

# **Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) child and family**

Annual report to the Department for Education

April 2021–March 2022

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## **Section 1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Acknowledgements**

Skills for Care would like to acknowledge the hard work and commitment of all the employers and employees that are involved in the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) for child and family.

We would particularly like to thank those organisations that participated in the review visits.

### **1.2 Overview**

Skills for Care is the employer-led workforce development body for social care in England.

In 2018 we were appointed by the Department for Education (DfE) to manage the support to child and family services with the delivery of the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment programme.

In the period since then we have worked with programmes to build a collective understanding about how the ASYE is being delivered in children's services across the country; to support the development of a consistent approach across programmes; also, to respond to the significant developments associated with the pandemic and in relation to equality, diversity, and inclusion.

This is the fourth report published since 2018 all of which reflect the journey that ASYE programmes, newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) and assessors have been on over this time.

This report covers a period where employers, the Department for Education and Skills for Care have all been making the transition from the reactive/responsive stance required when the pandemic first started, to a more proactive position. It seeks therefore to build on the learning from this period and reference a course of action that will continue to support employers to meet the needs of NQSWs in a changed working environment.

The report brings together both quantitative and qualitative data and information from a broad range of sources including:

- The NQSW registration portal
- National fora
- National events
- In-depth employer quality assurance review visits
- The 360-degree organisational evaluation tool
- Self-managed action learning for supervisors/assessors
- Action learning facilitation training – refresher and consultancy project
- The annual ASYE survey

Section 2 discusses relevant key messages from the sources outlined above.

Section 3 focuses on specific areas that we have been tasked to explore by the Department for Education – COVID-19 recovery; support for assessors; and racial diversity and inclusion within the ASYE

Section 4 draws together the learning from all sources and offers recommendations in the form of reflective questions. It also indicates the next steps for the further development of the ASYE framework.

Section 5 includes appendices which provide further detail of information provided in the report.

### **1.3 Executive summary**

The purpose of this report is to provide an update about ASYE activity that has taken place in 2021-22 and share the learning with employers and the Department for Education (DfE). It also references the areas for future development in 2022 and beyond.

2021–22 has been a significant year for the ASYE:

- The pandemic has shaped much of the activity, with COVID and COVID-19 recovery in particular, continuing to present a major force for change. While employers, NQSWs and assessors continue to experience challenges, the opportunities for future development are also emerging
- The focus on NQSW wellbeing has been emphasised, particularly in view of increasing anecdotal evidence about post-ASYE retention issues.
- The needs of assessors have been highlighted as pivotal in addressing the support requirements of NQSWs although there is a mixed picture with regards to the support that is available for them.
- Disparities in the success rates of NQSWs from different ethnic backgrounds have come to light following analysis of the NQSW registration portals (adults as well as children).

In response to these highlighted areas the DfE, Skills for Care and employers have collaborated to:

1. Reduce the burden on NQSWs and assessors through the refreshing of the ASYE framework including the assessment documentation, guidance, and templates
2. Increase the focus on quality assurance within the ASYE framework, further embedded quality assurance visits and introduce peer reviewers within this process.
3. Reinforce the voice of the NQSW through the establishment of a quarterly NQSW national forum
4. Amplify the needs of assessors through a separate quarterly forum and action learning support
5. Establish commitments around racial diversity within the ASYE through adding and revising the ASYE evaluation criteria and implementing an action plan.

The breadth of activity associated with these areas has been ongoing throughout the year, and it has reflected a gradual transition from being reactive and responsive to fast changing circumstances, to a more proactive approach building on learning and direct experience to set the scene for the next level of ASYE development.

## Section 2. Learning from different sources

### 2.1 The NQSW registration portal

In 2019-20 there were 3065 NQSW registrations. The numbers dipped in 2020-21 to 2799, but it is positive to note that they recovered in 2021-22 and reached a total of 3052. The distribution of employer types and NQSWs have shifted slightly, with a few less from private organisations, but a small increase in those from the NHS and schools. A detailed breakdown can be found in appendix 1.

For the first time in 2021 Skills for Care undertook an analysis of the registration portal success rate data in the period since 2018. The portal analysis covered adults and child and family social workers (combined and separately) and covered three cohorts: 2018-19, 2019-20 and 2020-21. Of the 1660 complete records for NQSWs in child and family services three significant determinants of the outcome of the ASYE were identified:

- Gender – 18 out of 1,486 (1.2%) female NQSWs failed and 6 out of 174 (3.4%) male NQSWs failed.
- Ethnicity – 10 out of 1,188 (0.8%) white NQSWs failed and 14 out of 472 (3.0%) NQSWs from minoritised ethnic groups\* failed
- Deferral rate – 10 out of 1,110 (0.9%) with 0 deferrals and 9 out of 409 (2.2%) with 1 deferral and 5 out of 141 (3.5%) with 2 deferrals failed.

Understanding and addressing the factors that have led to this highly significant data has now become a cornerstone of our activity with the DfE, NQSWs and employers. We are committed to working with them to understand this and to explore in more depth, working with employers to respond to what the national data is telling us. We

will be repeating our analyses on a regular basis and have an action plan to manage this. This will also help to determine the type of information that needs to be gathered from other sources such as the GEMS forum (described in section 2.2).

### Key messages

- NQSW numbers have recovered to pre-pandemic levels following a dip last year. Cohort 10 (2021-22) had **3052** registrations, cohort 9 (2020-21) **2799**, and cohort 8 (2019-20) **3065**.
- ASYE programmes are challenged to collect and analyse the success/failure data within their organisations and to address any determinants that are identified. This will become a key reporting indicator going forward.

## 2.2 National fora

### 1. National NQSW forum

The NQSW forum has become embedded as a key activity during 21/22, with a total number in the region of 80 NQSWs from child and family services participating. These fora have represented a shift for Skills for Care's support providing direct engagement with NQSWs about their ASYE experience. To date, participants have shared their views about:

- the refresh of the ASYE assessment templates and guidance
- the NQSW registration portal data and the correlation between protected characteristics and pass/fail data
- celebrating the achievements of NQSWs – strengths over the past 12 months – see appendix 2
- career aspirations.

### 2. Group for Ethnic Minority Social Workers (GEMS) NQSW forum

This new forum was established in February 2022 and is the result of a request from members of the national NQSW forum for the co-ordination of a group for those self-identifying as ethnic minority social workers. The forum offers NQSWs from these groups the opportunity to network with each other to explore issues they want to address.

There were 140+ expressions of interest to join the first meeting of this group which took place in early 2022 and it was attended by 90 GEMS NQSWs. At this meeting the membership decided on its' remit. which, going forward will be focussed on individual experiences of participating in ASYE programmes and understanding of anti-racist practice issues plus exploring ways to deal with racism. Outputs from the forum will be shared with the sector once they are available. However, the importance of a feedback link to the other forums is recognised, so information on the themes and issues of concern raised by GEMS has been shared with the

assessors forum, so that assessors are clearer about the types of themes and information on the types of support that would be beneficial to GEMS NQSWs.

### 3. National assessors' forum

This forum was initiated during the year to enable Skills for Care to increase our engagement with assessors. To date there have been four assessor forums and they have been used to discuss the refreshed assessment documentation, to consider the implications of the protected characteristics data mentioned earlier in this report. 209 assessors from child and family services have participated in these forums.

#### Key messages

- The popularity of these national fora – open to social workers from both child and family and adult services - demonstrates the demand for and interest in cross-organisational peer support.
- Employers are encouraged to think about ways that NQSWs and assessors can be offered opportunities to engage with others beyond their immediate environment. This not only supports transparency across ASYE programmes, but it broadens the learning and experience of individual participants.
- Engagement with NQSWs and assessors is crucial and support and co-ordination of the ASYE nationally enables Skills for Care to plan for the next stages of development that will enhance the continuous improvement agenda.
- Increased engagement with NQSWs has meant that Skills for Care has started to receive direct communications from a very small number of NQSWs who have been experiencing difficulties on their ASYE programmes. We do not directly intervene in individual disputes with employers but have developed a protocol in conjunction with employers to ensure a transparent response in these circumstances. This is included in appendix 3

### 2.3 National events

Two national conferences have been held during this year both of which were concerned with the need to evolve the ASYE in line with a changing world.

The DfE, Skills for Care and employers have been on a journey together this year, exploring, seeking to understand, and responding to the increased support needs of NQSWs who have started their professional lives during the pandemic. At the same time, equality of opportunity and racial diversity has been recognised as an urgent area for attention within ASYE programmes. The two national events have reflected

these themes, with discussions and input designed to develop the ASYE in this changed world.

The first was online and took place on 30 September 2021. Titled “Supporting a new generation of social workers in a changing world: Part 2”, this programme built on conversations started in the early days of the pandemic about the immediate support needs of NQSWs. It also challenged participants to consider equality, diversity and inclusion issues that are being acknowledged as a result of the “Black Lives Matter” protests in summer 2020.

The second national event took place in March 2022. Titled “ASYE, the Sequel – Evolving the ASYE in a changing world” this conference adopted a forward- looking approach, introducing participants to the refreshed ASYE framework, and supporting documentation that will be launched in the 2022/ 2023 financial year. This event also served as an opportunity to celebrate the achievements of NQSWs.

This was held as a hybrid event with 30 participants attending face to face in Birmingham and 200+ participating online via a live stream.

Feedback from this event included the following:

- It was my first experience of an event like this (only my second day in post) and I was worried I would not be able to engage or understand what was happening but there were no glitches and the breakout groups were a great opportunity for me to network and meet people to learn from.
- Learnt a great deal, new ideas to reflect on in my role as assessor, mentor/ reviewer.
- Great to see the hybrid model work, really lovely to observe real life training again! The information was useful for future practice and planning.
- It was refreshing to hear from NQSWs
- The online/hybrid format was excellent and really well produced. One of the best I have experienced. Content was also good, and I feel more positive about the new paperwork.
- It was nice to have the option of both online and face to face and see how well this worked. Lots of great speakers from all levels. It was a long day so probably would have been good to have a breakout in the afternoon, always love the mentimeter engagement exercise.
- The hybrid event felt inclusive.
- It was good to attend an in-person conference after more than two years (due to the pandemic). Very informative, engaging speakers with a good chair throughout



the day. Good update provided on the ASYE programme and the NQSW/employer experience. Good venue. Excellent IT platform.

- I very much appreciated hearing from the NQSWs gaining their viewpoints and considering how they find the support given as NQSWs. I also liked that Skills for Care want to make the ASYE programme more consistent for NQSWs nationwide.
- There was a lot of new information shared, which I wasn't expecting. It was great to have face to face opportunities to meet and build up networking. I found this event very helpful as it allowed me to meet face to face and communicate with about 200 people online. Amazing opportunities! I have gained a lot from group discussions, sharing experiences and ideas. I left the event with my own 'to do' list.
- Well facilitated and rich in information
- Sharing the refreshed ASYE paperwork prior to the event would have been helpful. Potentially we could have been given a simple questionnaire on this e.g name one change you like and one you dislike etc.
- I have just started in post, so to come to this event in person and meet people face to face was a valuable experience for me. I learned from my peers by asking them about their ASYE programme, swapped emails, received information to help me since the conference. I was really pleased to hear about the new forms. Great to hear about GEMS and great to meet NQSW of the year.
- It was well organised, informative, focused on current issues and had the voice of the NQSW.

Participants clearly appreciated the hybrid event however the point was made that for some this should never fully take the place of meeting others in person i.e the human interaction. Others felt that with work and other responsibilities, the cost of travel etc they appreciated the opportunity to be able to still participate and learn about change and new developments by attending in this way. There were also some IT glitches for some in terms of joining break out rooms and changing between platforms but overall, it was a very well received conference.

The next conference will be held on 29 September 2022 and will be a solely virtual event called: **'Grow, Support and Retain: Building the workforce through the ASYE, social work education and continuing professional development'**. Speakers will be from Social Work England, JUCSWEC and the Departments for Education and Health and Social Care and an NQSW from the Group for Ethnic Minority NQSWs (GEMS) will also speak about their experiences.

## Key messages

- This has been a significant year in the evolution of ASYE programmes, it has highlighted the need to continually reflect, develop and improve to meet the needs of all NQSWs. It has seen employers transitioning from a reactive approach to the challenges created by COVID-19, to a more proactive exploration of ways in which their programmes can develop in the future.
- The refreshed ASYE framework, introduced in the March event establishes a “whole-profession” approach taking the ASYE to the next level of development. Further activity will take place in 2022-23 to support employers embed the refreshed framework and revised assessment documentation. This work has been supported by the roll out of 6 webinars which are available on the Skills for Care website and additional sessions to support assessors.
- It has also been important to celebrate the achievements of NQSWs both locally and nationally.

## 2.4 In-depth employer quality assurance review visits

In November and December 2021, Skills for Care conducted a series of online quality assurance review visits to employers across England. This was the fourth series of visits that we have undertaken since 2019, and as previously the organisations were selected to ensure a diverse range of employer type, number of NQSWs and region. See appendix 4 for full list of organisations visited.

For the first time in 2021-22 Skills for Care employed a peer review model to build capacity to increase the annual number of quality assurance review visits carried out with ASYE programmes. We recruited 12 colleagues with extensive experience of ASYE delivery with each undertaking review visits alongside the Skills for Care team. Peer reviewers brought an additional level of expertise, and enabled a sharing of learning, which was valued by most employers.

As in previous years, the purpose of the quality assurance review visits was to:

- Focus on improving consistency (using the ASYE evaluation criteria as the basis for discussions)
- Listen and try to understand issues for ASYE programmes in continuously changing circumstances.
- Identify, champion and support sharing of best practice.
- Provide support for ASYE programmes identifying issues/weaknesses as a ‘critical friend’.

As before, it was reassuring to note that most ASYE programmes visited broadly adhere to the requirements of the ASYE framework and the evaluation criteria. Prior to the visits they had been asked to check this out through the 360-degree

organisational evaluation tool and to identify any improvement actions arising from this.

Employers consistently reported that they found this process a useful reflection that supported their quality assurance and continuous improvement actions.

Actions typically arising from these evaluations concerned the need

- To strengthen feedback loops including with senior management
- Enhance communication channels to ensure that organisational messages/policies e.g. to do with diversity and inclusion and staff wellbeing were being heard and understood by NQSWs
- Address the peer support and CPD requirements of assessors
- Increase the opportunities for networking between NQSWs
- Reinforce internal moderation processes to capture learning for programmes
- Embed the 360-review as an annual process for gathering feedback from all programme stakeholders.

In the time since the previous visits (February/March 2021), the demands on services remain very high and staff continue to be under significant pressure. However, organisations are adjusting to the changes in working practices that had been imposed due the pandemic and are adopting a “business as usual” type approach. Many NQSWs are adopting a hybrid style of working which is helping them to manage the isolation and lack of peer support challenges that had previously been an issue.

NQSW wellbeing continues to be a major focus for employers especially given emerging anecdotal evidence of falling retention rates and staff shortages.

Given that NQSW workload management is an ongoing challenge that contributes to NQSW disillusionment, we also asked organisations to share their approach for the benefit of the whole sector.

To summarise their responses - it is evident that ASYE programmes all aspire to protect the workload and development time for their NQSWs, but most find it a continual struggle in the face of escalating demand and increasing complexity. They employ a variety of approaches to manage the competing operational demands with those of the ASYE learning process. Several organisations surveyed specify a cap on NQSW caseloads. These appear to be in the range of 15-20 by the end of the year. Others refer to a percentage reduction of between 10% and 25%. Most employ a graduated approach with specified maximum caseloads at 0-3, 3-6 and 6-12 months.

There are also different approaches to monitoring and managing NQSWs' caseloads, some programmes utilising an informal discussion approach as required, but many others having a more formal escalation policy strategy involving some form of caseload tracking. We heard from one local authority that they can recruit additional social work capacity on a short- term basis to maintain the caseload cap for their NQSWs. Another employer in the independent sector has instigated a “Team around the NQSW” approach to reinforce everyone’s responsibility to support all aspects of their ASYE experience including workload management. Whilst

employers are reminded of the need to support protected time for NQSWs during quality assurance visits and other interactions, Skills for Care is also mindful that through the pandemic and the adjustments both NQSWs, managers and assessors have had to make, a balance between expectations and support regarding protected time is also important, particularly as adjustments are still being made around working in the 'new normal' environment following the pandemic.

Full details of responses are included in appendix 5

Other areas of focus in discussions with the ASYE leadership, assessors and NQSWs were the impact of COVID-19 and recovery, assessor experience, and racial diversity and inclusion. These are discussed in section 3.

### Key messages

- Most ASYE programmes report that they are adapting to the changes imposed on them due to the pandemic and they are returning to a “business-as-usual” approach.
- Many employers are developing more robust means of monitoring NQSW workload with examples emerging of strategies to intervene when necessary
- NQSWs are benefitting from more interaction with colleagues in the work environment but are feeling the pressure of increased workloads and complex cases. Anecdotally this is having an impact on retention rates.

## 2.5 360-degree organisational evaluation tool

This tool provides a comprehensive method for reviewing an ASYE programme, seeking feedback from all relevant stakeholders. Once completed, the generated report can be used by employers to inform action planning. For the first time in the quality assurance visits that took place in Autumn 2021 ASYE programmes were asked to report on the actions they would be taking forward having undertaken the 360 process.

The organisational evaluation tool also has the capability to produce local/regional/national data which can inform strategic planning at each level. A summary of the high-level findings is included in appendix 6.

### Key messages

- The higher the number of organisations that use the 360-degree evaluation tool, the more robust the local, regional, and national data can be. This will inform strategic planning at each level and for this reason the Department for Education regard this as an important source of evidence for their investment in the ASYE.

- ASYE programmes are encouraged to use the 360-degree evaluation tool as part of their quality assurance and continuous improvement process. Going forward this will become a requirement of grant funding.

## 2.6 Self- managed action learning for supervisors

Self-managed action learning workshops took place between November 2021 and March 2022 and included 48 participants from 48 organisations across England, mostly employed by local government but also private providers and charity providers. The aims of the workshops were to embed a sustainable means of peer support and development for supervisors using action learning. Workshops included support and guidance to help participants to operate as a self-managed action learning set. At the time of writing, each self-managed set has a minimum of 4 future dates in their calendars.

Themes that have emerged from the discussions within the action learning sets reinforced feedback from other sources. They included challenges associated with:

- developing NQSWs who studied through the COVID-19 pandemic and the lack of practical experience on placements protecting them in the face of increasing and overly complex caseloads
- managing their wellbeing, sickness absences and disenchantment about the reality of social work
- working in the virtual environment
- restructuring leading to lack of stability within teams
- lack of management support for supervisors.

### Key messages

- Demand for this opportunity massively outstripped the availability of places, highlighting the interest in and need for peer support and development for supervisors. Employers should ensure that they have the processes in place to enable supervisors to access the support that they need.

## 2.7 Action learning facilitation training – refresher and consultancy project

In 2019- 20 Skills for Care, in partnership with the Centre for Action Learning, offered action learning facilitation training to 87 individuals from 75 organisations. The aim of these free development opportunities was to create sustainable capacity by providing skills development to personnel within local ASYE programmes and further support to help them embed action learning within their organisations.

At the time this opportunity was very well received, and participants reported that pre-COVID-19 they had started using action learning for:

- 1 supporting student placements and NQSW's in their AYSE year
- 2 working with managers in specific topic areas anti-discriminatory practice, father-inclusive practice, plus around OFTED improvements and complaints.
- 3 encouraging integration between adults and children's services
- 4 supporting reflective practice.

Unfortunately, much of this activity was impacted by the pandemic, so to support post-COVID-19 recovery the DfE offered some additional support to the previous participants and their employers.

This comprised a one day refresher workshop plus consultancy support individual to each organisation. At the time of writing this work is in progress with the following plans having been identified through conversations between the programme leaders and the participants:

- 1 Delivering action learning sets with senior managers so that they can experience what it does and its benefits.
- 2 Implementing action learning in post-ASYE year as a way of supporting continued learning.
- 3 Obtaining senior management buy-in for action learning and using it to support strategic thinking and planning.
- 4 Using action learning to strengthen the ASYE offer also for Step-Up students
- 5 Blending Appreciative Inquiry and action learning to support group supervision
- 6 Use action learning to support an organisational restructure, also the establishment of a social work academy
- 7 Introducing action learning for practice educators, also as peer support for action learning facilitators
- 8 Using action learning with schools and children who have social workers
- 9 Introducing action learning as part of induction and support for new social workers in the first 6 months
- 10 Developing a social work managers development programme that integrates action learning.

### Key messages

- The scope of the various projects identified by employers demonstrate the value of action learning as a methodology for organisational as well as individual professional development.

- Senior managers need to be on board if organisations are to successfully embed action learning.

## 2.8 The annual ASYE survey

To avoid overburdening the sector during the pandemic, the annual ASYE survey was conducted in two stages within the evaluation of the two ASYE events held in March and September 2021.

In total 159 child and family workers attended the events (although there is no way of knowing how many of these attended both the March and September events). The report includes 39 responses from child and family services and 18 from those who work across both adult and child and family service areas.

Findings from the surveys reflected a similar picture to the previous year in terms of understanding about the ASYE. The questions that focussed on the issues of COVID-19 recovery demonstrated a sense that social workers had adapted well to new ways of working during the COVID-19 pandemic although stress and anxiety levels had escalated due to the disruptions to workloads, direct observations, and CPD.

Respondents identified that the biggest challenges going forward are anticipated to be embedding the PQS (formerly KSS) across the workforce, putting in place the support arrangements for the ASYE, improving the capacity of assessors, and supporting leaders and managers.

The subject of racial diversity and inclusion highlighted a mixed picture, with an acknowledgement that more attention to this issue is required. While more than half of organisations record the protected characteristics of NQSWs, only one third incorporate anti-racist practices in the delivery of the ASYE programme.

The full report is included in appendix 7.

### Key messages

- Almost all respondents said that social workers had adapted well to new ways of working during the COVID-19 pandemic, although 90% said that social workers had experienced higher levels of stress and anxiety.
- Assessor forums/briefings and peer support were the most popular support mechanisms for the development of ASYE assessors.
- Respondents regard the biggest challenges in the coming 12-24 months to be embedding the PQS (formerly KSS) across the workforce, putting in place the support arrangements for the ASYE, improving the capacity of assessors and supporting leaders and managers.

- While more than half of organisations record the protected characteristics of NQSWs, only one third incorporate anti-racist practices in the delivery of the ASYE programme.

## Section 3. Areas of focus

### 3.1 Impact of COVID and easing of restrictions

Employers demonstrated varying approaches to working through the lockdowns, for example, in their attitudes to working in the office and the types of support that they made available to their staff. As the year progressed there were some positive signs that support a general sense that employers did – in the main – adapt to the reality of COVID-19 and most have now resumed a “business as usual” approach.

NQSWs have, in the main, been impressed by the way and the speed in which organisations adjusted to the new circumstances and it is evident that employers have learned lessons from their experiences of working through a pandemic. They have embedded new working practices that are unlikely to change going forward, such as a commitment to flexible working practices including hybrid working, online supervisions, team meetings, multi-professional meetings and so on. Employers have also made significant changes to their ASYE programmes, and they are providing online development workshops and have also instigated such things as buddying which have been regarded as valuable.

There has been some positive feedback from NQSWs about their experience of undertaking the ASYE in a pandemic. (See appendix 8) There has been a perception that employers are much more focussed on their wellbeing and the need to provide enhanced support especially in the early stages of the ASYE which are crucial in terms of building confidence levels. Opportunities to mix with other colleagues have also impacted on the experience, with some employers being innovative in ways they have encouraged relationships to develop.

NQSWs have also made very good use of technology, which has led to increased participation in training, multi-professional meetings etc. This impact has also been noted across the whole workforce.

NQSWs have spearheaded some new and innovative ways of engaging with young people – we heard examples such as – going jogging together, making more use of social media; using online platforms to undertake life-story work.

Despite the challenges, a significant number of NQSWs report that they have enjoyed working from home, especially those who have got caring responsibilities who have benefitted from more flexible working patterns.



That said, the points above should not be assumed as representing the “general” NQSW experience. There have been a significant number of reports of the pandemic impacting on confidence levels around face-to-face contact with families, knocking on doors and so on. This is exacerbated when NQSWs feel isolated, missing out on some of the usual learning experiences of working alongside others, shadowing, and observing more experienced workers. Where peer support has been lacking, these issues have been exacerbated.

There is plenty of anecdotal evidence about NQSWs feeling disillusioned about social work and leaving the profession soon after they complete their ASYE. This remains a significant retention issue for employers. In 2022-23 Skills for Care will be communicating directly with NQSWs via an annual survey of those registered on the ASYE portal. This will provide the opportunity to gather national feedback which uncover a national picture of the reasons why individuals have cause to leave their roles.

### Key messages

- There has not been a “generic” NQSW COVID-19 experience. As employers move towards the post-pandemic era, it will remain important to respond to their needs, including regarding a flexible way of working.
- Employers are concerned about the retention of NQSWs post ASYE.

## 3.2 Assessor’s experience

In contrast to the experience of most NQSWs, there appears to have been much less focus on the needs of assessors during the pandemic.

We have received examples of many assessors who have provided excellent support for their NQSWs by doing their best to shield them from escalating caseloads and increased pressures and going the extra mile to support their well-being. One notable example is of the assessor forming a support bubble with the NQSW so that they could work together in the assessor’s home, however there are many other ways in which assessors have maintained contact and given assistance in the virtual working environment.

Many of them have done this despite feeling unprepared for the role often through lack of training and support and being under significant pressures in day-to-day roles. Cultural differences have been found to exist between organisations in terms of recognising and responding to their support requirements. This is particularly evident where assessors are in the role of line manager. Most have not received any workload relief to undertake the assessor role, and they have had to fit it around their other commitments. As a result, NQSWs have identified that the support they have

received from them has been variable with implications for their sense of well-being within their new professional roles.

Discussions with assessors has illuminated what they have found to be helpful sources of organisational support.

- Creating a career development pathway with recognition and roles incorporating that of assessor built into it
- Investing in additional support roles – a “middle” person in the relationship between the NQSW and the assessor
- Introducing a Social Work Academy model within which NQSWs are supported in the first 6 months of their employment
- Offering more time for them to undertake their assessment responsibilities and complete the documentation
- Provide more training to induct them into their role, plus peer support/supervision.

### Key messages

- Assessors are key to the NQSW’s ASYE experience and as such need support and training to enable them to properly undertake their role
- Going forward employers will be expected to monitor and manage the performance of assessors.

## 3.3 Racial diversity and inclusion within the ASYE

Following the publication of the NQSW registration portal data in Summer 2021 (referenced in section 2.1), there is evidence of a general improvement in the discourse around racial diversity and inclusion within the ASYE.

Employers and assessors have taken to heart the need to reflect on the structural disadvantage that may exist within their organisations, what has been missed in the past and what they can do differently in the future.

Senior leaders have also taken the wider issues seriously and yet there is sometimes a disconnect between the intent of managers and the actual experience of the NQSWs undertaking the ASYE programme.

There were messages for senior managers about the need to have a more structural oversight of the diversity and inclusion issues across their organisation, also between social workers and the local community. While there may be a diverse NQSW population, this is not necessarily reflected in the more senior roles. It was noted by NQSWs in one organisation that the bank of assessors and those used to deliver training were not representative of them or the wider community. They are

fully aware of the limited number role models further up the career ladder. Similarly increased levels of discussion about equality diversity and inclusion have unearthed differences associated with the different training routes into social work, and the potential differences in experience between these.

The importance of open conversations within team was raised by some NQSWs. Questions were asked about the use of the Social Graces and Mandela models in supervision without wider discussions about the structural issues underpinning them. Some employers were open about their limitations in these areas but also their willingness to try and understand more. One talked about the journey they have been on to understand the experience of their black workers. Another has set up workshops to provide the opportunity for ongoing discussions about having challenging conversations about race, including role plays.

While these examples are positive, questions remain about how to ensure that NQSWs feel comfortable talking about their experiences and their needs with their supervisors. One black male NQSW expressed that he feels he has to work extra hard to ensure that he is not a “fail” statistic rather than rely on his employer to ensure that this does not happen. Another example shared with us related to an NQSW who was actively experiencing racism and felt they had no option but to leave their job because the issue was not dealt with.

In summary a mixed picture was detected, with some pockets of excellent practice but other employers acknowledging that they have more to do in this area.

### Key messages

- While many NQSWs are receiving a positive ASYE experience, this is not the experience of all.
- There is often a disconnect between the intent of senior managers and the direct experience of NQSWs.
- Those NQSWs in teams where they feel able to explore the impact of racism feel safer, those that don't feel less safe. Employers need to consider how to open these conversations in a way that enables everyone to learn and understand what needs to happen.
- Going forward, ASYE programmes will be asked to report on the measures that they have in place to address diversity and inclusion issues and to check out the impact of these measures.

## Section 4. Moving forward: Conclusions, recommendations and next steps

This report builds on those published in previous years and is intended to guide ASYE programmes in their continuous improvement journey.

This review period (April 2021–March 2022) has witnessed employers, NQSWs and assessors respond proactively to the challenges of the last few years, and to build on the learning to establish new ways of working.

Skills for Care and the DfE have been working alongside ASYE programmes to help them on this journey.

- We are reinforcing our commitment to ensuring that NQSWs are at the centre of the ASYE by increasing our direct engagement with NQSWs via the national forum and GEMs groups.
- We have established a national forum with assessors as well. Further activity to support assessors and ensure high standards of assessment practice is planned in the future.
- We have refreshed the ASYE framework to reflect a “whole profession” approach and an increased emphasis on national consistency. Activity to embed this with employers will take place in the coming year.
- We have responded to sector feedback and refreshed the ASYE assessment documentation and guidance. Employers will be requested to use the new templates as from 1 September 2022.
- We are holding ourselves to account through the development and implementation of a diversity and inclusion action plan. Going forward, data collection and reporting will be central.

### Recommendations

1. ASYE programmes should reflect on the learning from the past two years of COVID-19 and consider how they can evolve.

- Are you doing enough to understand and respond to your NQSW’s needs and experiences, in the immediate and the longer term?
- What initiatives introduced at speed during the pandemic have worked well and can be established for the future?
- What are you doing to support assessors? Is this enough? Do you have the support of senior management?

2. ASYE programmes should ensure that they are able to keep abreast of forthcoming (2022–23) developments in the ASYE framework, those associated with quality assurance in particular.

- Are you starting to think about ways in which you can implement the refreshed assessment documentation and guidance which will be in place as from 1 September 2022?
- Have you reviewed your quality assurance and continuous improvement process recently? Is it fit for purpose in a changing world? Are your NQSWs actively engaged within the process?

3. ASYE programmes should ensure that issues of equality, diversity and inclusion are proactively addressed.

- Do you have a robust system for collecting recruitment, completion, and attrition data from your ASYE programme? What do you do with this data? How does it inform your programme development?
- What is the culture in your organisation? To what extent do colleagues feel able to engage with the “hard-to-have” conversations? What else can you do?
- Do NQSWs feel supported if they experience racism in any aspect of their work life?

## **Section 5. Appendices**

**5.1 [NQSW registration portal data](#)**

**5.2 [Skills for Care protocol when NQSWs contact](#)**

**5.3 [List of employers visited for quality assurance review visits](#)**

**5.4 [360-degree evaluation annual report](#)**

**5.5 [Annual surveys 2021-22 report](#)**

**5.6 [Further information about workload management processes adopted by the organisations where in-depth review visits were undertaken](#)**