Newly qualified social workers in Scotland: A five-year longitudinal study

Interim Report 3: December 2019

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Contents	Page
Acknowledgements	3
Project team	3
Glossary	4
List of tables	5
Executive summary	6
Introduction	10
Overarching aim	10
Objectives	10
Themes	10
Method	11
Online survey	11
Individual interviews	12
Observational analysis	13
Note on terminology	13
Findings	14
Current employment	14
Professional confidence and competence	24
Formal supervision	28
Informal support	33
Professional learning and development	33
Professional identity	38
Developing leadership	42
Anything else?	45
Summary of key findings and conclusion	48
Appendix 1 – Data tables	54

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Glossary

ECSW	Early career social worker
NQSW	Newly qualified social worker
SSSC	Scottish Social Services Council
T1	Year 1 data
T2	Year 2 data
T3	Year 3 data

List of tables

Table no	Table	Page
1	Composition of interviews	12
2	Type of employer	14
3	Practice setting	15
4	Working pattern	16
5	Number of cases held	20
6	Type of case held	22
7	Volume of case by type	21
8	Attitudes to workload	25
9	Frequency of supervision	27
10	Length of supervision	27
11	Attitudes to informal support	30
12	Advice and guidance from colleagues and peers	31
13	Training provided by employer	35
14	Own time spent on learning/development activities	35
15	Satisfaction with amount of learning/development opportunities	36
16	Quality of learning/development opportunities	36
17	Understanding of leadership	42
18	Leadership capabilities	43
19	Support to develop leadership skills	43
20	Importance of leadership capacity	44
21	Engagement with leadership development activity	44

Executive summary

This report presents findings from Year 3 of a five-year longitudinal study which aims to develop a national picture of how early career social workers (ECSWs) experience and navigate their early years in practice. Methods of data collection include annual repeat-measure online questionnaires, participant observation and in-depth interviews. Year 3 findings draw on 120 responses to a national online questionnaire, 14 in-depth interviews and a ten-day period of observation in a single local authority.

Key findings from Year 3

Year 3 findings indicate a workforce that is increasingly confident, capable and critical regarding its professional purpose and contribution. ECSWs emerge as committed to their role in helping the most vulnerable in Scottish society yet constrained by what they experience as sometimes harsh economic, political, organisational and inter-professional climates.

The optimism, strength and resolve expressed by ECSW's appears, at times, to function as a protection in professional environments characterised by challenge and uncertainty. This dimension underscores the temporal nature of the study findings and prompts consideration of how long workers can sustain and be sustained by this narrative.

Employment

Year 3 data conveys a stronger sense of workers taking responsibility for their career path and wellbeing, including the process of 'exiting' practice environments experienced as detrimental. Accounts of the latter mostly involved movement from statutory children's services to other service areas, with respondents citing a mix of staff absence, high caseloads, lack of resource, stress and professional disillusionment as reasons for exit. Notwithstanding, the majority of ECSWs continue to be employed in statutory settings and almost six out of ten continue to be based in children's services (56.8%). Closer analysis of workforce movement patterns, including within children's services, is required to better understand these findings.

Participants continue to describe their experience of **agile working** in mostly negative terms. As echoed in previous reports, concerns include time inefficiencies, noisy working environments and distance from peer support. The most stressful aspect of agile working was related to uncertainty, specifically, not knowing if you will have a desk to work at. Conversely, positive or neutral messages were consistently associated with having allocated and adequate desk space.

Professional confidence and competence

Year 3 data indicates either sustained or increased levels of **professional confidence and competence** and a diminishing sense of anxiety and vulnerability for most ECSWs. Participants continue to describe varied caseloads and reasonable increases in volume and complexity. As in previous years, there are exceptions to this picture, with a small number of ECSWs describing overwhelming caseloads linked to staff absence, inadequate support and difficult team dynamics. In most cases, negative experiences were managed at the individual level, ie by moving job.

Findings remain broadly consistent regarding **how workers spend their time**. Most time is spent on desk-based activities, specifically 'report writing', this year followed by 'time spent with service users and carers', then 'case-recording'. As in Years 1 and 2, least time is spent on 'reading and using research knowledge and evidence'.

Considerations for employers, educators and policy makers

Closer attention needs to be given to social workers' experiences of agile working. A co-design approach to change would allow employers and workers to work together to maximise the benefits and minimise the harms of developing models and practices.

Policy makers and employers should recognise that social workers have distinctive professional needs and that collegial relationships centred on a proximal concept of 'team' are crucial to effective, safe and emotionally resilient practice. Education can better prepare graduates for agile working by exposure to different organisational structures/models during education.

We need to understand why reading, research and evidence emerges as marginal in ECSW accounts of practice. This will be a focus in our next round of interviews, but it is an important question for the sector more generally.

Supervision, support, learning and development

Supervision continues to be a valued mechanism for professional support and development. However, ECSWs continue to describe a privileging of case-management over professional development in supervision. The number of ECSWs reporting regular (ie monthly) supervision continues to fall; more than 30% of ECSWs report irregular or infrequent access to supervision (ie 6-8 weeks).

Informal support continues to emerge as an important but under-developed mechanism for supporting professional confidence, competence and development. This year, informal support emerged more clearly as an exchange relationship, as ECSWs give and receive support to and from colleagues.

Considerations for employers, educators and policy makers

Improving the experience, quality and consistency of supervision practice is not especially complex, but it will require a commitment from employers and managers to co-create models of supervision that prioritise occupational needs over organisational ones. Academics and others have a role in supporting this process through knowledge development and knowledge mobilisation.

Informal support can be recognised and harnessed in creative ways to the benefit of organisations and staff. Some social work providers have recently introduced senior practitioner roles as one route towards this, a development that would benefit from national recognition and roll-out.

Professional learning and development continues to be mostly self-directed with little expectation amongst ECSWs of structured learning opportunities or structured career pathways. Relatedly, most ECSWs appear reasonably satisfied with the variety and quality of learning opportunities available, most of which continue to be training-based and delivered 'in-house'. Qualitative data indicates an increasing desire for more specialised and/or formal learning opportunities, related to working with particular user groups and/or service areas. Current emphases on self-directed and in-house learning appear to be linked to funding shortages and limited strategic direction for professional learning in social work.

Considerations for employers, educators and policy makers

Professional learning can be strengthened by:

(i) a sector-wide commitment to establishing strategic direction for professional learning, ie in the form of nationally agreed learning priorities aligned to professional standards, promotion pathways and funding routes;
(ii) recognition of the value of different learning opportunities, beyond in-house training and self-directed learning;
(iii) ensuring 'permission', 'funding' and 'time' is available for informal and formal learning opportunities, aligned to workforce/ professional priorities.

Professional identity and leadership

Year 3 findings demonstrate a deepening sense of **professional identity** expressed in a grounded sense of purpose, values and contribution. Constraints on professional identity continue to include a perceived lack of recognition, respect and support from others, alongside a lack of adequate resource for services required to support change with vulnerable individuals and groups.

ECSWs demonstrate a developing understanding of what **leadership** means in practice, although one in three remain unclear. There is evidence of regular opportunity for **practice** leadership across settings, however opportunities are not routinely recognised or rewarded. Findings in this area suggest a continued privileging of traditional models of leadership in which leadership is constructed as a role rather than a disposition.

Considerations for employers, educators and policy makers

ECSWs are confident in their role and purpose but want recognition of and respect from others for the important and complex work they do. Strengthening professional identity requires more consistent attention to known constraints to professional identity at strategic and operational, as well as national and local levels. There is a need for better political recognition of the contribution of social services, a more strategic approach to public and professional messaging and adequate investment in services. Improving the public and professional profile of social work may also require a more coherent and coordinated approach to this from the various bodies that currently represent social work in Scotland.

Next steps

We are entering Year 4 of the study and the fourth online survey was circulated to all ECSWs in March 2020. A final online survey will be circulated in March 2021, followed by a final round of in-depth interviews. Our Year 4 interim report will be available in spring 2021.

Introduction

This interim report presents findings from Year 3 of a five-year longitudinal study exploring the experiences of newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) as they progress in their careers. Findings from Years 1, 2 and 3 will feature in this report.

Led by researchers from Glasgow Caledonian University and the University of Dundee, this project aims to provide a broad view of how early career social workers develop as professionals in Scotland. By exploring professional development at incremental stages, this project will develop a national picture of how social workers experience and navigate their first five years in practice. This research will explore organisational, practical and subjective dimensions of professional social work life.

(i) Overarching aim

The research aims to incrementally develop a national picture of how newly qualified social workers experience and navigate their first five years in practice.

(ii) Objectives

1. To examine NQSWs' journeys of professional transition and development.
2. To understand how NQSWs experience and navigate a complex, contested and dynamic professional landscape, in relation to professional roles, tasks, structures and settings.
3. To understand how NQSWs are supported, trained and developed across diverse practice settings.
4. To identify NQSWs' ongoing professional development needs as they progress their careers.

(iii) Themes

Mindful of aims and objectives set for this project, the research will address the following key themes.

- Professional identity and socialisation.
- Knowledge and skills development (professional learning and development).
- Navigating dynamic professional roles and contexts
- Emotions, self-care and resilience.
- Developing value commitment and value strain.
- Recruitment and retention.
- Supervision and support.
- Leadership.

Method

Each year includes data collection, data analysis and data reporting. Methods of data collection include annual repeat-measure online questionnaires, in-depth interviews and participant observation. Members of the research team have responsibility for different aspects of data collection and analysis.

(i) Literature review

The project team completed a preliminary stage 1 literature review in 2016. Methods of data collection were informed by initial appraisal of existing research. Stage 2 of this review was completed in 2018, with the production of a comprehensive literature review authored by Clarke and McCulloch (2018). This review is available in Appendix 1 of our Year 2 report and will be updated in our final report in Year 5.

(ii) Online survey

For each year, an online survey will follow a repeat-measure process where participants will be asked to complete the same questions at each stage of the project. Measuring incremental change in longitudinal research requires the same questions to be asked at equidistant points. This enables researchers to map changes and identify patterns over a designated period.

The Year 3 online survey took place in March 2019. We received 120 responses (giving a response rate of 29.7% - based on a total population of 404). However, we are not able to confirm the number of participants who may have left the profession or, for other reasons, have de-registered since 2016. The total population of 404 may indeed be much lower – therefore increasing our overall response rate. Our current rate of 29.7% is fairly consistent with our last survey in Year 2 (where the response rate was 29%).

The Year 3 survey comprised of eight sections.

Section 1	Current employment
Section 2	Professional confidence and competence
Section 3	Formal supervision
Section 4	Informal support
Section 5	Professional learning and development
Section 6	Professional identity
Section 7	Developing leadership
Section 8	Space for you to add anything else you'd like us to know about your experiences

The Year 4 online survey will take place in March 2020.

Survey respondents

Whilst we had a reduction in online survey respondents between Year 1 and Year 2 (approximately 25%), the Year 3 figures show broad consistency with Year 2. No significant change is noted here (except concerns noted in the previous section). Overall composition of participants in Year 3 remains broadly similar to Year 2. The majority of survey respondents in Year 3 described their gender as female (86%) and the rest as male. Two participants preferred not to say. The largest proportion were aged between 25-34 years (50%), followed by 45+ (25%), followed by 35-44 (21%). The smallest proportion were aged between 20-24 years (3.7%). The majority of respondents described their ethnic origin as 'White Scottish' (75%), followed by 'White British' (8.7%), 'White Irish' (6%), 'Other White' (6%), 'African, African Scottish or African British' (2%) and 'Gypsy/Traveller' (1.2%). The majority of respondents said they had no disability (92%). Only 3.8% said they had a registered disability and 3.8% said they had a self-defined disability.

(iii) Individual interviews

In order to explore the individual career trajectories of social workers in greater depth, we recruited a small sub-sample of participants for a series of interviews at three key points during their careers: years one, three and five. Participants were recruited from four local authority areas via Chief Social Work Officers who invited newly qualified social workers in their respective authorities to contact the research team. We completed the first wave of interviews in July 2017.

Second wave interviews were conducted with 14 participants between August 2019 and January 2020. A reduction in participants from 16 (Year 1) to 14 (Year 3) is noted, as one participant is currently on maternity leave and one participant has not responded to requests for interview. Indeed, whilst attrition is to be expected in longitudinal research, we are pleased that nearly all participants have continued to engage in the study. The composition of this sample is provided below in Table 1.

Table 1: Composition of interviews

Area	Number of participants	Gender
North	3	2f/1m
Central	5	3f/2m
South East	5	3f/2m
South	1	1f

In the second wave of interviews, we asked participants about their experiences in practice since their last interview. We asked if they still felt like newly qualified staff and we explored areas relating to professional development, workload, support, integrated working and future plans.

Initial findings from Year 3 (second wave interviews) are included in this report. Our final wave of interviews (Year 5) will take place in June 2021.

(iv) Observational analysis

To help address potential bias in self-reporting by participants involved in online surveys and individual interviews, we proposed three small-scale concentrated periods of participant observation. These would ideally take place in a representative sample of social work organisations. A member of the research team would spend around ten days in a social work office to observe participants in practice. We proposed to do this in years two, three and four.

The first period of observation took place over 10 days in March 2018 in a local authority setting in the West of Scotland. The second period of observation took place in June 2019, over 10 days, in a local authority setting in the East of Scotland. In each instance, the researcher observed participants in situ, compiled fieldnotes, conducted interviews and captured audio reflections on ECSWs experiences. Findings from both periods of observation are integrated throughout this report.

The breadth and diversity of ECSW settings across Scotland places significant limits on the value of the data achieved through this method of enquiry (as relevant to the purposes of this study). For these reasons, the research advisory group will review the merits of conducting a third and final period of observation in 2020.

A note on terminology

The project team recognised that the phrase ‘newly-qualified social worker’ (NQSW) may be a poor fit for social workers navigating the first five years of their career. For this reason, we have chosen to replace it with ‘participants’ and ‘early career social workers’ (ECSW) in the body of this report. Further discussion is required about how we operationalise a label to capture the transition from newly-qualified to something else – possibly leading to a change in the title of the project itself.

In Year 3, we addressed this directly by asking participants in the online survey to indicate how they would describe themselves at this stage in their career. Interestingly, exactly half (50%) said ‘early career social worker’, followed by ‘social worker’ (38.7%). The rest described themselves as ‘other’ (6.2%), with roles such as ‘Social Inclusion Coordinator’ and advocacy worker (one participant described themselves as now being a manager). Only 5% of the total sample would describe themselves as being a ‘newly-qualified social worker’. Overall, data here appears to indicate a significant shift in how participants perceive themselves in the third year of their career. Among the interview participants, several were already supporting more recently qualified workers and, more formally, were acting as mentors on recently introduced NQSW pilot schemes in Scotland (newly qualified social worker supported and assessed year). Only one participant felt they did not have the requisite skill or knowledge levels to undertake this.

Findings – Year 3

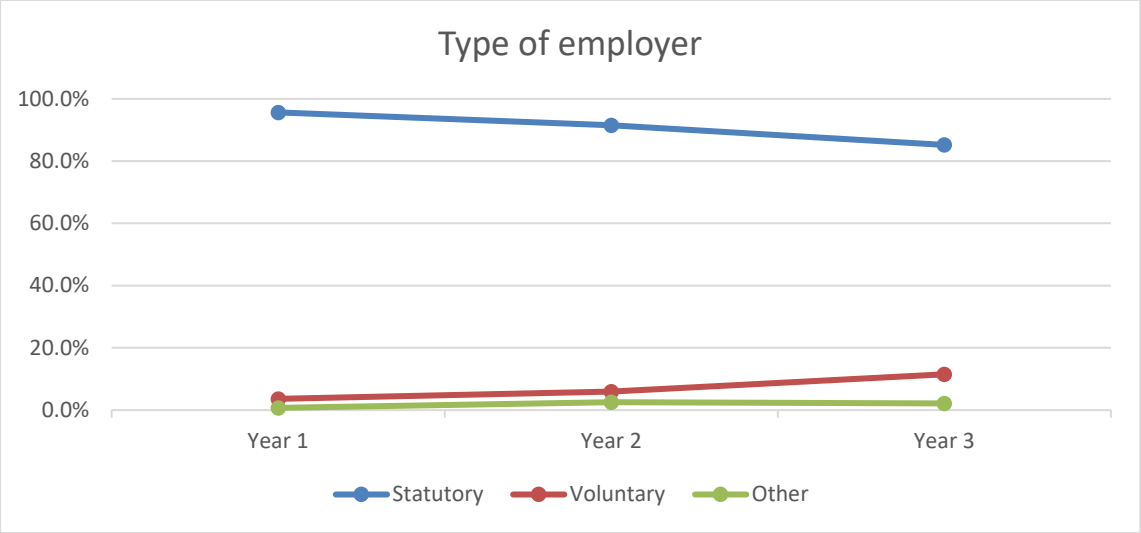
This section will present findings under key themes related to the aims and objectives of this project. Given the breath of data collected, the structure of the online survey will be used to frame findings in a manageable form for the reader.

This section will highlight emerging themes from Year 3 of the project and will comment on any significant changes from Year 2 findings.

Current employment

The majority of participants in Year 1 were based in statutory authorities (96%). By Year 2 the figure had dropped to 92%. A further drop is noted in Year 3 – now 85%. In contrast, we noted a rise in the number of participants based in the voluntary sector, from 3.6% in Year 1 to 11.5% in Year 3 (see Table 2).

Table 2

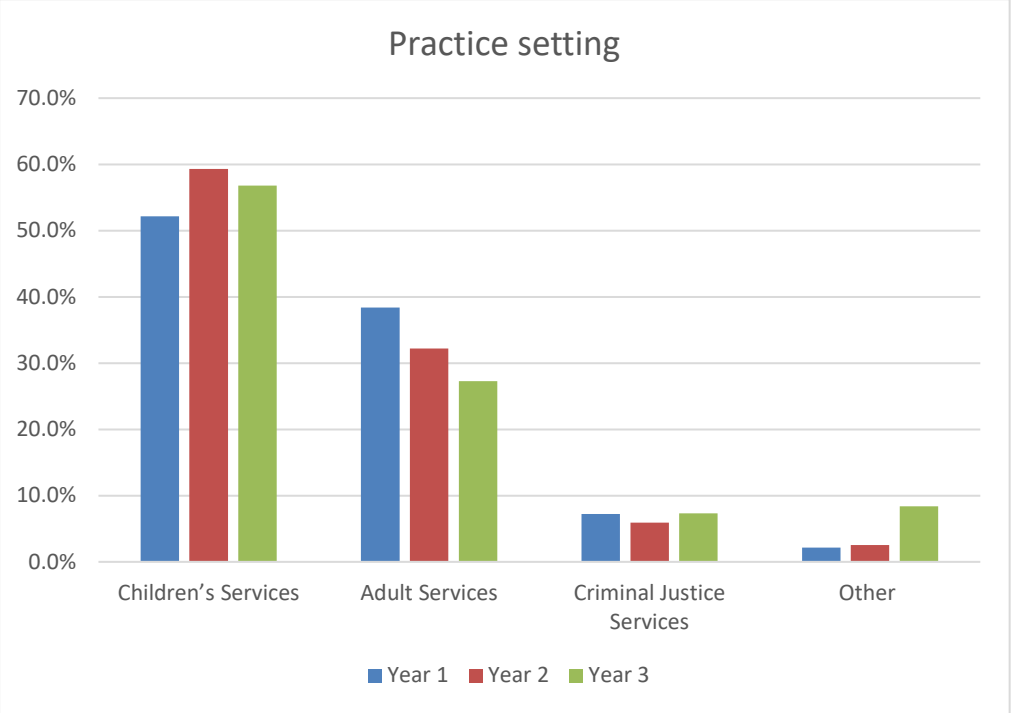


On the face of it, this pattern suggests that growing numbers of early career social workers (ECSWs) are moving from statutory to voluntary sector settings; however, the reasons for this are not clear at this point. Interestingly, less than half of the respondents (42.6%) described working in an integrated or interdisciplinary settings or team – despite the significant growth of health and social care partnerships across Scotland.

Some changes were noted in types of practice setting where participants are situated. Between Years 1 and 2, a rise was noted in those based in children's services from 52% to 59%; however, in Year 3 this figure had fallen slightly to 56.8%. Adult services was down from 38% to 32% between Years 1 and 2. This downward trend has continued in Year 3, now 27%. Criminal justice has remained relatively stable around 7-8% over the last three years. However, we did note a rise in respondents answering 'other' to this particular question: from 2.2% to 8.4%. We asked participants to expand on their answers here; responses suggest that most could have selected one of the

subsequent categories, eg those involved in 'fostering', 'whole systems' and 'young people's services' could have chosen children's services, whilst those involved with 'older adult mental health', 'older people' and 'adults with disabilities' would fall under adult services. We are therefore confident that the rise in participants selecting 'other' is not statistically significant here (see Table 3).

Table 3



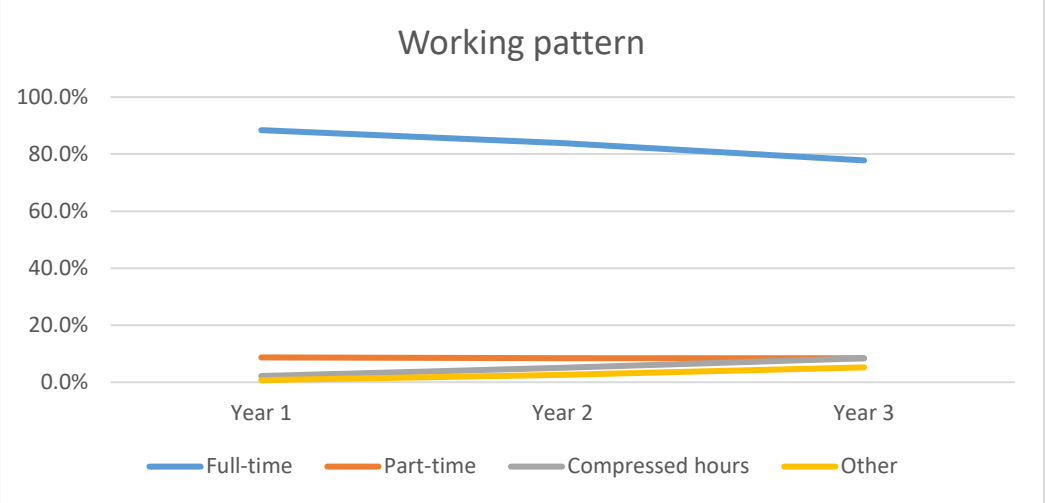
Variation in practice setting over time may be influenced by a number of factors, not least changes to local authority and sector wide priorities, participants simply moving jobs within authorities or between sectors, or statistical effects due to attrition. In a separate question (first introduced into our Year 2 survey and repeated in Year 3), we asked participants if they have moved post or changed jobs in the last twelve months. Interestingly, we found consistency between Years 2 and 3 in the numbers of participants who answered 'yes' – around 24% each year. In both years, qualitative responses indicate a mix of reasons for moving jobs, including wanting to be 'closer to family', 'less time commuting' and 'career development'. While expressed reasons for moving were positive for most, a minority suggested that moving was the result of caseloads, inadequate resources, limited time with services users, stress, anxiety and disillusionment with practice. As one interviewee expands - describing their move from children's services to a specialist youth justice team:

> 'my professional identity is probably the same, it's just much more clear when it's here. My ethics are still the same, my values are still the same. My view of what social work should be, is still the same, it's just… that I'm now being a social worker.'

An interesting feature of participants' accounts of their job changes was the apparent proliferation of specialisms within specialisms, such that a children's service might contain several teams performing slightly different roles, eg initial referral team, focussed-intervention team, intensive support team and throughcare team. This is an interesting development and might be interpreted as facilitating the development of more specialist and in-depth practice knowledge and skills. On the other hand, it raises broader questions about the fragmentation of a once holistic approach and practice in social work's search for evermore concrete responses to complex need (McBeath and Webb, 1991). There will be opportunity to explore participant reflections on this in the final round of interviews in 2021.

We noticed other changes to employment patterns in Year 3 that seem to indicate slight trends. The number of participants on permanent contracts continues to rise (from 74% to 90% over the last three years), whilst the number on temporary contracts has declined significantly from 22.5% to 5.3%. Current patterns suggest a reduction in full-time working and a rise in compressed hours and other types of flexible arrangements (see Table 4).

Table 4



Participants were also asked directly if they ever did unpaid hours of work for their employer. 61.7% said 'yes' in Year 2; however, this had reduced to 53.6% in Year 3. Unpaid out-of-hours work also emerged as significant in observations and interviews. As one interviewee put it, 'the downside is admin, not enough time to do this and the direct work, scared not to write everything down…'. Another cited increasing unpaid hours as their reason for moving jobs, 'I was working up until 8pm, 90% of the time from the start of last year'. For this worker, the move was transformative, from a job where he questioned whether he could continue as a practitioner to one that is 'amazing'.

Across the data sets, respondents expressed a variety of hopes and fears for their professional futures, reflecting optimism regarding the opportunities and realism on the challenges that lie ahead, as well as fear and uncertainty regarding their ability to navigate present and future pressures facing the profession. Notwithstanding this duality, most respondents appear to envisage remaining in social work for the immediate period.

Agile working

Over half of participants in Years 1 and 2 reported to be working for an employer with agile working policies in place. This remains the case in Year 3; however, a slight reduction from 57.6% to 53.6% was noted.

Similar to findings from Years 1 and 2, the impact of agile working in Year 3 emerged as a significant issue for those subject to it. Over the last three years, we have noted an increase in negative comments on the impact of agile working on everyday work. Consistent with Years 1 and 2, we found a similar interplay of practical and emotional costs in Year 3.

1. **Time** - This has emerged as a significant theme in each subsequent year of data collection so far. The majority of participants in Years 2 and 3 referred to extra time required to function effectively in agile working environments. This refers to setting-up workstations in the morning, finding desk space, carrying computer equipment, files and other relevant literature from different locations and clearing desks before the end of the working day. When referring to time spent on these tasks, many participants in Year 3 referred to phrases and terms like ‘waste of time’, ‘unpredictable’, ‘stressful’, ‘uncertainty’, ‘disruptive’ and ‘difficult’. Participants also referred to additional ‘unnecessary’ time spent trying to locate colleagues for peer support/discussions. Some expressed the view that these tasks had a negative effect on their productivity.

2. **Concentration -** Consistent with data from Years 1 and 2, participants in Year 3 expressed concerns about their ability to focus on complex work in noisy, open environments. Some participants referred to a lack of privacy and ability to have case discussions.

3. **Health** - Again, consistent with previous years, a significant number of responses in Year 3 referred to the stressful nature of agile working – linked to other sub themes here (particularly time).

4. **Peer support** - Emerging again in Year 3, some participants referred to the impact of agile working on interactions with peers and colleagues. Participants expressed concerns at not being able to discuss cases or share experiences with team members on some occasions (particularly when offices are busy).

5. **Resources** - This emerged more strongly in Year 3 that previously. A significant number of participants referred to the availability of desks and computer equipment in their offices. Typical comments include: 'unsure if you have a desk when you get into work', 'can be stressful if no computers', 'can be difficult to access a workspace'. One participant captured the impact of this on team cohesion 'it can be stressful not knowing if there will be a desk available…It can make the team feel fractured…'

For those in the survey subject to agile working policies in Year 3, over two thirds expressed concerns. This marks a growing trend from Year 2, where we highlighted a shift towards negative reporting compared with Year 1. Across all years, the least number of positive comments were noted in Year 3. Most of these referred to degrees of 'flexibility' associated with this type of working; although some comments are countered by reference to stress and frustrations when desks are not available.

These findings from the survey data are reflected in interview data. In addition to the concerns above, participants raised the issue of managing confidentiality in open settings.

> '… we do duty meetings a couple of times a week, we sit in that space and talk about it. But sometimes we have to be very wary of who's roundabout us because it's not always social work staff, like there's financial inclusion staff, so we have to be really careful what we're talking about.'

The open sharing of service user information also struck the researcher during participant observation, although this was not expressed as particularly concerning by the participants themselves. On the sites where observations took place, agile working practices were in operation. Both sites were fully open plan, with hot-desking arrangements as standard. The first site consisted of a room comprising 20 workspaces across two rows where within each, five workers face onto another five. Two separate social work teams appeared to operate quite independently of each other in this shared space. The space was shared by social workers, family support workers, admin and team managers, with the latter two having a fixed desk. Workers tended to gravitate to the same space, but its availability was not guaranteed and no personal belongings were left after use. There were lockable cabinets where workers could leave personal effects. A staff room for lunch and tea breaks, shared with another discipline, was accessible directly from the main room. There were no quiet spaces here, other than the staff room which was in use most of the time.

This site was not accessible to service users. Supervision, meetings, client contacts took place in a different building close by. Conversations with the team leader happened around her desk. The printer, the clicking of keyboards and multiple conversations means noise-levels were fairly high. Workers described going 'elsewhere' to undertake work requiring some reflection or with a deadline as it is 'impossible sometimes to get

peace'. One also described feeling 'in the spotlight' when discussing serious matters over the phone.

In the second site, three social work teams were situated down one side of a long room, with health professionals down the other side. On each side, there were ten rows where workers faced each other (40 workstations in total down each side). Workers tended to sit in teams. Admin worked across all teams and were based in the centre of each space at fixed desks. Also at the centre was a hot-desking hub which other social workers from different offices could use. The room contained a few internal breakout spaces and a space for staff to have breaks. External to this large room, there were small rooms which could be booked for supervision, meetings and contacts with service users.

In both sites, the staff logged on with passwords to use their phones and computers and could do this in any council base across the local authority. Workers' movements were recorded on large notice boards (eg who was in/out, etc). Indeed, while the flexibility offered was welcome to some degree, the ECSWs generally spoke negatively about hot-desking, suggesting/ that it made it 'hard to focus' on work.

Improvements to working environment

Participants were invited to comment on changes or improvements they would like to see in their working environments. Responses in Year 1 were more negative than positive, with frequent references to lack of availability of desks. This was reflected again in Year 2 data, where around a third of participants expressed a desire to be with their team in one office, with fixed workspaces. Some participants in Year 2 expressed anxiety that their employer was about to adopt agile working policies, which these participants felt would be detrimental to their current working arrangements. Around a third of participants in Year 2 referred to physical characteristics of working environments, mostly age of buildings, poor lighting, need for modernisation and an inability to control the ambient temperature. The remaining participants (around a third) were satisfied with their working environments, with many referring to space and fixed desks as particular features. Responses in Year 3 revealed consistency with Year 2 in terms of emerging themes, but with around a third of participants this time referring specifically to noise levels in offices (making it hard to concentrate on work). Once more, lack of desks and lack of quiet spaces emerged as significant. Around a third indicated that a fixed desk makes or would make a difference to their work. As one participant wrote:

> 'I love my current working environment, especially having my own desk. I am dreading when we move onto agile working, as having my own desk provides me with structure and consistency, which I feel I need to my job well.'

Individual interview data here presents a similar picture, with one participant weighing up the positive features of a new office space with the perceived loss of a team identity.

> '… so the new office space, it looks great, it's bright and airy, it's a lot cleaner looking… they're taking all the managers out of offices and all the managers are going to be on the floor as well. So, everybody's just going to be mixed in. Which some people are not happy about, because some people have a really strong sense of team identity and like to sit together.'

Team and team identity, proximity, privacy and opportunities for informal discussions are clearly important to the vast majority of participants. Agile working is perceived as a threat, or at least an obstacle in most cases. The nuance within these findings ought to be of concern to employers and policymakers tasked with driving forward 'progressive' changes to working environments within the public sector. Drives for efficiency will invariably create other costs, which our evidence indicates by the cumulative negative impact of agile working on early career professionals.

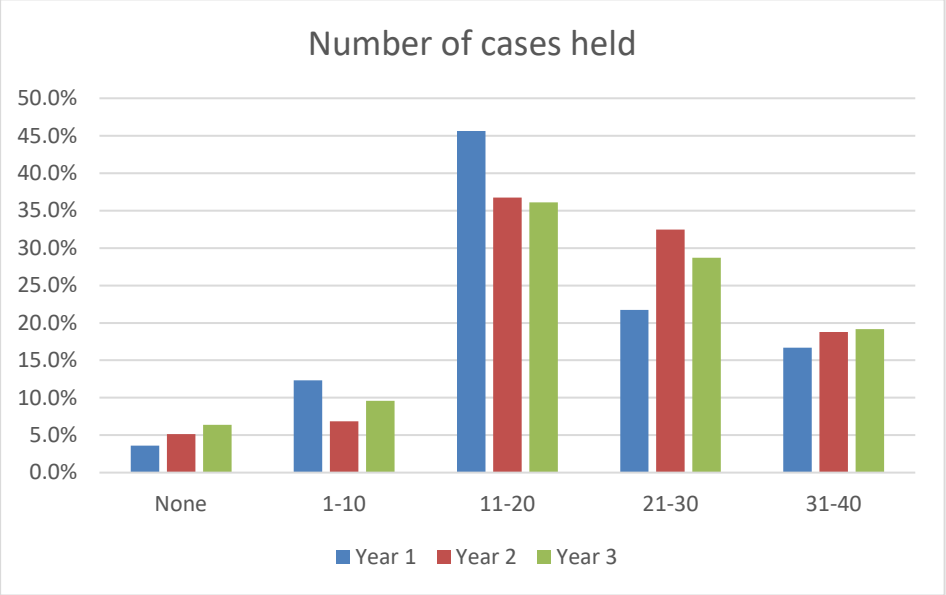
Time spent on social work tasks

Across the three years, a fairly consistent pattern is emerging where participants tend to spend most time on report writing and case recording – with least time spent on reading and using current research, knowledge and evidence. No significant changes are noted here; however, we did spot a slight increase in time spent with service users and carers each year (please see full data table in Appendix 1). However, this may indicate a number of things – not least the growing complexity and general number of cases held by early career social workers, much of which requires (in some cases mandates) more frequent contact with service users. In many ways however, it is encouraging to see a positive trend in this particular aspect of practice.

Workload

Over the last three years, workloads have not changed significantly for participants. There is some variation in terms of a slight reduction in those holding 11-20 cases and slight rise in those holding between 31 to 40 (see Table 5). However, variation here will reflect a number of factors, not least the diverse range of workload management arrangements across 32 local authorities and various voluntary sector and private agencies in Scotland, as well as the type of work and particular setting in which participants are based. It should be noted here that participants who answered 'none' (see table 5 below) were mostly based in secondary settings (such as hospital or court-based services) where working practices largely follow non-case holding models.

Table 5



Whilst the number of cases held by participants has not changed significantly over the last three years, the **type** of cases held by participants has changed (see Tables 6 and 7).

Table 6

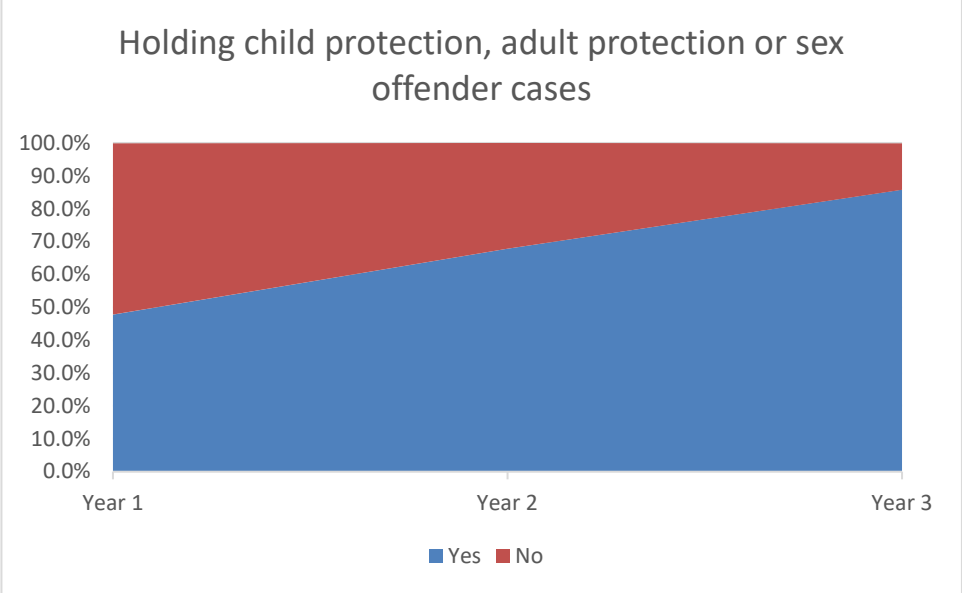
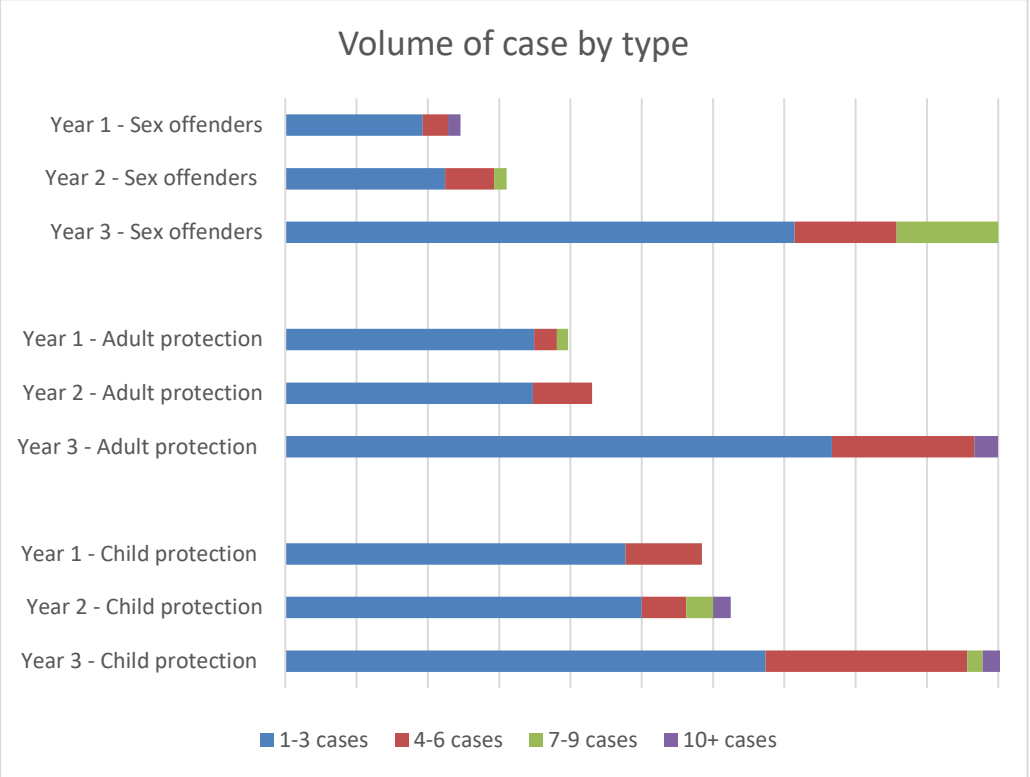


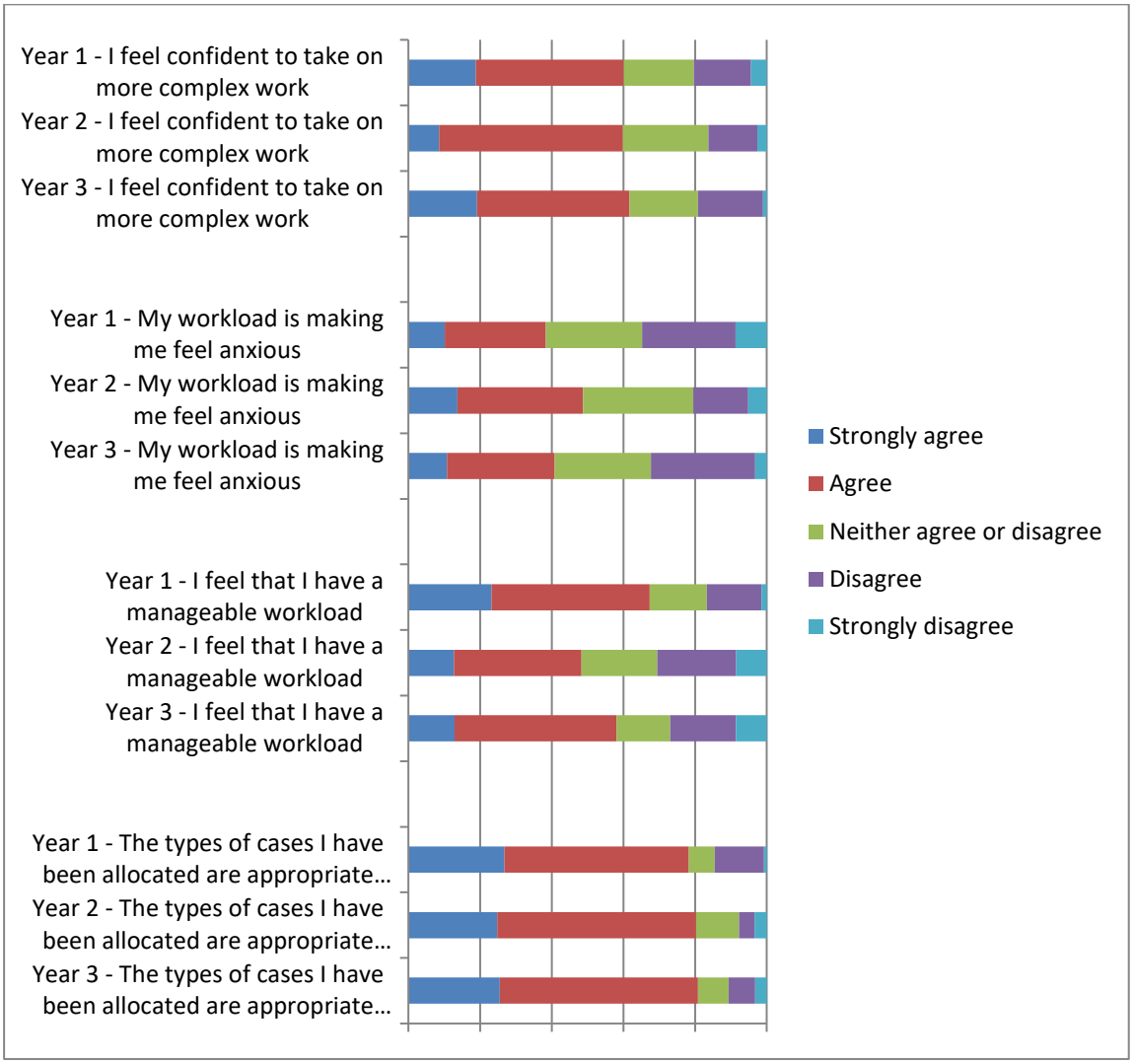
Table 7 below indicates that the allocation of specific types of case has increased over the last three years. It seems that the majority of respondents in our survey have been exposed to work in relation to child protection, adult protection and/or sex offenders. However, whilst an upward trend is noted here, we would suggest that there is nothing particularly significant about these figures. We would expect to see social workers becoming involved in least one of these more complex categories as they progress in their careers.

Table 7



Indeed, the majority of participants in Year 1 reported that work allocated to them was appropriate for their level of skill and knowledge, that workloads were manageable, with many feeling confident to take on more complex work. However, data from Year 2 suggested that whilst most continued to feel confident, there appeared to be less agreement that current workloads were manageable and more agreement that workloads were making early career social workers feel anxious. Data from Year 3 would appear to indicate that levels of anxiety have decreased since Year 2 and that confidence to take on more complex work has returned (almost back to Year 1 levels). We also noted a slight increase in agreement that workloads are manageable – although countered slightly by levels of disagreement consistent with Year 2 and higher than Year 1. Agreement on the appropriateness of allocated work remains fairly consistent over the last three years, although we noted a slight rise in disagreement between Years 2 and 3 (see Table 8).

Table 8: Attitudes to workload



Reflecting the survey findings noted above, interview participants were generally satisfied with the level and type of workload. Almost all had moved job in the preceding two years and there was a sense that they had found a niche in which to practice which is consistent with their values and their idea of what it is to be a social worker, relative to previous roles. This was summed up by one worker who had moved from a children and families post where he felt he 'was doing really no good. I wasn't doing the job of a social worker, I was doing the job of someone who was checking to make sure the kids were safe and their absolute basic needs were being met…' By contrast his new work in a youth justice team was relationship-based and person-focussed to the point that he could even incorporate a game of badminton into his intervention!

However, survey, interview and observation data underscores the significance of unpaid work in current practice. On one occasion, a worker conceded that she would not finish report by 7pm when the building closes and began making enquiries about how to access the network outside these hours. Another ECSW said that most of her recording was done at home, in her own time. All ECSW's commented that 'the downside is admin, not enough time to do this and the direct work, scared not to write everything down…' This was not however unexpected, with one commenting that she 'knew there would be a battle between the paperwork and the direct work' but that she prefers the direct work.

Relatedly, a striking feature of the interview data was the number of references to staff absenteeism in teams through long-term illness and the impact this had on both workloads and supervision. For most participants, these aspects appeared to be manageable challenges at this point in their careers, but they were identified as sources of anxiety for the future.

Interestingly, during participant observation, the researcher noticed that everyone in one team seemed to know one another's cases in detail. It was explained that this was because they regularly covered for each other at times of absence, when 'child protection' cases must be visited weekly. One worker however indicated that this is a 'tick-box exercise' and described feeling 'like an intruder' on a recent visit of this nature. As mentioned earlier in relation to working environments, the issue of service-user confidentiality did not feature as a cause for concern in this particular team.

Professional confidence and competence

Key to this study is examining and charting the development of professional confidence and competence of social workers as they progress in their careers. In Year 1 we established baseline levels of confidence and competence across a range of occupational items drawn from the Professional Capabilities Framework and National Occupational Standards. We repeated this in Years 2 and 3 and findings will be presented and compared here. We retained our focus on four key domains: skills, knowledge, professional values and self-efficacy.

Skills

In this domain, respondents were asked to rank how confident they felt across a range of typical social work skills. Participants ranked themselves on a scale from 'confident' to 'unconfident'. Whilst Year 1 data indicated strong levels of confidence across all skill areas, Year 2 data indicated slight reductions in confidence with 'delivering personalised services', 'using research skills to inform practice and enhance learning' and 'managing demands on own time to prioritise what is important as well as what is urgent'. However, Year 3 data indicates an upward shift in confidence across all skill areas for the majority of participants (see Appendix 1).

Interview data also reflected growth in professional confidence. Most described feeling very confident in direct work with service users in their current settings and in 'knowing what my role is, knowing what my limitations are'. Some expressed a lingering lack of confidence in systems and procedures, 'forms and recording' and in decision-making and report-writing, 'There's certain areas that I feel confident, there's other areas… when I submit court reports, I'm like, 'oh my God, is the Sheriff going to tear me to shreds? Should I be recommending this?'

Knowledge

Respondents were asked to rank how confident they felt in their understanding of particular areas of knowledge for practice. Data from Years 1 to 3 shows growing levels of confidence across most knowledge domains. Clear progress is noted in 'principles of risk assessment and risk management', 'statutory and professional codes…', 'legislation' and understanding of theories relating to intervention and human development. Theories relating to discrimination and psychological/ sociological issues showed some progress between Years 2 and 3 (see Appendix 1).

Professional values

We asked survey participants to consider a number of items relating to professional values (drawn from codes of practice). Participants were asked to rate their ability to demonstrate professional values on a scale from 'always' to 'never' (see Appendix 1). The key point from the survey data is that from Years 1 to 3, the majority of early career social workers feel they can demonstrate professional values either 'always' or 'often'. Slight variation is noted between years, but no significant patterns emerged.

Interview data however, offers a more nuanced picture. Many described a strengthening of values and increased confidence in being able 'to challenge other higher-ups', particularly in the face of budget cuts that are impacting on services, 'I've been in some situations where I've had to really strongly argue "this is what is best for this young person. This is why it's best for them."' However, others had left posts because of an experienced dissonance between their professional values and organisational/work practices. For one interviewee this was between an increasingly 'case-management' function of social work and relationship-based practice which is 'touted all the time and it's shown it's effective (but) people just don't have the resources and time to do that.' Another described a 'moment of disillusion' and 'slap in the face' on being told by her manager that it was not her job to provide practical support when working with a 'very impoverished family (where) mum had poor mental health, dad did work but it was sporadically.'

Self-efficacy

The project team used a widely adopted method of measuring self-efficacy developed by Ralf Schwarzer & Matthias Jerusalem (1995) (see Year 1 report for more detail).

Participants were asked to consider nine areas of self-efficacy and rate themselves against a scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree'. In Years 1 and 2, the same three areas of self-efficacy emerged as top.

1. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
2. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
3. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.

In year 3, the same areas emerged again as top; however, with a switch between position 1 and 2.

1. I am confident that I could deal efficiently with unexpected events.
2. I can remain calm when facing difficulties because I can rely on my coping abilities.
3. I can solve most problems if I invest the necessary effort.

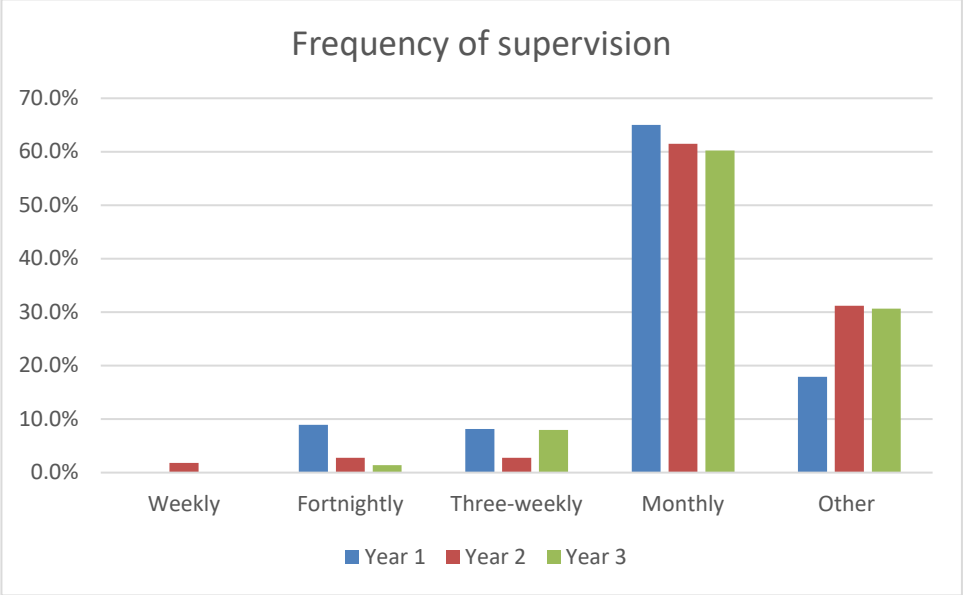
Similar to Years 1 and 2, the only negative skew found in Year 3 data relates to the item 'If someone opposes me, I can find the means and ways to get what I want'.

The majority of early career social workers in Year 3 have sustained high levels of self-efficacy since the last survey.

Formal supervision

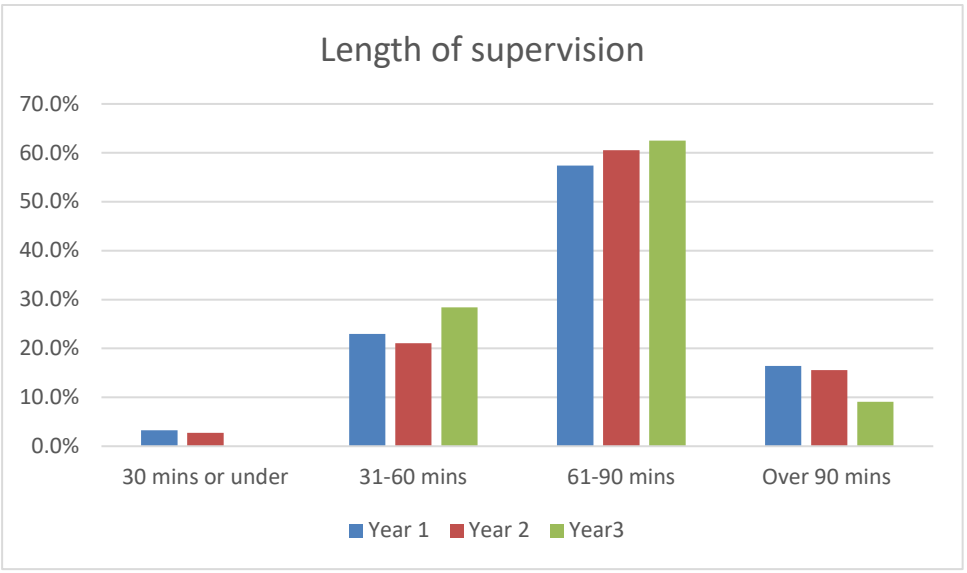
Whilst most survey participants continue to receive formal supervision on a monthly basis, we noticed a continued reduction in this proportion from 65% to 60% from Years 1 to 3 (please see Table 9). Other reductions are noted in those receiving fortnightly supervision – down from 8.9% to 1.4%. Curiously, levels of three-weekly supervision in Year 3 have increased back to Year 1 levels – around 8%. Just over 30% of participants remain subject to 'other' arrangements, which include 6-8 weekly supervision, with other variations such as 'once every two months', 'at least quarterly' and 'once or twice a year'.

Table 9



For the majority of participants, supervision continues to take place in a closed office space and lasts, typically, between 61 and 90 minutes (see Table 10). Indeed, this pattern has increased incrementally over the last three years. There has been a gradual decline in those receiving over 90 minutes of supervision, with the biggest drop between Years 2 and 3. There is variation across the years for those receiving 31-60 minutes each session and no participant received a session shorter than 30 minutes in Year 3.

Table 10



We noted a slight reduction in those who agree they have adequate time to prepare for supervision, as well as a slight decline in agreement on the quality of supervision received (see Appendix 1). For most survey participants, the main focus of supervision still seems to be workload management (around 76% in agreement). A drop was noted in those who agree that their manager gives them good advice and guidance - from 85.9% in Year 1 to 72.7% in Year 3. This could be viewed positively however, as some practitioners may be growing in confidence with their own professional judgement and their own understanding of complexity in the cases they are working with. We noted a slight reduction in agreement with those who feel they got enough time to discuss professional learning needs. However, the majority did continue to feel supported by their manager and most continued to agree that supervision is a safe space to express emotions.

Interview data broadly supports these messages; for most, supervision was generally experienced regularly and described positively. It involved a mix of attention to case management, emotional wellbeing and professional development, albeit the balance of attention to these areas varied across participants. Several participants commented on the importance of good relationships with their supervisors and a sense sometimes that supervisors are attuned to workers' needs.

> '…he gives really, really good feedback, but he'll also take feedback and he'll always reflect on his own practice and his own managing style as well… he can read me when he knows I'm fine or not fine… also he'll know all my cases and my caseload… he's good at being able to read my caseload and say, "Well actually, this will be busy for a couple of weeks, but after that you'll have some space."'

A number also reported an 'open-door' approach to informal, ongoing support. However, some also described poor supervision experiences. For example, one participant recalled returning from a difficult child protection visit and the senior prioritizing the "cup of tea in my hand that's going to go cold" over a debrief. She described the senior as 'quite airy-fairy' and not engaging with the workers' concerns.

During participant observation, formal supervision and informal support were very positively represented. One aspect of the open-plan office model observed was the regular availability of the team manager. On return from home visits or other service user contacts, workers could be seen briefing their team manager and if necessary, agreeing a way forward. Social workers and their team managers appeared to have very positive working relationships and the managers were broadly viewed as very supportive.

Improvements to supervision

Using free text boxes, participants were asked to comment on what they would like to see changed or improved in their experience of formal supervision. In Year 2 of this study, we found a greater emphasis placed on the need for supervision to provide adequate space and time for critical reflection. This is still the case in Year 3, where the majority state that more time to reflect and analyse work (exploring the links between theory and practice) would be a key improvement to current experiences of supervision. Across all years, we found emphasis in some responses for supervision to be a 'safe' space to explore emotional issues, as well as calls for supervision to be less about case management and more about professional development and personal wellbeing. In essence, Year 3 data is similar to Year 2, with general equivalence in the frequency of responses (summarised below).

- More time spent on analysing practice through critical reflection (particular weight given to making connections between theory and practice).

- Less emphasis on case management and more focus on professional development and personal wellbeing.

- Supervision to be a safe and confidential space, where practitioners feel listened to, trusted and not judged.

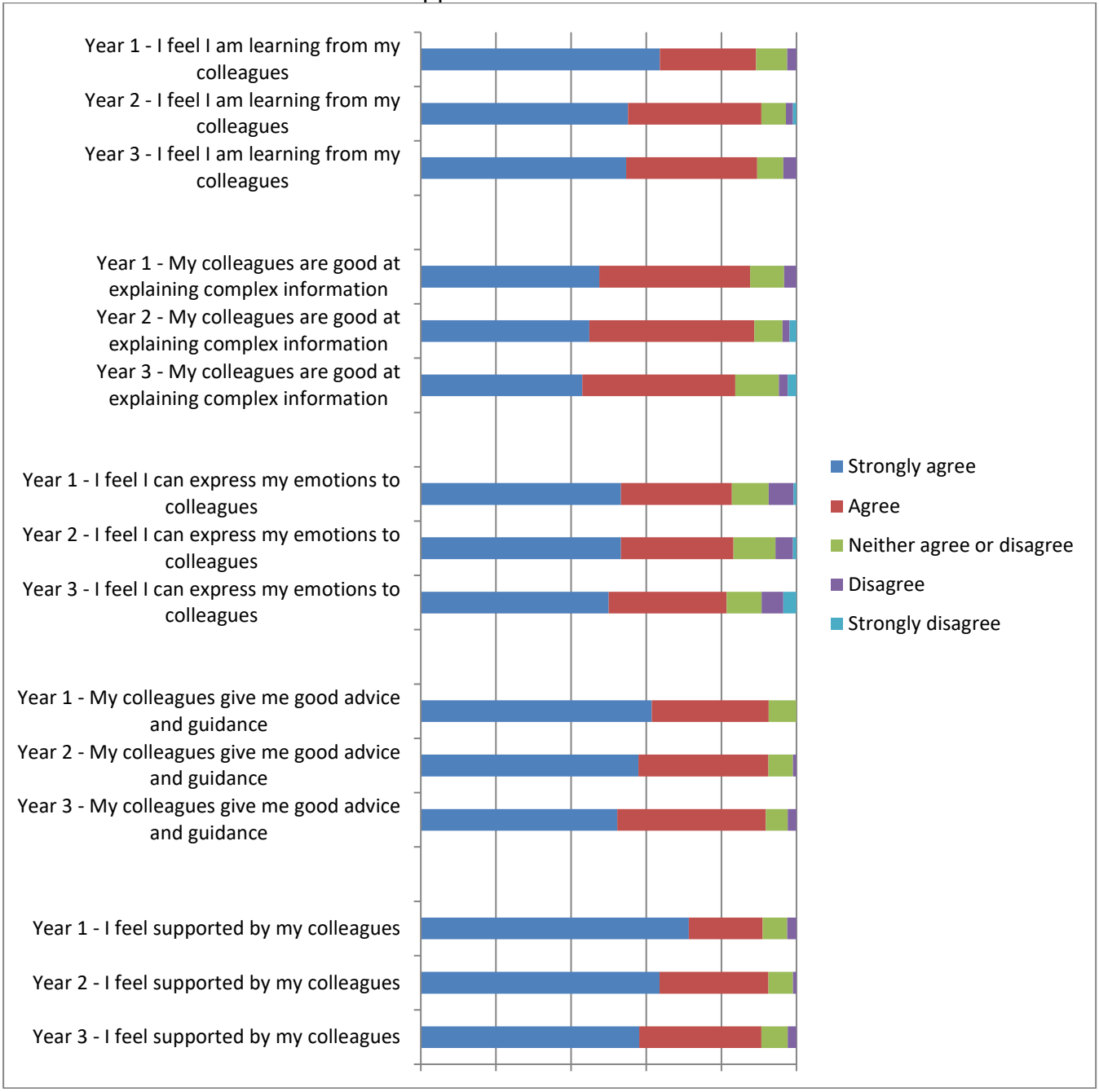
Supervision is clearly important to participants. The findings here suggest that supervision is being provided with variable degrees of frequency, support, depth and attention; however, the majority did – on the whole - reflect positively on their experiences of this interaction with their manager.

Informal support

In this section of the survey we explored participant experiences of informal support from team members and other non-management staff in their employment settings.

Participants were asked first about the extent to which they agreed or not with a number of statements in relation to informal support. Respondents were invited to rank their responses on a scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (see Table 11).

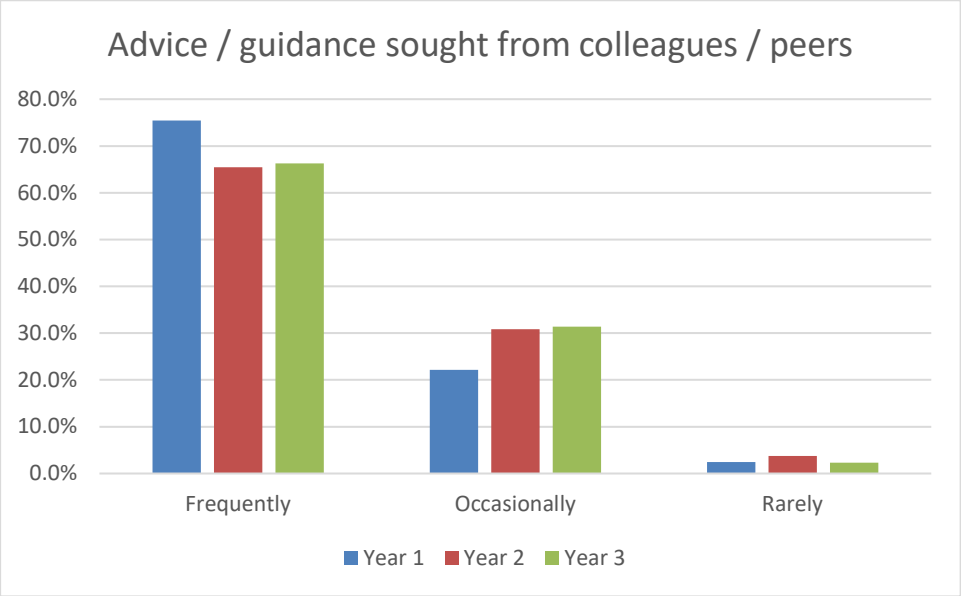
Table 11: Attitudes to informal support



Data presented in Table 11 shows that whilst the majority of participants continue to value the support, advice and learning opportunities provided by their colleagues, there is a reduction in those who 'strongly agree' across all categories. Some variation is evident across numbers who 'agree'; however, slight reductions in overall agreement are noted for: 'My colleagues are good at explaining complex information' and 'I feel I can express my emotions to colleagues' (in Year 3, both have increased numbers who 'strongly disagree').

Next, participants were invited to state how often they sought advice and guidance from colleagues and peers (see Table 12). Aside from changes noted between Years 1 and 2, data from Year 3 would appear to suggest some leveling of frequency. Crucially, the majority continue to seek advice frequently from colleagues and peers.

Table 12



In free text boxes, participants were invited to comment on the types of informal support received from colleagues and peers. The majority of responses in Year 1 referred to professional advice and guidance from colleagues, followed by emotional support (cited by over a third). Year 2 data showed a similar pattern in that general advice and guidance remained important, however two differences were noted. Firstly, a growing number of participants in Year 2 seemed to place more emphasis on support as helping to work through difficult practice issues using reflective dialogue with colleagues and peers. We noticed a slight increase in responses that referred to the provision of emotional support or care (sometimes framed as reassurance or offloading). Year 3 data indicates that advice and guidance remain important, however we found that responses lent towards framing informal support more as providing a safe space to express and offload emotions, anxieties and fears without judgement. The importance of 'sharing' emerged strongly in Year 3 responses – drawing on the experience and knowledge of others to help resolve professional and personal issues. We found a particular emphasis in Year 3 around the notion of collective self-care – the team being the informal site for reciprocal support (contingent on proximity). This is captured well in the following extracts:

> 'I am fortunate to be in a team which is open and honest, which allows me freedom to express fears, anxieties and inadequacy. We support each other in times of stress and look out for signs of fatigue before they erode practice'

> 'Speaking at work when stressed about feelings of being overwhelmed, or over-worked and these concerns being recognised, legitimized and agreed with by older and respected colleagues… Colleagues identifying when you are feeling like this and being accommodating to you with their time in supporting you'

A similar emphasis on sharing expertise and peer exchange emerged in relation to the ways in which informal support contributes to respondent's professional development. Data from Years 2 and 3 had more emphasis on sharing experiences of practice (helping practitioners to explore or resolve similar issues) and sharing knowledge (mostly by signposting participants to policy documents, journal articles and current research). As one participant in Year 3 put it:

> 'my colleagues all have different areas of work that they are more confident in, for example, one has much experience with permanence, another has more experience with SDS and personalization assessments – they're always willing to share their experience and help me to think about my own cases/practice.'

Individual interview data affirms the value respondents place on informal support for professional, practical and emotional wellbeing: 'we rely a lot on each other, for that kind of informal supervision, peer support really and just I suppose a sound boarding.' Informal support was also identified as important in negotiating periods of challenge and change; as one interviewee expressed, reflecting on the impacts of budget cuts and proposed changes to practice and team functioning: 'we will support each other more, in relation to how else can we meet this service user's needs?'

Relatedly, during participant observation, the researcher noticed the important role of more experienced staff in supporting ECSWs to prepare for contacts with service users or to plan interventions. Advice was readily sought and freely given. Teams evidently enjoyed good relationships and a sense of camaraderie and the ECSWs spoke very positively of their work colleagues. The fact that these mechanisms were observed within an agile environment might suggest, either, that workers are adept at and overcoming obstacles to team support and/or that professional fears in this regard are overstated.

Team meetings and the adoption of a 'shared-caseload' approach within teams also emerged across the data sets as important mechanisms for peer learning and peer support. As one interviewee expressed:

> 'Much learning takes place from sharing caseloads with colleagues and a collegial approach to supporting each other. I think we feel like we've got each other's caseloads, to be honest, we know each other's cases more or less inside out, which is good, because if one of us goes on holiday we can take over.'

Importantly, both survey and interview data attest to the diversity of experiences in this area, with many respondents now able to recognize, compare and contrast different experiences within their career pathway. As one interviewee reflects, comparing their current team/post with their previous team/post:

> 'They're a very different team, they work really well as a team, and they get on really well, but they wouldn't necessarily socialise together outside of work. They all come in, do their job, get on with it and go home which is good. And they all work very strictly nine to five and that's like a team culture, which I'm loving…'

Professional learning and development

Analysis of survey data from Years 1 to 3 shows that participants are engaging less in shadowing activities as they progress in their careers, whilst engaging more in specific learning and professional development opportunities provided by employers. We noted a continued increase in self-directed learning at home (reading books, journal articles, research evidence) and an aggregate decrease in self-directed learning at work.

Types of knowledge thought to be important to participants shows little variation from that reported in Years 1 and 2. The majority of participants in Years 1 and 2 ranked the following areas of knowledge as being most important (in the same order).

1. Risk assessment and risk management.
2. Social work interventions.
3. Legislation.

By Year 3, the same three areas scored high again, however, with slight variation in terms of order this time.

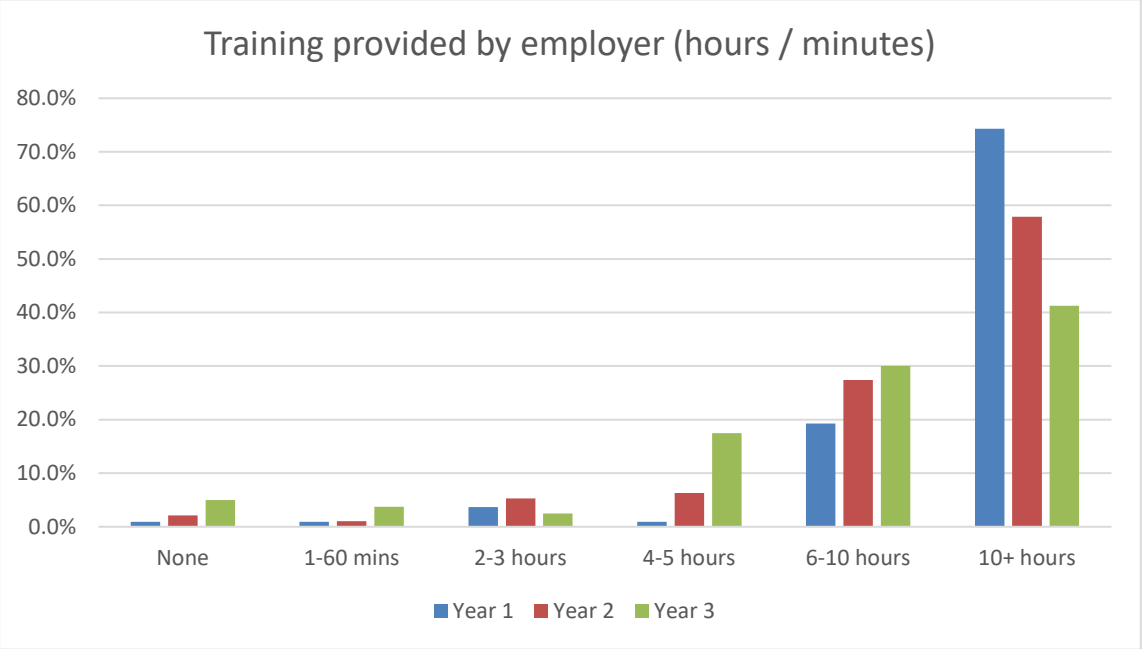
1. Legislation.
2. Risk assessment and risk management.
3. Social work interventions.

In each year, the least important area of knowledge continues to be 'health and safety', followed by 'employer policy and procedures'. Other areas of knowledge, such as 'government policy and guidance' and 'social work theory, research and evidence summaries', all scored somewhere in between (with no significant variation from Years 1 to 3).

Despite slight variation, data from Years 1 to 3 suggest that the majority of participants continue to take control over their own professional development and learning (see Appendix 1). However, those who 'strongly agree' that managers support requests for learning and development opportunities has decreased year on year (down from 41.2% to 23.7%). Two particular areas where overall aggregate agreement has decreased are 'I feel that my learning is structured' (down from 45.8% to 36.2%) and 'My employer provides me with adequate learning and development opportunities' (down from 80.7% to 62.5%). Indeed, when exploring the nuance of these patterns across all data sets, what emerges (also discussed earlier) is that a growing number of participants are seeking more formal/structured learning opportunities. This is a positive finding in terms of the workforce's commitment to professional development but external learning opportunities come with a cost in terms of resources (time and money). Many ECSWs are generally satisfied with the quality of training on offer (see below), however, a proportion will be seeking more advanced/specialised inputs which are less likely to be readily available and more difficult to secure support by employers with restricted training budgets.

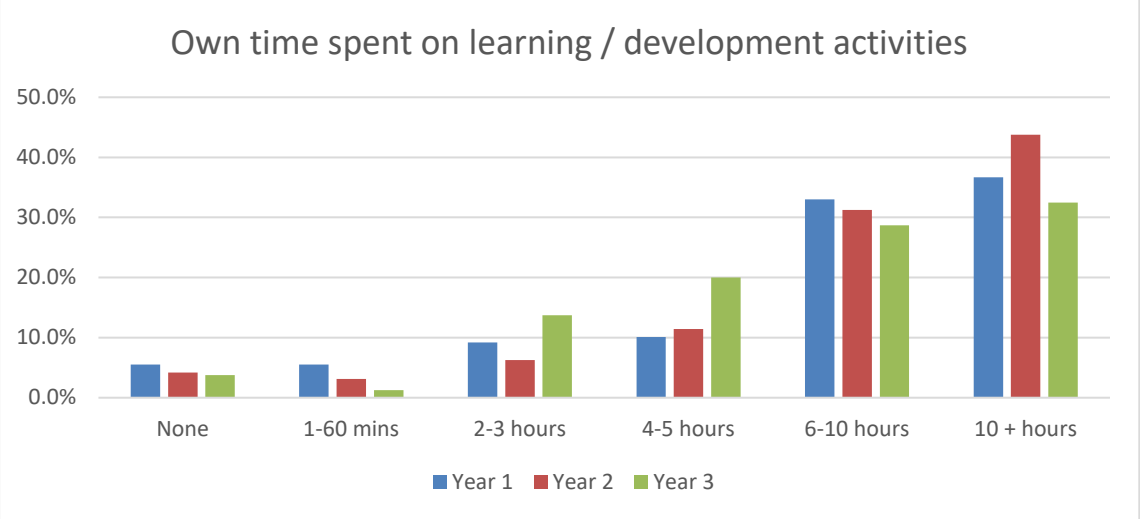
A significant proportion of respondents across Years 1 to 3 (around 40% in Year 3) continue to receive over 10 hours of training provided by employers (per year). Here the range goes from 10 to over 60 hours, with an average of 38 (some participants mentioned formal joint interview training, Mental Health Officer training, practice teacher awards, adult support and protection training and other inputs relating to child protection). However, Year 3 data indicates a reduction in the number completing 10+ hours, whilst those receiving 4-5 and 6-10 hours are increasing year-on-year (see Table 13). A concentration of training is evident in Years 1 and 2, which is perhaps to be expected as practitioners must evidence 144 hours of continuous professional development to satisfy post registration training and learning (PRTL) requirements (as mandated by the SSSC).

Table 13



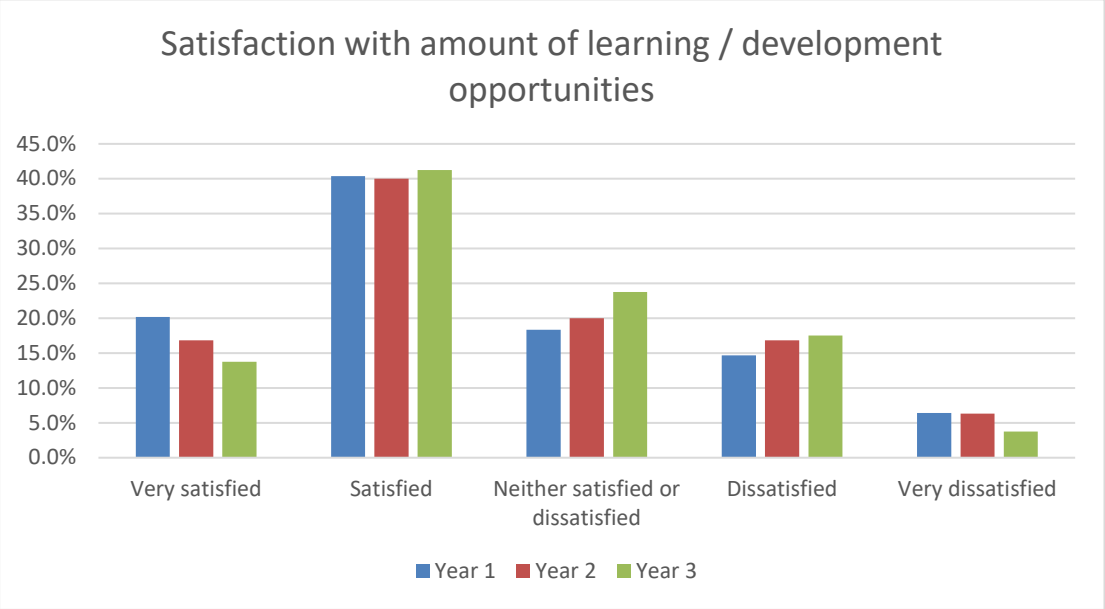
The majority of participants across Years 1 and 2 spent a significant amount of their own time (10+ hours) on learning and development (ie researching topics, reading books and journal articles). Here the range is from 15 to 100 hours, with an average of 44 hours. However, after peaking in Year 2, this is beginning to level-off in Year 3, with fewer doing 10+ hours and more doing between 2-3 and 4-5 hours (see Table 14).

Table 14



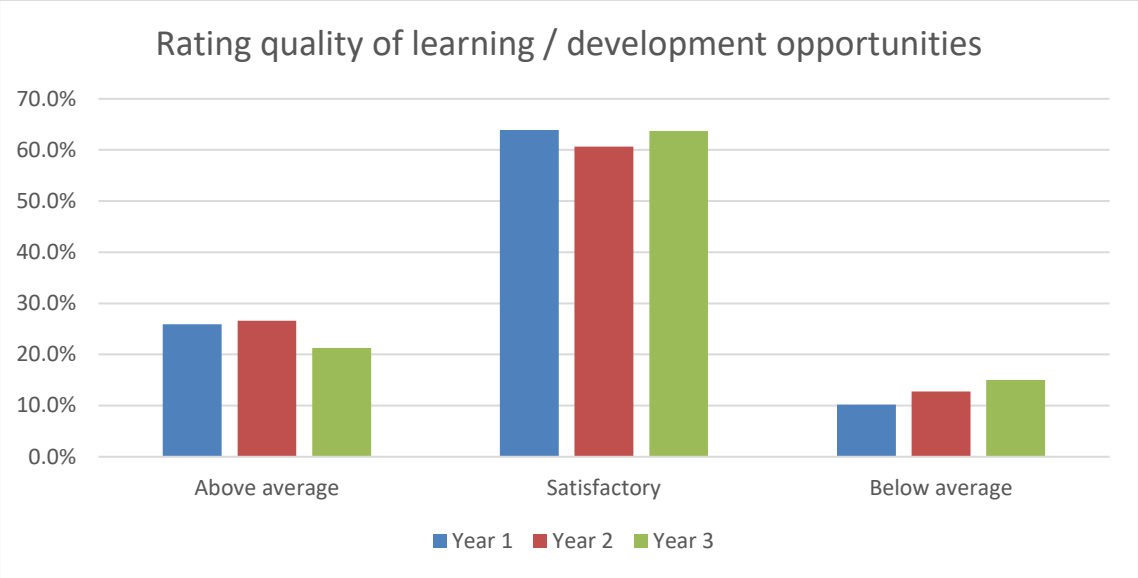
Participants were also invited to rank how satisfied they felt with the amount of learning and development opportunities made available to them. Over the last three years there has been a gradual decline in those who are 'very satisfied' and gradual rise in those who feel 'dissatisfied'. However, the majority of participants did feel 'satisfied' and this has remained fairly stable (see Table 15).

Table 15



Survey participants were asked about the **quality** of learning and development opportunities made available to them. Data from Year's 1 to 3 reveals general consistency amongst the majority who feel 'satisfied'; however, we noted a slight reduction in those who felt that quality was 'above average' and an incremental increase in those who felt that quality was 'below average' (see Table 16).

Table 16



In free text boxes, participants were invited to comment on their professional learning and development needs at the current time. Year 1 responses to this question were varied, but needs were broadly framed as **wanting** more formal training and more protected opportunities for self-directed learning (ie space for independent learning, reading and research). Whereas data from Years 2 and 3 is more direct in terms of specific learning needs. As might be expected, we identified some correlation between learning needs and current practice setting. Those employed in children and families' contexts

often referred to further training in child protection, practitioners in adult settings referred to training in adult protection and mental health and practitioners in criminal justice referred to training on risk and sexual offending. A common theme across the majority of responses in Year 2 was a wish for deeper, richer knowledge. For some this meant having tools to make sense of complex cases within their particular practice area. For others, this meant expanding on existing skills and knowledge, consolidating previous learning and moving forward in terms of professional development. Indeed, Year 3 data shows that some, at least, are now engaged in 'deeper' learning by doing postgraduate courses in child protection, autism and mental health (Mental Health Officer Award). We found that Year 3 responses were more specific than previous years, with clear needs identified across key areas, eg 'risk and risk assessments', 'legislation', 'adult support and protection', 'child protection', 'report writing'.

Next, participants were invited to comment on how their employer could support their professional learning and development. In Year 1 the most commonly cited word was 'training' – often modified by 'more' or 'better'. In most cases, this referred to going beyond what is currently offered inhouse by employers and moving towards specialised opportunities around specific areas relevant to current practice roles. In Year 2 we found a similar focus on additional role-specific training, with more emphasis on issues relating to funding, access to external courses, providing opportunities and protecting time. Year 3 data show little change in types of response to this question. Lack of 'time' emerged again as a dominant theme - in most cases prefaced by 'providing', 'allowing', 'making', 'protecting', 'supporting'. Similar concerns emerged about getting support to access a wider range of training opportunities, moving beyond inhouse provision.

Findings from the interview data describe the availability of an extensive range and variety of training for participants' ongoing learning and development needs after satisfying the regulator's post registration training and learning requirements (PRTL). As one interviewee noted:

> '…obviously I've completed my PRTL, that was last year, so I did have to make sure there was lots that I had done in preparation for that. But even after that, I'm still always encouraged that if there's anything that you're interested in, any courses that you want to do, you can go ahead and do it.'

Several reported being in new areas of work with access to a variety of training opportunities to meet their learning needs, in addition to an expectation that they will identify appropriate learning resources themselves. In addition to inhouse training, several interviewees are already undertaking or about to undertake formally accredited post qualifying training eg the Mental Health Officer (MHO) Awards and the Postgraduate Certificate in Child Protection. For at least some of the interviewees, opportunities to undertake such training is supported by some form of workload protection:

> '…I have been taken off the duty rota, I've not yet had any new cases, I don't think that there's any more really that could be done to support me through it.'

Consistent with the findings regarding training in the first wave of interviews, some workers feel '…bombarded with it. When you work in Justice there's absolutely loads of it, compared to other departments I've worked in… it's like a week at this, a week at that… you just feel as if you're never off training.' However, another interviewee expressed frustration about the lack of materials to support the application of the training into practice, specifically in her work in learning disabilities: 'the tools aren't there to follow it through… you can adapt things, but it's just not the same as the proper tools and the proper tool training.'

Several interviewees commented that the best source of learning is from the everyday 'doing' of casework, for example, attending multidisciplinary meetings which are 'good for learning what other people's roles are' and from team members more generally. One interviewee described the value of learning by reflection. He takes himself away from his base to write up case notes elsewhere:

> '…and in doing that… I'm reflecting on my time with my service users, I'm looking at my caseload and I'm in silence. And there's only emails, there's no phone unless somebody really needs me. And that's probably where I learn most'. Notably, this worker has not undertaken much formal training 'because there's not been time and I've been moving teams.'

Professional identity

The online survey presented respondents with a series of general statements on professional identity. Participants were invited to rank the extent to which they agreed or not with each, using a scale from 'strongly agree' to 'strongly disagree' (see Appendix 1).

Data shows that from Years 1 to 3, participants' sense of professional identity, as well as their overall confidence as social workers, is continuing to rise. Participants are increasing clear about their professional contribution and their ability to locate and use up-to-date research, theory and evidence continues to be important to their professional identity. However, we noted a continued decrease in those who felt respected by other professions. Participants continued to feel that service users, employers and colleagues help to shape their professional identity (as well as doing so on their own). As we noted in our last report, it should be emphasised that participants expressed more agreement than disagreement with all items presented to them here. It seems that professional identity is likely to be shaped by a number of aspects.

Participants were also invited to rank a series of statements from what had the 'most' to 'least' impact on their sense of being a professional (see Appendix 1).

Items that have the most impact on participants' sense of being a professional have not changed significantly over the last three years. The top three (all remaining in the same ranked position):

1. Having the ability to make complex judgements and decisions.
2. Having autonomy over the work I do.
3. Being able to apply my professional values.

Also in the same position is the item ranked as having the least impact on participants' sense of being a professional, ie 'Being registered with the SSSC'. This item was scored 'least' by 42% in Year 1, increasing to 52% in Year 2 and now 62.3% in Year 3.

What does professional identity mean?

In free text boxes, survey participants were invited to comment on what professional identity meant to them. Data from Year 1 had frequent articulations of purpose, referring mostly to the application of skills, knowledge and values in practice. Articulations of purpose still featured strongly in Year 2 data, however, responses had more clarity and consistency. This is reflected again in Year 3 data, where professional identity is framed more clearly as having a combination of features. Like Year 2, Year 3 responses focused largely on understanding of role, application of practice and perception by other professionals and agencies. Many participants emphasised the importance of being part of a profession with distinct sets of knowledge, skills and values. Like Year 2, professional identity emerged clearly in Year 3 as something that is brought into being for social workers by who they **are**, and in what they **do**. But for many participants, this requires accurate and purposeful recognition from other professionals (who value the unique contribution of social work). For many participants, this helps them to see where and how they fit as a distinct professional group.

The following extracts give a snapshot of the clarity and depth in responses to this question in Year 3:

> 'Being respected by other professionals and service users for my ability to make critical, evidenced decisions and interventions underpinned by values in line with codes of conduct, theory, research and learning from practice experience.'

> 'Professional identity means my alignment of roles, responsibilities, values and ethical standards.'

A number of interview participants described dimensions of 'pride in being a social worker'. Their sense of professional identity comes from clarity of role, confidence in assessments, increased knowledge, confidence working with others, especially health, education, solicitors and sheriffs, increased experience of managing a caseload and the respect of other professionals. Participants generally feel that their professional identity as social workers has become stronger, although it is not something they are aware of on a day-to-day basis but is 'probably there on a

subconscious level'.

For interviewees, the development of this identity is supported by 'a stable working environment' without budgetary pressures and concerns about team survival in the background, 'encouragement and reassurance from other members in your team and from seniors and managers', good intra and inter-professional communication and 'a willingness to see things from other people's points of view'. Several discussed the importance of relationships, both with the people they support and with other professionals as being key to their professional identity. Positive outcomes also reinforce a sense of identity: 'I've made a real difference in your life today and it was something tiny. Those are the bits where I feel like I've been a social worker.'

Restrictions on professional identity

In free text responses, survey participants were invited to comment on what restricts their professional identity as a social worker. Data from Years 1 to 3 were broadly similar in that two dominant themes seemed to emerge in each subsequent dataset: (1) lack of respect/understanding from other professions and (2) lack of resources to do effective work. In Year 3 however, we found that some responses referred more specifically to perceived failure by national social work agencies to promote and strengthen the identity of the profession as a whole. On this last point, three particular responses stood out:

> 'Media malignment, misrepresentation, poor practice by a small number of colleagues and employers and a culture of blame and scapegoating masquerading as accountability…'
>
> 'The SSSC's focus on individual social workers for their actions, as opposed to the structures imposed on them by local authorities… within which they are forced to operate'
>
> 'I feel we are sometimes the forgotten profession. We are supposed to solve all sorts of problems but never get recognised for the good work we do, always for the mistakes. It is the one profession you don't want to tell people what you do because others will assume the worst'

In each dataset so far, around half of respondents identified a lack of respect, understanding and value afforded by other professionals (see Grant et al, 2018; 2019). One participant referred to the unrealistic expectations often placed on social work from other professions: 'As much as we try and support families, at times we cannot fix everything; however, the expectation is that it is the sole responsibility of social work to address these issues.'

Around a third of participants in Year 3 (similar to Years 1 and 2) discussed a lack of resources – mostly relating to accessing support and other provision for service users. This was felt to be restrictive because professional identity is linked with having autonomy, but this is compromised when social workers are unable to meet the needs of service users because of limited provision and budget restrictions.

Interview data also reflected these survey findings. One worker described service provision being 'much more resource-led (which) makes it harder to be autonomous', as she is reliant on management telling her whether resources are available or not. Additionally, a lack of confidence in case knowledge appeared to undermine professional identity:

> 'I feel more confident at certain times than others. And I think that's more about if you really know a case, if you know where you're going with it… sometimes cases can be quite rocky, so when you're not particularly sure where you're going with the case or what you're looking to do, I think that really inhibits your kind of professional identity.'

Strengthening professional identity

Survey participants were invited to comment in free text boxes on what they thought would strengthen their professional identity. Year 1 data focused on three particular areas (with equal weight): improving public perceptions of social work, improving recognition of social work in multi-disciplinary sites and improving opportunities for professional development. Year 2 data showed a similar pattern in responses, however, responses revealed more emphasis on improving recognition, understanding and value of social work roles with other professional groups – particularly health staff. A similar picture emerged in Year 3 where having more time, resources and training to help strengthen professional identity was thought to be important, as well as more positive promotion of social work in wider society. We found that participants in Year 3 gave more defined responses to what might be required strengthen the professional identity of the profession as a whole. The following stood out:

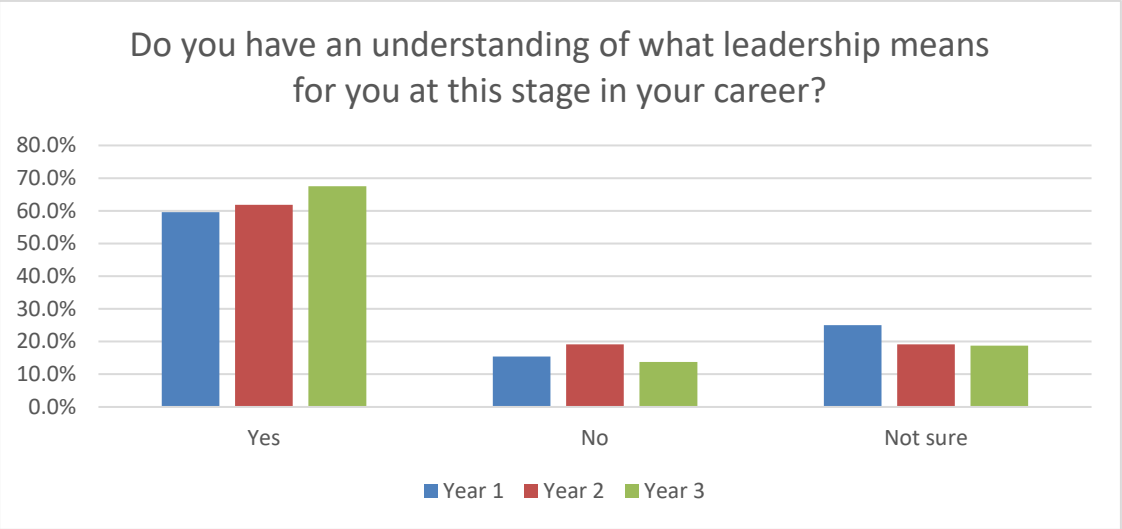
> 'I think we need a strong spokesperson/union/voice to advocate for us, to speak up for us as a profession and let society know about what we do, how we keep people safe and the good work done'

> 'More recognition by government of the high level and serious nature of cases worked. Feeling listened to and action taken'

Developing leadership

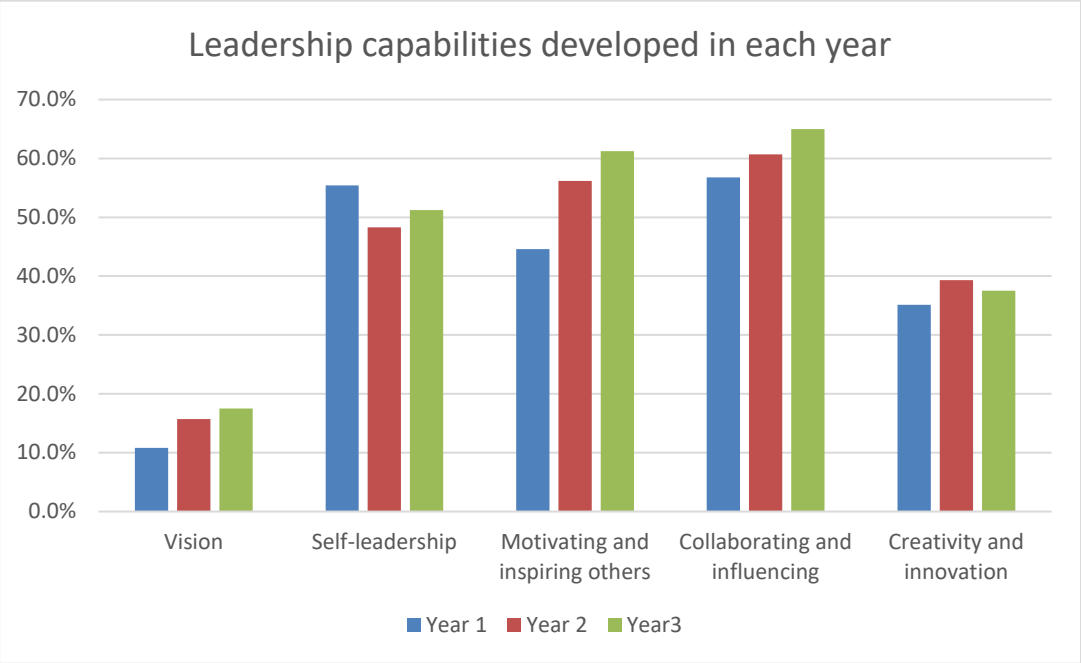
Participants were asked if they understood what leadership meant to them at this stage in their careers (see Table 17). We suggested in our Year 1 report that the concept of leadership is relatively new to frontline staff in social services, so it could be inferred that many respondents had yet to develop their own understanding of this in their everyday role. Data from Year 2 showed some improvement in understanding, while Year 3 data shows a marked increase in those who understand what leadership means at this stage in their careers. Notwithstanding, approximately 35% still either don't know or are 'not sure' about what leadership means to them in Year 3.

Table 17



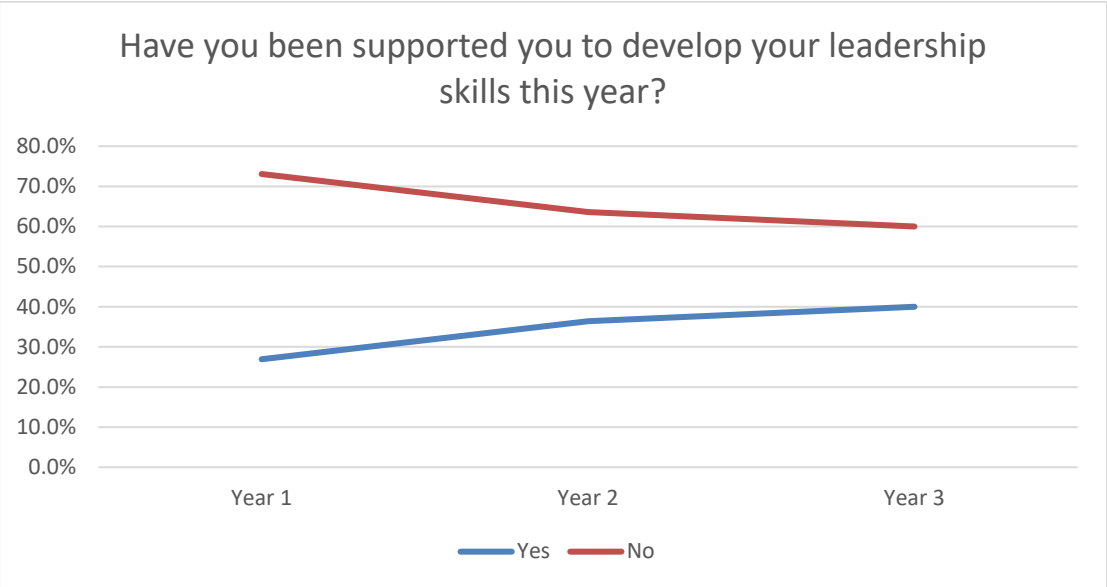
Next, participants were asked if they had developed any leadership capabilities in the last twelve months (see Table 18). Here we see improvements across most leadership capabilities, except 'creativity and innovation' which seems to have dipped slightly in Year 3.

Table 18



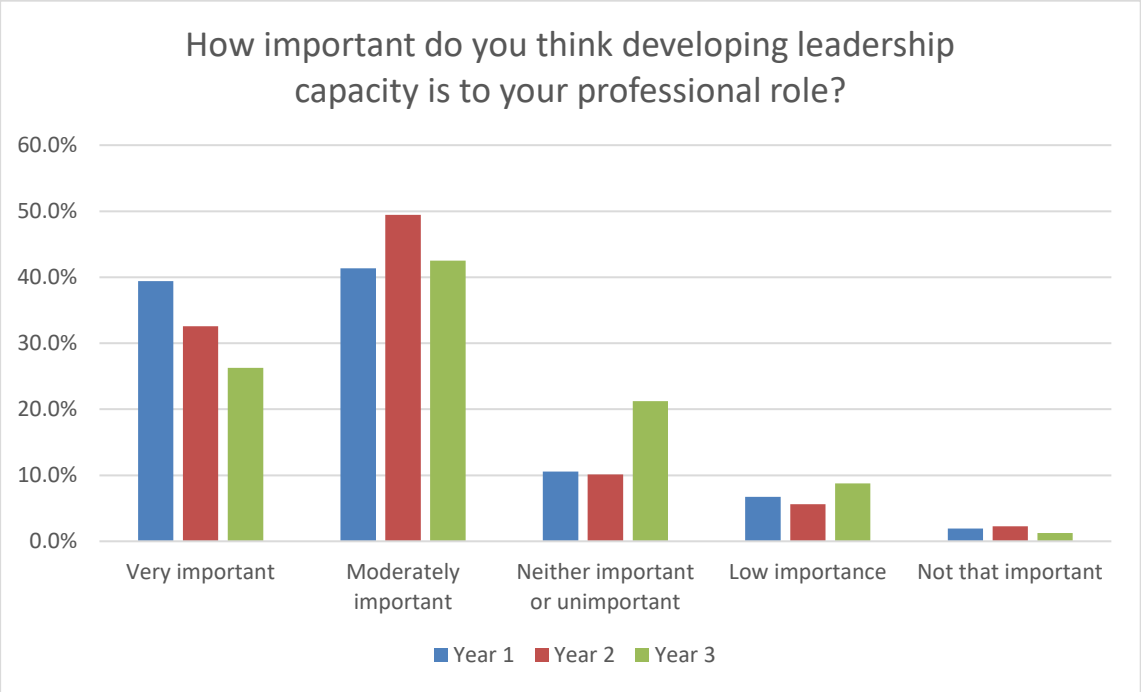
When asked if employers had provided support to develop leadership skills in the last twelve months, we noted that increasing numbers are reporting 'yes' (see Table 19). This suggests that employers may be providing staff with wider opportunities to demonstrate these qualities in practice. However, approximately 60% still claim that support for developing leadership skills is not forthcoming.

Table 19



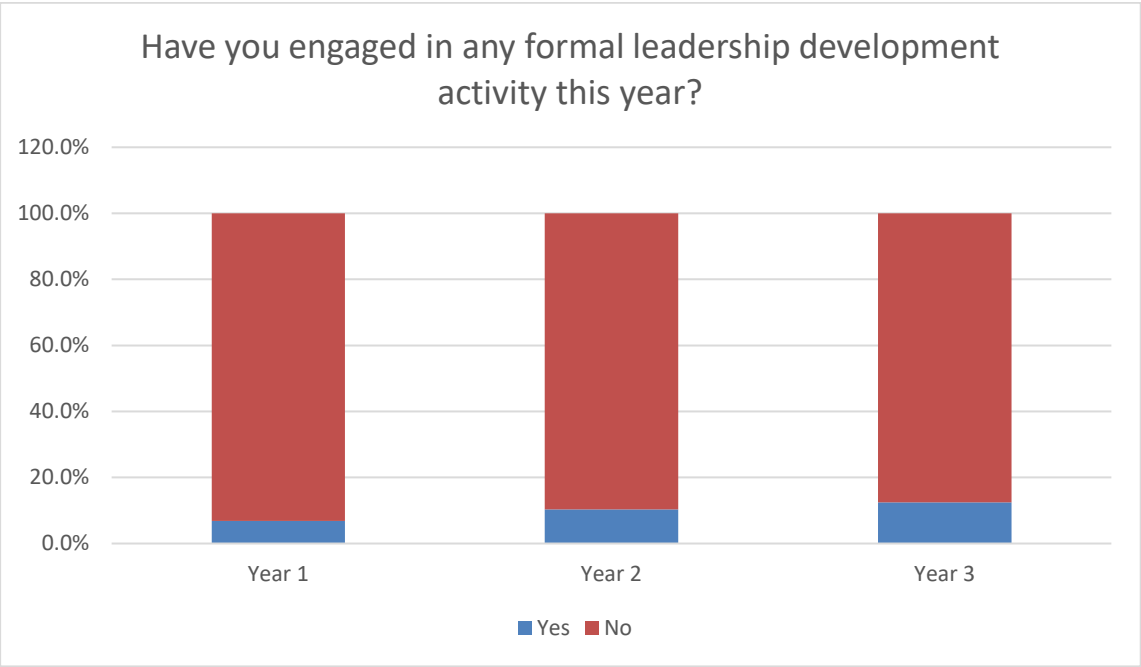
Indeed, whilst the development of leadership capabilities and understanding of leadership continues to improve year-on-year, there is a decline in those who feel that developing leadership capacity is important to their professional role (see Table 20).

Table 20



However, when asked if participants had engaged in any formal leadership development activity in the last twelve months, we noted a small but steady increase over the last three years (see Table 21).

Table 21



In free text boxes, survey participants were invited to comment on what employers or others could do to help them develop leadership skills. Responses from Years 1 to 3 are broadly similar, with no significant differences. More than half in year indicated that employers could do more by providing more training, opportunities and time to develop leadership skills.

Anything else?

Across Years 1 to 3, a number of survey participants chose to provide a concluding reflection on their experience of being an early career social worker in Scotland today. These reflections cut across project themes and findings and underscore the plurality of participant experience already discussed. Broadly speaking, participants' concluding reflections speak to the highs and lows of being a social worker within challenging, changing and uncertain contexts.

Year 1 responses were generally optimistic, with emphasis on the sense of 'pride' or 'worth' in being a social worker. Many participants referred to having a sense of purpose, with some reflecting positively on what their career might bring in the future. However, a much less optimistic picture emerged in Year 2: from 58 responses, only nine had positive tones. Most refer to the fulfilling and rewarding aspects of the social work role, but nearly all provide negative counterbalance by using phrases, such as, 'it's a difficult job, but…', or 'it's stressful, but manageable…' A common theme in positive responses was the notion of being 'lucky' or fortunate to have found a supportive team and manager. As one participant put it, 'I feel extremely lucky to be part of such a supportive and skilled team. I feel supported by my manager and feel valued'. In more negative reflections, responses variously referred to a lack of resources (mostly funding and time); heavy workloads; a lack of respect and recognition from other professionals; too much administration and bureaucracy; and thoughts about leaving the profession altogether.

This negative pattern continues in Year 3. Out of 41 responses, only four can be categorized as positive. Of the remaining 37, 18 present a mixed picture and 19 are unreservedly negative. Broadly, responses speak to a purposeful but difficult, and for some overwhelming, experience of doing 'battle' in challenging times:

> 'I love my job, I will continually battle through budgets and other professionals to stand up for my service users and give them the care that they need. Resources are so tight and it is difficult having to turn people away'

Described challenges are multiple and consistent with those described in previous years and in previous sections of this report. More than half of the respondents described challenges caused by austerity, cuts and inadequate funding for social work and related services, which has direct effects on both the nature of the work: 'it's crisis management' and the ways in which it is done. As one respondent expressed:

> 'I love my job, although it is challenging. However I do worry about the continual cutting of services and how that affects our ability to support people. Without these services we cannot help others and thus perpetuating the negative view of social work.'

> 'It's becoming an increasingly difficult job to do in a changing environment where more people need support with increasingly reduced resources. I feel it's going to take a serious incident to highlight the difficulties public and voluntary sector workers are facing. Thresholds are becoming too high and people are suffering as a result.'

Again, some of these issues were perceived to be particularly acute within children's services. A significant number also highlighted a lack of recognition and respect for social work, which ECSWs experience in a variety of ways. Linked to this, a small number described their frustration at the lack of a professional or collective voice for social work and what some perceive to be 'a blame culture' and heavy-handed regulation and scrutiny on the part of the regulator:

> 'The profession is heavily scrutinised without the time, support, resources or priority given to early intervention programmes that would enable better outcomes. It is crisis management.'

One person in particular felt unappreciated by the general public and other professionals and expressed concerns that fitness to practice investigations focused too much on individuals and not enough on the structural factors needed to sustain good practice.

While a small number of responses identified various ways forward, few appeared to have much confidence in the formal bodies or structures which frame and govern social work service. Rather, participant optimism tended to focus on the relational rewards of their work with individual and teams. As one participant expressed:

> 'the only thing that keeps me going are small victories, my colleagues and the young people I work with – their bravery and resilience inspires me to keep doing what I can with what I've got'.

Concluding remarks from both the interview and observation data were more positive. As mentioned earlier, there was a strong sense from interviewees that some had been in very difficult posts but that latterly they had found a fit with their own approach. Again, positive aspects included having a good supportive team and manager 'people (who) care about their staff and they do want to keep them', being in roles with low levels of conflict and having opportunities to work directly with people.

> 'I still have that feeling of, this is what I'm meant to be doing, I'm glad I studied to do this. I don't feel as if I've had the wool pulled over my eyes, I've done this degree and come into this profession, it's something I didn't expect. I've learned a hell of a lot and I've had a few surprises… it would probably take a lot to push me out of it, I do genuinely enjoy it".

Summary of key findings

Employment

Almost nine out of ten respondents continue to be employed in statutory roles (85%) with a small rise in those employed in voluntary settings. Notably, less than half describe working within integrated or interdisciplinary teams. The findings continue to indicate moderate movement within and across service settings with one in four having moved jobs in the last 12 months. Reasons for movement continue to include a mix of practical and professional reasons, most of which are positive. Year 3 data conveys a stronger sense of workers taking responsibility for their own professional career path and wellbeing, including by 'exiting' practice environments which they experience to be detrimental to that. Accounts of the latter appear to mostly involve movement from statutory children's services to other service areas, with respondents citing a mix of staff absence, high caseloads, a lack of resource, stress, anxiety and professional disillusionment as reasons for exit. Notwithstanding, almost six out of ten ECSWs continue to be based in children's services (56.8%). This raises the question of whether children's services are staffed by a particularly transient workforce and/or whether the sense of movement 'from' statutory children's services depicted in this study is a minority rather than a majority phenomenon. Closer scrutiny and analysis of ECSW workforce data and children's services workforce data is needed to better understand these emergent patterns.

Just over three in ten respondents (32%) are employed in adult care and just under one in ten (8%) are employed in criminal justice social work. The overlapping but distinctive career pathways for qualifying social workers, set alongside Scotland's commitment to a generic social work qualification, reinforces the need to conceptualise qualifying learning as a foundation for professional learning and professional learning as a career-long endeavour. Recent policy and practice attention to NQSW's first year in practice is a positive step in this regard but the findings suggest that more investment in professional learning is needed if social work is to develop learning pathways that reflects the complexity of professional practice are that are comparable to those experienced by the professional groups social work increasingly works alongside.

More than half of the respondents describe regular unpaid, out of hours work, much of which appears to involve 'keeping up with admin'. For most, this emerges as a commonplace feature of practice and raises questions about the ways in which service demand and resource shortfalls are being managed by the profession. Interview data suggests significant variations in the amount of unpaid work required of ECSWs however closer analysis of the survey data is needed to establish whether there are particular patterns across service settings or local authority areas.

Participants continue to describe their experience of working in an agile environment in mostly negative terms. Expressed concerns are consistent with those expressed previously and include time inefficiencies, crowded and noisy working environments and distance from supportive peers and teams. For a significant number the most stressful aspect of agile working relates to the uncertainty of not knowing if you will be able to find a desk to work at. Conversely, positive or neutral messages about agile working were consistently associated with having an allocated or adequate desk space. Direct observation of two agile working sites suggests that some teams are finding ways to overcome some of the obstacles associated with agile working, for example access to team support. It is clear from the findings that there are elements of agile working that help and hinder social workers in their role. Closer attention needs to be given to hearing workers experiences of what helps and hinders and to co-design methods that can enable organisations and teams to 'design out' features that hinder.

Professional confidence and competence

Following a slight dip in confidence in Year 2, Year 3 data indicates either sustained or increased levels of professional confidence and competence across most knowledge, skill and value domains for most respondents. While these findings are encouraging, in light of respondents' more critical reflections on the service, system and inter-professional obstacles faced in their daily work, we were surprised by the almost uniform positivity of the survey findings in this area. Intersectional data analysis suggests that articulations of professional confidence and competence reflect a variety of internal, external and interpersonal factors, including the ways in which human beings make sense of and represent their social/ professional life. For example, experience, access to adequate supervision and training and strong intra-professional support systems appear to play an important part in respondents' developing sense of identity, purpose and contribution, each of which appear to contribute to increased levels of professional confidence and competence. However, across the data sets, respondents' sense of agency, optimism and resolve also appeared to function as a protective narrative, that is as a creative framework through which the workforce comes to understand, reconcile and represent itself. Bourdieu's theory of habitus and social imaginary theory provide helpful frames for exploring these themes further while also highlighting the risks of 'bracketing off' more troubling and contradictory elements of our social/ professional experience. There is also, almost certainly, a temporal dimension to the research findings in this area; respondents remain in the early stage of their professional careers and their professional optimism, agency and resolve needs to be understood within this frame. In this respect, the study findings highlight the importance of developing our understanding of experiences across the professional life-course, including across mid-point and later stages of workers careers.

Participants continue to describe varied caseloads and reasonable increases in caseload volume and complexity. Year 3 findings also suggest a diminishing sense of anxiety and vulnerability amongst respondents, which aligns with the developing sense of professional confidence described above. However, as in previous years, there are exceptions to this general picture, with a small but significant number of respondents describing high or overwhelming caseloads - linked to high levels of staff absenteeism, inadequate support with complex cases, and difficult team dynamics. In most instances, these experiences appeared to be managed at the individual level, ie by the ECSW moving to another team. The contrasting nature of professional experiences is a recurring finding in this study and merits closer scrutiny. Relatedly, further activity is underway to track those who have exited the profession over the research period with a view to developing understanding of why.

Findings remain consistent regarding how workers spend their time. The majority of ECSW's time is spent on desk-based activities, specifically: report writing and case recording. Least time is spent on 'reading and using research knowledge and evidence'. Time with service users comes next, and we found a progressive pattern here where participants seem to be spending more time on this year on year. These are important, if familiar, findings for social work and there is a risk of complacency in our responses to them. In the next round of interviews, we will attempt to get behind these consistent but fairly abstract patterns to understand why worker time is utilised in these ways, what perceived impacts this has (if any) on service users and others, and what can be done to alter this pattern. A recent report published by fast-track training provider Frontline and others engages directly with this issue and sets out 'an alternative model' for children and families work that promises to significantly increase workers face to face time with families through the creation of small self-managing teams. The detail and merits of the model described is beyond the scope of our discussion here but, inspired by social care practice in the Netherlands, it usefully highlights that there are alternative and innovative ways of delivering social work services in Scotland if we are willing to invest in them.

Supervision, support, learning and development

Supervision continues to be an important and valued mechanism for professional support and development and typically takes place in the context of a one to one relationship between an ECSW and their manager. Supervision works best when it is person-centred, relational and combines a focus on case-management, wellbeing, learning and development. However, many ECSWs (though few of those interviewed) continue to describe a privileging of case-management in supervision, to the relative neglect of the other elements identified. Again, these findings are consistent with broader findings on supervision in social work services across the UK and appear to reflect the sustained privileging of new public management cultures and priorities within public sector organisations. Also troubling is the finding that the number of ECSWs reporting regular access to

supervision continues to fall with now more than 30% of those surveyed reporting irregular or infrequent access to supervision. Again, further analysis of existing data is needed to ascertain whether there are particular patterns in these findings. For example, is regular access to supervision more or less likely in particular service settings and/or areas and, if so, why might that be? Improving the experience, quality and consistency of supervision practice does not appear to be especially complex, but it may require a willingness to move beyond organisational norms to co-create refreshed models and methods that prioritise occupational needs over organisational ones.

Informal support continues to emerge as a critical if underutilised mechanism for supporting professional confidence, competence and development. Informal support functions typically within a team structure with more experienced colleagues providing an important role in supporting those at an earlier stage in their career. However, this year, informal support emerged more clearly as an exchange relationship as ECSWs both give and receive support to and from colleagues. This year's findings also highlighted the value and potential of a 'shared' or team approach to professional practice and development, including, for some, a shared approach to case management. Interestingly, there are some overlaps between the findings in this area and the Dutch model touched on briefly above. These are, potentially, important developments to the traditional individual casework relationship and to more traditional and hierarchical models of professional support and development. Further enquiry is required to explore the viability of alternative models for professional practice and development and highlights the need for a more strategic and structured approach to knowledge development in social work, set within an infrastructure that can support knowledge exchange and implementation. Issues of proximity to, and distance from team supports within evolving agile working arrangements remain significant for ECSWS, though there are some indicators that some individuals and teams are findings ways to overcome some of the obstacles described.

Professional learning and development continues to be mostly self-directed with little evidence - or expectation amongst ECSWs - of structured learning and career pathways. Notwithstanding, quantitative data continues to suggest reasonable levels of satisfaction amongst ECSWs with the variety of learning opportunities available, most of which continues to be delivered in-house or via partner agencies. Knowledge of (i) legislation, (ii) risk assessment and management and (iii) social work interventions continues to be prioritised, in this order, though it is worth noting that legislation overtook risk as the most important knowledge base this year. Qualitative data indicates an increased desire for more 'specialised' and/or 'formal' learning and training opportunities, related to working with particular user groups and/or service areas. Relatedly, whereas Year 2 findings underscored the value of 'field' learning, this year an increasing number of participants expressed a desire to augment field learning through formal post-qualifying routes. Employers can better support learning by more consistently providing 'permission', 'funding' and 'protected-time' for formal and informal learning opportunities.

Professional identity and leadership

Respondents continue to demonstrate a deepening sense of professional identity, expressed in a clear and critical sense of purpose, values and contribution. Professional identity continues to be constrained by a (i) perceived lack of recognition, respect and support from others - including political leaders, the SSSC, other professionals and publics and (ii) a lack of adequate resource for social work and the wider support services required to support change with vulnerable individuals and groups. Professional identity can be strengthened by attention to the above areas, by investment in professional learning and development and by more supportive media relationships. In this respect the findings echo broader research messages in this area and continue to illuminate the personal, political, relational and practical dynamics of professional identity and impact.

Year 3 data suggests a developing understanding of what leadership means in day-to-day practice though at least one in three respondents remain unclear. Relatedly, though the findings suggest slightly increased opportunities to develop leadership skills, for many, leadership remains an abstract concept, as one respondent put it: 'it would need spoke about in the first instance'. There is good evidence of practice leadership in the day to day activity of ECSWs, whether in the form of 'challeng[ing] other higher-ups', contributing to the learning and development of colleagues, or in inter-professional activity and advocacy. However, leadership does not appear to be routinely recognised or rewarded in these activities, by ECSWs or others, suggesting a sustained privileging of traditional and hierarchical models in which leadership is constructed as a role rather than a disposition.

Conclusion

Year 3 findings indicate a workforce that is increasingly confident, capable and critical regarding its professional identity, purpose and contribution. Across enquiry areas, ECSWs emerge as clear and committed to their professional role in helping the most vulnerable in Scottish society, while also significantly constrained by what they perceive to be harsh and sometimes hostile economic, political, organisational and inter-professional climates. In this respect the findings suggest a distinctly plural and at times conflicted professional identity and experience.

There is much to celebrate in the study findings regarding how ECSWs experience professional practice and professional development; specifically, there is a strong sense of purpose, opportunity, agency, interdependence and resolve that shines through the research findings. However, we should not overlook the significant constraints, dissonance and dilemmas also recounted by participants, particularly when given space for reflection. Experienced constraints mostly relate to a lack of adequate resource - both for social work services and the broader welfare services on which social work depends; and a perceived lack of political, inter-professional, media and public regard for social work, its complexities and contribution. Perhaps for these reasons, ECSWs appear

to have little confidence in the will or capacity of existing political or macro-professional structures to effect significant change or improvement for the profession. Relatedly, across the data sets, there is a developing sense that some of the early career workforce's expressed optimism, strength and resolve functions as a necessary protection and defence in a professional environment riven by challenge, change and uncertainty, These findings underscore the temporal nature of the research findings and prompt questions about how long workers can sustain and be sustained by this particular narrative.

References

Bourdieu, P. (1990), The Logic of Practice. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

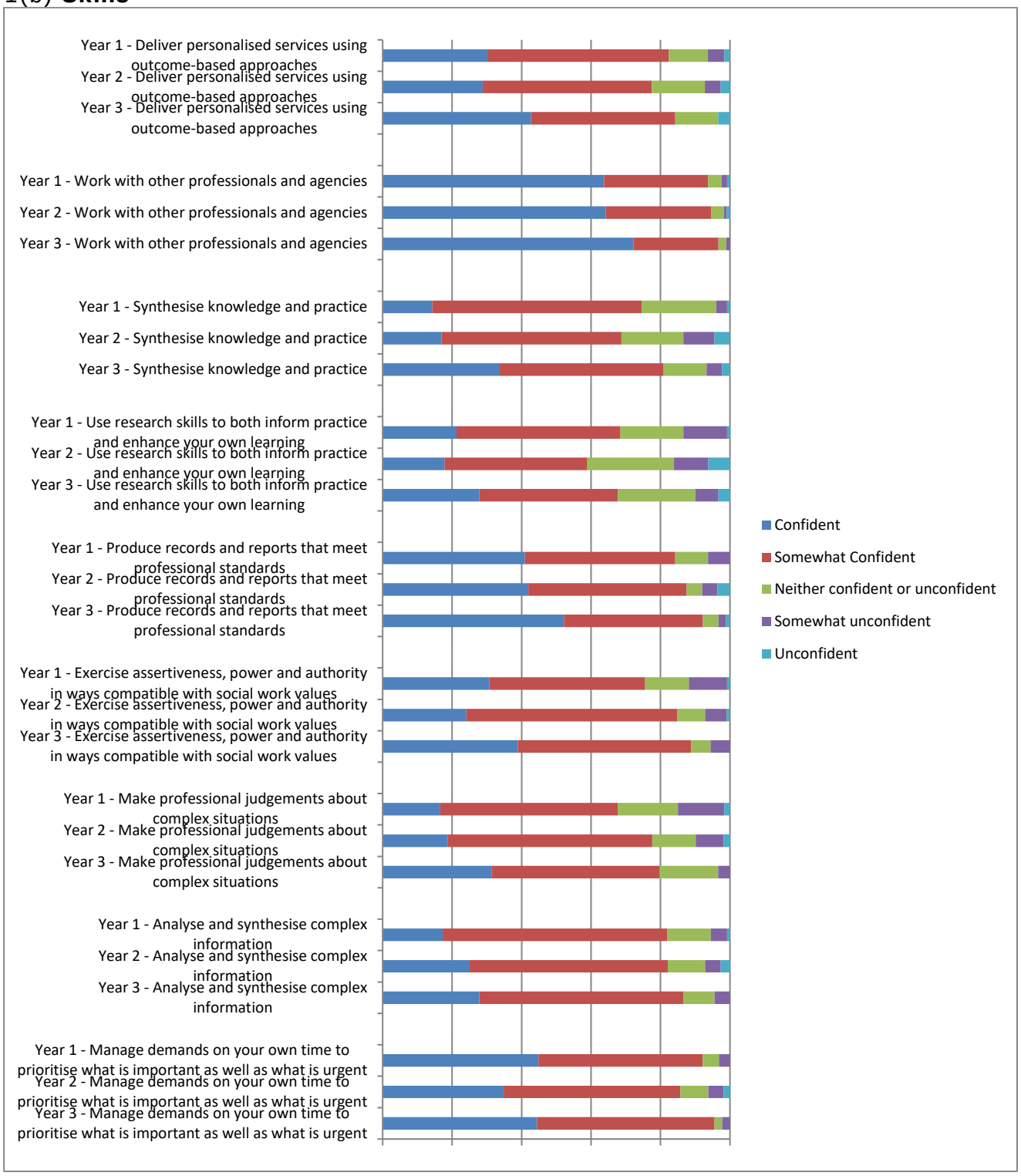
Steger, M. (2009). Globalisation and Social Imaginaries: The Changing Ideological Landscape of the Twenty-First Century. Journal of Critical Globalisation Studies, Issue 1.

Appendix 1 – Data tables

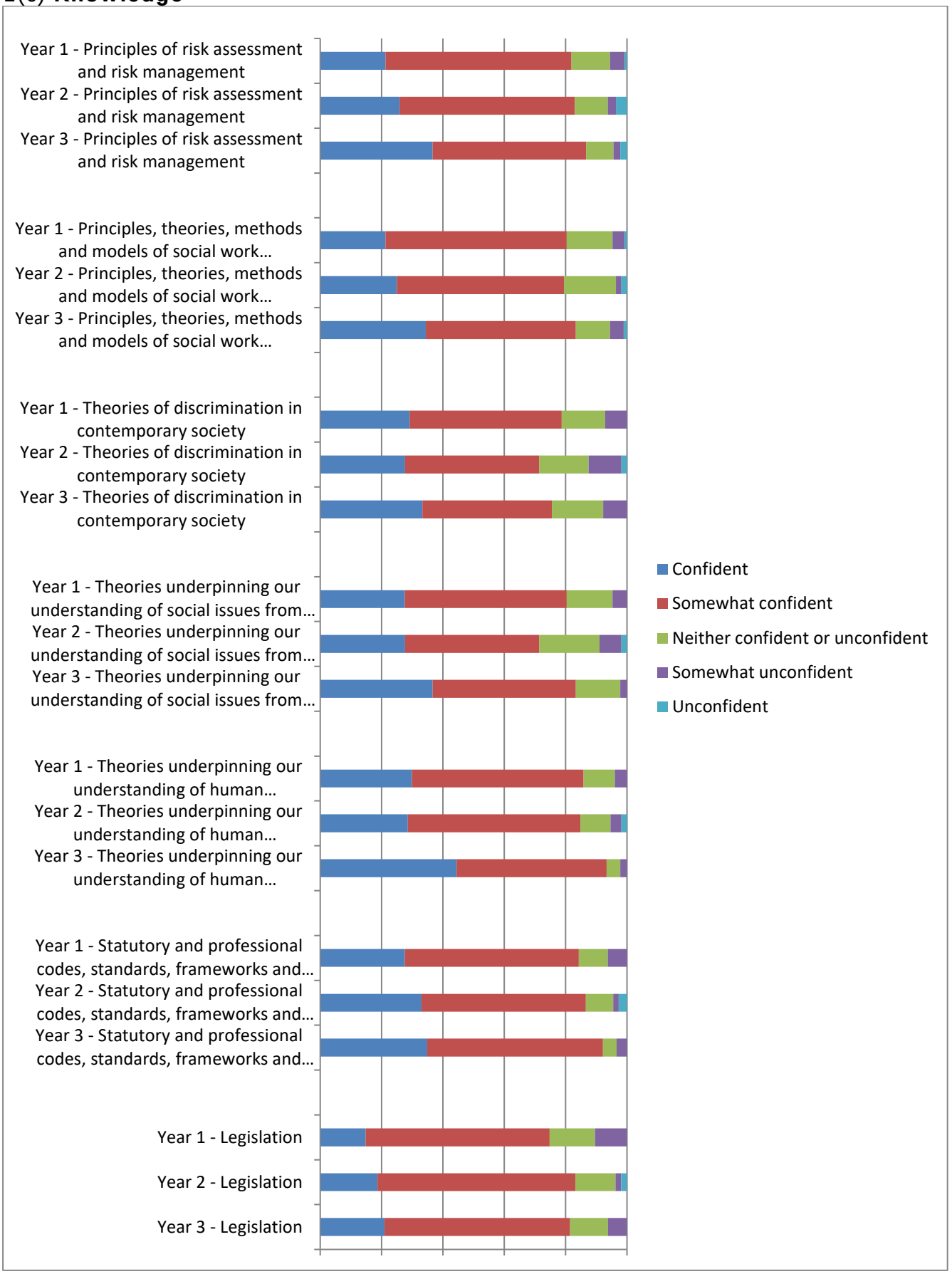
1(a) **Time spent on social work tasks (Year 3)**

Thinking about everyday social work tasks, please rank the following from those you spend most time on (1) to those you spend least time on (7)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
Service user and/or carer contact	20.20%	13.48%	25.84%	19.10%	11.24%	5.62%	4.49%
Report writing (including assessment/ risk ma	40.20%	21.84%	6.90%	6.90%	13.79%	6.90%	3.45%
Case recording/ data entry	17.90%	33.71%	21.35%	13.48%	5.62%	3.37%	4.49%
Responding to crisis	6.82%	17.05%	21.59%	20.45%	19.32%	12.50%	2.27%
Liaising with other professionals, teams, serv	9.09%	3.41%	17.05%	29.55%	23.86%	14.77%	2.27%
Reading, analysing and using current researc	5.43%	4.35%	1.09%	2.17%	9.78%	18.48%	58.70%
General admin	2.13%	8.51%	7.45%	9.57%	18.09%	35.11%	19.15%

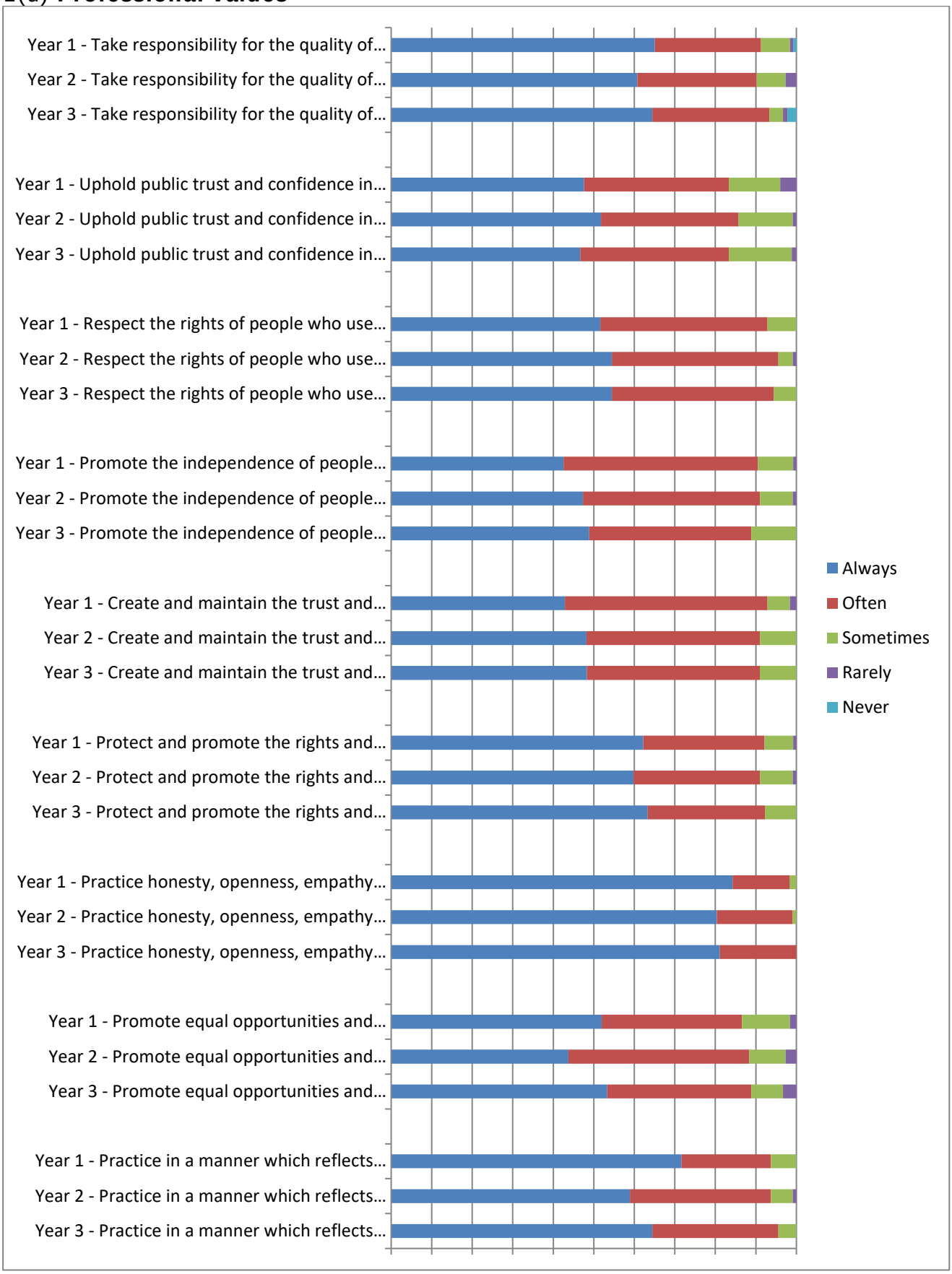
1(b) **Skills**



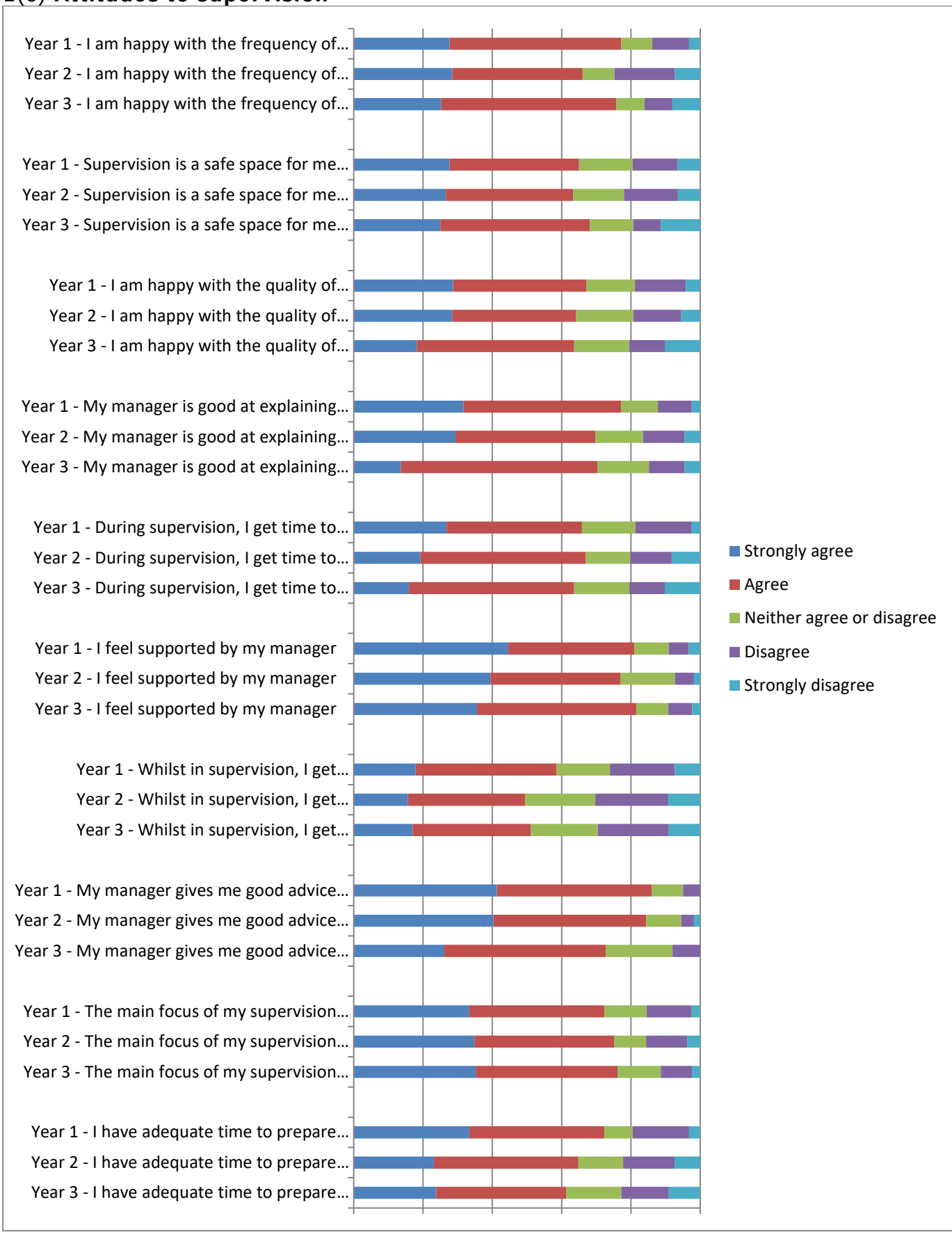
1(c) **Knowledge**



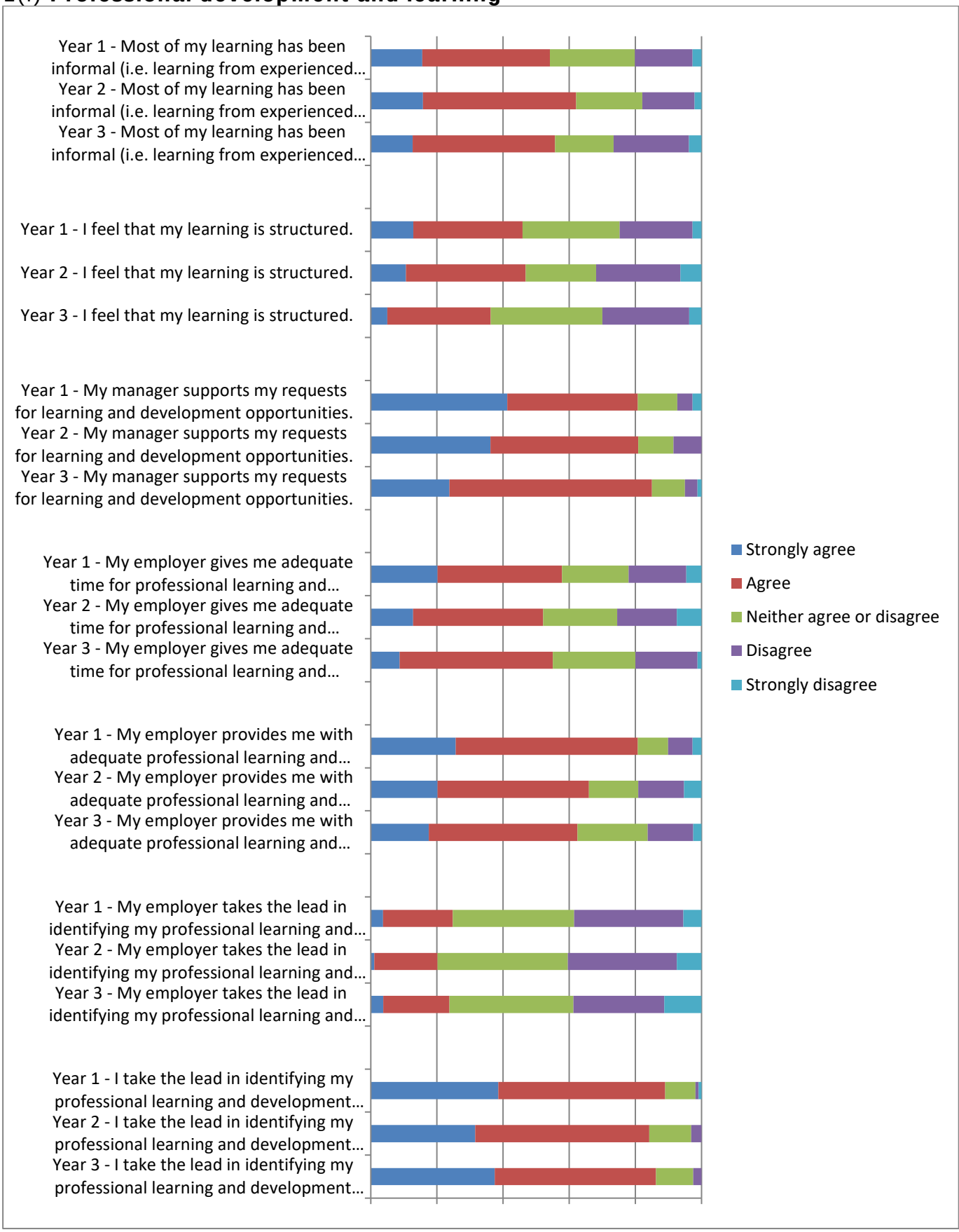
1(d) **Professional values**



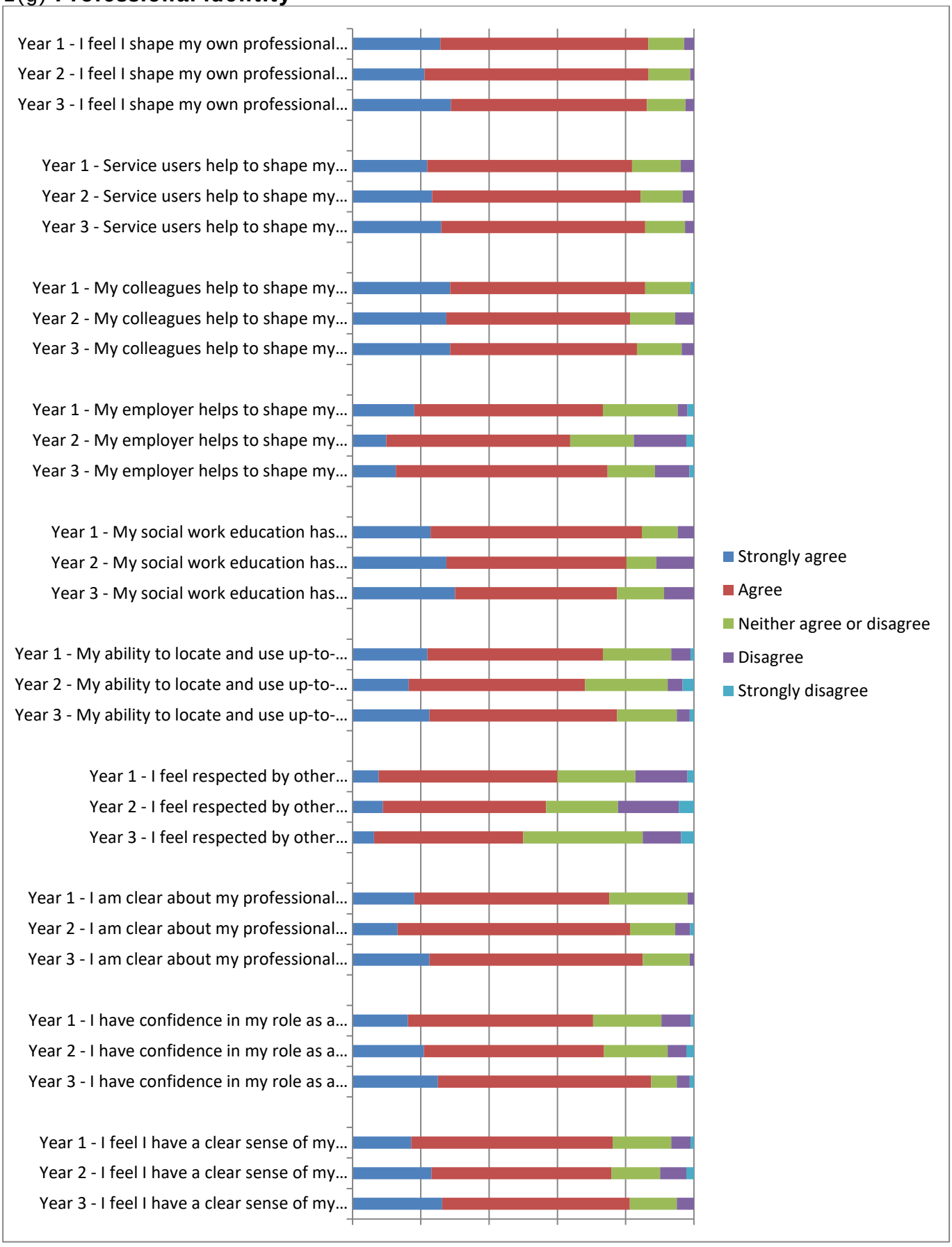
1(e) **Attitudes to supervision**



1(f) **Professional development and learning**



1(g) **Professional identity**



1(h) **Statements on professional identity**