCF and apply them specifically to the assessment of the ASYE.

1. **Progressive assessment**

   Assessment is no longer a 'snapshot' of a competence demonstrated at a point in time, but is a demonstration of progressive development over the year, culminating in evidence of consistently reaching the standard required. For the ASYE this will require assessors, wherever possible, to have knowledge of the candidates and their development over the year in order to judge whether that development of overall capability has been evidenced over time. This is illustrated within the fictional case studies of Simon, Jane, Joanne and the fictional example assessment reports for Farida Begum and Graham Knight.

2. **Consistency with the PCF level descriptor**

   The PCF provides navigation points to identify the standard that is required. At ASYE, the 'level descriptor' makes a comparison with the qualifying student level:

   "By the end of the ASYE social workers should have consistently demonstrated practice in a wider range of tasks and roles, and have become more effective in their interventions, thus building their own confidence, and earning the confidence of others. They will have more experience and skills in relation to a particular setting and user group, and have demonstrated ability to work effectively on more complex situations. They will seek support in supervision appropriately, whilst starting to exercise initiative and evaluate their own practice."

   Click here for the full ASYE level descriptor.

   This description should not be taken on its own. Although the capability statements should not be assessed separately, taken overall they describe the expectation at ASYE in the context of the level of complexity, risk and autonomous working. To help with assessing at the right standard, assessors are advised to familiarise themselves with the level descriptors for end of last placement and for the social worker level, together with the capability statements relevant to the domains at these levels. This will help to pinpoint the requirements for the ASYE, sitting as it does between the two.
In making this holistic assessment of practice the assessor needs to be satisfied that the standards have been met across all of the nine domains. This will be based on their observations of and discussions with the NQSW, as well as on feedback from colleagues, other professionals and people who need care and support, together with their written evidence. In practice, the capabilities are so interrelated, reflecting the complexity of practice, that failure in one domain is likely to signal a failure in a number of others.

3. Use of the individual capability statements
The PCF's capability statements should not be simply ticked off as individually achieved one after another. As noted above, the individual statements are great for pinpointing the overall requirements within each domain, but to attempt to sign off each one would be to return the exercise to the very 'tick box' problem that has been associated with competence-based assessment until now. However, the individual statements will help when identifying gaps or areas for development or concern. The expectation is that the statements will be used to review, personal development planning and performance management. It is anticipated that looking at the individual capability statements may help assessors with making and articulating their judgements. See the case study for Joanne and assessment report for Sally Mills.

4. The importance of critical reflection
Central to social work practice and to the development of professional judgement and expertise is the ability of every social worker to critically reflect on their work, including making reference to sources of knowledge that have informed the intervention. Although there is a specific domain in the PCF that describes the capability for critical reflection, in practice the nine domains interact. An instance of this is that the development of critical reflection runs through professional practice right across the PCF.

The expectation is that the development of critical reflection during the ASYE is supported through reflective supervision processes, but also that the NQSW builds on this and makes progress by writing up their analysis. It is desirable that evidence of progression in critical reflection will be found in the majority of the pieces of evidence that support the final assessment decision.

See case study Simon and Isabella. NQSWs and supervisors/assessors will find the Principles for evidencing critical reflection useful when considering the development of this fundamental area of capability.

5. Feedback from people who need care and support
The use of critical reflection in the development of practice has at its core a response to feedback from the person or people being supported. Holistic assessment requires that the development of practice starts from the analysis of the person's situation and reflection on all aspects of the intervention. At every stage of their work, social workers are expected to consider, obtain evidence of, and respond appropriately to, the views of the people they are supporting about the social work intervention and the professional relationship the social worker has with them. There is no single correct way by which a social worker should seek feedback, and indeed
best practice would dictate that the process and tools could differ according to situation and those supported.

6. Evidence and the assessor’s professional judgement

There is no prescribed list of evidence types or quantity of evidence that should be submitted for assessment. However, a number of employers have said that, based on their experience of past NQSW frameworks and their understanding of ASYE, the following are likely to be most helpful to show sufficient evidence of capability:

- Supervision records, see case studies Simon and Jane.
- Direct formal observation, see case study Isabella.
- Work products (e.g. case records, reports, etc), see case studies Jane, Anya and Simon.
- Critical reflection, including a piece of evidence based on direct practice written towards the end of the ASYE year, see case study Simon. Feedback from people who need care and support, see case study Simon, Anya.

Additionally, The College of Social Work will be asking employers as part of their quality assurance process to provide evidence that they have based their judgement on evidence that meets the following requirements:

- observations of a range of examples of practice
- in different settings and at different times
- by different observers made by those capable of making reliable assessments with reference to known and agreed criteria or standards (in this case, the PCF).

The types of evidence suggested above, taken from a range of cases, people and occasions, should provide a breadth of evidence over the period of the ASYE on which the assessor can make a robust judgement.

Therefore in the production of evidence for the ASYE, the following people have complementary responsibilities:

1. the NQSW, for providing evidence of growth and development to the standard required by the ASYE across all nine domains of the PCF
2. the employer, for offering opportunities for NQSW development across all nine domains of the PCF via the learning agreement and periodic review
3. the assessor, for gathering a range of evidence from the NQSW and others across all nine domains of the PCF.

Holistic assessment places the responsibility on the assessor for the judgement of the NQSW’s development over the nine capabilities. The assessment is based on on-going interaction with, and progressive assessment by the assessor; decisions are made taking the whole breadth of evidence into account. In using their professional judgement on sufficiency, the assessor should record progression,
and/or concerns, in order that the final decision that they make is evidence-based. The information on informing judgements may be useful in thinking about how assessors can be supported to develop confidence in their judgements and decisions, especially when they are new to the process.