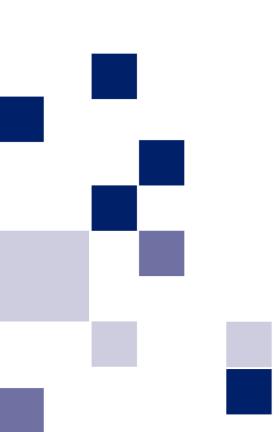# Evaluation of post registration training and learning test sites
Summary report

July 2019

Introduction

This report summarises the impact of five test sites which explored new ways of recording post registration training and learning (PRTL) for social service workers in Scotland. These test sites were led and supported by the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC) which recognises the current approach to PRTL was not working and is reviewing the process.

About the test sites

The test sites ran during 2018/19. The SSSC worked with five social service organisations to try out new methods of recording and reflecting on learning. The test sites were selected to reflect a range of different sectors, including public, private and third sector organisations working in the fields of early years, care at home, housing support, care homes and regulation.

The organisations received support from the SSSC including:

- face to face meetings with managers and practitioners
- development and leadership days
- attendance at team meetings
- feedback on learning options.

Support was provided in an informal and relaxed way, focused on building relationships and raising awareness. Staff were also provided with a range of resources including a handbook on the test site approach, templates for reflective learning, suggested reflective activities, standards and codes of practice, and information about learning activities such as the SSSC Open Badges.

The test sites focused on social service workers, excluding social workers and social work students, as other work is underway to test new approaches for those groups.

About the evaluation

The evaluation took place in spring 2019. It explored whether the new PRTL methods used in the test sites:

- are effective and meaningful ways of recording learning
- encourage reflection and make a difference to practice
- encourage both employee and employer involvement
- complement wider learning and development approaches
- could be effectively verified by employers
- would remain effective and sustainable without SSSC support.

The evaluation also explored views on future approaches to PRTL. It involved a desktop review, and interviews with 44 test site participants and six SSSC staff members.

Methods of recording learning

Test site participants were pleased with the concept of having a range of methods for recording learning. Participants liked having templates and ideas to give them parameters of what was acceptable.

Participants found that recording learning in a range of ways helped to make it clear that different types of learning, particularly informal learning, could contribute towards PRTL. Some found it easier having paper based rather than IT based options for recording learning.

The most commonly used template was a reflective account, which many participants were familiar with through their studies, work or previous PRTL submissions. Staff found the template simple and easy to use, fitting well with everyday workloads. Some said that reflective accounts would fit well with their organisation's existing approaches to learning and development.

Participants also tried and liked completing reflective diaries, floor books, mind maps and Open Badges. Test site participants were less sure about the 'Making a Mistake' template which some found confusing or worrying.

Impact of new approaches

Most of those who had tried new approaches to recording and reflecting on their learning felt this had made a difference to their practice. Most indicated that they were:

- clearer about how PRTL requirements relate to outcomes for service users
- better able to reflect on learning and how it related to practice
- more confident about PRTL and continuous professional development
- less anxious and worried about PRTL
- more in control of and responsible for their own learning.

Some reported being more able to see PRTL as an ongoing process. Managers indicated they felt more confident explaining the PRTL process to their staff. Staff were positive about discussing their learning with managers.

SSSC staff believed the learning records produced were of a higher quality, with more evidence of reflection, demonstrating outcomes and linking to codes of practice.

The face to face support provided by SSSC was a key factor in achieving this impact.

Views on future approaches

Overall test site participants were happy with the SSSC proposals to change the PRTL process.

- **Introduce more flexibility in how learning was recorded** – Almost all participants would like to continue to use more flexible approaches to recording their learning. Just a few participants indicated that they preferred recording their learning the previous way.

- **Submit less information to the SSSC** – Most participants liked the idea of their employer holding the records locally. Some said that would make them feel less worried about PRTL.

- **Better link with employer systems** – Most felt this was the right approach, and would be more meaningful, reduce duplication and allow managers to support staff around PRTL records.

Managers broadly felt quite confident about embedding PRTL processes in the organisation and verifying employee learning. Test site participants felt that there was a need to consider the following.

- **Verification** – Including who should verify records and how to obtain consistent standards in verification. Managers indicated they would need clear guidance both from the SSSC and their own organisation.

- **Culture change** – Some felt the new approach would require significant organisational culture change and would take time.

- **Quality assurance** – Most felt there would still need to be a role for SSSC in assuring quality, so employers treat the obligations seriously. Some suggested spot checks linked to Care Inspectorate inspections.

Issues for consideration

1. Improving the PRTL process

The test sites supported the SSSC's understanding that there is a need to improve the PRTL process. However, social service workers operate in a pressured environment and any changes need to be made sensitively, working in partnership with the sector.

The SSSC should continue to work with the sector to build an effective and meaningful process which supports the SSSC outcome of ensuring its standards lead to a safe and skilled workforce.

2.   Focusing on outcomes for service users

The ultimate purpose of asking social service workers to learn (and record and evidence this) is so there is a skilled and safe social service workforce, able to support people using services effectively. Learning plays an important part in this – along with other factors.

The SSSC should clearly articulate why the focus is on recording the learning (one means of becoming an effective practitioner), rather than on recording the outcomes (of meeting the appropriate professional standards of practice and supporting people using services effectively).

The SSSC should consider how the focus on ensuring the social service workforce is learning contributes to the outcome of building a safe and skilled social service workforce, how it fits more widely with ensuring people have the competences to do their job and positive outcomes for people using services.

3.   Focusing on learning outcomes

The SSSC has clearly identified that it wishes to retain a minimum level of hours to be spent learning over the registration period. However, the test sites show there is some fear and confusion over the hourly requirement. The SSSC should consider how the minimum level of hours to be spent learning fits with a focus on outcomes for people using services. Other options may include a requirement to identify clear goals for learning for each year; or a commitment to improve practice in a certain area of work and reflect on this.

If the minimum level of hours is retained, consideration should be given to how this is described in a simple and positive way to social service workers.

4.   Recording learning

Within the test sites there remained a strong focus (both from SSSC and test site participants) on reflective writing. The SSSC should consider the barriers that the act of writing creates for some. The focus of reflection is that learning can be translated into practice – not the writing itself. The SSSC should provide clear guidance on how reflection on learning can be recorded, without producing a written reflective account.

5.   Employer verification of learning

The SSSC will need to be very clear what it is employers are being asked to verify and how they record this. The test sites did not allow for testing of the verification process but did provide useful feedback on issues that may arise.

Employers are likely to establish a range of different mechanisms for verifying learning. The managers responsible for verifying learning may be different to those

involved in social service worker registration, and the range of skills required to verify learning may be new to some.

The SSSC should carefully consider the detail of the verification process, the language used, the issues which may arise and the support required for managers. The verification process should be further explored and tested with the sector. Processes should be put in place for those who may need to manage their own records of learning and reflection (for example if self-employed) or transfer their learning records between employers.

6.   SSSC support

The test sites clearly show the value of face to face engagement with SSSC staff, which was critical to changing perceptions of PRTL. There will be a need for SSSC support to implement the new approach – both for employers at senior level and for the managers responsible for verifying records. There is a risk that without adequate support the culture shift required is not made, managers are not able or willing to take on the role of verifying records, or there is a high level of inconsistency in approach across the country.

The SSSC should develop a support plan based on the resources available. There may be opportunities for collective support for groups of managers across large organisations; group events for multiple employers; surgeries for multiple employers with individual short support sessions; and information provision through online videos or webinars (in bite sized segments to avoid information overload). It may also be worth considering providing organisations with regional or sectoral key contacts within the SSSC to provide email, phone or video call support if appropriate.

7.   SSSC quality assurance

While this evaluation identified a clear demand for some level of SSSC quality assurance on learning records, it obtained only limited views on the way in which this may happen. However, the range of options may include:

- random sampling of individual records – linked to re-registration
- random sampling of employer records
- focused sampling of employer records – linked to factors such as risk, Care Inspectorate focus, fitness to practise focus, sector and required registration date, or other factors.
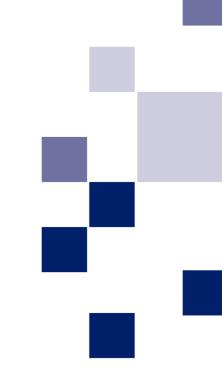
The SSSC should consider whether it wishes to sample individual records or employer records, and the potential implications on the connection between learning and individual re-registration.

If moving away from sampling individual records, the SSSC would need to recognise there would be a separation of the individual re-registration process and its assurance of learning records. If moving towards sampling employer records, the SSSC would need to be mindful of how it provides feedback and support in a way that is meaningful – both for individuals and employers.

The SSSC should also work proactively with the Care Inspectorate to identify potential for collaborative working around continuing professional learning.