

SASW

The professional association for
social work and social workers

Findings from the Student Placement Experience Survey

February 2024



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Introduction

There are considerable difficulties in Scotland in the recruitment and retention of social workers. The sector is seeing the highest vacancy rate¹ for practicing social worker posts since the early 2000s. 19% of registered social workers are nearing pension age² which makes this crisis even more pressing.

In Scotland, there are nine Higher Education Institutes (HEIs) that provide social work courses. All of those courses include practice learning where students spend a significant number of weeks with an employer, gaining experience in a supervised and supported setting as part of their studies. The systems and arrangements for these placements vary and the sufficient provision of social work placements is becoming more and more challenging. The vacancy rate within social work teams in the public sector impacts on their ability to provide student placements.

The reliance on the third sector to deliver placements is consequently growing and already provides the majority of placements³. And the consequence of this is that social work employers report that newly qualified social workers are not able to evidence experience of the roles and tasks that social workers in the public sector need to undertake. This completes the circuit of public sector employers reporting high vacancy rates.

In order, to gain an insight into the current social work placement experience, we designed a survey with significant direction and input from social work students at all stages. The survey ran in Spring 2023 and captures the placement experience of social work students and their transition into becoming newly qualified social workers in Scotland. The survey encompassed 33 questions and received 344 responses which is a response rate upward of 15% and indicates an emotive topic. Of those responses 269 were from students⁴ (78%) and 75 from NQSWs (22%).

SASW intends this data to be useful to the sector in evidencing the range of issues affecting not only students and newly qualified social workers but their future employers and communities we work in.

We will publish the full data from the survey as an annex to this report at a later date.

If you would like to contact SASW regarding the survey, please email scotland@basw.co.uk

¹ https://data.sssc.uk.com/images/SixMonthSurveyReport/LA_SW_WTE_Vacancy_Report_June_2023.pdf

² <https://socialworkscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Setting-the-Bar-Full-Report.pdf>

³ SSSC (2023). 'Social Work Practice Learning Funding: Research and Evaluation', p.7

⁴ At the time of the survey 1807 students were registered which relates to a response rate of 15%.

<https://data.sssc.uk.com/registration-data>. However, only students who had finished at least one placement were asked to answer. This means the actual response rate is likely higher than 15%.

1 Key Findings

Students:

- 64% rate their placement experience as good or even excellent.
- Students can be left feeling unprepared when third sector placements do not include significant levels of social work tasks.
- Students experience high levels of stress and poorer mental health when they find themselves managing a fulltime placement in addition to academic work, a paid job to bring in income and caring responsibilities in varying combinations.
- Placements themselves put an additional financial strain on students due to time constraints for a paid additional job or being asked to stop working in addition to placement.
- 60% of students stated that their mental health was impacted by their placements.
- Students with a disability are at much higher risk of failing their placements than their peers.
- 9% of students experienced discrimination, harassment or victimisation on placement.
- Placement experiences significantly affect reported levels of confidence; good experience leads to high confidence and poor experience to low.

Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSW):

- 30% felt very prepared to take on role as NQSW.
- 20% felt completely unprepared to start their career as a NQSW.
- Lack of public sector placement makes it harder for graduates to find their first social work job.
- 41% felt somewhat supported at work or not supported at all.
- Less than half (49%) of NQSWs in this survey felt they were provided with sufficient learning opportunities and time for learning.

2 Survey Results

2.1. Social work placements

The different sectors:

Statutory: Around 60% of social workers⁵ are employed by local authorities who have the legislative duties of protection and welfare.

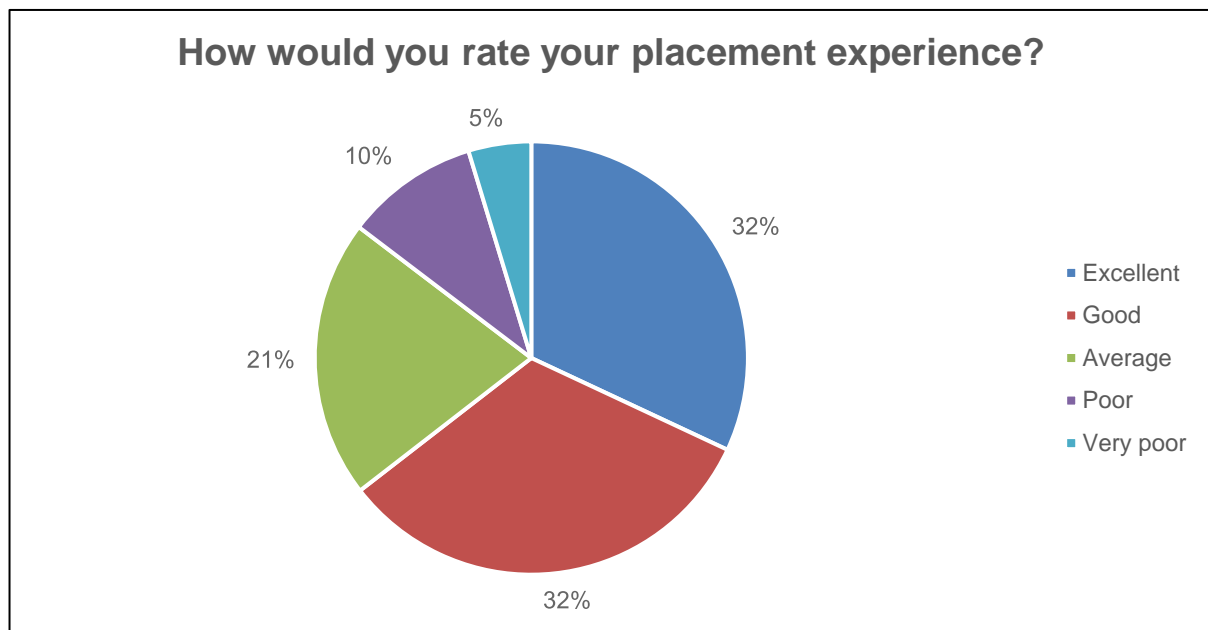
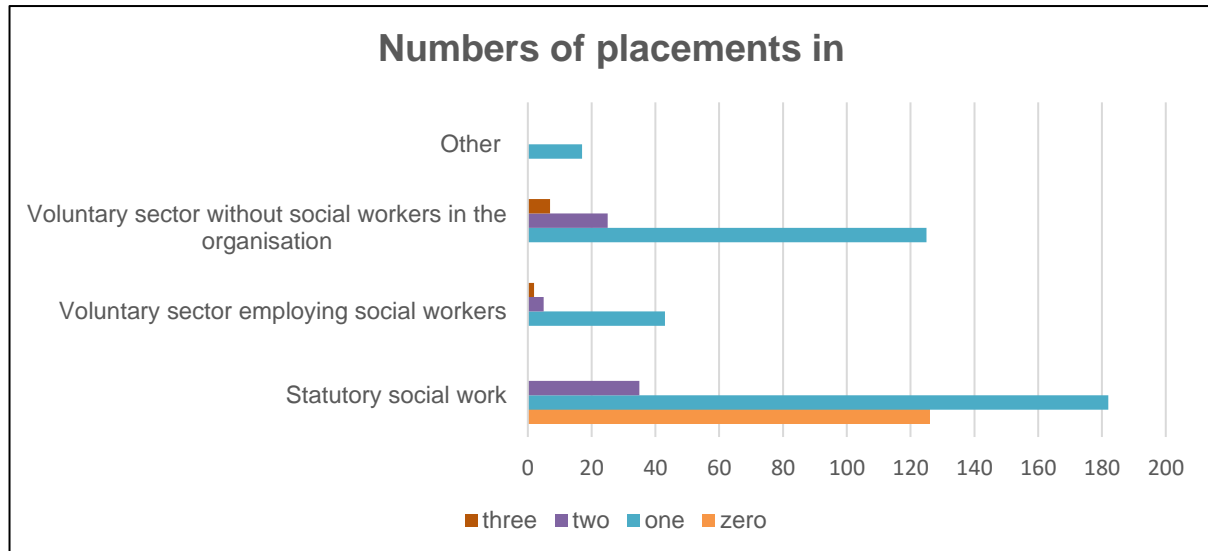
Voluntary: Organisations whose primary purpose is to create social impact rather than profit. It is often called the third sector. It is independent from local and national government and distinct from the private sector. Some organisations with social work tasks employ social workers whilst others do not have the need for one.

⁵ <https://socialworkscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Setting-the-Bar-Full-Report.pdf>

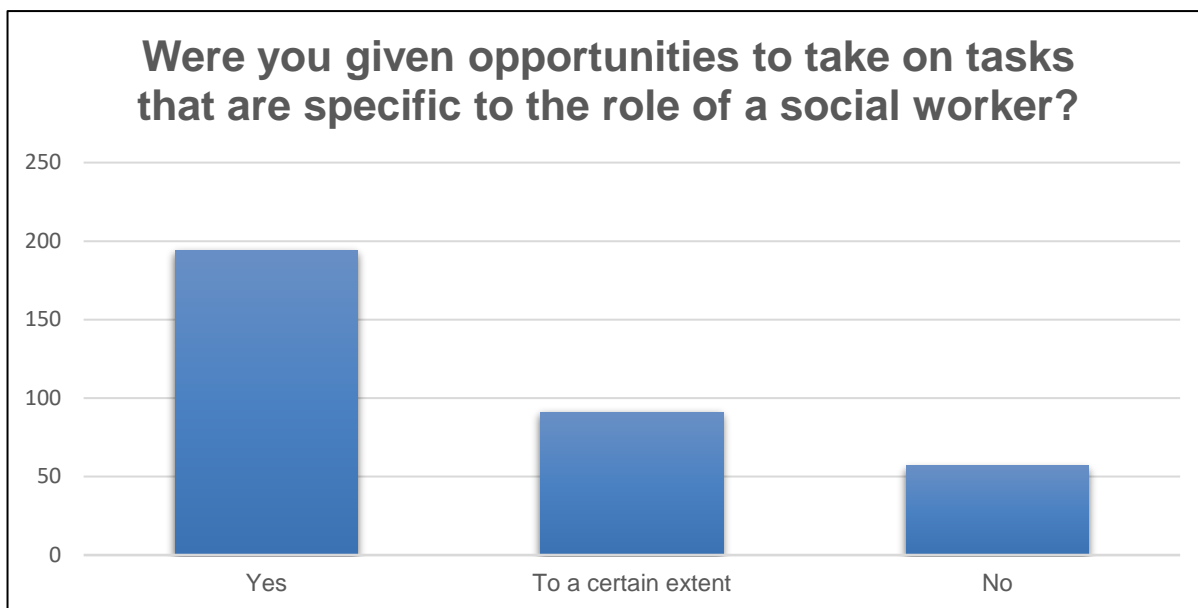
Private: For profit organisations.

Other: residential, statutory settings but in a team without social workers, NHS, university module

Respondents were asked how many placements they had in each sector.



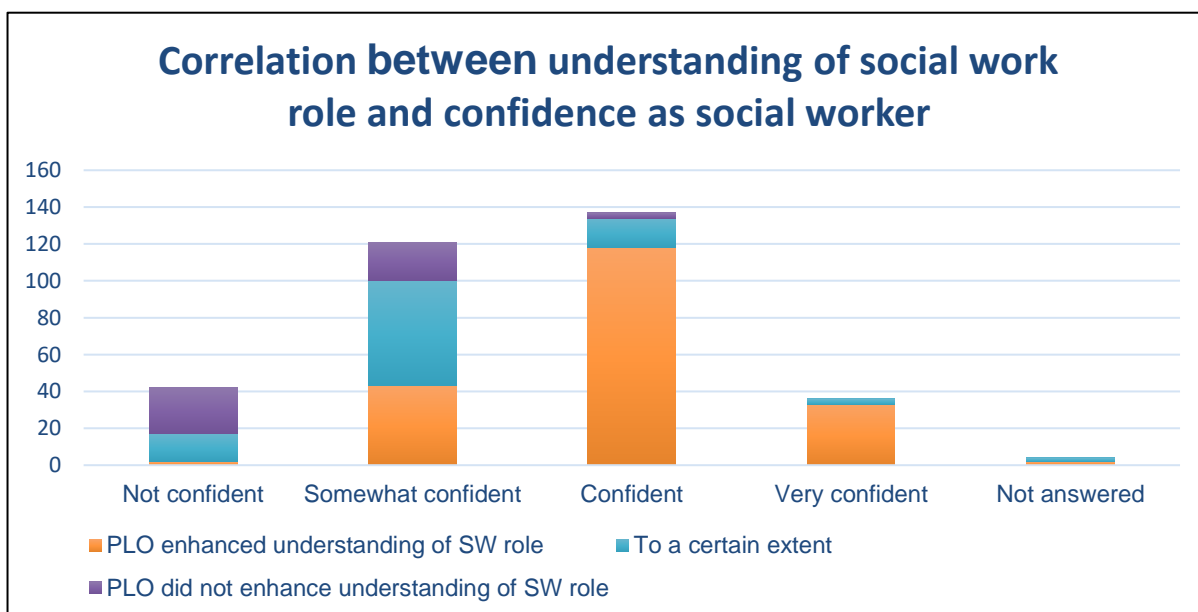
All placement types received the extreme ratings of very poor and excellent. There are positive and negative comments about placements for any of the sectors. Statutory placements scored very high on learning opportunities but often came with high workloads and stress levels. Voluntary sector placements without a social worker in the organisation ranked very low on stress levels but also low regarding learning opportunities. For all sectors there were some exemptions to this pattern.



17% were not given the opportunity to take on social work tasks as defined by the Standards in Social Work Education⁶ (SiSWE) during their placements.

No one at my organisation is practising as a social worker in their role and I was not taught social work specific skills or legislation.

Did the practice learning opportunities (PLO) enhance the student's understanding of the social worker role and does this affect their confidence as a social worker?

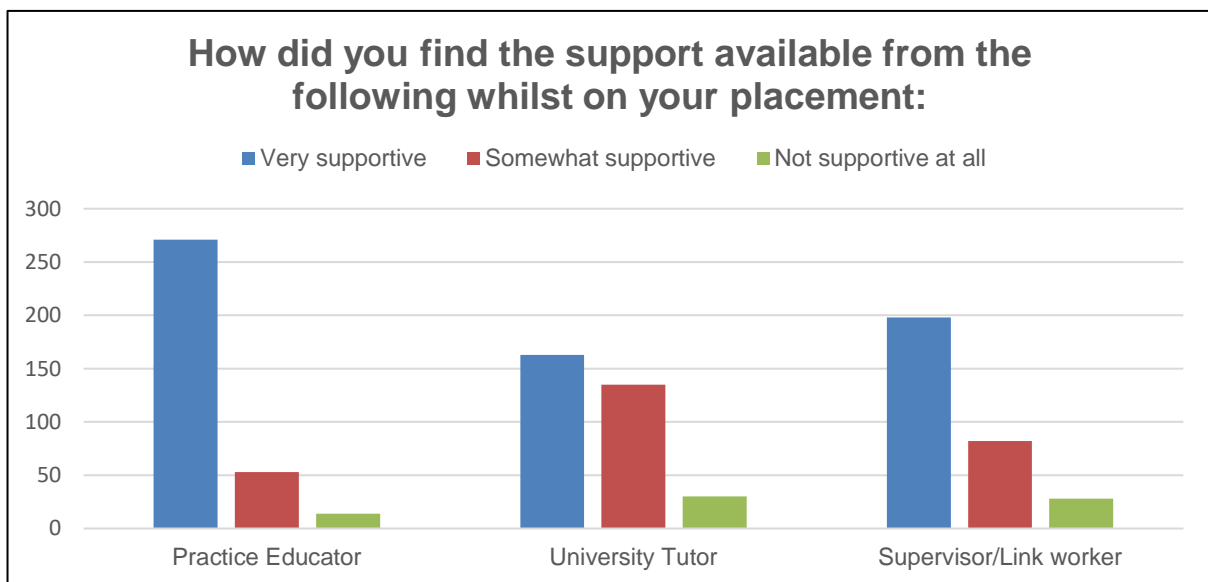


⁶ <https://learn.sssc.uk.com/siswe/siswe.html>

Of those who gained understanding of the social work role in their placement 92% rated themselves as very confident. None of those who did not think that their placement increased their understanding of the social worker role rated themselves as very confident. Only 1% of those whose placement enhanced their understanding said they do not feel confident. 94% of those whose placement did not enhance their understanding feel only somewhat confident or not confident at all. This indicates a strong correlation between placement experience and confidence as a social worker.

2.2. Support

Most students (79%) found their Practice Educator⁷ to be very supportive and only 4% did not find them supportive at all. A significant number of comments were made about their Practice Educator going the extra mile to make it possible for students to meet the required Standards of Social Work Education by using their personal connections when the placement itself did not provide sufficient learning opportunities.



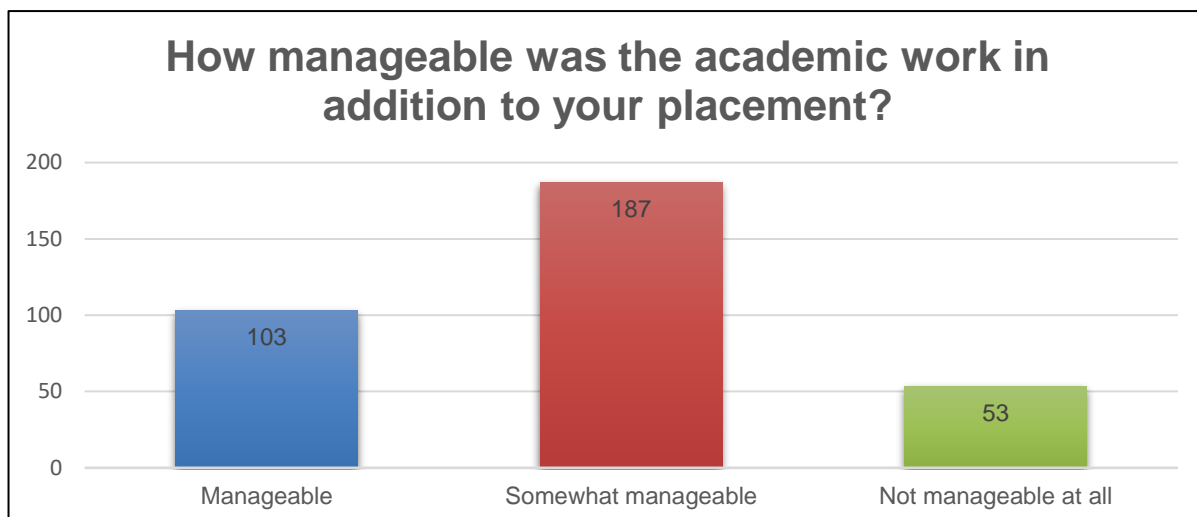
Generally, there seemed to be a higher expectation in regard to providing support on the Practice Educator than on supervisor/link worker⁸ who, unless placement was in a statutory setting, might not have been a social worker.

2.3. Factors impacting on stress levels

High number of comments about academic work during placement indicates strong feelings about this topic.

⁷ Social workers who either hold or are working towards an accredited qualification in practice education. They teach, support and assess students on placement. Practice Educators can be external to the organisation.

⁸ Link workers can be involved in social work placements where the designated practice educator is at a distance from the student's placement base (external), and the link worker is given responsibility for specific elements of the practice learning. Link workers do not need to be qualified as social workers. They are often the student's line manager within a placement setting.



“I had a 120 day placement, doing assignments, portfolio, and doing a dissertation at once which was too much. I also had to work to sustain myself.”

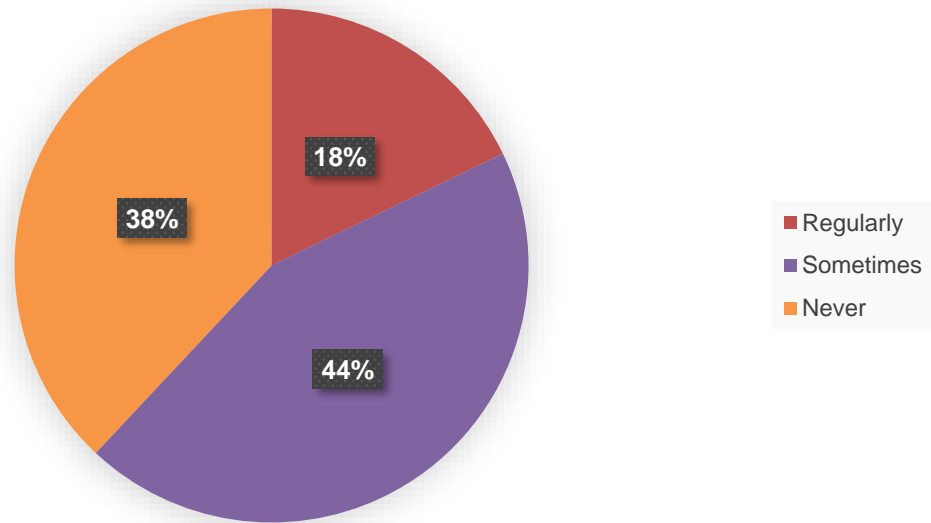
“Only manageable as during placement limited work was given to me, so I was usually left with nothing else to do.”

“There should be less academic work to do in placement to enable students to concentrate on practice itself.”

“I was on 6 month placement and my uni reduced the uni workload to reflect this. Extremely appreciated and helpful. It allowed me to focus on practice.”

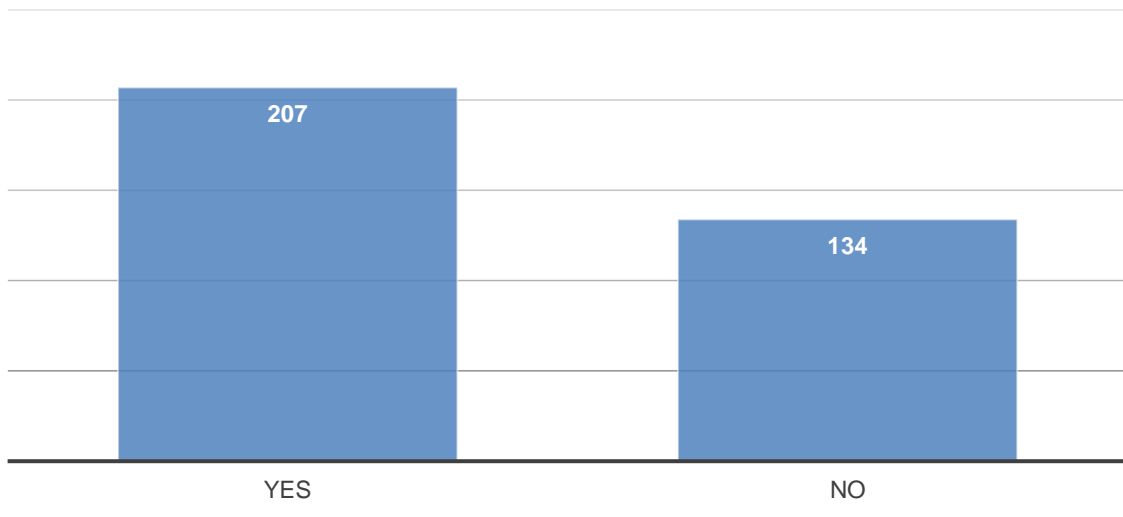
82% of students on placement worked overtime either sometimes or regularly. The comments indicated that placement providers expected students to sometimes work out of the anticipated office hours of 9 AM to 5 PM. Whilst this would be necessary to meet the needs of people needing support, students experienced little flexibility from placement providers for their own needs, for example with regards to their caring responsibilities.

Whilst on placement did you work overtime?



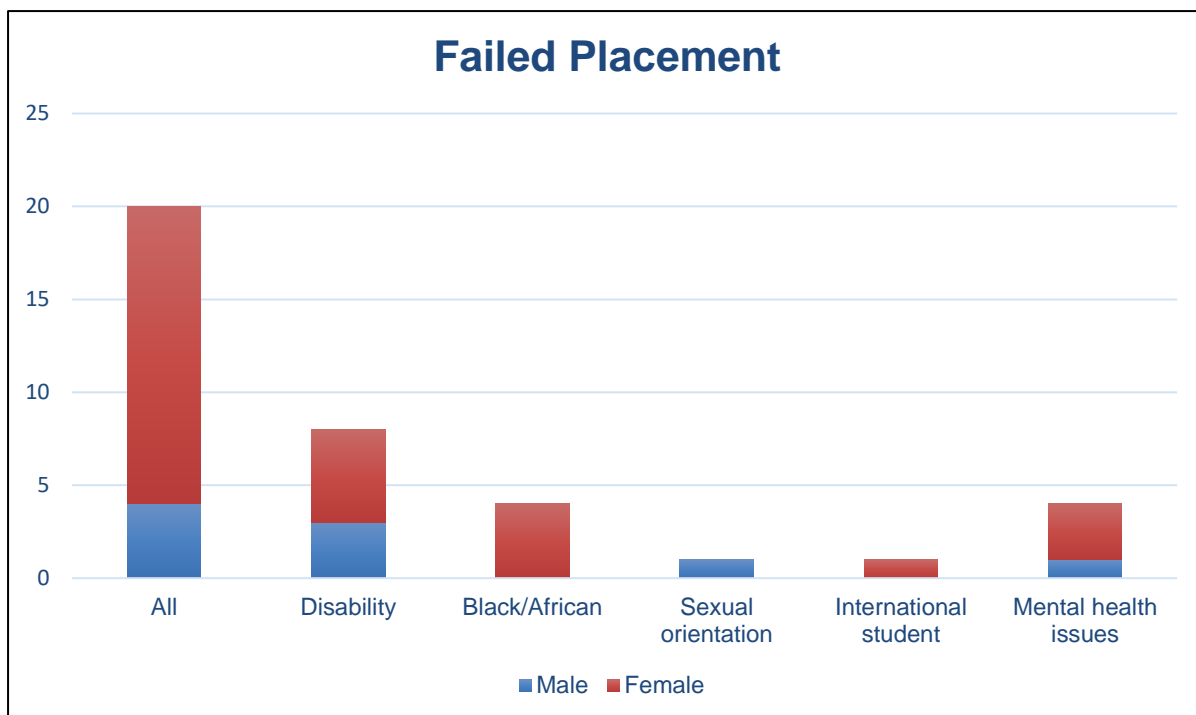
61% had to work outside the placement for financial reasons. 55% were advised by their Practice Educator or link worker to stop paid employment during placement.

Did you have to work outside the placement for financial reasons?



63% of students reported that placement harmed their financial situation. 21% stated that their finances were impacted to a certain extent. Only 16% stated that their financial situation was not made worse by being on placement.

Having to work a part time job on top of placement took a physical, mental and emotional toll on me.



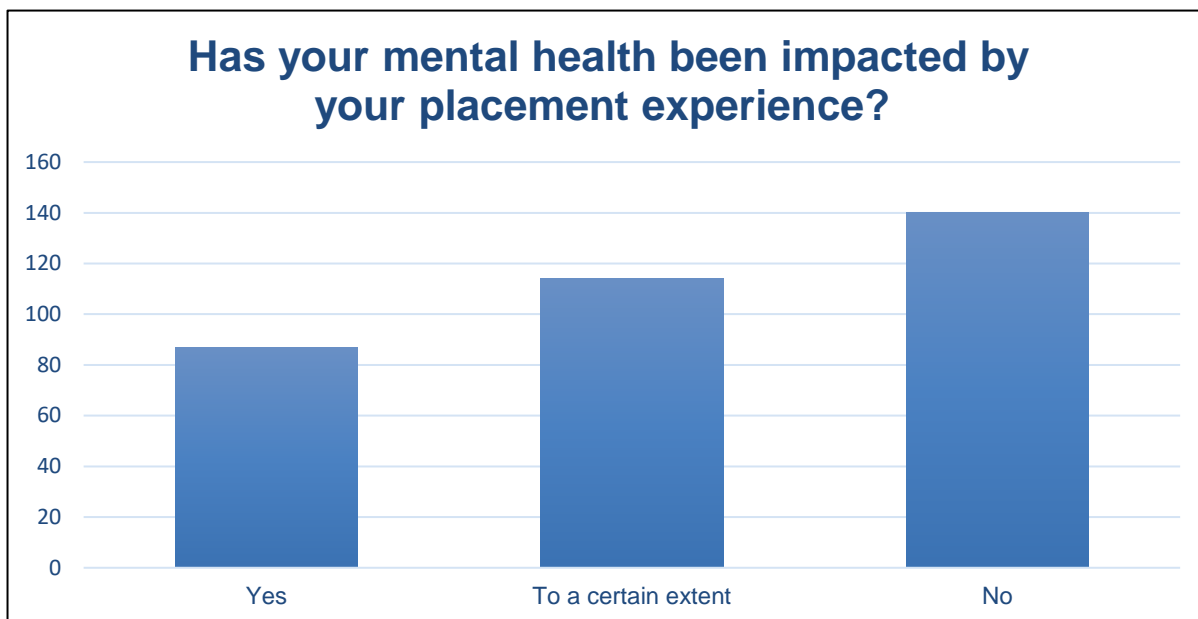
- 6% of survey respondents failed a placement (20 in total):
- 80% female and 20% male (entire survey respondents: female: 91%, male: 8%)
- 40% of those who failed a placement have a disability (survey: 15% have disability, SSSC 2021 stats: 3% of registered social work students)
- 20% identify as having Black/African ethnicity (survey: 6%, SSSC 2021 stats: 9%)
- 5% identified as LGBTQi+ (survey: 8%)
- 5% are international students (survey: 14%)
- 20% state they have mental health issues
- 35% stated that they experienced discrimination

The number of respondents failing a placement is small therefore it might not be representative. However, in this survey disabled, black/African and male students are overrepresented amongst those who failed their placement.

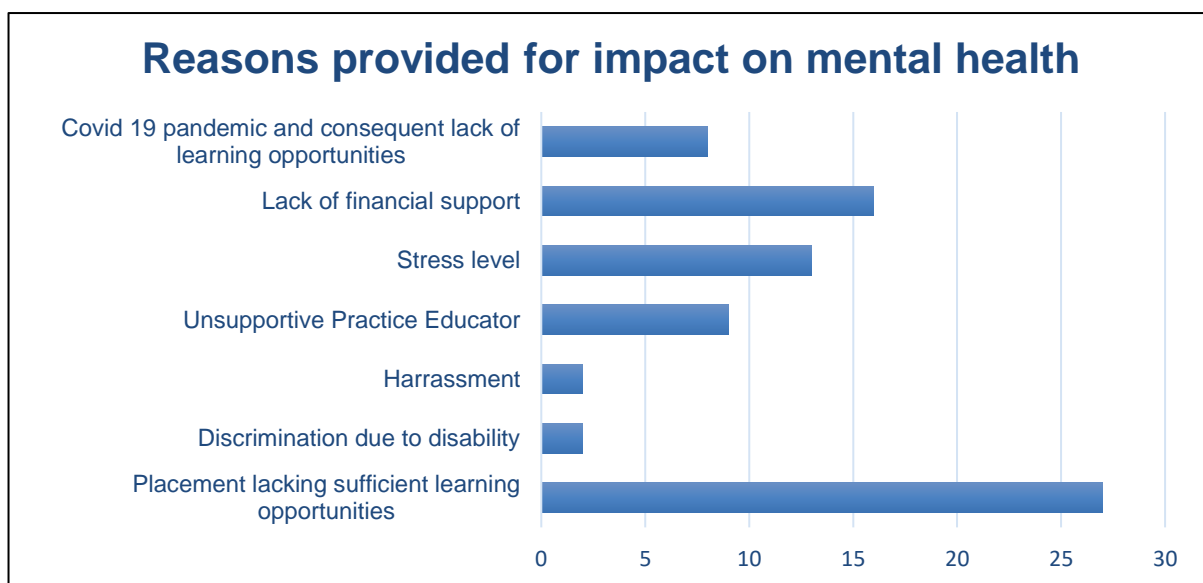
At least 6 students failed statutory placements, at least 2 failed in the voluntary sector and at least 5 in the voluntary sector without social work (7 placements cannot be ascribed). Two of those who did their placements in the voluntary sector without social work stated that the main reason they failed was because they could not meet the required Standards in Social Work Education due to the placement not offering sufficient learning opportunities.

2.4. Mental health

Only 41% stated that the placement experience did not impact on their mental health. 59% felt their mental health was at least somewhat to certainly poorly affected by their placement experience.



The comment section provided information for the following grouping of responses:



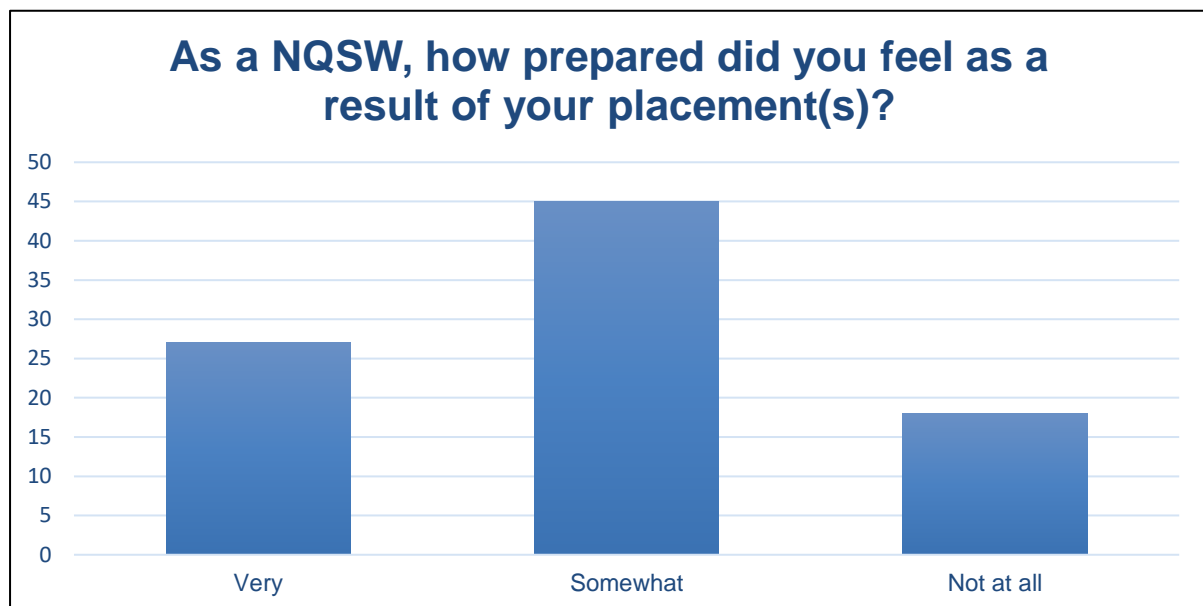
The top reason for the decrease in mental health was placements that provided little to no opportunity to take on social work tasks. Students stated their voluntary sector placements left them uninspired, bored or frustrated which had a bearing on their confidence and mental health.

Financial concern came second as reason given why their mental health deteriorated during placements. This was often combined with the stress of having to work whilst being on placement and doing academic work. Some people had additional care responsibilities that made placements a difficult balancing act. One student said that they felt 'burnt-out' before even having graduated. Workload and stress levels came third in the reasons provided followed by unsupportive Practice Educators.

Two people stated that their mental health improved as a consequence of being on placement⁹.

2.5. Newly Qualified Social Worker

30% felt very prepared to take on the job as a social worker after graduating. 50% felt somewhat prepared and 20% did not feel prepared at all. This aligns with the statistics from the recent Setting the Bar report that only 7 out of 8 graduates continue to register/work as social workers¹⁰. This ties in with views from Local Authority employers who report finding it difficult to fill their vacancies as applicants do not fulfil their expectations on prior experience¹¹.



⁹ Both students had their placement experience during the Covid-19 pandemic. Their placements were office based and due to that reduced their feeling of isolation.

¹⁰ <https://socialworkscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/Setting-the-Bar-Full-Report.pdf>

¹¹ <https://data.sssc.uk/data-publications/337-social-worker-filled-posts-and-vacancies-six-monthly-survey>

"I have gathered from attending interviews that Child/Adult Protection experience on placement is important. My placements did not present me with this opportunity."

"If you want social workers to stay, you need to give them proper placements or they will enter the workforce entirely unprepared."

"While certainly there is value in non-statutory placements it was my experience that statutory placements were massively more valuable and impactful preparing me for my career as a NQSW today."

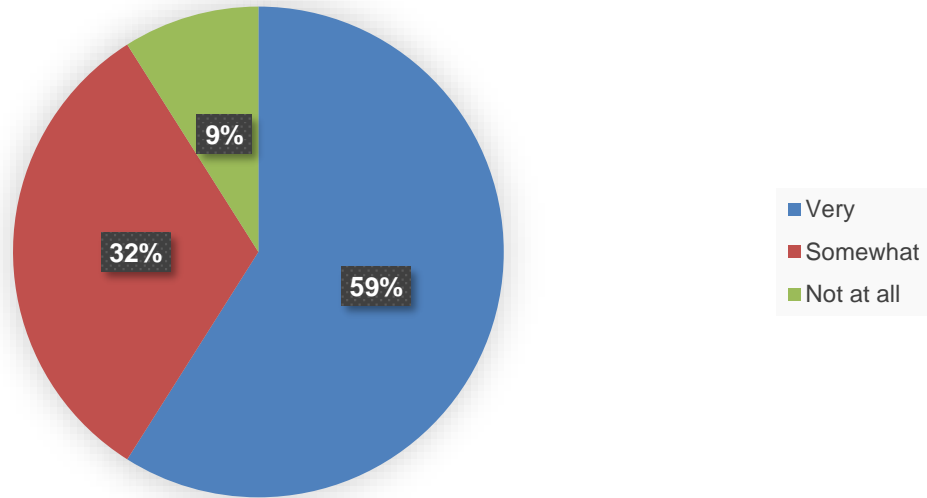
"Social work placement doesn't truly reflect your social work role upon graduating. My mental health was impacted during my NQSW training. I struggled to cope with the workload and took annual leave to complete reports."

"I recently started a NQSW role and while the Local Authority stated I would be part of a support programme to improve staff retention, I've not had any emails regarding this since, mentoring sessions have been cancelled due to mentor's other commitments. Supervision with my team leader has been inadequate as meetings are often cancelled at short notice and not rescheduled."

"Fortunately, as a NQSW I'm in a very supportive statutory team and it has been a very positive experience."

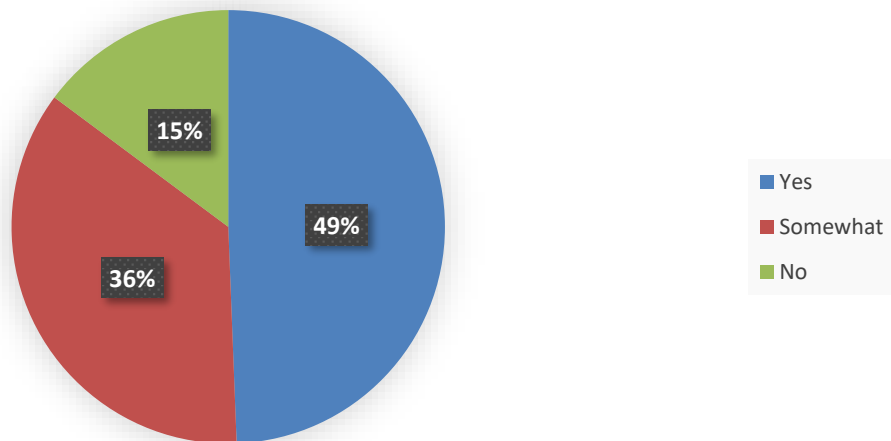
"NQSW programmes of support are failing due to lack of workers. There is no protection for NQSW in terms of caseload which often makes it unmanageable at early stages of your career."

As a NQSW, do you feel supported at work?



Just under half (49%) of the NQSWs feel they are provided with sufficient learning opportunities and time. 15% do not feel they have sufficient opportunity for their development.

As a NQSW, do you have sufficient learning opportunities and time that allows for learning?



Conclusion

The high response rate and rich commentary provided indicates that students and NQSWs want to be heard and are keen to share their experiences. The picture outlined in this report shows that there are areas that require further efforts from all stakeholders within social work to make social work placements a more consistently positive experience for all.

Published by SASW, February 2024

Cite as: SASW (2024) *Findings from the Student Placement Experience Survey*. Edinburgh: SASW

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