

Scottish Social Services Council Newly Qualified Social Worker Continuous Professional Learning requirements Social Work Scotland response

October 2026

Introduction

Social Work Scotland welcomes the opportunity to respond to the Scottish Social Services Council consultation on proposed changes to the Continuing Professional Learning (CPL) requirements for Newly Qualified Social Workers (NQSWs). This response has been informed by discussion within the Social Work Scotland Learning and Development Subgroup, including a consultation session with representatives from the SSSC, which brought together learning and development leads, workforce practitioners and managers involved in supporting NQSWs through their supported year.

Members welcomed the opportunity to contribute to the review and recognised the positive intent behind the current framework. There was broad agreement that a supported and structured first year in practice remains an important part of helping newly qualified social workers consolidate learning, develop confidence and build their professional identity.

However, members consistently highlighted concerns about the volume and prescriptive nature of the current mandatory learning activities. Feedback suggested that, while the supported year is valued, the focus on completing specific activities can sometimes detract from meaningful learning, reflection and development. Members were generally supportive of approaches that better integrate CPL into day-to-day practice and allow learning to be evidenced through supervision, professional discussion, observation and practice experience.

The discussion also highlighted the importance of high-quality supervision, mentoring and organisational support. Members emphasised that any future model must be achievable within the realities of current workforce pressures and recognise the variation in supervision capacity across sectors and organisations. Consideration should also be given to the wider factors that shape the NQSW experience, including workload, protected learning time, organisational culture, wellbeing and workforce retention.

Overall, members supported the direction of travel towards a more flexible and practice-based approach to CPL but did not consider any of the three proposed models fully satisfactory in their current form. Members were drawn to different aspects of both Options

2 and 3 and generally favoured a blended approach that combines the flexibility of practice-based evidence with a staged review structure. Any revised requirements should balance flexibility with clarity and consistency, remain proportionate and achievable, and focus on supporting professional development rather than compliance.

Questions:

Part 1 – Improvements to the current CPL review template

Q1. Before each development review discussion, NQSWs complete a confidence scale. They rate how confident they feel that they can demonstrate each core learning element in practice, using a scale from 1 to 10 where 1 means lowest and 10 means highest confidence.

Would guidance help NQSWs and supervisors use the confidence scale as part of their self-assessment discussions?

Response: Yes

Guidance would help ensure the confidence scale is used consistently and supports meaningful reflection and discussion between NQSWs and supervisors. Members felt the value of the confidence scale is less about the numerical rating itself and more about the opportunity to explore strengths, areas for development and progress over time.

Any guidance should emphasise that confidence does not always equate to competence and should encourage reflective discussion about the reasons behind ratings, rather than focusing on the score alone. Guidance should also support supervisors and NQSWs to use the confidence scale as a tool for identifying learning needs and informing development planning throughout the supported year.

Members highlighted the importance of keeping requirements proportionate and developmental. The confidence scale should support professional learning and reflection, rather than becoming a compliance exercise.

Q2. Before each development review discussion, NQSWs reflect on their confidence ratings across all core learning elements. Here is an extract from the current template:

Use this space to critically reflect on your rating and show analysis and evaluation, for example why did you rate 3 rather than 2 on a particular core learning element. What areas of your practice are strong and what areas require further development? Make sure you consider all core learning elements and include learning from your Individual Learning Plan (ILP). Be honest in your self-assessment, we are all on a continuous professional learning journey.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that adding headings for each core learning element would improve the self-assessment by helping NQSWs reflect on each one separately?

Options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

Response: Agree

Adding headings for each core learning element could help provide structure to the self-assessment process and support NQSWs to consider the full range of their learning and development across the supported year. It may also promote greater consistency in reflective discussions and help ensure that areas of strength and development are identified across all elements.

However, members highlighted the importance of ensuring that reflection remains meaningful and focused on professional development rather than completion of a template. The core learning elements are often demonstrated simultaneously through day-to-day practice, supervision and professional discussion, and care should be taken not to create an overly fragmented or task-focused approach to reflection.

Headings should therefore act as prompts to support critical reflection and discussion rather than requiring NQSWs to address each element in isolation. The emphasis should remain on the quality of reflection, identification of learning needs and ongoing professional development.

Q3. Would adding a minimum word count improve the self-assessment section?

Response: No

Members did not support the introduction of a minimum word count. Feedback suggested that quality of reflection is more important than quantity and that prescribed word counts risk encouraging NQSWs to write to meet a requirement rather than engage in meaningful reflection. Rather than introducing minimum lengths, guidance and examples of effective reflective writing would provide greater consistency while allowing flexibility to reflect individual learning needs and practice contexts.

Q4. Supervisors provide developmental feedback on each NQSW's progress at every development review discussion. Here is an example from the current template:

Use this space to record a summary of the developmental feedback shared with the NQSW during the review. The record will briefly capture areas of strength, consolidation and areas for development. The purpose is to support NQSW to continue to learn, consolidate and apply their learning in practice. The summary will include, where appropriate, reference evidence from other sources ie ILP, feedback from others, observations through day-to-day practice and examples of work.

To what extent do you agree or disagree that recording developmental feedback under headings for each core learning element would improve the feedback section?

Options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

Response: Agree

Recording developmental feedback under headings for each core learning element could help provide greater structure and consistency to review discussions. It may support supervisors and NQSWs to consider progress across the full range of learning and development expectations and help identify areas for further growth.

However, members highlighted that social work practice is inherently holistic, and the core learning elements are often demonstrated together through day-to-day practice. Care should therefore be taken to ensure that headings support reflective discussion rather than encouraging a fragmented or checklist approach to feedback.

Throughout discussion, members emphasised that high-quality supervision is central to the success of the supported year. Feedback should focus on meaningful professional development, drawing on supervision, observation, practice experience and feedback from others, rather than requiring supervisors to evidence each core learning element separately.

If headings are introduced, they should act as prompts to support consistency and developmental discussion, while retaining sufficient flexibility for supervisors to provide holistic feedback that reflects the realities of social work practice.

Q5. Feedback suggests the IDP should be more prominent so NQSWs can use it as a working document to identify, plan and review their ongoing development needs throughout the year. Should the IDP stay within the review template?

Response: Yes

Members agreed that the IDP should remain within the review template as it provides a clear link between learning needs, development planning and review discussions throughout the supported year.

Q6. To what extent do you agree or disagree that the IDP would be better placed at the start of the CPL review template to increase visibility and encourage its use?

Options: Strongly disagree, Disagree, Neither agree nor disagree, Agree, Strongly agree

Response: Agree

Members supported moving the IDP to the start of the template to reinforce its role as a live working document. Greater visibility may help maintain focus on development planning throughout the year and strengthen links between supervision, reflection and learning.

Q7. If the IDP is separate from the review template, should all NQSWs use the same standard template?

Response: Yes

Members supported a standard national template, which would provide consistency and clarity across employers and sectors. However, the template should remain sufficiently flexible to reflect different practice contexts and individual development needs.

Part 2 – Options for how NQSWs meet their CPL requirements

Q1. Overall approach

Please rank the three options in order of how well they would support NQSWs to meet their CPL requirements, with 1 being the best fit and 3 being the least suitable.

Option 1 - Staged approach using continuous professional learning activities. Structured model with set practice-based learning activities for each review. Evidence of consolidation and progression at each stage

Option 2 - Integrated continuous professional learning cycle. Portfolio-based model using a continuous cycle of planning, practice, reflection, evidence and review.

Option 3 - Supported transition to continuous professional learning. Supported introductory phase, before moving on to specific practice-based activities later in the year.

Response:

- 1. Option 3 - Supported transition to continuous professional learning**
- 2. Option 2 - Integrated continuous professional learning cycle**
- 3. Option 1 - Staged approach using continuous professional learning activities**

Feedback from Social Work Scotland members indicated a preference for **Option 3**, as it offers the strongest balance between providing structure and recognising the realities of the transition from qualification into practice. Members highlighted the importance of allowing NQSWs time to adjust to their new role, develop confidence, establish relationships and become familiar with organisational processes before undertaking more structured CPL activities. Several members felt the supported introductory phase reflected the purpose of the supported year more effectively than approaches centred on prescribed activities from the outset.

Option 2 was also viewed positively by members due to its emphasis on practice-based learning and its potential to move away from a task-focused approach to evidencing CPL. Members welcomed the focus on integrating learning into day-to-day practice, reflection and supervision. However, concerns were raised about the significant reliance on supervision within this model and the variation in supervisory capacity, mentoring arrangements and organisational support currently experienced across different settings. Members noted that successful implementation would require clear national guidance and appropriate support for supervisors.

Option 1 was generally viewed less favourably as it was seen as being closest to the current model. Members expressed concern that a highly structured approach risks recreating many of the issues identified through feedback on the existing arrangements, particularly a focus on completing activities rather than supporting meaningful professional development, reflection and learning.

Across all options, members emphasised the need for CPL requirements to be proportionate, achievable and focused on professional development. There was strong support for approaches that embed learning within practice whilst maintaining sufficient structure and consistency for NQSWs, supervisors and organisations.

While members ranked the existing options in order of preference, there was no clear support for any of the proposed models in their current form. Option 1 was not supported, as it was felt to remain too focused on evidencing activities rather than demonstrating professional learning and development. Members recognised the strengths of Option 2, particularly its emphasis on reflective practice and professional judgement, but expressed concern about the additional demands it would place on an already stretched supervisory workforce. Conversely, while Option 3 was viewed as a more proportionate and achievable approach, members felt it did not represent a sufficiently significant shift from current arrangements.

Members therefore discussed a potential hybrid approach that combines elements of Options 2 and 3. This would retain structured review points at key stages of the supported year while enabling evidence to be drawn primarily from day-to-day practice, supervision, professional discussion and reflective learning. Members felt this would provide a more balanced and proportionate approach to evidencing development, supporting professional learning whilst avoiding unnecessary additional burden for both NQSWs and supervisors.

Q2. Starting point

Which option would best support individual development discussions and planning?

Option 1 - Staged approach using continuous professional learning activities. Activities completed for initial, mid-year and end-of-year reviews.

Option 2 - Integrated continuous professional learning. Learning develops through an ongoing cycle rather than separate staged activities.

Option 3 - Supported transition to continuous professional learning. Initial reflective pieces followed by activities for mid-year and end-of-year reviews.

Response: Option 2 – Integrated continuous professional learning

Members felt that **Option 2** would best support individual development discussions and planning because it allows learning needs, reflection and professional development to drive the process. Members welcomed the emphasis on an ongoing cycle of planning, practice, reflection and review, which aligns with how professional learning typically develops in practice.

Members consistently highlighted the importance of moving away from a task-focused approach and ensuring that CPL supports individual learning needs rather than completion of prescribed activities. Option 2 offers greater flexibility to tailor development planning to the NQSW's role, experience, strengths and areas for growth, whilst allowing evidence to emerge from day-to-day practice, supervision and professional discussion.

However, members also noted that the effectiveness of this approach would depend on high-quality supervision and organisational support. Variation in supervisory capacity was identified as a significant consideration, and clear guidance would be required to support consistent implementation across different settings.

Overall, members felt that Option 2 provides the strongest basis for meaningful learning conversations and ongoing development planning throughout the supported year. However, they did not support adopting it unchanged. A more proportionate approach would retain its emphasis on reflection and practice-based evidence within defined review stages, reducing the extent to which supervisors are required to drive continuous evidence selection, mapping and review.

Q3. Structure

Which option would be easiest to put into practice in your organisation or role?

Option 1 - Staged approach using continuous professional learning activities. Some flexibility in how evidence is gathered, within a clear national structure.

Option 2 - Integrated continuous professional learning cycle. High flexibility, as evidence is drawn from day-to-day practice, supervision and feedback. No set learning.

Option 3 - Supported transition to continuous professional learning. Some flexibility, combining early reflective learning with structured practice-based activities, providing a supportive transition to the workplace.

Response: Option 3 – Supported transition to continuous professional learning
Please briefly explain your answer.

Feedback from Social Work Scotland members suggested that **Option 3** would be the easiest model to implement in practice. Members felt it provided an appropriate balance between flexibility and structure, whilst recognising the realities of transitioning from qualifying education into professional practice.

Members welcomed the inclusion of an introductory phase that allows NQSWs to focus on induction, supported practice, supervision and building confidence in their role before undertaking more structured CPL activities. This was seen as reflecting the purpose of the supported year and providing a more realistic starting point for newly qualified workers.

While members were supportive of the principles underpinning Option 2, concerns were raised about the extent to which successful implementation would depend on the quality and consistency of supervision, mentoring and organisational support. Given the variation

in supervisory capacity and workforce pressures across organisations and sectors, some members questioned whether this model could be implemented consistently at present.

Option 1 was generally viewed as offering clear structure but was seen as being closest to the current approach, with a risk of continuing the emphasis on prescribed activities and evidence gathering that members felt could detract from meaningful learning and development.

Overall, members felt that Option 3 offers the most practical and achievable balance between supporting NQSWs, maintaining national consistency and recognising the operational realities within services.

Q4. Flexibility

Which option would offer the right level of flexibility for NQSWs, supervisors and organisations?

Option 1 - Staged approach using continuous professional learning activities. Set practice-based evidence: 8 practice-based learning activities at the initial, mid-year and end-of-year, each linked to the core learning elements.

Option 2 - Integrated continuous professional learning cycle. Flexible evidence range gathered continuously across the year. Evidence must be sufficient, varied and mapped using the mapping tool to the core learning elements and meet the registration requirements.

Option 3 - Supported transition to continuous professional learning. Set pieces of evidence: 4 initial reflections, 8 practice-based learning activities at the mid-year and end-of-year, each linked to the core learning elements.

Response: Option 2 – Integrated continuous professional learning cycle

Feedback from Social Work Scotland members suggested that **Option 2** would offer the greatest level of flexibility for NQSWs, supervisors and organisations. Members consistently highlighted the importance of moving away from a task-focused approach to CPL and creating opportunities for learning to be evidenced through day-to-day practice, supervision, professional discussion, observation and reflection.

Members welcomed the emphasis on individual learning needs and the ability to draw on a wide range of evidence sources. This was seen as more reflective of how social workers learn and develop in practice and allows professional development to be tailored to the NQSW's role, setting and stage of development.

There was concern that approaches based on prescribed activities linked to individual core learning elements risk recreating some of the challenges experienced under the current model, including a focus on completing tasks rather than demonstrating meaningful learning and development. Members noted that social work practice is holistic and that learning often spans multiple core learning elements simultaneously.

However, members also emphasised that flexibility must be accompanied by clear guidance, appropriate support for supervisors and sufficient oversight to ensure consistency of expectations across organisations and sectors. Rather than adopting Option 2 in its current form, members favoured retaining its flexible range of practice-based evidence within a staged review process. This would provide national clarity about when reflection and review should take place while limiting the additional demands placed on supervisors.

Q5. Evidence expectations

Which option gives the clearest, most realistic and manageable evidence expectations?

Option 1 - Staged approach using continuous professional learning activities. May include practice-based evidence, written reflections, observations, supervision notes, case examples, presentations, peer discussions, learning from training, examples of work and multi-source feedback.

Option 2 - Integrated continuous professional learning cycle. Will include day-to-day practice evidence, including casework, visits, meetings, joint work, supervision discussions, feedback, reflective accounts, observations, training, research and examples of work.

Option 3 - Supported transition to continuous professional learning. May include initial writ- ten reflections, observations, supervision notes, practice examples, feedback from others, presentations, peer discussions, training or induction learning and examples of work.

Response: Option 2 – Integrated continuous professional learning cycle

Feedback from Social Work Scotland members suggested that Option 2 provides the clearest, most realistic and manageable approach to evidencing CPL. Members consistently highlighted the importance of ensuring that evidence requirements reflect the realities of day-to-day social work practice and support professional learning rather than completion of prescribed activities.

Members welcomed the broad range of evidence sources available within this option, including casework, supervision discussions, observations, feedback and reflective accounts. This reflects how learning naturally occurs in practice and provides flexibility for NQSWs working in different settings and roles.

Throughout the discussion, members expressed concern that highly structured activity-based approaches risk creating unnecessary administrative burden and can shift the focus away from individual learning needs and professional development. There was support for approaches that allow evidence to emerge from existing practice rather than requiring additional tasks to be completed solely for CPL purposes.

Members also noted that social work learning is often demonstrated across multiple core learning elements simultaneously. A more flexible evidence model better reflects the integrated nature of practice and reduces the need for artificial distinctions between different areas of learning.

However, members emphasised that clear guidance would be required regarding the sufficiency and range of evidence expected to ensure consistency across organisations and sectors.

Q6. Types of evidence

Should direct observations be used to support evidence gathering?

Response: Yes

Q7. If direct observations are used, would observation templates be helpful?

Response: Yes

Social Work Scotland members supported the use of direct observation as one of a range of evidence sources available to NQSWs during the supported year. Direct observation can provide valuable insights into practice, support reflective discussion and allow supervisors to offer constructive developmental feedback based on observed practice. It may also help evidence aspects of professional capability that are not easily captured through written reflections or other forms of evidence.

Members also agreed that observation templates could be helpful in supporting consistency and providing a clear framework for recording observations and feedback. A template may support supervisors in focusing on key aspects of practice and help ensure observations contribute meaningfully to professional learning and development.

However, members emphasised that direct observation should be one component of a broader evidence base and should not become a mandatory or dominant requirement. Opportunities for observation vary across practice settings, teams and roles, and any expectations should be sufficiently flexible to reflect these differences. Similarly, any observation template should be proportionate and avoid creating additional administrative burden or encouraging a checklist approach to practice.

Overall, members supported the use of direct observations and observation templates where these are used to enhance learning, reflection and supervision, rather than as tools for compliance. The focus should remain on supporting meaningful professional development and evidencing learning through a range of complementary methods

Q8. Would guidance on word count be helpful for written reflections used as CPL evidence?

Response: Yes

Social Work Scotland members agreed that guidance on word count could be helpful in providing an indication of the expected depth and scope of written reflections. This may assist NQSWs and supervisors in understanding what constitutes a proportionate piece of reflective evidence and promote greater consistency across organisations and settings.

However, members did not support the introduction of mandatory minimum word counts. Throughout discussion, there was a strong view that the quality of reflection is more important than the quantity of words produced. Prescriptive word counts risk encouraging NQSWs to write to meet a requirement rather than engaging in meaningful reflection on their learning, development and practice.

Members therefore favoured guidance, examples and indicative ranges rather than fixed requirements. Any guidance should support reflective practice while maintaining flexibility and avoiding unnecessary administrative burden. The focus should remain on meaningful professional learning and development rather than compliance with process requirements.

Q9. Role of supervisor

Supervision is a key part of the Supported Year. As a supervisor or NQSW, which option would work best in your setting?

Option 1 - Staged approach using continuous professional learning activities. Supports completion and review of staged activities and endorses quality of evidence.

Option 2 - Integrated continuous professional learning cycle. Central to planning, reflection, evidence selection, mapping and review.

Option 3 - Supported transition to continuous professional learning. Supports initial planning and reflection, then review of staged activities and endorses quality of evidence.

Response: Option 3 – Supported transition to continuous professional learning

Members felt that Option 3 would work best from a supervision perspective, as it provides an appropriate balance between structure and flexibility whilst recognising the transition from qualification into practice. The introductory phase allows supervisors and NQSWs to focus on induction, supported practice, professional development and identifying learning needs before moving into more structured activities.

While members were supportive of the principles underpinning Option 2, there were concerns about the extent to which it relies on supervision to drive planning, reflection, evidence gathering and review. Feedback highlighted variation in supervisory capacity and experience across organisations, as well as growing pressures on services. Members also emphasised the important contribution of mentors and noted concerns that mentor capacity is already reducing in some areas.

Members therefore felt that Option 3 provides a more realistic and achievable model within current workforce pressures, whilst still supporting meaningful professional development. Any future approach should be accompanied by clear guidance and support for supervisors to help ensure a consistent experience for NQSWs across different settings.

Q10. Overall approach

Which option provides the best balance between national consistency and flexibility for different roles, teams and organisations?

Option 1 - Staged approach using continuous professional learning activities. Structured model with set practice-based learning activities for each review. Evidence of consolidation and progression at each stage.

Option 2 - Integrated continuous professional learning cycle. Portfolio-based model using a continuous cycle of planning, practice, reflection, evidence and review.

Option 3 - Supported transition to continuous professional learning. Supported introductory phase, before moving on to specific practice-based activities later in the year.

Response: Option 3 – Supported transition to continuous professional learning

Feedback from Social Work Scotland members suggested that Option 3 provides the best balance between national consistency and flexibility. Members recognised the value of having a clear national framework to support equitable experiences and expectations for NQSWs, whilst also recognising the need for sufficient flexibility to reflect different practice settings, roles and organisational contexts.

Members felt that the supported introductory phase acknowledges the reality of transitioning from qualifying education into practice and allows NQSWs time to develop confidence, establish relationships and identify learning needs. The subsequent structured activities provide a degree of consistency and assurance, without being as prescriptive as the current approach.

While members welcomed the flexibility offered by Option 2, concerns were raised about the potential for variation in implementation due to differences in supervisory capacity, mentoring arrangements and organisational support. Members emphasised that flexibility must be accompanied by clear expectations and guidance to ensure consistency of experience for NQSWs across Scotland.

Members generally viewed Option 1 as offering consistency but felt it risked recreating a task-focused approach that many had identified as a challenge within the current model. There was a strong preference for approaches that support meaningful learning and development whilst avoiding unnecessary administrative burden.

Overall, members felt that Option 3 came closest to striking an appropriate balance between consistency and flexibility. However, there was a strong view that a final model should draw on elements of both Options 2 and 3 rather than adopting any single option unchanged. Members favoured a staged approach to review and support, combined with greater flexibility in how learning is evidenced through day-to-day practice.

Q11. Is anything missing from the proposed options that we should include before agreeing a final approach?

Response: Yes

Members identified several areas that are not fully reflected within the proposed options and should be considered as part of the final approach. These include:

- the role of mentors and mentoring arrangements alongside supervision
- support, guidance and development opportunities for supervisors
- protected caseloads and protected learning time
- workforce pressures, organisational culture and their impact on learning and development
- the experience of NQSWs working in third sector settings, including access to registered social work supervision
- wellbeing, retention and workforce sustainability for newly qualified social workers
- the transition from qualifying education into practice and how this is supported during the first year of employment.

Members also emphasised the importance of ensuring that any future model supports meaningful professional learning rather than compliance. Learning is often demonstrated across multiple core learning elements simultaneously, and future requirements should avoid recreating a highly prescriptive or task-focused approach to evidencing CPL.

Q12. Is there anything else we should consider when deciding how NQSWs meet their CPL requirements?

Response: Yes

Social Work Scotland members emphasised that the supported year should be viewed primarily as a period of transition, consolidation and professional development rather than a process focused on evidencing compliance. Any future approach should support NQSWs to develop confidence, professional identity and capability, whilst recognising the realities of contemporary social work practice.

Members consistently highlighted the importance of ensuring that CPL requirements are proportionate and achievable. Feedback suggested that future arrangements should minimise unnecessary administrative burden and enable learning to be evidenced through existing practice activities, supervision, mentoring, observation and professional discussion wherever possible.

Consideration should also be given to the factors that influence successful completion of the supported year, including the availability and quality of supervision, access to mentoring, protected learning time, protected caseload arrangements, workforce pressures and organisational culture. Members felt these factors have a significant impact on NQSW wellbeing, confidence, retention and learning outcomes.

Members also highlighted the importance of ensuring any future model is applicable across the range of settings in which social workers are employed, including local authority, health and third sector services. The requirements should be sufficiently flexible to accommodate different organisational contexts whilst maintaining consistency of expectations and standards.

Finally, members stressed the importance of clear guidance and communication to support implementation. Previous experience has highlighted the challenges that can arise where expectations are unclear or open to interpretation. Any revised approach should therefore

be accompanied by accessible guidance, examples of good practice and support for those responsible for supervising and supporting NQSWs throughout the supported year.

Ultimately, members felt that the supported year should provide NQSWs with the time, support and space to consolidate their learning, develop confidence and establish their professional identity, rather than prioritising completion of prescribed activities.

For further information, please do not hesitate to contact:

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