Government
Equalities Office

Return to Social Work Programme

Evaluation Report

Contents

Executive Summary

1. Executive Summary

Introduction

In the 2017 Spring Budget, £5 million was allocated to support people back into employment after taking a career break. As part of this, the Government Equalities Office (GEO) set up programmes across the public and private sector to support people to return to work after a break for caring responsibilities.

GEO defines a returner as a person who left employment for at least a year to take on a caring responsibility, and would like to return to paid work at a level that recognises their skills and experience.

Returner programmes were first introduced to the UK in 2014 as a method to recruit and retain skilled professionals. Most returner programmes support a small number of people with training and support to return to work.

In 2016 and 2017, Local Government Association (LGA) ran 2 Come Back to Social Work pilot programmes to recruit previously registered social workers who had left the profession in the last 2 to 5 years. These programmes provided a high-quality training package for people who had left or taken a break from social work so that they could return to social work practice.

To build upon this success, GEO awarded around £650,000 of funding to LGA to expand the offer nationally, supporting 2 distinct cohorts. One cohort would consist of people with a career break of between 2 and up to 5 years (referred to as the 2 to 5 year cohort from now on), and one cohort would be available for people with a career break of between 5 and 10 years (referred to as the 5 to 10 year cohort from now on). The offer was rebranded as the Return to Social Work (RtSW) programme.

The RtSW programme is part of a £1.1 million package of returner programmes managed by the LGA on behalf of GEO. Other funded returner programmes would include the Return to ICT programme and a Return to Planning programmes. These programmes would also provide insights into what could work for specific professions within the public sector and would be the first to test this type of support.

Overall, the RtSW programme aimed to offer 200 places for social workers with a 2 to 10 year career break from the profession. Candidates would be provided with a high-quality training package, including support for sourcing placements with local councils, to refresh their skills and support them to return as registered social workers. The RtSW programme would also give local councils (as employers) access to this pool of social workers and promote the value of hiring and supporting returners.

It was anticipated that the RtSW programme would contribute to the evidence base of what works for those looking to return to work and for councils who are looking to hire and support returners. The programme was originally expected to run between November 2019 and September 2020.

When the first national COVID-19 lockdown restrictions began in March 2020, the RtSW programme was in the process of recruiting participants to the programme. GEO held discussions with LGA about the potential risks presented by COVID-19 and the associated lockdown restrictions, and mutually agreed to extend the recruitment period for the programme until June 2020.

Training was adapted from being classroom based to a fully online experience, and instead of participants experiencing 6 weeks of training over a 4-month period, training was condensed so that each cohort undertook 6 consecutive weeks of training between May 2020 and August 2020. The timeframe for participants to undertake supervised placements with qualified social workers in local councils was also extended and ran from May to November 2020 (instead of May to August 2020). However, participants were still able to complete a placement beyond this period.

Programme Outcomes

Outcomes were reported at important milestones of the RtSW programme. These are covered within this evaluation report. In summary:

- the programme surpassed its expression of interest target (400), generating 1,668 expressions of interest - as a result, 773 full applications to participate in the programme were submitted
- the programme nearly met its overall target to recruit and onboard up to 200 candidates (100 candidates per cohort) - 236 applicants were offered a place on the programme, and of these, 199 applicants accepted a place on the programme (98 for the 2 to 5 year cohort and 101 for the 5 to 10 year cohort)
- for the 199 participants who started the programme, the majority were women (75%), of White ethnicity (57%), and were aged over 40 years (74%). 49% of participants had ongoing caring responsibilities
- the programme nearly met its overall target to provide training and support for up to 200 participants (100 participants per cohort) - of the 199 who accepted a place on the programme, 184 participants completed training (88 from the 2 to 5 year cohort A and 96 from the 5 to 10 year cohort)
- the programme was unable to meet its target of securing placements for up to 200 participants (100 per cohort), required for participants to re-register with Social Work England - of the 199 who accepted a place on the programme, 89 placement opportunities were secured or completed and 44 participants undertook private study (a supplement placement activity during the lifetime of the programme), and at programme end, LGA reported that 133 of the 184 participants had registered with Social Work England

Learning and Recommendations

Table 1-1 summarises the learning obtained from the RtSW programme and potential recommendations that should be considered for future returner programmes. These are explained in more detail in the report.

Section of the report	Learning	Recommendation
Engagement	Paid advertising was an effective way of directing potential applicants to the RtSW website	Consider multiple marketing channels, including paid advertising, to raise awareness of the programme
	Video content from those with experience of returning to the social work profession was a popular way of engaging audiences	Consider effective ways to capture relatable case studies, particularly from those who have successfully returned to work, and use these accounts when promoting the programme
Recruitment and Onboarding	The programme was successful in reaching and recruiting returning social workers with ongoing caring responsibilities as well as those with former caring responsibilities	Use targeted messaging when promoting the programme to reach eligible participants
	Some eligible applicants and participants declined a place on the programme, or withdrew, due to a change in their circumstances or preferences between the initial application period and the start of the programme	Consider how the length of time between applying for and starting a programme may affect attrition, and consider offering additional places to meet programme targets
Training, Upskilling and Support	Coaching was popular and highly rated by participants	Develop a programme that includes coaching, and consider whether programme alumni can attend training sessions and support participants by sharing insights from their own return to work journeys
	Some participants wanted access to additional fee-based training materials that were not covered by programme funding	Be transparent and clear at the outset that some training materials may cost money, and explore whether this can be covered in part or in full by the programme
	Some participants needed sufficient notice to attend some training sessions to balance training requirements and personal commitments, and were offered recorded or later sessions to catch up	Consider how participants' personal commitments may affect training attendance, allocate sufficient time for participants to prepare to start training, and explore flexible options such as repeated or recorded sessions

	Some training sessions were considered to be too short to cover the topics in detail	Ensure the length of training sessions enables tutors and participants to explore and discuss topics in depth
	Larger group training sizes presented challenges for some participants to interact and engage in the sessions	Review the size of training groups to ensure that all participants can fully engage and share insights, encouraging course tutors to monitor participants' engagement within sessions to create an inclusive learning environment
	Some participants faced technological difficulties with virtual training that may have been avoided or resolved in a face-to-face training setting	Be clear on the IT skills required for the programme from the outset and ensure all participants have the opportunity to receive support to develop their digital skills during the programme
	Access to additional sources of support, such as through peer support networks and out-of-hours support from the training provider, were considered valuable	Develop a programme that offers participants additional forms of support, such as the provision of out-of-hours support, as well as opportunities for participants to establish support networks with their peers
	There was no planned council involvement in training sessions, which reduced the opportunities for participants to engage with prospective employers	Include a range of opportunities for prospective employers to be involved in training sessions, so participants gain insights into current employment practices
Placements	LGA was able to work with Social Work England and the training provider to resolve challenges to undertaking placements that were caused by COVID-19 restrictions, to support participants to satisfy the regulation standards for returning to social work	Use existing relationships with partners and wider networks to quickly identify solutions to programme challenges
	The COVID-19 pandemic affected councils' abilities to prioritise and supervise placements, resulting in delays to participants undertaking placements and some participants experiencing challenges with accessing placements	Include guidance and information on the processes for securing placement opportunities within participant induction material, and consider hiring a dedicated placement coordinator to match participants with available placement opportunities
Post-Programme	Participants with longer career breaks did not reflect as positively in their feedback on the programme when compared to participants with shorter career breaks	Consider how the programme design can be adapted to meet the differing needs of participants, and scope whether participants with longer career breaks need additional support (for example, longer training timeframes for upskilling and development)

Table 1-1: Summary of programme learning and recommendations

Evaluation Methodology and Aims

This report presents the findings of evaluation research provided by LGA and Chinara Enterprises on behalf of GEO. It is based on evidence reported by LGA up to March 2021.

The evaluation of the RtSW programme ran alongside the programme. The purpose of the evaluation was to:

- monitor the characteristics of programme applicants and participants
- identify the reasons participants left their profession, why they are returning, and any barriers to returning to work experienced by participants
- record and understand the expectations, journey, and experiences of participants
- assess the success of the programme, evaluate the processes used, and identify potential areas for improvement
- provide learning and recommendations to inform any future return to work programmes

The overall evaluation approach was to capture reflections from participants at programme milestones. The evaluation research used online surveys completed by participants to capture data and insights during 3 stages of the programme:

- the application and onboarding stage (through a pre-programme survey)
- the training stage (through a training survey)
- completion of the programme (through a post-programme survey)

Survey participation was fairly high for the pre-programme and training surveys (81% and 67%, respectively), but was lower for the post-programme survey (51% response rate). The post-programme survey was issued in November 2020, and coincided with the timing of the second national lockdown in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Therefore, priorities may have changed for participants at this time.

Additional data, beyond the surveys sent to participants, has also been captured through programme application forms and governance reporting provided by LGA (as the programme manager) to GEO (as the funder). LGA also shared further qualitative feedback from 6 participants who gave additional insights into their experiences on the programme, which is referred to as 'additional qualitative feedback' within the report.

Programme Overview

2. Programme Overview

Background

GEO identified social work as an important public sector workforce that could benefit from a returner programme for the following reasons:

Supports women back into work: latest data from the Department for Education states that 86% of children and family social workers identify as female[1]. Unpaid care work, including childcare and informal adult care, is disproportionately performed by women, and women are more likely to have time out of work for caring. Taking time out of work or limiting work hours, often for unpaid care work, can affect pay and progression. Establishing a programme that supports women to return to social work could prevent occupational downgrading (whereby people return to a lower paid occupation after their career break).

Supports returners as a talent pool: LGA provided evidence of retention and recruitment difficulties for social work roles across local councils. Latest data has found that councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland experience recruitment difficulties for adult social workers (75% of all councils) and children social workers (55% of all councils)[2]. Supporting experienced social workers to return to the profession can expand the talent pool available to employers. Returner programmes provide an alternative recruitment pathway, reducing the need to hire agency workers, or employ those who need further professional training. The programme would also offer councils the opportunity to hire from a national pool of skilled and experienced social workers, without the associated costs of running recruitment campaigns themselves.

Reduces barriers to returning to social work: social work is a regulated profession, and people who have been out of the profession for more than 2 years need to update their skills and knowledge before they are able to regain their registration and resume practising as a social worker. LGA reported that the requirement to upskill and demonstrate evidence of recent practical experience can act as a barrier for people looking to return to social work. The programme aimed to support people with a high-quality training package, provide opportunities for private study, and organise supervised placement opportunities to enable participants to return as registered social workers.

Around £650,000 of GEO funding awarded to LGA would support the costs associated with advertising and promoting the programme, recruitment and training, evaluation activities, as well as costs associated with organising supervised placement opportunities for up to 200 returning social workers.

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[1] Department for Education, children's social work workforce, reporting year 2020

[2] LGA Workforce Survey, February 2021

The programme would be run and managed by LGA and involve stakeholders such as Social Work England and local councils. A training provider would be procured and subcontracted through LGA to provide training to programme participants. Chinara Enterprises was successfully appointed in February 2020 (referred to as the training provider from now on). A third-party contractor would also be sourced to run a paid media advertising campaign for the programme. 360 Resourcing Solutions was successfully appointed for this role in December 2019.

Aims and Targets

The aim of the RtSW programme was to recruit and retrain people who were previously experienced social workers, to gain the skills and practice they needed to be able to register as social workers and return to social work. The programme would consist of 2 cohorts. One cohort would be available to people with a career break of 2 and up to 5 years (the 2 to 5 year cohort), and one cohort for those with a career break of between 5 and 10 years (the 5 to 10 year cohort). The programme also aimed to raise awareness of the value that returners bring to the workplace, and support councils to overcome recruitment and retention difficulties by sourcing skilled and experienced social workers on their behalf. Table 2-1 outlines the targets and actuals of the programme.

Milestone	Target	Actual
Engagement Any form of communication by people enquiring about the programme	400 expressions of interest	1,668 expressions of interest (limited to one per person)
Recruitment and Onboarding Using best endeavours to recruit a target number of candidates onto the programme	200 participants recruited • 100 in the 2 to 5 year cohort • 100 in the 5 to 10 year cohort	236 applicants were offered a place on the programme 199 participants accepted a place on the programme • 98 for the 2 to 5 year cohort • 101 for the 5 to 10 year cohort
Training, Upskilling and Support Procuring and managing the training provision to support participants back into social work	200 participants complete training • 100 in the 2 to 5 year cohort • 100 in the 5 to 10 year cohort	184 participants completed training • 88 from the 2 to 5 year cohort • 96 from the 5 to 10 year cohort
Placements Organise placement opportunities for participants to enable them to re-register as social workers	200 participants complete placements • 100 in the 2 to 5 year cohort • 100 in the 5 to 10 year cohort	89 placements secured or completed placements 44 participants undertook private study to supplement placement activity

Table 2-1: Programme targets and actuals
Source: LGA data reported up to 31 March 2021

Programme Design

LGA planned a communications campaign to promote the RtSW programme which would feature:

- a RtSW website, where prospective applicants and councils could access more information, express interest in the programme, and apply to take part in the programme
- video case studies from existing social workers, including case studies from those who have returned to the social work profession after a career break, for use across social media platforms and the RtSW website
- paid social media advertisements across a number of channels (such as Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, and Instagram) to direct potential applicants to the RtSW website
- toolkits and communications guidance for stakeholders and councils - LGA shared these resources by email as well as hosting them on the RtSW website to encourage the sharing of the campaign within their networks
- targeted and regular email bulletins to share campaign messages with stakeholders, such as LGA chairman and chief executive, council staff, and wider staff networks
- a feature piece in First magazine, LGA's monthly membership magazine for their 18,200 councillors and local authority chief executives in England and Wales

The plan was to receive applications to join the RtSW programme from November 2019 until March 2020. Applicants would be eligible if they had previous experience as a social worker and a career break of between 2 and 10 years. Targeted messaging would also be used during the communications campaign to encourage applications from those with former or ongoing caring responsibilities. Places on the programme would be offered to eligible applicants with former or ongoing caring responsibilities first, and remaining places would be offered to eligible applicants with no caring responsibilities.

The programme was designed to provide free training and support to participants so that they could meet the regulatory requirements to return to social work practice. This was planned to happen as follows:

Stage 1: Recruitment and Onboarding

- November 2019 to March 2020: candidates submit applications to join the RtSW programme
- April 2020: eligible applicants shortlisted and undertake a further video assessment to gauge their suitability to join the programme
- May 2020: successful applicants offered a place on the programme, receive induction materials and complete enhanced DBS checks, as part of the required documentation to return to social work practice

Stage 2: Training, Upskilling and Support

- May 2020 to August 2020: participants complete a 6-week classroom training programme spread out over a 4-month period

Stage 3: Placements and Registration

- May 2020 to August 2020: alongside the training programme, participants receive support to source a supervised placement within a local council
- August 2020 to September 2020: participants meet the requirements to register as social workers and start applying for available social worker positions within local councils
- September 2020: participants receive invites to attend a celebration ceremony, to receive a certificate and reflect on their successes

2019 UK General Election and COVID-19

Some elements of the programme were revised due to the 2019 UK general election and the COVID-19 pandemic. Due to the 2019 General Election and associated pre-election period restrictions[3], active communications as part of the paid advertising campaign were suspended from November 2019 until January 2020. During this time, LGA was unable to publicise and promote the RtSW programme.

The programme also coincided with the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated lockdown restrictions, which affected programme timeframes and design. It was anticipated that recruitment onto the programme would be complete by March 2020 and training would commence shortly after. Due to ongoing COVID-19 restrictions, GEO agreed to extend the recruitment period until June 2020 and shorten timeframes for training. It was agreed that training would also be virtual rather than face-to-face. As a result, each training cohort undertook 6 consecutive weeks of training in the period between May 2020 and August 2020, rather than over a 4 month period.

In addition, supervised placement opportunities were more difficult for LGA to organise and for councils to offer, and so some placements were delayed, withdrawn, or became a blend of face-to-face and virtual experiences. This is covered in more detail in the 'Placements and Registration' section.

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[3] Pre-election period relates to the period in the UK between the announcement of an election and the formation of the new elected government. During this time, central and local governments are prohibited from making announcements about new government initiatives

Evaluation Evidence

The evaluation of the RtSW programme ran for its duration and a range of data was used to assess the extent to which the programme's aims had been met. Evaluation evidence (Table 2-2) included:

- application data relating to 792 applicants, including their caring status
- pre-programme survey data relating to 162 participants, including their caring status, at a response rate of 81%
- training survey data relating to 123 participants, at a response rate of 67%
- post-programme survey data relating to 91 participants, including their caring status, at a response rate of 51%
- programme documentation, including the proposal, monthly governance reports, and the contract between GEO and LGA
- additional qualitative feedback from 6 participants
- insights from LGA's programme manager and the training provider

Data source	Duration	Total received	2 to 5 year cohort	5 to 10 year cohort	People with ongoing caring duties	People without ongoing caring duties
Application	Nov 2019 to Jun 2020	792	207	270	431	361
Pre-programme survey	May to Jul 2020	162	63	99	88	74
Training survey	Jul to Sep 2020	123	53	70	Data Unavailable	Data Unavailable
Post-programme survey	Nov 2020	91	37	54	49	42

Table 2-2: Evaluation evidence from the programme
Source: LGA data reported up to 31 March 2021

GEO was keen to understand whether there were any significant commonalities or differences in the experiences of participants with and without ongoing caring responsibilities, and whether the length of their career break affected their experiences of the programme. Therefore, this report analyses survey findings and data relating to the 2 participant cohorts (split by the length of their career break), and also reflects on any trends in findings for participants with and without ongoing caring responsibilities. Where significant differences or commonalities exist, these have been discussed in the report.

Data Limitations

Survey data

The programme relied on people completing a survey at the start of the programme, during training, and at the end of the programme. Although response rates were generally good, attrition occurred for later surveys and not all participants responded to all surveys. Some survey questions allowed participants to provide qualitative data through open text responses should they wish to. However, these were voluntary, including the additional qualitative feedback from 6 returners received from LGA. These may not be representative, but do provide a range of perspectives from participants about their experiences of the programme.

While the final number of respondents to the training survey was 123, some analysis was carried out on data from a point in time where there were only 114 respondents. As such, it should be assumed that any qualitative feedback relating to the training survey is taken from the pool of 114 respondents. Where quantitative data has been taken from the smaller pool, this is noted in the report.

In addition, data collection from the post-programme survey captured the views of respondents at one point in time and so the survey results are unable to capture future activities that participants may have been involved in after the survey closure (November 2020).

Calculation of caring responsibilities

The number of participants recruited onto the programme with ongoing caring responsibilities was calculated from responses to the application form. However, where other survey data is discussed or reviewed, ongoing caring responsibilities refers to participants' responses to the survey in question and not from the application form. It is possible that caring responsibilities changed for some participants during the course of the programme, and so the participants described throughout the report as having ongoing caring responsibilities may vary from the applicant stage through to when respondents completed surveys.

Demographic data

Personal characteristics were collected through initial applications. This included age, ethnicity, gender, caring responsibilities, and length of unemployment. Data for the 19 participants who transferred from the Social Work Together campaign is also included in the base data for 199 participants. However, it should be noted that there is a small limitation to the demographic data. No data on gender, ethnicity, age, sexual orientation, disability, and religion was gathered for 2 of the 19 participants who transferred onto the programme from the Social Work Together campaign, and this missing data has been recorded as not known for the relevant data points. Of the remaining 197 participants, there is only partial demographic data available in some cases as a small number of participants preferred not to disclose some of their information. There is a small

possibility this could potentially affect comparisons across the 2 cohorts, and between those with ongoing caring responsibilities and those without.

Council feedback

It was originally planned that councils would be asked for high level feedback on their involvement with the RtSW programme. However, LGA reported that councils were prioritising providing emergency services to local residents during the COVID-19 pandemic and so it would not be possible to secure council involvement in evaluation survey activities. While placement supervisors within councils may have provided feedback on people who had completed placements, high level council feedback on the RtSW programme is not available.

Engagement

3. Engagement

Communications Campaign

LGA designed and launched a communications campaign to promote the RtSW programme and generate applications. The RtSW website, where people could submit their application to join the programme, went live on 20 November 2019. However, due to the 2019 UK general election and associated pre-election period restrictions, active communications, such as paid advertising, were delayed until January 2020. Following the pre-election period, a 3-month paid advertising campaign started on 6 January 2020 and was run by a procured advertising provider, 360 Resourcing Solutions.

LGA developed a variety of digital assets for social media platforms as part of the RtSW campaign which included static quote cards from alumni of the 2017 Come Back to Social Work pilot programme, animations providing programme information, and video interviews with LGA's programme manager, LGA's senior adviser, and practising social workers. The core message of the communications strategy was to encourage people to return to social work, regain their professional identity, and help make a real difference to people's lives.

The paid advertising campaign included targeted advertisements on Facebook and Instagram news feeds, and Google Ads were used to target phrases such as Social Work Jobs and Return to Social Work. The RtSW programme was also posted on job boards, including Reed, Total Jobs, CV Library and Jobsite. In addition, advertisements and campaign materials for the programme were placed on specialist platforms, including Mumsnet, Working Mums, and Working Dads, to attract those with ongoing caring responsibilities.

Engagement Outcomes

The campaign surpassed its targets for unique visits to the website, views of video content, and applications to the programme. The campaign also met targets relating to the gender, age and ongoing caring responsibilities of applicants (Table 3-1).

Campaign	Targets	Actuals
Objectives	3,000 unique visits to the RtSW website	The campaign received 19,929 unique visits to the RtSW website
	2,000 views of campaign videos	Video content was viewed 30,010 times
Applications	**Targets**	**Actuals**
Audience	Attract 400 experienced social workers who have left the profession to apply for the programme	Of the 773 direct applicants[4], 568 (73%) reported having at least 2 years out of practice[5]
	Of the 400, we anticipate that they will be: • primarily women (80% of applicants to the 2017 pilot identified as female) • primarily those aged between 36 and 55 years old (68% of applicants to the 2017 pilot were between 36 and 55 years of age) • primarily people with caring responsibilities	Of the 773 direct applicants: • 83% were women • 63% were from those aged between 36 and 55 years of age • 55% were from those reported as having caring responsibilities

Table 3-1: Programme engagement targets and actuals
Source: LGA data reported up to 25 March 2020 (campaign) and 7 August 2020 (applications)

Between 20 November 2019 and 5 January 2020 (and during a pre-election period), the RtSW website received 2,231 unique visits. This was despite LGA being unable to publicise and actively promote the programme due to the 2019 UK general election. Following the start of paid advertising on 6 January 2020, the website increased its unique visits by 17,698, bringing the total unique visits to 19,929 by 25 March 2020. This data indicates that paid advertising was an effective way of directing candidates to the RtSW website. However, the increase in unique visits to the website between January and March 2020 could also be partially attributed to an increase in job searching activities that some people may undertake at certain points in the year. Findings from previous returner programmes have found that the time of year can be an important factor when making plans to seek work, for example, those with childcare responsibilities may not be looking for work just before the school summer holidays, or during December due to the festive holiday period.

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[4] Excluding the 19 participants who transferred from the Social Work Together programme
[5] A further 876 people expressed interest in the programme, but did not complete the full application. It is unknown whether these were previously qualified social workers

Learning	Paid advertising was an effective way of directing potential applicants to the RtSW website
Recommendation	Consider communication campaigns at times of the year where people may be looking to return to work, using multiple marketing channels, including paid advertising, to raise awareness of the programme

A wide range of social media platforms and other communication channels were used to promote the campaign. Up to 25 March 2020, it was reported that the main source of traffic to the RtSW website had come from Facebook (51%) and Google (10%). However, when asked how they found out about the programme, over one third of applicants (35%) to the programme reported Google as the main channel for finding out about the programme. In addition, only 18% of applicants identified Facebook as their main source of finding out about the programme. It is worth noting that respondents were asked to choose one option only. It is unclear why there were differences between the survey responses and the analytical communications data on how participants found out about the programme, but it is possible that participants saw the advertisement on social media but conducted a Google search to find out more about the programme afterwards.

As part of the campaign, LGA developed video content to attract applicants who left social work due to caring responsibilities, or who have ongoing caring responsibilities, to return to social work. One video was from a Principal Social Worker, who highlighted the flexibility that councils offer for those with ongoing caring responsibilities, and how the experiences and skills developed through parenthood can be valuable for social work with families (Figure 3-1).

"Local authorities are some of the most flexible organisations in terms of facilitating flexible working... They understand the need for a work-life balance and they also understand that I'm a human being, with a life and a family... The experience of being a parent has made me a significantly better social worker"
Transcript from video featuring a Principal Social Worker with caring responsibilities

Figure 3-1: Example of RtSW digital assets targeted to people with caring responsibilities
Source: LGA

LGA reported that the most successful social media asset was a video from a former 2017 Come Back to Social Work participant, who detailed how the pilot programme was integral to helping them return to practice after their career break. The advertising provider reported that as of 5 February 2020, the video had accumulated 121,306 views on Facebook and Instagram, with over 900 of these resulting in people clicking the link to the RtSW website. Data relating to the reach and engagement of the videos beyond 5 February 2020 is unavailable.

Learning	Video content from those with experience of returning to the social work profession was a popular way of engaging audiences
Recommendation	Consider effective ways to capture relatable case studies, particularly from those who have successfully returned to work, and use these accounts when promoting the programme

Recruitment and Onboarding

4. Recruitment and Onboarding

Programme Interest

The recruitment period was originally planned to end in March 2020, but was extended by 3 months to June 2020. LGA reported that in total 1,668 people expressed an interest in joining the programme, and a total of 773 applications were submitted.

In addition, 19 applicants transferred to the programme having originally expressed an interest in the Social Work Together (SWT) campaign. The SWT campaign aimed to support social workers who had been out of social work practice for less than 2 years and wanted return to the front line to support the emergency response to COVID-19[6]. The SWT campaign operated as an online platform to connect councils with previously qualified social workers, but unlike RtSW, only offered temporary registration with Social Work England.

Of the total 792 applicants, 236 people were offered a place on the programme, including 19 people who submitted applications for the SWT programme.

Participant Characteristics

From the 236 offers issued, a total of 199 applicants accepted a place on the programme. Training cohorts were determined based on how long people had been out of the social work profession. The 2 to 5 year cohort would include previously registered social workers who had been out of the profession between 2 and up to 5 years. As a statutory requirement, this cohort would need to complete 30 days of development. The 5 to 10 year cohort would include previously registered social workers who had been out of the profession between 5 and 10 years. As a statutory requirement, this cohort would need to complete 60 days of development. Overall, participants were evenly split between cohorts, with 98 participants (49%) on the 2 to 5 year cohort and 101 participants (51%) on the 5 to 10 year cohort.

Demographics

For the 199 participants, the demographic profile was as follows:

- 75% were women
- 57% were from a White ethnic group. 17% were from Black or Black British ethnic groups, 9% from Asian or Asian British ethnic groups, 4% from a mixed ethnic group, and 2% from other ethnic groups - 12% preferred not to disclose this information or information was not known
- 11% of participants reported a disability

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[6] https://www.socialworkengland.org.uk/news/social-work-together

- participant ages ranged from 25 to over 65, with 74% of participants aged over 40 - the most common age group of participants was 50 to 59, with 39% in this category

Caring Responsibilities

In total, there were 97 participants on the programme who declared ongoing caring responsibilities on their application form, and who made up 49% of the total programme participants. Table 4-1 summarises the breakdown of participants by cohort and those with ongoing caring responsibilities.

Participants' caring status	2 to 5 year cohort	5 to 10 year cohort	Total
Participants with ongoing caring responsibilities	49	48	97
Participants without ongoing caring responsibilities	49	53	102
Total	98	101	199

Table 4-1: Programme participants by cohort and ongoing caring responsibilities status (n=199)
Source: LGA data reported up to 31 March 2021

Of the 97 participants with ongoing caring responsibilities, approximately:

- 76% reported being a parent or guardian of a child or children under 18
- 15% reported caring for a disabled child or children under 18
- 5% reported caring for adults
- 5% reported being secondary carers, where another person carries out the main caring role

As participants were allowed to select more than one answer to this question, some participants may have multiple ongoing caring responsibilities.

Participant Experience

Reasons for leaving social work

As part of the application process, participants were asked why they previously left social work practice. The most common and main reason participants gave for leaving social work was 'to care for my family', with former or ongoing caring responsibilities being cited by around 38% of the 199 participants. The second most common main reason for participants leaving social work was reported as a career break (19%), followed by health-related reasons (13%). There were no marked differences between the 2 to 5 year and 5 to 10 year cohorts.

Just over half of the 97 participants with ongoing caring responsibilities cited caring responsibilities as the main reason for leaving social work practice (55%). However, 23% of the 102 participants without ongoing caring responsibilities also reported leaving social work for reasons related to caring. This indicates that there were a number of participants with former caring responsibilities who had left social work for reasons related to caring, but whose caring responsibilities had changed prior to starting the programme (Figure 4-1).

What was your main reason for leaving the social work profession?
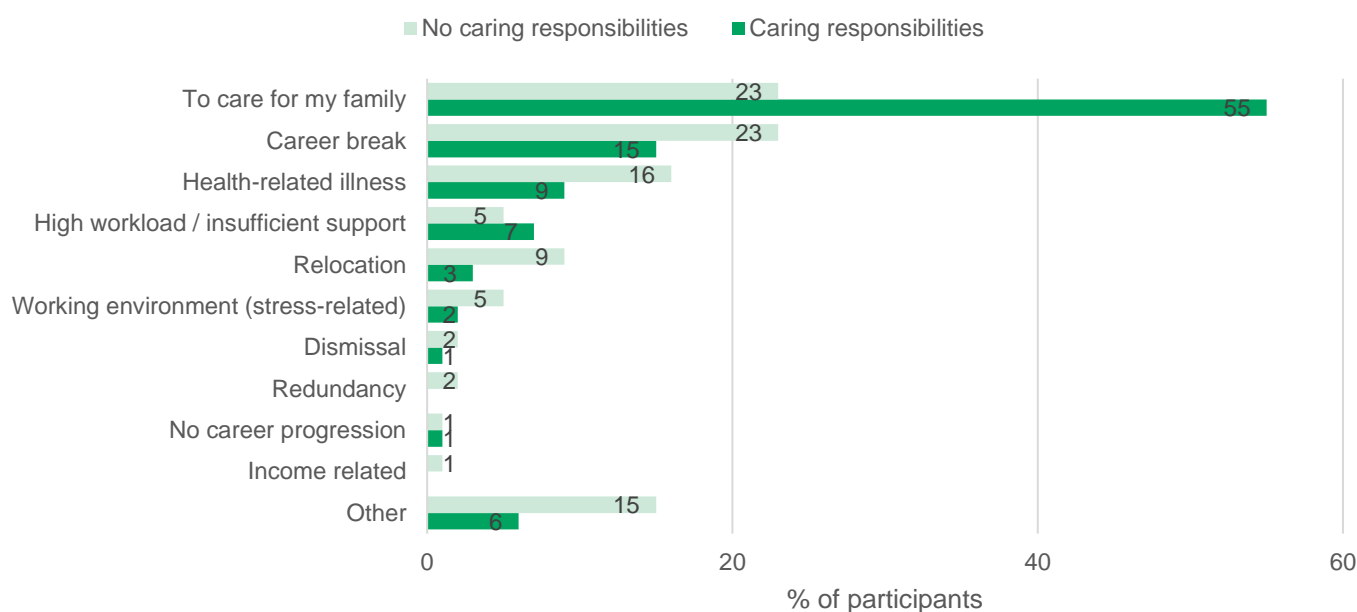
Figure 4-1: Main reason for leaving social work by caring responsibility (n=199)
Source: application form (single response only)

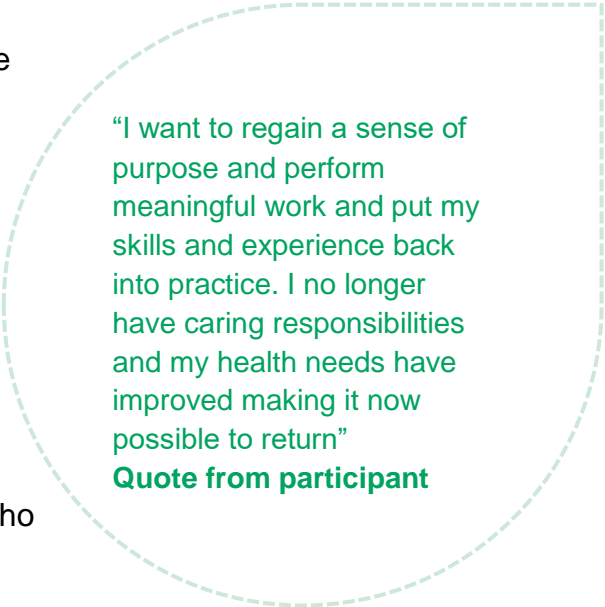|	
Learning	The programme was successful in reaching and recruiting returning social workers with ongoing caring responsibilities, as well as those with former caring responsibilities
Recommendation	Use targeted messaging when promoting the programme to reach eligible participants

In addition to the application data, the 2 most common reasons given by respondents on the pre-programme survey for why they left social work also related to caring responsibilities (as this was a multiple-choice question, some participants may have chosen more than one reason for leaving social work, or had multiple caring responsibilities). This supports the findings from the application stage about the role caring responsibilities played in some participants' decision to leave social work practice.

Reasons for wanting to return to social work

Participants were also asked in their application form why they wanted to return to social work. It should be noted that participants were able to give more than one reason. The most common reason given by participants for wanting to return was that they missed their professional identity (67% of all responses received). The next most common motivations were missing being able to help others who need support (46%) and the fact that participants' dependent children were now older or more independent (37%).

There were few marked differences between the cohorts, with the exception that a greater proportion of respondents in the 2 to 5 year cohort noted that financial reasons and contributing toward the household income was a reason why they would like to return to social work (36%) compared to respondents from the 5 to 10 year cohort (23%). This data potentially suggests that financial motivations for returning to social work was less important for people who had been out of work for longer.

"I want to regain a sense of purpose and perform meaningful work and put my skills and experience back into practice. I no longer have caring responsibilities and my health needs have improved making it now possible to return"
Quote from participant

The most marked difference in wanting to return to social work between participants with and without ongoing caring responsibilities related to changes in caring responsibilities, which included dependent children being older and changes to other caring responsibilities. The majority of participants with ongoing caring responsibilities (62%) listed their children being older as a reason for wanting to return to social work, whereas only a minority of participants without ongoing caring responsibilities identified this as a reason for wanting to return to social work practice (12%). Figure 4-2 summarises the reasons why participants wanted to return to social work.

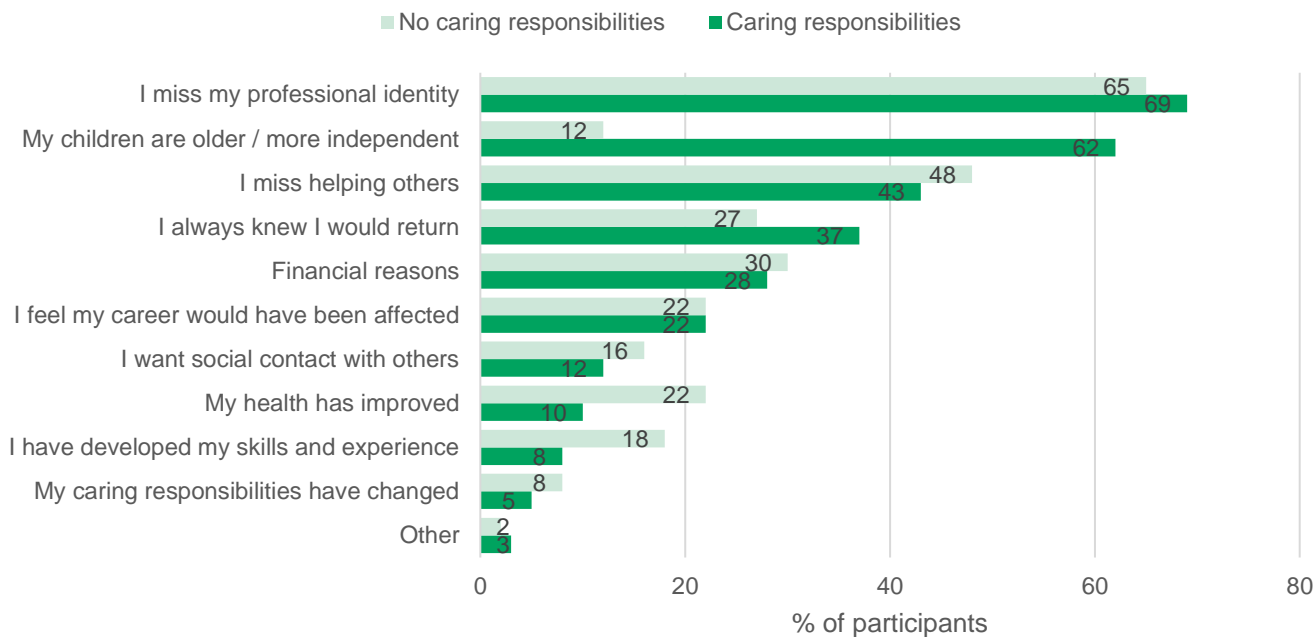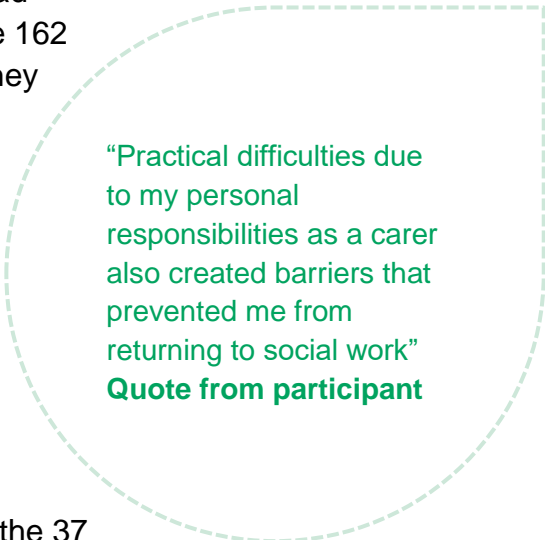## What are your reasons for returning to social work?

Figure 4-2: Participant reasons for wanting to return to social work by caring responsibility (n=199)
Source: application form (multiple response question)

Barriers to returning to social work

The pre-programme survey also asked participants whether they had previously tried to return to social work prior to the programme, and if so, whether they had experienced any barriers to returning to social work. From the 162 responses, the majority of respondents (60%) reported that they had not previously tried to return to social work practice. There was also no notable difference between respondents from the 2 cohorts, or between respondents with and without ongoing caring responsibilities on whether they had or had not tried to return to work previously.

"Practical difficulties due to my personal responsibilities as a carer also created barriers that prevented me from returning to social work"
Quote from participant

However, of the 64 respondents who had tried to return to work (Figure 4-3), 89% had experienced barriers to returning to work, making up 80% of the 25 respondents who tried to return to work in the 2 to 5 year cohort and 95% of the 39 respondents who tried to return in the 5 to 10 year cohort. Of the 37 respondents with ongoing caring responsibilities who had tried to return to work, 92% had experienced barriers compared to 85% of those without ongoing caring responsibilities. All respondents with both a career break of 5 to 10 years and ongoing caring responsibilities had faced barriers when previously trying to return. This indicates that having ongoing caring

responsibilities and a longer career break could increase the likelihood of experiencing barriers when returning to work.

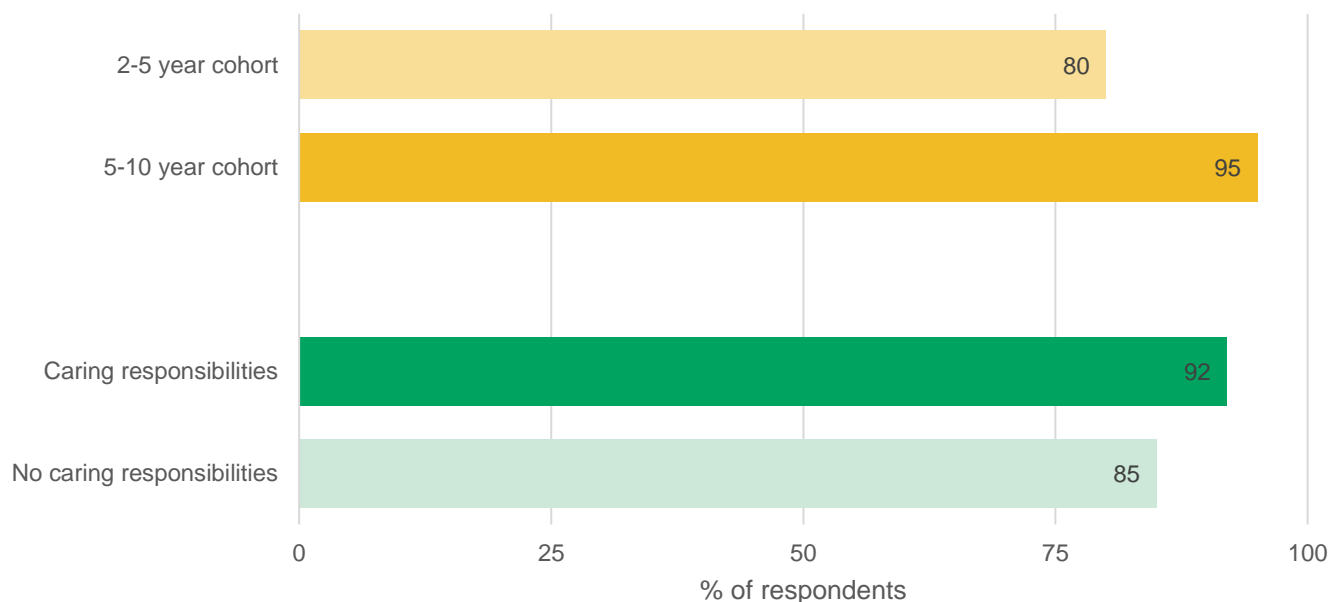## Percentage of respondents who have encountered barriers to returning to social work

Cohort	%
2-5 year cohort	80
5-10 year cohort	95
Caring responsibilities	92
No caring responsibilities	85

% of respondents

Figure 4-3: Whether participants encountered any barriers to returning to work by cohort (n=64)
Source: pre-programme survey

The barriers encountered differed across cohorts (Figure 4-4). It should be noted that participants were able to give more than one reason. For those in the 5 to 10 year cohort, the 2 most common barriers were being unable to find a placement or return to practice opportunity (27% of the 55 responses) and registration issues or difficulties (25%). The 2 most common barriers cited by those who reported having tried to return to work in the 2 to 5 year cohort were a lack of recent statutory experience (36% of the 25 responses) and other barriers (24%). The other barriers cited by participants (from across both cohorts) included a lack of childcare, a lack of part-time or flexible working opportunities, a lack of confidence, and interviews perceived as being designed for newly qualified staff or those already in jobs.

"The main barriers to my returning to social work has been my own lack of confidence in being able to carry out the job to the standard that service users deserve"
Quote from participant

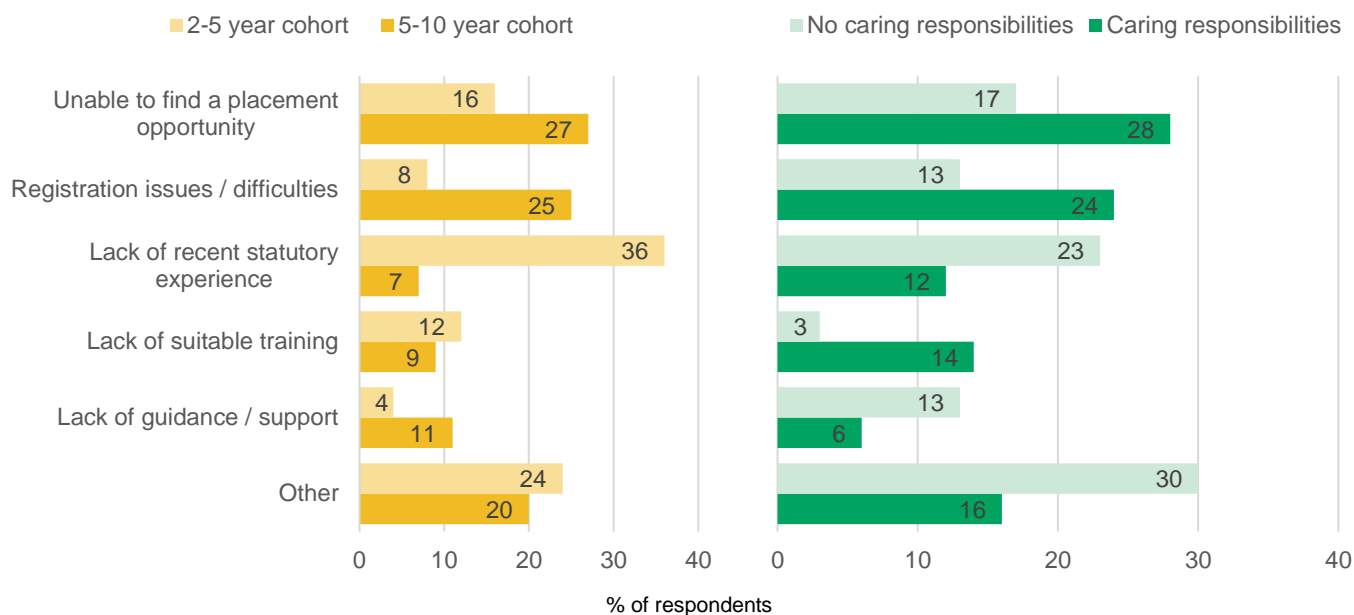Figure 4-4: Barriers encountered by participants returning to social work by cohort (n=57)
Source: pre-programme survey (multiple response question)

Reasons for enrolling on the programme

The pre-programme survey asked participants about their reasons for enrolling on the programme. It should be noted that participants were able to give more than one reason. Just over half (51%) of the 162 survey respondents said one of the reasons they had enrolled was to help them to get back into social work practice and restart their career. The second most common reason was to update and refresh skills and knowledge (30%), followed by the ability to help people and make a difference (13%). While there were broadly similar proportions of answers provided across both cohorts and from those with and without ongoing caring responsibilities, 'helping people and making a difference' and 'gaining confidence' were more common answers for those in the 2 to 5 year cohort than those in the 5 to 10 year cohort. 'Returning to social work' and 'gaining work experience or placement' were more common reasons for those enrolling on the 5 to 10 year cohort.

Across all groups, returning to social work or restarting a career, and updating or refreshing skills and knowledge were the most frequently chosen reasons for enrolling. Those without ongoing caring responsibilities were more likely to choose 'helping people', while 'regaining registration and gaining work experience' were more important for respondents with ongoing caring responsibilities (Figure 4-5).
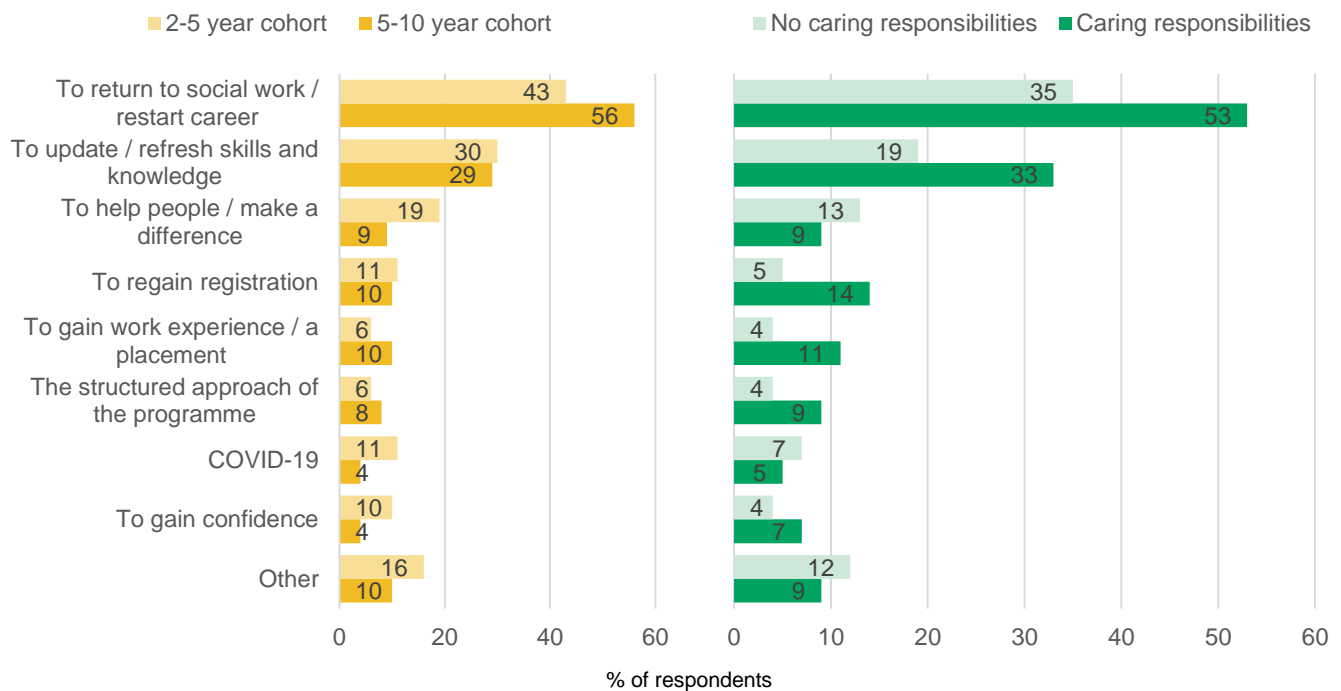
Figure 4-5: Participant reasons for enrolling on the programme by cohort (n=162)
Source: pre-programme survey (multiple response question)

When asked what they hoped to gain from the programme, the most common response was to 'update and refresh skills and knowledge', which was cited by 84% of respondents in the 2 to 5 year cohort and 77% of those in the 5 to 10 year cohort. While responses were broadly similar, 'returning to practice', 'gaining a placement', and 'gaining registration' were more important for those in the 5 to 10 year cohort than respondents in the 2 to 5 year cohort. 'Gaining a placement' and 'gaining registration' were also more important for those with ongoing caring responsibilities than those without ongoing caring responsibilities.

Enrolment and COVID-19

As part of the pre-programme survey, all 199 participants were asked whether the COVID-19 pandemic had influenced their decision to enrol on the programme. While the majority of respondents indicated that the COVID-19 pandemic had not influenced their decision to enrol on the programme (69%), a greater proportion of respondents from the 2 to 5 year cohort were influenced to enrol on the programme because of the COVID-19 outbreak (37%), compared to respondents from the 5 to 10 year cohort (27%). For those from the 2 to 5 year cohort, the most common reason why the COVID-19 pandemic had influenced their decision to enrol was due to 'a desire to support the service and colleagues'. For those from the 5 to 10 year cohort, the most common reason why the COVID-19 pandemic had influenced their decision to enrol was to 'help those in need of support'. Figure 4-6 outlines further differences in responses between the 2 cohorts. Despite the disruption of COVID-19, some participants considered the pandemic to be a motivator to apply to the programme and return to social work, with some noting that the pandemic had reinforced the importance of social work for them.

> "The COVID-19 outbreak helped me to focus my efforts to try to return to a profession that I loved. I felt I really wanted to make a difference and that I had relevant skills that would help during this time of crisis"
> **Quote from participant**

How has COVID-19 influenced your enrolment?
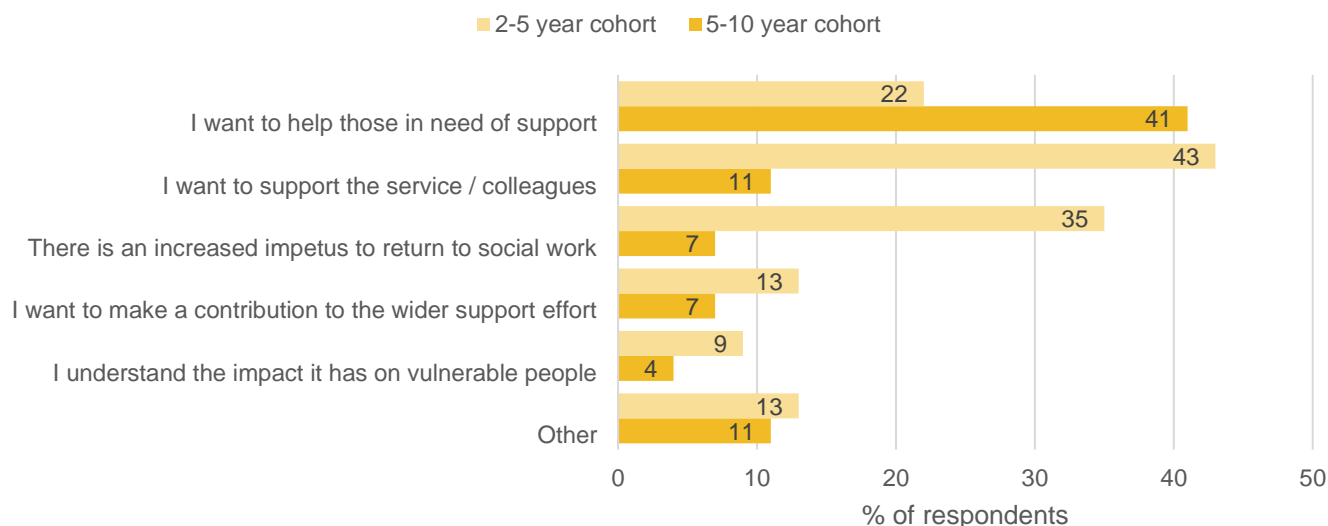
■ 2-5 year cohort   ■ 5-10 year cohort

Figure 4-6: How the COVID-19 outbreak influenced participant's decisions to enrol by cohort (n=50)
Source: pre-programme survey (multiple response question)

Withdrawals

236 applicants were offered a place on the RtSW programme. From the 199 participants who accepted a place on the programme, 184 participants completed the training (88 participants from the 2 to 5 year cohort and 96 participants from the 5 to 10 year cohort). As LGA offered 36 additional places on the programme (beyond the target of 200), this mitigated some of the attrition in programme participants who either declined a place or left the programme between the onboarding and training stages.

LGA sent a questionnaire to people who had either declined a place offered to them on the programme, or withdrew after accepting a place on the programme. Some responses received for declining a place or withdrawing included personal circumstances, COVID-19, or they had found a job in social work. Participants also withdrew after participating in the programme because the course did not meet their expectations. Further information on why the course did not meet their expectations was not provided, however, ways in which the programme could be improved are explored in the next section.

Learning	Some eligible applicants and participants declined a place on the programme, or withdrew, due to a change in their circumstances or preferences between the initial application period and the start of the programme
Recommendation	Consider how the length of time between applying for and starting a programme may affect attrition, and consider offering additional places to meet programme targets

Training, Upskilling and Support

5. Training, Upskilling and Support

Training Elements

As part of the programme, participants were provided with a 6 week high quality training and upskilling package to support them to meet the Social Work England requirements to register as social workers.

LGA awarded the training provider contract to Chinara Enterprises. Chinara Enterprises is a training provider and consultancy service to the private and public sector and has previously been appointed as the provider of social work training for individual councils, as well as the previous Come Back to Social Work pilot programmes run by the LGA.

It was originally anticipated that all participants would receive classroom training between May and August 2020, with participants undertaking supervised placements alongside their training schedule. However, due to COVID-19 restrictions introduced in March 2020, the training provider worked at pace to restructure training to an entirely virtual experience and condensed the training programme into blocks of 6 consecutive weeks for 16 training groups.

Between May 2020 and August 2020, 184 participants completed the training element of the programme (88 participants from the 2 to 5 year cohort and 96 participants from the 5 to 10 year cohort). The training was reviewed and approved by Social Work England, and included the following:

- induction: including an induction pack with participants' training timetables, an induction session with the ongoing learning and development manager at Chinara Enterprises, and an induction video
- seminars: 6 seminars were run by the training provider and provided by the making research count team from King's College London - the sessions included an overview of legislation, policy, and research in adult and children's social work and were tailored to address the changes in practice and policy implemented during the COVID-19 pandemic
- group Action Learning Sets (ALS): 5 sessions were held for participants to work through case studies, build on the making research count seminars, and support them to apply their learning into practice
- group reflective supervision: 5 sessions were provided to give participants an opportunity to reflect on their learning - participants were also encouraged to complete reflective learning logs and learning diaries to evidence their continuous personal development
- coaching: 5 group coaching sessions were provided which covered resilience, confidence and interview skills

Training Activities and Materials

The training provider asked participants to complete an evaluation survey at the end of the training. The survey received 123 responses from 184 participants who were sent the survey, which includes qualitative feedback on several elements of the programme.

As part of the training survey, participants were asked to rate different elements of the training programme mentioned previously. The majority of training survey respondents rated each of the training activities and materials as very good or good (Figure 5-1). However, coaching was rated the highest of all the training elements. Of the 123 respondents to the survey, 96% of respondents rated the coaching offer as 'very good' (76%) or 'good' (20%). In addition, respondents were asked a separate question on whether coaching had met the aim of building their resilience and confidence: 67% of the 114 respondents to the training survey agreed that this aim had been met fully and a further 25% agreed that this aim had been met mostly. LGA reported that extra virtual coaching sessions were made available for participants who were managing heightened caring responsibilities during school closures associated with the COVID-19 pandemic. LGA felt that participants on future returner programmes could also benefit from coaching from programme alumni, who could support participants by sharing insights from their own return to work journey.

"The coaching sessions were immensely helpful and something that I didn't know I needed"
Quote from participant

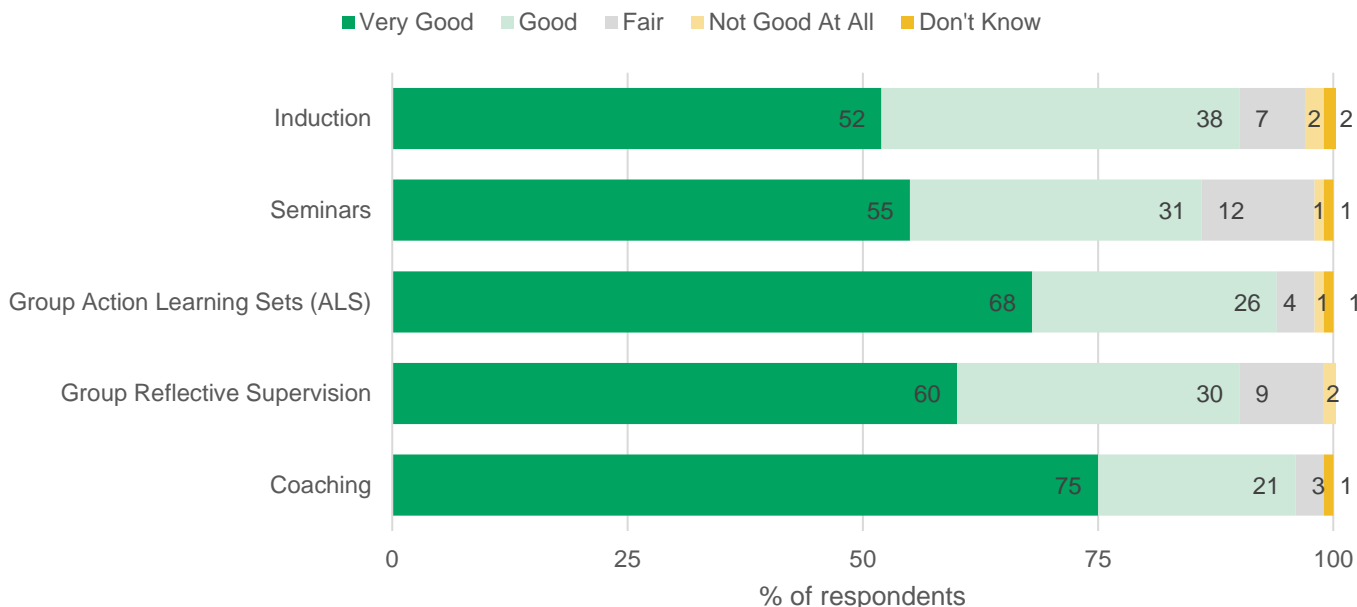| Learning	Coaching was popular and highly rated by participants
Recommendation	Develop a programme that includes coaching, and consider whether programme alumni can attend training sessions and support participants by sharing insights from their own return to work journeys

How would you rate the training activities?

■ Very Good ■ Good ■ Fair ■ Not Good At All ■ Don't Know

Activity	Very Good	Good	Fair	Not Good At All	Don't Know
Induction	52	38	7	2	2
Seminars	55	31	12	1	1
Group Action Learning Sets (ALS)	68	26	4	1	1
Group Reflective Supervision	60	30	9		2
Coaching	75	21	3		1

% of respondents

Figure 5-1: How participants rated the training activities (n=123)
Source: training survey

The majority (89%) of training survey respondents said the training programme either fully or mostly met their expectations. No respondents reported that the training element of the programme did not meet their expectations. LGA also noted that the majority of post-programme survey respondents identified the training as one of the most useful aspects of the RtSW programme.

"The training has definitely brought my knowledge and skills up to date"
Quote from participant

However, there were several respondents who noted areas for improvement for future returner programmes. It was reported that the training resources could have been labelled better, and that it would have been useful to have all of the learning materials hosted on one website rather than being sent by email.

"I feel it would have been more useful to have all the learning materials on the [website] rather than having these sent through by email"
Quote from participant

A common reason given by pre-programme survey respondents for joining the programme was to update and refresh their skills and knowledge. Qualitative feedback from some pre-programme survey respondents highlighted that the free nature of the training offered and being unable to afford other training routes were reasons for applying to the RtSW programme. LGA and the training provider noted that there were some private study materials that participants wanted to access outside of the formal training provision that incurred a cost. To avoid financially disadvantaging participants, the training provider suggested that future returner programmes need to be mindful of training options that may not be free. Where possible, programmes could consider either covering these costs or being transparent and clear at the outset that some modules may incur a financial charge.

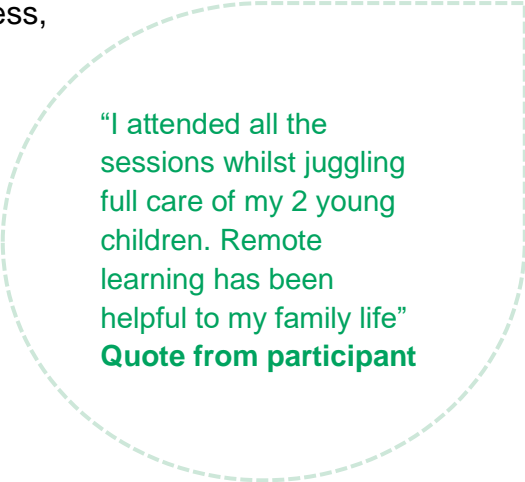|	
Learning	Some participants wanted access to additional fee-based training materials that were not covered by programme funding
Recommendation	Be transparent and clear at the outset that some training materials may cost money, and explore whether these costs can be covered in part or in full by the programme

Training Methods

Scheduling of Training and Attendance

The majority (78%) of the 114 training survey respondents reported being able to attend all or most of the training sessions hosted by the training provider. Qualitative feedback from 23 of the 25 respondents who were not able to attend all of the sessions suggested the main reason they were unable to attend training was due to balancing current employment. Other reasons cited were difficulties with technology or internet connection issues, late awareness of sessions or changes to timetables at short notice, personal or family illness, and ongoing caring responsibilities. LGA noted that some participants were able to join later training sessions and some sessions were rescheduled, repeated or recorded to support participants to catch up on missed sessions and create maximum flexibility. The training provider confirmed that some training materials were sent to participants at short notice, but this was because they wanted to provide participants with the latest position on changing social work regulations related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

"I attended all the sessions whilst juggling full care of my 2 young children. Remote learning has been helpful to my family life"
Quote from participant

Learning	Some participants needed sufficient notice to attend some training sessions to balance training requirements and personal commitments, and were offered recorded or later sessions to catch up
Recommendation	Consider how participants' personal commitments may affect training attendance, allocate sufficient time for participants to prepare to start training, and explore flexible options such as repeated or recorded sessions

Length of the Sessions and Group Sizes

Some training survey respondents felt that training sessions were rushed and insufficient time was allocated for discussions, particularly where larger groups were dominated by specific people. The training provider also reported that some participants felt there was a lot of material to cover, particularly in relation to the 'making research count' seminars. The training provider confirmed that tutors also sometimes struggled to fit all of the learning content into the one hour sessions. Both training survey respondents and the training provider recommended longer training sessions for future returner programmes.

Learning	Some training sessions were considered to be too short to cover the topics in detail
Recommendation	Ensure the length of training sessions enables tutors and participants to explore and discuss topics in depth

To increase the flexibility for participants on the programme, participants were able to join later training sessions if they were unable to make an earlier session, which resulted in larger group sizes for some sessions. While the training provider reported that there were good levels of participant engagement in the online chat functions, some participants felt that the size of their group had restricted their engagement and interaction in some training sessions. Future programmes may benefit from tutors continuing to monitor engagement levels and also adapting the size of each training cohort depending on the activity. For example, larger group sizes may be more appropriate for information sharing, whereas smaller group sizes may be beneficial for more discussions. Training providers could also offer engagement opportunities with smaller groups or individual participants after a training session for those who may require additional support.

Learning	Larger group training sizes presented challenges for some participants to interact and engage in the sessions
Recommendation	Review the size of training groups to ensure that all participants can fully engage and share insights, encouraging course tutors to monitor participants' engagement within sessions to create an inclusive learning environment

Virtual Training and Digital Upskilling

A potential benefit of moving the training to a virtual model during the COVID-19 pandemic was that it may have enabled more participants from a wider geographical coverage to join the programme, particularly those who may have been unable to travel to a central location for training or who were from more remote parts of the country. As a consequence, LGA and the training provider have recommended that future programmes should consider combining virtual and face-to-face support, to enable access for more participants while also being able to offer face-to-face support for those who require it.

"COVID-19 hit and to my delight the entire course went online, which made it even more accessible for me"
Quote from participant

Both LGA and the training provider reported that some participants had experienced technical difficulties, or struggled with the pace and technology involved in the virtual training. The training provider highlighted that it was important for participants to develop their digital skills, given the significant role technology plays in current social work practice. These insights suggest that returner programmes need to consider the potential technology challenges that may arise for participants and provide the required digital upskilling support, particularly for programmes that are online. In addition, consideration should also be given on how to clearly communicate to participants at the outset of the programme what digital skills will be required to fully navigate and access online learning resources.

Learning	Some participants faced technological difficulties with virtual training that may have been avoided or resolved in a face-to-face training setting
Recommendation	Be clear on the IT skills required for the programme from the outset and ensure all participants have the opportunity to receive support to develop their digital skills during the programme

Additional Support

Informal Support

The training provider complemented the formal training with emotional support and guidance, and maintained regular contact with participants who needed additional support to build their resilience and independence. Additional qualitative feedback from participants described the support and encouragement from the course tutors in very positive terms and it was felt that they went "the extra mile" to ensure successful outcomes. The training provider reported that they provided out-of-hours support to participants in the evenings between 5pm and 10pm and also on Saturdays, and described this dedicated resource as "essential" on a return to social work programme. LGA echoed that the out-of-hours support by the training provider helped provide guidance and support to participants and should be included in future returner programmes.

> "It was so helpful to have the companionship of other returning social workers, for us to air and compare our thoughts and feelings, needs and aspirations"
> **Quote from participant**

In addition to the support from tutors, participants who provided additional qualitative feedback felt that an important feature of the programme was the opportunity to develop peer support networks. It was reported that creating social groups and networks through WhatsApp was a main support mechanism for them.

Learning	Access to additional sources of support, such as through peer support networks and out-of-hours support from the training provider, were considered valuable
Recommendation	Develop a programme that offers participants additional forms of support, such as the provision of out-of-hours support, as well as opportunities for participants to establish support networks with their peers

Participants' Confidence

The majority of training survey respondents (66%) reported feeling confident or very confident about returning to social work following completion of their training (Figure 5-2). A common theme from the 53 respondents who gave qualitative feedback on this question was that the training had improved their confidence in relation to new legislation and keeping up to date with current practice. Other themes included feedback that stated they felt ready to return, and that the programme had helped them to realise their skills and reaffirm the reasons why they wanted to return as a social worker. Additional qualitative feedback from participants also described the RtSW programme as providing a very positive model for engagement, developing their resilience and confidence, as well as providing the necessary information needed to return to social work (for example, information on recent legislation).

> ""I feel the training has been invaluable for me and helped consolidate my reasons for wanting to return to the profession. I feel that the course was so well done and I completed it feeling really confident"
> **Quote from participant**

How do you feel about returning to social work since completing the training?
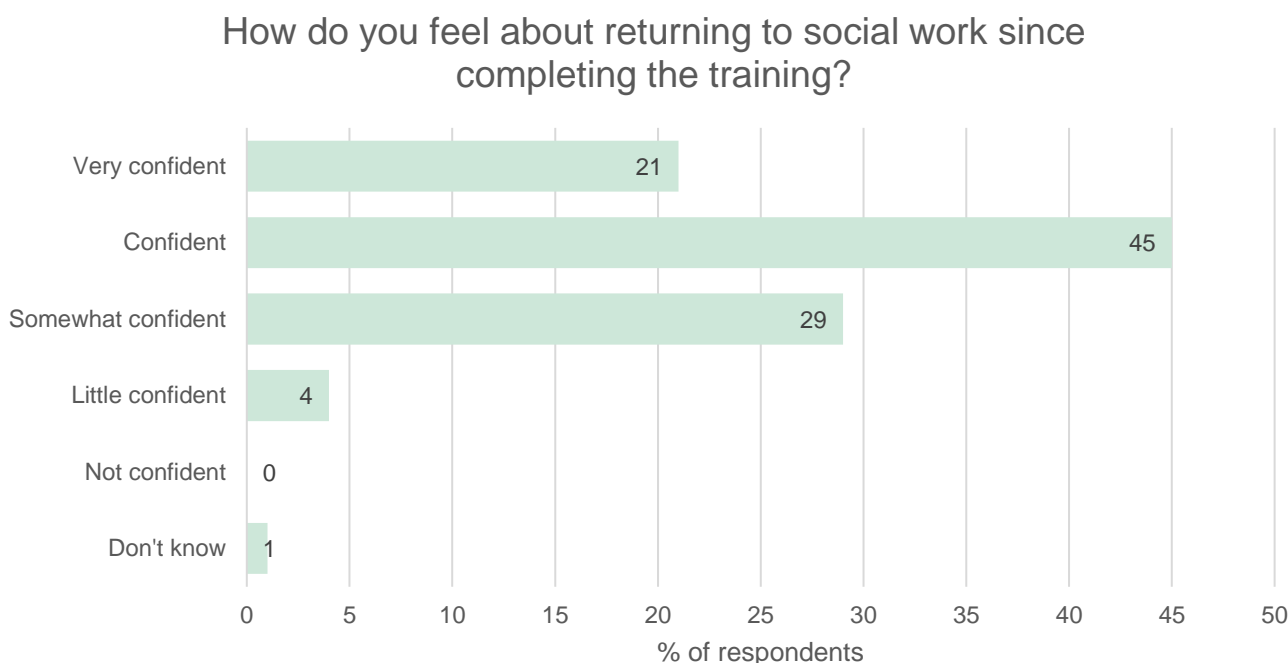

Figure 5-2: Confidence about returning to social work since completing training (n=123)
Source: training survey

While no training survey respondents stated that they did not feel confident about going back into social work, a sense of apprehension and nervousness about returning to social work, particularly in the COVID-19 context was a theme mentioned by respondents, including concerns around the legislative changes that now apply to social work practice. Challenges around securing a placement were also raised by training survey respondents, and had affected their confidence to return to social work. This is discussed in further detail in the 'Placements and Registration' section.

Stakeholder Support

LGA had regular engagement with the training provider and held weekly governance meetings to monitor performance and address any risks or issues as they occurred. The training provider felt this relationship went well in terms of the frequency of engagement and the governance and support provided by LGA.

The training provider gave very positive feedback on the role of Social Work England in the programme, who they felt were very responsive to participants' queries, and engaged with participants through information sessions. The training provider felt that this level of engagement from the regulator was an asset to the RtSW programme.

LGA reported that 72 councils registered interest in the programme. While it was not part of the programme design to involve councils in the training sessions, the training provider noted that this may have been beneficial. Involving councils in the training could have allowed participants the opportunity to engage with prospective employers, learn more about their expectations, and potentially broker placement or employment opportunities. Increased employer involvement in training might also offer a valuable opportunity to engage employers in evaluation activities, and help to understand employers' needs and recommendations.

Learning	There was no planned council involvement in training sessions, which reduced the opportunities for participants to engage with prospective employers
Recommendation	Include a range of opportunities for prospective employers to be involved in training sessions, so participants gain insights into current employment practises

Placements and Registration

6. Placements and Registration

Support for Placements

Participants needed to update their skills and knowledge before they were able to regain their registration and resume practising as a social worker. Participants could do this by completing formal training, private study, or undertaking supervised practice with an experienced social worker, for a period of either 30 or 60 days (dependent upon the length of their career break).

In the original programme design, participants were due to complete supervised placements within a social work setting alongside their training programme, so that they could apply their learning in a practical context. The placement activity was due to take place from May 2020 to August 2020 with local councils.

The national lockdown restrictions introduced from March 2020 and subsequent changes to councils' priorities meant that some councils had to consider new ways of supervising placements while adhering to social distancing guidance. Some placements became a blend of remote and face-to-face experiences, and some supervised placements were withdrawn, delayed or rearranged. LGA reported that in some instances, placements were delayed by up to 4 months and that some councils could only offer supervised practice opportunities from September 2020 onwards. Therefore, it was agreed with GEO to extend the placement period until November 2020. However, LGA reported that the second national lockdown restrictions introduced in November 2020 were a challenge to participants undertaking placements, and anticipated that some participants would complete placements beyond the programme timeframe.

As a result of the challenges councils experienced in supervising placements during the COVID-19 pandemic, LGA negotiated with Social Work England an alternative way for participants to restore their social work practice. Where a placement wasn't possible, LGA and Social Work England agreed that a participant would be able to conduct continuous personal development (CPD) private study to count towards the training they needed to complete to register as a social worker. Therefore, course tutors worked at pace to implement more private study resources for participants to replace and supplement supervised placement activity.

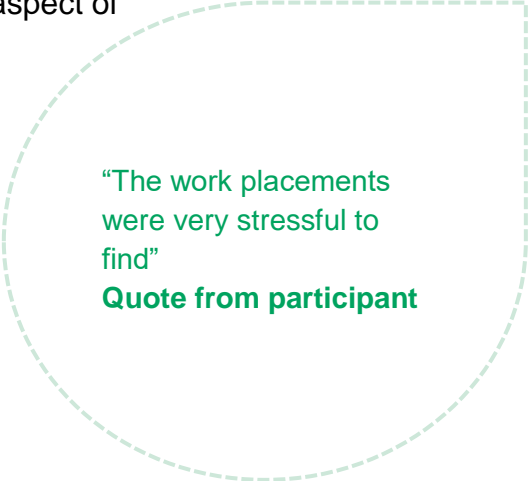|	
Learning	LGA was able to work with Social Work England and the training provider to resolve challenges to undertaking placements that were caused by COVID-19 restrictions, to support participants to satisfy the regulation standards for returning to social work
Recommendation	Use existing relationships with partners and wider networks to quickly identify solutions to programme challenges

Details of available placements and supporting guidance was sent to participants to support them to apply for and secure placements. LGA contacted participants to request information on their preferred councils and location for undertaking a placement. They also asked for information on what barriers participants were experiencing to securing placements, and what further support they needed, and worked with councils on their behalf to organise placement experiences. The training provider also supported participants with preparing applications for placements by running extra workshops, which included improving their communication and interaction with prospective employers.

Access to Placements

LGA reported that some post-programme survey respondents identified placements as a useful aspect of the programme, but a similar proportion of respondents also flagged challenges with access to placements as the least useful aspect of the programme. Qualitative feedback from 16 respondents to the training survey also suggested that there was limited availability for placements in their local area. In addition, some of the 53 respondents who gave extra detail on how they felt about returning to social work following the training, noted that the difficulty of sourcing a placement and being unable to apply their theoretical knowledge to real life practice had limited their confidence about returning to social work. Similarly, the training provider identified sourcing placements as being the most challenging aspect of the programme.

4 of the 9 training survey respondents who stated placements were the reason the programme didn't meet their expectations cited a lack of support with placements. Other respondents noted that the process was stressful and they had expected the placements to be organised for them. LGA felt that participants' expectations around securing placements could be better managed with clear and upfront communications about how the process works for any future returner programmes.

"The work placements were very stressful to find"
Quote from participant

45

Around 25% of respondents to the post-programme survey concluded that the programme could be improved by providing more support for placements. Based on participant feedback, the training provider suggested hiring a placement coordinator for future returner programmes, who could broker relationships and manage expectations between participants and councils.

Learning	The COVID-19 pandemic affected councils' abilities to prioritise and supervise placements, resulting in delays to participants undertaking placements and some participants experiencing challenges with accessing placements
Recommendation	Include guidance and information on the processes for securing placement opportunities within participant induction material, and consider hiring a dedicated placement coordinator to match participants with available placement opportunities

Placement and Registration Outcomes

Despite the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic on undertaking and accessing supervised placements, LGA reported in March 2021 that 89 placements had been secured or completed, and 44 participants had conducted private learning that met regulatory requirements. While this did not meet the original target of organising placement opportunities for 200 participants, LGA reported that 133 participants (67% of the total participants) had successfully restored their registration to practice with Social Work England by March 2021.

Similar rates of registration across cohorts (65 from the 2 to 5 year cohort and 68 from the 5 to 10 year cohort) could indicate that the length of career break does not determine registration rate. It is not known how many other participants have registered with Social Work England beyond the lifetime of the programme.

"Really valued the course. I would definitely not have been able to renew my registration and return to social work without the structured learning, support and guidance and the placement that was provided on this course"
Quote from participant

Post-Programme

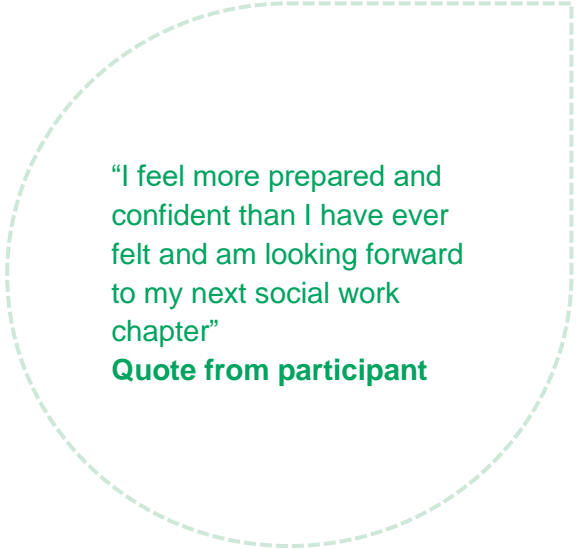# 7. Post-Programme

Post-Programme Feedback

Participant feedback at the end of the programme was captured by a post-programme survey. The survey asked about their satisfaction with the programme, whether the programme had met their expectations, whether the programme had equipped them with the skills and support to return to social work, and whether the programme had supported them to overcome barriers to returning to work. It is worth noting that at the point of the post-programme survey, some participants had not yet secured or completed their placement.

Overall, 91 post-programme survey responses were received:

- 37 survey responses were from the 2 to 5 year cohort
- 54 survey responses were from the 5 to 10 year cohort
- 49 survey respondents reported having ongoing caring responsibilities, making up 54% of total respondents

The post-programme survey results on the following areas were largely positive:

Programme satisfaction: the majority (83%) of respondents noted that they were either very or fairly satisfied with the programme (Figure 7-1). A higher proportion of those with no ongoing caring responsibilities were very satisfied (50%) compared to those with ongoing caring responsibilities (37%), as were those from the 2 to 5 year cohort (51%) compared to those from the 5 to 10 year cohort (37%)

"I feel more prepared and confident than I have ever felt and am looking forward to my next social work chapter"
Quote from participant

How satisfied were you with the programme?

■ Very satisfied ■ Fairly satisfied ■ Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied ■ Fairly dissatisfied ■ Very dissatisfied

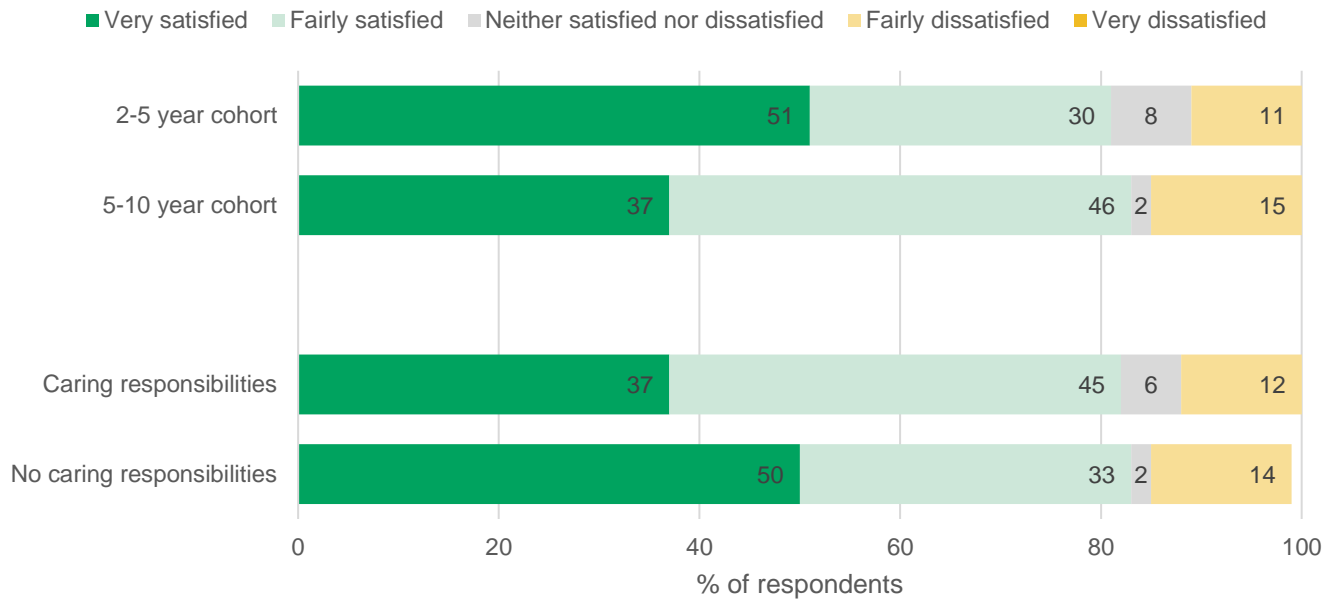| Cohort	Very satisfied	Fairly satisfied	Neither satisfied nor dissatisfied	Fairly dissatisfied
2-5 year cohort	51	30	8	11
5-10 year cohort	37	46	2	15
Caring responsibilities	37	45	6	12
No caring responsibilities	50	33	2	14

% of respondents

Figure 7-1: How satisfied participants were with the programme (n=91)
Source: post-programme survey (percentages may not total 100 due to rounding)

Meeting expectations: the majority of respondents (69%) felt the programme met all or most of their expectations (Figure 7-2). However, more respondents from the 2 to 5 year cohort reported that the programme met all or most of their expectations (78%) than respondents from the 5 to 10 year cohort (63%). A slightly larger proportion of respondents with ongoing caring responsibilities (72%) selected these options than those without ongoing caring responsibilities (66%)

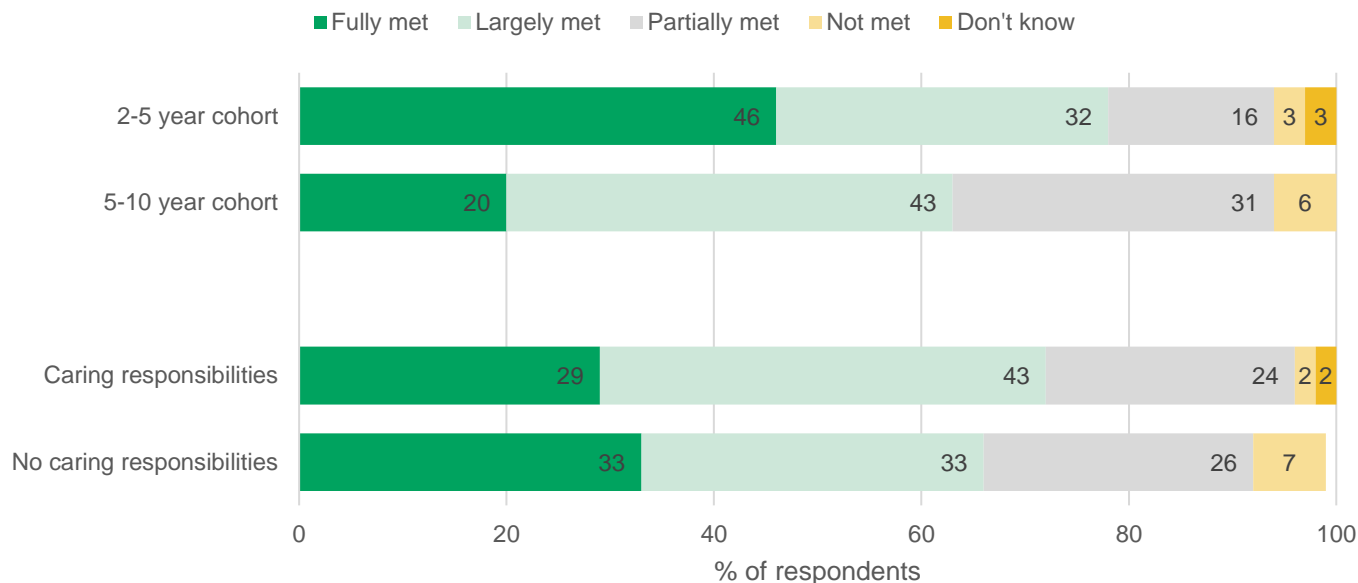## To what extent did the programme meet your expectations?

Figure 7-2: The extent to which the programme met participants' expectations (n=91)
Source: post-programme survey (percentages may not total 100 due to rounding)

Skills and support: the majority of respondents reported that they felt the programme either fully or partially equipped them with the necessary skills and support to help them return to social work (Figure 7-3). However, a higher proportion of respondents from the 2 to 5 year cohort reported that the programme had fully equipped them with the necessary skills and support (73%) compared to those from the 5 to 10 year cohort (57%). There was little difference in responses from those with and without ongoing caring responsibilities

"This course has helped me enormously, particularly my confidence and my ability to return to practice. Thank you very much for this amazing opportunity. I have such a passion for social work and this programme has helped me to reach my goals"
Quote from participant

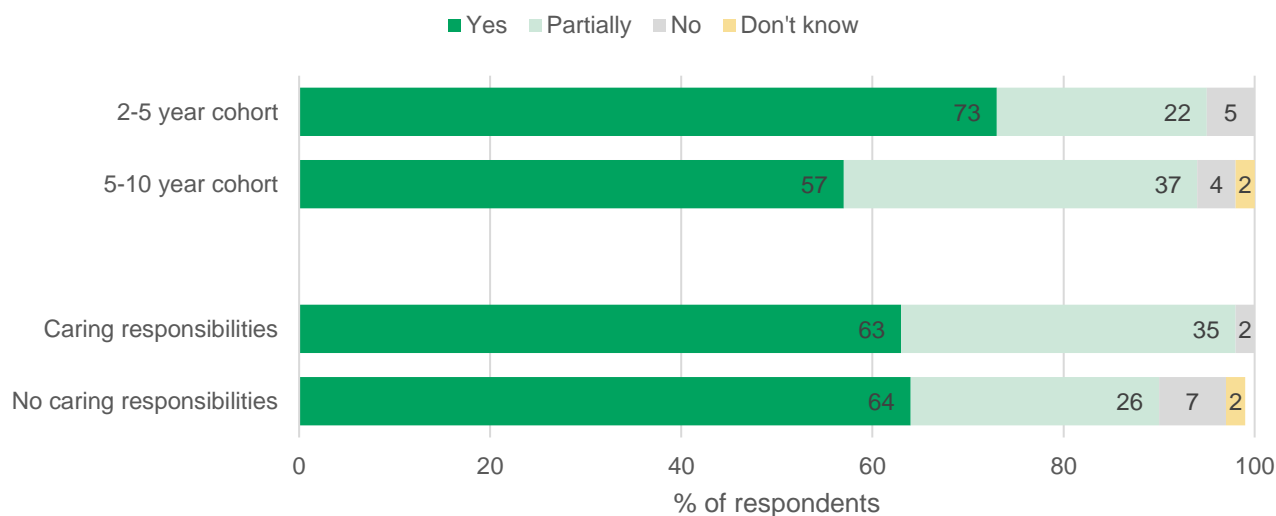## Has the programme equipped you with the necessary skills and support to return to social work?

Legend: ■ Yes ■ Partially ■ No ■ Don't know

Cohort	Yes	Partially	No	Don't know
2-5 year cohort	73	22	5	
5-10 year cohort	57	37	4	2
Caring responsibilities	63	35	2	
No caring responsibilities	64	26	7	2

% of respondents

Figure 7-3: Whether participants felt the programme equipped them with the necessary skills and support to return to social work (n=91)
Source: post-programme survey (percentages may not total 100 due to rounding)

Overcoming barriers: of the 91 respondents to the post-programme survey, 84% reported having previously encountered barriers when returning to work. When asked whether the programme had supported them to overcome these barriers, the majority of respondents who had experienced barriers felt that the programme had done so (59%), or had done so partially (22%). Of those who had experienced barriers, similar proportions from both cohorts and those with and without ongoing caring responsibilities reported that the programme had helped them to overcome these.

For each of the areas mentioned previously, and with the exception of overcoming barriers, a higher proportion of participants from the 2 to 5 year cohort selected the most positive option (for example, very satisfied or fully met) compared to those in the 5 to 10 year cohort. In addition, and with the exception of whether the programme had equipped participants with the required skills and whether they had overcome barriers, a higher proportion of respondents from the 5 to 10 year cohort left negative feedback (for example, fairly dissatisfied or not met) than those from the 2 to 5 year cohort.

From the 91 responses received to the post-programme survey, those who had been out of work for a longer period did not reflect as positively in their feedback on programme satisfaction, the extent to which the programme met their expectations, and whether the programme equipped them with the necessary skills and support to return to social work, when compared to feedback from respondents with shorter career breaks. Data on the specific reasons why participants with longer career breaks were less likely to select the most positive option compared to those with shorter career breaks was not available. Qualitative feedback from the training survey suggested

that future programmes could potentially offer the option of longer training timeframes to complete upskilling and development. However, it is unclear whether this feedback was specifically from respondents from the 2 to 5 year or 5 to 10 year cohort.

Learning	Participants with longer career breaks did not reflect as positively in their feedback on the programme when compared to participants with shorter career breaks
Recommendation	Consider how the programme design can be adapted to meet the differing needs of participants, and scope whether participants with longer career breaks need additional support (for example, longer training timeframes for upskilling and development)

Employment

The aim of the RtSW programme was to provide people with the skills and support to be able to re-register as social workers. No targets were set in relation to employment, however it was anticipated that some participants would find employment as social workers at the point of programme closure. At the programme end (March 2021), 133 participants had successfully renewed their registration with Social Work England. After the programme ended, the training provider reported that 79 participants had secured a role in social work (approximately 40% of the total programme participants). This is likely to increase due to recruitment difficulties reported by local councils and is an early sign of the longer-term success of the programme.

LGA noted that external factors may have negatively affected the number of social worker roles advertised and available for participants to apply to during this time, such as COVID-19 related crisis management and recruitment freezes within councils. However, despite the onset of COVID-19, there are early successes relating to employment outcomes and it is likely that employment outcomes will increase beyond the lifetime of the programme.

"Perhaps more importantly for the group, the programme provided a supportive environment to not only learn but to develop their confidence and resilience as well as other skills such as preparing for job interviews and writing a CV" **Quote from LGA's programme manager**

Research suggests that the majority of councils in England, Wales and Northern Ireland face recruitment difficulties for both adult and children social workers. Supporting previously registered social workers to return to the profession could be seen as an alternative and viable

recruitment option for councils, broadening the talent pool and supply of available and experienced social workers to councils.

Celebration Event

To celebrate participants' achievements, LGA held a virtual celebration ceremony for participants in April 2021 (Figure 7-4). The Minister for Women, Baroness Berridge, gave a speech that congratulated participants on completing the programme, highlighting how the skills developed through caring for others can be valuable to employers, and emphasised the importance of returning social workers. The Chief Social Worker for Adults working within the Department for Health and Social Care and representatives from GEO, LGA, and the training provider attended the event to provide supportive messages to participants.

Figure 7-4: Invitation to the RtSW Celebration Event

Conclusion

For those who have taken a career break from social work for longer than 2 years and want to return to practice, there is a requirement to evidence a period of upskilling and personal development. The RtSW programme aimed to reduce barriers faced by potential returners, by providing access to free training and placement opportunities, and enabling them to meet the re-registration requirements to be able to return to social work. The high level of interest expressed in the programme, and the volume of applications submitted, suggests that there was appetite from people to return to the social work profession through a formal return to work programme.

Despite challenges that the participants and the programme faced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and associated lockdown restrictions, the programme has been largely effective in enabling 184 returning social workers to enhance their learning and prepare for a return to social work. At programme end, (March 2021), 133 participants were reported as having successfully restored their registration with Social Work England. After the programme ended, the training provider reported that 79 participants had secured offers of employment as social workers, and it is likely that this will increase. This is an early sign of the longer-term success of the programme.