



Department
for Education

Social Work Degree Apprenticeships

Research report

May 2026

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Government
Social Research

Contents

List of tables	4
List of figures	5
Glossary of terms	7
Executive summary	9
Characteristics and entry paths of apprentices	10
Apprentices' motivations for doing the apprenticeship	10
Local authorities' motivations for offering the apprenticeship	11
Experiences of the apprenticeship	11
Whether the apprenticeship is good preparation for social work practice	12
Employment trajectories and future plans	12
Reflections on areas for improvement and good practice	13
Conclusion	13
Introduction	14
Aims and objectives of the research	15
Methodology	15
Reporting conventions	20
Characteristics and entry paths of Social Work Degree apprentices	21
Apprenticeship starts by academic year	21
Prior employment	22
Demographic profile of the apprentices and perceptions of how this differs from other routes	23
Pathway into the apprenticeship	26
Prior qualifications	28
Individual motivations for doing the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship	31
What attracted apprentices to a career in social work	31
Awareness of other routes	35
Route preferences	35
Reasons for choosing the apprenticeship	38
Employers' motivations for offering the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship	41
Other routes offered by local authorities	41
Reasons for offering the apprenticeship route	42

Role of government funding	45
Advertising the apprenticeship	47
Reasons for not offering the apprenticeship	48
Experiences of the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship	51
Apprentices' satisfaction with the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship	52
Reasons for non-completion	60
Employers' experience of the apprenticeship	62
Whether apprentices and employers would recommend the apprenticeship to others	64
Views on whether the apprenticeship is good preparation for social work practice	68
Apprentices' views on practice readiness	68
Employers' views on practice readiness	72
Employment trajectories and future plans	75
ASYE application processes	75
Apprentices' employment trajectories	77
Reasons for leaving social work	81
Apprentices' career aspirations	82
Reflections on areas for improvement and good practice	85
Apprentices' views on areas for improvement	85
Employers' views on areas for improvement and good practice	87
Conclusions	91
The characteristics, educational backgrounds and employment trajectories of apprentices	91
Motivation of apprentices and employers for doing/offering the apprenticeship	91
Key enablers for completing the apprenticeship	92
Key barriers to completing the apprenticeship	92
Local authority experiences of offering the apprenticeship	92
Whether apprentices and employers regard the apprenticeship as good preparation for social work practice	92
Technical appendix	94
Survey sampling	94
ILR analysis	94
Survey analysis	98
Limitations of the survey research	100

Qualitative fieldwork and analysis	101
Questionnaire script	105
Background and motivations	106
Reasons for non-completion	113
Experiences of the apprenticeship	115
Current activity and future plans	120
Data linking	128
Demographic questions	128

List of tables

Table 1. Number of achieved survey responses by completion status (based on survey response)	16
Table 2. Number of achieved responses by mode	17
Table 3. Confidence intervals across 3 key subgroups	18
Table 4. Case study qualitative interviews by job role	19
Table 5. Non-case study qualitative interviews with strategic leads, by apprenticeship offer status	20
Table 6 Social Work Degree Apprenticeship starts by academic year (ILR)	22
Table 7 Demographic breakdown by cohort	95
Table 8. LLDD by cohort	96
Table 9. Regional breakdown by cohort	97
Table 10. Apprentice age profile used for weighting targets	99
Table 11. Apprentice sex profile used for weighting targets	99
Table 12. Apprentice region profile used for weighting targets	99
Table 13. Completion status profile used for weighting targets	100
Table 14. Learning Difficulty and Disability (LLDD) profile used for weighting targets	100
Table 15. Target and completed case studies by local authority type	102

List of figures

Figure 1. Breakdown of apprentice age when apprenticeship began – ILR	24
Figure 2. Breakdown of apprentice ethnicity – ILR	25
Figure 3. How the opportunity to do the apprenticeship came about	27
Figure 4. Highest level of qualification prior to the apprenticeship	28
Figure 5. Whether apprentice needed to complete or agree to complete any additional qualifications to meet the entry requirements	30
Figure 6. Whether apprentices had considered becoming a social worker before hearing about the apprenticeship	32
Figure 7. Reasons for deciding to become a qualified social worker	33
Figure 8. Awareness of other routes into social work	35
Figure 9. Preferred route to qualify as a social worker	36
Figure 10. Route apprentices would most likely have taken if had not secured a place on the apprenticeship	37
Figure 11. Reasons for choosing the apprenticeship route (any reason and main reason)	38
Figure 12. Overall satisfaction with apprenticeship experience	52
Figure 13. Reasons for dissatisfaction	54
Figure 14. Satisfaction with academic aspects	55
Figure 15. Satisfaction with their employer	57
Figure 16. Satisfaction with practice placements	59
Figure 17. When non-completers left their apprenticeship	60
Figure 18. All reasons and main reason for non-completion	61
Figure 19. Reasons for recommending the apprenticeship	65
Figure 20. Reasons for not recommending the apprenticeship	66
Figure 21. Reasons apprentices felt prepared for social work practice, by main area of practice during apprenticeship	69

Figure 22. Whether worked as a social worker after completing apprenticeship	77
Figure 23. Areas of social work practice completed apprentices worked in, by their main area of practice during apprenticeship	79
Figure 24. Deployment of completed apprentices across teams	81
Figure 25. Completed apprentices working in social work: career aspirations in 3 years' time, by their main area of practice during apprenticeship	83

Glossary of terms

Approach Social Work – A three-year graduate training programme focused on child and family social work. Students complete a 14-month Postgraduate Diploma, gaining practice placement experience in local authorities, with the option to complete a master's degree in their third year within three years. The programme is fully funded and delivered by Frontline in partnership with Lancaster University.

Assessed and Supported Year of Employment (ASYE) – A structured employer-led and employment-based programme designed to support newly qualified social workers during their first year of employment. It provides additional training, supervision and assessment to help them transition from academic learning to professional practice.

Current apprentices – Individuals who are actively undertaking a social work degree apprenticeship at the time of survey or interview.

Completed apprentices – Individuals who had successfully finished their social work degree apprenticeship, including all required academic and practical components, at the time of survey or interview.

Contrasting placement – A period of supervised work experience undertaken by social work students that provide different experiences and learning in practice settings.

Employer Support Fund (ESF) - The Child and Family Social Worker Apprenticeship
Employer Support Fund (ESF) was introduced by the Department for Education in 2023 to help local authorities increase their social work apprenticeship capacity in child and family settings. Funding was awarded through a competitive process, with successful local authorities receiving grants to support the recruitment of additional apprentices. The scheme closed in March 2025.

Individualised Learner Record (ILR) – A data collection system specific to England, which records detailed information about learners (such as apprentices), including their demographics, programmes and outcomes. Learning providers in the further education and skills sector submit regular data returns to the Department for Education.

Level 6 qualification – A qualification at Level 6 on the Regulated Qualifications Framework (RQF), equivalent to a bachelor's degree. Examples include BA (Hons) or BSc (Hon) degrees in Social Work, and the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship. Other Level 6 qualifications include professional diplomas and graduate certificates.

Non-completed apprentices – Individuals who started a social work degree apprenticeship but did not successfully complete the programme for any reason.

Operational Lead – A person within the local authority with an operation or delivery role, responsible for managing and supporting apprentices.

Postgraduate Social Work Degree – Typically, a master’s-level social work qualification lasting up to two years. Designed for graduates with a bachelor’s degree in any subject other than social work, combining academic study with practice placements.

Social Work Degree Apprenticeship (SWDA) – A work-based training programme that typically takes around 36 months to complete, though the duration may be reduced where credits are awarded for prior learning or experience. Students earn a wage while working towards an accredited social work degree (Level 6), combining academic study with on-the-job learning and practice-based experience.

Social Work England – The regulatory body for social workers in England, responsible for maintaining professional standards, approving training programmes, and overseeing the registration of social workers.

Step Up to Social Work – An intensive, 14-month, training programme focused on child and family social work. Students complete academic learning at a university and undertake practice placements within local authorities, leading to a Postgraduate Diploma qualification. The programme is fully funded and delivered by Step Up to Social Work regional partnerships between local authority employers and universities.

Standalone apprenticeship role – A role that has been specifically created as an apprenticeship, for the duration of that apprenticeship.

Strategic Lead – A person within the local authority with a strategic role, responsible for decisions about provision of the apprenticeship. This may be the Director of Children’s Services or Principal Social Worker.

Substantive role – The permanent core job role or post that the apprentice holds within the organisation, if they have been recruited internally and have not had a standalone apprenticeship role created for them.

Think Ahead – A paid two-year graduate training programme focused on mental health social work for students with a non-social work degree. Students complete a Postgraduate Diploma during their first year before completing a master’s degree in the second year. Funding from the Department for Health and Social Care will not continue beyond the 2025 cohort. The programme is delivered by Think Ahead in partnership with Middlesex University.

Undergraduate Social Work Degree – Typically, a three-year full-time bachelor’s degree delivered by universities, combining academic study with practice placements.

Executive summary

In September 2025, the Department for Education (DfE) commissioned IFF Research to conduct mixed-methods research on the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship route, with a primary interest in child and family social work. This was the first large-scale research investigating experiences of this entry route and the barriers or enablers to successful delivery, from both apprentice and local authority employer perspectives.

The Social Work Degree Apprenticeship combines paid work with academic study, leading to a degree in social work (Level 6) which enables professional registration with Social Work England (SWE) to practice as a social worker. It was introduced in 2018 and has since expanded rapidly. Its aims are to improve recruitment in social work and diversify entry into the profession, by providing a work-based route through which more people have an opportunity to qualify.

Fieldwork for this research included a survey which achieved responses from 1,216 current, completed or non-completed¹ Social Work Degree apprentices (a 26% response rate). The survey covered apprentices across adult and child and family social work in England. The sample was drawn from the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) in June 2025 and all Social Work Degree Apprentices from the start of the programme in 2018 to the point of sample draw were in scope.

Fieldwork also encompassed 15 case studies with local authorities currently offering apprenticeships in child and family social work. Case studies incorporated qualitative interviews with strategic and operational leads in local authority employers, and with current and completed apprentices. A further 5 qualitative interviews were conducted with strategic leads offering the apprenticeship but not selected for case studies, and 3 interviews were conducted with strategic leads in local authorities that were not currently offering Social Work Degree Apprenticeships.

Throughout the report, 'apprenticeship' or 'apprentices' is used as shorthand to refer exclusively to the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship or Social Work Degree apprentices. Where reference is made to those 'surveyed' or when percentages are given in this report, these exclusively refer to survey findings unless otherwise specified. Where stated, some percentages relate to demographic data from the ILR. Any references to apprentices, employers, or to any individual 'interviewed' or 'spoken to' indicates a finding from the qualitative research interviews.

¹ By non-completed, we mean individuals who left the apprenticeship before completing it. Please note that due to the small base size of non-completed apprentices (n=55), survey results from this subgroup should be interpreted with caution.

Characteristics and entry paths of apprentices

The survey found that most apprentices were already working in the Health and Social Work sector² prior to starting the apprenticeship (89%), and 91% were already working for their apprenticeship employer. Many employers interviewed explained they used the apprenticeship (in some cases exclusively) to upskill their existing staff.

According to data from the Individualised Learner Record (ILR), the majority of apprentices were female (85%), white (83%) and over 35 years old when they started the apprenticeship (58%). Around 1 in 6 (17%) surveyed apprentices reported having a disability, and 14% reported having learning difficulties. Employers interviewed perceived that the mix of practical and academic learning meant the apprenticeship attracted more people with disabilities or learning difficulties than the traditional undergraduate route. Similarly, employers interviewed typically felt that the apprenticeship route appealed more to those with caring responsibilities (as opposed to the more traditional university routes).

Over half (55%) of apprentices were offered the apprenticeship role by their existing employer, while around two-fifths (41%) applied for an advertised apprenticeship role. Apprentices were most commonly employed by a local authority (87%), with only small proportions working for other types of employer such as the NHS (13%). Half (50%) were mainly working in child and family social work during their apprenticeship, 45% mainly worked in adult social work, while a minority (5%) worked equally across the two.

Around two-fifths (42%) of apprentices already had a qualification at Level 6 or higher prior to starting the apprenticeship, including around one-third (34%) qualified to degree level. Most (73%) did not need to complete or agree to complete any additional qualifications to meet the apprenticeship entry requirements.

Apprentices' motivations for doing the apprenticeship

Four-fifths (80%) of apprentices had considered becoming a qualified social worker before hearing about the apprenticeship. The most common reason for wanting to become a qualified social worker was to help people or make a difference (86%). In qualitative interviews, apprentices discussed how they were motivated by how social workers were able to make a tangible difference in peoples' lives.

The vast majority (97%) of apprentices were aware of other routes into social work before deciding to do the apprenticeship, and awareness was highest for the undergraduate degree in social work (91% of those aware of other routes). Around four-fifths (81%) said the apprenticeship was their preferred route to become a qualified social worker.

² This was defined in the survey with the answer option "Health and Social Work (e.g. health services, social care, youth work)".

The ability to earn while learning (33%), the financial affordability compared with other routes (24%) and the ability to stay with the same employer (20%) were key reasons for choosing the apprenticeship over other routes.

If unsuccessful in securing an apprenticeship place, the majority (63%) reported they would not have undertaken another route to qualify as a social worker. Many apprentices interviewed explained that other entry routes were not accessible to them due to eligibility criteria or cost (including loss of earnings).

Local authorities' motivations for offering the apprenticeship

Many employers interviewed were motivated to offer the apprenticeship for the opportunity to 'grow their own' workforce. They viewed upskilling their existing staff and supporting their progression as a way to support retention.

Most employers interviewed only recruited to the apprenticeship internally. It was commonly promoted via internal email and advertised on the intranet. Those who hired externally used local job boards (the same approach as for other health and social care sector roles).

Among the small number of local authorities interviewed that did not offer the apprenticeship, the main reason was a lack of child and family social worker vacancies. These were typically small teams without Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) vacancies to fill.

Experiences of the apprenticeship

Most apprentices reported satisfaction with their experience of the apprenticeship (92%), although satisfaction was much lower among non-completers (47%). Satisfaction was high across most academic, employer and practice placement elements. Apprentices were most satisfied with training being relevant and beneficial to a social work career (95%) and with practice placements being relevant and beneficial (96%). The main area of lower satisfaction was balancing the apprenticeship with work demands, with 22% dissatisfied with the balance between work and study requirements and 23% dissatisfied with the balance between workplace learning and day-to-day work duties.

Interviews with apprentices and employers helped explain these patterns. Apprentices linked more positive experiences to clear structure, predictable routines and consistent protected study time. Employers described delivering the apprenticeship through protected off-the-job learning time, workload and caseload planning, supervision and mentoring, and regular progress monitoring with learning providers. Employers also described challenges in delivery, particularly at placement and assessment pressure points, where teams often needed to cover apprentices' work and limited funding or staff available to resource 'backfill' made it harder to protect time consistently.

Reflecting the high overall satisfaction, almost all apprentices surveyed (99%) said they would recommend the apprenticeship, most commonly because it allowed them to earn while learning (87%), learn through practical experience (78%), and prepared them for a career in social work (75%).

Of the 55 non-completers, most left early, with 75% leaving in the first year (including 42% in the first 6 months). Apprentices often attributed this to multiple factors, with poor work-life balance/workload (48%) and mental health issues (44%) the most common. However, when asked to identify a single main reason, the most common was caring responsibilities (17%), followed by feeling unsupported during on-the-job learning (14%) and the apprenticeship being badly run or poorly organised (13%).

Whether the apprenticeship is good preparation for social work practice

Most current and completed apprentices (94%) felt that the apprenticeship has prepared (or was preparing) them well for social work practice. A key driver of this was the on-the-job learning element, with 32% citing it as a reason they felt well prepared.³

Strategic and Operational Leads interviewed felt the apprenticeship provided good preparation for practice overall. They felt that the apprentices' sector-related experiences, gained both prior to and during the apprenticeship, meant they were typically more prepared to deal with complex cases, compared with social workers who qualified through different routes.

Employment trajectories and future plans

Most completed apprentices (90%) had worked as a social worker following their apprenticeship. At the time of survey, 88% of completed apprentices were still in social work, with 82% still working at the same employer where they undertook their apprenticeship. This was higher among those whose apprenticeship was in adult social work (86%) compared with those whose apprenticeship was in child and family social work (78%).

Among those still in social work at the time of survey, the majority (88%) planned to still be in the sector in 3 years' time. Five per cent saw themselves moving to an alternative career within the next 3 years, with high workload being the most cited reason.

Employers varied in their approach to transitioning newly qualified apprentices into the ASYE. Some required them to apply for a competitive role while others guaranteed them an ASYE post if they qualified.

³ Reasons for feeling well-prepared were offered spontaneously by respondents at an open-text survey question.

Reflections on areas for improvement and good practice

Most apprentices identified at least one area where the apprenticeship could be improved, although around a fifth (22%) felt no changes were needed. The most common suggestions focused on increasing practical learning opportunities, improving the balance between work, life and study, and ensuring more consistent communication and support from learning providers. Apprentices interviewed discussed how their workload was not always adjusted to reflect academic demands, and many wanted clearer expectations from managers and a greater variety of placements to broaden their experience.

Many employers felt that additional government funding that could be used for backfilling substantive roles while apprentices are on placement, or funding for whole Social Work Apprentice roles, would allow them to expand the programme. Better communication with learning providers was another recurring theme with some employers introducing their own tracking tools to address information gaps and recommending that clear expectations are set with providers at the outset of the programme.

Conclusion

The apprenticeship was found to primarily function as an internal progression pathway, attracting experienced health and social care staff who may not have been able to qualify through other pathways, mainly because of their need to remain in paid employment while training, and because of entry requirements. The apprenticeship was therefore seen by employers and interviewed apprentices to be diversifying entry routes into social work, particularly providing opportunities for those who would not otherwise have been able to undertake the traditional university-based routes.

Organisational delivery was perceived to be most successful where employers provided protected learning time, manageable caseloads, strong supervision and effective collaboration with the learning provider. Organisational capacity was, however, a key challenge for employers, particularly during placement periods. For apprentices, the potential barriers to completion typically related to workload pressures and work-life balance.

Overall, the apprenticeship was widely valued by both apprentices and employers and regarded as strong preparation for practice. Post-qualification trajectories further reinforced this perception: most apprentices moved into social work roles, frequently remaining with their apprenticeship employer. The majority expressed an intention to stay within the profession. However, those who trained in child and family social work were less likely to do so, compared with those who trained in adult social work.

Introduction

In September 2025, the Department for Education (DfE) commissioned IFF Research to conduct mixed-methods research on the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship route, with a primary interest in child and family social work. All qualitative research findings presented in this report relate solely to child and family social work apprentices, whereas the survey included apprentices in both child and family and adult social work. Survey findings, therefore, relate to all apprentices unless otherwise specified.

The Social Work Degree Apprenticeship (hereafter referred to as “the apprenticeship”) was introduced in 2018 and has since rapidly expanded, from 93 starts in the 2018/19 academic year to 1,250 starts by the end of May in the 2024/25 academic year⁴. Initial completions occurred in the 2020/21 academic year, with 30 completions, rising to 320 completions during 2024/25⁵. This research was conducted 7 years after the route was first introduced, and approximately 4 years after the first apprentices completed the programme.

The apprenticeship aims to improve recruitment in social work and diversify entry into the profession, by providing a work-based route through which more people have an opportunity to qualify. Due to its rapid expansion and potential for diversifying the social work workforce, the apprenticeship is of growing strategic interest. This is the first large-scale research investigating experiences of the route and the barriers or enablers to successful delivery in local authorities.

The apprenticeship combines paid work with academic study, leading to a degree in social work (Level 6) and enabling professional registration with Social Work England (SWE) to practice as a social worker. The apprenticeship typically takes 36 months, although it can take longer if completed part-time. Entry requirements vary according to employer specifications but include minimum English and Maths qualifications. Supervised practice during the apprenticeship can cover either or both adult and child and family social work, and at least 20% of paid working hours must be off-the-job training. Apprentices must gain experience in a different setting or with a different service user group to their primary placement (known as a ‘contrasting placement’).

Employers can access government funding to support the costs of apprenticeship training and assessment through contributions to the apprenticeship levy. In addition to accessing apprenticeship levy funding, some employers have been able to secure additional financial support to help deliver the apprenticeship, such as capacity-building grants. These are separate, time-limited funding streams intended to support workforce development and implementation costs, rather than tuition fees.

There are a number of other entry-routes into social work, which the apprenticeship sits alongside. These include completing an undergraduate or postgraduate degree in social

⁴ Based on analysis of starts in the ILR (drawn from June 2025). Starts for 2024/25 are up to May 2025 so do not include a full academic year.

⁵ Based on analysis of completions in the ILR (drawn from June 2025). Completions for 2024/25 are up to May 2025 so do not include the full academic year.

work, which are known as ‘traditional’ entry routes. Other routes include enrolling on the ‘Step Up to Social Work’ or ‘Approach Social Work’ (previously known as ‘Frontline’) programmes, which both offer an intensive, practice-based postgraduate training pathway in child and family social work; and participating in ‘Think Ahead’, a specialist programme focused on adult mental health social work.⁶ The apprenticeship and undergraduate degree are the only routes that do not require an existing undergraduate degree qualification.

Aims and objectives of the research

This research was commissioned to give a clearer view on the apprenticeship route and the barriers or enablers to its successful delivery. More specific aims and objectives within this included building an understanding of:

- Characteristics, educational backgrounds and employment trajectories of apprentices
- Motivations of apprentices and local authority employers for doing/offering the apprenticeship
- Key enablers and barriers to participating in and completing the apprenticeship
- Apprentices’ experiences of doing the apprenticeship
- Local authority experiences of offering the apprenticeship, for example how workloads and caseloads are managed to allow time for academic study, how supervision is offered, and how apprenticeship roles fit into wider social work teams
- Whether apprentices and employers regard the apprenticeship as good preparation for social work practice

The research also investigated employer perceptions of how the apprenticeship compared with other qualification routes, in particular in terms of how well prepared apprentices were for practice.

Methodology

The research consisted of a survey of child and family and adult social work apprentices, and qualitative interviews with child and family employers (local authorities) and apprentices. Qualitative interviews were, for the most part, conducted as part of case studies with local authorities offering the apprenticeship but also included a small number of interviews in non-case study local authorities offering the apprenticeship, and a small

⁶ The ‘Think Ahead’ programme will not receive government funding for cohorts commencing from summer 2025.

number of interviews in local authorities not offering the apprenticeship. These two strands are outlined in turn below, and further detail can be found in the Technical Appendix.

Survey fieldwork

The quantitative fieldwork consisted of a short survey of apprentices, sampled from the Individualised Learner Record (ILR)⁷. The ILR is a database used by the Department for Education to collect information about students in further education and training. It includes details such as learners' demographics, courses, qualifications and progress. Colleges, apprenticeship providers and other training organisations submit this data regularly.

The survey took a census approach, with all current, completed and non-completer⁸ apprentices invited to take part⁹. At the time of the sample draw, this included data up to June 2025. Apprentices in child and family social work, adult social work or working equally across both areas were in scope for the survey. Information on the apprentices' main practice area was not available in the ILR data set, and this was collected during the survey.

A total of 4,677 individuals were invited to take part in the survey. A total of 1,216 responses were achieved representing an overall response rate of 26%. The number of responses by completion status is shown in Table 1. More detailed breakdowns are available the Technical Appendix.

Table 1. Number of achieved survey responses by completion status (based on survey response)

Completion status (from survey)	Number of responses achieved
Current apprentices	646
Completed apprentices	515
Non-completers	55
Total	1,216

There was a soft launch of the survey with a small initial sample on 4th and 5th November 2025, to check the questionnaire was working well and that participants found it

⁷ For more information about the ILR please refer to: [What is the individualised learner record \(ILR\)? – Customer help centre](#)

⁸ A non-completer apprentice is defined in the ILR as an apprentice who has withdrawn from their learning activities before completing the learning aim.

⁹ Apart from those who were not eligible to be contacted for research purposes.

straightforward to answer. This was followed by mainstage survey fieldwork which took place between 17th November 2025 and 5th January 2026.

Fieldwork was primarily online with individuals invited through email, followed by 3 further email reminders to non-responders. To further boost response, and to reach those without a usable email address on sample, Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI) took place between the 4th and 19th December, alongside online fieldwork. Apprentices who were eligible to be contacted for research, but who were without a valid email address or telephone number on the ILR sample, were invited to take part by postal letter in a push-to-web¹⁰ or push-to-CATI¹¹ approach. The number of achieved responses by web and telephone are shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Number of achieved responses by mode

Mode of survey completion	Number of responses achieved
Online	725
Computer-Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI)	491
Total	1,216

Weighting

Weighting was applied to the final dataset to ensure the analysis presented in this report is representative of all social work degree apprentices (current, completer and non-completer) on the ILR at the time of sample draw in terms of key characteristics. This defined the in-scope population of the survey.

Weights were applied by apprentice age (at time of survey), sex, home address region, Learning Difficulties and/or Disability status and completion status (from ILR population profile)¹². The survey profile of apprentice ethnicity was found to be representative of the target population without further weighting needed.

This weighting helps to ensure that results accurately represent the target population for this research by correcting for over or under representation of specific sub-groups in the

¹⁰ "Push-to web" approach refers to inviting participants to complete the survey online by providing them with a web link and access instructions in the invitation letter.

¹¹ "Push-to-CATI" approach refers to inviting participants to complete the survey by telephone interview by providing contact details to arrange a telephone appointment. This is a secondary option for participants who do not want to, or are not able to, complete the survey online.

¹² There was a discrepancy between ILR sample and survey responses on completion status – namely that 22% of apprentices who are marked as current on the ILR and who took part in the survey were completers at the time of survey. The completion status provided on sample (rather than survey response) was used for weighting. Survey response completion status was used for analysis and reporting.

response profile. Further detail on the weighting approach, and limitations, can be found in the Technical Appendix.

Statistical confidence

Although the sample has been weighted to be nationally representative, the data is still subject to sampling error. The extent of sampling error depends on:

- The sampling approach: the closer it is to a random sample the less the sampling error.
- The sample size: the larger the sample the lower the likely sampling error.
- The survey result: the closer to 50% the less confident statistically we can be in the finding.

The estimated confidence intervals associated with findings from all apprentices, and from the 3 key survey subgroups, are outlined in Table 3. Taking the questions routed only to completed apprentices as an example, the sample of 515 means that, statistically, we can be 95% confident that the ‘true’ value of any survey finding of 50% will lie within a +/- 4.3 percentage point range (i.e., 45.7% - 54.3%). As shown in Table 3, confidence intervals (CI) are widest for non-completers due to the small sample size (55), so additional caution is needed when interpreting findings from this group.

Table 3. Confidence intervals across 3 key subgroups

Respondent group	Survey finding at 10% or 90% (+/- percentage points) 95% CI	Survey finding at 30% or 70% (+/- percentage points) 95% CI	Survey finding at 50% (+/- percentage points) 95% CI
All apprentices (n=1,216)	1.7	2.6	2.8
Current (n=646)	2.3	3.5	3.9
Completers (n=515)	2.6	4.0	4.3
Non-completers (n=55)	7.9	12.1	13.2

Subgroup analysis

Unless explicitly stated, all subgroup differences referenced in this report are statistically significant at the 95% confidence level. These are depicted in charts with the use of an asterisk (*).

Due to the small base size for non-completer apprentices (55), subgroup analysis for this group is limited.

Qualitative fieldwork

In addition to the survey, case study interviews were carried out across 15 local authorities currently offering the apprenticeship in child and family work. As shown in Table 4, in each case study area interviews were carried out with:

- A ‘strategic lead’ (a person with a strategic role, responsible for decisions about provision of the apprenticeship).
- Two ‘operational leads’ (staff with an operational or delivery role, responsible for managing and supporting apprentices, such as a Team Manager or Practice Educator).
- At least one current apprentice.
- At least one individual who had completed the apprenticeship within the authority and gone on to work as a child and family social worker (if applicable).

Table 4. Case study qualitative interviews by job role

Case study interview participants	Number of qualitative interviews completed
Strategic leads	15
Operational leads	26
Completed apprentices	10
Current apprentices	20
Total	71

Interviews were conducted between 4th November 2025 and 9th January 2026. Through sample information provided by the Department for Education, and telephone screening, case study areas were selected to ensure coverage of a broad range of local authority characteristics including region, Ofsted rating and volume of apprentices. A full breakdown is provided in the Technical Appendix.

In addition to the case study fieldwork, additional qualitative interviews were carried out with strategic leads in areas not currently offering the apprenticeship (referred to as “non-offering local authorities”). Initially, participant recruitment targeted 8 local authorities not offering the apprenticeship, however due to low sample volume (most were found to be already offering the apprenticeship), the scope changed to target 4 additional interviews

with those offering, and 4 with those not offering. By the end of the fieldwork period, a total of 7 further interviews were conducted. As shown in Table 5, 2 of these had never offered the apprenticeship, and one had previously offered the apprenticeship but no longer did so.

Table 5. Non-case study qualitative interviews with strategic leads, by apprenticeship offer status

Local authority apprenticeship offer status	Number of qualitative interviews completed
Previously offered the apprenticeship	1
Never offered the apprenticeship	2
Currently offering the apprenticeship	4
Total	7

Reporting conventions

Where reference is made to those ‘surveyed’ or when percentages are given in this report, these exclusively refer to survey findings unless otherwise specified. Where stated, certain percentages relating to the demographic profile of apprentices are based on ILR data. The survey included several open-text questions – these are free-text comment boxes in which respondents provide written comments and do not have to select from pre-coded lists. Responses to these survey questions were coded and are reported quantitatively unless otherwise stated. Any references to apprentices, employers, or to any individual ‘interviewed’ or ‘spoken to’ indicates a finding from the qualitative research interviews.

Case study summary boxes are included in various sections of the report to highlight interesting examples of experiences or practices.

Throughout the report, ‘apprenticeship’ or ‘apprentices’ is used as shorthand to refer exclusively to the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship or Social Work Degree apprentices.

Characteristics and entry paths of Social Work Degree apprentices

This chapter explores apprentices' previous employment, educational background and demographic profile. It also investigates routes into social work and whether employers feel the profile of apprentices differs from that of other entry routes. This chapter uses data from the ILR, the survey and the qualitative research.

Key findings

Most apprentices surveyed were already working in the Health and Social Work sector prior to the apprenticeship (89%), and 91% were already working for their apprenticeship employer. Many employers interviewed explained they used the apprenticeship (in some cases exclusively) to upskill their existing staff.

The majority of apprentices surveyed were female (85%), white (83%) and over 35 years old (58%) when they started the apprenticeship. Over half (52%) had childcare responsibilities, while a further 18% had other caring responsibilities. Employers interviewed typically felt that the apprenticeship route appealed more to those with caring responsibilities (as opposed to the more traditional university route) as it does not require a break in employment or financial costs of tuition fees.

Around 1 in 6 (17%) apprentices surveyed reported having a disability, and 14% reported having learning difficulties. Employers interviewed felt that the mix of practical and academic learning meant the apprenticeship attracted more people with disabilities or learning difficulties than university-based routes.

Over half (55%) of apprentices surveyed were offered the apprenticeship role by their existing employer, while around two-fifths (41%) applied for an advertised apprenticeship role. Apprentices were most commonly employed by a local authority (87%), with only small proportions working for other types of employer such as the NHS (13%).

Around two-fifths (42%) of apprentices surveyed had a qualification at Level 6 or higher prior to starting the apprenticeship, including around one-third (34%) qualified to degree level. Most (73%) did not need to complete or agree to complete any additional qualifications to meet the apprenticeship entry requirements.

Apprenticeship starts by academic year

ILR analysis in Table 6 shows rapid expansion of apprenticeship starts after the first year that the apprenticeship was introduced.

Table 6 Social Work Degree Apprenticeship starts by academic year (ILR)¹³

Cohort (academic year)	Number of starts
2018/19	93
2019/20	575
2020/21	699
2021/22	665
2022/23	991
2023/24	1,298
2024/25*	1,250
Total	5,571

*Note that the figure for 2024/25 only includes starts up to May 2025.

Looking at the regional distribution over time (Table 9 in the Technical Appendix) shows that the apprenticeship was adopted in a small number of regions in 2018/19, with the majority being in the North West (53%) or East Midlands (27%). Apprenticeships expanded from 2019/20 onwards to cover all regions.

Prior employment

Almost all apprentices surveyed (99%) were in employment immediately before starting their apprenticeship. Around 9 in 10 (91%) were already working for their apprenticeship employer, while 8% were working for a different employer. Only very small proportions were studying or not in work or education (less than 1% each).

This is supported by qualitative findings with employers, where many approached the apprenticeship as a mechanism for retaining and upskilling existing staff and therefore only hired internally. This is discussed in more detail in Employers' motivations for offering the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship.

Completed apprentices surveyed (96%) were more likely to have been working for their apprenticeship employer prior to the apprenticeship, compared with both current apprentices (88%) and non-completers (84%).

Apprentices surveyed whose main practice area was adult social work were more likely than those in child and family social work to already be working for their apprenticeship employer (94% vs. 89%). Similarly, older apprentices were also more likely to have

¹³ Note that this is based on the ILR data as of June 2025, so data for the 2024/25 academic year covers to the end of May 2025 rather than being a full academic year.

worked for their apprenticeship employer (97% aged over 45 years old vs. 85% aged under 35 years old).

Before starting the apprenticeship, 89% of surveyed apprentices were already working in the Health and Social Work Sector. A small proportion of apprentices were previously employed in Education (4%) or Public Administration (1%). In terms of prior job roles, the majority of apprentices who were working for an employer were previously employed in Health and Social Care Associate Professional roles (86%), such as family support workers, social work assistants and social care practitioners.

Non-completers (9%) and current apprentices (5%) surveyed were more likely than completed apprentices (1%) to have worked in the Education sector prior to the apprenticeship. Similarly, those whose main practice area was child and family social work were more likely than those in adult social work to have previously worked in the Education sector (6% vs. 1%).

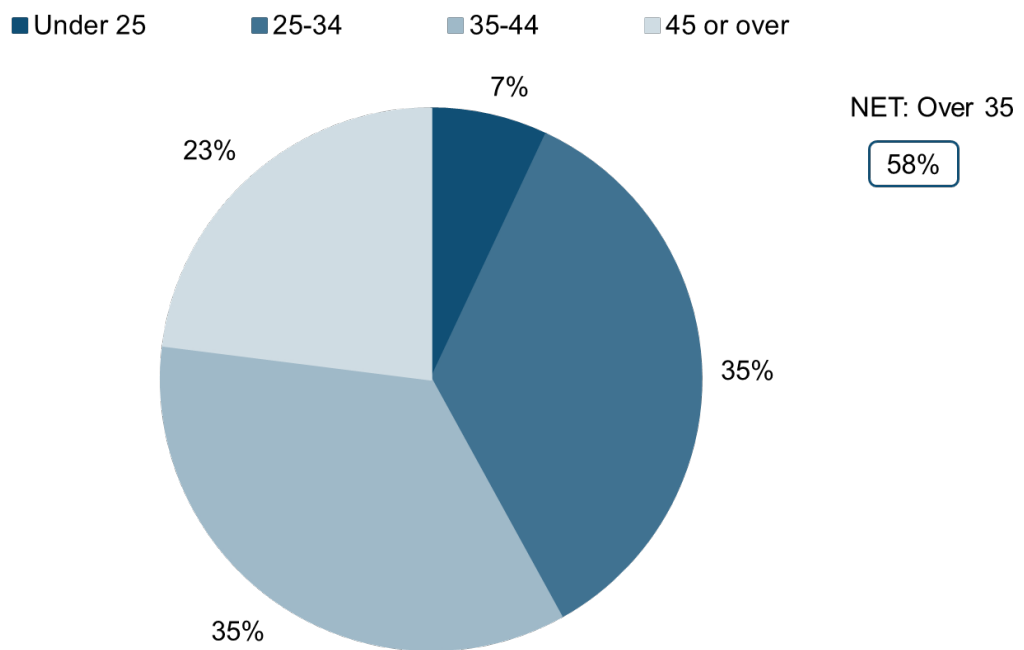
Demographic profile of the apprentices and perceptions of how this differs from other routes

As previously outlined, increasing diversity among entrants into social work was one of the aims of the apprenticeship. This subsection outlines the demographic profile of apprentices from the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) and from survey responses. It also investigates employer views on how the demographic profile of apprentices varies from other routes they offer or support.

Age at start of apprenticeship

Individualised Learner Record (ILR) data shows that apprentices were most likely to be female (85%), white (83%) and over 35 years old (58%) when they started the apprenticeship. More information about the ILR is available in the Technical Appendix. The full breakdown of apprentice age at the start of the apprenticeship is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Breakdown of apprentice age when apprenticeship began – ILR



Source: Individualised Learner Record (ILR).

When asked if they perceived the demographic profile of apprentices to differ from those of other routes into social work, employers felt that the apprenticeship applicants tended to be older people, especially compared to the traditional university routes:

I think the apprentices generally tend to be a lot older. It tends to be the university [students] who are generally quite young... But [with] the apprenticeships, we get more experienced...not in terms of social work experience, in terms of life experience. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Childcare and caring commitments

Over half (52%) of apprentices surveyed had childcare responsibilities, while a further 18% had other caring responsibilities, equating to 60% of apprentices surveyed who had any caring responsibilities. One-in-ten (10%) had both childcare responsibilities and other caring responsibilities. Apprentices between 35 and 44 were most likely to have childcare responsibilities (73%), while those over 45 were more likely to have other caring responsibilities (24% vs. 10% of those under 35).

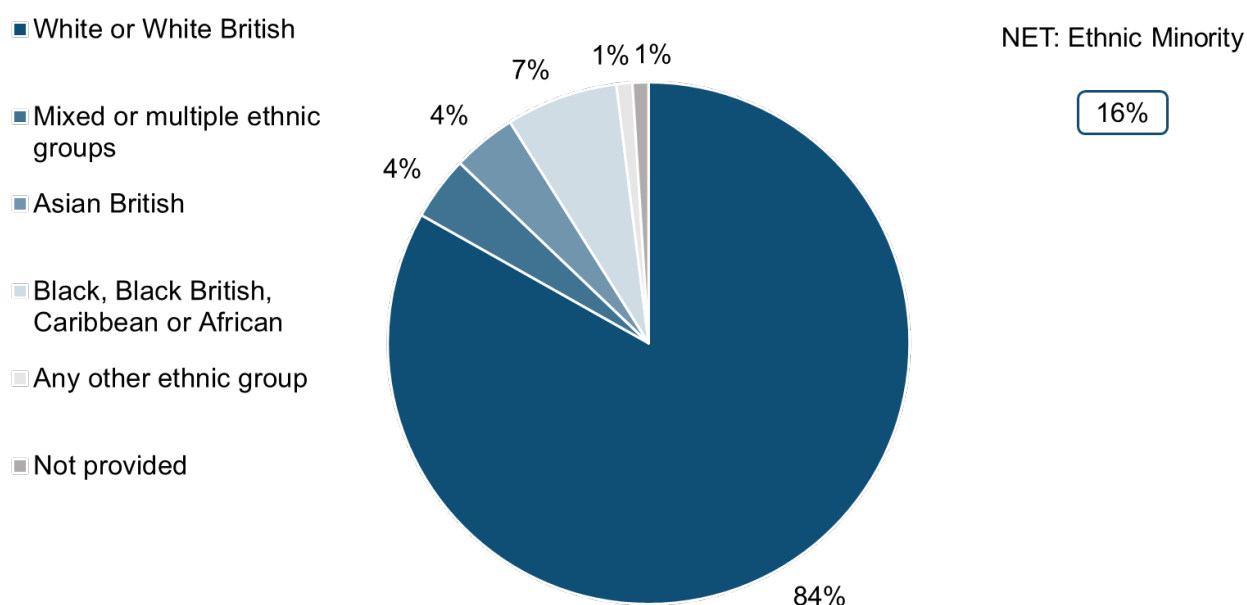
When interviewed, employers reported the view that the apprenticeship often attracted older people than other entry routes, as it is more accessible for people with families or other caring commitments, who tend to be older. Other routes require a break from full-time employment, which was described as financially difficult, especially for those with family or caring responsibilities.

I think the difficulty is when you get into a working environment and you're used to earning a certain amount of money, to then suddenly go back to have to do a traditional degree route, stop working, not be paid and face a student loan at the end of it... if you've got life and family commitments, quite often you're not in a position to do that. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Ethnicity

As shown in Figure 2, ILR data shows that (where ethnicity data is provided) 81% of apprentices were white and 16% were from ethnic minority groups. Ethnicity data was not available for 1% of apprentices.

Figure 2. Breakdown of apprentice ethnicity – ILR



Source: Individualised Learner Record (ILR).

When asked about the ethnicity profile of apprentices compared with other routes, employers typically felt that the profile of apprentices reflected that of the local authority's population, often because apprentices were hired internally and so were already living locally. However, they did not feel that this was any different to other routes, and so did not believe the apprenticeship route increased or decreased ethnic diversity.

Learning difficulties and disabilities

In ILR data, one-fifth (22%) of apprentices are recorded as having learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Among surveyed apprentices, 26% reported having learning difficulties and/or disabilities – 17% considered themselves to have a disability and 14% considered themselves to have learning difficulties. Some employers felt that the route was more likely

to attract people with disabilities or learning difficulties due to the mix of academic and practical, work-based learning:

We've all got slightly different learning styles that, if you're more of a pragmatist, you're going to learn by doing rather than being based initially at university. [The apprenticeship] gives opportunities to those people that have those different learning styles or learning needs. I know sometimes for people that have got quite significant dyslexia or neurodiversity, the thought of being within a university setting in that traditional way is quite off-putting. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Profile of apprentices over time

The profile of apprenticeship starts by academic year has remained fairly stable over time (see Table 6 and Table 7 in the Technical Appendix) based on the ILR data. The main exceptions to this are, comparing 2024/25¹⁴ to 2019/20¹⁵:

- the proportion of apprentices who were under 35 increased (45% in 2024/25 vs. 40% in 2019/20)
- the proportion of apprentices from ethnic minorities increased (17% in 2024/25 vs. 14% in 2019/20)
- the proportion of apprentices with LLDD also increased (22% in 2024/25 vs. 16% in 2019/20).

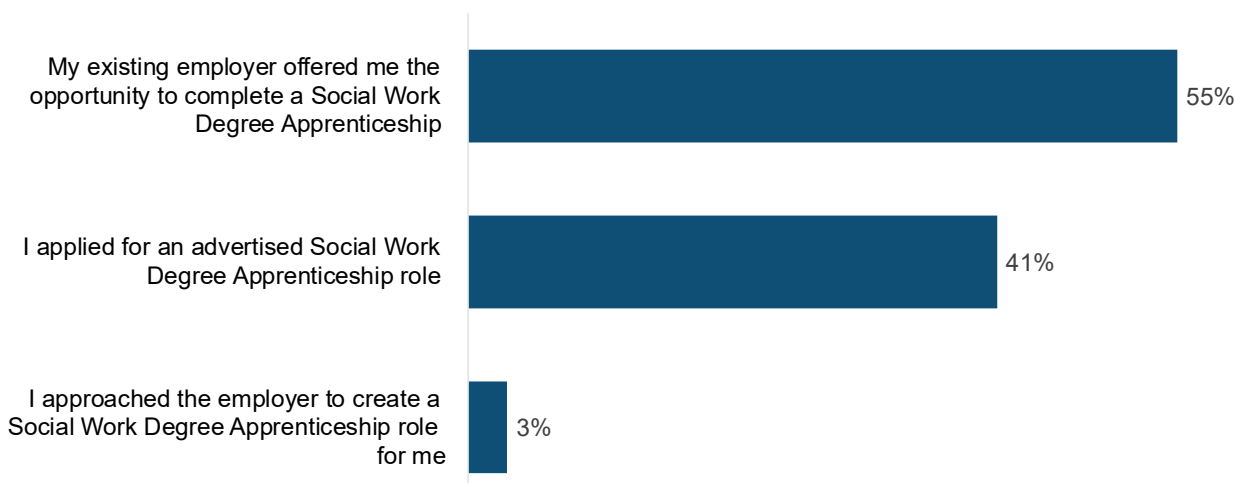
Pathway into the apprenticeship

Figure 3 shows that just over half (55%) of apprentices surveyed were offered the opportunity to do the apprenticeship by their existing employer. Around two-fifths (41%) applied for an advertised apprenticeship role, and a minority (3%) approached the employer directly to create an apprenticeship role for them. In interviews with employers, most said they advertised the apprenticeship internally via an internal jobs board. A small number recruited both internally and externally, advertising apprenticeship posts on the local authority website. Where apprentices were only recruited internally, this usually involved a couple of rounds of interviewing, while some employers introduced the apprenticeship programme with specific internal recruits in mind, and the recruitment process was less formalised. Recruitment approaches for the apprenticeship are discussed further in Employers' motivations for offering the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship.

¹⁴ Note that as the ILR was drawn in June 2025, this is not a full academic year as it only includes starts between August 2024 and the end of May 2025

¹⁵ 2019/20 has been used as 2018/19 had fewer than 100 starts and these were concentrated in particular regions.

Figure 3. How the opportunity to do the apprenticeship came about



A17. Which of the following best describes how the opportunity to undertake your apprenticeship came about? Base: All apprentices surveyed (1,216).

Surveyed completed apprentices were more likely than current apprentices to have been offered the apprenticeship by their employer (59% vs. 52% respectively). Current apprentices were instead more likely to have applied for an advertised role (45% vs. 37% of completed apprentices), suggesting a potential shift in employers' recruitment approach. Some employers interviewed reflected that they had initially introduced the apprenticeship with specific staff in mind for the programme, but had introduced more formalised recruitment processes for subsequent cohorts due to the growing popularity of the route.

[In the beginning] we had [specific] members of staff who we wanted to give an opportunity to move up into social work... they were [already] really good at that direct work with families and vulnerable adults... but they struggle sometimes with the academic [side]. We've [now] had to put [in] some quite stringent entry requirements because it's so popular... They have to do all sorts of things, webinars, interviews, skills screening. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Older apprentices surveyed were more likely to have been offered the opportunity than younger apprentices (63% aged over 45 years old vs. 49% aged under 35 years old), and less likely to have applied for an advertised role (33% vs. 48%). This may in part be because older apprentices were more likely than younger apprentices to have been working for their apprenticeship employer prior to the apprenticeship (97% vs. 85%).

Most surveyed apprentices were employed by a local authority during their apprenticeship (87%). Only small proportions of apprentices were employed by the NHS or other public health bodies (5%), private providers (3%), a Trust or partnership providing social services on behalf of a local authority (3%) and a charity or voluntary sector organisation (2%).

Surveyed apprentices working mainly in child and family social work were less likely than those working in adult social work to have been employed by the NHS or another public

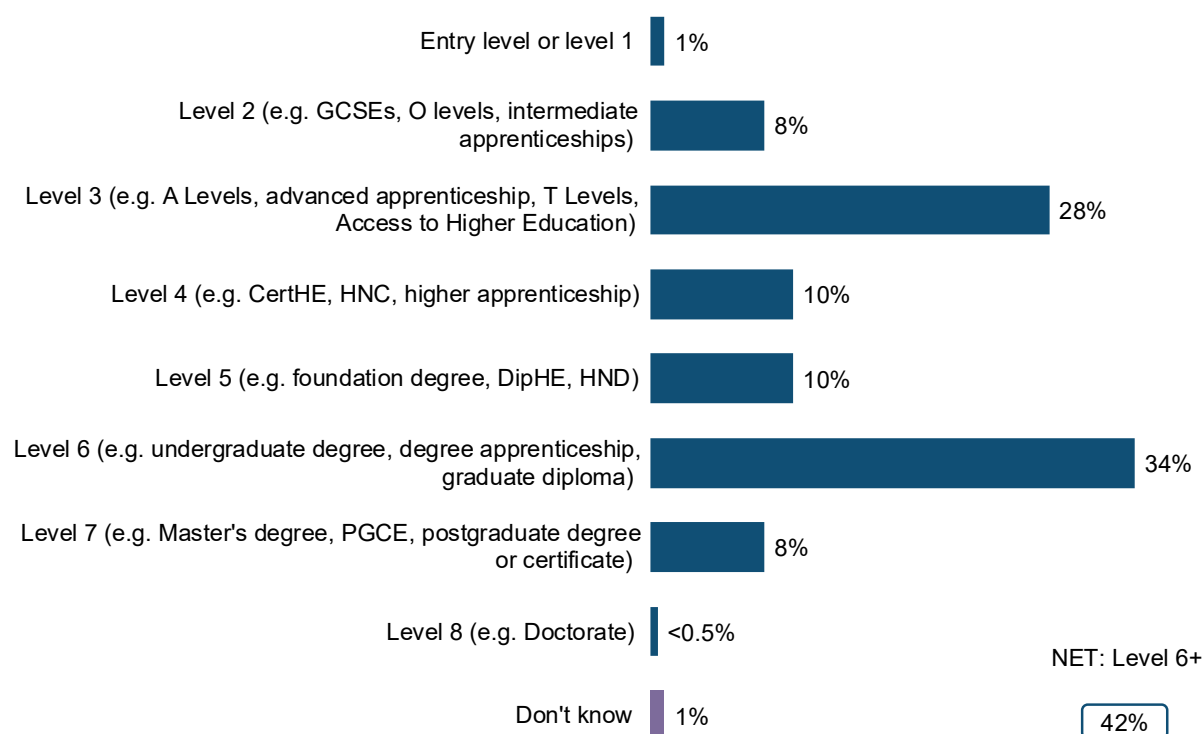
health body (2% vs. 7%). Apprentices who mainly worked in child and family social work were more likely to have been employed by a private company or independent provider compared with those mainly working in adult social work (5% vs. 1% respectively).

Prior qualifications

Around two-fifths (42%) of apprentices surveyed had a qualification at Level 6 or higher prior to starting the apprenticeship, including around one-third (34%) who were qualified to degree-level, as shown in Figure 4.

Non-completers surveyed were more likely to have a qualification at Level 6 or above (57%), compared with current apprentices (40%) and completed apprentices (43%). Similarly, younger apprentices were more likely to have a qualification at Level 6 or higher (45% under 35 years vs. 37% over 45 years), as were apprentices from ethnic minority backgrounds (49% vs. 41% for white apprentices). By region, having a qualification at Level 6 or above was most likely for apprentices in the North East (60%) and least likely for apprentices in the South East (29%), who were instead more likely to have a highest qualification at Level 3 (42% vs. 28% overall).

Figure 4. Highest level of qualification prior to the apprenticeship



A6. What was your highest level of qualification before starting the apprenticeship? Base: All apprentices surveyed (1,216).

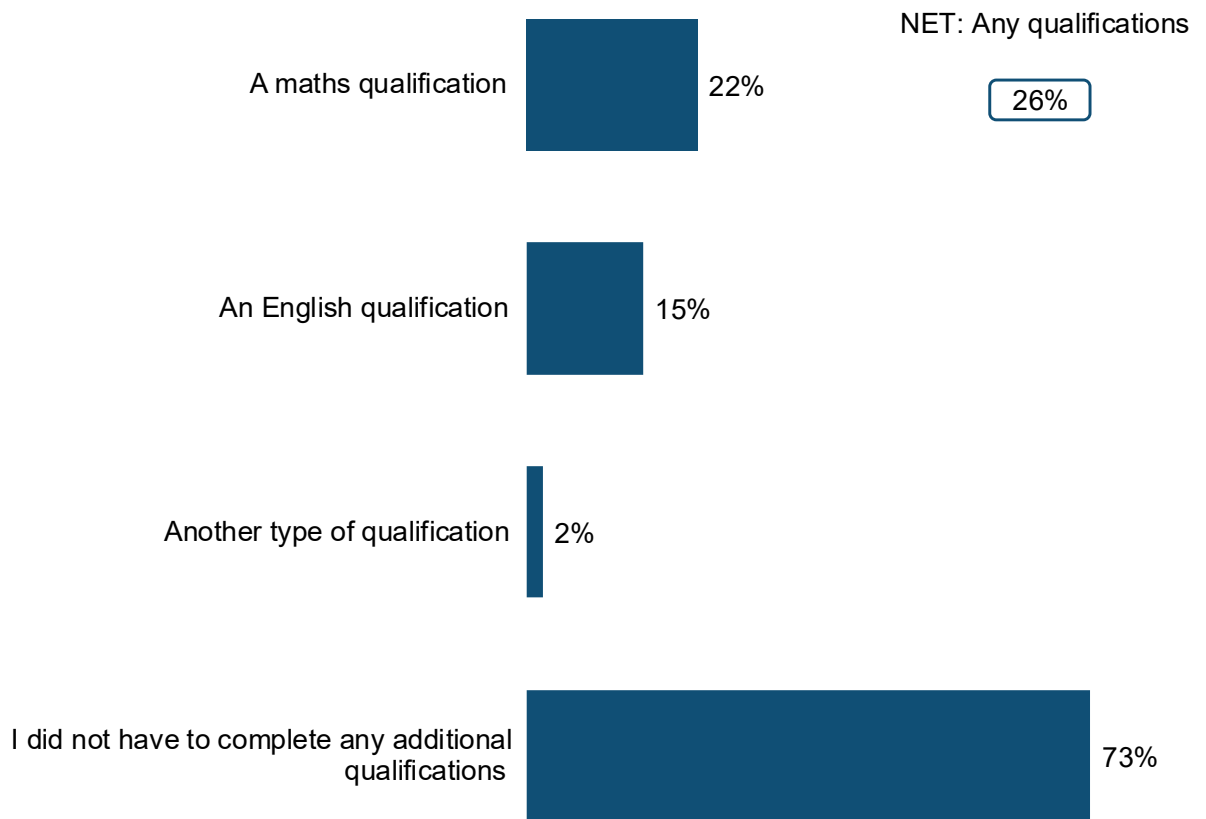
As shown in Figure 5, before starting the apprenticeship, around a quarter (26%) of apprentices surveyed had to complete an additional qualification – just over one-fifth

(22%) had to complete a maths qualification and around 1 in 7 (15%) an English qualification.

Surveyed apprentices qualified to Level 2 (or lower) prior to starting the apprenticeship were the most likely to have to complete additional qualifications (52% vs. 20% of those already qualified to Level 6 or above). In particular, those qualified to Level 2 were more likely to have to complete additional Maths and/or English qualifications (49% and 35% respectively) reflecting the entry requirements for the degree apprenticeship.

Surveyed apprentices working mainly in adult social work were more likely to have been required to complete additional qualifications compared with those in child and family social work (29% vs. 22%). This was also the case for older apprentices (39% over 45 years old vs. 11% aged under 25 years old) and apprentices from ethnic minorities (36% vs. 24% of white apprentices). Apprentices in London were most likely to have to complete additional qualifications (38%) while those in the North East were least likely (13%), reflecting patterns in prior qualification levels.

Figure 5. Whether apprentice needed to complete or agree to complete any additional qualifications to meet the entry requirements



A7. Before applying to your apprenticeship, did you have to complete or agree to complete any additional qualifications or courses, to meet the entry criteria? Base: All apprentices surveyed (1,216).

Individual motivations for doing the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship

This chapter uses findings from surveyed apprentices and qualitative interviews with apprentices to examine apprentices' motivations for pursuing a career in social work and for doing the apprenticeship as their route to becoming a qualified social worker. It explores their awareness of other routes into social work and their perceptions of how the apprenticeship compares with other routes.

Key findings

Four-fifths (80%) of surveyed apprentices had considered becoming a qualified social worker before hearing about the apprenticeship, with one fifth (21%) saying they had always wanted to be a social worker and just under half (47%) having considered it for 'some time'.

The most common reason for wanting to become a qualified social worker was to help people or make a difference (86%). Apprentices interviewed discussed how social workers were able to make a tangible difference in peoples' lives.

The vast majority (97%) of apprentices were aware of other routes into social work before deciding to do the apprenticeship. Apprentices were most commonly aware of an undergraduate degree in social work (91%).

Around four-fifths (81%) said the apprenticeship was their preferred route to become a qualified social worker.

If unsuccessful in securing an apprenticeship place, the majority (63%) reported they would not have taken an alternative route to qualify as a social worker. Only a quarter (24%) said they would have taken a different route, most commonly an undergraduate degree in social work (30%). Many apprentices interviewed explained that other entry routes were not accessible to them due to eligibility criteria or cost (including loss of earnings).

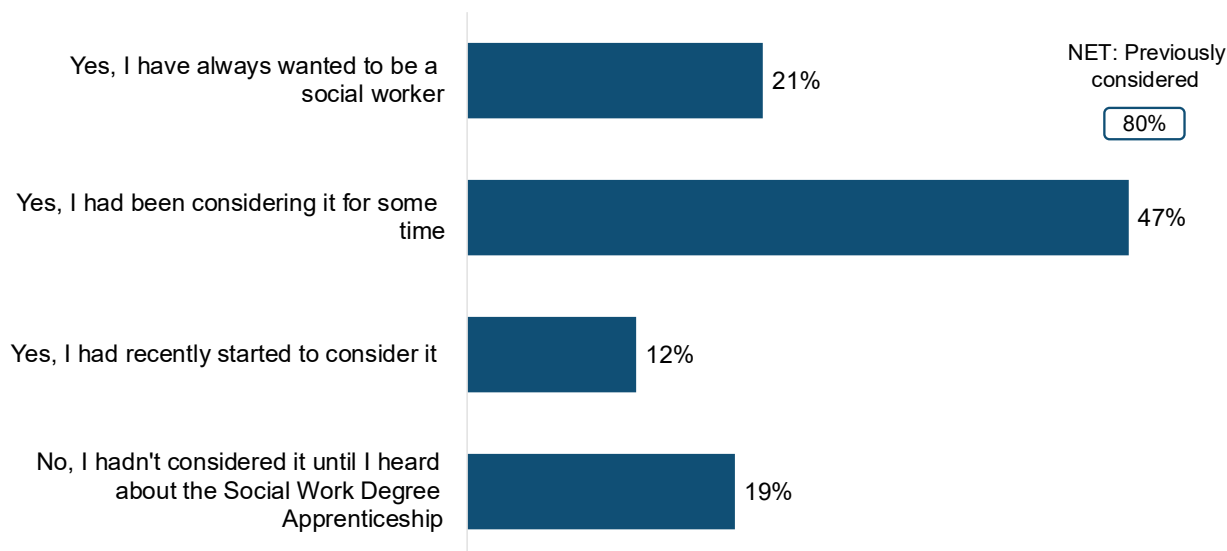
The ability to earn while learning (33%), the financial affordability compared with other routes (24%) and the ability to stay with the same employer (20%) were key reasons for choosing the apprenticeship over other routes.

What attracted apprentices to a career in social work

Four-fifths (80%) of apprentices had considered becoming a qualified social worker prior to hearing about the apprenticeship. As shown in Figure 6, around one-fifth (21%) had

always wanted to be a social worker, just under half (47%) had been considering it for some time and 12% had recently started to consider it.

Figure 6. Whether apprentices had considered becoming a social worker before hearing about the apprenticeship



A8. Had you considered becoming a qualified social worker before you heard about the apprenticeship?
Base: All apprentices (1,216).

Apprentices who already worked in the Health and Social Work sector were more likely to have previously considered becoming a qualified social worker than those who worked outside of the sector beforehand (82% vs. 68%).

Female apprentices were more likely than male apprentices to say that they have always wanted to be a social worker (22% vs. 14% respectively). By age group, younger apprentices were more likely to have recently started to consider it (17% under 35 years vs. 8% over 45 years), while older apprentices were more likely to have always wanted to be a social worker (27% over 45 years vs. 14% under 35 years).

As shown in Figure 7, the most common drivers to become a qualified social worker were wanting to help people or make a difference (86%), perceived alignment with political or personal beliefs (65%), and opportunities for career progression (63%). Just under half (47%) cited wanting a stable, well-paid job as a reason for qualifying.

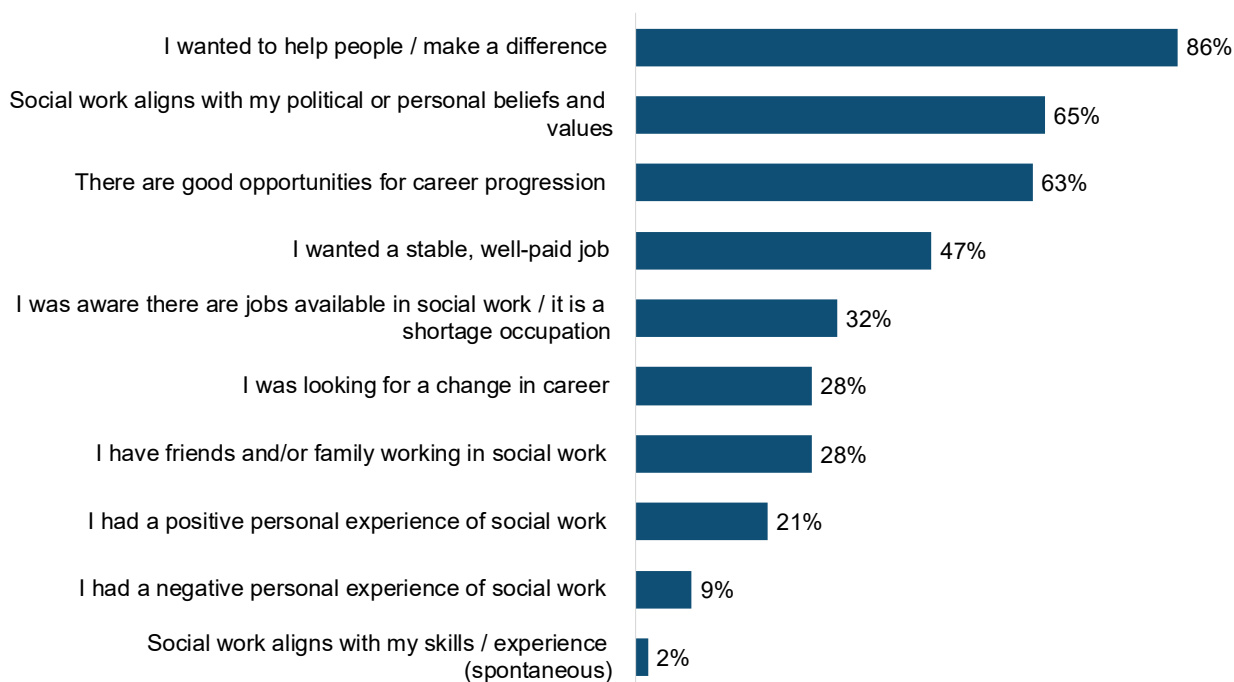
Apprentices mainly working in adult social work were more likely than those in child and family social work to cite the motivation that social work aligns with their personal or political beliefs (71% vs. 61%) and that they had a positive personal experience of social work (25% vs. 18%). Those mainly in child and family social work were instead more likely to say they were looking for a change of career (33% vs. 23%).

Younger apprentices (under 35 years old) were more likely to cite each of the top 7 reasons shown in Figure 7, compared with those over 45 years old. This suggests that

younger apprentices may identify with more reasons for qualifying as a social worker compared to older apprentices. Most notably, 57% of younger apprentices cited that they were interested in social work because they wanted a stable, well-paid job compared with 37% of older apprentices.

Apprentices with learning difficulties and those with disabilities were more likely than those without to cite having a negative personal experience of social work as a key driver for becoming a social worker themselves (16% and 15% respectively vs. 8%).

Figure 7. Reasons for deciding to become a qualified social worker



A9. Why did you decide you wanted to become a qualified social worker? Base: All apprentices (1,216).

Similar themes around the desire to help others and make a difference came through from the apprentice interviews. Many described social work as “fulfilling” and “interesting”, and explained how they joined the sector because they were motivated by a desire to help and support people:

It requires a specific person for social work. It's not for everyone. And I feel like I'm that person, I've always been in the supporting role and wanting to help people, I like all of that. That's what drives me. That is my motivation. - *Completed apprentice*

A few interviewees had worked alongside social workers in their previous role which then inspired them to qualify themselves. Others felt becoming a social worker would enable them to make more of a difference in contrast to their previous role working with children or vulnerable people outside of the health and social work sector:

As a teacher... you can see on their face that... they're hungry... worried about what's happening at home... and you're not helping them with that... it was just very frustrating... it made me realise that [a social work] role was exactly what I was looking for. - *Current apprentice*

I think when I worked for a charity, supporting families of disabled children, because it was a voluntary organisation, there wasn't much of a role I could play in making change, I could only advise and direct families to relevant services. So it just made me look into a statutory role to see how I can support families from a different angle. - *Current apprentice*

Those already working in the health and social work sector without a degree felt that they had already reached the 'ceiling' of their career and would not be able to progress further without qualifying as a social worker, which requires a degree.

In one sense, I felt like I'd reached the limit [of] jobs I could go for. So I was a manager then, I was managing youth services, but as services transitioned more under social care, I sort of knew I couldn't really get anywhere without a social worker degree. And [they were] offering it for free. So I thought, well, go on then, I'll do it. - *Completed apprentice*

Apprentices were also motivated by the variety of career pathways available once they qualified as a social worker, reflecting on the range of different roles and practice areas of social work. They felt this would enable them to tailor their role to their interests and progress into different areas once they had qualified:

There's always loads to do [in child and family] social work because it's so broad, isn't it? You can do anything in terms of working in schools or working for the local authority, whatever I want. - *Current apprentice*

None of the apprentices interviewed felt pay was a motivator or a barrier for joining the sector. However, there were mixed views regarding pay – some felt it was satisfactory and others felt the sector was known as somewhat poorly paid. A small number of apprentices mentioned job security and the high demand for social workers as a motivation for qualifying, although both pay and job security were discussed less frequently than the fulfilling nature of the work.

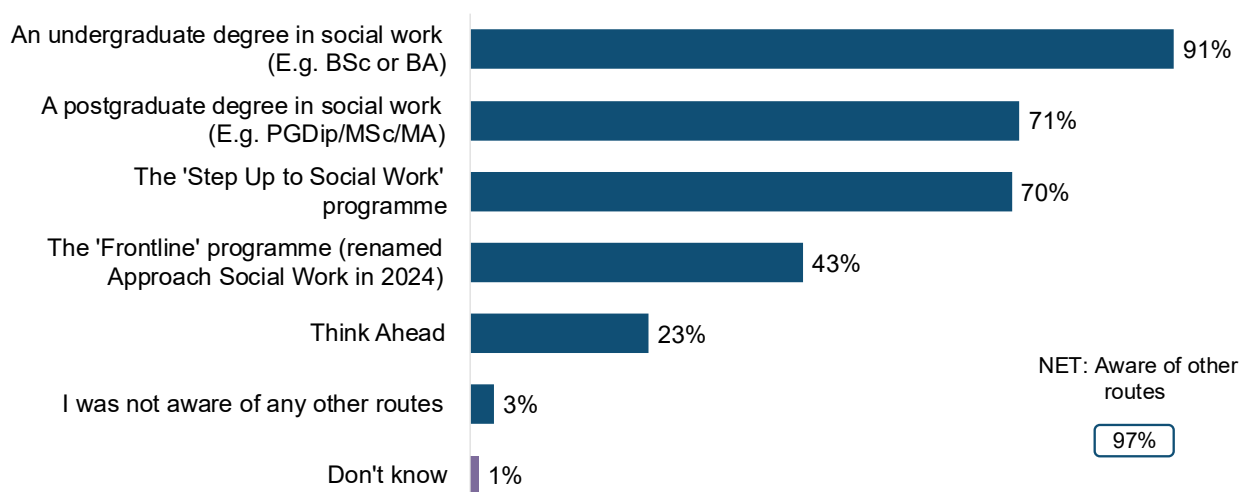
Everywhere needs social workers. - *Current apprentice*

[I was motivated by] job security, definitely. Because of, the unfortunate way that some people live and the [financial] hardship that people face.... I always thought 'the jobs are safe there'. - *Completed apprentice*

Awareness of other routes

Almost all apprentices (97%) were aware of other routes into social work before deciding to do the apprenticeship. As shown in Figure 8, most apprentices were aware of the undergraduate route into social work (91%). The majority were also aware of a postgraduate degree in social work (71%) and the 'Step Up to Social Work' programme (known as 'Step Up') (70%). Less than half (43%) of apprentices had heard of the 'Approach' programme and less than a quarter (23%) had heard of Think Ahead.

Figure 8. Awareness of other routes into social work



A12. Which of the following routes into social work were you aware of before deciding to do the apprenticeship? Base: Apprentices aware of other routes (1,155).

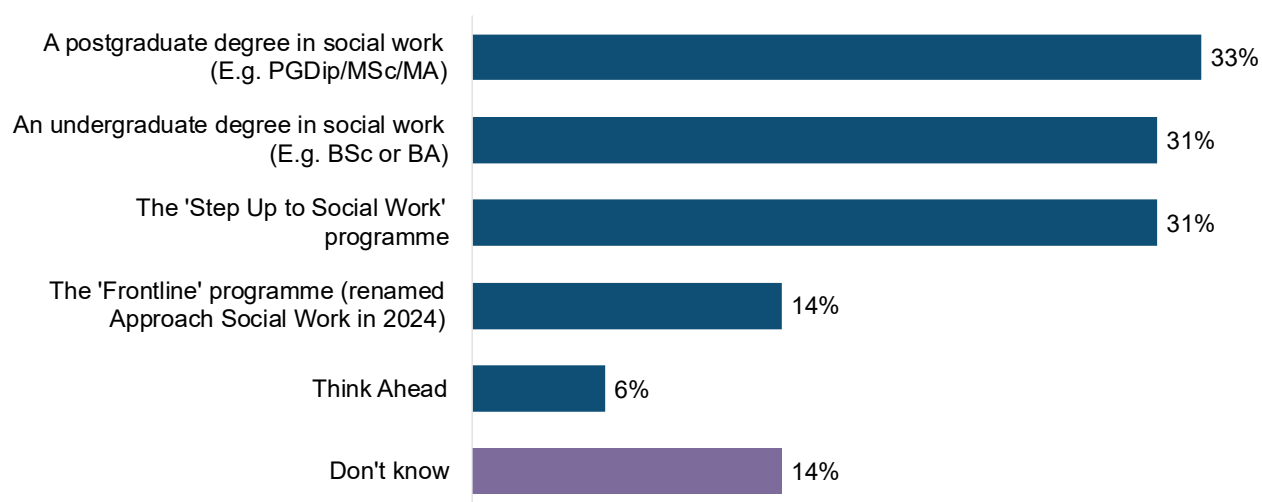
Route preferences

Around four-fifths (81%) said the apprenticeship was their preferred route to become a qualified social worker. Apprentices mainly working in adult social work (86%) were more likely to say it was their preferred route than those working mainly in child and family social work (79%) and those working across both practice areas equally (68%). Similarly, male apprentices were more likely than female apprentices to report the apprenticeship as their preferred route (87% vs. 81%).

Those who indicated that the apprenticeship was not their preferred route were asked which route they would have preferred to do at the time of applying. As shown in Figure 9, the most common route was a postgraduate degree in social work (33%), closely followed by an undergraduate degree in social work (31%) and the Step Up programme (31%). More than 1 in 10 apprentices were unsure (14%).

Overall, this equates to 3% of all apprentices who would have preferred to do a postgraduate degree, 3% who would have preferred to an undergraduate degree and 3% who would have preferred the Step Up to Social Work programme.

Figure 9. Preferred route to qualify as a social worker



A14. At the time, which route or routes would you have preferred to do instead? Base: All who indicated the apprenticeship was not their preferred route (115).

Those already qualified to degree level or higher (Level 6+), whose preferred route was not the apprenticeship, were more likely to have preferred to undertake a postgraduate degree (47%). This may be because a postgraduate degree allows them to qualify faster than the apprenticeship or because it requires an existing degree qualification, although the research did not provide evidence of this. Those qualified to Level 5 or lower were more likely to be unsure what they would have preferred to do instead (23%).

Apprentices mainly working in child and family social work were more likely to have preferred Step Up (42% vs. 19% for adult social work¹⁶) but less likely to have preferred Think Ahead (2% vs. 15% for adult social work). This aligns with expectations given that Step Up is a training programme for child and family social work, whereas Think Ahead is a training programme for adult social work. Therefore, child and family social workers may have a lower awareness of Think Ahead, and adult social workers may have a lower awareness of Step Up, which may contribute to the differing preferences.

Route preferences if they had not secured a place on the apprenticeship

Apprentices surveyed were also asked what they would have done if they had been unsuccessful in securing a place on the apprenticeship. The majority (63%) reported they would not have undertaken another route to qualify as a social worker. Only a quarter (24%) indicated they would have undertaken another route to qualify, with a further 12% unsure.

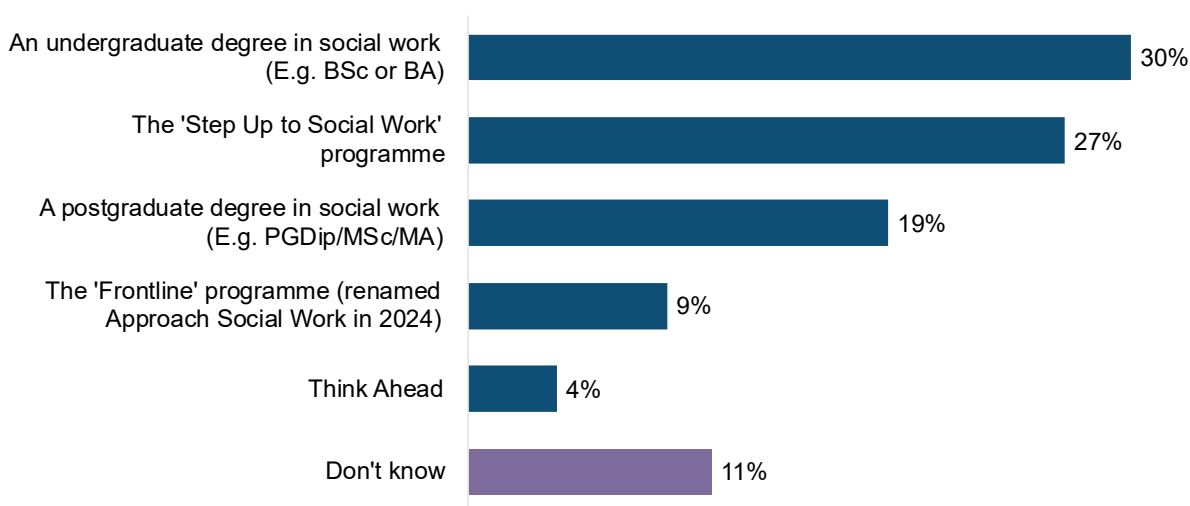
Younger apprentices were more likely to say they would have undertaken another route to qualify (32% under 35 years old vs. 19% over 45 years old), as were apprentices from

¹⁶ Please note that the base at this question for apprentices working in adult social work is low (39). Findings should be interpreted with caution.

ethnic minority backgrounds (32% vs. 22% of white apprentices) and those who were hired externally (36% vs. 22% of internal hires). Apprentices who held a Level 6 or equivalent qualification prior to the apprenticeship were also more likely to say they would have qualified through a different route if they had not done the apprenticeship (31% vs. 24% average) which may reflect their eligibility for a wider range of routes.

Those who said they would have qualified through a different route if they had not done the apprenticeship were asked which route they would most likely have taken. As shown in Figure 10, the most likely alternative route was an undergraduate degree in social work (30%), followed by the Step Up to Social Work programme (27%). These preferences may be influenced by apprentices' awareness of other routes.

Figure 10. Route apprentices would most likely have taken if had not secured a place on the apprenticeship



A16. Which route would you most likely have taken? Base: All who would have undertaken another route if they had not secured an apprenticeship place (289).

As may be expected, those who held a Level 6 or higher qualification prior to the apprenticeship were less likely to say they would have undertaken an undergraduate degree compared to those with a Level 5 or lower qualification (8% vs 56%). Those with a previous Level 6 or higher qualification were more likely to say they would have undertaken the Step Up programme (38% vs 14% of those with a Level 5 or lower qualification level) or a postgraduate degree (32% vs 5%).

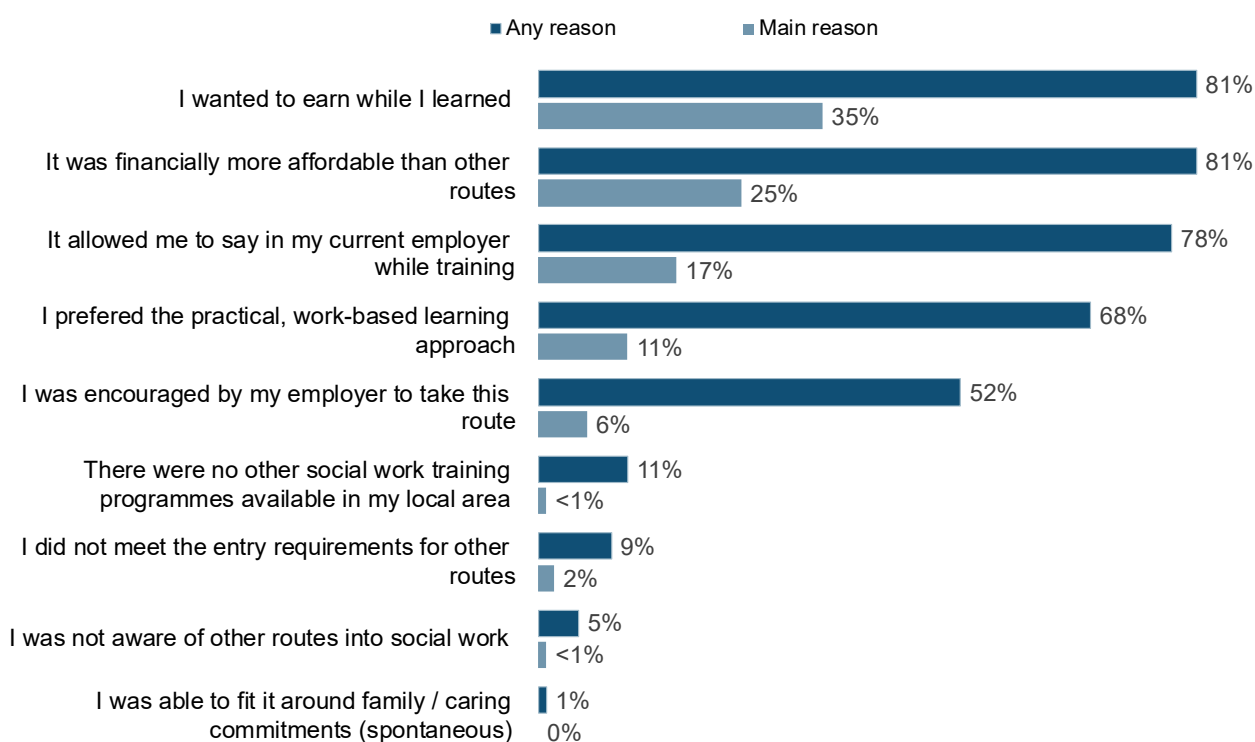
Apprentices who mainly worked in child and family social work were more likely to say they would have taken the Step Up route compared with those who mainly worked in adult social work (32% vs. 20%), but less likely to say they would have taken the Think Ahead route (1% vs. 7%). This reflects those seeking routes into either adult or child and family social work specifically (with Think Ahead focused on adult mental health social work, and Step Up being a pathway into child and family social work). Among apprentices who

mainly worked in child and family social work, they were more likely to say they would have taken the Step Up route compared to Approach (32% vs 11%).

Reasons for choosing the apprenticeship

Surveyed apprentices were asked to select from a pre-coded list, all reasons for choosing the apprenticeship as their route to qualify. They were also asked to indicate which of these was the main reason. As shown in Figure 11, the most common reasons for choosing the apprenticeship were financial – 81% cited the ability to earn while learning (35% said this was the main reason) and the financial affordability of the route (25% said this was the main reason).

Figure 11. Reasons for choosing the apprenticeship route (any reason and main reason)



A10. Why did you choose the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship as your route to qualify as a social worker? A11. Which of these was the MAIN reason for choosing the apprenticeship route? Base: All apprentices (1,216).

Younger apprentices were more likely to cite being able to earn while learning (37% of those under 35 vs. 29% of those over 45). Apprentices with childcare responsibilities were also more likely to report the financial affordability of the route as the main reason, compared with those without any caring responsibilities (27% vs. 21%).

Apprentices already qualified to degree-level or higher (Level 6+) were more likely to be motivated by the ability to earn while they learned (34% vs. 19% of those qualified to Level 2 or below).

Financial affordability was also a strong theme in the apprentice interviews, with several apprentices highlighting this as a key reason for choosing the apprenticeship route over others, especially the ability to study without needing to pay tuition fees or accrue student debt. This was the case for both apprentices who already had a degree and those who did not.

Many interviewed apprentices said they would not have been able to undertake the traditional university route as they could not afford to take time away from full-time work, especially if they had a family or other caring commitments:

I need my wages because... I need to be able to provide for my family. I think going to college and accruing student fees wouldn't have been an option for me either. Stopping work to go to university full time wouldn't have been an option either. So I think [the motivation] was definitely being able to [do it] whilst studying part time and still getting that same wage is a massive... a massive encouragement to do it. - *Current apprentice*

It should be noted that the survey did not capture whether other preferred routes (when specified) were available, affordable and feasible.

Employer interviews revealed different approaches to offering the apprenticeship – some employers reported that they paid apprentices the same wage as their prior role, but required a pay cut for other routes, while others provided the apprentices with less pay than their previous role. Among interviewed apprentices who already had a degree and were eligible for other routes, such as Approach, they reported that the pay cut required to transition to the training role was often not financially viable.

Under one in ten (9%) surveyed apprentices selected not meeting the entry requirements for other routes as a reason for choosing the apprenticeship, and a minority (2%) selected this as the main reason. This was discussed in the interviews, where some apprentices explained that they were not eligible for other routes (such as Step Up and Approach) as they did not have a degree, or did not meet the grade requirements.

They did have [other] routes into social work then, but when I asked about it, I couldn't get on certain programmes because I didn't have a degree... [With] Step Up I think you already have to have a degree to get onto it. - *Current apprentice*

For these apprentices, the apprenticeship therefore provided them with the degree they required to progress in the sector. Some employers reported guaranteeing apprentices an interview for the ASYE programme. Others went further and offered apprentices a guaranteed ASYE place if they qualified, providing apprentices with additional progression after the apprenticeship, alongside job security. Some apprentices felt that this was not the case for people qualifying under other routes with their employer.

You're guaranteed a spot [on the ASYE], it's probably hard to get that on other routes. - *Current apprentice*

Most interviewed apprentices had expectations before the apprenticeship that social workers have a high workload. Some felt that a benefit of the apprenticeship route was its longer programme length, which they believed allowed for a better work-life balance than shorter training routes. They also felt that the slower transition into social work through the apprenticeship meant that the workload once they qualified was less of a 'shock to the system' (as one apprentice called it).

I think just the way it's spread out, I think it offers a better work-life balance... This route enabled you to still learn, [but] at a slower pace, I know that the [other] routes are a bit shorter, so I felt like this just offered more opportunities. - *Current apprentice*

Among surveyed apprentices, 11% said the practical work-based learning approach was their main reason for choosing the apprenticeship. Current apprentices were more likely than completers and non-completers to cite their main reason as a preference for a practical, work-based learning approach (15% vs 9% and 2% respectively). Apprentices working mainly in child and family social work were also more likely to report this (14% vs. 8% of those working in adult social work). Younger apprentices were more likely to cite preferring the practical, work-based approach (18% of those under 35 vs. 7% of those over 45) than older apprentices.

Similarly, interviewed apprentices often discussed how they preferred the apprenticeship's mix of academic and practical learning compared with the more intensive academic learning required for the traditional university route. For the interviewed apprentices who did not have a degree prior to the apprenticeship, they said that the style of learning at university could be unfamiliar and intimidating, or even if they did have a degree, they thought the traditional university route would not be practical enough to prepare them for a career in social work:

It was better for me doing it this way... being able to put into practice what I was learning... kind of imprints it in your brain a bit better... it's not just theory you're actually doing it. - *Completed apprentice*

However, a few discussed how the university route was likely to support a better work-life balance than the apprenticeship as it would not require them to juggle on-the-job and off-the-job training at the same time.

Employers' motivations for offering the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship

This chapter uses case study interviews with strategic and operational leads in local authorities offering the apprenticeship and interviews with strategic leads in local authorities not offering the apprenticeship. It examines employer's motivations for offering the apprenticeship, including the other routes they offer and any considerations they have. This chapter also looks at the way the apprenticeship has been advertised and why some local authorities do not offer the apprenticeship route.

Key findings

Many factors were considered by strategic leads in their decision to offer the apprenticeship. The most common perceived benefits were the progression opportunities for internal staff and employer retention. Many felt this 'growing your own' ethos was central to their decision. However, there were a few drawbacks to consider such as the time investment to get a qualified social worker and the need to backfill the role of the internal hire when they are on placement or studying.

The role of government funding was important to employers who previously received funding through the Employer Support Fund (ESF), particularly in getting the programme set up. For many, particularly those who did not receive ESF funding, there were financial constraints on the scale of their offering, such as the ability to offer standalone roles for apprentices.

Most of the case study local authorities only hired internally and advertised via email and intranet. Whilst prospective apprentices were approached by their manager or colleagues to suggest they apply, there were still formalised interview processes with two rounds in most cases.

For the small number of interviewed local authorities who were not currently offering the apprenticeship, while they recognised the potential benefits of the apprenticeship they were ultimately deterred from offering it by wider factors, specifically their lack of child and family social worker vacancies and small size.

Other routes offered by local authorities

Employers interviewed offered a variety of different entry routes alongside the apprenticeship, including facilitating placements for undergraduate and postgraduate students. Employers said the volume of intake from other routes varied in line with their expected number of newly qualified social worker vacancies available. For many employers, because the apprenticeship programme spans 3 years, it was too early to

forecast how the apprenticeship route would affect future newly qualified social worker intake from other routes, or vacancy rates.

Many employers preferred supporting as many entry routes as possible. They wanted their recruitment pathways to draw from a diversity of experiences and types of people and hire from a pool of qualified social workers who have experience in their locality.

We've got vacancies as well. So we need as many different ways of filling those vacancies as possible. When we advertise for social work vacancies, just on the open market, you don't get many applicants. And the applicants you do get are always newly qualified social workers [usually recent university graduates]. The apprenticeship is much better because they're going to come with more experience. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Reasons for offering the apprenticeship route

Strategic leads became aware of the apprenticeship through different sources including through a local network of social workers, learning providers and through Department for Education, with some noting this was because of previous grant funding available through an Employer Support Fund.

Many strategic leads who were involved in decision making thought the apprenticeship offered mutual advantages to employers and apprentices.

When asked about their motivations for introducing the apprenticeship route, some strategic leads outlined the benefits to their internal staff recruited through this route. These benefits were similar to those outlined by apprentices themselves in Apprentices' motivations for doing the apprenticeship. Both strategic and operational leads emphasised wanting to give an opportunity to their own employees in one of two circumstances. Firstly, when they had reached a pay or progression ceiling in their current role and secondly when there was no other route available for the employee to qualify, for a range of reasons including financial constraints. For example, employers referred to employees who did not hold a degree or who were not in a position to leave their job to become a full-time student. While they described this as supporting employees, they also expected it to strengthen recruitment and retention by showing that they are a 'good' employer who invests in staff.

Expected employee retention was a key motivator for offering the apprenticeship. Retention was considered both in terms of existing workforce, through internal hiring, and in terms of retention after completing the route in comparison with those who have qualified through other routes, through building a greater sense of resilience. Many strategic leads felt that practical experience, both gained through the apprenticeship and

pre-existing in the more experienced applicants for the programme, meant that those qualifying through the apprenticeship route were more resilient.

Anecdotally, I think that [apprentices are] probably a bit more resilient [...] just a direct comparison, the people who are successful in our current apprenticeship program, progressing to the apprenticeship, are those who have direct work experience with children and families, particularly those ones who are at the more difficult stage of engagement of working with those families. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Additionally, some strategic and operational leads felt that apprentices had experienced the more challenging realities of social work, due to their on-the-job learning, compared to those who had qualified through the traditional university route, with only placement experience. One strategic lead, at an employer who did not yet have any completed apprentices, perceived that those that qualified through the undergraduate route were likely to have a lower retention rate than those who would go on to qualify through the apprenticeship, who they thought had a better understanding of what to expect due to their work experience in the sector.

A lot of people [coming through the undergraduate route] start social work and then drop out. They do one year or two years of being a social worker and then they leave. It's different from what they expected. Whereas, we haven't had a chance to test this yet, but I feel very confident that our apprentices [are] coming into social work with a really good understanding and a realistic expectation of what social work is. Because they've worked with families, they've worked alongside social workers... they know what they're coming into. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Strategic leads talked about the role of the apprenticeship route in retention in the context of having a more stable workforce, a stronger recruitment strategy and avoiding agency workers. For example, one strategic lead described workforce stability as a critical enabler of quality practice and organisational performance, highlighting the apprenticeship's contribution to a move away from agency staffing and linking this to service quality and inspection outcomes.

We've moved to a point where we don't have any agency workers within the department at all... it makes an absolutely enormous difference... because we've got a really stable workforce who were able to grow and develop. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Many strategic and operational leads held the value of 'growing your own' as key to their reason for offering the apprenticeship programme. A perceived benefit of offering the apprenticeship to internal employees was that they would already have adopted the behaviours, culture and ways of working at the employer. Having knowledge about internal systems and team structures would also help apprentices to start their roles with minimal

adjustment time. Some strategic leads felt that internal employees would have a greater loyalty to the employer and therefore it would increase retention.

The 'grow your own' ethos was also extended beyond internal recruitment. A small number of strategic leads used the apprenticeship as a way to recruit people who lived more locally, which allowed them to build a workforce which better reflected the demographics of the area. They thought that these people would bring good links with the community and knowledge of the area. One strategic lead said one of the biggest factors for them in choosing the apprenticeship route was their commitment to equality, diversity and inclusion.

I think a big thing for us ... was growing your own and social capital across [the area] as well. So really making sure we're investing in the wider community. So not just employees of [local authorities], but really looking out there to see who else is out and about that wants to train. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Additionally, the ability to keep employees in their substantive post was perceived by some to be a benefit over other routes. For example, one strategic lead compared the apprenticeship to the traditional university route which had been previously used as a secondment opportunity for employees. Keeping apprentices in their substantive posts allowed employers to avoid hiring a fixed term employee to replace the role temporarily (which they described as backfilling).

So historically we had had options regarding sort of seconding people off to university to take degrees. But the difficulty was that took the individual out, effectively out of the workforce, except from placements. Whereas the work based learning route was really appealing for us because it meant we could keep them in the workforce while developing and furthering their skills. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

However, in other cases backfilling roles was seen as a barrier for some strategic leads when considering offering the apprenticeship in comparison with the existing routes they were offering. For example, one strategic lead recognised that Step Up can be operationally "cleaner" for managers because candidates resign their post, whereas apprentices remain employees and undertake placements without backfill. Employers reported that it was not possible to hire someone to cover a 100 day placement, both from a budget and practical perspective.

One of the disadvantages of the apprenticeship programme is people remain within our employment and then move into placements outside of their own team and they're not backfilled, it makes it quite tricky to manage, whereas to compare, if somebody even undertakes the Step Up programme, they resign their posts and they go and be a Step Up student. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Additionally, the length of the training period was viewed by strategic and operational leads at a handful of employers as a drawback of offering the programme. In comparison to the apprenticeship, other routes offered qualified social workers within a shorter period; 1 year for Approach and 14 months for Step Up.

It's a long time before you can get the worker up and running and able to practice [social work]. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Role of government funding

Strategic leads in many of the case study local authorities reported that the availability of government funding over and above the levy was a key enabler for offering the apprenticeship programme. A handful used the previous grant funding available through an Employer Support Fund for the initial set up of the apprenticeship programme and to introduce infrastructure for future cohorts. For example, they hired practice educators, administrators or apprentice leads to oversee the programme. Some of these were already employees, but the funding allowed their time to be “bought” for the apprenticeship. Employers who used grant funding for set up said it was very important to their decision to launch the programme.

It's not like we were 100% dependent on that money... but I think without that amount of money [Employer Support Fund] we would have never got it off the ground. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

One employer that received the funding to support the costs of the apprenticeship route during the first year of training, was unable to undertake any further recruitment because they did not have the funds to support the programme. This employer said there was a desire to continue to recruit more apprentices but more financial planning was needed, and some “creative” thinking about how to fund it, potentially looking at how budget is used for other routes. One strategic lead from a local authority who used both internal and external recruitment said:

It's something that, we are hoping to continue but...our apprenticeship lead... that one-year contract ran out as well so I just need to do a bit more thinking and be a bit more creative around how we can manage, our pot of money, our reduced pot of money, to support the entire student programme slightly differently so that we can accommodate a regular rolling programme of apprentices as well. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

When strategic leads discussed financing the programme they spoke about a few effects of financial constraints. The first was the size of the planned cohort. This was limited both by the number of practice educators available, and the balance of the number of students that were hosted as part of the traditional university route. Some employers had

agreements with partnered learning providers about the number of student placements they would host each year which reduced the capacity of practice educators to support the apprenticeship route. The number of practice educators was also limited by funding for their roles, making financial constraints the limiting factor.

I absolutely think that a significant amount of the decision-making [to only hire 2 apprentices] was based upon us not being able to have the funding available, otherwise we would have had more. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Strategic leads also spoke about how the traditional university route was financed in a more attractive way than the apprenticeship, as the employer was given a set amount of funding from the higher education provider for each student they supported. The placements they offered to apprentices were not funded, and for one employer, learning and development budget was dependent on offering student placements. The financial incentives to offer the apprenticeship were comparatively less attractive, particularly in covering the number of practice educators needed to facilitate placements and backfilling.

My budget for putting on any learning and development opportunity is entirely dependent on how many [university] students we have. Because of our apprentices, we're taking less university students because we only have a finite number of practice educators. And so by the 17 people [apprentices] and they're not all on placement at the same time. In theory, that's 17 university students that we could have had otherwise. And each of those university students brings in about one and a half thousand pounds of funding. So I'm losing out financially from my learning and development budget by having to find placements for apprentices rather than university students. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Government funding was also seen to be quite critical in the offer of the apprenticeship to external candidates, or as a standalone role rather than keeping internal hires in their substantive posts in non-statutory teams. Many were keen to give their apprentices more experience of working in statutory social work but creating a new post required a greater budget. Internal hiring was described as a kind of "brain drain" where resource is moved rather than brought into the local authority.

The thing with recruiting internally, it's great, it works well, I love it, but you are slightly robbing Peter to pay Paul. We're not really growing the social work workforce, are we? Yes, we're bringing in more qualified workers, but effectively we're taking them out of differently qualified roles. We're not increasing the numbers ...actually if I could recruit externally specifically for the apprenticeship I would be bringing new people into social work. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority.*

One strategic lead would have liked to offer the apprenticeship as a standalone role rather than only alongside the roles staff already held, but funding was a barrier. They lost a member of staff to a neighbouring local authority offering the apprenticeship because they could not afford to offer apprenticeships to multiple members of staff from the same service area. While another local authority was able to offer the apprenticeship as a standalone role and to external candidates, this was only because of previous funding schemes that supported the costs of facilitating apprenticeships above the levy.

With some DfE funding from the teaching partnership, we had a number of apprentices that we applied for externally. They applied to join on an apprenticeship programme and they came into social work teams. So there and then they went into the social work team and it does appear that that seems to have been more steady. They've got a much greater exposure much more quickly in terms of what social workers do. -
Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority

Local authority case study – External recruitment introduced through funding

A local authority had previously only offered places to internal candidates, where apprentices would remain in their substantive posts. However, previous funding through the Teaching Partnership allowed the local authority to offer the role as a standalone apprenticeship which was opened up to external, as well as internal candidates.

The local authority framed this as a 'growing your own' approach, where they invested in their internal talent as well as talent from the local community to create 'home grown' social workers with knowledge of the local area.

A current apprentice who had been recruited externally felt that this model had given them more experience than if they had been in a non-statutory role, for example their post at their previous employer which was a family time worker. Operational leads also felt that the immersive nature of being in a social work role was beneficial as apprentices were learning on-the-job instead of just on their placement.

Advertising the apprenticeship

The majority of employers interviewed only hired for the apprenticeship internally, so roles were advertised on an internal jobs board, with communications also sent via email in most cases. Some strategic leads hosted internal briefings for anyone interested in applying, which worked well for setting expectations of what the apprenticeship programme would require in terms of time commitments to studying.

In most cases a couple of rounds of interviewing took place, the first with just the employer and the second with the learning provider. Some employers introduced the apprenticeship

programme with specific internal recruits in mind, and the recruitment process was less formalised. In the other employers, managers had suggested staff they line-managed for the programme and encouraged them to apply. However, most apprentices interviewed had seen the opportunity advertised before they were approached by their manager or colleagues.

There were a few case study employers and 2 strategic leads interviewed from other local authorities who hired both internally and externally. The posts were advertised on the local authority website, and in one case a job board used for public sector jobs in the region. One operational lead suggested that their employer should use more widely known job boards like “Indeed” to attract external candidates who may not be looking at public sector jobs specifically.

If you don't know about [regional job board], because you've never been in a caring profession before, so you know where to look, you're going to miss that. I don't think we necessarily put [the advert] on like Indeed, where most people would be looking. So I think we perhaps do miss a bunch of people that could be really great social workers but they don't know where to look. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Local authority case study – External recruitment introduced to fill vacancies

A local authority recruited 4 apprenticeship places in their first year of offering the route. They initially had a high amount of interest internally so at first, they advertised internally, within the family services team only. However, many who had initially expressed interest chose not to apply once they understood the commitment involved. In particular the time commitment of studying outside of working hours was a barrier for people with young families and caring responsibilities.

To fill the posts the employer opened up the advert to the wider local authority, beyond family services, and then to external candidates and filled the roles with 2 internal and 2 external hires. They now appreciate the balance this has brought to the programme, recognising the benefit of ‘growing their own’ and investing in staff, but also hiring externally which brought in new ways of working and different perspectives.

Reasons for not offering the apprenticeship

There were 3 strategic leads interviewed from local authorities who were not currently offering the apprenticeship. One of these was supporting other routes, and the other 2 were not supporting any routes. Capacity was a significant barrier that prevented them from offering the apprenticeship, as teams were too small to support apprentices. Due to the small size of the social work teams and high staff retention rates, there were also no child and family social worker vacancies available for apprentices to take up after

completion. The strategic leads also felt that if they did take on an apprentice, there would be fewer learning and progression opportunities for them than they would receive in a larger local authority.

One strategic lead reported being very unlikely to consider the apprenticeship in the future unless staff retention dropped and caseload volume increased.

Realistically our size is not going to change and I think that is the main barrier for us in terms of kind of offering these new programmes. -

Strategic Lead, Non-offering local authority

However, another employer did have social work entry routes, including the apprenticeship, under consideration. They recognised the apprenticeship as a way to 'grow your own' and boost the number of social workers settled in the local area. The feasibility of offering the apprenticeship, including finding a learning provider and a supervisor, still needed to be considered.

I think we want, we want [to] grow our own. I think this may be an apprenticeship option. It may be one of the options of a couple of options.

- *Strategic Lead, Non-offering local authority*

Ultimately, it was not the apprenticeship itself but rather wider factors in the employer setting that deterred some employers from offering the apprenticeship. The strategic leads all recognised the apprenticeship as a beneficial route for individuals looking to enter social work.

I feel really sad about it in a way...because I do think there's a lot to be said about giving opportunities to local communities to help ensure that your workforce is representative. - *Strategic Lead, Non-offering local authority*

One of the 3 local authorities interviewed that was not currently offering the apprenticeship had offered it in the past internally only. This local authority had only offered it on a small scale for a limited period of time, and the programme ran at the same time as other entry routes they supported, such as Step Up and Approach. As a small local authority, they found running several programmes simultaneously was challenging due to capacity and funding constraints. The decision to stop running the apprenticeship stemmed from the fact that they felt they were having the least success from this programme compared to others, with mixed completion rates and low retention of the apprentices. However, the strategic lead did not feel that this was an issue with the apprenticeship itself, and believed it was because the few apprentices they had taken on were not emotionally or academically well prepared for the course.

It's been quite complex and we've had to do quite a lot of extra work. Either to support them personally or with the academic side. - *Strategic Lead, Non-offering local authority*

This strategic lead reported that despite having discontinued the apprenticeship in their local authority for the time being, they had not ruled out considering it again in future and would reassess this on an annual basis in relation to funding and capacity.

Experiences of the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship

This chapter uses both survey findings and qualitative research to examine apprentice and employer experiences of the apprenticeship. It explores apprentices' satisfaction with the apprenticeship, how employers managed workload and caseload alongside study requirements, how employers organised supervision and support, and how apprentices experienced practice placements. It also draws out enablers and barriers to successful completion, challenges in delivery, and summarises reasons for non-completion.

Key findings

Most apprentices reported that they felt satisfied with their experience of the apprenticeship overall (92%) with satisfaction predictably lower among non-completers (47%). A small minority felt dissatisfied with the apprenticeship overall (7%).

ILR data showed that 7% of apprentices were non-completers. Most non-completers left within their first year (75%), including 42% who left within the first 6 months. The most common factors linked to non-completion were not having a good work-life balance (48%) and mental health issues (44%).

Apprentices reported high satisfaction with employer related elements overall, particularly that training felt relevant and beneficial to a social work career (95%). However, 23% felt dissatisfied with the balance between time spent learning in the workplace and day-to-day work duties.

Satisfaction with practice placements was also high. Almost all apprentices felt placements were relevant and beneficial (96%).

Employers were also broadly positive about the apprenticeship, particularly as a route for developing and retaining staff, although some described challenges in protecting learning time, managing workload and backfilling posts during placements.

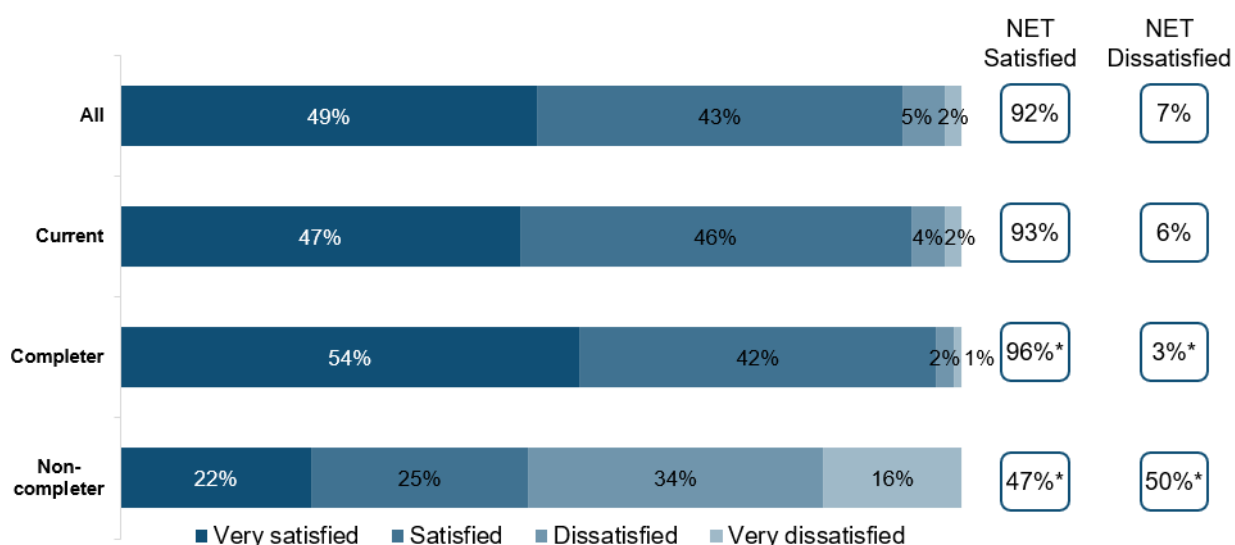
Reflecting the high levels of satisfaction, almost all apprentices said they would recommend the route as a way for people to train as a social worker (99%). The most common reasons for recommending it were being able to earn while learning (87%), learning through practical experience (78%), and feeling the apprenticeship prepared them well for a career in social work (75%).

Apprentices' satisfaction with the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship

Overall satisfaction

As shown in Figure 12, overall, most apprentices (92%) were satisfied with their experience of the apprenticeship. Those who did not complete their apprenticeship were less likely to feel satisfied (47%).

Figure 12. Overall satisfaction with apprenticeship experience



C1. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are/were you with your experience of the apprenticeship? Base: All respondents (1,216), Current (646), Completer (515) and Non-completer (55).

Satisfaction was very high in both practice areas, but highest for apprentices working mainly in adult social work (94%) compared to those working mainly in child and family social work (91%).

There was a relationship between how well apprentices felt the programme prepared or was preparing them for their career and satisfaction with the apprenticeship. Those who felt that the apprenticeship prepared them well for their career were more satisfied (97%) than those who felt the apprenticeship had not prepared them well for their career (59%).

Those who worked for a different employer or were self-employed prior to starting the apprenticeship were less satisfied compared to those already working for their apprenticeship employer (86% vs. 93%).

Apprentices interviewed often linked satisfaction to whether the apprenticeship had a clear structure, predictable routine, and protected study time that stayed consistent even when taught sessions did not run every week. Employers typically provided a protected off-the-job learning day within the working week. Apprentices interviewed explained that structure mattered because it helped them set boundaries with teams and plan study alongside

home life. They described benefitting when employers treated the study day as fixed, and when employers reinforced this through additional support such as dedicated skills sessions, peer spaces, and reflective group supervision. They explained how these support activities are helping them translate learning into practice and manage the emotional demands of frontline work while studying. Apprentices described valuing the predictability of their protected day because it supported planning and balance across work, study and home life.

The beauty of that is you still get paid... but you do 1 day a week at uni...
It gives you a better work-life balance. - *Current apprentice*

Every Friday is a uni off-the-job day. - *Current apprentice*

Apprentices interviewed generally felt that, before starting the apprenticeship, they had a good awareness of what the workload involved. Many had already been working in the sector and so had interacted with social workers in their prior roles, while others were aware of the high demand for social workers. As a result, some anticipated workload pressures and possible understaffing and although some apprentices were dissatisfied with the high workload, they were often not surprised by it.

I knew that there's a lot of [staff] demand, which sort of flows into personal life, and stress that comes within it... I think the biggest reservation or expectation [of being a social worker] was the case load. - *Completed apprentice*

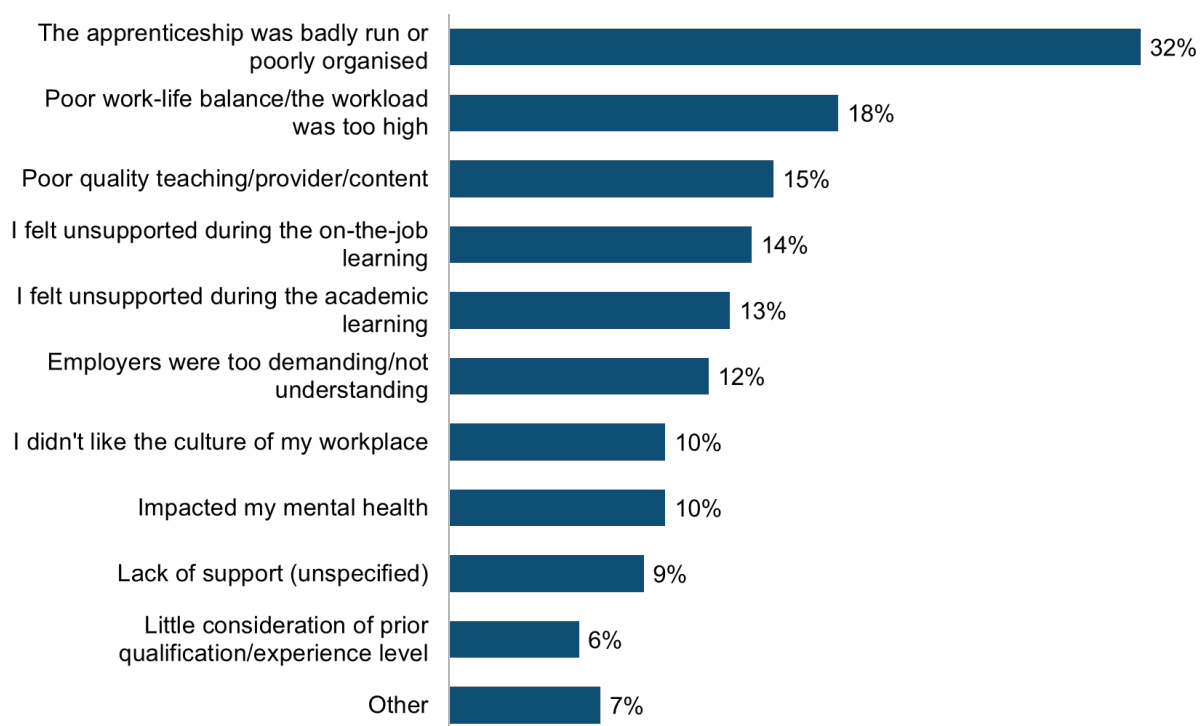
A small number of apprentices interviewed were surprised by the intensity of their workload after they started the apprenticeship, suggesting it was higher than they expected beforehand.

I think being brutally honest, I think I've come into it a little bit naïve... I've been a little bit humbled with the work-life balance. There's been periods where I was really, really struggling due to staff sickness. - *Current apprentice*

Whilst satisfaction was very high, 7% of all apprentices surveyed were dissatisfied with the apprenticeship. These apprentices were asked why in an open-text question, with responses coded for analysis. The most common reason was that the apprenticeship was badly run or poorly organised (32%). Work-life balance (18%) was also a notable factor.

Figure 13 shows reasons mentioned by more than 5 per cent of apprentices who were dissatisfied.

Figure 13. Reasons for dissatisfaction



C2. Why are/were you dissatisfied? Base: All who are/were dissatisfied (87). Responses below 5% not charted.

Across the interviews where apprentices reported dissatisfaction, this was often attributed to inconsistent communication, changing points of contact, or unclear expectations between employers and the learning provider. One completed apprentice described how instability in learning provider staffing reduced the consistency of academic support.

I got more from my employer than the university... [the university] had so many changes in personnel. - *Completed apprentice*

Employers also reported differences in the performance of learning providers involved over the course of the apprenticeship, particularly in relation to communication.

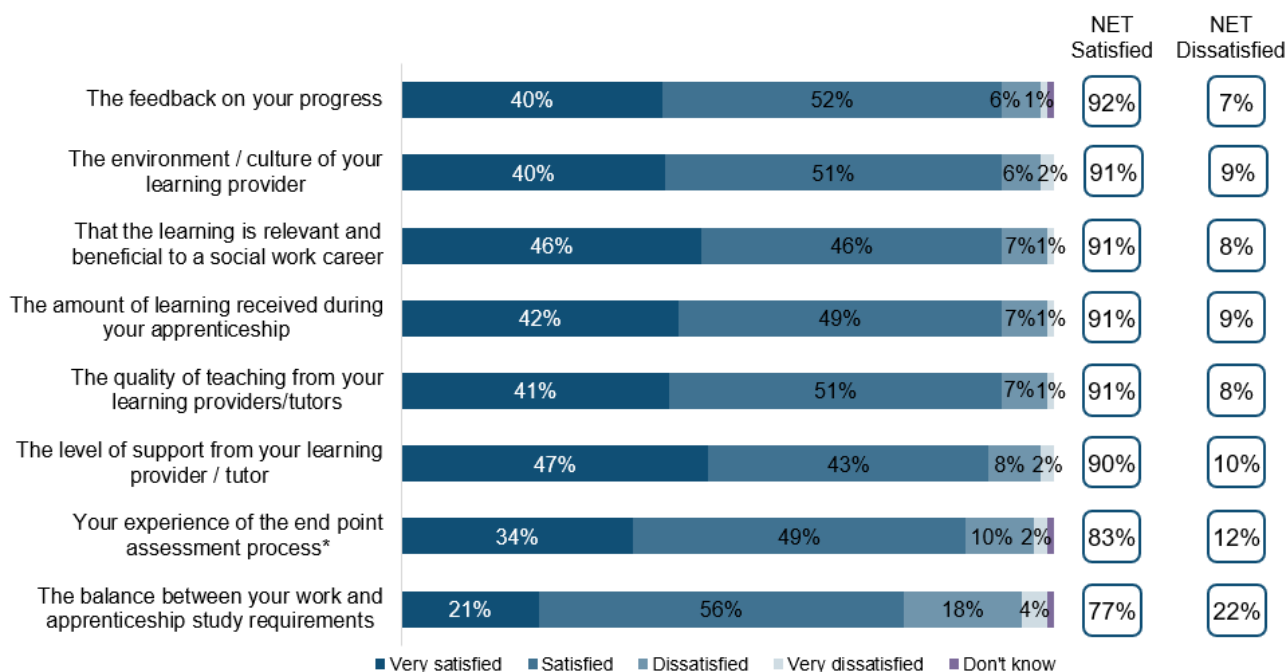
They found the first learning provider disorganised and [it] did not set clear expectations... They [then] had a really good relationship with their new learning provider. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Satisfaction with academic aspects

When asked to rate their satisfaction with the academic aspects of their apprenticeship, apprentices generally reported high levels of satisfaction across most measures as shown in Figure 14. Satisfaction was highest for feedback on progress (92%) and was also high for the learning provider environment/culture, the relevance and benefit of learning to a

social work career, the amount of learning received, and quality of teaching (all 91%). The lowest levels of satisfaction were with the balance between work and the apprenticeship study requirements, where 22% of apprentices reported dissatisfaction.

Figure 14. Satisfaction with academic aspects



C3. How satisfied or dissatisfied are/were you with the following academic aspects of your apprenticeship?
 Base: C3.1-C3.7 All respondents (1,216), *C3.8 Your experience of the end point assessment process. All completers (515).

Those who said the apprenticeship was their first choice of route were more satisfied (79%) with the balance between work and study than those for whom it was not (69%). Those who reported having a learning difficulty were less satisfied (70%) with the balance than those who did not report a learning difficulty (79%).

There was an association between apprentices' previous work experience and satisfaction with their work and study balance. Those who had worked for the apprenticeship employer in the Health and Social Work sector were more satisfied than those who had worked for a different employer in Health and Social Work or for a different employer outside the sector (78% vs. 66% and 62% respectively).

Interviews with apprentices indicated that satisfaction with academic delivery depended in part on how the learning provider structured teaching and support. There were differences in how learning providers delivered this, including the balance of online and in-person learning, and these created different demands.

Where learning relied heavily on self-directed online study, some apprentices felt less supported and described needing to be more proactive to make the most of the content.

It has been a bit difficult because you're kind of responsible to do [it] on your own... if you really wanted to make the most out of your studies you have to be proactive. - *Current apprentice*

Some apprentices and employers interviewed also linked dissatisfaction to inconsistency in learning provider communication and planning. Where this happened, apprentices contrasted weaker academic support with stronger day-to-day support from employers.

I was told I would meet them monthly then I was expected to meet with them fortnightly, write up their supervision notes, contribute to their reports... the whole expectations changed when the university started moving things around. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Apprentices also suggested that inconsistent learning provider support could undermine the review meetings between the apprentice, employer and learning provider, and they said this increased the administrative load on apprentices during already pressured periods.

The meetings take 7 minutes when they should take an hour... I do all the preparation and the minute taking... He doesn't turn up sometimes. - *Current apprentice*

Local authority case study – Changed learning provider

A local authority had a cohort model of offering the apprenticeship and for each of their 3 current cohorts they were working with a different learning provider. There were some issues encountered such as a lack of support provided from the learning provider. For example, one apprentice was unable to get their ADHD diagnosis through their learning provider and had to seek this elsewhere due to being a part time student. An operational lead also felt communication with a learning provider had been insufficient, and felt the local authority should have more joined up working with the curriculum and oversight over what apprentices were learning.

The local authority is now satisfied with its learning provider for the most recent cohort. An important learning was choosing a local learning provider. The strategic lead emphasised the importance of the learning provider understanding the local context of the community they serve. They also felt that having a strong existing relationship, through collaborating on university courses and student placements, made the learning provider more attractive. Apprentices and operational leads in this local authority also highlighted their preference for off-the-job learning to take place in person.

Many apprentices interviewed also described that academic study felt especially challenging for those who had not previously attended university, drawing both on their

own experiences and on what they had observed among peers. Apprentices said they needed to learn academic conventions (for example, referencing and assignment structure) while also adjusting to the volume of reading and independent study expected by the learning provider.

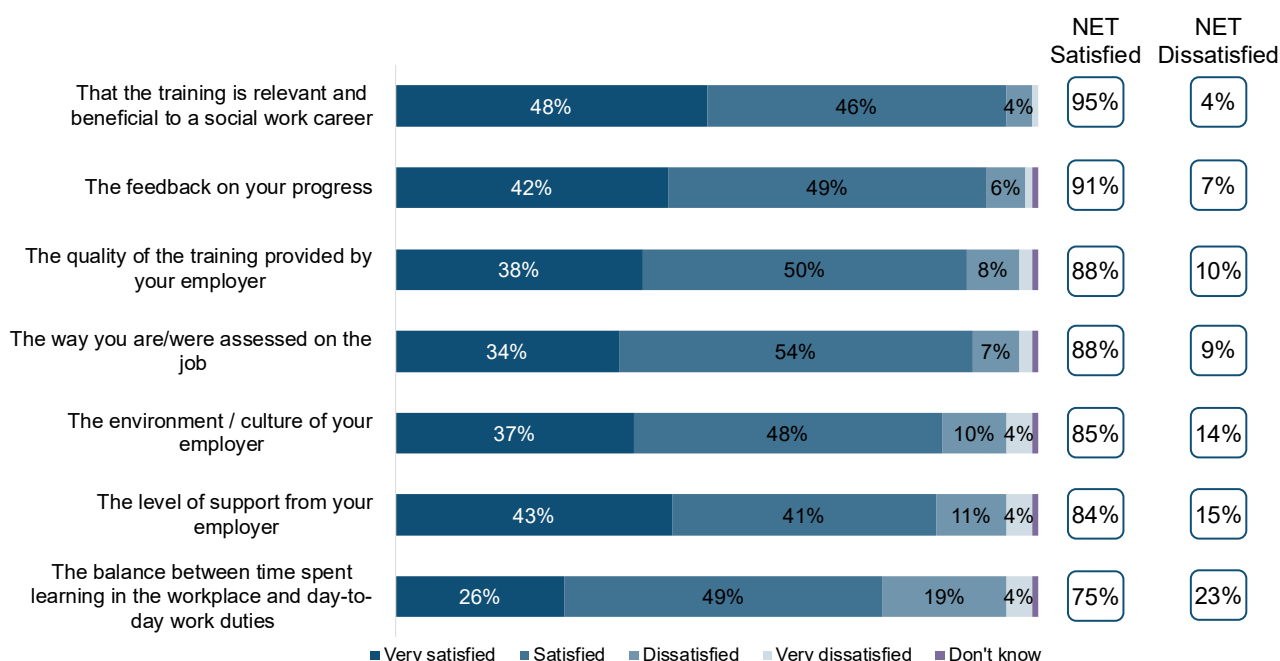
This being my first time at uni, it was initially very challenging getting my head around the referencing and the expectations... the expectation was 'we've given it to you, now read and run'. - *Completed apprentice*

Employer interviews also helped explain why balancing work and study felt harder for some apprentices where employers recruited internally. In these cases, employers described needing to actively manage expectations because teams could continue to view apprentices as established staff members, which could make it harder to protect learning time and reduce workload at key points.

Satisfaction with employer aspects

Apprentices reported high levels of satisfaction across most employer-related aspects of the apprenticeship as illustrated in Figure 15. Satisfaction was highest for training being relevant and beneficial to a social work career (95%), followed by feedback on progress (91%), the quality of training provided by their employer (88%), and how they were assessed on-the-job (88%).

Figure 15. Satisfaction with their employer



C4. How satisfied or dissatisfied are/were you with the apprenticeship employer in the following areas?
Base: All respondents (1,216).

While satisfaction remained high overall, the balance between time spent learning in the workplace and day-to-day work duties was the main area of lower satisfaction, with 23% of apprentices reporting dissatisfaction with this aspect.

The environment and culture of the employer (85%) and the level of support from the employer (84%) also reported lower satisfaction rates than other aspects of the apprenticeship programme. Those with a disability or learning difficulties were less likely than others (79% vs. 87%) to feel satisfied with the culture. This was similar for the level of the support provided from the employer for those with a disability (77% vs. 86% without) or learning difficulty (78% vs. 85% without).

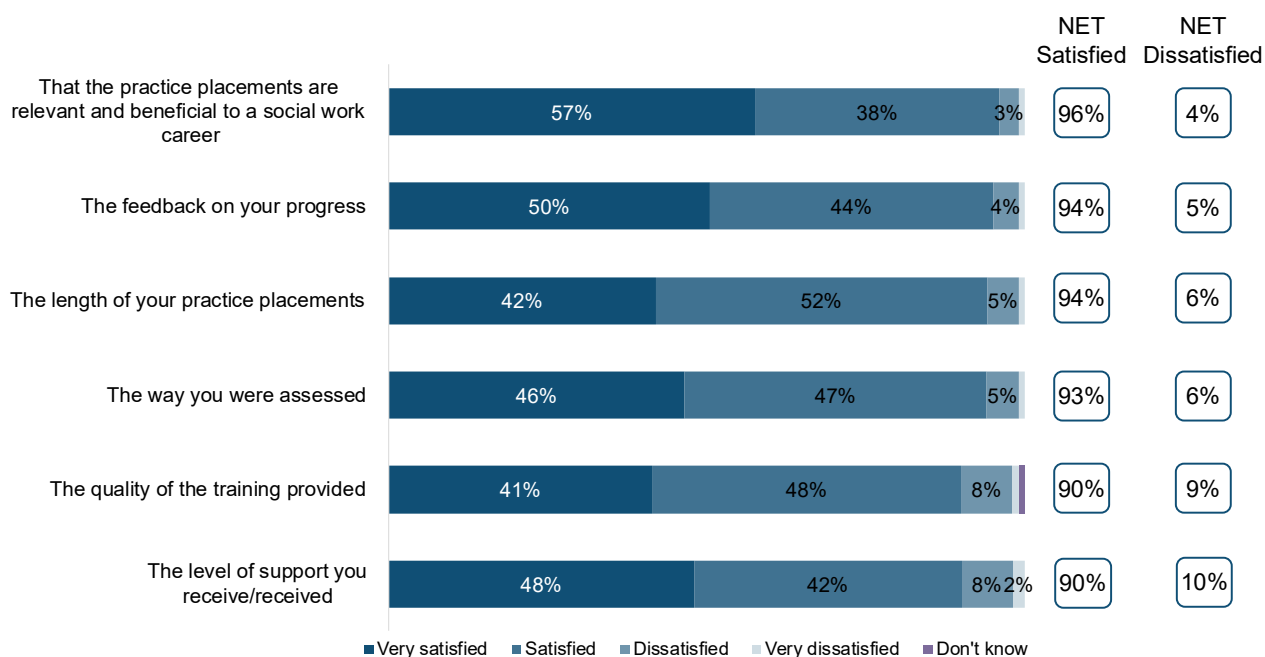
Across interviews, apprentices' satisfaction with employer support was stronger when employers provided additional structures beyond line management, including group spaces for reflection and regular review meetings between the apprentice, employer and learning provider.

Satisfaction with practice placements

Apprentices who had participated in a practice placement, were asked to rate their satisfaction of different elements, as shown in Figure 16. Generally, satisfaction was high, with at least 90% of apprentices being satisfied with each aspect of practice placements listed in the survey. The greatest levels of satisfaction were with the practice placements being relevant and beneficial to a social work career (96%).

One in 10 apprentices who had done practice placements (10%) were dissatisfied with the level of support received, but this increased to almost 1 in 5 among those who had a disability (18%).

Figure 16. Satisfaction with practice placements



C6. How satisfied or dissatisfied are/were you with the following aspects of the practice placements undertaken during your apprenticeship? Base: All completers and current/non-completers who participated in practice placements (993).

In interviews, employers reported working proactively to secure contrasting placements that built capability beyond apprentices' existing roles. Employers described assessing apprentices' prior experience to identify gaps and then matching placements to ensure apprentices gained experience in a range of social work settings and were ready for practice.

We look at all of the experience they currently have... [and then] a distinctly different placement... [and] always... a statutory setting... because that's about readiness for practice. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Apprentices interviewed also described that placement quality depended on employers' preparation and clarity about what they would do day-to-day. Where employers prepared placements well, apprentices described placements as "eye-opening" and valued the increase in reflective supervision and structured input from their practice educator. Where preparation was weaker, apprentices described needing to push for a broader experience.

The preparation for the 70-day starting placement was disgraceful... I kept having to fight to do different things... but this 100-day experience has been fantastic... I've learnt so much in the 100-day placement, I've had a lot more reflective supervision. - *Current apprentice*

Employers also described actively negotiating placements across teams to secure capacity and ensure apprentices gained the necessary range of experience. Some described this approach as “swaps” with other routes to make placements available:

We have all sorts of swaps going on... we work with Think Ahead... we'll provide you with a children's placement if you take [one of the apprentices] on [another team]. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

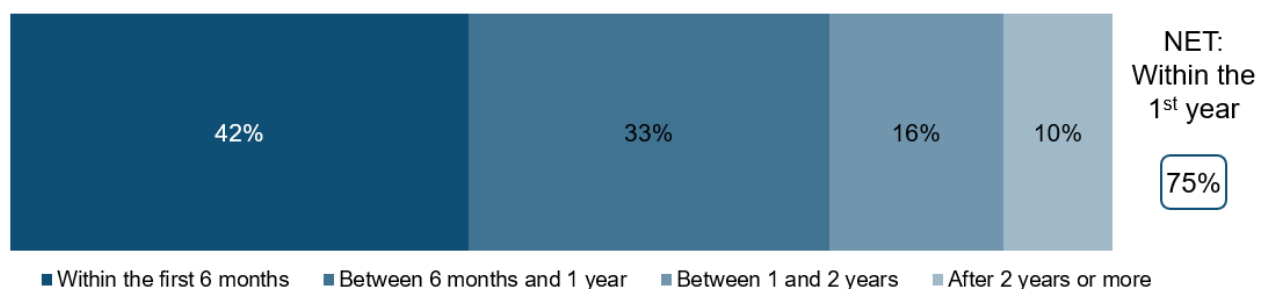
Some employers also emphasised that, despite the backfill issues, they prioritised protecting the integrity of contrasting placements by keeping them as substantial blocks, rather than multiple shorter placements which would have created shorter, more manageable periods without backfill.

We've very much retained a contrasting placement... [a] proper 100 day experience taking on cases really getting a feel for that. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Reasons for non-completion

ILR data showed that 7% of apprentices were non-completers. Most of the 55 surveyed non-completers reported they had left within their first year (75%), while around 2 in 5 (42%) left within the first 6 months as shown in Figure 17.

Figure 17. When non-completers left their apprenticeship

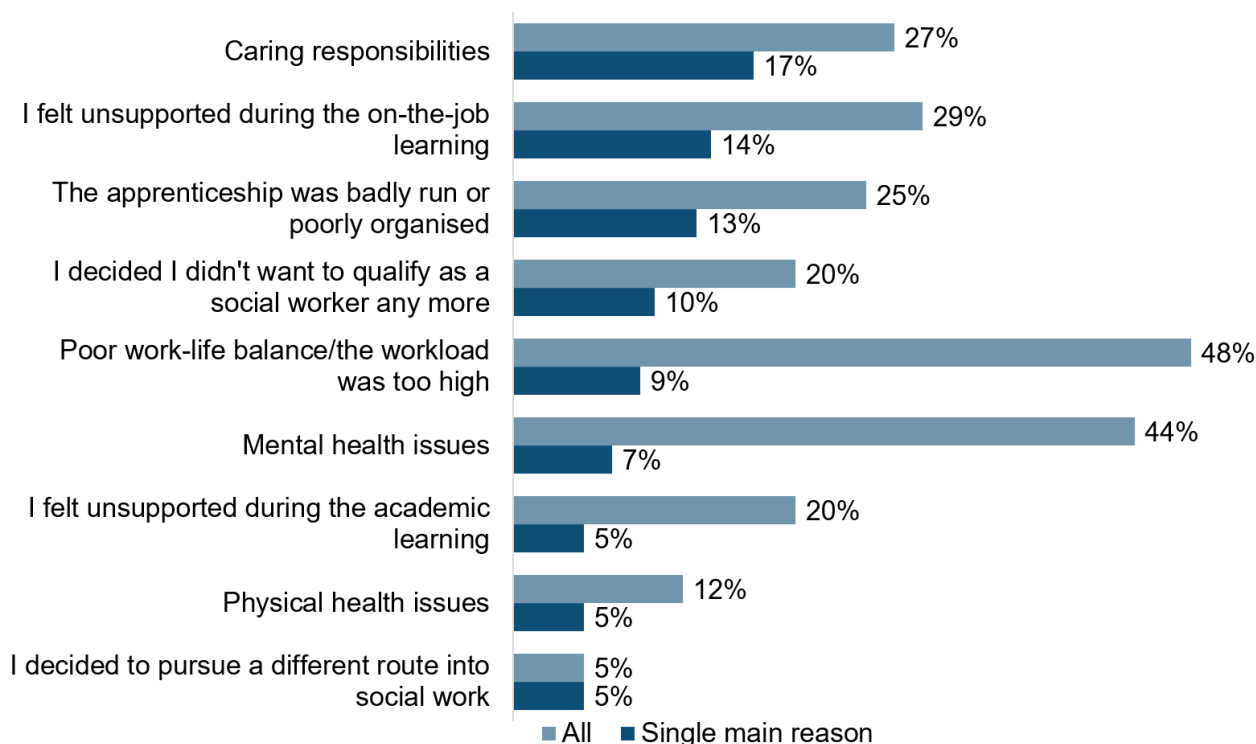


B1. When did you leave the apprenticeship? Base: All non-completers (55).

As shown in Figure 18, the most common reasons given for not completing the apprenticeship were not having a good work-life balance (48%) and mental health issues (44%). It was less common for the employer or learning provider to be a factor for leaving. Furthermore, some reported not completing the apprenticeship as they felt unsupported with on-the-job (29%) or off-the-job (20%) learning or felt the apprenticeship was badly run (25%).

However, when asked to choose a single main reason for not completing the apprenticeship, the most common answer was caring responsibilities (17%). Some apprentices highlighted the role of employers as the main reason for leaving including feeling unsupported during the on-the-job learning (14%) and the apprenticeship being badly run or poorly organised (13%). This showed that some factors were commonly part of a wider set of pressures, but were less often identified as the main reason for non-completion.

Figure 18. All reasons and main reason for non-completion



B2. Which of the following factors contributed to not completing your apprenticeship? If more than one reason: B3. Which of these was the single MAIN reason for not completing your apprenticeship? B2/B3-DERIVED. Main reason for not completing apprenticeship. Base: All non-completers (55). Responses below 5% not charted.

While non-completers were not in scope for qualitative interviews, current and completed apprentices often described an initial intensity when first joining the apprenticeship. Employers also described the early stages of the apprenticeship as particularly demanding, suggesting this may represent a point of heightened risk for non-completion where additional support and realistic workload planning mattered.

One operational lead described how the academic programme front-loaded requirements:

We have a system in place where when they come in for the first 6 months to complete a year of theory... the first year [was] compressed... It was very intense. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Apprentices and employers explained why the early intensity could be challenging. Apprentices described needing to switch between a “study” mindset and a “work” mindset, and they said this became harder when academic deadlines and workplace expectations peaked at the same time. Apprentices also stressed that, even when employers and learning providers offered support, they still needed to meet fixed deadlines across both work and study.

Employers’ experience of the apprenticeship

Employers described factors that supported positive apprenticeship experiences and challenges that could make delivery harder. For example, they described aiming to provide additional flexibility around academic deadlines and “crunch points”, but they also said service capacity sometimes limited how much further protected time they could offer.

Many described using workload planning approaches to protect apprentices’ learning time and manage transitions into placement blocks. This included scaling down caseload ahead of placements and early circulation of placement dates so managers could plan.

There [was] a workload management tool and we were very clear [that apprentices were] unavailable for 1 day a week. As soon as we’ve got the placement dates we provide that immediately, [and the] workload [got] scaled down coming up to placement. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

The main challenges employers described related to placements and backfill. They described placements as the point where the apprenticeship created the greatest operational pressure, particularly where they could not backfill the apprentice’s substantive role. Employers described backfill as a recurring and critical constraint that they needed line managers to understand upfront so that apprentices’ work could be redistributed to the wider team during placement blocks.

If there’s something that always causes a little bit of an issue it’s backfill... there is no backfill. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Once they move on from their 70-day placement, then their workload is then sieved out to the employees within that team [and] we tend to gradually reduce caseload on their 70-day placement. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Employers also described variation in how the apprenticeship was organised in practice. They described a wider delivery trade off that extended beyond placement planning. While internal recruitment supported retention and created a pipeline of qualified social workers, some employers said it could create operational gaps in other parts of the service when apprentices moved out of their previous roles and employers could not backfill posts.

We can pull down the levy to cover the course cost... [but] we cannot backfill... when we take someone out of a team we're left with a gap... [and] that post does sit empty. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Employers described using a combination of practice education oversight, line management support and wider team support to help apprentices navigate competing demands.

The practice tutor and practice educator [met] with the apprentice... every 6 weeks to discuss progress, set targets... and any support that they need. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

A couple of employers took their offer further, creating an internal social worker academy, available to all staff not just apprentices, that brought learners together for skills development and reflective group supervision. A current apprentice described the group supervision as a key form of support:

The group supervision within the Student Academy [was] the most useful thing... you can bring your scenario and talk through it using reflective tools. - *Current apprentice*

Employers described different approaches to how apprentices fitted into teams. Some employers aimed to keep apprentices in their substantive posts (rather than creating distinct apprentice posts), and said this helped apprentices maintain links with their teams and share learning back into practice.

Our approach was we wanted to keep people within their working posts... enable them to come back to their teams... share their learning. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Employers also said that because apprentices were already well-established in their teams, it was sometimes harder for colleagues to see them as learners. They described needing to set clear expectations with managers and teams to protect learning time and maintain appropriate caseloads.

Sometimes it's hard to prioritise studies when you've got things going on at work. You almost have to put two hats on at different times... the studying hat and then the working [hat]. - *Current apprentice*

I think even though there are support from both sides, there are still deadlines for the apprenticeship and deadlines for your workplace that can be conflicting... deadlines can't change really. - *Current apprentice*

Where these arrangements were less clear or less well supported, employers also identified risks for apprentices. Employer interviews suggested that the risk of non-

completion increased when apprentices experienced unclear boundaries between their substantive role, placement expectations, and academic deadlines. Employers described the apprenticeship as adding complexity that they needed to actively manage:

Disadvantages... [included] managing somebody who is already within an apprenticeship role how do you fulfil their substantive workload, and then enable them to be on placement... what is the responsibility between the employer and the university [it] added an extra level of complexity. -
Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority

Local authority case study –Introducing a standalone apprentice role and refining placements

One local authority had been offering the apprenticeship for a number of years and had onboarded several cohorts of apprentices. They felt that two changes in approach had made the apprenticeship more successful in later cohorts.

The first change was to create a standalone role for the apprentice. They found this was particularly helpful to the experiences of apprentices who had been hired internally. For earlier cohorts, these individuals had stayed in their current role while on their apprenticeship training. However, bringing them out of their previous role, and into the apprenticeship role encouraged others to see and support them as trainees rather than existing members of staff.

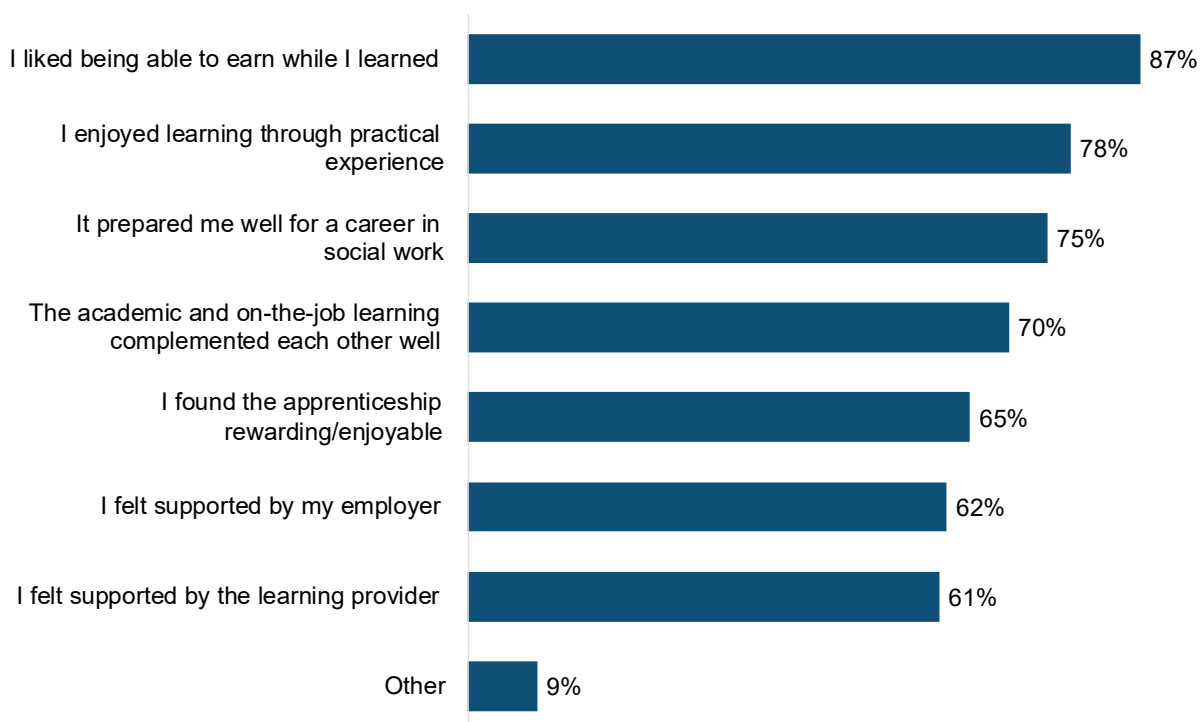
This local authority did have initial concerns that apprentices were moving to adult social work after training in child and family teams. They felt they had 'lost' some very competent qualified apprentices to adult social work teams, after investing in their training. To reduce this risk in future cohorts they implemented a second change to limit the scope of placements, allowing them only in child and family social work teams. They felt this increased exposure to child and family social work teams, rather than experience of adults, encouraged individuals to remain in child and family teams after qualifying.

Whether apprentices and employers would recommend the apprenticeship to others

Almost all apprentices (99%) would recommend the route, with 71% saying they would definitely recommend it and 28% who would recommend it but with some reservations. One per cent said they would not recommend it. As shown in Figure 19, of those who would recommend the apprenticeship route, the most common reason was being able to earn while learning (87%). This was more commonly cited by younger apprentices (91% under 35 vs. 84% aged 45 or over). Many also would recommend it because they enjoyed

learning through practical experience (78%), and they thought it had prepared or was preparing them well for a career in social work (75%).

Figure 19. Reasons for recommending the apprenticeship



C8. Why would you recommend it? Base: All current, completers and non-completers who would recommend the apprenticeship (1,202). Responses below 5% not charted.

Interviews suggested that many apprentices recommended the apprenticeship because it combined studying for the qualification with continued employment and offered a structured, practice-based route into social work. Many apprentices often framed this as the only viable route for them to qualifying, because it allowed them to maintain their existing income.

Interviewed apprentices often praised the apprenticeship format for enabling them to combine employment with studying, with protected space for both, to help them manage competing demands.

You do 1 day a week at uni and then 4 days working... [and] you can prioritise your studying on those days. - *Current apprentice*

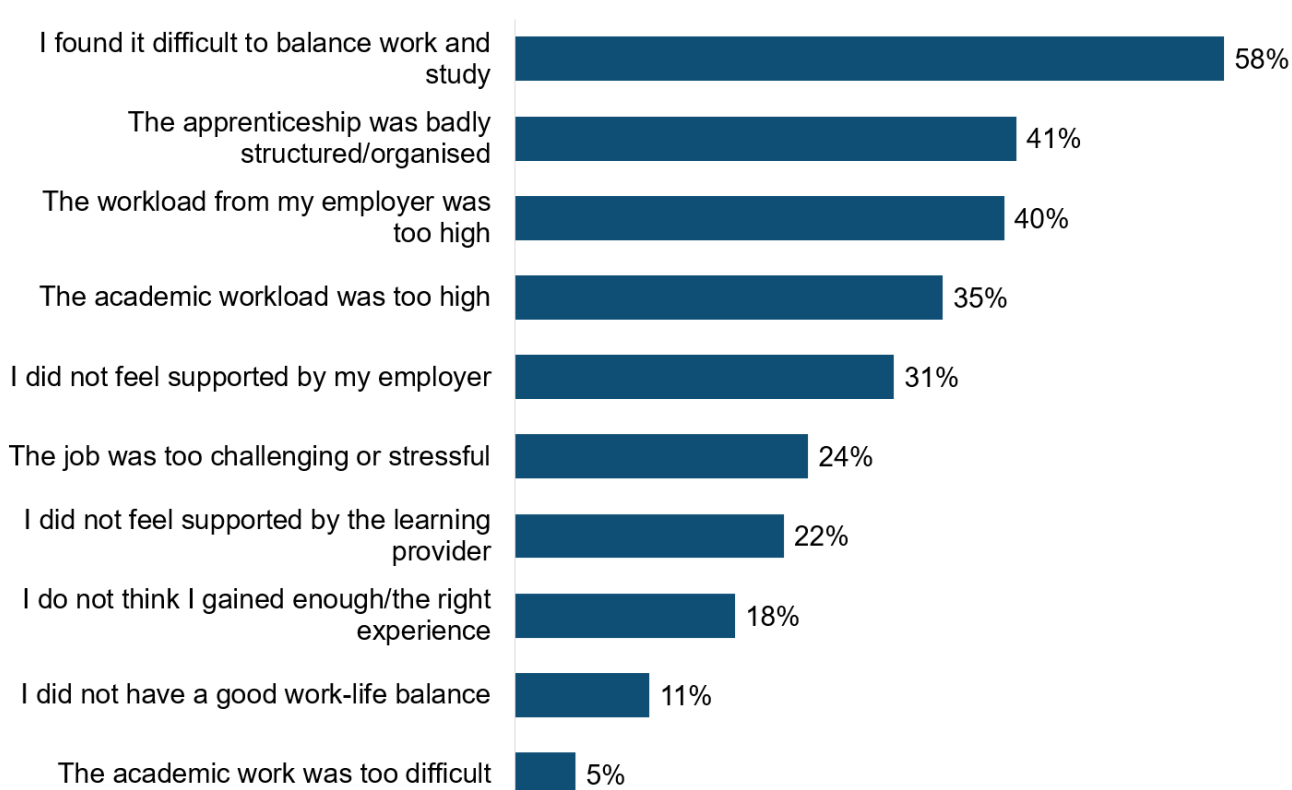
Employers also explained that the apprenticeship allowed them to retain experienced staff who would not otherwise qualify through routes with entry requirements linked to prior degrees. This reflected apprentices' accounts of needing an earn-while-learning route to make training financially and practically possible.

We had individual staff members saying... 'I'm not sure there's any other routes' or 'I don't currently have an undergraduate degree' yet we knew they were valuable practitioners... we wanted to make sure that they were retained in the organisation. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Employers also linked the apprenticeship to workforce stability and long-term retention, describing it as part of a broader strategy to grow and keep a stable workforce.

The minority of apprentices who would not recommend the apprenticeship (1%) or would recommend it but with some reservations (28%) were asked why in an open-text question which was then coded. Figure 20 shows that the most common reason cited by over half (58%) was the difficulty balancing work and study. Those with childcare responsibilities (66%) were more likely to have this reservation compared to those without any caring responsibilities (53%). Additionally, many who would not recommend the apprenticeship or would recommend it with reservations felt it was badly structured or organised (41%), or their workload from their employer was too high (40%).

Figure 20. Reasons for not recommending the apprenticeship



C9. Why would you not recommend it? / What reservations would have about recommending it? Base: All who would not recommend the apprenticeship, or would recommend it but with some reservations (359). Responses below 5% not charted.

In interviews, apprentices' reservations about recommending the apprenticeship were minimal but often related to the cumulative demands of the role, particularly when

apprentices needed to maintain a substantive workload while meeting academic requirements. Most apprentices described periods where study expanded well beyond their protected day:

I would go to university for 6 hours and then continue studying until probably about 12 o'clock at night. - *Current apprentice*

Views on whether the apprenticeship is good preparation for social work practice

This chapter uses both survey findings and qualitative research to examine the views of current and completed apprentices on their readiness for social work practice, alongside the views of employers.

Key findings

The vast majority (94%) of completed and current apprentices felt well prepared for social work practice.

The most common reason that current and completed apprentices gave for feeling prepared was the on-the-job or practical training and experience it included (32%). In qualitative interviews, apprentices and employers emphasised the role of on-the-job learning to their readiness for practice.

Employers and apprentices interviewed reported that having previous professional experience meant those qualifying through the apprenticeship were often viewed as being more ready to deal with complex and challenging social work cases than other newly qualified social workers.

Apprentices' views on practice readiness

The vast majority (94%) of completed and current apprentices felt the apprenticeship had prepared or was preparing them well for social work practice, with over half (55%) believing it prepared them very well. Only a small proportion (5%) felt it did not prepare them well.

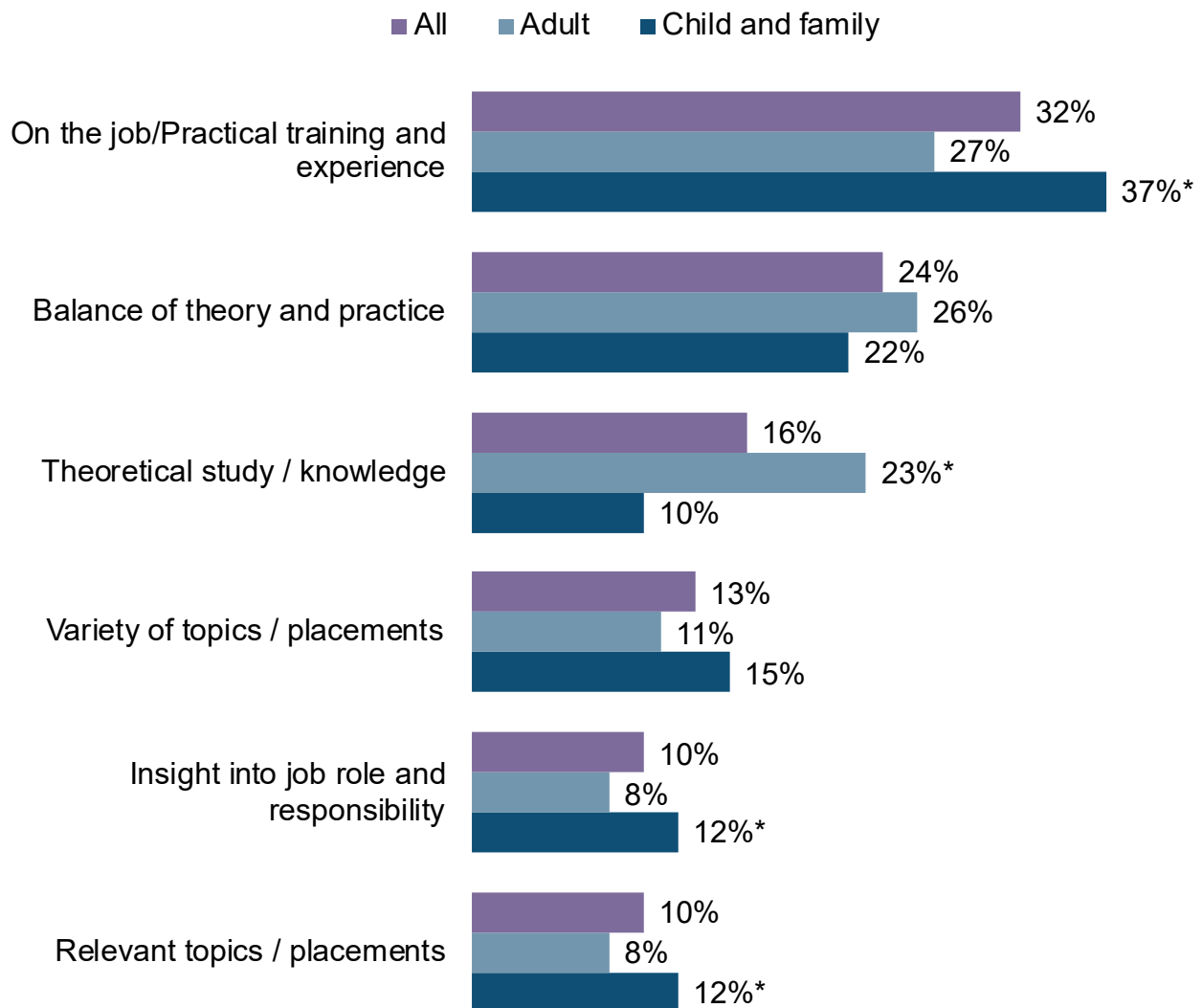
Those who spent their apprenticeship predominantly in child and family social work or adult social work were about as likely as each other to feel well prepared (94% and 95%, respectively). Those who spent their apprenticeship working equally across the 2 areas were less likely to feel prepared (88%). The following groups were more likely to report they felt prepared for social work practice:

- Those who were employed by a local authority or a Trust or Partnership delivering social services during their apprenticeship (95%), compared with those who worked for a different type of employer (89%).
- Those for whom the apprenticeship was their first choice route for undertaking a social work qualification (95%), compared with those who reported it was not their first choice (88%).

As shown in Figure 21, the most common reason that current and completed apprentices gave for why they felt the apprenticeship had prepared them well was the on-the-job or practical training and experience it included (32%). The second most common reason was the balance of theory and practice on the apprenticeship (24%).

Figure 21 also shows that those whose main area of practice during their apprenticeship was child and family social work were more likely than those in adult social work to cite on-the-job training (37% vs. 27%), ability to get insight into the role and responsibility of a social worker (12% vs. 8%), and relevance of topics or placements covered (12% vs. 8%) as reasons they felt prepared for practice.

Figure 21. Reasons apprentices felt prepared for social work practice, by main area of practice during apprenticeship



D12. Why do you feel it prepared you well? Base: All who felt the apprenticeship prepared them well (1,092). Excludes where all < 10%. * Indicates statistically significant difference between sub-groups.

For the small proportion who did not feel the apprenticeship prepared them well for social work practice, this was most commonly attributed to feeling the apprenticeship did not cover enough content or key topics (24%), that there was little consideration of apprentices' prior experience or no new content (23%), or that there was a lack of practical training (19%). This likely reflects variation in programme structure or the quality of on-the-job training provided by different employers, given practical training was the most commonly cited reason for apprentices feeling well prepared.

Perceived gaps in the relevance of the practical experience on the apprenticeship were highlighted by interviewed apprentices who had spent one of their placements in the same team their substantive role was based in. They felt that doing a work placement in their usual team made it difficult to ensure the work they did on placement supported their development (for example, by taking on new responsibilities and caseload as opposed to continuing with their existing allocation) and also limited the breadth of their experience.

Apprentices found different elements of the programme more beneficial to their feeling of preparedness for practice depending on how the opportunity to undertake the apprenticeship came about. Apprentices who had applied for an advertised role were more likely to report on-the-job training as a feature of the apprenticeship which prepared them for practice than those who had been offered the opportunity by an employer (35% vs. 29%). However, those who had been offered the opportunity by their employer were more likely to cite the value of the theoretical study and knowledge they got through the apprenticeship and the balance between theory and practice than those who applied for an advertised role (18% vs. 13% and 27% vs. 21%, respectively). Those hired internally were less likely to cite on-the-job training as a reason for feeling prepared (30% vs. 47% of external hires).

Younger apprentices were also more likely to emphasise on-the-job training than their older counterparts (42% of those aged under 35 vs. 24% of those aged 45 and over). Older groups (those over 45) more frequently felt the balance of theory and practice, and the theoretical study had prepared them well (29% vs. 19% of those under 35 and 22% vs. 9% of those under 35, respectively).

Those who did their apprenticeships in local authorities with a higher Ofsted rating more frequently cited the on-the-job training as a reason why they felt prepared for social work practice (35% of those in local authorities rated Good or 36% Outstanding, compared with 27% of those in local authorities rated Requires improvement or Inadequate).

These patterns were mirrored by findings from interviews with current and completed apprentices, who put a strong emphasis on their on-the-job learning as crucial to their practice readiness. They felt they got strong exposure to a range of experiences through the practice-based learning which enabled them to build key social worker competencies, and to build a realistic view of social work as a profession 'from day one'. For older apprentices interviewed, however, while on-the-job training was valuable, they reflected that it reinforced a lot of their knowledge from their prior professional career rather than

teaching them new skills. They particularly emphasised the value of the academic learning to back up their practical knowledge and skills.

Some apprentices interviewed argued that the practical training on their apprenticeship meant they had higher confidence than their peers trained through other routes, particularly those on university routes. They often felt others at similar points in their training journeys were less equipped for the workload and emotional realities of social work, and were further behind in getting key development experiences such as case-holding.

[As an apprentice] you've been in the deep end and you do get a real feel for it straight away. Whereas the BA students, I don't think they really quite get how manic it really is going to be. So, I feel better equipped and I kind of know what I'm getting myself into. - *Current apprentice*

I feel very prepared because I've been doing it already with the experience that I've had ... [people who have trained through traditional route have] done all the training, all of the lectures, all the learning, but they're just not at the same level as any apprentice is. I've got a full case load at the moment and [non-apprenticeship] students have got one case and they're at the same point in their learning journey as me. - *Current apprentice*

[Other NQSWs are] a bit like rabbits caught in headlights ... I think it's the processes – suddenly the words that they've read about in pages are suddenly people's lives. And that feels very different, maybe. Whereas when I've been there watching it, I've already established it's about someone's life and it's not just a bit of text in a book. - *Completer apprentice*

Those who were hired as an Assistant Social Worker or a dedicated Social Work Apprentice role for the duration of their apprenticeship felt particularly prepared as they had worked in focused social work training roles for the entirety of their training. In one case, this led to dissatisfaction with the prospect of undertaking the ASYE, which they saw as delaying access to the full social work role they felt they were ready for.

[My practice development worker] said that she actually don't know what she's going to do with us in our ASYE because we are equipped and prepared ... she feels that because we've had 3 years in post day-in-day-out being basically a full-time social worker ... I'm not going to feel nervous when I'm on my own. - *Current apprentice*

For interviewed apprentices who had worked in wider health and social work roles before their apprenticeship, their prior experience helped them feel ready for practice. Some

attributed much of their confidence to previous professional roles, while feeling the apprenticeship gave them the formal knowledge required for social work practice.

I'm going to feel not only like mentally geared up in terms of knowing theories and stuff that comes with your education, but I also feel like I'm going to be ready because I've had this really long period of being a frontline worker ... I couldn't imagine going straight from uni to doing this job. It would be terrifying. - *Current apprentice*

In some instances, these advantages of experience also led apprentices to believe they may progress quicker to more senior roles than those qualifying through other routes, especially those on traditional university routes who had less exposure to the workplace. They felt familiarity with how social work is practiced by their employer would assist them with securing opportunities in the future, specifically citing awareness of how social work teams are organised and the frameworks for intervention and case management that employers use.

Because the organisation already know you, they know your skills, you've learned here, you've done your placement here, that puts you at a better chance of getting whatever opportunity you would like to do. - *Current apprentice*

Interviewed apprentices felt especially ready for practice with their apprenticeship employer, where they generally intended to stay. This was because they had familiarity with workplace systems and had the opportunity to get to know teams and individual colleagues and managers while studying, or indeed in roles prior to the apprenticeship. A handful highlighted they thought staff had particular confidence in their abilities and this encouraged them to want to stay in a social work role there.

Employers' views on practice readiness

Employers interviewed generally saw apprentices as practice-ready on qualifying and there was a prevailing view that as Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs) they were able to 'hit the ground running'. This was due to the knowledge of the organisation, its culture and systems, and the realities of frontline practice that apprentices developed during the programme.

Employer-apprentice familiarity

Employers reported that apprentices' experiences on the apprenticeship meant they were fully up to speed with introductory professional competencies which often consumed substantial staff time for new social workers, especially those coming from the traditional undergraduate route. This included using IT and HR systems, email etiquette and introductions to team members. Having been able to develop these skills while training

meant that on entering ASYE roles, employers could concentrate on supporting apprentices' development as social workers straight away. This was particularly the case for internal hires due to apprentices' years of professional experience in the same organisation, including in social work or wider children's social work teams.

They're equipped, they're ready, they're ready to go and it's just then about specialising their skills then into the social work role. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Employers also felt that if they hired someone who had completed an apprenticeship in their organisation, they would have valuable knowledge of their previous learning and development journey. Completed apprentices were seen as desirable recruits by both strategic leads who oversaw the apprenticeship and workforce development, and team managers as they had "become part of the furniture" of their social work teams. While managers explained the apprentices would still require support during their ASYE, they personally felt better equipped to provide this support than to someone unknown to them, as was the case for the majority of ASYE hires.

Employer views on apprentices' social work skills

Overall, employers did not feel the apprenticeship consistently produced social workers with better social work skills than those qualifying through other routes. In part, this was because they had not formally tracked and compared ASYE performance by training route. While the apprenticeship produced some stand-out candidates, they also felt this was the case for other routes, and that variation was more due to individual experience and skills than specific training routes. Several employers pointed out that different routes bring in different types of social worker because the features of those programmes attract different profiles of individual, and that this variety was important for the "health" of the whole sector.

However, some employers did share a view that there were several areas where completed apprentices were more competent than would ordinarily be expected of someone newly qualified. These were namely in the capacity to take on cases with greater complexity, skills in handling challenging relationships and conversations with families, and knowledge of the wider children's social care sector and local context.

Employers felt the key advantage was the accumulation of practical experience from working in social work teams during the apprenticeship, and for internal hires, from their professional experience before the apprenticeship. Some felt this on-the-job experience was important because it gave apprentices skills that come more through exposure and time than through teaching.

I'd bring everyone in through the apprenticeship route if I could just because I think it's a different level of learning ... we can teach them the other bit [academic content] what we can't teach them is that relational element, the empathy, the ability to adapt and prioritise things during crisis ... [This comes from them getting] more time and from where they've come from. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

You generally have somebody who has either worked in the profession [or] they're looking for their next career move, so their level of experience, knowledge and understanding of the children's social work is a little bit more advanced than others. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

In a couple of instances, employers felt completed apprentices had higher levels of resilience to the emotional load of social work practice due to having acquired a knowledge of "what they're getting themselves into". However, other employers did not feel this was the case, and reported providing similar support to completed apprentices regarding the emotional demands of social work, as they would to any other NQSW.

Several employers still stressed the need for careful workload management of completed apprentices going into the ASYE. While apprentices' confidence and level of experience created clear advantages, some employers worried that destination teams might over-burden newly qualified apprentices because they expected them to be more capable than other NQSWs. Employers emphasised that even highly capable apprentices remained new social workers who required structured learning and protected caseloads.

[Apprentices have] been in their teams, they have relationships, they're still growing as practitioners and developing. And I think that's something that we've had to learn is that just because someone's been a brilliant child practitioner doesn't now make them a brilliant social worker straight away – you have to treat them in the same way as any social work student, not just go 'we've worked here for 10 years, 20 years, like surely you're all right you've just been a mini social worker anyway' and so we've had to help our managers and teams learn that. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Employment trajectories and future plans

This chapter explores the employment trajectories and future career plans of completed apprentices, and reasons for considering leaving the profession. It also outlines employer approaches to recruiting completed apprentices into ASYE positions for newly-qualified social workers.

Key findings

Employers used 2 main models for transitioning apprentices into the ASYE – either requiring them to apply competitively for roles or guaranteeing them an ASYE post.

A large majority of completed apprentices (90%) had continued to work in social work; most who had not done so intended to work in a social work role at some point (7% of all completed apprentices). The majority were working as a social worker for their apprenticeship employer (82%).

Around 9 in 10 completed apprentices still in social work saw themselves still working in social work in 3 years' time (88%). Only 5% of completed apprentices said they were planning to leave the sector. High workload – particularly paperwork and caseload – were key drivers for considering leaving.

ASYE application processes

Employers interviewed consistently emphasised their commitment to retaining apprentices by employing them as social workers at the conclusion of their apprenticeship training. They described a range of approaches for how apprentices progressed into ASYE roles upon qualifying.

Broadly, employers operated 2 models. Some of those who only recruited internally did not ringfence ASYE posts specifically for apprentices. Instead, they expected them to apply for roles and in some cases guaranteed interviews for all completing apprentices. Alternatively, some employers running either internal-only or internal-and-external recruitment routes offered guaranteed ASYE roles to apprentices who completed successfully. This guarantee was not necessarily communicated to prospective applicants during recruitment.

For employers who said they did not ringfence posts, completed apprentices who had been hired internally were typically able to return to their original role if they were unable to secure a social work post or if there was a period between finishing the apprenticeship and officially qualifying or ASYE induction cycles starting. There was also a risk that they may not secure a social work role at all or a role of their choosing.

In the latter model, while employers felt they had sufficient information about apprentices' competencies as a social worker to offer them a role outright, they sometimes set conditions on what team this role could be in to support their own workload needs, for example only offering a role in frontline teams such as Multi-Agency Safeguarding Hubs.

There's no point in us investing them to do the professional qualification and then not offer them the opportunity to apply for a social work post ... there are usually vacancies within our system somewhere. I suppose the worst-case scenario is they might not get the opportunity to be a social worker in their preferred team, but there would be opportunities to apply for a social work post. So, they didn't need to stay in their unqualified post once they qualified. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

We don't interview our apprentices because we've been assessing them for the whole time, the 3 years. So that'd be awful to do, but we do expect them to go into a frontline team. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

The key challenge employers said they faced in establishing transitions to ASYE was the need to balance the recruitment pipeline from multiple qualification routes. This included factoring completed apprentices in alongside routes where roles were guaranteed at the conclusion of training, like Approach. Several employers noted that even where they could not guarantee roles, they would help initiate conversations about destinations for apprentices in terms of teams that interested them and scope out recruitment capacity on their behalf.

Some apprentices found these processes clear to navigate and felt their professional relationships allowed some flexibility around their transition to ASYE where a role was not guaranteed. They felt it was fair that they should apply to roles alongside other NQSWs.

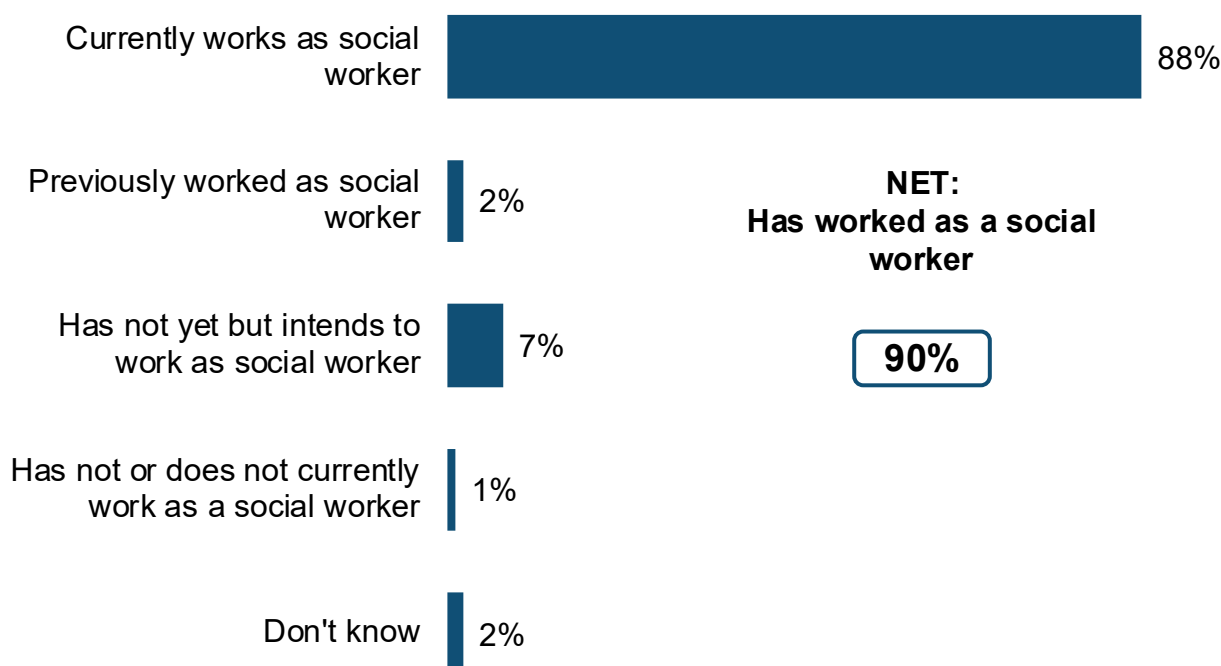
I applied like any other student would ... I had to go through filling your application, be interviewed, like if I was coming from inside or outside. Obviously it helped knowing the team and, you know, being quite specific in your answers because you know exactly how [employer] did do it ... I suppose what was different for me though is I was then taken on as a social work assistant until I qualified. - *Completer apprentice*

In other cases however, some apprentices were unclear about what they could expect in terms of transitioning to the ASYE. Many assumed they would secure a role because they saw the apprenticeship as an employer investment designed to support progression into qualified practice. This suggests some employers may need to improve clarity and communication on the transition process.

Apprentices' employment trajectories

As shown in Figure 22, a large majority of completed apprentices surveyed (90%) had continued to work as a social worker. Of those who confirmed they had not (9%), most intended to work in a social work role at some point (7% of all completed apprentices). Of those who had continued to work in social work, almost all were still working as a social worker (88%) while a small proportion had previously worked as a social worker but were not doing so when surveyed (2%).

Figure 22. Whether worked as a social worker after completing apprenticeship



D1, D2, D3. Whether has worked or intends to work as a social worker. Base: All completers (515).

Those whose apprenticeship was in adult social work were more likely to be working as a social worker at the time of survey than those whose apprenticeship was in child and family social work (91% vs. 85%). They were also more likely to still be working for their apprenticeship employer (86% vs. 78%).

Nearly all (96%) of those who had worked as a social worker since completing their apprenticeship had worked for the same employer they did their apprenticeship with. The majority of completed apprentices (82%) were working as a social worker for their apprenticeship employer at the time of the survey. This suggests that in the short-term at least, one of the key anticipated benefits driving employers to offer the apprenticeship – to support their recruitment pipeline and 'grow their own' workforce – is being realised.

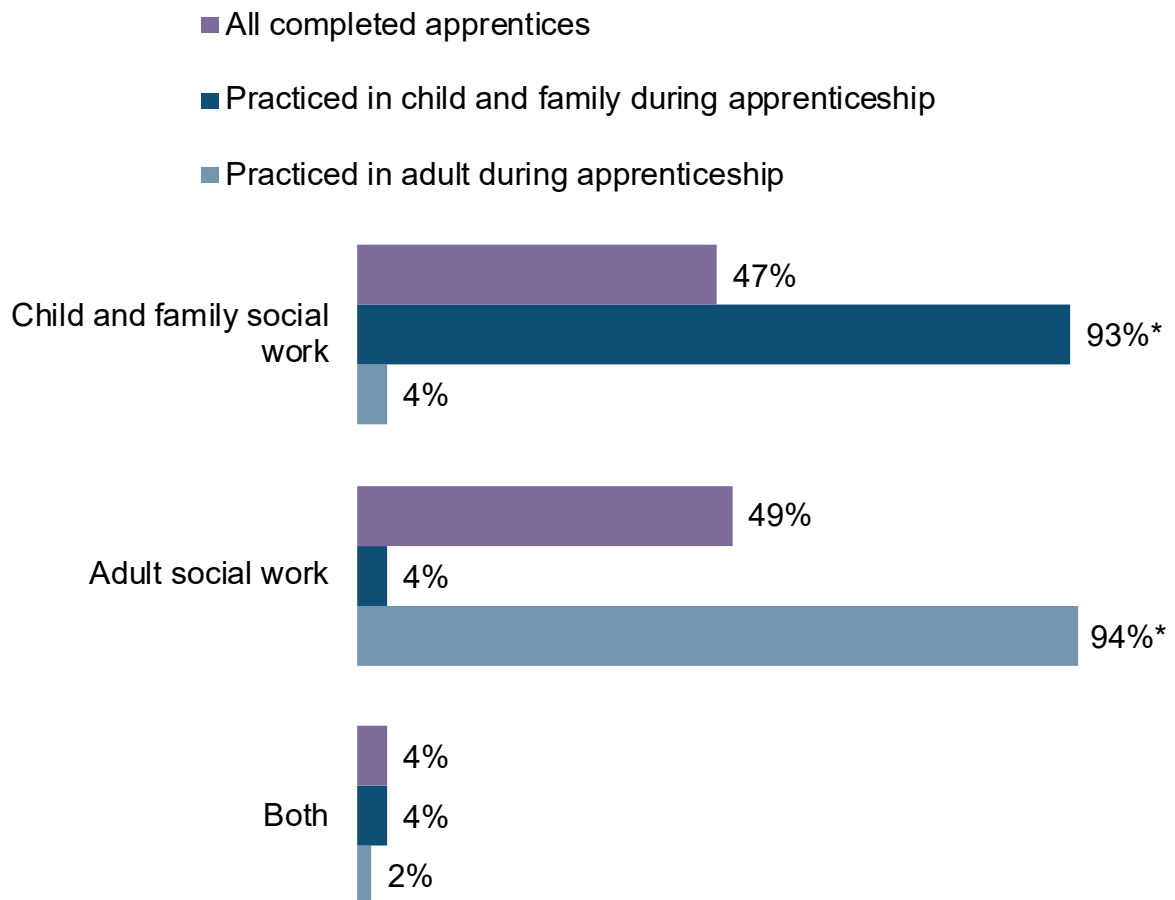
However, as time since completion increases, the proportion of qualified social workers still working for their apprenticeship employer decreased slightly. Among those who were

working as a social worker at the time of the survey, almost all (99%) who had completed less than 1 year ago were still working for their apprenticeship employer compared with 94% of those who completed over 2 years ago. Among completed apprentices, those who had been employed by a local authority or Trust/Partnership delivering social services during their apprenticeship were more likely to be working as a social worker than those who had been employed by another type of organisation (89% vs. 75%). They were also more likely to still be working for that employer (84% vs. 60%).

In terms of time since completing the apprenticeship, the proportion of completed apprentices who had worked as a social worker at all was lowest among those who had qualified most recently, indicating that some completed apprentices experience a gap between qualifying and securing their first social worker post. Those within their first year of qualifying were less likely to have worked as a social worker at all than those who had qualified over a year ago (80% vs. 97%). Several case study employers described an approach to recruitment at the conclusion of the apprenticeship that involved internal-hires returning to their substantive post while they applied for social work posts.

On the whole, apprentices who progressed to social work roles continued to work in the broad social work area they had completed their apprenticeship in. As shown in Figure 23, 93% of those who went on to a child and family social worker role had come from an apprenticeship where they were predominantly practicing in child and family social work, while a similar proportion (94%) of those working in adult social work had spent the majority of their apprenticeship in the same area. Only 4% of those who had practiced mainly in child and family social work during their apprenticeship reported having worked only in adult social work after completing.

Figure 23. Areas of social work practice completed apprentices worked in, by their main area of practice during apprenticeship



D6. Since completing your apprenticeship, have you worked as a child and family social worker or adult social worker? Base: All who have worked as a social worker since completing apprenticeship (456), whose main practice area during the apprenticeship was child and family social work (213) or adult social work (220). *Indicates statistically significant difference between sub-groups.

This indicates that as well as supporting employer aims to increase social worker recruitment overall, the apprenticeship supports pipelines to areas of practice. Interviewed current and completed apprentices reflected this when they showed enthusiasm for continuing in child and family social work. Some of those who had previously worked in other roles in children’s social care highlighted that their experience on the apprenticeship confirmed child and family social work as the area of practice they wished to pursue. Several employers also noted that the apprenticeship supported career progression for internal recruits with experience in children’s social care.

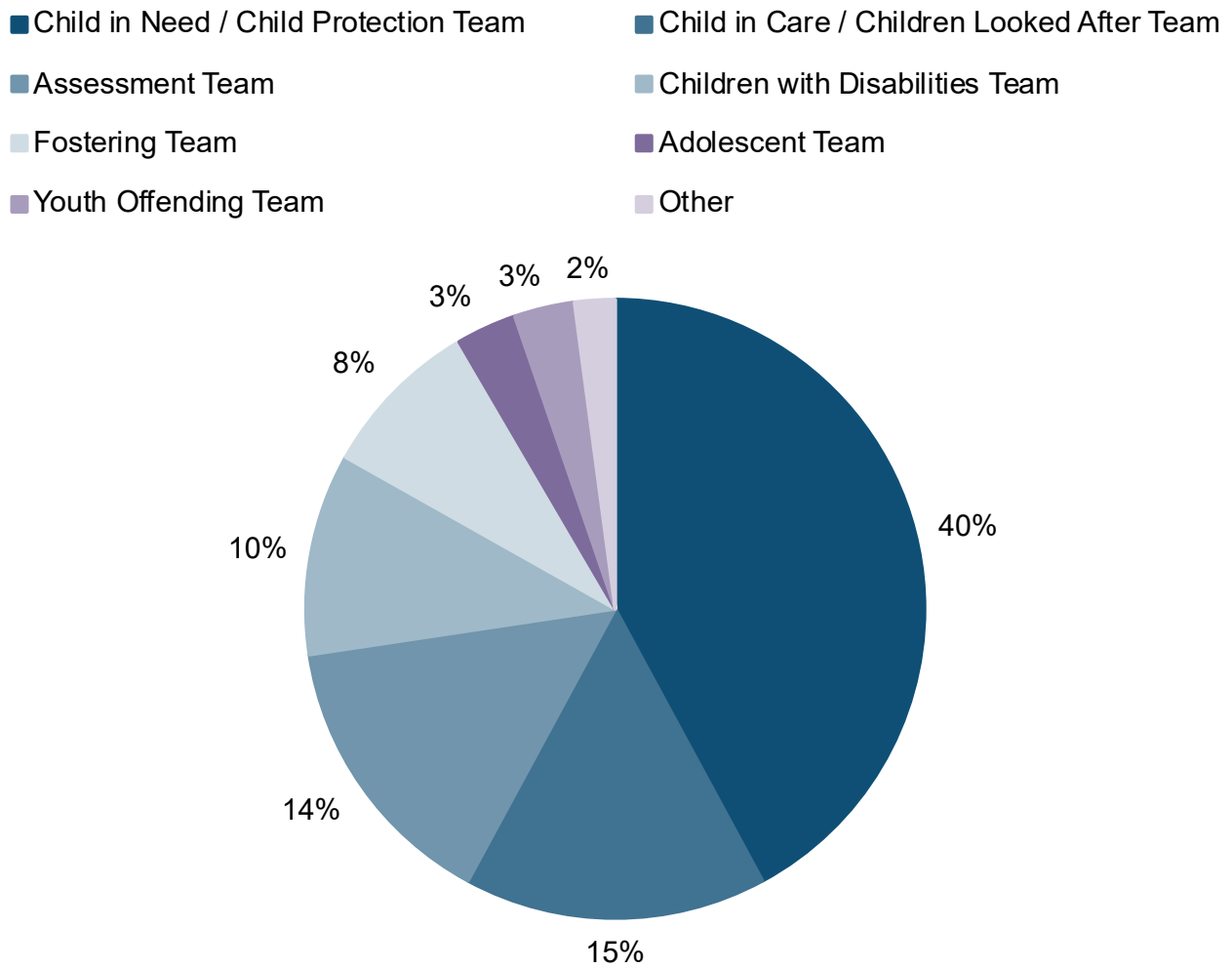
They want to progress and they can’t really progress in children’s social care without that social work qualification. So what it has enabled us to do is we can recruit into there, give them a couple of years to embed and settle in and get their heads around children’s social care and work out if this is actually an area they really want to work in. Then we can support them applying and going for the

apprenticeship, and then we can move them into social work roles. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Most of those who were working as social workers after completion had the job title 'Social worker' (90%), followed by 'Senior social worker' (6%). Around 1% had other more senior job titles such as 'Consultant social worker' or 'Team manager'. This distribution reflects most completers having become qualified social workers only recently due to the relative newness of the apprenticeship route.

Completed apprentices who were working in child and family social work roles worked in a wide range of teams, but the largest proportion were in child in need or child protection teams (40%). As shown in Figure 24, this was followed by child in care teams (15%), assessment teams (14%) and children with disabilities teams (10%).

Figure 24. Deployment of completed apprentices across teams



D10. Which of the following best describes the type of team your role is in? Base: Those currently working in child and family social work (201). Figures less than 2% are not shown.

Reasons for leaving social work

Of completed apprentices who were not working as a social worker¹⁷, the vast majority (94%) were employed, with 88% working in social care-related jobs. This means that almost all completed apprentices had continued to work in health and social care in some capacity.

Only a very small proportion of completers surveyed indicated they were planning to leave the sector (5%). The most common reasons cited for considering leaving social work related to problems with high workload: of 13 respondents, 12 cited the amount of paperwork and 9 cited the high caseload.¹⁸

¹⁷ n=69

¹⁸ Please note that findings are indicative only due to small base size (n=13)

Some of the reasons apprentices may choose not to continue in social work roles were elaborated on in case study interviews, with workload and pay a focus. In one example, a completed apprentice who had caring responsibilities was practicing in child and family social work but thought they may move into adult social work long-term as they perceived that the workload was lighter and felt this would be more sustainable.

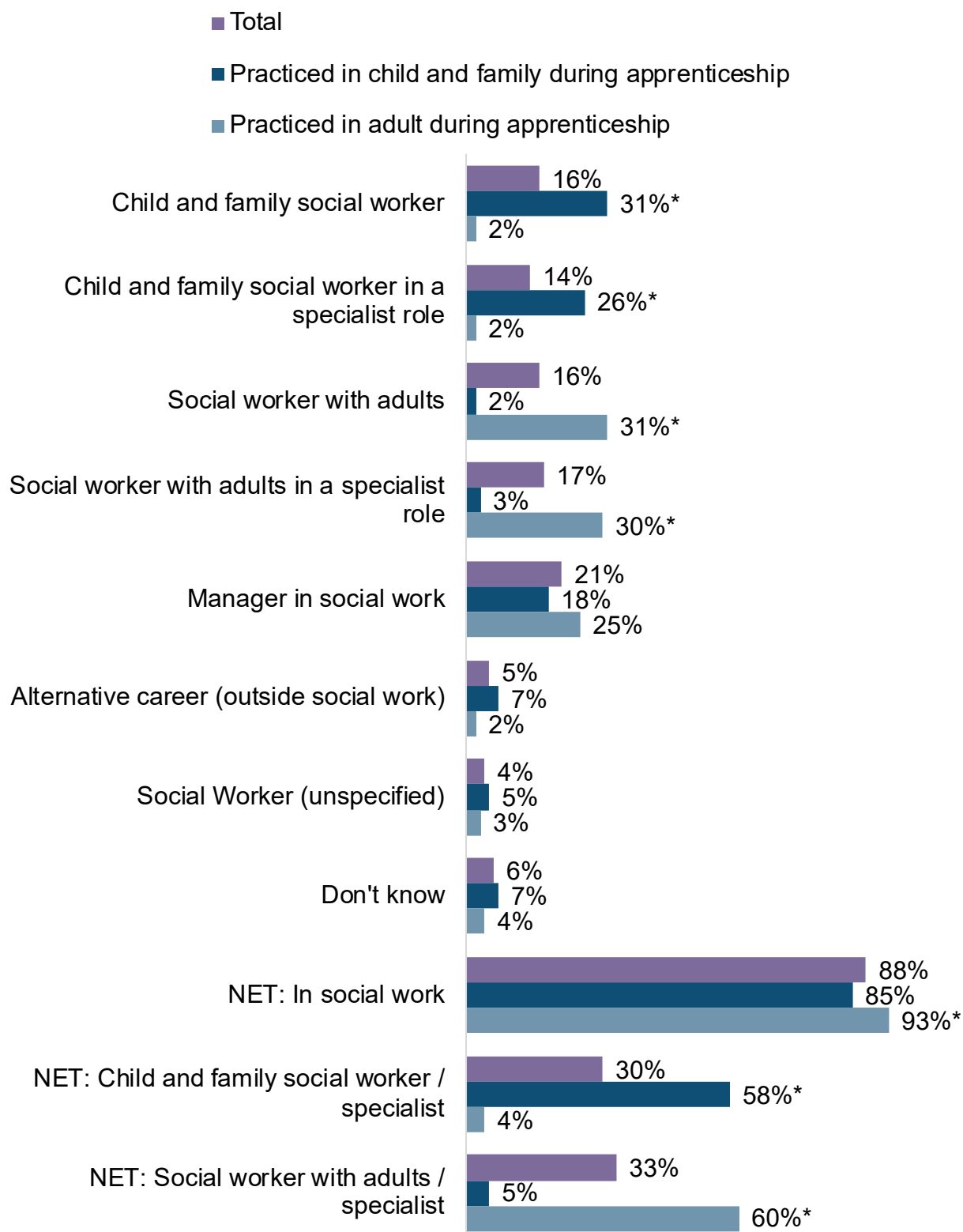
A handful of apprentices raised challenges around pay, specifically on pay-scales for NQSWs and how these compared to their previous roles. One current apprentice had retained their salary from a more senior role with their employer whilst training, but were concerned this would not be possible if they took on a social worker role after qualifying.

Apprentices' career aspirations

Figure 25 shows that surveyed apprentices still in social work mostly expected to stay in the social work profession: almost 9 in 10 saw themselves remaining in social work in 3 years' time (88%). Most expected to stay in the same practice area they had completed their apprenticeship in. Around 3 in 5 (58%) of those whose main practice area was child and family social work expected to work in child and family social work after 3 years, in line with the 60% of those who trained predominantly in adult social work who expected to work in that field after 3 years. Around 1 in 5 (21%) expected to move into a social work management role not specific to child and family or adult social work within 3 years. Those aged 35-44 (28%) were more likely than those 45 or over (19%) to aspire to be in a management role.

A small proportion (5%) did not expect to be working in social work in any capacity in 3 years.

Figure 25. Completed apprentices working in social work: career aspirations in 3 years' time, by their main area of practice during apprenticeship



D14. In terms of your career goals or aspirations, where do you see yourself in 3 years' time? Base: All still in social work (444). *Indicates statistically significant difference between sub-groups.

The proportion who saw themselves staying in social work in 3 years' time was higher among those whose main practice area during the apprenticeship was adult social work compared with those whose main practice area was child and family (93% vs. 85%). There was some evidence from the case studies that current and completed apprentices perceived adult social work as entailing more reasonable workloads and that the most challenging aspect of social work practice in child and family teams was managing workloads. However, all apprentices interviewed were working in child and family social work so their perceptions of how this compared with adult social work were limited.

[Those in adults] they have a caseload of 2. And I like working with adults, it's really interesting, but I wanted to do at least 3, 4 years in children's to get a real understanding of the dynamics and functions of family and how that all fits in. I'm very much secure in my position, but my long term, I can't sustain this, it's a lot. - *Completer apprentice*

Those who had completed their apprenticeship over 2 years ago were the least likely to see themselves in social work in 3 years' time (83%, compared to 92% of those who qualified in the last year).

There were some notable differences in expectation of remaining in social work by apprentice demographics. Completed apprentices practicing as social workers who had the lowest qualification levels before starting the apprenticeship were less likely to see themselves in social work in 3 years (77% of those with Level 2 or lower qualifications vs. 98% of those with Level 7+ qualifications). Those who reported having a disability were also less likely to say they thought they would still be in social work (78% compared to 90% of those who did not have a disability). These patterns underline the challenge of the ambition for apprenticeships to support sustained diversification of the social work workforce.

Reflections on areas for improvement and good practice

This chapter summarises areas for improvement identified by surveyed apprentices, and (from the qualitative interviews and case studies) employers' views on what would enable them to improve how they run the apprenticeship. It also highlights employers' views on aspects of how they ran the apprenticeship which they regarded as good practice, and which they would share with other employers.

Key findings

While around a fifth (22%) of apprentices did not feel the apprenticeship required any improvements, most (67%) felt that there could be at least one area of improvement. The most common areas of improvement were opportunities for practical training (10%), work, life and study balance (9%) and better treatment by the learning provider (9%).

Apprentices suggested having more support to manage their workload from their management and more varied placements or longer placement time to allow for more opportunities for practical learning.

Strategic leads of employers stressed the importance of additional government funding to allow for the creation of standalone social work apprentice posts. They felt this would reduce limits on teams when hiring internally, for example more applicants from the same service area could be successful, and it would enable them to open up the apprenticeship to external candidates.

Communication with the learning provider was another point of improvement for many strategic and operational leads. Many employers discussed their lessons learned from the process including having internal processes to track attendance of apprentices and in future setting better expectations of the provider during procurement.

Apprentices' views on areas for improvement

Surveyed apprentices were asked to indicate any ways they felt the apprenticeship could be improved, through open-text responses. Around one-fifth (22%) said it did not need any improvements, in particular those doing their apprenticeship in a local authority which had an 'Outstanding' Ofsted rating (26%).

Almost 7 in 10 (67%) apprentices shared at least one area for improvement. A quarter (25%) shared one area of improvement, 1 in 5 (21%) shared 2 areas, 15% shared 3 areas, and 6% shared 4 or more. There was no one prominent area of improvement identified,

though around a tenth (between 8% and 10%) identified various areas related to the following themes:

- The amount of time spent fulfilling the requirements of their on-the-job and academic learning, including a better balance of work, life and study (9%) and building in more protected study time (8%).
- The organisation of and communication about the apprenticeship by the employer and learning provider, including fairer treatment by the learning provider (9%), better communications about requirements by the employer and learning provider (8%), and better organisation or fewer changes to the programme structure (8%).
- Changes to the content and balance of work, including more time spent on practical/placement learning or less time on paperwork (10%) – this was more common among those who trained in child and family social work than those in adult social work (12% vs. 8%).

These areas for improvement broadly reflect the most common areas of dissatisfaction discussed in Apprentices' satisfaction with the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship, particularly regarding programme organisation and communication.

Surveyed apprentices who reported in open-text responses that they would like more time on practical learning typically referred to insufficient variety between their placements, including doing one apprenticeship placement in their substantive team. Some would have liked to experience a range of teams, or else been able to express a preference in the type of team they went into. This emerged as an improvement theme in interviews, where some apprentices felt they had not experienced sufficient variety in their work-based learning, for example by not moving team for their 70-day placement. They stressed that exposure to different social work areas and teams was important to their professional development, underlining the importance that apprentices placed on on-the-job training.

You can shadow and get more opportunities, but I think in terms of the people you're working with, it's limited... I think just having more placements might be helpful, in different places with different teams. -

Current apprentice

Interviewed apprentices also raised challenges with paperwork for their academic learning. They felt they had to do repetitive form-filling to evidence progress which took them away further from practical or other academic learning opportunities.

Evidencing of progress is tedious and there is too much focus on this; so much that it gets in the way of spending time on teaching, reading and other learning. Of the job logs, progress reviews, daily written reflections during placement, skills days trackers - some of this is meaningless, some of this is too frequent. - *Current apprentice*

Interviewed apprentices suggested several structural changes, such as replacing the 70-day placement with another 100-day placement, adding another placement to widen exposure to social work specialisms, or introducing other experiences like shadowing opportunities in organisations adjacent to social work (e.g. charities, the police). Mirroring this, interviewed apprentices whose employer had built in an additional 20-day shadowing experience early in the programme felt they had received broad exposure to different areas of social work practice which helped them with decision-making later in their apprenticeship.

In terms of work/life/study balance, apprentices surveyed mentioned in their open-text responses challenges ensuring their placement supervisors or day-to-day managers understood the demands of their studies and responded accordingly in helping them manage their workload. They highlighted a need for employers to exercise greater oversight of the work they were assigned to ensure it supported their learning and was not simply there to plug resourcing gaps.

Interviewed apprentices also felt their experience would be improved by those overseeing apprenticeships setting clearer expectations with teams about their capacity for case-holding (both quantity and complexity) and protecting reflection time to support their learning. Some employers also highlighted this, suggesting they needed to build awareness of the structure and demands of the apprenticeship programme among teams where apprentices would be hosted or placed whilst training. Employers who ran training for teams to this effect felt more confident that apprentices' workload was planned fairly and to support their learning. A small number of apprentices and employers interviewed felt employers also needed to improve "transparency" on expectations of apprentices during the application process.

[There needs to be] recognition, understanding and kind of transparency around what the demands of this program will be because ... it's a tough program if you've got other commitments. It's kind of carefully considering – is this the right course and is it the right time? - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Employers' views on areas for improvement and good practice

Government financial support

From employers' perspectives, the most prominent area for improvement was the provision of additional government financial support to enable them to expand the apprenticeship programme. Employers wanted to be able to utilise funding to backfill roles or create standalone social work apprentice posts, to benefit both internal and external recruitment routes.

For existing internal members of staff, employers felt this would enable them to ensure work in substantive teams is covered when apprentices have to split time with study and for periods where they are on placement, and reduce need to place limits on how many individuals can be recruited from different internal teams in a single cohort. In terms of external recruitment, employers felt this would either enable them to sustainably expand existing external recruitment routes, or to start recruiting externally if they did not already do so, something which was a prevailing ambition for employers spoken to who were not already doing so.

I think [the apprenticeship] should be a job in its own right. Absolutely can see why [employer] are just doing it internally at the moment. But we are a huge organisation. We employ a lot of people from [town] and the surrounding area, and I do feel we should open to others, particularly, others from different backgrounds, minority groups, because I think everybody should have the same opportunity to learn. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Local authority case study – Plans to change recruitment approach

The local authority are in discussions to change their approach to offering the apprenticeship. They have been offering the apprenticeship to internal candidates only, and because of a hiring freeze, apprentices had remained in their substantive roles. As the apprentices were from a few service areas there were significant impacts on resourcing, and candidates were turned down because there are already too many apprentices in their service area. They had lost talent to a nearby local authority because their own service area didn't have the resources to support another apprentice. Additionally, service areas with several apprentices worried about budget cuts, as they appeared to cope with fewer staff during the 70- and 100-day placements.

The strategic lead now believes that offering the apprenticeship as a standalone role from the start would have been more successful in minimising disruption. They are in discussions with senior leadership to offer one apprenticeship as a standalone role each year, alongside substantive posts. This would allow multiple applicants from the same service area to start the apprenticeship. The offering would remain open to internal candidates only, as there were still high levels of demand.

Employers who had previously accessed additional government funds to support them to run the apprenticeship noted that conditions of the funding meant they were not allowed to spend it on backfilling roles, which made it less useful.

Not allowed to spend it on backfill, a massive missed opportunity, [it would give us] more flexibility to offer to more candidates. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Some employers had used these types of funds to create new job roles in workforce development teams whose role it was to coordinate the apprenticeship or otherwise be involved in apprentices' development. These employers felt this had enabled them to improve the quality of their apprenticeship offering, and one suggested there should be a requirement for apprenticeship employers to have a "named person" who is responsible for apprenticeship coordination.

Communication with the learning provider

Some employers emphasised a need for improvement in communication with their learning provider. To help remediate poor communication with the learning provider, particularly around attendance, one local authority launched an internal process for tracking apprentice attendance. The tool tracks attendance both at work and at the learning provider, as well as completion of academic work and logging on-the-job hours. This followed a series of miscommunications where apprentices were marked absent when they were present.

We can look at that [internal tracker] and troubleshoot and put in support or give pushback and challenge depending on what we get rather than just leaving it [attendance monitoring] to chance or when we meet with the universities. - *Operational Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

While some strategic and operational leads felt that there were good levels of communication with and fast responses from the learning provider, others felt they lacked oversight of off-the-job learning. For example, one operational lead felt they would have liked to have an outline of the curriculum week-by-week rather than relying on the apprentice to relay this information. That way they could better use supervisions and find on-the-job opportunities for the apprentice which matched their learning. There was appetite among many apprentices and operational leads for a more joined-up or holistic approach between on-the-job and off-the-job learning.

Several employers felt that in order to improve communications and working relationships with their degree apprenticeship learning provider, better expectations could be established at the start. They considered it best practice to set out their expectations of the provider during procurement, including frequency of communications, and escalation of challenges with individual apprentices.

Be really specific when you're procuring HEI, the academic provider, about what you want in the communication and how often you want it. As I say, we've had to, you know, learning that somebody hasn't been in university the next quarter or any issues that arise in behaviours from apprentices, you want it in a timely way. - *Strategic Lead, SWDA-offering local authority*

Local authority case study – supporting apprentices

The employer was impressed with how the learning provider ran the apprenticeship programme and the style of teaching that they offered, as they felt it was very visual and interactive. The strategic lead felt this style of teaching had been beneficial for their neurodivergent apprentices in particular, and was pleased with how the learning provider tailored their teaching for these apprentices.

Apprentices felt that the support they received from their employer and the learning provider was “joined up”. Every 6 weeks, the apprentice met with their practice educator and their university tutor together to discuss any issues and review targets. This meeting also allowed the apprentice to raise any clashes with workload and deadlines, to see if extensions or workload solutions could be put in place. While apprentices acknowledged that such clashes were inevitable, they explained that their employer and learning provider would work together to try and minimise any impact.

Conclusions

This research has generated a substantial body of evidence on perceptions of the apprenticeship route and on the factors that enable or inhibit successful delivery. The conclusions presented below are structured around the original research questions and draw together findings from both the survey and qualitative research strands.

A central overarching conclusion is that the apprenticeship was widely valued by both apprentices and employers as a credible and effective route to social work qualification, and typically produced practitioners who are ready to enter the ASYE with the required knowledge, skills and professional readiness. Employers particularly valued the apprenticeship as a mechanism for developing and retaining their existing workforce. For many apprentices, this route provided access to qualification that may not have been feasible through other pathways, either because of entry requirements or the need to remain in paid employment while training.

The characteristics, educational backgrounds and employment trajectories of apprentices

Most apprentices were already working in the Health and Social Care sector and typically already working for their apprenticeship employer. In practice, it was frequently used as an internal progression route more than as a mechanism for external recruitment. Many apprentices were mature entrants (over 35), often with caring responsibilities. Some employers also felt the route was more accessible to those with learning difficulties or disabilities. Most apprentices (over half) did not already hold a degree-level qualification. The route therefore appeared to widen access to professional qualification for experienced staff and was found to function less as an initial entry point into the sector and more as a structured progression pathway within it.

Motivation of apprentices and employers for doing/offering the apprenticeship

Apprentices were typically motivated by a longstanding interest in becoming qualified social workers and a strong commitment to making a difference in people's lives. While most were aware of alternative qualification routes, the apprenticeship was generally viewed as the only realistic or preferable option due to its financial accessibility and the opportunity to earn while learning. For many, other routes were perceived as impractical because of cost, eligibility criteria or the need to step away from paid employment.

Employers were primarily motivated to offer the apprenticeship as a tool to develop their workforce. The apprenticeship was widely seen as a means to "grow their own" practitioners, supporting progression among committed staff and strengthening retention. Internal recruitment was common, reflecting a strategic decision to invest in existing

employees. Employers that recruited to the apprenticeship externally had typically first offered the route to internal staff. External recruitment was then introduced either to support expansion of the programme or in response to reduced interest from internal candidates. Where the apprenticeship was not offered, this tended to relate to organisational capacity rather than any perceived issues with the apprenticeship itself.

Key enablers for completing the apprenticeship

Overall experiences of the apprenticeship were positive, particularly where programmes were well-structured and supported. Key enablers included protected off-the-job learning time, manageable caseloads, effective supervision and mentoring, and strong collaboration between employers and learning providers.

Key barriers to completing the apprenticeship

Barriers most often related to workload pressures and the challenge of balancing employment, academic study and personal responsibilities. Non-completion was most commonly associated with work–life balance challenges, caring responsibilities and experiences of insufficient support.

Local authority experiences of offering the apprenticeship

For many local authorities, the apprenticeship was becoming an established workforce development route aligned to longer-term recruitment and retention strategies. Employers outlined the benefits of developing practitioners who are already familiar with the local community, the organisational culture and the systems.

Employers discussed some organisational challenges to offering and delivering the apprenticeship, typically around budget considerations and team capacity. In particular, placements were a point of heightened pressure for employers, stretching team capacity as it was often not possible to ‘back-fill’ the apprentice role during this time of absence.

Employers emphasised the importance of forward workforce planning, clear processes for transition into qualified roles, and effective partnership working with learning providers to manage programme demands.

Whether apprentices and employers regard the apprenticeship as good preparation for social work practice

Both apprentices and employers regarded the apprenticeship as strong preparation for social work practice. The integration of academic learning with sustained on-the-job experience was widely viewed as a distinctive strength, which enabled apprentices to develop applied skills alongside theoretical understanding. Employers often perceived

apprentices as entering qualified roles with a high level of practical readiness, supported by their prior professional experience within the sector.

Post-qualification trajectories further reinforced this perception: most apprentices moved into social work roles, frequently remaining with their apprenticeship employer. Most expressed an intention to stay within the profession, however those who trained in child and family social work were less likely to do so than those who trained in adult social work.

Technical appendix

Survey sampling

The sample for the apprentice survey (the ILR extract) was provided to IFF Research by DfE. The 'in scope-sample' was defined as all social work degree apprentices recorded on the ILR up to and including R10 2024/25 which had a final submission date of June 2025. The sample file incorporated both child and family and adult social work apprentices.

Prior to survey fieldwork, the sample was cleaned by IFF Research to remove duplicate records for individual learners.

To ensure accuracy of the sample, respondents were asked during the survey to confirm whether they were current, completed or non-completed apprentices, and were screened out if they indicated they had never participated in the apprenticeship. Survey respondents were also asked whether they mainly worked in child and family social work or adult social work during their apprenticeship (as this information was not available on the ILR sample).

ILR analysis

Analysis of apprentice starts in the ILR was conducted to provide context and explore any changes over time, as well as to inform weighting decisions

Key findings are discussed in the main body of the report, but in summary, Table 7 to Table 9 show an expansion from limited regions in 2018/19, to a more nationwide distribution in 2024/25¹⁹. Comparing 2019/20 to 2024/25 there is increased representation among under 35s, people from ethnic minorities, and people with LLDD.

¹⁹ Data for 2024/25 does not cover a full academic year as the sample was drawn in June 2025 and therefore includes starts up to the end of May that year.

Table 7 Demographic breakdown by cohort

Sex	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	Total
Female	15%	17%	17%	16%	17%	14%	14%	15%
Male	85%	83%	83%	84%	83%	86%	86%	85%
Age	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	Total
Under 35	40%	40%	36%	39%	43%	42%	45%*	42%
Over 35	60%	60%	64%	61%	57%	58%	55%*	58%
Ethnicity	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	Total
White or White British	89%	84%	81%	84%	85%	82%	82%	83%
Mixed or multiple ethnic background	3%	3%	3%	5%	4%	3%	4%	4%
Asian or Asian British	4%	5%	4%	4%	3%	6%	4%	4%
Black or Black British	2%	3%	9%	6%	7%	7%	9%*	7%
Other ethnic group	0%	2%	0%	0%	0%	0%	1%	1%
Summary: Ethnic minority	10%	14%	17%	16%	14%	17%	17%*	16%
Not provided	1%	2%	2%	1%	1%	1%	1%	1%

*Indicates statistically significant difference between 2024/25 and 2019/20.

Table 8. LLDD by cohort

LLDD	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	Total
Yes	18%	16%	17%	23%	23%	24%	22%*	22%
No	82%	82%	80%	76%	73%	76%	77%	77%
Unknown	0%	1%	3%	1%	3%	1%	1%	2%

*Indicates statistically significant difference between 2024/25 and 2019/20.

Table 9. Regional breakdown by cohort

Region	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24	2024/25	Total
East Midlands	27%	9%	10%	8%	10%	8%	9%	9%
East of England	0%	14%	11%	11%	9%	12%	11%	11%
London	0%	3%	11%	6%	8%	7%	9%	8%
North East	0%	4%	4%	4%	4%	7%	5%	5%
North West	53%	15%	19%	19%	19%	19%	18%	19%
South East	0%	20%	13%	14%	18%	14%	15%	15%
South West	1%	7%	8%	11%	9%	8%	10%	9%
West Midlands	12%	14%	14%	14%	8%	14%	13%	13%
Yorkshire and The Humber	8%	11%	8%	12%	14%	10%	9%	11%

Survey analysis

Coding

The survey contained partial open-ended questions: these questions offer respondents the opportunity to say 'other-please specify', allowing respondents to answer in ways not on the predefined list. It also contained several open-ended questions (free-text response boxes with no predefined answer list).

Responses to partial and fully open-ended questions were coded by IFF Research's in-house coding team and incorporated into the final data files.

The research team then carried out checks on both the code frame and quality assurance checks on the coding by the coding team.

Weighting

Weighting was applied to the apprentice survey to make it representative of all social work degree apprentices (current, completer and non-completer) on the Individualised Learner Record (ILR) at the time of sample draw (which was R10 of 2024/25, including data up to June 2025). This defines the in-scope population of the survey.

A Random Iterative Method (RIM)²⁰ weighting approach was used. Targets were set, using in-scope ILR population profile data, to ensure data was representative by:

- Apprentice age (at the time of survey)
- Apprentice sex
- Home address region (which acted as a strong proxy for work region and had full coverage in the population profile)
- "Completion status" (i.e. current, completer or non-completer)
- LLDD status

The data was found to be representative of the ethnicity profile without further weighting needed.

There was a discrepancy between ILR sample and survey responses on completion status – namely that 22% of apprentices who are marked as current on the ILR and who took part in the survey were completers at the time of survey. The completion status provided on sample (rather than survey response) was used for weighting. However, as more recently collected information, the survey response for completion status was used for survey routing and reporting.

²⁰ A standard method for weighting data by several variables using an iterative algorithm.

The ILR population profiles used for weighting targets are shown in Table 10 to Table 14.

Table 10. Apprentice age profile used for weighting targets

Age at time of survey	Population percent
Under 25	2%
25-35	28%
35-44	37%
45 or over	33%

Table 11. Apprentice sex profile used for weighting targets

Apprentice sex	Population percent
Male	15%
Female	85%

Table 12. Apprentice region profile used for weighting targets

Apprentice home region	Population percent
East Midlands	9%
East of England	11%
London	8%
North East	5%
North West	19%
South East	15%
South West	9%
West Midlands	13%
Yorkshire and the Humber	11%

Table 13. Completion status profile used for weighting targets

Completion status	Population percent
Current	61%
Completer	32%
Non-completer	7%

Table 14. Learning Difficulty and Disability (LLDD) profile used for weighting targets

LLDD status	Population percent
Yes	22%
No	77%
Unknown	2%

Analysis

Cross-tabular (bivariate) analysis was conducted on the survey data. Subgroups included: apprenticeship practice area (child and family social work, adult social work); completion status; age band; sex; disability status; ethnicity; region; and local authority Ofsted rating. As discussed in the Methodology section, only differences that are statistically significant (95% CI) are highlighted in the report.

Limitations of the survey research

- **Sample scope:** If any apprentice records were missing from the R10 submission of the ILR they were not in sample file for survey invitations, population demographics and weighting purposes. The sample file did not include apprentices starts after June 2025.
- **LLDD Data Accuracy:** ILR data was utilised to determine the population profile of LLDD learners for weighting purposes. However, known issues with LLDD data recording in the ILR, such as unclear differentiation between no response and 'no LLDD', may have impacted accuracy. Despite these limitations, ILR data remained the most comprehensive source available for LLDD population information.
- **Weighting Limitations:** While the weighting approach ensured representation of specific sub-groups in the response profile (see Table 10 to Table 14), unobserved differences between the weighted sample and the overall population may still exist.

- **Response Bias:** Individuals participating in research about their apprenticeship may have different experiences compared to the general apprentice population, potentially leading to response bias. This could manifest in more polarised views regarding their apprenticeship experience.
- **Recall Issues:** For surveyed learners who began their apprenticeship in 2018/19 (completing in 2020/21), recall issues may have influenced their responses. All apprentices were surveyed during the fieldwork period in late 2025, meaning some respondents were reflecting on experiences from up to 7 years prior.
- **Non-Completer Sample:** Results from the non-completer sample should be interpreted with caution. With only 55 responses from this group, findings are indicative, and further subgroup analysis was not feasible.

Qualitative fieldwork and analysis

Case study sampling and recruitment

The 15 case study areas were selected to ensure coverage of a wide range of characteristics, such as region and level of participation in the apprenticeship, as shown in Table 15.

Table 15. Target and completed case studies by local authority type

Local authority characteristic	Target number of case studies	Number of case studies completed
Number of apprentices: Less than 15 (low volume)	3-4	2
Number of apprentices: 15 or more (higher volume)	11-12	13
Employer Support Fund recipient: Yes	10-11	11
Employer Support Fund recipient: No	4-5	4
Region: North ²¹	c. 4	4
Region: Midlands ²²	c. 4	3
Region: South ²³	c.4	6
Region: London	c. 3	2
Ofsted rating: Outstanding	c. 3	3
Ofsted rating: Good	c. 7	8
Ofsted rating: Requires improvement / Inadequate	c.5	4
Vacancy Rate: Higher than average	c. 4	3
Vacancy Rate: Around average	c. 7	6
Vacancy Rate: Lower than average	c. 4	6
Indices of Multiple Deprivation: Lowest quintiles (least disadvantaged)	c.4	6
Indices of Multiple Deprivation: Middle quintile	c. 6	3
Indices of Multiple Deprivation: Highest quintiles (most disadvantaged)	c.5	6
Total	15	15

²¹ This includes North East, North West and Yorkshire & the Humber.

²² This includes West Midlands, East Midlands and the East of England.

²³ This includes South East and South West.

DfE provided IFF with local authority data on number of apprentices and whether or not the local authority received funding from the Employer Support Fund. IFF sourced other profile data from the following published sources:

- Ofsted rating: https://www.adcs.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/ILACS_outcomes_for_www.xlsx
- Vacancy rate: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/fast-track/be5428e5-bde0-4ae0-d47b-08dd45cb367d>
- Indices of Multiple Deprivation (2019): https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5d8b3d7aed915d0369518030/File_1_1_-_IoD2019_Local_Authority_District_Summaries__upper-tier__.xlsx

In each case study area IFF Research aimed to speak to:

- A person with a strategic role, responsible for decisions about the apprenticeship provision, which could be the Director of Children’s Services, or another colleague. For the purposes of reporting this individual is referred to as the “strategic lead”.
- At least 2 staff with an operational or delivery role, responsible for managing and supporting apprentices. For the purposes of reporting these individuals are referred to as “operational leads”.
- At least one individual currently undertaking the apprenticeship within the local authority.
- At least one apprentice who completed the apprenticeship and went on to work as a child and family social worker (if applicable).

An introductory email and follow-up contact between IFF Research and the Director of Children’s Services in each case study local authority sought to explain the purpose of the research, gain consent for local authority participation and identify a primary liaison contact. This was typically the Principal Social Worker or Service Director. Early contact also aimed to confirm sample information on local authority characteristics and to ensure that the local authority was currently offering the apprenticeship in child and family social work (hence in scope for the case study research).

Primary liaison contacts at each local authority then assisted with identifying and engaging suitable interviewees and arranging interviews.

Fieldwork

All interviews were carried out by members of the IFF Research team, trained in qualitative interviewing. Interviews lasted, on average, around 45 minutes. Interviews in case study areas predominantly took place on site, with a small number requiring an online interview (namely for individuals unavailable on the day of the site visit). The additional depth interviews with strategic leads (outlined in Table 5 of the Methodology chapter) were conducted online.

Topic guides

All topic guides were developed in collaboration with DfE. The topic guides varied by audience types, with a different version for strategic leads, operational leads, current and completed apprentices to ensure that all questions were relevant.

Topic guides for strategic leads and operational leads in areas that offer the apprenticeship explored areas such as how the decision to offer the apprenticeship was made, role of government funding, recruitment approaches, how the apprenticeship is delivered, it's impact, comparison with other graduate routes and future plans for the apprenticeship.

Topic guides for apprentices explored areas such as their background, motivations for a career in social work, why they chose the apprentice route, their experiences on the apprenticeship including what they enjoyed and what they found most challenging, how well they felt the apprenticeship prepared them (or is preparing them) for practice and their future plans.

Analysis framework

Findings from each case study area were documented in a standardised template, which included key quotes from the interview transcripts. Completed templates were then imported into Quirkos, a qualitative data analysis software, where they were systematically coded according to key themes identified in the research framework. The codeframe was reviewed by the research team and iteratively refined. This approach facilitated rigorous thematic analysis and ensured consistency in the interpretation of all qualitative data collected.

Questionnaire script

ASK ALL CURRENT AND COMPLETER APPRENTICES (FROM SAMPLE)

S4. We contacted you because we understand that you are currently or were recently undertaking a Social Work Degree Apprenticeship. Can you tell us which of the following applies?

SINGLE CODE.

1. I am still doing the apprenticeship. CONTINUE.
2. I finished and completed the apprenticeship. CONTINUE.
3. I left the apprenticeship without completing it. CONTINUE.
4. I never did the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship. SCREEN OUT.
5. I have not yet started the apprenticeship. SCREEN OUT.

S4 SCREENOUT TEXT: Thank you for your time. Unfortunately, we are only looking to speak to people who are currently doing, or have recently undertaken, a Social Work Degree Apprenticeship. If you have any queries, please email SWDAsurvey@iffresearch.com

ASK IF NON-COMPLETER (FROM SAMPLE)

S5. Our records suggest that you started a Social Work Degree Apprenticeship but left before completing. Is this correct?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes, I left the apprenticeship without completing
2. No, I completed the apprenticeship
3. No, I'm still doing the apprenticeship
4. No, I never participated in the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship. SCREEN OUT.

S5 SCREENOUT TEXT: Thank you for your time. Unfortunately, we are only looking to speak to people who are currently doing, or have recently undertaken, a Social Work Degree Apprenticeship. If you have any queries, please email SWDAsurvey@iffresearch.com

Background and motivations

From this point onwards we will refer to your Social Work Degree Apprenticeship as your 'apprenticeship'.

ASK ALL

A1. During your apprenticeship [IF CURRENT: are][IF COMPLETER OR NON-COMPLETER: were] you mainly working in child and family social work or adult social work?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Child and Family Social Work
2. Adult Social Work
3. Working equally across both 'Child and Family' and 'Adult' Social Work

ASK ALL

A2. Which one of the following best describes your main activity just before you started the apprenticeship?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Working for the same employer as your apprenticeship employer
2. Working for a different employer to your apprenticeship employer
3. Self-employed
4. Doing or recently completed a course in school or college
5. Doing or recently completed a course at university
6. Doing or recently completed a different apprenticeship
7. Unemployed
8. Looking after home or family
9. Unable to work due to illness
10. Doing something else (SPECIFY)
11. Don't know
12. Prefer not to say

IF WORKING BEFORE SWDA, INCLUDING SELF-EMPLOYED AND APPRENTICES
(A2=1/2/3/6)

A3. Which of the following best describes the sector you worked in just before starting the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Health & Social Work (e.g. health services, social care, youth work)
2. Education (e.g. schools, nurseries, colleges)
3. Public Administration (e.g. central or local government)
4. Manufacturing
5. Construction
6. Wholesale & Retail
7. Hotels & Restaurants (e.g. accommodation and food service activities)
8. Information & Communications (e.g. publishing, information services)
9. Financial Services (e.g. insurance activities)
10. Business Services (e.g. accounting, advertising, employment activities)
11. Arts and other services (e.g. health & beauty, entertainment, recreation, libraries, museums, sports, betting)
12. Primary sector and utilities (e.g. agriculture, electricity, gas, water supply, waste management)
13. Transport and Storage (e.g. postal and courier activities, warehousing)
14. Other (SPECIFY)
15. Not sure
16. Prefer not to say

IF WORKING BEFORE SWDA (A2=1/2)

A4. What was your job title just before starting the apprenticeship?

1. WRITE IN.
2. Don't know.

ASK ALL

A5. Which of the following best describes who employed you for the majority of your apprenticeship?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Local authority
2. A Trust or partnership providing social services on behalf of a local authority
3. NHS or other public health body
4. Charity or voluntary sector organisation
5. Private company or independent provider
6. Other (SPECIFY)
7. Don't know
8. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL

A6. What was your highest level of qualification before starting the apprenticeship?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Entry level or level 1
2. Level 2 (e.g. GCSEs, O levels, intermediate apprenticeships)
3. Level 3 (e.g. A Levels, advanced apprenticeship, T Levels, Access to Higher Education)
4. Level 4 (e.g. CertHE, HNC, higher apprenticeship)
5. Level 5 (e.g. foundation degree, DipHE, HND)
6. Level 6 (e.g. undergraduate degree, degree apprenticeship, graduate diploma)
7. Level 7 (e.g. Master's degree, PGCE, postgraduate degree or certificate)
8. Level 8 (e.g. Doctorate)
9. Don't know

ASK ALL

A7. Before applying to your apprenticeship, did you have to complete or agree to complete any additional qualifications or courses, in order to meet the entry criteria?

MULTICODE.

1. A maths qualification
2. An English qualification
3. Another type of qualification (SPECIFY)
4. I did not have to complete any additional qualifications (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
5. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
6. Prefer not to say (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK ALL

A8. Had you considered becoming a qualified social worker before you heard about the apprenticeship?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes, I had recently started to consider it
2. Yes, I had been considering it for some time
3. Yes, I have always wanted to be a social worker
4. No, I hadn't considered it until I heard about the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship
5. Don't know

ASK ALL

A9. Why did you decide you wanted to become a qualified social worker?

MULTICODE. RANDOMISE.

1. I wanted to help people/make a difference
2. I wanted a stable, well-paid job
3. I was looking for a change in career
4. There are good opportunities for career progression
5. Social work aligns with my political or personal beliefs and values
6. I have friends and/or family working in social work
7. I had a positive personal experience of social work
8. I had a negative personal experience of social work
9. I was aware there are jobs available in social work/ it is a shortage occupation
10. Other (SPECIFY)

11. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

12. Prefer not to say (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK ALL

A10. Why did you choose the Social Work Degree Apprenticeship as your route to qualify as a social worker?

MULTICODE. RANDOMISE.

1. I wanted to earn while I learned
2. It allowed me to stay in my current employer while training
3. It was financially more affordable than other routes
4. I preferred the practical, work-based learning approach
5. I was encouraged by my employer to take this route
6. There were no other social work training programmes available in my local area
7. I did not meet the entry requirements for other routes
8. I was not aware of other routes into social work
9. Other (SPECIFY)
10. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK THOSE THAT GAVE MORE THAN ONE REASON AT A10

A11. Which of these was the MAIN reason for choosing the apprenticeship route?

SINGLE CODE. ONLY SHOW REASONS SELECTED AT A10.

1. I wanted to earn while I learned
2. It allowed me to stay in my current employer while training
3. It was financially more affordable than other routes
4. I preferred the practical, work-based learning approach
5. I was encouraged by my employer to take this route
6. There were no other social work training programmes available in my local area
7. I did not meet the entry requirements for other routes
8. I was not aware of other routes into social work
9. Other (SPECIFY)

10. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK ALL AWARE OF OTHER ROUTES (A10=1-7/9/10)

A12. Which of the following routes into social work were you aware of before deciding to do the apprenticeship?

MULTICODE.

1. An undergraduate degree in social work (E.g. BSc or BA)
2. A postgraduate degree in social work (E.g. PGDip/MSc/MA)
3. The 'Step Up to Social Work' programme
4. The 'Frontline' programme (renamed Approach Social Work in 2024)
5. Think Ahead
6. I was not aware of any other routes (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
7. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK ALL

A13. Before starting your apprenticeship, was it your preferred route to qualify as a social worker?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know
4. Prefer not to say

IF SWDA not preferred route (A13=2)

A14. At the time, which route or routes would you have preferred to do instead?

MULTICODE. IF A12 ANSWERED ONLY SHOW ROUTES AWARE OF AT A12.

1. An undergraduate degree in social work (E.g. BSc or BA)
2. A postgraduate degree in social work (E.g. PGDip/MSc/MA)
3. The 'Step Up to Social Work' programme

4. The 'Frontline' programme (renamed Approach Social Work in 2024)
5. Think Ahead
6. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
7. Prefer not to say (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK ALL

A15. If you hadn't secured a place on the apprenticeship, what do you think you would have done instead?

SINGLE CODE.

1. I would have undertaken another route to qualify as a social worker
2. I would not have undertaken another route to qualify as a social worker
3. Don't know
4. Prefer not to say

IF WOULD HAVE UNDERTAKEN ANOTHER ROUTE (A15=1)

A16. Which route would you most likely have taken?

SINGLE CODE.

1. An undergraduate degree in social work (e.g. BSc or BA)
2. A postgraduate degree in social work (e.g. PGDip/MSc/MA)
3. The 'Step Up to Social Work' programme
4. The 'Frontline' programme (renamed Approach Social Work in 2024)
5. Think Ahead
6. Don't know
7. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL

A17. Which of the following best describes how the opportunity to undertake your apprenticeship came about?

SINGLE CODE.

1. I applied for an advertised Social Work Degree Apprenticeship role
2. My existing employer offered me the opportunity to complete a Social Work Degree Apprenticeship
3. I approached the employer to create a Social Work Degree Apprenticeship role for me
4. I applied some other way (SPECIFY)
5. Don't know

Reasons for non-completion

ASK ALL NON-COMPLETERS (STATUS=3)

B1. When did you leave your apprenticeship?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Within the first 6 months
2. Between six months and one year of doing the apprenticeship
3. Between one and 2 years of doing the apprenticeship
4. After 2 years or more of doing the apprenticeship
5. Don't know/Can't remember

ASK ALL NON-COMPLETERS (STATUS=3)

B2. Which of the following factors contributed to not completing your apprenticeship?

[IF ONLINE: If there are other or additional reasons that apply to you, please enter up to three reasons in the boxes provided.]

MULTICODE. RANDOMISE LIST.

1. I found the academic learning too difficult
2. I found the on-the-job training too difficult
3. The salary was too low/I was struggling to get by financially
4. I did not have a good work-life balance/the workload was too high
5. The apprenticeship was badly run or poorly organised
6. I decided I didn't want to qualify as a social worker any more
7. I decided to pursue a different route into social work instead

8. I felt unsupported during the on-the-job learning
9. I felt unsupported during the academic learning
10. Physical health issues
11. Mental health issues (including depression, anxiety/stress etc.)
12. Caring responsibilities (e.g. childcare or looking after relatives or friends)
13. Other reason 1 (SPECIFY)
14. Other reason 2 (SPECIFY)
15. Other reason 3 (SPECIFY)
16. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
17. Prefer not to say (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK ALL WHO CHOSE MORE THAN ONE OPTION AT B2

B3. Which of these was the single MAIN reason for not completing your apprenticeship?

SINGLE CODE. ONLY SHOW CODES SELECTED AT B2.

1. I found the academic learning too difficult
2. I found the on-the-job training too difficult
3. The salary was too low / I was struggling to get by financially
4. I did not have a good work-life balance/the workload was too high
5. The apprenticeship was badly run or poorly organised
6. I decided I didn't want to qualify as a social worker any more
7. I decided to pursue a different route into social work instead
8. I felt unsupported during the on-the-job learning
9. I felt unsupported during the academic learning
10. Physical health issues
11. Mental health issues (including depression, anxiety/stress etc.)
12. Caring responsibilities (e.g. childcare or looking after relatives or friends)
13. Other reason 1 (SPECIFY)
14. Other reason 2 (SPECIFY)
15. Other reason 3 (SPECIFY)
16. Don't know

17. Prefer not to say

Experiences of the apprenticeship

ASK ALL

C1. Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied [IF CURRENT: are][IF COMPLETER OR NON-COMPLETER: were] you with your experience of the apprenticeship?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Very satisfied
2. Satisfied
3. Dissatisfied
4. Very dissatisfied
5. Don't know

ASK ALL DISSATISFIED (C1=3/4)

C2. Why [IF CURRENT: are][IF COMPLETER OR NON-COMPLETER: were] you dissatisfied?

SINGLE CODE.

1. WRITE IN.
2. Don't know.

ASK ALL

C3. How satisfied or dissatisfied [IF CURRENT: are][IF COMPLETER OR NON-COMPLETER: were] you with the following academic aspects of your apprenticeship?

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know	Not applicable
The quality of the teaching from your	1	2	3	4	5	6

learning provider/tutors						
The feedback on your progress	1	2	3	4	5	6
The amount of learning received during your apprenticeship	1	2	3	4	5	6
That the learning is relevant and beneficial to a social work career	1	2	3	4	5	6
The balance between your work and apprenticeship study requirements	1	2	3	4	5	6
The environment/culture of your learning provider	1	2	3	4	5	6
The level of support from your learning provider/tutor	1	2	3	4	5	6
IF COMPLETER: Your experience of the end point assessment process, including any time spent preparing for the end point assessment	1	2	3	4	5	6

ASK ALL

C4. How satisfied or dissatisfied [IF CURRENT: are][IF COMPLETER OR NON-COMPLETER: were] you with your apprenticeship employer in the following areas?

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know	Not applicable
The quality of the training provided by your employer	1	2	3	4	5	6
That the training is relevant and beneficial to a social work career	1	2	3	4	5	6
The feedback on your progress	1	2	3	4	5	6
The balance between time spent learning in the workplace and day-to-day work duties at your workplace	1	2	3	4	5	6
The way you [IF CURRENT: are][IF COMPLETER OR NON-COMPLETER: were] assessed on the job	1	2	3	4	5	6
The environment/culture of your employer	1	2	3	4	5	6
The level of support from your employer	1	2	3	4	5	6

IF CURRENT APPRENTICE OR NON-COMPLETER (STATUS=1/3)

C5. [IF CURRENT: Have you participated][IF COMPLETER OR NON-COMPLETER: Did you participate] in any practice placements during your apprenticeship?

ADD IF RESPONDENT ASKS FOR CLARIFICATION ABOUT 'PRACTICE PLACEMENT' DEFINITION: Practice placements are part of the structured on-the-job training your

apprenticeship employer organises. These might be referred to as 70-day and 100-day placements, and you may go to another team than the one you are usually based in for one or both of these practice placements.

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

IF COMPLETERS OR PARTICIPATED IN PRACTICE PLACEMENT (STATUS=2 OR C5=1)

C6. How satisfied or dissatisfied [IF CURRENT: are][IF COMPLETER OR NON-COMPLETER: were] you with the following aspects of the practice placements undertaken during your apprenticeship?

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Dissatisfied	Very dissatisfied	Don't know	Not applicable
The length of your practice placements	1	2	3	4	5	6
The quality of the training provided	1	2	3	4	5	6
That the practice placements are relevant and beneficial to a social work career	1	2	3	4	5	6
The feedback on your progress	1	2	3	4	5	6
The way you were assessed	1	2	3	4	5	6
The level of support you [IF CURRENT: receive][IF COMPLETER OR	1	2	3	4	5	6

NON-COMPLETER: received]						
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ASK ALL

C7. Which of the following best applies to whether or not you would recommend the apprenticeship route as a way for people to train as a social worker?

SINGLE CODE.

1. I would definitely recommend it
2. I would recommend it, but with some reservations
3. I would definitely not recommend it
4. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL WHO WOULD RECOMMEND IN ANY WAY (C7=1/2)

C8. Why would you recommend it?

MULTICODE. RANDOMISE.

1. I [like/liked] being able to earn while I learned
2. The academic and on-the-job learning experience [complement/complemented] each other well
3. It [is preparing /prepared] me well for a career in social work
4. I [enjoy/enjoyed] learning through practical experience
5. I [find/found] the apprenticeship rewarding/enjoyable
6. I [feel/felt] supported by the learning provider
7. I [feel/felt] supported by my employer
8. Other (SPECIFY)
9. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
10. Prefer not to say (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK ALL WHO WOULD NOT RECOMMEND (C7=3) OR HAVE RESERVATIONS (C7=2)

C9. (IF C7=3) Why would you not recommend it?

(IF C7=2) What reservations would have about recommending it?

MULTICODE. RANDOMISE.

1. The academic workload [is/was] too high (too much to do)
2. The academic work [is/was] too difficult
3. The workload from my employer [is/was] too high (too much to do)
4. The job [is/was] too challenging or stressful
5. I [find/found] it difficult to balance work and study
6. The apprenticeship [is/was] badly structured/organised
7. I [do/did] not feel supported by my employer
8. I [do/did] not feel supported by the learning provider
9. I do not think I [am gaining /gained] enough/the right experience needed to prepare me for a career in social work
10. Other (SPECIFY)
11. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
12. Prefer not to say (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK ALL

C10. In what ways, if any, do you think the apprenticeship could be improved? Please share up to three areas for improvement.

MULTICODE.

1. Improvement 1. WRITE IN.
2. Improvement 2. WRITE IN.
3. Improvement 3. WRITE IN.
4. It doesn't need any improvements (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
5. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

Current activity and future plans

ASK ALL COMPLETERS (STATUS=2)

D1. Since completing your apprenticeship, have you worked as a social worker?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

ASK IF HAS WORKED AS A SOCIAL WORKER (D1=1/3)

D2. Are you currently working as a social worker?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

ASK IF HAS NOT WORKED or is not currently a social worker (D1=2 or d2=2)

D3. Do you intend to work as a social worker in the future?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

ASK IF HAS WORKED AS A SOCIAL WORKER (D1=1)

D4. You said that you [IF D2=2: have worked][IF D2=1: are currently working] as a social worker after completing your apprenticeship. During this time, has there been any period where you have been working for...?

MULTICODE.

1. The same employer you did your apprenticeship with
2. A different employer as a social worker
3. A different employer outside of social work
4. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK IF CURRENTLY WORKING AS A SOCIAL WORKER AND WORKED FOR THE SAME EMPLOYER (D2=1 AND D4=1)

D5. And are you still working for the same employer you did your apprenticeship with?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

ASK IF HAVE WORKED AS A SOCIAL WORKER (D1=1)

D6. Since completing your apprenticeship, have you worked as a child and family social worker or adult social worker?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Child and family social worker
2. Adult social worker
3. Both
4. Don't know

ASK IF NOT WORKING AS A SOCIAL WORKER (D1=2 OR D2=2)

D7. Which of the following best describes your current activity?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Working in a social care-related job e.g. family support worker
2. Working in a job unrelated to social care
3. Further study
4. Unemployed and looking for work as a social worker
5. Unemployed and looking for work outside of social work
6. Unable to work due to health condition or disability
7. Unable to work due to caring responsibilities
8. Doing something else (SPECIFY)
9. Don't know
10. Prefer not to say

ASK IF NOT IN SOCIAL WORK AND IS EMPLOYED (D7=1/2)

D8. Which of the following best describes the sector you are currently employed in?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Health & Social Work (e.g. health services, social care, youth work)
2. Education (e.g. schools, nurseries, colleges)
3. Public Administration (e.g. central or local government)
4. Manufacturing
5. Construction
6. Wholesale & Retail
7. Hotels & Restaurants (e.g. accommodation and food service activities)
8. Information & Communications (e.g. publishing, information services)
9. Financial Services (e.g. insurance activities)
10. Business Services (e.g. accounting, advertising, employment activities)
11. Arts and other services (e.g. health & beauty, entertainment, recreation, libraries, museums, sports, betting)
12. Primary sector and utilities (e.g. agriculture, electricity, gas, water supply, waste management)
13. Transport and Storage (e.g. postal and courier activities, warehousing)
14. Other (SPECIFY)
15. Not sure
16. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL CURRENTLY WORKING AS A SOCIAL WORKER (D2=1)

D9. Which of the following best describes the seniority of your current role?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Social worker
2. Senior social worker
3. Consultant social worker
4. Independent review officer

5. Assistant team manager
6. Team manager
7. Service manager
8. Principal social worker
9. Head of service
10. Other (SPECIFY)
11. Don't know
12. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL CURRENTLY WORKING IN CHILD AND FAMILY SOCIAL WORK (D2=1 AND D6=1)

D10. Which of the following best describes the type of team your role is in?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Access/MASH Team
2. Assessment Team
3. Child in Need / Child Protection Team
4. Children with Disabilities Team
5. Child in Care / Children Looked After Team
6. Adoption Team
7. Fostering Team
8. Leaving Care Team
9. Adolescent Team
10. Youth Offending Team
11. Other (SPECIFY)
12. Don't know
13. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL COMPLETER AND CURRENT APPRENTICES (STATUS=1/2)

D11. [IF CURRENT: Based on your experience so far, how] [IF COMPLETER: How] well do you think the apprenticeship has prepared you for a career as a social worker?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Very well
2. Quite well
3. Not very well
4. Not at all well
5. Don't know

ASK ALL WHO FELT APPRENTICESHIP PREPARED THEM WELL (D11=1/2)

D12. Why do you feel it prepared you well?

1. WRITE IN.

ASK ALL WHO FELT APPRENTICESHIP DID NOT PREPARE THEM (D11=3/4)

D13. Why do you feel it did not prepare you well?

WRITE IN.

ASK ALL STILL IN SOCIAL WORK (D2=1)

D14. In terms of your career goals or aspirations, where do you see yourself in 3 years' time?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Child and family social worker
2. Child and family social worker in a specialist role
3. Social worker with adults
4. Social worker with adults in a specialist role
5. Manager in social work
6. Alternative career (outside social work)
7. Other (SPECIFY)
8. Prefer not to say
9. Don't know

ASK ALL PLANNING TO LEAVE SOCIAL WORK (D14=5)

D15. When are you planning to leave social work?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Within the next 6 months
2. 6 months to a year
3. In over a year's time
4. Don't know
5. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL PLANNING TO LEAVE SOCIAL WORK (D14=5)

D16. What sector are you planning to move to?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Health & Social Work (e.g. health services, social care, youth work)
2. Education (e.g. schools, nurseries, colleges)
3. Public Administration (e.g. central or local government)
4. Manufacturing
5. Construction
6. Wholesale & Retail
7. Hotels & Restaurants (e.g. accommodation and food service activities)
8. Information & Communications (e.g. publishing, information services)
9. Financial Services (e.g. insurance activities)
10. Business Services (e.g. accounting, advertising, employment activities)
11. Arts and other services (e.g. health & beauty, entertainment, recreation, libraries, museums, sports, betting)
12. Primary sector and utilities (e.g. agriculture, electricity, gas, water supply, waste management)
13. Transport and Storage (e.g. postal and courier activities, warehousing)
14. Other (SPECIFY)
15. Not sure
16. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL PLANNING TO LEAVE SOCIAL WORK (D14=5)

D17. Why are you planning on leaving social work?

MULTICODE.

1. The challenging nature of the work
2. Lack of support or supervision
3. Lack of opportunities for career progression
4. I am not making the best use of the skills or experience I have
5. I feel I am unable to make a difference to children's, families' or adults' lives
6. I don't like the culture of my workplace
7. The amount of paperwork
8. The high caseload
9. The pay / benefits package
10. The working pattern or schedule
11. Other (SPECIFY)
12. Don't know
13. Prefer not to say

ASK IF HAS NOT WORKED OR IS NOT CURRENTLY A SOCIAL WORKER AND DOES NOT INTEND TO (D3=2)

D18. Why do you not intend to work in social work?

MULTICODE.

1. The challenging nature of the work
2. Lack of support or supervision
3. Lack of opportunities for career progression
4. I was not making the best use of the skills or experience I have
5. I feel I am unable to make a difference to children's, adults' or families' lives
6. I didn't like the culture of my workplace
7. The amount of paperwork
8. The high caseload
9. The pay / benefits package
10. The working pattern or schedule
11. Other (SPECIFY)

12. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

13. Prefer not to say (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

Data linking

ASK ALL

E1. Would it be OK for us to link your answers to data held on the Individualised Learner Record (ILR)? This would allow us to analyse the survey by different demographic groups and employment statuses to see if views, and experiences and outcomes of the apprenticeship vary. This information will be completely confidential and used for research purposes only.

You can still complete the survey if you do not want us to link your answers to the ILR.

Further information:

Department for Education's (DfE) Individual Learner Record (ILR) includes information about your participation and achievement in further education from age 16, as well as details about the college or training centre you may have attended.

Adding this data allows us to build a more complete picture of how your apprenticeship has helped you, and allows us to fill in the blanks for any details you may not know or remember. It also means that we do not have to ask you for these details during the survey.

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes

2. No

Demographic questions

We have a few additional questions to ask. These are just to help us analyse the survey results based on different backgrounds. If there is anything you feel uncomfortable sharing then you do not have to tell us. All your responses will remain confidential.

ASK ALL NOT ON SAMPLE (DOB=BLANK) OR THOSE NOT CONSENTING TO DATA LINKING (E1=2)

F1. What is your date of birth?

SINGLE CODE.

1. [COLLECT IN DD/MM/YYYY FORMAT.]
2. Prefer not to say

ASK IF REFUSED DATE OF BIRTH (F1=2)

F2. How old are you?

1. WRITE IN.
2. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL NOT ON SAMPLE (SEX=BLANK) OR THOSE NOT CONSENTING TO DATA LINKING (E1=2)

F3. What is your sex?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Male
2. Female
3. Other (SPECIFY)
4. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL NOT ON SAMPLE (ETHNICITY=19) OR THOSE NOT CONSENTING TO DATA LINKING (E1=2)

F4. How would you describe your ethnicity?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Asian or Asian British
2. Indian
3. Pakistani
4. Bangladeshi
5. Chinese
6. Any other Asian background
7. Black, Black British, Caribbean or African
8. African
9. Caribbean

10. Any other Black, Black British, or Caribbean background
11. Mixed or multiple ethnic groups
12. White and Black Caribbean
13. White and Black African
14. White and Asian
15. Any other Mixed / multiple ethnic background
16. White
17. White English / Welsh / Scottish / Northern Irish / British
18. Irish
19. Gypsy or Irish Traveller
20. Any other white background
21. Other ethnic group
22. Arab
23. Any other ethnic group
24. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL

F5. Do you consider yourself to have a disability?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know
4. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL

F6. Do you consider yourself to have learning difficulties?

SINGLE CODE.

1. Yes
2. No
3. Don't know

4. Prefer not to say

ASK ALL

F7. Outside of work, do you have any care or childcare responsibilities?

MULTICODE.

1. Yes: for school aged child/children
2. Yes: for pre-school aged child/children
3. Yes: for child/ children with disabilities
4. Yes: caring for other family member or friends
5. No (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
6. Don't know (SINGLE CODE ONLY)
7. Prefer not to say (SINGLE CODE ONLY)

ASK IF A LOCAL AUTHORITY OR TRUST (A5=1/2)

F8. [IF CATI] Which local authority or trust were you employed at for the majority of your apprenticeship?

[IF ONLINE] Please select the local authority or Trust where you [IF CURRENT: are][IF COMPLETER OR NON-COMPLETER: were] employed for the majority of your apprenticeship.

This information will be used to help us analyse the survey by factors like region, we will not be doing analysis by individual local authorities and the local authority will not know you have participated in this research.

1. SHOW DROP DOWN LIST OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES.



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for Education

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Reference: RR1626

ISBN: 978-1-83870-781-1

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This document is available for download at www.gov.uk/government/publications.