



## Open Research Online

### Citation

Hamill, Bronagh; Boyle, Shirley and McFadden, Paula (2023). The impact of mentoring interventions to support newly qualified social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland. *European Social Work Research*, 1(3) pp. 329–344.

### URL

<https://oro.open.ac.uk/90371/>

### License

(CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) Creative Commons: Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

### Policy

This document has been downloaded from Open Research Online, The Open University's repository of research publications. This version is being made available in accordance with Open Research Online policies available from [Open Research Online \(ORO\) Policies](#)

### Versions

If this document is identified as the Author Accepted Manuscript it is the version after peer review but before type setting, copy editing or publisher branding

# The impact of mentoring interventions to support newly qualified social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic in Northern Ireland

Bronagh Hamill, Bronagh.hamill@northerntrust.hscni.net  
Northern Health and Social Care Trust, UK

Shirley Boyle, shirley.boyle@open.ac.uk  
Open University, UK

Paula McFadden, p.mcfadden@ulster.ac.uk  
Ulster University, UK

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the early cessation of practice learning opportunities for social work students across Northern Ireland and an expedited graduation to enable them to join the workforce. The article reports on a small-scale service evaluation of the Assessed Year in Employment Mentoring Programme in the Northern Health and Social Care Trust. The programme provided additional support to newly qualified social workers as they transitioned from student to professional. Focus groups facilitated with 11 Assessed Year in Employment social workers highlighted the positive impact of mentoring, with emphasis on the importance of formal, accessible and effective organisational support during the transitional period. Recommendations call for continued facilitation of mentoring for future cohorts of Assessed Year in Employment social workers in order to cultivate a supportive organisational climate and strengthen the workforce.

**Key words** newly qualified social worker • Assessed Year in Employment  
• mentoring • organisational support • COVID-19

## Introduction

Social work, as a profession, is no stranger to uncertainty. Social workers regularly navigate uncertain, challenging and complex situations (Taylor and White, 2006; Afrouz, 2021). In Northern Ireland (NI), social work has effectively responded in times of uncertainty and crisis, both during and following the 30-year period of conflict known as 'The Troubles' (Duffy et al, 2019; O'Rourke et al, 2020). However, the pandemic presented additional and unprecedented challenges, and health and social services are at the front line of this. In March 2020, NI entered its first formal lockdown in line with the rest of the UK. In addition to school closures, numerous measures, such the closure of non-essential businesses, enforced mask wearing and restrictions on gatherings and social movement, were implemented.<sup>1</sup> The culmination of these measures, alongside the introduction of personal protective equipment (PPE), working from home where possible, decreased physical contact with service users and increased use of digital technology to

communicate, had a significant impact on the delivery of health and social care (Neill et al, 2022).

Social workers experienced stressors of the pandemic on both personal and professional levels, working with others who were in crisis or states of adversity that had been amplified by the pandemic. This 'dual exposure' (Holmes et al, 2020: 2) could increase the likelihood of burnout or secondary trauma, especially if a strong organisational response is lacking. Further, it is difficult to predict the long-term impact of the pandemic on the mental and physical health of our workforce (Descatha et al, 2020; Baginsky and Manthorpe, 2021). Research highlights the importance of an ethos of support embedded in work culture to mitigate the negative impact of the pandemic on social care staff (McFadden et al, 2020a).

### *Background*

In NI, social work is a graduate qualification, and the professional title of 'social worker' is protected and regulated by the Northern Ireland Social Care Council. The social work degree is comprised of classroom-based teaching and two placement learning opportunities (PLOs), the first of which spans 85 days and the second 100 days. Upon qualification, many social workers take up employment within one of the five health and social care trusts in NI, which provide the majority of statutory health and social care across the province. The profession takes a lead role in the multidisciplinary approach to safeguarding children and adults, and as such, there is a duality to the social work role in enabling and protecting (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014).

The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in the premature end of PLOs for social work students in NI during March 2020 and an expedited graduation to enable them to join the workforce. The students missed the final three months (approximately 50 per cent) of their PLOs. This experience of transition from student to social worker is unparalleled, and social workers joined the front line of work amid this global crisis (O'Rourke et al, 2020). In recognition of this, the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in NI (hereafter, the Trust) mobilised to deliver a mentoring programme to newly qualified social workers. The aim of the programme was to support staff members in the Trust as they transitioned from student to social worker. Newly qualified social workers were matched with a mentor (a senior social worker with at least five years' practice experience) from within the organisation's Social Services Learning and Development Team, who provided individual professional mentoring sessions for three to six months, focusing on professional development, well-being, self-evaluation and reflective practice.

### *The Assessed Year in Employment*

Newly qualified social workers in NI must complete the Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) (NISCC, 2021), which is the year following the completion of their degree.

---

### The impact of mentoring interventions to support newly qualified social workers

During the AYE, social workers are assessed in terms of their competence to practise as fully qualified social workers, and specific organisational support mechanisms are in place, such as an increased frequency of supervision and designated formal appraisal meetings (DHSSPS, 2015).

The AYE aims to promote safe and effective service delivery through the provision of structured support to social workers during the pivotally formative first year in professional practice (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014). Focused attention is required to support and develop social workers' expertise in working effectively with service users, which often entails complex risk management (Munro, 2011). This structured support is vital in the context of challenges facing the sustainability of the social work workforce across the UK. Contributing factors include the ageing population of social workers (McFadden et al, 2020b) and chronic staff retention difficulties in child welfare (Webb and Carpenter, 2012; McFadden et al, 2015). The impact of these factors on the robustness and stability of the social work profession is worrying. Turnover of staff adversely impacts service users and carers, as well as the organisation, both financially (Ellet et al, 2007) and in losing the expertise of the worker (Slater et al, 2018).

### *Resilience*

There is growing focus on the relationship between staff retention and social worker resilience in the profession. Resilience can be understood from an ecological perspective, whereby individual factors like job satisfaction and self-efficacy interact positively or negatively with organisational factors like caseload and supervision (McFadden et al, 2019). This interaction subsequently influences the worker's intention to remain in or leave the organisation (Barbee et al, 2018). Consideration of resilience in this multifaceted way avoids the imposition of pathological individual responsibility on the social worker to simply 'cope' with the work. It also places a duty on the organisation to ensure that social workers have access to, and receive adequate support throughout, the entirety of their careers, including the formative AYE year. Literature highlights that social workers exhibit higher levels of resilience following at least four years of experience (McFadden et al, 2019). Therefore, it is vital to ensure that social workers are supported at the early stage of their career in order to enhance resilience, maintain the well-being of the workforce and avoid staff turnover, and such interventions as supervisory or mentoring support can target and improve staff retention (McFadden et al, 2019). This has never been more critical than during the COVID-19 pandemic, which brought unprecedented challenges for newly qualified social workers.

### **Aim and objectives**

This article presents the results of a service evaluation that aimed to explore whether a sample of AYE social workers were impacted by a mentoring programme designed to support their premature transition from student to social worker during the COVID19 pandemic. Objectives included gathering

knowledge regarding the demographic characteristics of newly qualified social workers employed by the Trust and insight into their experience of commencing and/or continuing the first year of their career during the COVID-19 pandemic. The study also sought to explore participants' experience of formal mentoring, including whether mentoring contributed to their transition from student to social worker, and to make recommendations to inform future support for newly qualified social workers.

## **Methodology**

This article presents the results of a service evaluation. Social work interventions should be subject to rigorous evaluation in order to justify their use (Gambrill, 2001). While service evaluations are distinct from research, similar research methods may be used to ensure rigour (Taylor et al, 2015). This service evaluation used qualitative methods to explore social workers' perspectives and experiences of their first year in practice and of the mentoring programme. A qualitative approach was utilised, and the rationale was to provide in-depth insights and a voice for participants (Hardwick and Worsley, 2011).

Data were collected using focus groups. Focus groups have potential to offer richness of data arising from the natural interaction and conversation between participants (Kitzinger, 1994). In order to balance this natural interaction with the need to remain focused on the topic, a semi-structured discussion guide was utilised with each group.

Inclusion criteria required that participants were existing AYE social workers in the Trust who graduated early during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 and received formal AYE mentoring. This included AYE social workers across all areas of practice (with children and adults) in the Trust. Exclusion criterion were social workers who were not within their AYE during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, social workers not employed by the Trust and AYE social workers in the Trust who did not receive formal AYE mentoring. This purposive sampling technique was applied in order to gain an 'information-rich' sample of participants (Taylor et al, 2015).

## **Procedures**

Invitations were emailed to all AYE social workers that met the inclusion criteria. This was accompanied by a participant information sheet. Invitees were given two weeks to respond to the invitation in order to enable them time to consider whether they would like to participate.

Due to restrictions in place regarding face-to-face meetings during the COVID19 pandemic, three separate but synchronous focus groups were facilitated online. Focus-group discussions were recorded and transcribed. Data analysis utilised a thematic approach, in which the data were studied for emerging themes and patterns (Roberts et al, 2019). The transcripts were reviewed to identify a preliminary set of codes. A key task in qualitative analysis is data immersion, whereby items are coded in accordance with

their essential meaning (Campbell et al, 2017). Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (in the form of NVivo© 2020) was employed to develop sets of nodes and codes by two researchers. Once coded, the data were examined for patterns and themes (Braun and Clarke, 2013), and interpreted in the context of theoretical concepts from existing literature, with the aim of creating new theoretical or conceptual ideas based on the experiences of participants (Campbell et al, 2017). The analysis involved elements of grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), and analysis was conducted iteratively as transcripts from the focus groups were compared and contrasted with each other to identify emergent themes (Taylor et al, 2015). Throughout the analysis stage, it is important to be cognisant of the potential for researcher bias. The perspective of researcher in qualitative studies is paradoxical: there is a need to be tuned-in to the experiences and perspectives of others, yet it is important to reflect on and manage potential biases that could influence how data are interpreted (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994). In order to promote objectivity in the interpretation of data, a reflexive approach was adopted, in which recordings were listened to several times and supporting notes made (Taylor et al, 2015).

Just as social work practice was impacted by the pandemic, so too was research activity. This study was developed for a master's-level educational project and was originally planned to be a research project. The pandemic brought an embargo on research for educational purposes (other than for doctoral studies) being undertaken in statutory health and social care settings across the UK (NHS HRA, 2020). Therefore, the study proposal was amended to be a service evaluation and was not eligible for review by the Trust's Research Ethics Committee. However, it was reviewed by the Trust's social work research lead, and governance approval was granted from the Trust to proceed with the service evaluation. The evaluation was also registered with the Trust's Audit and Service Evaluation Department. Despite limitations imposed on this project by research governance policy at that time, the study adhered to ethical procedures nonetheless.

Details of consent, confidentiality and anonymity were outlined to participants within the participant information sheet and consent form. Explaining procedures regarding the use and anonymity of data to participants helps to minimise social desirability response bias (Bergen and Labonté, 2020). Following the focus groups, only the facilitator had access to the audio recordings. Identifiable details of participants were removed from the data during the transcription process to maintain anonymity and confidentiality (Iphofen, 2009).

## **Findings**

### *Demographics*

The study included 11 self-selected participants from a possible pool of 26 participants, which was an uptake of 42 per cent. Ten participants were female, and one was male. There was one male in the potential pool of

participants, and therefore this sample is representative of AYE social workers in the Trust and in the region (Department of Health, 2020). All participants achieved their social work qualification in NI, and their ages ranged between 21 and 40 years. There was representation of social workers from across adult and children’s services.

### *Themes and subthemes*

There were 38 codes initially identified from the raw data. Following this, the 38 codes were integrated into 18 subthemes and divided into five overarching themes. These are presented in Table 1.

Dominant themes included the premature cessation of the PLOs and the commencement of the career amid the global pandemic. The impact of mentoring on the transition from student to social worker, the contribution of mentoring to professional and personal development, and emotional impact were also dominant themes.

**Table 1: Themes and subthemes**

<b>Dominant themes</b>	<b>Subthemes</b>
Early cessation of the PLOs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Abrupt ending and quick transition to work</li> <li>•Missed learning opportunities and milestones</li> <li>•Impact on confidence when commencing career</li> <li>•Connotations of the ‘COVID Cohort’</li> </ul>
Commencing AYE amid a global pandemic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Constant state of change and flux</li> <li>•Challenges presented by the pandemic to daily work</li> <li>• Support from team and line manager</li> <li>•Feeling like a ‘burden’</li> </ul>
Emotional impact	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Personal stressors with regards the pandemic</li> <li>•Feeling isolated as an AYE social worker</li> </ul>
AYE mentoring helped with transition from student to social worker	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Mentoring as a continuum of learning</li> <li>•Mentoring supported the adjustment following early completion of the degree</li> <li>•Consistency amid an uncertain climate</li> <li>•Assistance in completion of AYE requirements</li> </ul>
Mentoring supported professional and personal development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•Mentoring offered guidance and support with regards professional development</li> <li>•Emotional support provided via mentoring/buffer to stress</li> <li>•The mentoring programme made AYE staff feel valued</li> <li>•Benefits of mentor being located outside of the team</li> </ul>

### *Early cessation of the PLOs*

#### *Abrupt ending and quick transition to work*

Participants discussed their experiences of the early and sudden cessation of the PLOs. They highlighted that they were informed to leave and not return to the placement site, without forewarning. There was emphasis on the lack of satisfactory endings in terms of being unable to say goodbye to colleagues and finish tasks. The impact of the abrupt ending on service users and carers was also noted, with recognition of the emotional impact this may have had: “I had built up good relationships with teenagers that we weren’t allowed to go out and say goodbye to.... We couldn’t give those

---

### **The impact of mentoring interventions to support newly qualified social workers**

endings and I think that had an effect on those families” (Participant 6). Following the end to placement, most participants quickly took up employment in the Trust. Many participants voiced their uncertainty at commencing work so quickly: “There was such a level of anxiety coming back and feeling like, ‘Oh my God, I was only in that placement like two months’” (Participant 7).

#### *Missed learning opportunities and milestones*

The early cessation of the PLOs signalled the end of learning within the placement site, and participants lamented lost learning opportunities: “The last few months of your placement ... is confidence building and really understanding what your role is” (Participant 4). In addition, most participants noted that they had missed certain milestones usually enjoyed by students. This included saying goodbye to their host teams on the PLOs and having a graduation ceremony. The culmination of these missed milestones resulted in participants feeling as though they did not have a true sense of closure in terms of finishing their degree, as well as impacting their feeling of readiness to practice.

#### *Impact on confidence when commencing career*

Most participants identified that the premature ending of PLOs adversely impacted their confidence when commencing their career. Participants reflected on their feelings of anxiety and worry in relation to the sudden transition from student to social worker. One social worker spoke of turning down jobs because she believed she was not skilled enough to take on the role. There was also a common thread throughout the focus groups with regards the swift change in professional expectations from student to social worker: “Are you ever ready for social work? You know, what you think it is and the reality of it is completely different.... It still makes you nervous to go out as a social worker on your own” (Participant 11).

#### *Connotations of the ‘COVID Cohort’*

Participants demonstrated acute awareness of the uniqueness of their situation and the circumstances of their cohort. Some pointed out that on the surface, it may appear to others that they were given certain allowances in order to graduate quicker, for example, finishing PLOs early, which contributed to them feeling undeserving of their qualification: “You felt like you didn’t deserve your degree.... It feels like we’ve been let off easy and you feel like other students now coming out are just thinking, ‘Oh, you are the COVID class!’” (Participant 3).

#### *Commencing AYE amid a global pandemic*

##### *Constant state of change and flux*

Participants spoke of the strange nature of the working environment during the pandemic, marked by rapidly changing guidance around working arrangements, such as PPE, team ‘bubbles’ and the unprecedented utilisation of online technology. Some participants also discussed



challenges in terms of staff depletion within their teams due to such factors as shielding, isolating, illness and redeployment. They identified that this constant state of flux and change compounded an already-difficult transition from student to social worker: “You were joining teams where there ... was low staff and the ways of working were completely changing; nobody really knew what they were doing. So, it was ... a strange time to join because you weren’t getting that same support” (Participant 1).

#### *Challenges presented by the pandemic to daily work*

All participants experienced remote working to varying degrees, and the impact this had on the availability of peer support was noted. Remote working also presented issues in relation to the completion of tasks, such as assessments. They worried about the quality of their work, as well as the impact on service users’ well-being: “We were expected to assess people over the phone, and that was really hard. How can we assess someone’s needs if we can’t see them?” (Participant 2).

#### *Support from team and line manager*

Some participants identified the significance of having a supportive team and line manager. They valued having managers who ensured that consistent supervision took place and colleagues who were accessible for informal support when required: “I had a great team here ... very supportive, and I think that matters because you feel rooted and then you’re getting your confidence” (Participant 4).

#### *Feeling like a ‘burden’*

In contrast to the positive experiences noted by some participants, others voiced concerns that they were viewed as burdensome by way of being an AYE social worker. It was pointed out that as staff footfall within the office setting was limited, there was less availability of peer support, and so managers were more frequently sought out. Some participants worried that this made them a ‘hindrance’ and also expressed reluctance at interrupting busy colleagues in order to ask questions: “You do feel like you are a bit of a nightmare going to them and saying, ‘Look, I need help on this”” (Participant 7).

#### *Emotional impact*

##### *Personal stressors with regards the pandemic*

Many described competing personal and professional priorities. Concerns for the health and well-being of their own families was a frequently cited stressor, and this was heightened by a sense of guilt that participants were potentially exposing their families to COVID-19 as a result of work on the front line: “Even balancing the risk – I was living at home, my mum was clinically vulnerable and trying to manage your own personal feelings around that” (Participant 5). Participants also cited the context of the COVID-19 pandemic as worrying in itself, with unsettling news bulletins

---

**The impact of mentoring interventions to support newly qualified social workers**  
arousing feelings of anxiety. This context added to their overall stress levels at the time of their transition from student to social worker.

*Feeling isolated as an AYE social worker*

Feelings of loneliness as an AYE social worker were common among participants. They described the difficulty in beginning their career at a time when many staff were not physically present in the office. This had an impact on being able to forge relationships with colleagues and establish a sense of belonging. There was a sense of being on the periphery of teams and being unable to effectively settle into the role and organisation.

*AYE mentoring helped with transition from student to social worker*

*Mentoring as a continuum of learning*

In each focus group, participants valued the continuum of learning and development that mentoring provided in light of the early cessation of PLOs. A key factor was the continuation of focus on learning needs that were carried over from PLOs. Participants worked with mentors to complete their personal development plan based on these learning needs: “Whenever we carried all of our learning needs over into our AYE, it was a really good way of ... continuous learning” (Participant 9). There was also emphasis on the mentors’ encouragement for participants to continue to relate practice to theory and consider methods and models of social work. Participants noted that this was beneficial, as they may not otherwise have been prompted to practise in this way due to the hectic nature of their transition and the working environment in the context of the pandemic.

*Mentoring supported the adjustment following early completion of the degree*

Participants regarded the mentoring as a supportive mechanism in their transition from student to social worker. Mentors provided a link to the organisation in the early days, when it can feel overwhelming to navigate new systems and procedures. Further, the mentor was viewed as a readily accessible support with whom issues could be addressed and from whom guidance could be sought: “It made the process seamless.... The transition felt a lot more manageable to have someone ... to create that link and know you had someone to talk to when you were settling into a new environment” (Participant 11). There was a general consensus that this type of support would be beneficial to future AYE social workers. Participants reflected on the pressure of moving from student to social worker and how the support and security of having a mentor could ease this process: “It was really beneficial for that crossover between uni and being a qualified social worker, and I don’t think that’s just because of COVID either. I think it would be beneficial for everyone” (Participant 6).

*Consistency amid an uncertain climate*

There was appreciation for the consistency of mentoring in the midst of an unpredictable working environment. Participants highlighted two main

elements in relation to this: first, the relationship with the mentor was valuable and provided a space for learning; and, second, mentoring ensured consistent supervision. This was of particular relevance given the climate of increased staff absences and additional team pressures, which several participants experienced: “It was useful given COVID and the pressures because when my operational supervisor was off, the mentor was able to step in and step up the supervisions” (Participant 8).

#### *Assistance in completion of AYE requirements*

Mentors assisted in navigating and completing AYE requirements and documentation. There was a clear distinction between operational supervision, which was facilitated by operational managers, and professional supervision, which was facilitated by the mentors: “[The mentor was] a dedicated supervisor for AYE ... a support just for that reason” (Participant 1).

#### *Mentoring supported professional and personal development*

##### *Mentoring offered guidance and support with regards professional development*

Participants highlighted the mentor’s role in encouraging and supporting their professional development. They valued time spent with mentors in professional supervision that focused on their practice and professional growth: “In your operational supervision ... you don’t go into the same depth of looking at where can you develop or what can you learn more in” (Participant 4). Key areas for professional development, such as relating theory to practice and critical reflection, were noted as important aspects of supervision with mentors. Participants identified that engagement in the programme resulted in increased confidence as a practitioner:

‘My AYE mentor gave me confidence ... and whenever she said, “Look, we’re at the three months here, and I don’t feel like you need any more support from me”, it kind of gave you the confidence that, you know, “Maybe I am ready for this and I can go and do it.” That was nice.’ (Participant 10)

##### *Emotional support provided via mentoring/buffer to stress*

In addition to professional support and guidance, the mentoring programme offered emotional support: “It’s such a demanding job ... so even just having that person there makes you feel like you have that extra bit of security around you. Because, you know, you’re not that student anymore” (Participant 8). Others echoed this sentiment, likening the mentoring to a ‘cushion of support’ and a ‘safety blanket’. For many of the participants, mentors created a buffer to the stressors they were experiencing as newly qualified social workers.

##### *The mentoring programme made AYE staff feel valued*

---

### The impact of mentoring interventions to support newly qualified social workers

Participants noted that the provision of the mentoring programme resulted in them feeling valued by the organisation. On a personal level, mentors helped to make mentees feel valued by acknowledging the work they were doing: “[My mentor] was very good at giving acknowledgement for the work I did.... It was easy in the teams to be overlooked for what you’re doing because they’re doing the work too, I suppose” (Participant 3).

#### *Benefits of mentors being located outside of the team*

Participants discussed the benefits of mentors being separate from their own teams. This was identified as an important factor in being able to be open and honest with the mentor, as well as having a confidential space to discuss worries and concerns: “You do genuinely feel because they’re not in the office with you, you can say anything to them” (Participant 6). Participants also appreciated having a space outside of the team within which they could separate themselves from the often-hectic nature of the work to offload and recharge: “You’re so busy ... at least you were getting that hour, or hour and a half, to just come into a different room.... You were able to get away from it, you know” (Participant 2).

### **Limitations**

This was a small-scale study involving 11 participants, and findings are not therefore generalisable. While the study was small, it provides valuable insight into the experiences of newly qualified social workers and the benefits of formal mentoring. The study also contributes to the evidence base about organisational support for newly qualified social workers.

### **Discussion**

The transition from student to social worker is fraught with challenges (Kearns and McArdle, 2012; Kinman and Grant, 2017). There is an organisational priority that newly qualified social workers can quickly and competently manage a substantial caseload, while social workers themselves may have difficulty in adjusting to the significant increase and complexity of work in comparison to their practice learning experience (Carpenter et al, 2015). The early cessation of PLOs arguably resulted in this cohort of graduates being less prepared for this transition than previous counterparts. There is much emphasis on the importance of PLOs in consolidating social work students’ learning and translating the learning into practice (Walker and Gant, 2021). In this study, participants were clear in identifying missed learning and milestones, and the subsequent impact this had on their feelings of readiness as they embarked on their careers. Some also expressed their regret over the impact that the sudden end to PLOs had on service users and carers. These now-qualified social workers need a safe space in which they can reflect on the abrupt ending and the impact this has had on them and the people they have worked with, and mentoring is a mechanism to achieve these aims and address these needs.

The study cast light on the challenges experienced by newly qualified social workers in effectively carrying out their job amid the pandemic. In working with service users and carers, they needed to reassess their skill sets in the face of social-distancing guidelines and restricted face-to-face contact. Golightly and Holloway (2020: 1297) note that these restrictions created 'a significant threat to the relationship-based skills on which social work has traditionally relied'. It is difficult to measure the impact of this on service users and carers, yet we do know that the social care workforce has been 'dedicated and committed' (Boyle and Mullineux, 2021: 74) to helping others throughout the pandemic. While social workers experienced great challenges, the pandemic has also created opportunities to explore new and innovative ways of working, such as utilising online platforms (Ferguson et al, 2021). Critically, the study highlighted the role mentoring had in promoting continuous professional development. This supports the recognition that qualifying education is part of a continuum of professional development rather than an end product (Moriarty et al, 2011), as well as the importance of organisational support, such as mentoring, for newly qualified social workers.

The 2020 social work graduate cohort experienced additional stress and pressures, yet staffing issues resulted in less availability of peer support within teams. This is concerning in terms of the well-being of the social workers, as well as the impact on service delivery. The quality of social care services being delivered correlates with the level of organisational support being offered to staff (Acker, 2004; Jack and Donnellan, 2010). Mentoring has been identified as an effective way to formalise peer support as an organisational intervention (McFadden et al, 2019). The need for this type of support is pivotal, as the long-term impact of this experience for AYE social workers is unknown. Drawing on research following the 11 September 2001 (9/11) terrorist attacks, it is forecasted that the COVID-19 pandemic will result in high levels of post-traumatic stress disorder, depression and substance misuse within the helping professions (Apgar and Cadmus, 2021). This study shone light on the emotional impact of the transition from student to social worker, and participants highlighted that mentoring helped them to feel valued and supported in the early days of their career. This is supported by other studies that highlight psychological and emotional support as key tenets of mentoring (Jacobi, 1991; Clark et al, 2000; Gregory, 2007). Research indicates that employees who receive mentoring have increased levels of job satisfaction and commitment to the organisation (Allen et al, 2004; Baranik et al, 2010).

The organisation has an important role in recognising and addressing the emotional and psychological aspects of the transition from student to social worker (Jack and Donnellan, 2010; Kearns and McArdle, 2012). In the context of an ecological perspective of resilience, such organisational factors will interact positively or negatively with individual factors; therefore, critical to building resilience is understanding and supporting the individual self within the work environment (Russ et al, 2009). Relationships at work, both with co-workers and with managers, are critical to building resilience and reducing burnout risk, with social supports evidenced as being direct

buffers to burnout (McFadden, 2018). As such, mentoring is indeed a social support and is a vehicle that can bridge individual and organisational factors; this evaluation highlights participants' experiences of feeling valued and supported by the organisation, as well as individually having increased confidence to carry out their job roles. There are benefits for the organisation here too. As noted previously, organisational interventions like mentoring promote not only resilience but also staff retention. Therefore, employers and the overall service benefit from a more stable workforce (McFadden et al, 2019).

## **Conclusion**

Organisational support is needed to reduce the likelihood of burnout or secondary trauma (Holmes et al, 2020). This is of particular importance for newly qualified social workers, who also face inherent challenges in their transition from student to social worker, such as increased caseloads and complexity of work (Carpenter et al, 2015). Formal organisational support, such as mentoring, is a protective factor, promoting resilience and retention (McFadden et al, 2019), as well as positively impacting the quality of care delivered to service users and carers (Jack and Donnellan, 2010). Future cohorts of newly qualified social workers may benefit from mentoring during their first formative year in practice. To sustain this intervention, mentors also require formal support. Future service evaluations and research on outcomes for 'mentored' AYE social workers will provide an evidence base and knowledge about structured mentoring supports for graduate social workers.

## **Note**

<sup>1</sup> See the Health Protection (Coronavirus, Restrictions) Regulations (Northern Ireland) (2020) (NISR2020/55), available at: [www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2020/55/contents/made](http://www.legislation.gov.uk/nisr/2020/55/contents/made) (accessed: 3 February 2022).

## **Funding**

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## **Acknowledgements**

We would like to acknowledge the Northern Health and Social Care Trust in enabling the completion of this study. Special thanks go to the newly qualified social workers who participated in the study and to Carole Kirk for her support throughout the project.

## **Conflict of interest**

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

## References

- Acker, G. (2004) The effect of organizational conditions (role conflict, role ambiguity, opportunities for professional development, and social support) on job satisfaction and intention to leave among social care workers in mental health care, *Community Mental Health Journal*, 40(1): 65–73. doi: 10.1023/B:COMH.0000015218.12111.26
- Afrouz, R. (2021) Approaching uncertainty in social work education: a lesson from the COVID-19 pandemic, *Qualitative Social Work*, 20(2): 561–7. doi: 10.1177/1473325020981078
- Allen, T.D., Eby, L.T., Poteet, M.L., Lentz, E. and Lima, L. (2004) Career benefits associated with mentoring for protégés: a meta-analysis, *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 89: 127–36. doi: 10.1037/0021-9010.89.1.127
- Apgar, D. and Cadmus, T. (2021) Using mixed methods to assess the coping and selfregulation skills of undergraduate social work students impacted by COVID-19, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 50: 55–66. doi: 10.1007/s10615-021-00790-3
- Baginsky, M. and Manthorpe, J. (2021) The impact of COVID-19 on children’s social care in England, *Child Abuse and Neglect*, 116: 1–10. doi: 10.1016/j.chiabu.2020.104739
- Baranik, L.E., Roling, E.A. and Eby, L.T. (2010) Why does mentoring work? The role of perceived organizational support, *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 76(3): 336–73. doi: 10.1016/j.jvb.2009.10.011
- Barbee, A., Rice, C., Antle, B.F., Henry, K. and Cunningham, M.R. (2018) Factors affecting turnover rates of public child welfare front line workers: comparing cohorts of title IV-E program graduates with regularly hired and trained staff, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 12(3): 354–79. doi: 10.1080/15548732.2018.1457589
- Bergen, N. and Labonté, R. (2020) ‘Everything is perfect, and we have no problems’: detecting and limiting social desirability bias in qualitative research, *Qualitative Health Research*, 30(5): 783–92. doi: 10.1177/1049732319889354
- Boyle, S. and Mullineux, J. (2021) *Working During the COVID-19 Pandemic: Practitioner Perspectives on the Impact of Lockdown & Social Distancing on Social Work Practice*, Antrim: Northern Health and Social Care Trust.
- Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013) *Successful Qualitative Research: A Practical Guide for Beginners*, London: Sage.
- Campbell, A., Taylor, B.J. and McGlade, A. (2017) *Research Design in Social Work: Qualitative and Quantitative Methods*, London: Sage.
- Carpenter, J., Shardlow, S., Patsios, D. and Wood, M. (2015) Developing the confidence and competence of newly qualified child and family social workers in England: outcomes of a national programme, *British Journal of Social Work*, 45: 153–76. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bct106
- Clark, R., Harden, S. and Johnson, W. (2000) Mentor relationships in clinical psychology doctoral training: results of a national survey, *Teaching of Psychology*, 27(4): 262–8. doi: 10.1207/S15328023TOP2704\_04

- Croisdale-Appleby, D. (2014) *Re-visioning Social Work Education: An Independent Review*, London: Department of Health.
- Department of Health (2020) *Northern Ireland Health and Social Care Workforce Census: March 2020*, Belfast: Information Analysis Directorate.
- Descatha, A., Dab, W. and Jean, K. (2020) Working from home in the time of COVID19: how to best preserve occupational health, *Occupational and Environmental Medicine*, 77(7): 509–10. doi: 10.1136/oemed-2020-106599
- DHSSPS (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety) (2015) *Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) of Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQS): Implementation of the AYE Policy. Circular HSS (OSS) AYE 2/2015*, Northern Ireland: DHSSPS.
- Duffy, J., Campbell, J. and Tosone, C. (2019) *Voices of Social Work through the Troubles. Workshop 21, November 2019*, Belfast: BASW NI and NI Social Care Council.
- Ellet, A.J., Ellis, J.I., Westbrook, T.M. and Dews, D. (2007) A qualitative study of 369 child welfare professionals' perspectives about factors contributing to employee retention and turnover, *Children and Youth Services Review*, 29(1): 264–81. doi: 10.1016/j.childyouth.2006.07.005
- Ferguson, H., Kelly, L. and Pink, S. (2021) Social work and child protection for a postpandemic world: the re-making of practice during COVID-19 and its renewal beyond it, *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 36(1): 5–24. doi: 10.1080/02650533.2021.1922368
- Gambrill, E. (2001) Social work: an authority-based profession, *Research on Social Work Practice*, 11(2): 166–75. doi: 10.1177/104973150101100203
- Golightly, M. and Holloway, M. (2020) Editorial: unprecedented times? Social work and society post-COVID-19, *British Journal of Social Work*, 50(5): 1297–303. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcaa110
- Gregory, M. (2007) Probation training: evidence from newly-qualified officers, *Social Work Education*, 19(6): 585–96.
- Hardwick, L. and Worsley, A. (2011) The invisibility of practitioner research, *Practice*, 23(3): 135–46. doi: 10.1080/09503153.2011.569971
- Holmes, M.R., Rentrop, C.R., Korsch-Williams, A. and King, J.A. (2020) Impact of COVID-19 pandemic on posttraumatic stress, grief, burnout and secondary trauma of social workers in the United States, *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 2: 1–10.
- Iphofen, R. (2009) *Ethical Decision Making in Social Research: A Practical Guide*, London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jack, G. and Donnellan, H. (2010) Recognising the person within the developing professional: tracking the early careers of newly qualified child care social workers in three local authorities in England, *Social Work Education*, 29(3): 305–18. doi: 10.1080/02615470902984663
- Jacobi, M. (1991) Mentoring and undergraduate academic success: a literature review, *Review of Educational Research*, 61: 505–32. doi: 10.3102/00346543061004505



- Kearns, S. and McArdle, K. (2012) Doing it right: accessing the narratives of identity of newly qualified social workers through the lens of resilience, *Child and Family Social Work*, 17: 385–94. doi: 10.1111/j.1365-2206.2011.00792.x
- Kinman, G. and Grant, L. (2017) Building resilience in early-career social workers: evaluating a multi-modal intervention, *British Journal of Social Work*, 47(7): 1979–98.
- Kitzinger, J. (1994) The methodology of focus groups: the importance of interaction between research participants, *Sociology of Health and Illness*, 16: 103–21. doi: 10.1111/1467-9566.ep11347023
- Maykut, P. and Morehouse, R. (1994) *Beginning Qualitative Research: A Philosophic and Practical Guide*, London: The Falmer Press.
- McFadden, P. (2018) Two sides of one coin? Relationships build resilience or contribute to burnout in child protection social work: shared perspectives from leavers and stayers in Northern Ireland, *International Social Work*, 63(2): 1–13.
- McFadden, P., Campbell, A. and Taylor, B. (2015) Resilience and burnout in child protection social work: individual and organisational themes from a systematic literature review, *British Journal of Social Work*, 45: 1546–63. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bct210
- McFadden, P., Gillen, P., Moriarty, J., Mallett, J., Schroder, H., Ravalier, J., Manthorpe, J., Harron, J. and Currie, D. (2020a) *Health and Social Care Workers' Quality of Working Life and Coping while Working during the COVID-19 Pandemic 7th May–3rd July 2020: Findings from a UK Survey*, Belfast: University of Ulster Press.
- McFadden, P., Mallett, J., Campbell, A. and Taylor, B. (2019) Explaining self-reported resilience in child-protection social work: the role of organisational factors, demographic information and job characteristics, *The British Journal of Social Work*, 49(1): 198–216. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcy015
- McFadden, P., Moriarty, J., Schröder, H., Gillen, P., Manthorpe, G. and Mallett, J. (2020b) Growing older in social work: perspectives on systems of support to extend working lives – findings from a UK survey, *British Journal of Social Work*, 50(2): 405–26. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcz165
- Moriarty, J., Manthorpe, J., Stevens, M. and Hussein, S. (2011) Making the transition: comparing research on newly qualified social workers with other professions, *British Journal of Social Work*, 41: 1340–56. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcr031
- Munro, E. (2011) *Munro Review of Child Protection: Final Report – A Child-Centred System*, London: DfE.
- Neill, R.D. et al. (2022) Comparing psychological wellbeing and work-related quality of life between professional groups within health and social care during the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK, *Merits*, 2: 374–86. doi: 10.3390/merits2040026
- NHS HRA (National Health Service Health Research Authority) (2020) Student research, [www.hra.nhs.uk/planning-and-improving-](http://www.hra.nhs.uk/planning-and-improving-)

- 
- The impact of mentoring interventions to support newly qualified social workers research/research-planning/ student-research/, (Accessed: 28 Jun 2022).
- NISCC (Northern Ireland Social Care Council) (2021) *The Assessed Year in Employment for Newly Qualified Social Workers in Northern Ireland*, Belfast: Northern Ireland Social Care Council, [https://niscc.info/app/uploads/2020/12/2021-04-26-AYEGuidance-April-2021\\_as-1.pdf](https://niscc.info/app/uploads/2020/12/2021-04-26-AYEGuidance-April-2021_as-1.pdf), (Accessed: 29 May 2022).
- O'Rourke, M., Maguire, C., Tanner, L. and Mullineux, J.C. (2020) Testing partnership and preparedness in Northern Ireland during COVID-19, *Social Work Education*, 39(8): 1084–93.
- Roberts, K., Dowell, A. and Nie, D.B. (2019) Attempting rigour and replicability in thematic analysis of qualitative research data: a case study of codebook development, *BMC Medical Research Methodology*, 19(6): 1–8. doi: 10.1186/s12874-018-0650-3
- Russ, E., Lonne, B. and Darlington, Y. (2009) Using resilience to reconceptualise child protection workforce capacity, *Australian Social Work*, 62(3): 324–38. doi: 10.1080/03124070903060042
- Slater, G.Y., O'Neill, M., McGuire, L.E. and Dickerson, E. (2018) IV-E or not IV-E, that is the question: comparisons of BSW child welfare scholars and matched trainee confidence and retention, *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 12(3): 300–16. doi: 10.1080/15548732.2018.1444531
- Strauss, A. and Corbin, J. (1998) *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd edn, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.
- Taylor, B.J., Killick, C. and McGlade, A. (2015) *Understanding and Using Research in Social Work*, London: Learning Matters.
- Taylor, C. and White, S. (2006) Knowledge and reasoning in social work: educating for humane judgement, *British Journal of Social Work*, 36(6): 937–54. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bch365
- Walker, J. and Gant, C. (2021) Social work students sharing practice learning experiences: critical reflection as process and method, *Practice*, 33(4): 309–27. doi: 10.1080/09503153.2021.1902973
- Webb, C.M. and Carpenter, J. (2012) What can be done to promote the retention of social workers: a systematic review of interventions, *British Journal of Social Work*, 42: 1235–55. doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcr144