

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

Annual report to the Department for Education

April 2020–March 2021

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Acknowledgements

Skills for Care would like to acknowledge the extreme circumstances that have faced employers and social workers due to COVID-19 in the past 12 months and recognise the hard work and commitment of everyone involved with the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) for child and family services.

We're particularly grateful to those organisations that have made the time to participate in the review visits and those who have engaged with us in focus and working groups.

Section 1. Introduction

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.

This report builds on the previous two annual reports (published May 2019 and June 2020). It provides an assessment of the state of play with regards to the delivery of the ASYE between April 2020 and March 2021.

As in the previous report, the focus is on the Newly Qualified Social Worker (NQSW) experience, with conclusions and recommendations presented for the employer. In writing it we have sought to set out the themes including where possible examples to illustrate the key points. These are anecdotal based on things we've heard from NQSWs and employers.

The period since the 2019-20 report was written has been characterised by trauma and fundamental changes in all aspects of life. These circumstances present a direct challenge for all those involved in the delivery of the ASYE to do things differently in the future. In this report we have focussed on the areas below with the intention of supporting employers with this endeavour.

1. The impact on NQSWs and their employers of COVID-19
2. Organisational responses to the Black Lives Matter campaign in summer 2020, the impact on ASYE programmes and NQSW experiences.

The activities of the Black Lives Matter protests have once again highlighted systemic failures which have minoritised, discriminated against and continue to disadvantage Black and other ethnically diverse people in all walks of life.

Alongside preparing this report, Skills for Care has begun conversations with stakeholders on race and ethnicity in the context of the ASYE. We've also reflected

at length about the way that we write and the terminology we use. In light of the Black Lives Matter movement and the current climate in relation to race and racism and terminology used to describe different cultural groups, in this report we will continue to use the term Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) until further research and consultation with BAME communities determine an agreed and acceptable replacement for the term BAME.

Going forward it is our intention to be explicit about the need for anti-racist practice in the ASYE alongside the need for inclusivity. We're encouraging employers to go on this journey with us.

1.1 Summary of what is covered in the report

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

- The NQSW registration portal
- The 360 degree organisational evaluation tool
- The NQSW online forum
- In-depth quality assurance review visit
- Feedback and findings from the ASYE events March 2021
- Activities in response to COVID-19

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

Section 3 focusses on the NQSW experience in COVID-19

Section 4 starts the discussion about anti-racist practice in the context of the ASYE.

Section 5 draws together the learning from all sources and outlines the key messages and recommendations for the further development of ASYE programmes.

Section 6 includes appendices which provide further detail of information provided in the report.

1.2 Executive summary

The purpose of this annual report is to provide an update about ASYE activity between April 2020 and March 2021 – a period dominated by the COVID-19 pandemic and the challenge to white privilege highlighted through the Black Lives Matter movement.

This report provides a snapshot of the progress employers are making in addressing both the consequences of the pandemic and equality, diversity and inclusion. It's written from the perspective of NQSWs with messages for employers.

The basis of the report is information gathered during 20 in depth "virtual" visits to organisations combined with information from other sources which substantiate the findings.

Through this analysis we were able to draw some similar conclusions about the ASYE to those in the previous report (published June 2020). It is recommended that readers review that report alongside this one.

This has however not been an "ordinary" year. Employers are all focussed on the wellbeing of their staff and the reviewers heard about a wide range of initiatives in place to ensure that individuals feel supported. Isolation is a particular challenge for NQSWs who are new to their roles and to their teams. Most employers have viewed the ASYE – albeit adapted to be online - as an important means of countering isolation and to ensuring their development needs are addressed.

NQSWs have provided mixed reports about the extent to which this has worked for them. Workload pressures have been hard to manage, with some organisations finding it very difficult to maintain the pre-pandemic levels of support for their new workers.

Despite the challenges however, NQSWs have proved themselves to be flexible and resilient and many have found new ways of overcoming problems, accessing learning opportunities and generally making a valuable contribution within their teams.

Organisational responses to the Black Lives Matter protests in summer 2020 have varied. All of the employers that we visited confirmed that there has been a renewed focus on matters of equality, diversity and inclusion but the extent to which this has, in a practical sense, filtered into the ASYE has, in the main been limited. Skills for Care has found evidence within the ASYE registration data to support reports that BAME NQSWs experience disproportionately high failure rates than their white counterparts. This is a serious finding, and most employers acknowledge that there is work for them to do in embedding proactive approaches to overcoming inequalities and addressing systemic racism.

The primary conclusion of this report is that the NQSW's experience must be at the centre of the ASYE process. The challenge to employers is to enable this to happen.

Many of the challenges that NQSWs have experienced in the past year can be eased if NQSWs are able to share their feelings, in the knowledge that their employers will listen and take action to help them.

The cycle of quality assurance and continuous improvement including the 360 degree evaluation tool provides a framework for building in the feedback loops that will enable this to happen.

Section 2. Learning from various sources

2.1 The NQSW registration portal

In 2020-21 a total of 202 different employer organisations registered 2808 newly qualified social workers onto the ASYE programme. Due to the pandemic, 137 of these were registrations of NQSWs commencing prior to 1 April 2020. Taking this into account, there appears to be approximately 10% fewer NQSWs employed during this year. This figure is in line with the intelligence we were picking up from employers. Looking at the overall trends it would suggest that around 3000 NQSWs are likely to be employed in 2021-22.

We're committed to working with the Department for Education (DfE) and employers to understand then act upon what the portal data tells us about the impact of ethnicity on outcomes for the ASYE. As a starting point, we've looked at the most recent completed set of registration and outcome data which is from 2018-19.

This has shown us that while 26% of the total number of NQSWs registered are identified as BAME, they account for 53% of the total fails. By comparison, the 60% of NQSWs who are identified as white account for 47% of the total fails.

This very concerning issue will be a key area of focus for our activity in 2021-22.

Key messages

- It appears that the impact of the pandemic on the number of NQSWs being registered for the ASYE shows an approximate 10% reduction.
- Initial data from the registration portal is supporting anecdotal evidence that there is a disproportionately higher fail rate amongst those NQSWs that are identified as BAME. This is a very concerning initial finding, which places a responsibility on all those involved with the ASYE to identify areas of inequality and to find ways of addressing them.
- Skills for Care will be undertaking more detailed analysis of the registration portal data in the coming year. Where they aren't doing this already, employers should also start to gather, monitor, and understand their own data; then take action so that BAME employees do not run the risk of being disadvantaged.

2.2 The 360 degree organisational evaluation tool

This tool provides:

- Employers with a comprehensive method for reviewing an ASYE programme alongside other sources of feedback to inform action planning
- Skills for Care and the Department for Education with high level data about the national picture which informs decision making about funding etc.

To date, the take up of this tool amongst employers has mainly been limited to those who have received review visits from Skills for Care. Most of these organisations

have recognised the benefit of the tool and have expressed an intention to use it annually to feed in the results to the annual planning cycle within their organisations.

Following its launch in May 2019, the number of organisations that have registered on the system is 83. Out of these, 27 have fully completed the process and most of these have re-registered to complete it for a second time.

The data submitted via the 360 degree tool for this round of review visits supports the qualitative information gathered elsewhere. It indicates that the ASYE is functioning well for participants across most of the statement measures. A detailed analysis of the findings can be found in appendix 5.3.

Key messages

- It is now a requirement of NQSW grant funding that employers confirm that they have implemented a process of quality assurance and continuous improvement in their ASYE programme. Completion of the 360 degree feedback tool on an annual basis will be accepted as evidence of their quality assurance cycle.
- As the data within the system increases the potential of the evaluation tool is maximised and a much fuller picture of ASYE programmes nationally becomes possible.
- To date, the number of employers that have completed the 360 is low, although most of those that have, report that it has been useful as a way of consolidating and confirming evidence gained from elsewhere. For some it has enabled them to gather feedback on their ASYE programme systematically for the first time.
- The Department for Education is committed to the use of the tool as a means of gathering regional and national data. As such, Skills for Care will be working with the DfE to encourage more widespread use of the tool in the coming year.
- Employers should ensure that NQSWs understand their employers' rationale for providing the ASYE and the overall shape of the programme within their organisation. This will enable them to make a meaningful contribution to and be active participants in the Cycle of Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement, including the 360 degree evaluation.

2.3 The NQSW Community of Practice/online forum

The NQSW Community of Practice was initially set up in 2018 to capture the views of NQSWs and ensure that there was a central national voice of NQSWs. Initially, we used a model of eight representative NQSWs from across England (increasing to 12 in 2020) who met three times a year to discuss ASYE themes and best practice.

Since 2018, we've been thinking about the best way to take this forward and have experimented with different models. As COVID-19 caused us to work remotely it offered an opportunity for us to try a more direct approach to communicate with NQSWs. We set up an online forum open to all NQSWs across the country. The NQSW online forum is now a quarterly online event, hosted by Skills for Care, which offers networking space and an opportunity for NQSWs to feedback directly to the national ASYE framework about their experience of ASYE.

We've held two online forums so far, in September 2020 and January 2021 and reached 80 NQSWs. A clear benefit of this model is that it allows us to hear from a far larger number of NQSWs than the previous model. NQSWs can feedback and share experiences with other NQSWs from different organisations as a form of peer support, which has been increasingly important through the pandemic. Another strength of this model is that it offers NQSWs the experience of engaging with the bigger ASYE picture outside their organisation, which can be an empowering experience.

We found from the NQSW online forum that NQSWs want to make links with others and share experiences of the ASYE. NQSWs find the support of their peers vital and can take learning and ideas back to their own organisations.

As we're increasing our direct communication with NQSWs, we've been receiving some feedback of a sensitive nature relating to individual ASYE programmes. We will be looking to develop a transparent protocol for supporting NQSWs with these types of issues. We'll be asking for employer input via regional social work education networks in the first part of 2021-22.

Key messages

- Provide as many opportunities as you can for NQSWs to connect with their peers across teams, service areas and organisations. Encourage them to join the online forum as part of their ASYE experience.
- NQSWs told us how helpful they find having a 'buddy', particularly with the loss of informal learning opportunities due to working remotely. Consider a 'buddying' approach within your organisation so NQSWs can gain peer support from those who have recently finished their ASYE. Buddies also benefit from this model as an opportunity to develop and demonstrate their leadership skills.

2.4 In depth quality assurance employer visits

Between October and December 2020, Skills for Care conducted a series of virtual visits to employers across England. These organisations were selected using a “heterogeneous, purposive” research method that enabled us to select a diverse range of employer type, number of NQSWs and region. We excluded those who had been visited previously.

Twenty visits were undertaken, and the profile of the selected organisations is outlined in appendix 5.1

Although it was less than a year since the previous visits were undertaken, the context in which they took place could not have been more different. In the intervening period COVID-19 has fundamentally impacted every aspect of the delivery of social work services including the working arrangements for staff members. While it has been an evolving picture the demands on social work teams throughout this period have remained enormous.

Prior to the visits, employers completed the 360 degree organisational evaluation tool and provided background information about their programme. Analysis of this information indicates that the support and assessment arrangements in most ASYE programmes broadly adhere to the structure of the ASYE framework. This is positive and reflects much of what we found in the previous set of visits.

The reality however is that several of the organisations we visited have been challenged to fully maintain previous standards and meet the needs of the NQSWs, especially those who started their employment in the middle of a lockdown, in this period.

The review teams were mindful of this and visits were undertaken in the spirit of “critical friend” and support. The visits comprised of discussions with those involved with the programme, including NQSWs, supervisors, principal social workers and ASYE leads. We were pleased to note that senior leaders participated in most visits as well. In keeping with the circumstances, discussions focussed predominantly on NQSW experience during COVID-19 and equality and diversity in the context of the ASYE. Feedback from these discussions will feature in following sections within this report.

As mentioned above, much of the information gathered about the pre-COVID ASYE programmes reinforced that from obtained from the previous set of visits (February/March 2020). For this reason, it is recommended that this report is read alongside that [published in June 2020](#).

A summary of the further evidence gathered in this year’s visits is reported below.

1. The integration of the ASYE within the organisation remains of key importance, with most employers visited being able to articulate the positive investment of senior leaders. As mentioned in section 2:6:3 a series of senior manager webinars had taken place in advance of the visits taking place and this had supported engagement.

The benefits of senior manager investment can be seen in the extent to which the ASYE is embedded within recruitment, retention, learning and development, and performance management policies.

There was some evidence that some employers are reviewing their ASYE provision in the light of experiences over the last year. There appears to be renewed interest and uptake of 'Academy' models.

2. As a direct result of the pandemic, the reviewers noted a discernible increase in employers' focus on the wellbeing of all their staff including NQSWs. In conversations with NQSWs they talked about experiencing a variety of initiatives such as:

- relaxation sessions
- online NQSW celebration event
- positive use of WhatsApp groups and other social media to keep in touch
- focussed induction adapted to COVID-19
- an increase in group supervision
- use of 'permitted' office time for supervision sessions
- positive shielding policies and risk assessments.

3. Workload continues to be an important factor in NQSW wellbeing. Several of those that the reviewers spoke with referred to an increase in complexity of the work that they are having to undertake. They were also able to identify the mismatch between the reduced workload policy and the actuality.

A worry for several of the NQSWs was the reduced contact with children, young people, and families. This is also impacting on their job satisfaction.

4. CPD continues to be recognised to be an important aspect of the ASYE although there have been delivery issues associated with the restrictions on face-to-face contact during the pandemic. Many organisations have converted their training workshops to online platforms. However, they are not always clear how many NQSWs have accessed these.

NQSWs have lacked the experience of learning "by osmosis", the soft learning conversations and observations of others' practice, that they would have gained if they were in an office environment. Recognising that NQSWs are reluctant to ask simple questions, some employers have sought to replicate this through buddying arrangements. This is not however universal.

5. Supervisors continue to experience issues associated with volume of work and consequent time pressures, plus – in many cases – mixed levels of support with their own CPD. The pandemic has exacerbated these issues. Despite this, it was noticeable that most of the supervisors that the reviewers spoke to were

reluctant to talk about their own needs, preferring to focus on those of their NQSWs.

This level of dedication to the wellbeing of their staff is admirable, particularly in the light of emerging evidence from the supervisor's action learning referred to in 2:5:5 which have demonstrated the intense pressures facing many of these workers.

Key messages

- Qualitative data from review visits plus the quantitative data from the 360-degree organisational evaluation tool, indicate some consistency in the "normal" ASYE arrangements. The pandemic has been very disruptive, but most employers have sought to find solutions.
- The complexity of workloads has increased, and this is impacting on NQSWs and supervisors. Employers should formalise their workload policy so that expectations are transparent and NQSWs benefit from the workload reduction should form part of their ASYE experience.

2.5 Activities in response to COVID-19

Consultation with employers and stakeholders told us that the ASYE is robust and flexible enough to meet the demands put upon the profession due to COVID-19. Together, we identified key areas where the ASYE could be enhanced to respond to the pressures on the sector. Skills for Care and the DfE agreed a flexible approach and some additional resources were made available.

2.5.1 Supporting the transition from university to employment

COVID-19 has presented new challenges to NQSWs who graduated in 2020 and those who will graduate in the forthcoming year. Whilst some of these challenges may mean that NQSWs have not had the placement experience they were anticipating, they may have had new and different learning experiences which support their development as professional social workers.

We initiated a project in September 2020 to explore this in more detail and the key messages are as follows:

Key messages

- Employers should be prepared to offer a tailored ASYE which meets the needs of each NQSW; they need to be aware of the strengths of the NQSW and further areas for development from the NQSWs student placement. Due to varying placement experiences during the pandemic this has become even more important.
- Principles have been developed for employers about how to support NQSWs before they start work as a social worker, as they begin their ASYE year and

during their ASYE year. These principles for transition are available on the Skills for Care website - [Transition from student to NQSW - COVID-19 support](#).

2.5.2 Increasing the voice of the NQSW

As mentioned previously, capturing the voice of the NQSW and collecting evidence about how the ASYE is meeting the needs of NQSWs has always been central to the ASYE and has become increasingly important during the pandemic as NQSWs were feeling isolated and looking for opportunities for peer support.

In response to these needs we set up an online forum for NQSWs to attend and learn more about the bigger picture of the ASYE, meet NQSWs from across England and share ASYE experiences with their peers. This forum has grown in popularity as NQSWs find it a valuable way of gaining support and communicating with others in challenging times.

Key messages

- Ensure the NQSW voice is central to your ASYE programme and quality assurance and consider ways you can increase this.
- Encourage your NQSWs to attend an NQSW online forum, these run quarterly, and details are included in the social work briefing.

2.5.3 Developing the voice of ASYE with senior managers

In previous reports the link between the effectiveness of the ASYE programme and the engagement of senior leaders was emphasised. For this round of Quality Assurance (QA) visits we held briefings prior to meeting with employers and invited senior managers from organisations we were due to visit to attend in order to find out more about the quality assurance process.

Key messages

- A whole organisation commitment to embedding the ASYE framework is regarded as the most critical element in the delivery of any programme. Without this engagement NQSWs do not receive the support that they need and the integrity of the ASYE is undermined.
- The senior manager briefings were well received, and Skills for Care will explore whether they can be usefully expanded to be part of other regular conversations with social work employers, ADCS and the PSW national network.

2.5.4 Enhanced programme of peer review visits

The Quality Assurance visits we undertake as part of the Cycle of Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement have been hugely successful. They have allowed us to interact with individual ASYE programmes as a critical friend and provided qualitative information about ASYE programmes and best practice that we share nationally.

We wanted to build on these successes by expanding our reach to more ASYE programmes and developing a peer review model which allows programmes to learn from and support each other.

A peer review model will continue to focus on improving consistency, increase understanding of issues for ASYE programmes in continuously changing circumstances, increase sharing best practice and provide support for ASYE programmes identifying issues/weaknesses. This will be a key area of our work in 2021-22.

Key messages

- The Quality Assurance visits are a key element in assuring consistency by Skills for Care and the DfE, with an ambition to increase the number of employers receiving visits and benefitting from them.
- Consider how you can share learning with other ASYE programmes. This could be through a Teaching Partnership or establishing links virtually, further afield.

2.5.5 Support for ASYE assessors

We know from speaking to employers that ASYE assessors have been under immense pressure trying to support NQSWs remotely whilst balancing the demands of their job and other pressures.

We arranged a programme of Action Learning Sets for supervisors which received a hugely positive response and has been oversubscribed with applicants. This programme provides two days of facilitated action learning and training providing continuing and sustainable support for ASYE supervisors by enabling ongoing self-facilitated action learning. The initial programme of action learning sets has 60 supervisors from as many organisations taking part and there will be another opportunity in 2021/22 to register for the next round of action learning sets.

Key messages

- Look for opportunities to support your ASYE assessors through action learning and peer support. For more information about action learning and how it can benefit your NQSWs and assessors, you may find it helpful to read ["Improving social work practice through critically reflective action learning"](#)

2.5.6 Guidance for working in the “new normal”

We wanted to emphasise the positive responses people have had to the crisis and are creating guidance which identifies, encourages and promotes new ways of working in the virtual world. The guidance focuses on the following areas:

- good practice models for virtual working
- undertaking virtual direct observations
- gathering feedback from service users and carers
- gathering feedback from professionals
- support for assessors.

Key messages

- The pandemic has created a “new normal” for most organisations whose staff are working remotely, wearing PPE, and finding new and innovative ways to engage with their teams and the communities they work in. Organisations have innovated and adapted leading to the creation of new ways of working.
- “Working in the new normal” guidance will be on the Skills for Care website and promoted in the social work briefing as soon as it’s ready.

Section 3. NQSW experience in COVID-19

As mentioned earlier in this report, a primary area of focus in this round of visits has been the impact of COVID-19 on NQSWs and the delivery of their ASYE programmes. This has been at the request of the Department for Education which is committed to enhancing arrangements to support the new generation of social workers through this critical time in their career. We’ve discussed the range of activities that are being undertaken in response to COVID-19 in section 2:5 above.

The findings in this section are the results of conversations with NQSWs and their employers in the review visits together with feedback gathered in NQSW forum meetings.

It will come as no surprise that NQSWs have found 2020 an extremely challenging time to enter the workforce. However, they have not had a homogenous experience with several factors playing their part. These include:

- Pre-COVID-19 experience of working in the organisation:

The ease with which NQSWs have been able to develop working relationships with their colleagues and become familiar with the expectations of their role during a period of remote working has been affected by whether they had been a student or worked in the organisation prior to qualifying. In addition, the point in the year when they started their employment was critical, with some having some office-based working prior to the first lockdown, and others beginning since then. The reviewers spoke to several NQSWs who were interviewed for

their jobs virtually and have not had the chance to meet their colleagues face to face or visit their normal place of work. For those NQSWs whose final student placements were disrupted the challenges are perceived as even greater.

- Personal circumstances:

The individual circumstances of NQSWs have clearly influenced their ability to settle into their role. Those with children have been providing home schooling, and others with health issues may have been required to shield.

In addition, things like the reliability of their personal internet and phone connection and the availability of a private space in which to work have been cited as significant to their practical ability to do their work and their stress levels.

- Employer's management of and support for remote working:

This includes such things as IT and technical support; the extent to which internal computer systems support remote access, availability of online learning opportunities, both formal and informal; the commitment of the team manager and colleagues to maintain contact and peer support.

Of all the issues raised by NQSWs, isolation - with all its' ramifications - is the most pressing. Supportive relationships with team colleagues are consistently highlighted as a defining element in the extent to which this is a problem. Those that the reviewers spoke with mainly feel that their team manager and colleagues are very responsive, and they appreciate the regular contact from team managers that most of them enjoy. Opportunities to connect with other NQSWs, share experiences and learning are also regarded as essential in counteracting isolation. They need "permission" to do this, but it would appear, messages encouraging them to do this are not always as clear as they could be.

Uncertainty and reduced confidence in performing their role forms another key area of concern for NQSWs alongside worries about being a burden on their colleagues. They are missing out on informal opportunities to assimilate knowledge in an office environment and are therefore dependent on asking others for basic information and guidance. The restrictions associated with the socially distant and virtual contact they are having to maintain with children, young people and families on their caseloads also play their part with some NQSWs also reporting that this factor is affecting their job satisfaction.

All employers that the reviewers encountered during the visits are taking account of the wellbeing challenges facing their staff and being proactive in finding ways of providing support.

They also recognise the especially high potential for NQSWs to experience stress under the circumstances of remote/socially distanced working. The delivery of most

programmes has continued, in large part, to ensure that a high level of support is maintained.

Feedback about whether this continuation has led to increased support during a period of such high intensity is mixed. While there are a lot of examples where all the component parts of the programme (regular professional supervision, peer learning, workload relief etc.) have been able to withstand the pressures and are continuing to happen successfully, there are many others where circumstances have got in the way.

In these cases, NQSWs report that managers are not prioritising the ASYE in the face of all the other demands on their time. This is resulting in:

- increased and more complex caseloads, beyond the levels recommended in the ASYE
- drop in the availability of professional supervision.
- reduction in learning/networking opportunities with fellow NQSWs
- less priority on the ASYE reviews
- overlooking direct observations especially where there are practical challenges associated with social distancing and lockdown restrictions
- NQSWs not necessarily understanding or appreciating the value of the ASYE and regarding the building of their portfolios as an added burden.

As acknowledged above, it has been a challenging time for NQSWs. The focus of employers, Skills for Care and the Department for Education for most of the last year, has rightly been on ensuring that NQSWs are not disadvantaged at the start of their career - mitigating problems and addressing perceived lacks in their experience through the delivery of ASYE programmes.

Alongside this, it is also important to acknowledge that the changes that have been required in the last year have had some positive benefits, which should be captured for the post-COVID era.

It's heartening to note that over time most employers and NQSWs have adapted well to the changed circumstances and the immediate concerns have in many cases been reduced. While everyone would agree, longer term challenges still exist some NQSWs report that they have benefitted from working from home, less travel, more consistency in supervision, and additional support. In addition, experience of starting their social work career as remote workers has brought to the fore some hitherto unidentified learning. Opportunities that previously may not have been available to them have become accessible. Examples include such things as attendance at court proceedings and shadowing of a wider range of multi-agency meetings

It is important for their emerging professional identity that social workers who have graduated in the pandemic are not defined in a negative way by this fact. They are also applauded for their:

- Resilience in counteracting challenges and establishing themselves as resourceful team members.
- Creativity and innovation in finding virtual and digital solutions to the practical challenges of engaging with children, young people and families.
- Proactivity in accessing all available learning opportunities which has resulted in rapid progress in the development of professional autonomy and decision-making
- Contribution to the defining of new ways of working in the post-COVID era.

Key messages

- Regular and easy access with managers and team colleagues is vital in reducing isolation
- Connect NQSWs with their peers and encourage them to maintain informal as well as formal contact
- Avoid a purely deficit narrative in relation to those social workers who have qualified and been on the ASYE in the pandemic period as this will impact on their long-term professional confidence. Applaud them for the resilience they have demonstrated over this period.
- The DfE and Skills for Care have committed extra resources and have adopted a flexible approach to the use of resources, to address the issues and challenges associated with COVID-19.

Section 4. A journey towards an anti-racist and fully inclusive ASYE

A second area of in this round of visits was on equality, diversity and inclusion and the extent to which this is being considered within ASYE programmes. This was the first time that we had explored this area in depth, and it is acknowledged that, in having this conversation there is learning for all of us who are involved in delivering the ASYE.

Employers were notified of our wish to discuss this topic prior to the visits and, in the main, reviewers received a positive reaction and a willingness to engage with new and, at times, uncomfortable thinking.

Feedback from some of the employers following the visits was that the conversations had given them food for thought. For example, one employer was caused to reflect

on their low level of recruitment from ethnically diverse communities which contrasts with the ethnic mix of students at the local partner university.

Most employers acknowledged that while issues around equality, diversity and inclusion have always been viewed as important, they have been higher on the strategic agenda in recent months as a direct result of the Black Lives Matter movement.

That said, the extent to which the wider agenda was being translated into specific ASYE focused activity varies. The reviewers heard excellent examples of proactive efforts to address inequalities concerning ethnicity. These include:

- An impact assessment used in all parts of the ASYE scheme, ensuring an open and transparent approach in terms of equality and diversity.
- Scrutiny of vacancy rates and data - recruitment focus on males from ethnically diverse backgrounds to try and flatten the bias in the system.
- Detailed risk assessments for members of staff from BAME groups.
- Positive leadership to consider and promote white 'allyship' within an ASYE programme inviting involvement of managers, NQSWs and supervisors.

Most programmes, however, appear more reactive, offering robust responses when a problem is identified, but not monitoring experience or delving deeply into the causes. In these situations, the responses tended to be more process driven and procedural.

There is a sense that the focus is on equipping NQSWs with the skills and knowledge to work inclusively with service users. While this is clearly vitally important, there appears to be less attention given to the lived experience of social workers from BAME backgrounds going through the ASYE and to pre-empting disadvantages where these may occur.

This is borne out by the feedback from some ethnically diverse NQSWs who suggested that whilst their organisations have policies around equality and diversity these aren't always connected/able to help them on a day-to-day basis. For example, ... 'Supervision is a bit reactive rather than proactive, it gives a focused opportunity to say if something has happened, but nothing that keeps the issues highlighted'. Also, 'equality is raised in supervision, but feels more of a tick box'.

Our conversations were with ethnically diverse groups of NQSWs, who mainly spoke positively about their direct experience. They expressed the view that the language skills and cultural knowledge and experience of different team members are appreciated. However, some did raise frustrations about caseload allocations and mistaken assumptions that because a worker is from a particular ethnic community, they are the "go to" expert.

Alongside this there were some positive reflections about the risk and safeguarding issues associated with service users seeing social workers from their own or similar cultural backgrounds.

The risks of tokenism were also noted, for example in the employer's response if an NQSW experiences racism from a service user. What is the policy to cover this? How does an NQSW make a complaint?

In at least one conversation there was concern that NQSWs may not feel able to raise these issues or challenge racism in the workplace due to the implications for their assessment outcome. This is indicative of the wider challenge in addressing anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice across the whole workforce. It should not therefore be seen merely as a problem within ASYE programme activity.

Where learning and development was discussed, employers referenced resources available through local universities and teaching partnerships, also from Research in Practice.

Two approaches – The “Social Graces” Tool and the “Mandela” model of practice learning – were referred to in several discussions.

One practice educator spoke of the ‘Mandela model’ taught on their Practice Educator course, which was a helpful tool in learning about and understanding ‘different cultural processes, communications, and cultural humbleness’. This is a good tool which is used with NQSW's, and focusses on ‘people's heritage and lived experience, and so brings out into the open and celebrates difference so bias and disadvantage can be addressed’.

Following the visits Skills for Care devoted a half-day session at the March 2021 national ASYE event to have a further conversation about race and ethnicity across the ASYE community, learning from which continues to inform our thinking.

Key messages

- Overall, the reviewer's observations were of a mixed picture. While all employers acknowledge the importance of anti-racist practice, they are at different stages in terms of thinking through the issues as they apply to the ASYE.
- NQSWs report a mixture of experiences, mainly feeling supported and valued within their teams, but also experiencing a level of disconnect with the organisational rhetoric. The policies are in place, but in many instances, these haven't yet trickled down to front line NQSWs.

- Ensure that all of your NQSWs and supervisors have the necessary training and support to enable them to call out racist practices. Ensure that NQSW's from BAME backgrounds are linked into peer support groups if this is their choice.
- Encourage the “hard to have” conversations which may be awkward or clumsy but where individuals are not afraid to say the wrong thing and learn from the ensuing dialogue. NQSWs want this both in one-to-one supervisions and in team meetings. They feel that there is more to be done to understanding different cultures.
- Ensure that these conversations take place at the outset of the ASYE and keep them on supervision and team meeting agendas throughout
- Think about the ways in which you can capture and analyse data around ethnicity, recruitment, achievement, and attrition.
- Consider how you can incorporate an analysis of this data as well as feedback from NQSWs about their lived experience within your annual quality assurance and continuous improvement cycle.
- Ask yourself the question “What can your ASYE programme do to develop an ethos of Allyship”?

As a final note, employers should not lose sight of the wider challenges of addressing anti-racist and anti-discriminatory practice within ASYE programmes. Ask yourself what else can you do to uncover both conscious and unconscious bias that may result in:

- less representation amongst the NQSW workforce in your organisation
- black and ethnically diverse NQSWs experiencing less successful outcomes than their white colleagues within their ASYE programme?

Section 5. Moving forwards – conclusions and recommendations

As the name implies, the Cycle of Quality Assurance and Continuous Improvement is about ASYE programmes progressing over time, taking account of feedback, and learning from experience. This review period (April 2020–March 2021) has created some major challenges, but opportunities to do things differently have also presented themselves.

While this annual report has focussed on the two areas that have become central in 2020- 21, the findings, key messages, and recommendations contained within it rest on the ASYE framework and the foundations of the solid programmes that most organisations have established over several years. They coalesce under one fundamental principle - The voice of the NQSW is central to the ASYE.

To use the maxim “actions speak louder than words” we are all learning to do this better.

As far as COVID-19 is concerned, Skills for Care has had to revise our planned ASYE activity to respond to new and changing circumstances, and to work in new ways with employers. We have broadened our engagement with NQSWs so that we can hear and learn from them directly. We will continue to do this and are committed to developing and testing out guidance and resources that address their needs.

In terms of the anti-racism agenda, Skills for Care commits to working to ensure that the ASYE programme nationally is anti-racist and fully inclusive. We intend to deal with the subject in the coming months by putting together an action plan to address the issues including:

- our increasing direct engagement with ethnically diverse NQSWs
- the ways in which we gather and analyse data about registration and completion in order to address any inherent disadvantage related to pass rates
- the support that we offer to employers and NQSWs in all aspects of the ASYE.

Recommendations

1. Employers should consider the extent to which the quality assurance and continuous improvement process within your organisation is fit for purpose in the changing world.
 - a. Are you doing enough to ensure that your NQSWs are able and encouraged to be active participants in their ASYE experience?
 - b. Do they understand why they are undertaking the ASYE, what the benefits to them and the organisation are perceived to be?
 - c. Do they have opportunities to engage with others in different service areas or organisations to broaden their learning, gain peer support and

- build their critical awareness? Do they know about the Skills for Care national forum?
- d. Do they have meaningful opportunities to influence the development of your programme? What could you, as the employer do better?
2. Given that the impact of the pandemic is likely to be felt for some time to come, employers should consider:
 - a. What the longer-term needs of the current cohort of NQSWs are likely be and how these will be addressed.
 - b. Ways in which the needs of future cohorts of NQSWs may differ from those of the existing group.
 - c. How supervisors and team managers can be enabled to provide for any additional support requirements.
 3. Employers should consider ways in which they proactively address the potential disadvantage experienced by BAME NQSWs.
 - a. Do you collect recruitment, completion, and attrition data for your ASYE programme? If so, what do you do with this? if not, what do you need to do to start?
 - b. To what extent do you encourage the “hard-to-have conversations within your teams? What else can you do?
 - c. Do BAME NQSWs feel supported if they experience racism from a service user?
 - d. Do NQSWs feel able to challenge racist language and racism in practice without fear of affecting their final report?

Section 6. Appendices

6.1 Organisations visited for quality assurance visits

Organisation Name	Employer Type	Number of NQSWs	
North Tyneside Council	LA	19	NE
Core Assets	PVI	2	M
D M R Services	PVI	1	M
Bolton Council	LA	7	NW
Hatols Fostering Service	Fostering	3	SE
St Helens Council	LA	18	NW
London Borough of Havering	LA	8	London
City of York Council	LA	14	NE
Bournemouth Christchurch & Poole Council	LA	18	SW
Change Grow Live (CGL)	PVI	3	SE
Oldham Council	LA	13	NW
Lincolnshire Partnership Foundation Trust	NHS	5	M
Leicestershire County Council	LA	24	M
North Somerset Council	LA	14	SW
Durham County Council	LA	25	NE
Norfolk County Council	LA	28	E
Calderdale Council	LA	18	YH
London Borough of Lambeth	LA	16	London
Kent County Council *	LA	95	SE
Central Bedfordshire Council *	LA	21	E

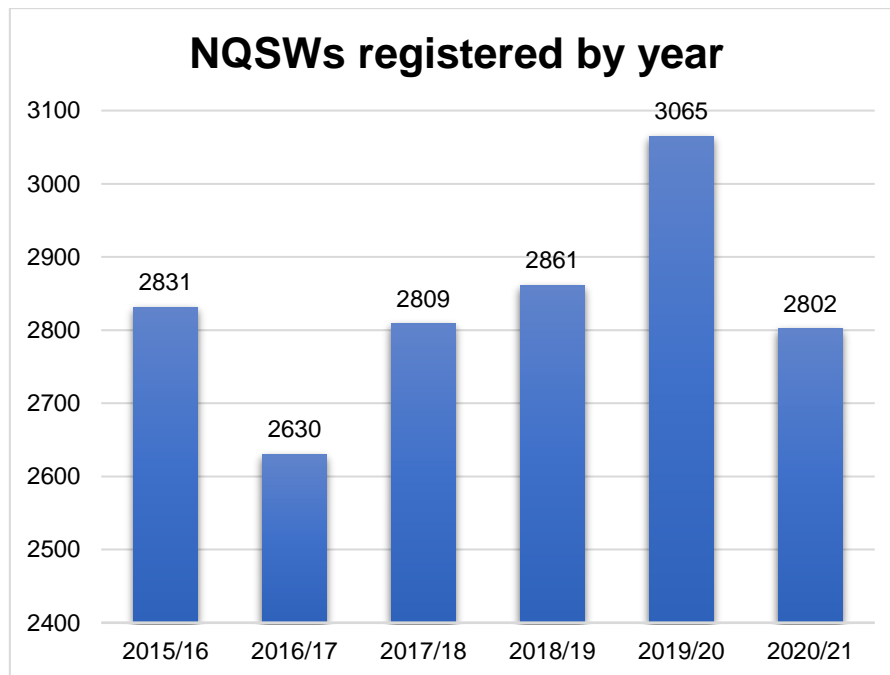
* The visits highlighted in grey above were to organisations where they have a joint ASYE programme with adult services.

6.2 Data from the portal

This section contains a summary of the data collected on the Skills for Care portal in respect of employer applications for grant funding. It shows that in 2020-21 a total of 202 different employer organisations registered 2802 newly qualified social workers onto the ASYE programme.

NQSW registrations, by year

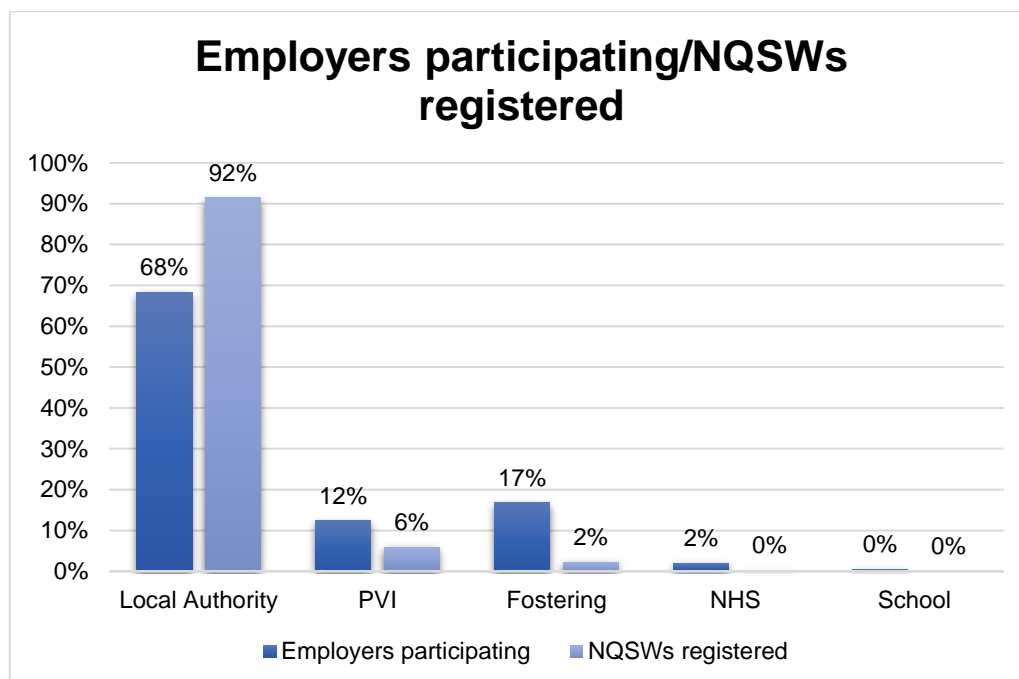
The total number of ASYE registrations for 2020-21 was 2802. This was lower than the previous than the previous five years. While we do not know for certain, this is likely to reflect the impact of COVID-19 over the past twelve months.



2020-21 registrations, by employer type

Registrations were made by 202 employers, 68% of whom were local authorities:

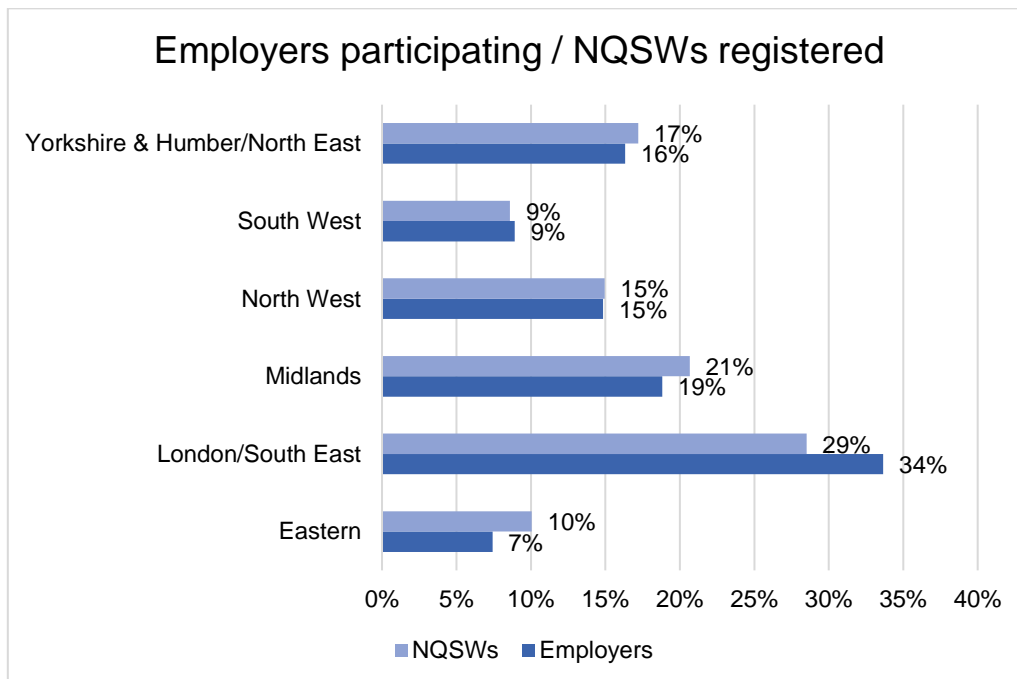
	Number of employers	Number of NQSWs registered
Local authority	138	2564
PVI	25	165
Fostering	34	64
NHS	4	8
School	1	1
Total	202	2802



2020-21 registrations, by area

Three in ten registrations came from employers based in London and the South East and one in five from those based in the Midlands:

	Number of employers	Number of NQSWs registered
Eastern	15	282
London/South East	68	799
Midlands	38	579
North West	30	419
South West	18	241
Yorkshire and Humber/ North East	33	482
Total	202	2802



6.3 Data from the 360 degree tool

The data submitted via the 360-degree tool to date indicates that the ASYE is functioning well for participants across most statement measures.

The evaluation criteria statements scoring the highest nationally were:

- The development needs of individual NQSWs are clearly identified, recorded and reviewed via a PDP at each stage of the ASYE process (Score = 4.2)
- NQSWs have access to learning opportunities relevant to their individual and collective development needs (Score = 4.2)
- Assessment outcomes for individual NQSWs are quality assured by the organisation's internal moderation process to ensure that they are accurate, valid, robust and sufficient (Score = 4.2)
- Supervisors/Assessors base their ASYE assessment on the KSS and the PCF (Score = 4.2)

[The first two of these four bullet points were different to those in the top four last year]

The evaluation criteria statement scoring the lowest nationally were:

- NQSWs are able to engage with the national quality assurance and continuous improvement framework via the National Community of Practice for NQSWs (Score = 3.4)

Background

A 360 degree tool has been provided to help employers gather feedback that will help them to review and quality assure their ASYE programmes. The tool enables employers to gain a balanced view of their progress because feedback is gathered from multiple stakeholders.

The tool is based around the ASYE programme's evaluation criteria and consists of 34¹ statements organised under four overarching themes:

¹ 2 new categories were added in 2020/21 – these related to equality and diversity issues




- 1) The ASYE programme is delivered in accordance with ASYE Framework and Employer Standards
- 2) The ASYE programme ensures that the KSS & the PCF underpin NQSW professional practice
- 3) The NQSWs' experience of undertaking the ASYE is central to the quality assurance and continuous improvement process
- 4) The ASYE programme is integrated within the wider organisational system

Respondents rate how they feel about each statement using a scale from 1 ('*Significant development needed*') to 5 ('*Exceptional strength*').

Employers complete the assessment themselves ('self-assessment'), as well as inviting their NQSWs, line managers and others to complete it. Feedback is provided anonymously.

Once complete each employer receives a personalised report which shows their results as an average for their organisation as well as broken down by type of respondent. As more data is input into the tool Skills for Care will be able to provide employers with comparative results for their region or Teaching Partnership.

The following pages show the composite results for the 55 organisations who had submitted their data up to 28 February 2021². Using this we're able to report on the national average for each statement, as well as the range of scores, from the minimum (0) to the maximum (5). The results have been coded as follows:

- 1.0 - 1.9 = Red  (1 = *Significant development needed*)
- 2.0 - 3.9 = Amber  (2 = *Development needed* / 3 = *Working well*)
- 4.0 - 5.0 = Green  (4 = *Strength* / 5 = *Exceptional strength*)

² A further 30 organisations have registered, but not submitted any data and a further 26 organisations have submitted some data but have not met the minimum criteria for inclusion in our reporting.

NB: Of the 55 organisations included in this report, 19 had also submitted their data and been included in last year's report.

April 2021

Evaluation criteria theme 1: The ASYE programme is delivered in accordance with ASYE Framework and Employer Standards

The results for the statements in this section were generally high. Thirteen out of the nineteen statements scored an average, nationally, of at least 4 out of 5 ('Green'), with the remaining six statements scoring an average, nationally, of 3.7-3.9 ('Amber') (see overleaf).
















There was no significant change between these scores and those recorded for 2019-20, or indeed 2018-19 (any observed changes were either 0.1 increase or decrease). Two statements, Statement 10 (The development needs identified in the NQSW's final placement report (pre-qualification) are addressed in the initial PDP of the ASYE) and Statement 16 (both NQSWs and supervisors have a clear understanding of what is required of them with regard to the sufficiency and quality of assessment evidence) changed rating (from 'Green' to 'Amber') but in both cases the score had only changed from a '4' to a '3.9'.

	2020-21		
	National average	Min	Max
The support needs of individual NQSWs are clearly identified and recorded and plans are in place to meet them from the start of the ASYE programme	4.0	3.0	5.0
Plans are in place to meet an NQSWs support needs from the start of the ASYE programme	4.0	2.0	5.0
NQSWs receive regular reflective supervision from a registered social worker who has demonstrable skills and experience in developing others	4.1	2.0	5.0
Supervision takes place as stated in the Employer Standards and is appropriate to the stage the NQSW is at in the ASYE	4.1	2.0	5.0
NQSWs receive work-load relief appropriate to their stage in the programme with a minimum level of 10%	3.7	1.7	5.0
There is a transparent approach to the way that workload relief is managed for NQSWs participating in the ASYE programme	3.7	1.0	5.0
Protected time is made available for NQSWs to undertake personalised CPD activities, ASYE dedicated training events and other peer learning opportunities such as action learning	4.0	2.0	5.0
Opportunities are available for NQSWs to access peer support	4.1	0.0	5.0
The support needs of supervisors / assessors are addressed in ways appropriate to their needs and level of experience in this role	3.8	2.0	5.0
The development needs identified in the NQSW's final placement report (pre-qualification) are addressed in the initial PDP of the ASYE	3.9	1.0	5.0
The development needs of individual NQSWs are clearly identified, recorded, and reviewed via a PDP at each stage of the ASYE process	4.2	2.0	5.0
NQSWs have access to learning opportunities relevant to their individual and collective development needs	4.2	2.0	5.0
Supervisors / assessors have access to learning opportunities relevant to their individual and collective development needs	3.8	2.0	5.0
NQSWs are supported to develop critically reflective practice within the ASYE programme	4.1	2.0	5.0
NQSWs and supervisors / assessors are supported to understand the emphasis on progressive development within the ASYE assessment process	4.0	3.0	5.0
Both NQSWs and supervisors have a clear understanding of what is required of them with regard to the sufficiency and quality of assessment evidence	3.9	2.0	4.7
Feedback gathered from service-users as part of the ASYE programme is addressed within the assessment process	4.0	2.0	5.0
Detailed action plans are put in place and reviewed regularly where there are concerns about an NQSW's conduct and performance at any stage of the ASYE	4.0	2.0	4.8
Assessment outcomes for individual NQSWs are quality assured by the organisation's internal moderation process to ensure that they are accurate, valid, robust and sufficient	4.2	3.0	5.0

Evaluation criteria theme 2: The ASYE programme ensures that the KSS & the PCF underpin NQSW professional practice

The results for the statements in this section were generally high. All five statements scored an average, nationally, of at least 4 out of 5 ('Green') (see below).










There was no significant change between these scores and those recorded for 2019-20, or indeed 2018-19 (any observed changes were either 0.1 increase or decrease).

	National average	Min	Max
The NQSW is informed about the KSS and the ASYE plus the associated organisational expectations as part of the recruitment	 4.0	 0.0	 5.0
Measures are in place to ensure that NQSWs have an understanding of the KSS and its' significance to their professional practice as soon as possible after they start their employment, and before they commence the ASYE	 4.0	 0.0	 5.0
ASYE supervisors / assessors and line managers (where different) support NQSWs to develop their professional practice underpinned by the KSS and the PCF	 4.1	 2.0	 5.0
There is clarity about the ways in which the ASYE learning and assessment process is mapped against the KSS and the PCF and this is clearly referenced in the assessment documentation	 4.0	 2.0	 5.0
Supervisors / assessors base their ASYE assessment on the KSS and the PCF	 4.2	 2.0	 5.0

Evaluation criteria theme 3: The NQSWs' experience of undertaking the ASYE is central to the quality assurance and continuous improvement process

The results for the statements in this section were slightly lower than the majority of those in the previous two sections. However, all scored an average, nationally, of at least 3.4 out of 5 ('Amber') (see below).

These scores were exactly the same as those recorded for 2019-20 and 2018-19.






















	National average	Min	Max
The views of NQSWs about their experience of the ASYE programme are fully represented within the local quality assurance and continuous improvement process	 3.8	 0.0	 5.0
NQSWs are able to engage with the national quality assurance and continuous improvement framework via the National Community of Practice for NQSWs	 3.4	 0.0	 4.3
NQSWs' experience within the ASYE is reflective of their employers' equality and diversity policies	 3.9	 0.0	 5.0

Evaluation criteria theme 4: The ASYE programme is integrated within the wider organisational system

The results for the statements in this section were generally high. Three out of the seven statements scored an average, nationally, of at least 4 out of 5 ('Green'), with a further three statements scoring an average, nationally, of 3.8 or 3.9 ('Amber') and one scoring 3.6³ (see below).

There was no significant change between these scores and those recorded for 2019-20, or indeed 2018-19 (any observed changes were either 0.1 increase or decrease). One statement, Statement 32 (A clear and transparent quality assurance and continuous improvement process is in place within the organisation) changed rating (from 'Green' to 'Amber') but the score had only changed from a '4' to a '3.9'.

³ This was the new equality and diversity measure

	National average	Min	Max
The organisation takes ownership of the supervisor / assessor's assessment recommendations as part of practice endorsement for child and family social workers	 4.0	 0.0	 5.0
A clear and transparent quality assurance and continuous improvement process is in place within the organisation	 3.9	 2.0	 5.0
The perspectives of supervisors / assessors and service users informs the quality assurance and continuous improvement cycle	 3.8	 0.0	 5.0
Senior management is engaged with all aspects of the quality assurance and continuous improvement process	 3.8	 1.0	 5.0
Career / CPD progression opportunities following on from the ASYE are in place for social workers	 4.0	 2.0	 5.0
Performance within the ASYE is linked to supervision, appraisal and other performance management processes	 4.1	 2.0	 5.0
The ASYE is regularly audited against organisational equality and diversity policies	 3.6	 0.0	 4.5

Appendices

Profile of organisations visited as part of the quality assurance process

Employer Type	NQSW count	Region
LA	19	North East
LA	14	North East
LA	25	North East
LA	18	North West
LA	7	North West
LA	13	North West
LA	18	Yorkshire and Humber
LA	24	Midlands
LA	28	Eastern
LA*	21	Eastern
LA	8	London
LA*	95	London
LA	16	London and South East
LA	18	South West
LA	14	South West
PVI	2	Midlands
PVI	1	Midlands
PVI	3	South East
Fostering	3	London and South East

NHS	5	Midlands
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* This was an organisation where the ASYE is an integrated programme with Adult services.

