

Observations of practice of newly qualified social workers

Guidance for practice assessors

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic of 2020-21 has changed the nature of social work and social work practice, impacting on social workers and other professionals with whom they work. The profession moved from frequent face-to-face practice to practice which embraced not only face-to-face work (when/where it is safe and appropriate) but also a new virtual world of practice and communications with services users, colleagues and other professionals from a wide range of disciplines.

Research carried out by Birmingham University on Child Protection and Social Distancing (2020) evidences a balanced view of the positives and difficulties that have arisen by the hybrid model of face-to-face and virtual practice. The university suggests that this hybrid model of practice, and social work contacts/visits is likely to be an ongoing facet of the way we work in the future. The research specifically focused on child protection work, but the findings are easily transferrable into adult social work.

This change in social work thinking and practice has revolutionised the way our profession thinks about, and undertakes social work, including how we educate, train and assess our social workers of tomorrow. Newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) undertaking their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) are now being assessed by assessors in both virtual and face-to-face environments. ASYE assessors, who must be registered social workers, have also had to embrace these new ways of working with, and assessing, NQSWs.

The ASYE programme continues to ensure the NQSW's capability is evidenced against the Post Qualifying Standards (previously known as the Knowledge and Skills Statement) and the Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF).

The following guidance is set within a context of changing times and their impact on NQSW practice and assessment methodology. It will specifically focus on the direct observations of practice of NQSWs by ASYE assessors.

Other guidance will cover additional issues such as peer support/buddying and gathering feedback from service users and carers and other professionals.

NQSW direct observations of practice

Direct observations are a good practice tool and remain a key method of learning and reflection for the NQSW. Direct observations should be a central component of the process of assessment and review of the NQSW during their ASYE. The ASYE requirement is that a minimum of three direct observations are undertaken by a registered social worker, ideally at least two of these by the ASYE assessor. A minimum of one of the direct observations over the year must be face-to-face, while the other(s) can be undertaken by a variety of media if appropriate.

Given their importance, observations need to be carefully planned and given the appropriate time to ensure the learning experience is maximised by the NQSW. The observations also need to be meaningful and purposeful for the NQSW and for the assessor/observer.

The pandemic has changed the nature of social work practice and, therefore, has implications on the nature of NQSW assessment and its various components, especially direct observations.

Face-to-face direct observations of practice

Face-to-face direct observations need to be considered carefully in terms of appropriate risk assessments related to good practice and the NQSW's employing organisation specific guidelines. The impact on the service user of these new ways of social work practice and the tools/methods to assess those new to practice (NQSWs) also need to be considered by the NQSW, assessor and the organisation. Face-to-face direct observations should happen within an ethical framework.

Consideration should be given to who undertakes the direct observations of practice in a face-to-face environment. Observations can be carried out by any registered social worker, either in your team or from another team. It should be remembered that the focus must be on the impact of introducing another person (i.e. the assessor/observer) into an already challenging situation where you and others may well be using Personal Protective Equipment (PPE).

Virtual observations of practice

Virtual observations of NQSWs and their developing practice are now a well established and excellent source of learning for the NQSW. These observations of practice may include virtual direct work (including virtual home visits), multi-disciplinary meetings, presentations to teams of a significant piece of learning and so on.



Good practice considerations related to observations of practice

As set out in the current Skills for Care ASYE observation of practice template, all observations contain the following three key stages:

1. **Pre-observation discussion and planning** between the NQSW and the assessor
2. Undertaking **the observation itself**
3. **Post-observation discussion, reflection and feedback** – as soon after the observation as possible and in greater depth some days later.

In all of these stages it is useful to consider the following **good practice considerations** relating to the planning and undertaking of a direct observation of practice.

Assessing what support the NQSW needs to ensure a positive learning experience

This section is about what you, as the assessor, and the NQSW need to discuss and think about prior to an observation.

It should be remembered that every NQSW is an individual with their own learning styles and their own strengths and areas of development in relation to their continuing practice and professional development throughout their ASYE.

- NQSWs have different **confidence levels** when using the different virtual platforms and so they may ask others to support them in using the platform.
- The NQSW may not feel **confident in using a virtual platform** and should be supported to become comfortable with it prior to a virtual observation.
- The NQSW is **limited to what they can see and hear**, which is entirely in the control of the service user being supported. This limits the use of senses that a NQSW would usually apply in conducting a face-to-face assessment e.g. smelling cooked food, pets, cigarettes, alcohol, drugs, indications of poor hygiene including feeling draught or damp.
- It may be difficult to **perceive emotional responses correctly**.
- The restricted screen coverage means it can be difficult to make accurate observations of non-verbal communication signals and so may find it harder to notice subtle reactions and nuances.
- Careful observation of synchronicity between verbal and non-verbal responses is necessary to gauge complex human emotions and helps to determine whether the information the person is providing is reliable or accurate, as well as measuring their emotional responses.

Planning the entire observation with the NQSW - prompts for discussion

Ensure there is clarity about the purpose of the call and what the NQSW wants to achieve from the virtual learning experience:

- How is the NQSW intending to adapt their approach to a virtual platform?
- How has the NQSW tried to ensure a confidential space that is not distracting?
- Has the NQSW prepared a list of their objectives/any questions they need to ask or points they need to raise?
- Has the NQSW considered how they are going to engage the service user in the call?
- Has the NQSW considered:
 - ▶ their appearance and emotional state and how it affects how they will be perceived?
 - ▶ checking that they will be looking at the camera on their laptop/phone so that they will be seen to be looking at the person?
 - ▶ finding a neutral area in their own home for the call, trying to avoid personal or family pictures in the background and/or objects that could be distracting?
 - ▶ obtaining consent for the observation – what does the service user need to understand about the purpose of the session/virtual visit/meeting?
 - ▶ speaking to the service user about the technology they prefer to use with a view to trying to accommodate their request?
 - ▶ speaking to the service user/family to check whether they have any additional needs, for example, parents with learning disabilities who do not use virtual platforms on a regular basis and will require some additional support and time?
 - ▶ if the service user is being supported in (for example) a residential home, link in with the provider to make them aware of the call and its timing so that they can set up and check the availability of the IT equipment?
 - ▶ agreeing a convenient time for the call with the person being supported – does it reflect their needs and vulnerabilities?
 - ▶ (for children and young people) considered the age of the child/young person and type of activities and questions that will engage them? What can the child/young person do to be actively involved in the call? For example, the child may be able to take you on a virtual tour of the house, explaining things, offers an insight and window into their lived experience and their world.



Assessor should explore the following with the NQSW

- what is the NQSW trying to achieve - what are their aims and objectives, what is the purpose of the virtual visit/intervention?
- if you as the assessor will be off-screen, how will you make the person you are calling aware that you are there and seek consent?
- what you'll be looking for e.g. is the NQSW picking up the emotional cues and adapting their communication style?
- how they might challenge or manage conflict in the virtual environment
- what are they anxious or unsure about? For example, not being able to engage the person because of a cognitive impairment/not understanding what is going on in the virtual environment, difficulties around the person's response to the IT equipment
- has the NQSW built in time for reflection with the assessor immediately afterwards?

Planning for the assessor's role in the virtual direct observation

This section is about what you, as the assessor, needs to think about and plan prior to an observation.



What is your role?

- will you be on-screen or off-screen and for all or part(s) of the meeting?

This needs careful thought because how will your presence be explained to the person?

- will you be silent or not?
- will you take notes or not?
- will you seek feedback afterwards with or without the NQSW present?
- what will you do if the service user tries to draw you as the assessor into the discussion?

Technical issues

The virtual world and the use of IT and virtual platforms/programmes has highlighted its own set of limitations and issues that need to be considered by the NQSW, assessor and organisation. Poor internet connection, at either end, may affect the continuity and quality of the observation or confuse the NQSW with wrong or mixed messages e.g. the NQSW and/or you as the assessor struggle to differentiate voice tremors with an audio device fault.

Make space and time to discuss, plan and think through such technical issues with the NQSW before undertaking the direct observation and make any changes to the observation if unexpected faults occur either intermittently or on a longer-term basis.

Observation stage 1: The pre-observation discussion and planning

In the pre-observation the NQSW needs to carefully reflect and discuss with the assessor/observer whether or not the observation should be in a face-to-face or virtual environment. When having this discussion, the following points should be considered when a face-to-face visit is not possible:

- The responses of the person being supported to both you and the NQSW can be influenced by others, so they may not be able to, or want to, express their views freely.
- It may not be possible to be sure whether the person being supported is in the room alone or even whether the video link is being screened to others present in a nearby room.
- The person being supported may feel under pressure to behave in a certain way during a video call.
- When seeing the fleeting eyes of the person being supported, or their body turning to a certain direction, the NQSW may sense that the person may be looking to another for approval, disapproval, prompt and it may not be possible to verify this on the video link.
- When speaking alone with the person being supported, be mindful that it is possible that the protected space you have sought to create, may not be so.

Observation stage 2 - the actual observation

The careful planning in stage 1 above should inform the actual observation and the role of the NQSW and assessor during the meeting. It is wise not to stray too far away from the plans you have made, unless the meeting takes an unexpected turn (particularly if you need to intervene).

As the assessor you should look for the following indicators/evidence in the NQSW's practice:

- joined in a timely manner
- introduced themselves and the assessor
- checked that everyone on the call can see and hear each other and introduced themselves
- active listening skills
- attentive observation
- comfortable with silences
- rapport building and building safe space, empathetic connection with the person(s) emotional state
- summarising, paraphrasing what is said and reflecting back your understanding
- use of self
- adapted communication style
- person actively engaged
- end the call/intervention in a timely manner, summarising any key points/actions agreed
- adopted a flexible and relationship-based approach while ensuring that the NQSW met their objectives
- at end of call asked about their experience of the call and what they would like to be different next time
- did the NQSW meet their aims and objectives.

If the NQSW is chairing a meeting, have they:

- been clear about the ground rules for a meeting using a virtual platform e.g. press mute when not speaking, clarified turn taking and raising hands to speak?
- emphasised that the child and the family/people being supported can intervene and ask to speak at any time if they have questions or wish to share something?
- explained how the chat box can be used?
- if the meeting is being recorded explain the reasons for this in line with GDPR
- stick to the timings of the meeting – did the meeting finish too early, on time or overrun?

Observation stage 3 - post-observation discussion, reflection and feedback

Ideally, this stage should embrace two sub-stages:

- observer feedback and a short two-way discussion with the NQSW immediately after the observation
- more detailed/considered observer feedback and two-way discussion a few days after the observation.

Issues/evidence to consider and discuss:

- how did the NQSW feel about the observation and their knowledge, skills and practice during the observation?
- what are the immediately noticeable strengths and areas of development of the NQSW intervention and practice?
- are there any immediate unresolved emotions, feelings or tasks that need to be discussed before this stage can be completed?
- is all the evidence clear and gathered in order that the NQSW and yourself can complete the evaluation and assessment of the observation?
- has the observation highlighted any areas of CPD that the NQSW would benefit from undertaking?

As a final part of this stage, if the observation is being undertaken by anyone other than the line manager or the assessor formal feedback should be given in order to triangulate assessment evidence.

These are changing times and we are adapting to the new hybrid model of face-to-face and virtual practice. We hope you will find this guidance useful as you undertake virtual observations. We will continue to work with the sector to gather good practice examples that we will share with you on the Skills for Care website.

Additional resources to support virtual direct observations

[Conducting international social work during COVID-19](#)

[The PCFSW Best Practice Guide for Video Call/Contact and Virtual/Online Home](#)

[Top tips for virtual direct work with children and families during COVID-19](#)

[Research in practice: Helping social workers prepare for practice observations](#)

[What makes a good digital home visit](#)

[Video calling technology checklist](#)

[BASW's COVID-19 Pandemic – Ethical Guidance for Social Worker](#)

[A best practice guide produced specifically for social workers about getting the most out of video-calling applications](#)

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