INDEPENDENT EVALUATION OF THE THINK AHEAD PROGRAMME

FINAL REPORT
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1. The Think Ahead programme has demonstrated the capacity to recruit and induct a cohort of highly capable and committed practitioners into mental health social work.

2. Completion rates were high, and on qualification participants were viewed as highly valued recruits to the workforce.

3. The programme model, combining an intensive preparation phase, followed by a sustained period of integrated practice-based learning, has provided a robust preparation for those moving into this specialist area of social work practice.

4. The partnership model established to host participants is able to provide an effective framework for programme delivery, achieving 'buy in' from agency partners and practitioners.

5. The 'student unit' model for supporting practice-based learning, with a dedicated Consultant Social Worker, works well in providing a rich, collaborative learning experience.

6. The embedded engagement of service users in programme delivery was highly valued by participants, and enhanced commitment to social work values.

7. The programme was observed to be intensive and highly demanding, as might be expected of fast track programmes of this nature.

8. Where preparations were sound, the partnership model worked well; but where systems were not robust or there were key personnel changes, the quality of the learning experience was jeopardised.

9. As perhaps could be expected with the first iteration of the programme, there was evidence of some organisational and delivery problems, such as the consistent engagement of service user interests, the problematic venue for the delivery of the initial six-week learning bloc, and the quality of some of the teaching days to support the practice learning experience.

The Think Ahead social work qualifying programme was launched in 2016, with the aim of providing a new, customised route into the social work profession in partnership with employer organisations. The programme was designed to offer a fast track, employment-based route into the profession, which would at the same time satisfy the regulatory requirements governing the delivery of social work qualifying education. Think Ahead is particularly distinctive because it concentrates on the area of practice associated with adult mental health. The programme therefore sought to enhance the preparation of social work practitioners who wished to work in this specialist area, and in doing so to enhance both the contribution and recognition of social work, specifically in adult mental health settings. In order to equip them effectively for practice in this context, the programme also sought

distinctively to provide intensive learning opportunities focusing on specific interventions with individuals, families and groups, and communities.

This vision for the programme is recognised as an ambitious set of aspirations which go some considerable way beyond the goal of enhancing the availability of well-qualified and committed practitioners in mental health social work, since it also encompasses the aim of achieving recognition for the capacity of social work itself, and in its own right, to achieve positive outcomes for people accessing mental health services.

The qualifying programme itself was designed to follow a series of distinct phases, comprising an initial intensive period of university-led learning (the Summer Institute), a subsequent practice learning element provided and hosted by a partner agency, supplemented by regular off-site teaching days, leading to the award of a social work qualification, and a third phase incorporating the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) offered to all newly-qualified social workers, and an additional practice-oriented project leading to the award of a Masters qualification.

In material terms, the programme was supported by way of a partnership with two universities to deliver the academic component of the programme, and agreements with thirteen employer organisations (local authorities, mental health trusts, and one independent provider) to act as hosts for the practice-based components of the learning and to provide support for the first year of practice following qualification. During their qualifying year in practice settings, participants would be co-located in groups of four in 'student units', each supported by a dedicated Consultant Social Worker (more or less equivalent to a Practice Educator in conventional social work qualifying programmes). Student learning was also to be supported by a number of 'Practice Specialists', based with Think Ahead. This unit-based framework for practice education would be pivotal in shaping the participants' learning experience and building on the initial intensive input (the Summer Institute).

With these arrangements in place, Think Ahead then set out to recruit participants to join the first iteration of the programme. Prior qualification standards included the requirement to hold a degree at the level of a 2:1 or above, and initial applicants were also expected to demonstrate suitable attributes for entry to the social work profession. Whilst the programme timetable and expectations were clearly very demanding, incentives were provided by way of relatively generous funding, the opportunity to qualify more quickly than those following conventional routes to social work qualification and the prospects of then moving into employment in a specialist area of practice.

The programme was very heavily subscribed and the recruitment process was rigorous. Of those who applied, in the end 96 accepted and took up places on the programme, starting in July 2016.

Over the course of its delivery, and beyond completion, the programme was the subject of a longitudinal multi-method evaluation, the findings of which are reported here. The evaluation was also 'formative',

and we have noted at various points in this report where changes were implemented by Think Ahead in response to initial findings.

1.1 The Summer Institute

The six-week intensive residential teaching element of the programme was the starting point for the Think Ahead participants. The objectives of the Summer Institute were to provide a sufficient grounding in the professional capabilities of social work to enable participants to move on to their practice learning settings. As such, the demands of this phase of the programme were substantial, as was the task of providing a balanced programme, incorporating research evidence, theory and methods, substantial elements of service user experience and expertise, law teaching and organisational learning, backed up by a series of assessments, including a scenario based readiness for practice exercise. The programme documentation and learning goals were comprehensive and clearly addressed the varied demands of providing a generic grounding in social work knowledge, skills and values; whilst maintaining a clear emphasis on the mental health context in which Think Ahead students would be practicing and learning in due course.

Participants completed the requirements of the Summer Institute successfully, although their views on the experience varied. There were clearly pressures associated with the unusual working environment, and being away from home, as well as the intensity of the programme itself, and these were noted. For some, too, the somewhat didactic and introductory nature of the teaching felt as if they were going over old ground; whereas others, with less relevant academic or practice experience found this grounding to be essential. They were, however, uniformly very positive about the extent to which they had been able to hear and learn directly from service users/experts by experience, throughout the Summer Institute. Finding this balance is an inevitable challenge given the range of prior experiences likely to be represented in the student cohort, and the task of covering all the elements of social work learning which need to be in place in advance of the initial practice placement. Extensive observation of the Summer Institute did suggest that there was a very high standard of relevant input provided by educators, and that the participants themselves were generally engaged with the learning process. Some of the less structured learning (breakout sessions, for example) did not appear to be so well focused, and this did appear to lead to some frustration amongst the participants. Concerns, too, were expressed about the timing and the consistency of assessments, although it was noted that procedures were in place to receive feedback and to address this kind of issue, which might reasonably be expected to arise in the first year of any educational programme.

On its second iteration, it was clear that there had been a real effort to respond to initial concerns, and observations at this point suggested that much closer attention was being paid to the coherence of taught sessions with supplementary work; more considered involvement of experts by experience and more effective use of facilitated breakout sessions were also noted.

Overall, we have concluded that the approach to intensive preparation for practice in the specialist area of mental health social work exemplified by the Summer Institute does offer a number of benefits, including the capacity to deliver intensive and targeted learning effectively; the establishment of an early sense of a valued professional identity; the very effective engagement of qualifying practitioners with service users; effective involvement of agency and professional interests; and targeted assessment which is realistically matched to the pre-practice learning stage of professional development.

1.2 Local partnerships and the practice setting

Importantly, given the nature of the programme, the context within which practice learning takes place has to be considered as a key contributory factor in regard to both the quality of teaching and the quality of practice. It is not in dispute that social work, and the 'social model' of intervention, have sometimes struggled to gain a distinct foothold in the wider domain of mental health practice. In order to provide a stable and productive learning environment for Think Ahead participants, there was an implicit requirement to establish credibility and endorsement of programme objectives across a number of agency and professional domains. Such challenges are more or less unique to Think Ahead in our view, simply because of longstanding tensions between alternative professional ideologies in the mental health arena.

The evaluation therefore sought to ascertain the nature and quality of the partnership and hosting arrangements put in place between Think Ahead and collaborating agencies. Local partners were drawn from local authorities, mental health trusts and, in one case, the independent sector, and collaborative arrangements were quite varied in nature. However, all followed the standard 'student unit' model, intended to provide a consistent base for participant learning, under the leadership of Consultant Social Workers. As the programme developed, however, it became clear that the model itself had to be adapted to local circumstances. Where partnerships were robust, this kind of adaptation to local circumstances was easily achieved, and certainly enhanced the learning experience for participants, who became more closely engaged with host agencies as a result.

Our visits to a diverse range of delivery sites did reveal a considerable variation in the nature and quality of arrangements put in place to host Think Ahead participants and to support local delivery. This did

result in a similarly wide variation in the experiences of the participants, and the adaptations they had to make to the circumstances of their practice placements. Although this did not lead to a complete loss of fidelity, compromise arrangements did mean that participants could not always be co-located, the timing of their placements were varied, and the 'cases' on which their practice learning would be based were not always drawn from a predictable source.

Variations in delivery arrangements were sometimes a more or less planned response to the particular local service settings (which seem to vary substantially from place to place); sometimes they appeared to be a necessary adaptation to changing circumstances; and sometimes, they appeared to be a consequence of wider system failures. In these cases, as programme participants observed, the learning journey could become problematic.

As anticipated in the preparatory inquiry on which Think Ahead is based, social work in mental health settings does sometimes struggle to establish a recognised place and achieve credibility, and this seems to have been the case in some of the sites which were visited in the course of the evaluation. This is not necessarily a comment on the integrity or potential of the programme itself, but it does underline the critical importance of preparation and support, given the potential for this sort of challenge to arise. Nonetheless, in those areas where partnership arrangements were robust, there was consistent 'buy in' from professional colleagues, practical arrangements were reliable, and skilled support was provided to participants, outcomes were viewed as consistently positive and beneficial in terms of enhancing the development and contribution of skilled social workers in mental health.

1.3 Practice learning: delivery and outcomes

From the perspective of host agencies and staff directly involved with Think Ahead participants, there was a great deal of positive comment about the qualities and commitment of the participants, suggesting that both their attributes at recruitment and the preparation offered by the Summer Institute stood them in good stead. This sense that participants were 'ready' for the practice environment was widespread and contrasted with the experience of employers who had previously worked with students whose preparation was more generic. TA participants were seen as knowledgeable and 'prepared'.

In the course of their practice learning, the participants were also observed to engage enthusiastically with the demands of mental health settings, even though these were sometimes quite challenging. There were some observations, however, that suggested the demands of combining intensive practice and academic learning meant that participants experienced a great deal of pressure.

There was considerable enthusiasm for the 'student unit' model with dedicated input from Consultant Social Workers, and in the main this brought consistency and structure to the learning experience which was seen as highly effective, notably in some cases where certain participants benefited from additional support. The strengths of the unit in terms of enabling positive peer learning were also apparent.

The qualifying year in practice was complemented by a series of academic teaching days, with specialist input and assessment relating to particular interventions[1], leadership and organisational theory which demonstrated identifiable strengths in terms of complementing practice learning and engaging participants in collaborative learning. However, there was some unevenness in the quality of teaching input in this phase of the programme, and service user expertise was not utilised at this point to the same extent as during the Summer Institute.

On completion of the qualifying year, there was general support for the view that Think Ahead participants were ready to move into the next phase of their careers as qualified mental health social work practitioners, although there was some concern that the move from a relatively 'protected' learning environment to the rigours of everyday practice might involve a significant leap. It was also clear, in practical terms, that some agencies were not well-prepared in the sense of providing employment opportunities for the participants they had hosted. Indeed, this points to one of the other problematic aspects of the programme which was the uncertainty in the wider working environment which seems almost endemic.

Moving into the second year of the programme, with a project still to complete for the Masters qualification, there were clearly still some pressures on participants which other colleagues undertaking the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) would not necessarily have experienced. In the main, though, employers viewed their new recruits as a highly capable addition to the workforce in an area where social work previously had been somewhat undervalued. The student unit model worked well, where Consultant Social Workers were effectively supported, and enabled to maintain a clear focus on creating positive learning opportunities, providing consistent supervision and enabling participants to apply interventions specifically promoted by the programme.

1.4 The participant perspective

Evidence from surveys and interviews suggested that Think Ahead graduates had clearly progressed over the course of the programme in professional terms. As the survey suggested, they had become

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[1] The programme provided specific intervention training in three domains of practice: working with individuals (eg motivational interviewing), working with families (eg family group conferences) and working with communities (eg connecting people), with participants expected to demonstrate capability in these interventions in order to progress.

more confident in their own capabilities, across a range of operational demands, and this mirrored the perceptions of employers and Consultant Social Workers. However, at the same time, survey findings indicated increased levels of 'role conflict', and significant levels of stress, higher even than those of newly-qualified social workers in general. We suspect that this at least partly reflects the particular complexities and challenges facing practitioners in mental health, as was the case with earlier research revealing similar levels of stress amongst mental health social workers[2]. Other more recent research[3] also suggests that stress levels are high and increasing amongst UK social workers in general.

These findings are echoed in the comments of Think Ahead graduates surveyed as well as those interviewed. Whilst most were pleased to have undertaken the programme and remained committed to their roles, the sense of unremitting pressure is notable, as indeed it is for all fast-track qualifying programmes in social work.

In terms of the quality of their learning experience, the majority rated the academic teaching and learning positively, especially in key areas such as learning about service users and their perspectives (often directly from them) and social work values and methods. On the other hand, placements themselves were viewed as much more mixed, reflecting perhaps the very variable arrangements for hosting and supporting participants that were observed. Whilst the student unit experience and support from Consultant Social Workers were viewed very positively, the placement settings themselves were often seen as problematic, being unprepared for hosting a new cadre of students whose professional identity was not always well understood by non-social work colleagues.

It was clear that participants were communicating regularly with each other within the cohort and across practice environments, so the contrasts between highly rewarding placements and those which did not go so well were quite stark, and for some this did add to a sense of feeling that they had missed out. In some cases, for example, practice learning was well-structured and carefully managed in a welcoming agency setting, and here the potential of the Think Ahead programme was demonstrated to its fullest extent, with practice theories being transported from the classroom, applied as defined interventions and '*when you see it in practice, it's working, that's when it's come to life and it's… really good*', as one participant put it.

Despite these undoubted achievements and the potential contribution of the programme, it is important to acknowledge that this was not the case for all concerned, and for some, the experience was clearly something of a struggle. We have concluded that this was less to do with the participants and their attributes or the Think Ahead 'model' itself, and more to do with the learning environment, which does pose a challenge in terms of the level of support and 'troubleshooting' capacity of a national

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[2] see Evans et al, 2006
[3] see Ravalier and Boichat, 2018

organisation overseeing programme delivery in a wide range of settings, with their own operational issues and dynamics.

1.5 Stakeholder perspectives

The Think Ahead programme brought together a range of relevant interests in its ambitious construction, and the evaluation has also sought to include reflections on their perspectives, notably those of service users who were attributed with a substantial role in the oversight and delivery of the programme, being represented both in a strategic advisory group, and as educators by experience, through the established groups associated with each of the academic institutions involved with the programme. In principle, then, this offered service users a strong base from which to influence direction and content of the programme.

It is undoubtedly the case that Think Ahead participants valued their opportunities to learn from experts by experience particularly highly, and their input was commonly rated as the most valuable aspect of the academic element of the programme. This appeared to be a mutual perception, with service users similarly welcoming the opportunity to contribute and feeling that this was valued by participants. Set against this, there were some concerns that their concerns were not always given proper attention, and their teaching input was sometimes mismanaged.

At strategic level, the picture was mixed, with the advisory group initially welcoming the extent to which they were involved in planning and preparation for the programme, and subsequently feeling somewhat under used. It did seem that there may have been a lack of clarity about the remit of the advisory group, which has been addressed with the reconfiguration of the programme around a new academic provider, and the appointment of a new chair to the group.

The educators themselves were positive about the programme overall, and felt that they had been provided an opportunity to design and deliver a good product, which provided a strong professional and academic grounding in preparation for the move into practice. A number of problems and challenges were identified by educators, although these appeared to be largely attributable to the kind of issues likely to arise in the first iteration of an intensive new programme, such as conflicting assessment schedules, finding the balance between didactic and inquiry-based learning and managing a diverse range of expectations and learning needs.

Undoubtedly, though, where effective partnerships were established, and early lessons incorporated in programme development, most of the diverse range of stakeholders were pleased with the delivery and initial achievements of Think Ahead.

1.6 Achievements and challenges

To reiterate, our key findings (below) suggest that even in its early days, the Think Ahead programme has demonstrated considerable potential, in terms of enhancing both the skills and the recognition of practitioners in mental health social work. There have been challenges and setbacks, but these do not represent fundamental problems with this model of professional social work education, itself; rather, these are implementation issues, which are capable of being addressed with effective planning and commitment from the Think Ahead, as a self-professed 'learning organisation', and other programme stakeholders.

Key Findings:

1. The Think Ahead programme has demonstrated the capacity to recruit and induct a cohort of highly capable and committed practitioners into mental health social work.

2. Completion rates were high, and on qualification participants were viewed as highly valued recruits to the workforce.

3. The programme model, combining an intensive preparation phase, followed by a sustained period of integrated practice-based learning, has provided a robust preparation for those moving into this specialist area of social work practice.

4. The partnership model established to host participants is able to provide an effective framework for programme delivery, achieving 'buy in' from agency partners and practitioners.

5. The 'student unit' model for supporting practice-based learning, with a dedicated Consultant Social Worker, works well in providing a rich, collaborative learning experience.

6. The embedded engagement of service users in programme delivery was highly valued by participants, and enhanced commitment to social work values.

7. The programme was observed to be intensive and highly demanding, as might be expected of fast track programmes of this nature.

8. Where preparations were sound, the partnership model worked well; but where systems were not robust or there were key personnel changes, the quality of the learning experience was jeopardised.

9. As perhaps could be expected with the first iteration of the programme, there was evidence of some organisational and delivery problems, such as the consistent engagement of service user interests, the problematic venue for the delivery of the initial six-week learning bloc, and the quality of some of the teaching days to support the practice learning experience.

Our 'end-to-end' evaluation of the first cohort to undertake the programme has enabled us to build up a comprehensive picture of its delivery, at all stages, leading up to participants' eventual achievement of

the twin outcomes of a Masters qualification and successful completion of the ASYE. 89 of the 96 who commenced the programme in the first cohort achieved a social work qualification, with 71 having completed the ASYE and associated Masters qualification by the end of the second year (and five more expected to complete following deferrals or extensions). For most, then, the outcomes could be judged successful in personal terms, and for most agencies, too, the results were clearly regarded as positive, in that they had recruited a number of additional social work practitioners who were highly valued. This, we believe, suggests that the programme overall has demonstrated the potential to enhance the social work workforce in mental health. It has recruited a cohort of highly able and committed students, the initial intensive preparation for practice learning has provided a robust foundation, the partnership-based student unit model, supported by dedicated Consultant Social Workers has provided a very effective environment for practice learning, and demonstrably capable practitioners have moved into the early stages of their careers in this professional environment. This provides a certain measure of validation for the learning model on which the Think Ahead programme is based.

Set against this, though, we must acknowledge that this was not the case for all participants, and certainly not all the time. The model's effectiveness in its entirety depends on the strength and resilience of a number of links in the chain overall. We feel this is a helpful analogy, since it recognises the interconnectedness of the different elements of the programme, as well as the obvious cliché. For some participants, it is clear that contextual factors, especially to do with the placement settings and hosting arrangements, resulted in a very uncomfortable experience; and, in some cases, they were lost to the programme well before the end. In many of these cases, unplanned contingencies were largely responsible for the difficulties experienced, and we do feel that the Think Ahead organisation needs to pay close attention to the factors which might lead to problems, such as a lack of commitment to partnership by one or another local agency, the absence of clarity about the proposed practice learning arrangements, or the absence of committed 'champions' for the programme at local level.

Despite these concerns, we recognise that the programme has led to positive outcomes for the great majority of participants, and this is attributable to certain key elements of the model, including the quality and comprehensiveness of the initial learning (targeted curriculum, strong service user input), effective preparation and support of Consultant Social Workers, structured and focused practice learning (case consultations, peer supported learning), and constructive and progressive support from hosting agencies (committed leadership, inclusive ethos). It is, therefore, worthy of continued support and further development, albeit with greater emphasis on advocating for, creating and sustaining the right environment for the development and recognition of mental health social work in its own right.

2. Think Ahead: Background and Context

2.1 Background: developments in social work education

The Think Ahead qualifying programme specialising in preparation for a career in mental health social work can be seen as the culmination of a prolonged period of discussion about the most appropriate form and content for social work education. Over the years, there has been a pattern of regular change in underlying policy in this area, which has resulted in a number of alternative delivery models, all ostensibly geared towards the same generic professional qualification. The backdrop for this has been a sense of recurrent concern amongst policy-makers, employers and service users that the nature and quality of educational provision and preparation for practice in social work are sometimes inappropriate or even inadequate.

As far back as 2003, the attempt was made to heighten professional qualifying standards by shifting entirely to a graduate level entry requirement for social work. This did not resolve lingering fears, however, and there has been a series of subsequent initiatives to attempt to address what have been identified as continuing shortcomings. These have included the work of the Social Work Reform Board, repeated changes in regulatory arrangements for overseeing the quality of professional education, the establishment and termination of the College of Social Work, the establishment of a series of frameworks designed to set the expected standards of good practice at differing career points, and the initiation of a variety of new entry routes into the profession, of which Think Ahead, of course, is one.

Although earlier evaluations did suggest that the 2003 reforms had broadly achieved the objective of ensuring a consistent and effective route to qualification (Evaluation of Social Work Degree in England Team, 2008), this did not satisfy the concerns of all stakeholders; and these issues were amplified as a result of further expert analysis (Social Work Reform Board, 2010; Munro, 2011). Employers continued to express the view that on occasion newly-qualified practitioners were not adequately prepared or sufficiently skilled to meet the demands of a challenging and critically important career.

Emerging from this period of considerable activity and deliberation, was the Step Up to Social Work programme, which led the way in terms of emerging models of fast-track social work education. Previous evaluations have illustrated the achievements and challenges associated with this model (Smith et al, 2013; Smith et al, 2018).

In parallel with this development, and that of the Frontline programme, further reviews of social work education were carried out by Sir Martin Narey and Professor David Croisdale-Appleby. Both reports

concluded that greater rigour should be applied in the selection of candidates for qualifying programmes; that qualifying programmes need to be more closely aligned to their goals; and that the quality of engagement between academic institutions, employers and practice learning settings could and should be improved.

Narey noted that: 'I did not speak to a single employer who said that he or she was always satisfied with the calibre of students entering social work study (although, often, there was a high level of satisfaction expressed about particular universities)' (Narey, 2014, p. 14); and: 'Even at those universities that enjoy excellent relationships with local authorities…, securing high quality placements has often been a struggle' (p. 25).

Adopting a slightly different perspective, Croisdale-Appleby suggested that: 'Student numbers should be rebalanced towards postgraduate entry, in line with the evidence from international comparisons as well as in the recognition of the challenging nature of both qualification and practice' (Croisdale-Appleby, 2014, p. 86); and that the: 'overall quality of the educational experience in practice placements must be improved' (p. 86).

Both reports outlined the potential contribution to the quality of the social work workforce potentially associated with alternative routes to qualification, which could both enhance the learning experience and broaden the range of potential recruits to the profession. Programmes based on similar principles had been introduced previously, based on the view that employment-based learning opportunities can ensure both that the right people are recruited to social work education and training and that their learning experiences are geared effectively to the desired outcomes. These have included 'grow your own' initiatives (Harris et al, 2008), graduate recruitment programmes (Children's Workforce Development Council, 2011). Few of these, it should be noted, have adopted a specific focus on recruitment to adult social work.

The consistent message that greater attention should be paid both to recruitment and to the quality and practice relevance of qualifying programmes was also echoed up by other analyses, such as those supported by the Institute for Public Policy Research (McAlister, 2012; Clifton and Thorley, 2014), which underpinned the development of the Frontline and Think Ahead programmes.

2.2 New models: Frontline and Think Ahead

The enthusiasm for new models translated into a commitment to develop fast track work-based routes to qualification, drawing inspiration partly from the established 'Teach First' initiative in teacher education. The dual focus of first Frontline and subsequently Think Ahead has been on attracting

'talented people' (Clifton and Thorley, 2014, p. 4) who might otherwise not have entered social work, and provide a strong practice-led induction into the profession, enabling the development of specialist skills backed up by generic knowledge and understanding of the professional task and a strong values base. The aim of producing rounded professional practitioners with a broad range of competences via a concentrated fast track route did give some cause for concern, with Narey (2014, p. 33) describing the rationale for Frontline's introduction as appearing 'a little thin', and potentially targeted at 'those who might want just a brief taste of social work rather than entering social work as a career'. Similarly, Croisdale-Appleby (2014, p. 26) was concerned that 'such courses through their focus on pre-qualification specialisation will not provide a sufficient knowledge and practice of research, coverage of the underpinning theoretical basis for understanding human and society's behaviours, nor an adequate internalisation of some of the major attributes (knowledge, skills and capability of application in a sufficiently representative range of practice) which educators feel newly qualified social workers should possess'. In the case of Think Ahead, of course, the programme was developed in full awareness of these comments, and efforts were made to address such concerns, for example by including comprehensive preparation in relation to key social work interventions across the three domains of work with individuals, families and communities.

2.3 The rationale for the Think Ahead programme

In light of these possible reservations, substantial thought and preparatory work went into the Think Ahead pre-qualifying programme in order to ensure that its recruitment and learning processes guard against some of the potential pitfalls identified (Clifton and Thorley, 2014). The scoping report commissioned by the Department of Health summarised prior concerns and set out a framework for delivering a model of social work education more closely attuned to the specific demands of integrated provision of mental health services. From this starting point, Think Ahead developed and adapted these ideas to suit the specific requirements of implementing a viable programme in full.

The report concluded that there were a number of identifiable 'problems with the recruitment, education and effectiveness of mental health social workers. The profession struggles to attract high calibre recruits and to adequately train [them] to cope with the demands of the job'; also noting that this 'problem is exacerbated by the fact that, in many integrated teams, social workers are 'de-professionalised' and struggle to have their voices heard in teams dominated by medical professionals' (Clifton and Thorley, 2014, p. 62).

In setting out a proposed model to address these concerns, the authors expressed an aspiration for the recruitment and training of very able social work professionals who would be able to take a professional

leadership role, viewed more broadly than simply achieving positions of seniority, in promoting a more integrated and balanced approach to mental health service delivery, demonstrating the profession's capacity to offer a distinctive and highly necessary element of the overall portfolio of interventions to enhance the well-being of service users.

2.4 The programme model

Based on this analysis, the report's authors set out an outline framework for the proposed Think Ahead programme, which would be expected to 'shift the balance of social work education further towards practical experience of working with service users' and to maximise participants' 'practice readiness and employability on completion' (Clifton and Thorley, 2014, p. 53). Based on these initial insights, Think Ahead developed a detailed programme specification, with the aim of integrating best practice in academic social work with tailored practice learning in well-prepared 'host' settings.

Initial selection of candidates (which this evaluation does not cover directly) would be rigorous and geared towards recruiting 'exceptional graduates', and career changers, with a complementary range of practice-oriented skills and appropriate values, and motivation to achieve positive change. Whilst acknowledging the value of specific undergraduate disciplines such as psychology and sociology, recruitment material also addressed those from other disciplines who might not previously have considered a social work career.

Once recruited, participants would be provided a short, intensive initial grounding in theoretical and legal underpinnings of social work practice, alongside an introduction to the core skills, values and context of professional practice in an integrated setting. On implementation, this element of the programme became established as the Summer Institute, delivered over six weeks on a residential basis by the programme's academic partners (the University of York, in association with the University of Central Lancashire). It also became clear in the delivery phase that service users and their organisations were given a much more central role as educators in this element of the programme than was perhaps initially envisaged.

Following completion of this preparatory element of the programme, the model was designed to facilitate 'on the job' learning (Clifton and Thornley, 2014, p. 55). Here, distinctively, the aim was to facilitate participant learning in typical mental health settings, where learners would be exposed to and become familiar with the range of social work roles and tailored interventions across a spectrum of community-based and hospital-based provision, working with a variety of mental health needs and diagnoses, experiences which are much less accessible to those on mainstream social work qualifying

programmes. As the evaluation revealed, there is no such thing as a 'typical' mental health setting, and the collaborative arrangements between Think Ahead and partner agencies reflected this, with the lead role at local level being assumed by local authorities in some cases, and mental health trusts in others. Participants' physical location and professional relationships also varied substantially depending on local contexts.

Importantly, though, the initial programme design did provide for a clearly designated 'student unit', under the leadership of an experienced consultant social worker (Clifton and Thorley, 2014. P. 56), whereby Think Ahead participants would be provided expert input into their practice-based learning; whilst at the same time, the opportunity would be provided to share experiences and learn together. The student unit would also be the base from which participants would be provided the complementary learning experience which enabled them to gain a wider insight into the breadth of social work functions (and overlaps with mental health), and at the same time satisfy the regulatory requirements of a generic professional qualification.

In parallel with their practice-based learning participants were also to be offered additional learning opportunities in parallel with placements, providing the opportunity to reflect constructively on ongoing practice experiences, and offering additional input on specialist areas of practice, social work methods, and specific theory and research informed interventions, as well as leadership skills.

After fourteen months, comprising the Summer Institute and a year in practice settings, participants would be expected to meet the qualifying requirements for social work (recognised by the award of a postgraduate diploma), and would then move into work settings with the host agencies as newly-qualified practitioners. During the second year of the programme they would engage with the ASYE (assessed and supported year in employment) in common with all other social workers at this point in their careers, but they would also be expected to undertake a specific project (research or practice-based) leading to the award of a Masters qualification by the education provider to the programme.

As the authors of the scoping report put it:

"By the end of the programme, participants will have completed both a postgraduate diploma and a master's degree in social work, along with the ASYE. They will therefore be fully qualified social workers, with a sound theoretical knowledge base, significant levels of high-quality practical experience in both mental health and a range of other settings, and an understanding of the unique nature of mental health social work within integrated teams. They will therefore be well placed to lead the integration agenda in mental health going forward" (Clifton and Thorley, 2014, p. 60).

2.5 The evaluation: objectives and approach

The central question for the programme evaluation was to assess both the extent to which Think Ahead has achieved its aims of achieving system change and transforming high potential into demonstrable achievement in a complex and challenging practice environment, on the one hand; and to try to understand the determinants and dynamics of the outcomes identified, on the other.

The evaluation took place between July 2016 and January 2019. Its substantive aims were to;
- Understand the impact of the programme on social work education and practice;
- To help Think Ahead to develop the quality of the programme and its working practices; and to
- Contribute to a better understanding of innovation in social work education and the role of social work in mental health practice.

The specific areas of delivery which the evaluation was expected to consider were the 'quality of training' and the 'quality of practice' demonstrated through the delivery of the programme and the performance of participants from its first cohort over its two-year lifespan.

Given the breadth and longitudinal nature of the task, the evaluation team adopted a 'mixed methods' approach, geared towards understanding:

- the qualities of those recruited to the programme;
- the nature and efficacy of the teaching and learning model adopted;
- participants' involvement and progression;
- the range and suitability of their learning opportunities;
- the extent to which their learning was translated into professional development in practice;
- the quality of their practice at the initial stage of their careers; and
- the impact of the programme from a range of stakeholder perspectives (including service users and employers).

In practical terms, this meant developing a range of qualitative and quantitative measures to provide an 'end to end' (Everitt and Hardiker, 1996) view, from the initial learning experiences through to the early career professional activities of Think Ahead participants. This has enabled us to assess the different elements of the programme in their own right (as learning moments, for example), and in terms of their contribution to the overall outcomes and progression indicators employed. Additionally, this approach to the evaluation has offered a developmental element, enabling the programme to draw on findings to adjust and enhance aspects of delivery as it has progressed from its first cohort to subsequent iterations. At various points in the report, we have noted changes identifiable in the second year of the programme, building on lessons from its first iteration. We were also able to gain a more substantial insight than perhaps initially envisaged into the contextual factors which play such an important part in

determining the nature and quality of the learning experience for programme participants, and, incidentally shed light on wider issues of collaboration across agency and professional divides in the mental health arena.

3. Methods

3.1 Overview

Each phase of the programme required a distinctive evaluative approach, whilst we also needed to ensure that the links and participant trajectories between each phase were clearly mapped and understood. In order to achieve this, we did effectively compartmentalise the programme according to the different stages identified in its initial formulation (Summer Institute - Practice learning - First year as qualified practitioner).

Clearly, the most appropriate methods to be deployed varied depending on the specific element of the programme under consideration. We relied extensively, for example, on detailed observation of teaching/learning sessions to understand the content and impact of formal educational input; whereas insights into participant experiences of the programme drew on interviews and longitudinal survey findings, and the recorded evidence of programme outcomes.

Table 3.1 Methods Used

Evaluation Phase	Summer Institute and Recall Days	Site Visits	Surveys	Stakeholder groups
Year 1 (Year 1 of Cohort 1)	* Structured Observations (multi-person) * Focus Groups (x2)	* Participant Observation of Case Consultations * Agency Interviews * Participant Interviews * Documentary Analysis	* Online Participant Survey * Comparator Survey	* Observation and Attendance at Service User Groups * Educator Interviews
Year 2 (Year 2 of Cohort 1 & Year 1 of Cohort 2)	* Structured Observations (multi-person)	* Participant Observation of Case Consultations * Agency Interviews * Participant Interviews * Documentary Analysis	* Online Participant Survey * Final closing Survey	* Observation and Attendance at Service User Groups

3.2 Summer Institute

Our original proposal was to complete two observation days; one at the beginning and one at the end of the Summer Institute. However, after reviewing the academic timetable the evaluation team decided that it would be advantageous to attend the Summer Institute at least once each week in order to observe a mix of sessions in relation to content, delivery partners and participatory elements.

Evaluation team members engaged in direct observations of teaching sessions using a standard recording sheet designed specifically for assessing adult teaching and learning. The observation sheets (one used per teaching session) were structured according to 5 themes: subject matter, managing the session, structure and teaching methods, promoting learning and participant activity. A copy of the observation sheet can be seen in the Appendix.

In addition to observation days, two focus groups were held at the Summer Institute in order to capture participant feedback. Each focus group lasted 60 minutes and followed a topic guide (see Appendix). The first focus group was held in the second week of the institute on Tuesday 26th July 2016, involved 12 graduates (all female, and self-selected) and focused on initial motivations and expectations. The second focus group was held in the final week on Tuesday 23rd August 2016 and 8 of the original 12 graduates were in attendance. The second group discussed participants' experiences of the Summer Institute and reflections on their learning and preparation for practice. Both focus groups were audio-recorded and participants were guaranteed their anonymity.

During the Summer Institute graduates were assessed via group presentations applying research and theory to practice, and individual assessments of communication and interviewing skills. The latter involved role plays in which graduates interviewed service users. Members of the evaluation team were present and observed these assessments. The participants' interviews were evaluated using an 'Assessed Observation Evaluation Framework' tool developed at Durham University and modified for this programme (see Appendix).

We have also ensured that service user views on the experience of the Summer Institute have been incorporated into the evaluation, along with responses from others involved in various aspects of the programme (see Section 6.4 and Chapter 9 below).

3.3 Site Visits

The site visits were an integral part of the evaluation as they afforded the research team the opportunity to conduct several evaluation tasks simultaneously focused on the provision and content of training provided in Year One and Year Two of the Think Ahead programme.

Sites were purposively selected in order to accommodate a range of different settings, types of partnership and geographical spread. Four sites were visited twice over the evaluation period, two sites were visited during Cohort 1 only and four sites during Cohort 2 only. Where possible, sites were visited by the same members of the research team to allow for continuity of analysis. Table 3.2 shows the sites visited as part of the evaluation.

Table 3.2. Think Ahead Site Visits[4]

Cohort 1 Site Visits (April - June 2017)	Cohort 1 & 2 Site Visits	Cohort 2 Site Visits (April - July 2018)
St George's Mental Health NHS Trust	Warwick County Council	North Somerset Council
Brighton Council and Sussex Partnership Trust	Northamptonshire County Council	North Tyneside Council
	Tees Esk and Wear Valleys NHS Foundation Trust	South London and Maudsley NHS Foundation Trust
	Bradford Community Mental Health Trust	Camden and Islington NHS Foundation Trust

As was to be expected, not all site visits were completely identical in terms of who was interviewed but we are confident that a range of views were obtained during each of the 10 visits. We did, however, ensure that interviewees were drawn from a range of groups at each site, including senior agency managers, partner agency representatives, team managers, consultant social workers, practitioner colleagues and, of course, Think Ahead participants themselves. This necessitated the development of a range of interview schedules (which can be viewed in the appendices).

Analysis of the material from the interviews was based on an approach which integrated the use of qualitative software (NVivo 10), individual coding of transcripts and collaborative cross-checking in the form of team-based 'analysis days'. From this exercise, a number of 'key themes' have emerged.

3.4 Surveys

Three online surveys were carried out to collect information about participants on the first cohort of the programme. This included their demographic profile and information on qualifications and experience. They were asked about their motivations for their choice to train as a social worker and which particular area of social work they hoped to work in following their qualification, their career goals and aspirations, specifically, where they saw themselves three years after qualifying as a social worker. Validated measures of self-confidence in tasks relating to social work, role clarity and role conflict, and stress were

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[4] The evaluation team are very grateful to site staff for their assistance in making these arrangements.

used. Similar data were also gathered from a baseline survey of a comparison group of postgraduate social work students following conventional university-based programmes.

Following completion of the Think Ahead programme, participants were invited to complete a final ('closing') survey. This asked their views about the Think Ahead programme overall, their current employment, their career development and their career goals and aspirations. It included an optional section on stress.

4. The Summer Institute

The Think Ahead Programme Handbook (2016) describes the Summer Institute as "*an intensive six-week residential study period"* where graduates will be taught a number of modules as they are introduced to the role of a social worker and obtain relevant underpinning knowledge and are prepared for their forthcoming practice placements.

The first Summer Institute was held at Devonshire Hall, Leeds University between 17 July 2016 and 26 August 2016. In total, 96 participants took part in, and successfully completed, the Institute over the course of the six weeks. This was also the first time that the academic partners of the University of York and University of Central Lancashire (UCLAN) had collaborated in the delivery of a qualifying programme of this kind.

As detailed in the Programme Handbook teaching at the Summer Institute was delivered between 9.00am and 4.45pm Monday to Friday in blocks of up to 7 sessions.

Teaching in the Summer Institute focused on three modules designed to prepare graduates for frontline social work;

- Module 1: Readiness for Social Work Practice
- Module 2: Social Work Knowledge and Information
- Module 3: Social Work Law, Policy and Practice

In addition, these three modules contribute towards the graduates' Postgraduate Diploma in Social Work Practice (Think Ahead).

The curriculum for the Summer Institute was based upon delivery of a mixture of research and theory-based teaching and practice skills days (10 in total) and was taught by a range of lecturers and speakers including sessions co-facilitated by service users and carers.

The Summer Institute assessment structure was a full and demanding programme of assessments, intended to cover the range of taught material covered during the intensive introductory phase of the programme (see Appendix).

4.1 Quality of Teaching

4.1.1 Teaching style: scope and definition

By teaching style, we mean the way in which teaching input at the Summer Institute was organised and delivered, including the arrangement of teaching sessions, presentation format, balance of learning experiences and practical aspects of teaching and learning.

As with other elements of this section of the report, we have relied extensively on the observations we made of teaching sessions, supplemented by focus group comments and notes based on informal feedback from participants and presenters.

4.1.2 Structure and organisation of learning opportunities

In overall terms, we did note a considerable variety in the approaches used by coordinators and contributors to the Summer Institute, and this was reflected in the structuring and delivery of sessions. There was much use of whole group didactic teaching, especially in the early part of the programme, comprising lectures supported by PowerPoint material in a recognisably conventional format. As the programme developed, and basic grounding in course material had been provided, it did appear that a greater variety of approaches to teaching and learning was introduced with extensive use of small group exercises and project work, and considerable latitude provided to participants to manage their own learning in this context. These activities were supplemented on occasion with what might be termed 'homework' where extension and development of daytime input was encouraged and facilitated – sometimes in response to requests from participants themselves.

Towards the end of the six-week period further diversification was evident as the programme culminated in a series of assessments which themselves were varied, and required a range of input from participants, from written exercises to presentations and simulations of practice. We felt that this was a good use of the opportunity to capture and assess learning effectively in a variety of ways, covering both academic and practice aspects of required learning (ideas, knowledge and skills).

In sum, the mix of learning activities and inputs provided was extensive and intensive, and the structure and organisation of programme delivery reflected that. There may be issues of balance and continuity, as would be expected in the first iteration of such an ambitious programme, but we feel that these are to be expected and capable of being addressed by the course team through reflection and adjustment to the programme. With the second iteration of the Summer Institute for the following cohort, we were able to observe that a number of adaptations of this kind had been instigated.

4.1.3 Session management

Although the venue imposed some constraints, session management was generally well handled, with very little time lost through late running or transitions from small to large group working. In the main, sessions appeared to be inclusive and enabling, providing opportunities for a wide range of participants to make comments or address questions to presenters.

Nevertheless, there were some problems with the organisation and planning of teaching sessions. In particular, presenters and session convenors were acutely aware of time constraints almost throughout the period of the Summer Institute. We observed a considerable number of direct references to being short of time, managing time, or saving time:

'We can fly through these…'

'I have a lot to get through…'

'We now have half an hour to get through behaviourism…'

Consequently, discussion was sometimes cut short, and some sessions over-ran which intruded on time set aside for breaks, other activities or personal study.

In this respect, it is clear that the nature of the programme was inevitably intensive, but perhaps this also prompted an implicit and self-fulfilling assumption that things would feel 'hurried'. Perhaps this suggests that it might be helpful to refer less often to a sense of being rushed or overloaded?

4.1.4 Balance of activities

We noted a shift from essentially didactic whole-class teaching at the beginning of the programme towards a more diverse and inquiry-based approach at its conclusion, and this does seem an appropriate balance. However, this model did pose considerable demands on the concentration and receptiveness of participants in the early stages and more space could have been provided from the start for some group-based self-directed learning; this was one of the adaptations we were able to observe when following up with the second cohort.

Attendance became more erratic as the programme went on. Partly, this may have been to do with the demands of completing assignments on time towards the conclusion of the Summer Institute, but it may also have been tiredness and a possible over-reliance on whole group teaching.

Where group work was facilitated, we noted that there was not always clarity about the nature of the task, and that perhaps more preparation would have helped participants in this respect, especially

where they were being asked to take the lead in formulating feedback or making presentations themselves. Where group activities were aided with the input of expert facilitators, it did seem that there was more structure to the ongoing learning, and perhaps more benefit to participants in terms of achieving intended outcomes.

It seemed at this point that the overall balance of activities and the timing of assessments needed to be re-considered; and changes were made for the second cohort to try and improve the alignment of learning and assessment and relieve undue pressure on participants.

4.2 Learning Content

4.2.1 Range of expertise

Although we were not present at every session and therefore have to rely to some extent on the documentary material associated with teaching input, we were able to draw some conclusions about the range and level of expertise available. Notably, there were a considerable number of 'mental health' perspectives provided, ranging from a variety of service user experience to detailed input from leading professionals and researchers from the disciplines of social work, psychology and psychiatry. There was some overlap in the material presented but this did allow different perspectives to be reflected and provided a basis for critical analysis of different viewpoints and different forms of 'knowledge'.
Input was consistently linked to available research evidence where possible, but this was not introduced uncritically, with competing accounts presented for analysis rather than simply being promoted as the authentic version.

4.2.2 Breadth of input

For the Think Ahead programme overall, we recognise the inevitable tension between generic requirements of social work qualifying programmes and the mental health focus which Think Ahead specifically incorporates. This is reflected in the construction of the Summer Institute curriculum, and although it is difficult to make a definitive judgement at this early stage of implementation, attempts were clearly being made to incorporate other elements of the social work task. For example, there was extensive coverage of child care and practice. This input was clearly informed and highly relevant.

We also noted that attention was given to the connections between adult mental health work and some aspects of children's social work practice, an opportunity which the Think Ahead programme in particular is able to utilise. In this respect, participants may actually be gaining a more rounded insight

than those on some mainstream programmes who are less able to draw on this level of specialist expertise in mental health.

As well as providing a degree of generic 'breadth', we also noted that the programme invested substantial time and effort into method or 'skills' based learning. Therapeutic methods were covered extensively, as was the topic of communication, which was of particular value for the participants as they prepared for their assessed practice simulation.

4.2.3 Integration of material

As noted above, opportunities were taken to illustrate areas where learning can be integrated, as in understanding the interface between adult mental health and children's services; or when adopting a lifecycle approach to understanding attachment. Similarly, a range of social work methods were introduced which are effectively applicable in most intervention settings, such as cognitive behavioural therapy, and principles of respectful and anti-oppressive practice.

It may have been helpful to articulate these linkages and cross-boundary issues more explicitly or to set tasks which enable participants to understand them concretely and in more depth.

4.2.4 Media use

Much of the teaching input, especially in whole group sessions, relied on conventional methods such as lectures, PowerPoint presentations, and some video material. It was not clear whether much use was being made of other teaching/learning media, although we did note that the noticeboard and suggestions box were particularly popular means of providing feedback – to which the course team clearly made every effort to respond. This may represent a kind of victory for 'old school' methods of encouraging interaction. Whether more use could have been made of blogs or discussion forums is unclear, but we were perhaps a little surprised not to see more emphasis placed on this kind of activity, even if only as supplemental to the core learning activities.

4.3 Teaching Impact

4.3.1 Attentiveness

The evaluation team was consistently impressed at the level of attentiveness demonstrated by participants, especially in whole group sessions. We noted the impact of some of the adverse conditions encountered (room size and layout, hot weather, technological malfunctions), but these did not seem to

have any significant impact on the capacity of the class to show sustained interest, and this was reflected in attentive body language, consistent note-taking and insightful questioning at the conclusion of lengthy and intensive input.

This suggests both a high level of commitment to engaging with the learning process on the part of participants and a consistently high quality of material provided by presenters.

As already indicated, there was a decline in attendance towards the end of the six-week programme which may well have been attributable in part to impending assessment deadlines, but could also have reflected overload in terms of whole group didactic teaching – the question arose as to whether more use could have been made of problem-based learning tasks, for example, in order to provide greater variety of learning experience? As a result, more of this type of activity was included in subsequent years, with rather less didactic input.

4.3.2 Responsiveness

In both the whole group sessions and small group tasks, we noted a high level of engagement on the part of the participant group as a whole. Whilst this does not, of course, imply that everyone was equally involved, it does suggest a considerable degree of uniformity in the extent to which they were playing an active part. This was evident in the considerable number of active 'questioners' in whole group sessions, and a high level of interest in group tasks. Tasks were usually completed conscientiously, and group feedback was taken very seriously and clearly seen by members as a contribution to learning overall.

4.3.3 Involvement

It was noticeable that a number of participants openly volunteered aspects of their own experience (personal and professional) from relatively early in the programme. This suggested that they felt reasonably comfortable about doing so, and that they had permission to share this kind of insight, and this is indicative of the strength of the induction process, in our opinion. Alongside self-disclosure, we also noted evidence of empathy with service users, as well as a considerable degree of openness to other viewpoints. Although we had limited opportunities to observe this (in group tasks, for example), there was also evidence of a widespread commitment to supporting each other's learning, and encouraging mutual questioning and discussion.

4.3.4 Insight

Although it is too early to draw too many firm conclusions about the continuing benefits of the learning experience offered by the Summer Institute, we were able to observe many examples of participants demonstrating insight based on the knowledge or experiences presented. In one instance, we observed a considered and authoritative discussion of intervention thresholds, for example, as well as group presentations which had synthesised and made accessible research material, which is an essential requirement of an informed practitioner.

Participants were thus demonstrating active learning skills and an enthusiasm to make sense of and develop the material presented. Here, then, we were able to conclude that this phase of the programme had clearly 'engaged' participants, it had incorporated appropriate teaching and learning elements, and pre-practice assessments were both rigorous and relevant.

4.4 Preparation for Practice

4.4.1 Readiness to practice – the approach to assessment

In common with other social work qualifying programmes, the Think Ahead model includes a threshold requirement (based on the Professional Capabilities Framework) that participants demonstrate their 'readiness' for practice before engaging directly with service users in a placement setting.

The approach to this requirement followed during the course of the Summer Institute was to introduce a number of programme elements to support participants in developing the relevant skills and professional attributes; and then to assess them in role in a practice scenario with service users, alongside their written work. Service users effectively enacted aspects of their own experience and it was the task of the graduate to undertake a brief introductory assessment meeting with the user and achieve a number of specified outcomes. Six assessment criteria were used by the programme, incorporating the structuring of the meeting, effective and empathic communication, and systematic information gathering. The interview lasted ten minutes, and provision was made for a brief written reflection by the graduate, initial debriefing and feedback to the participant by the service user, and a course tutor who observed the interaction.

In this interaction, the participants were expected to bring into play skills and insights developed or enhanced over the period of the Summer Institute and to show the capacity to reproduce prior learning effectively in the practice setting.

Members of the evaluation team carried out observations of twelve of these role play exercises, and undertook an independent assessment of participants' performance and the organisation and management of the exercise itself.

4.4.2 Preparation for practice – core interactional skills

With very few exceptions, the participants were observed to be applying communication skills effectively and in a considered fashion, with consistent evidence of their ability to apply active listening techniques and to engage effectively with service users in role. Clear explanations of the purpose of the meeting were provided, and there was good evidence of summarising and paraphrasing service user responses.

Where there were some limitations of technique, these graduates were preoccupied with 'getting the task done' at the expense of establishing a dialogue and the beginnings of a working relationship – perhaps understandable given the nature of the task itself and the time constraints.

4.4.3 Preparation for practice – social work values

In most cases, there was evidence of clear and supportive expressions of recognition of the service user's issues and empathy. It was consistently evident that the graduates were adopting a problem-solving approach with a number making commitments to undertake additional tasks ('we can look into that for you…'). This did not seem, however, to be associated with any tendency to 'over-promise' or to claim to be able to find solutions which were not within the practitioner's remit.

In one or two cases, the nature of the task again intruded, and there was a sense in which the graduate's agenda perhaps overrode what should have been the central focus of the interview, the service user and her/his wishes and feelings.

4.4.4 Preparation for practice – critical reflection and analysis

In nearly all cases, we found the ability of participants to reflect critically and analyse their own performance to be very impressive. This was generally utilised as an opportunity to learn and improve,

and we observed participants reviewing their practice and committing themselves to future improvement.

In only one case did we feel that the graduate's approach was inadequate and this was not recognised by staff. In this instance the entire focus of the interview appeared to be on gathering information and completing the task rather than engaging with the service user to establish a meaningful dialogue. Interestingly, though, this was not the perception of either the service user or the tutor both of whom felt the interview had been conducted well and with a clear sense of purpose.

4.4.5 Preparation for practice exercise – overview

In our view, the assessment exercise did clearly draw out a range of skills and insights of central relevance to practice settings. In general, graduates had effectively grasped what was required, they had prepared well, and demonstrated a very good level of knowledge and insight in carrying out the interviews. This form of assessment is, in our view, very robust, and it is possible to have a degree of confidence in the capabilities of participants as demonstrated here. There are some areas of improvement which may be worth considering.

Although, we appreciate that the provision of a scenario very shortly before the event is undoubtedly reality-based, it does seem perhaps an unnecessary additional challenge for those undertaking this sort of activity for the first time. (Think Ahead participants did seem unhappy about this).

We are somewhat dubious about asking service users to take on what is in effect an 'acting' role both because this is not their skill base necessarily and because it does run the risk of re-opening historic issues for them.

The timings of the interviews and feedback activities were very rushed, and more time should be allowed if possible.

There was some inconsistency of approach between tutors and this indicated the need for a more detailed preparation for subsequent iterations of the exercise; this suggestion was subsequently acted upon, according to the academic lead for the programme.

Preparation for this activity has improved in terms of guidance for service users involved in the second iteration, which was welcomed. There was concern, however, as to why this assessment had been brought forward in the timetable to the end of the second week. The mandatory nature and timing of

the assessment (readiness for practice) seems to obviate further improvements to communication skills from the level seen at the assessment centre (interview) stage.

4.4.6 Preparation for practice – summary

The assessed activity is clearly not the only context in which readiness for practice was addressed through the course of the Summer Institute. There was an accompanying written assignment which formed part of the Readiness for Social Work Practice module. Consultant Social Workers were also involved in assessing participants' understanding of practice capabilities, and there were other examples observed of developing skills and attributes which are generally indicative of progress in this respect – for instance, in the growing readiness of participants to take the initiative in organising their own activities and feedback; in their obvious commitment to each other and many examples of mutually supportive behaviour that were observed; in their obvious commitment to the programme overall and its goals; and in taking responsibility for their own professional development and extending learning.

4.5 Participant feedback

In order to provide a distinctive participant perspective on the experience of the Summer Institute, we conducted two focus group sessions, towards the beginning (26th July 2016) and end (23rd August 2016) of the programme (see above, Evaluation Approach).

These were designed to capture a sense firstly of prior expectations, motivations, and initial impressions; and secondly, of the nature and quality of the experience and how far it had coincided with those early understandings.

Focus group attendance was voluntary and self-selecting, with 12 Think Ahead participants attending the first session and eight returning for the second. This did enable us to gain a view of developing perceptions and assessments of the Summer Institute, and to some extent how prepared participants felt for their impending move into practice.

4.5.1 Motivations

We first explored participants' motivations for joining the programme. As anticipated, most were inspired by a particular interest in pursuing a specific pathway into mental health social work, perhaps rather than conventional pathways into careers drawing on psychology qualifications. In some cases,

this was born out of personal experience, but equally from prior experience in practice settings where mental health seemed to be a particular issue.

More pragmatically, some respondents referred specifically to the perceived benefits of a fast track programme which offered some relief from financial concerns and commitments and made this an 'affordable' option (*'I just don't have £20,000'*), whilst also offering a quick route to a professional qualification. Most reported that they had given up 'better paying' jobs to take up a place on the programme. This was not the central motivating factor, but helped for some to see this as a realistic possibility which did not involve major and unsustainable lifestyle changes.

4.5.2 Expectations

In terms of their initial expectations, it did seem that focus group members were well prepared, presumably as a consequence of undergoing a rigorous recruitment and selection process. They expected the programme, and especially this element of it, to be demanding and time consuming. They had no illusions that the following few weeks would absorb all of their time, and that other aspects of their lives had had to be *'put on hold'*. They did acknowledge, though, that they were being reasonably well supported financially through the programme, and that this seemed to be an acceptable 'trade off'.

For some who may not have had a 'relevant degree', for example, the need was quite clear, and they anticipated being offered a very substantial body of knowledge and skills very quickly in preparation for the next, practice-based, phase of the programme. Others felt that they had some grounding in these areas, but that it did enable them to gain insights into the realities of social work practice, and generic knowledge which they might not otherwise be able to access.

4.5.3 Initial experiences

First impressions of the programme were positive, and favourable comments were offered about the early days of the Summer Institute. Comments were made about the 'passion' of the course providers (Think Ahead and the academic team), and the opportunity offered to build up a common sense of professional identity quickly. The sense of being '*in it together'* was important to some members of the group, and may be a positive indicator of future developments as they seek to establish a place in quite diverse practice settings.

Some mention was made about relative lack of preparation ('*it was a leap of faith*'), but there was also a sense that things were 'working out'. Although indicative reading lists were provided prior to the programme, for some this had not provided the kind of platform to avoid the need for what was viewed, by others, as quite basic input. Some concern was expressed about people who might be a little disconcerted at the level of prior knowledge implicitly expected, although at this point confidence was expressed that these issues would be addressed.

There were also some observations about the early preponderance of health professionals in the teaching, and this was experienced as somewhat underplaying the strengths of mental health social work. This was associated with a view that there had been some repetition of input in these early stages, and that some of the material had been excessively detailed. The predominance of lecture-based input was noted, and it was acknowledged that this did not meet the preferred learning styles of all participants.

Perhaps, too, more preparation, structure and guidance could have been offered for the group activities participants were undertaking, which could facilitate the development of team-working skills as well as providing more structure to their learning. 'Breakouts' allowed people to 'share their own experiences' helpfully.

For most participants, service user input was strongly valued, even by this point ('*it's great to have an introduction to that experience*'). Credit was also given to the programme organisers for integrating the service user perspective so fully in the learning experience.

Some concerns were also expressed about the limited amount of initial support provided, both in terms of tutor contact and access to facilities and practical resources.

4.5.4 Experiences of teaching input

At the second focus group meeting, we sought to obtain a sense of participants' experience of the Summer Institute. Here, there was a difference of emphasis between content which was highly valued and process, where group members could clearly see room for improvement. Most felt that the teaching input had been very good overall ('95% positive'), although they also felt that there had been some issues of continuity and duplication.

Some areas could perhaps have merited rather more input, it was suggested, including sessions on the law, where it was observed that teaching was '*squeezed into two-and-a-half days for a three-hour exam*'. Similarly, and in keeping with our own observations, the suggestion was made that more

discussion of tools and techniques (social work methods and skills) would have been useful ('*things we actually need in the job*'). As in other respects, this feedback was acknowledged, and responded to for subsequent cohorts.

As in the initial focus group discussion, the input from service users was highly valued, and viewed as the strongest element of the entire programme by several of the group.

One area the group did raise as a potential omission was the subject of 'taking care of ourselves', and the possible value of sessions on managing pressure and dealing with challenges arising from the personal resonance of some teaching content (working with eating disorders, for example).

4.5.5 Experiences of programme organisation

More criticism was voiced about the organisation and management of the programme. This generally concerned poor communication and coordination, although participants clearly recognised that many problems related to the fact that this was the first iteration of the programme. They were also generally very positive about the level of involvement and support available from programme staff. 'Systems', though were sometimes problematic.

Particular concerns related to the inaccessibility of pastoral support or facilities for those with additional learning needs (with the relevant office being based in York during office hours and thus literally inaccessible). Indeed, the point about the need for 'reasonable adjustments' in such cases was emphasised.

In addition, the relative lack of information provided on timetabling, assignment tasks and changes to the programme was experienced as frustrating, and this was sometimes attributed to indecisiveness on the part of the course team; although many of these issues could be attributed to a lack of familiarity - this sort of challenge is relatively common with the first iteration of a complex programme, especially as it was delivered 'away from home'.

Participants considered that improvements were needed in practical arrangements – recording of presentations, for example, would have generated greater confidence in the detail and consistency of feedback offered ('*Marks are going to count towards our Masters*'). In general, it was felt that feedback could have been better organised and more helpful, so that advice could be more effectively incorporated into their work on subsequent assignments.

Use of electronic resources was perhaps less consistent than the group wanted, with Moodle not being viewed as a particularly useful source, and limited use being made of podcasts or discussion groups. Facebook was seen as the most useful source for peer learning in this context.

Other areas for consideration included the organisation and leadership of small group work which had continued to lack structure in members' view, echoing their initial impressions ('*we needed breakouts with seminar leaders*'). Positive comments were offered, too, in relation to those occasions where input had been effectively structured and led by service users and integrated with theory by tutors.

Concern was again expressed about continuity of teaching and unnecessary repetition which indicated the need for better coordination. The balance, too, between whole group and task-based teaching also felt skewed, echoing the earlier comments of the group – more learning in small groups and seminar/workshop formats would have been preferable. We do recognise that many of these concerns arose from the challenges of delivering a new programme for the first time, and many of the practical and process issues identified were acted upon speedily to ensure improvements could be put in place - in such diverse respects as changing the venue entirely, or adapting the assessment schedule, for instance.

4.5.6 Prepared for practice learning?

Some participants were ready and eager to move from the academic setting into practice, especially those with prior practice experience who had always expected the academic components of the programme to be the hardest part. Conversely, those who were rather more apprehensive about practice-based learning tended to be less experienced but did feel that the Summer Institute had provided a good foundation and given them a sense of what to expect ('*I know the acronyms, but have lots more to learn in practice*'). For the group as a whole, though, there was a palpable sense of excitement about the next phase of the programme, and '*getting to actually do the work*'.

Teaching was generally rated as 'pretty good'; and emphasis was continually placed on the quality and value of service user contributions, which were felt to be especially useful preparation for direct practice.

4.5.7 Summary

Overall, the sense was of a keen anticipation of a programme which would be challenging but would provide a strong basis for professional development in an area of practice in which group members clearly had a special interest.

There did appear to be a realistic understanding that group members would not be fully 'ready' at the point of moving on to the practice setting at the end of the Summer Institute; but they did believe that this would offer very useful preparation, especially because of the 'bonding time' and 'support networks' being facilitated.

The overriding message from participants was that there should be a distinctive role for social workers in mental health, and that the programme did promise to enable them to develop a clear and respected professional identity. At the same time, they believed social work as a discipline and a profession should be more central in the early course input - an observation which was incorporated in the curriculum revisions for the second cohort.

Recognition was offered of the level of preparation invested in the programme by the academic team, which clearly communicated itself and seemed to enthuse participants directly.

As the programme progressed, we noted that participants did express a greater sense of fatigue on completion of the six-week programme at a high level of intensity. They were also expressing quite commonly voiced concerns about the management of assessment tasks and communication problems, which are certainly to be found in most academic contexts.

To put any critical comments into perspective, though, these have to be set against the consistently positive observations of participants about the content of the programme and their continuing sense of enthusiasm and excitement about their learning experience overall, and their impending venture into practice – for which they felt better prepared as a result of the Summer Institute.

4.6 Service User feedback

The experience of service users involved in the Summer Institute, was generally a positive one. From both their comments and the overwhelmingly enthusiastic responses of participants, their contributions to the Summer Institute were viewed as absolute highlights, and key learning moments (see Chapter 6). Naturally however, there were challenges, and these were associated with the novelty of the programme and the unusual nature of the delivery arrangements as much as anything.

Service users were engaged to both act as educators, sharing their experiences and expertise from their distinctive perspective, and to act as interviewees in participants' individual assessments. Opinions about participants were positive and this was reflected in service user feedback:

> *"The students were amazing. They made me feel very positive about the future of social work and it's plainly obvious to me in my 40 years' experience of dealing with social workers, that they were obviously well selected by the team and academics, and were extremely polite and willing to learn."*

On reflection, the main challenges faced were communication on the days and managing expectations around levels of involvement. There was a desire for much clearer communication, so that those involved would feel more confident about their role. All service users who responded, said that because they are used to excellent channels of communication from their respective user group facilitators, it was more noticeable when it did not happen at the Summer Institute.

Ultimately most service users that responded felt that they had not been used to their full potential. Often their concerns were to do with practicalities and aspects of planning for their involvement which were not always smooth running. For example, the venue for the initial Summer Institute was not ideal for disabled people, as the training room was on the first floor with no lift available to use; although contingency plans were put in place to use an accessible alternative should the need arise.

In one instance, originally asked to be involved over a few days, one group of service users were then booked for one day; then told on that day, that they only had a one-hour slot shared between three people and had to adapt their input accordingly. As one person put it:

> *"Finalising details of just what is expected of service users on the day, could be communicated to us much sooner. It is difficult to plan a talk with regards to what we need to deliver with not knowing exactly what is expected."*

The day of participants' individual assessments was also observed to be less than organised, by some. One person commented:

> *"When it came to feedback at the end, there was very clear miscommunication about who should have been giving the participants feedback, and this caused confusion."*

These may not seem like major issues of concern, but great care has to be taken not to provide confirmatory experiences which mirror other aspects of service users' lives, and where they are particularly attuned to feelings of being undervalued. This is by no means an issue exclusive to Think

Ahead, and such critical comments need to be viewed in the wider context of the programme's ambitious aspirations and its very real efforts to engage wholeheartedly with a range of service user interests in developing the programme.

Service users have a lot to offer, the potential for co-production is huge and can offer Think Ahead a 'point of difference' in terms of social work education if it is able to build on its initial commitment, and the very extensive portfolio of service user involvement already in evidence, and widely welcomed by participants. There are clearly examples of this happening already, namely co-produced or user-led programme features such as; 'Social Work and Recovery', 'Looking after Yourself', 'Personality Disorder' and 'Emotional Resilience'.

4.7 Conclusions

Briefly, we have concluded that the experience of the Summer Institute was positive in the main. The level of engagement and active contribution of Think Ahead recruits was very impressive, and this was matched consistently with the quality of input provided by educators (service users, academics and professionals). There was a persistent challenge, though, in matching the teaching input and learning experience to the specific requirements of a group of participants with diverse prior experiences and subject knowledge, and this is reflected in participants' comments on how useful they found all aspects of the Summer Institute.

We also observed some aspects of the programme which required 'fine tuning', as we have indicated above; some of the initial problems identified in the first year of delivery were addressed for the second cohort, and we were able to observe clear signs of improvement, for example in terms of the more active engagement of participants in the learning process.

Thus, we would conclude that this approach to intensive preparation for practice in the specialist area of mental health social work suggests a number of positive benefits, including the capacity to deliver intensive and targeted learning effectively; the establishment of an early sense of a valued professional identity; the very effective engagement of qualifying practitioners with service users; effective involvement of agency and professional interests; and targeted assessments in substantive areas such as law and communication skills which are realistically matched to the pre-practice learning stage of professional development.

5. Organisation and Infrastructure: The Practice Learning Sites

There has been substantial historic concern about the integration of social work within mental health care, and this was clearly acknowledged in the preparatory report which set out the supporting arguments for the Think Ahead programme (Clifton and Thorley, 2014). The report also recognised the existing variations in service delivery arrangements, noting that those services taking part in the programme might 'have to improve their structures and systems for supporting social workers' (p. 56) in order to offer an effective learning environment. In some instances, this opportunity was clearly recognised at the local level, and agencies were able to create new 'spaces' for social work education and practice development which had previously been unavailable. Contextual factors are clearly likely to have a bearing on both the learning and practice opportunities for programme participants, as our investigation demonstrated.

Our exploration of the sites we chose to visit for the purpose of the evaluation enabled us to gain an insight not only of the experiences of the participants themselves and their consultant social workers in the 'student units', but also of the contexts within which they were based, the 'integrated' settings envisaged by the designers of the programme.

We sought to explore the learning experiences of Think Ahead participants in a range of settings, distinguished according to a number of criteria, including the 'hosting' arrangements (local authorities or mental health trusts); the scale of provision (single or multiple student units); geographical location; area characteristics (rural/urban/metropolitan); and the nature and stability of prior working relationships.

The complexities of the organisational arrangements were anticipated, so it is of interest to reflect on what we found, in terms of local structures and relationships and the very considerable variations identified. The evidence on which this aspect of the evaluation is based consists of the relevant sections of the interviews conducted with agency representatives, consultant social workers, participants, professional colleagues and 'leavers' (participants who had left the programme before completion).

5.1 Think Ahead set up - unit model in Trusts and Local Authorities/one charity

The organisational model on which the programme was based was relatively clear, and coherent, given that it derived both from a considerable amount of prior preparation, and a unified approach, vested in the Think Ahead organisation itself.

For a number of the units we visited, this clarity and relatively straightforward structural model was helpful, and provided a distinct sense of identity and purpose. Motivations for initial involvement did appear to differ. In some cases, the programme was seen as an opportunity to address recruitment problems, for some it appeared a natural opportunity to build on existing strengths in collaboration and service delivery, whilst for others it was equally seen as an opportunity to develop a stronger base and recognition for social work in the mental health field. This did mean that for some, the inclusion of a new group of graduates was relatively straightforward, whereas for others, 'teething troubles' (and more) were encountered, as both practical and (local) political issues had to be addressed in the process of implementation.

5.1.1 Negotiating constraints

The tensions between national level expectations and the pressures of negotiating local realities did become apparent in a number of respects, although in most cases these were resolved successfully. Partly because of the great variety in local organisational arrangements, some of the initial assumptions made by Think Ahead about shared learning and common practice experiences came to be modified in order to meet practical constraints, such as service capacity and existing caseload management practices.

5.1.2 Profile and expectations

Some issues perhaps arose because of the high-profile nature of the Think Ahead programme itself, whereby prior arrangements might be seen to be threatened and local sensitivities might be aroused. In one area, for example, the recruitment of the consultant social worker from an existing team was seen as a loss to the wider service; and in other cases, there was a sense amongst other professionals that the programme itself represented an unwelcome challenge to established practices.

By contrast, in many areas, the programme was welcomed, and with enthusiastic support from agency staff, its contribution was quickly accepted. This largely seems to be to relate to the broader climate of commitment to interprofessional collaboration, which is very evident in some sites, and much less so in others.

5.1.3 Importance of a 'champion' at the delivery partner - vision driver/facilitator - obtaining organisational buy-in and undertaking the preparatory work

Undoubtedly one of the critical factors affecting the overall coherence of the programme at the point of delivery in localities was the extent to which project 'champions' were visibly and consistently involved. Each host site has a designated 'operational lead' (senior agency manager), supporting the direct work with participants and professional colleagues undertaken by the Consultant Social Worker.
In a number of sites it could be observed that the project champion(s) could be seen to have a substantial impact, and it was notable that they had engaged with other colleagues and strengthened initial support for Think Ahead. In some cases, this might be a matter of sustaining and building on a strong and trusting collaborative relationship already in place - on several occasions we observed explicit mutual recognition between members of different professional groups at senior level which seemed to set the tone for all aspects of the initiative. In other cases, though, the presence of a powerful lead voice was fulfilling a function more akin to cutting through the undergrowth, in order to create space and a positive working environment for the student unit.
In one case, however, the programme enthusiast at senior level left the organisation shortly after the programme commenced and as a result there was a strategic level vacuum, which clearly affected both the Consultant Social Worker and the participants very significantly.

5.1.4 Local practitioner engagement with Think Ahead

The readiness and capacity of other practitioners and professional groups to engage with Think Ahead were also predictably variable. In some areas, and to an extent following the lead of senior colleagues, there was an obvious openness to the contribution potentially offered by participants ('*they realise now that social work is not just about sorting out benefits*'); whereas, elsewhere the reception was much less welcoming ('*I don't understand what they're here for*'). Variable reactions are certainly to be expected. Partly this is to do with the 'shock of the new', but it is also a consequence of professional tensions and uncertainties; and for social work, regrettably, it is also likely to be bound up with public perceptions which are also likely to permeate multi-agency settings.

5.1.5 National elements - satisfaction of partners with this structure - opportunities for employer involvement

Whilst for some local agencies and practitioners, the clear framework and relatively 'hands-off' (enabling rather than micro-managing) approach of the national Think Ahead organisation was unproblematic, for others there were some issues, such as the uncertainty over the extent to which expectations (over placement arrangements or use of specific practice methods, for example) could be modified. In some cases, it seemed, communication was not as clear, frequent or responsive as it could have been, although this is always likely to be a point of tension in the context of a national programme implemented locally, with the many and varied factors likely to come into play. Here the Practice Specialist role was significant, and a number of participants did comment on the help they received via this route.

5.1.6 Contingencies and their impact (e.g. staffing changes)

As noted, some contingent events clearly did have a substantial impact on the implementation process and the experience of a number of participants, probably affecting their outcomes in several cases. Amongst these influences were: staff changes, structural pressures (loss of funding, or re-organisation), additional demands (on Consultant Social Workers, particularly), hostile reactions (from other professional groups).

By their nature, contingent events (or their exact timing, at least) are hard to predict, although it is reasonable to suggest that some or all of the above were likely to occur at some point in some places during the course of the programme - perhaps difficult to plan for in specific terms. However, in several cases, we did note that preparation did pay off, such as the example of the 'reserve' Consultant Social Worker being called into action in one unit, with considerable success.

5.1.7 Adapting to a new model: roles and practical arrangements

> "Your Consultant Social Worker will share a caseload with you and your peers in your unit, modelling best practice and enabling you to take increasing responsibility for the care of people experiencing mental ill-health" (from the programme handbook, p. 13)

The supervisory and learning model devised for Think Ahead is quite distinctive, being organised around 'units' with the Consultant Social Worker taking a very clear and comprehensive lead role. This clearly offers real benefits in terms of offering a natural base for shared learning, and consistency of approach and input from the CSW. Many participants clearly valued the opportunity to learn together, to offer

mutual support and to gain a stronger sense of the value of the coherence of the programme in this way.

The pivotal nature of the CSW is clearly a strength in terms of ensuring a common approach to programme delivery, although it can also be problematic, where the CSW is either unavailable, or experiences other challenges, such as managing a highly demanding additional workload, as appeared to be the case in some instances, where adequate allowance had not been made for the new role.

We did not the provision for each area to have a reserve CSW in place, and this does seem like a wise precaution, as in at least one instance this meant that the reserve was able to step in at a crucial time and ensure no adverse consequences for the participants.

5.1.8 Variety of arrangements (full secondment and buy-out, in addition to existing role, job share, onsite and off-site)

It appears that there were some clear expectations about the arrangements for deploying Consultant Social Workers, which were not always followed in practice. In one instance, the decision was made to recruit two CSWs on an equal footing, rather than having a lead and reserve, partly to deal with the potential frustration of those joining the programme as reserves and then having little direct involvement:

> "So, the second difference, I think, maybe, from some of the partners, is that we decided to have two consultant social workers. The rationale for that was that I didn't, personally, see much point in having a reserve one. The reason for that was that if somebody had to drop out, quickly, a reserve social worker, who hadn't been involved, immersed in the program, I think would find it quite hard to pick it up, quickly. So, we decided to go for the two consultant social worker model but what we did was, again, slightly differently. We didn't say, forget your day job. We said, this will be… We'll take account of workload relief, for example, with the extra, additional responsibilities that being a consultant social worker brings but that essentially, it would be… You wouldn't come out of your social work role. So, you would still remain within a team because there were some concerns about people feeling quite isolated. So, people have both stayed in their teams".

Undoubtedly the CSW role was pivotal to the effective running and eventual success of the practice learning element of the programme. We were able to ascertain that most of those who took up the role were already experienced practice educators, and had a clear understanding of the expectations associated with the role, or adapted quickly to them:

> "It's not kind of a real short term placement; it's been a long term placement. They've [students] been able to see patients through lots of different stages. So being in hospital, to being in the community, and they've been able to work with lots of our kind of differing sites. So they've

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really kind of got to grips with all that we offer. Which I think has been really important. Which I think quite often with other students, nursing students, they're only very small placements, and quite often they miss lots that we do. So I think in that respect, I think they will be quite well equipped".

There were, certainly, distinct features of the Think Ahead model which did require a substantial degree of adaptation. Some of these were to do with local working practices, and the extent to which CSWs themselves were part of existing practice teams, or occupied a position more at arm's length from everyday service provision. This could cause problems where Think Ahead participants relied on these service settings as a source of work, and in some cases appeared to lead to tensions.

In other cases, provision for CSWs to have space to take on the additional working requirements of close supervision of the four members of the student unit did not seem sufficiently generous, and there was clearly some variation in local arrangements for workload relief in this respect:

"I thought actually. Because sometimes having just the one student can be quite challenging. But actually having four, okay well gosh, but actually it's been really good. I think it was… It's been a real success here".

5.1.9 Demands on the Consultant Social Worker

As a newly created role, the range and nature of the demands on CSWs were variable, and some appeared to be expected to take on rather more of the practical aspects of programme delivery than might have been anticipated, such as finding space to work, as well as arranging Contrasting Learning Experiences, and trying to organise schedules which ensured that each participant could meet all of the programme requirements in terms of placement activities.

"Initially I think staff members were concerned. Certainly other members of the team. I think as I said, I was a little bit concerned at first. Largely it's about to do with space, and the building size. A quite small building, and there was some difficulties...with where they fit in the building".

5.1.10 Variance in who line manages the Consultant Social Worker and implications

We observed a considerable variation in the local arrangements for coordinating and managing services, almost irrespective of the actual lead agency in any instance. So, in some areas where the lead body was the mental health trust, we observed very close collaboration, just as we did in some areas where this responsibility rested with the local council. However, the reverse was also the case with the evident lack of good working relationships also apparent in both types of structure, sometimes manifested in a tangible sense of indifference or even hostility:

> *"The negatives for me, I don't understand why we need them in one base. We're an IPU and it was made very clear to us from day one that not only did they want them in one base, they wanted them in one room. This is quite a small building. You can see that for yourself".*

For those involved with the Think Ahead programme, this inevitably resulted in some variable experiences, which meant in practice that some CSWs (and participants) were very closely supported and enthusiastically accommodated by agencies and staff; whereas in other cases, admittedly a smaller number, this was far from the case, culminating in one or two quite negative experiences.

5.1.11 Positive and negative impacts

The programme gave CSWs the chance to reflect on their own career, obtain new skills, and refresh existing skills. On the other hand, this could be seen as a highly intensive role, with continual demands, especially where participants might be having difficulties, and a demanding workload combining existing case responsibilities, and additional tasks such as completing academic feedback, case observations and the range of tasks involved in direct supervision.

For CSWs then, this was a 'high stakes' move, where those who were well supported and had a strongly positive orientation to the programme, the gains in terms of enhanced expertise, positive outcomes, and potentially career advancement could be clearly recognised:

> *"Positively, it's been fantastic having them [students] around. They're really fresh, they've kept us on our toes. They ask lots of questions, they're really intelligent. It's refreshing. They've got involved in a lot. They've kind of really just got on with it and taken on any opportunity that they could".*

In other cases, though, there was evidence of pressure and weariness, and in at least one case, the scale of the challenge appeared to have led to the post holder leaving.

5.1.12 Sense the solutions are not wholly satisfactory _worked because not tested, i.e. sickness absence

It is understandable that a new programme, being 'rolled out' across a range of settings would inevitably encounter local variations in structure and practice, although we did feel that there was a degree of frustration at local level with some of what were perceived as standardised expectations from the national level which simply did not 'fit' with the specific setting. As far as we could tell, these issues were mostly dealt with pragmatically with some degree of deviation from the prescribed model - in terms of the co-location or otherwise of unit members, for example. This did not seem to represent a degree of compromise which created great jeopardy for the programme as a whole in our view, although in some cases the practical constraints were pretty compelling.

5.2 Year 2 reflections

As indicated elsewhere in this report, site visits in the second year allowed the evaluation team to follow up with agency staff and programme participants where sites were being revisited and to reflect on what we had previously been told about the programme as well as pursue new lines of enquiry based on what had been observed or witnessed at other sites. Whilst site visits were very different, a number of themes emerged which it is useful to reflect on here, these include communication, reliance and impact on Consultant Social Workers.

5.2.1 Communication

Overall, relationships were said to be good with Think Ahead with information about the programme being cascaded from the central team to regional partners, and a sense from the materials shared that Think Ahead had a 'reasonably high profile'. From partners' perspectives, communication channels were felt to be open and established, yet the reduced frequency of national meetings in the second year was felt by some to be a missed opportunity for sharing knowledge and learning as well coming together with representatives from other units:

"I mean if I had an issue I could ring xxxx, I could ring yyyy. I just feel the links are good, the channels of communication are good. I do think it's a bit of a shame that the national meeting has eased off a little bit because there's good learning that come from that. So I think for example I think at one of the meetings I've raised the issue about the reserve and it would just be helpful to know okay so has this issue come up and how have you dealt with it"

5.2.2 Reliance and impact on Consultant Social Workers

We noted during first visits, and have described at length in this report, the centrality and importance of the CSW role in Think Ahead for both local programme delivery and facilitating graduate learning. The recognition amongst staff interviewed of the relevance and reliance on CSW staff had not diminished in the second visit, if anything, the reality of the role and post had increased in the intervening months amongst senior staff:

"the CSWs don't get a break if they carry on. Whereas usually if you have a student you'd have summer off or you know, you'd have up until October off or something like that".

"having to do a Peps 2 as well as getting to grips with the program for cohort one. So fair play to her, she stuck it out and did that, but I think if you had four and you were new and you hadn't got your Peps 2 and then you went straight into having the next lot. It would really be very demanding and challenging for the individual".

"So for them, I think the impact is greater on them because there's no breather. So as soon as cohort one finished, cohort two started".

"she's managed really well, but it's only recently that I've kind of realised how much"

There was a recognition after a year in post that whilst the Think Ahead CSW post had been intense and required a steep learning curve in places, that it had also given practitioners learning opportunities which they could utilise to further their own careers:

"It partly felt like I'd lost my links to social work. I'd lost my foundation because it was just so medical. And I thought this would be a really good way of re-identifying with them and building them back into my practice. So that when I go back, I can go back much stronger and much more energised again".

"I thought it was an interesting way of dipping my toe into more formal education and dipping my toe into a little bit of management to see whether I have those skills or not".

"I think it will sort of stand her in good stead if she wants to specialise further in practice education or in, you know, that, you know, social work, education generally I suppose".

"we had to change the consultant social worker. And the good positive was that she went off and did something good, and again, with this consultant social worker, she's now got the team manager's post for the team she's in. And I don't know whether it's actually a really good opportunity for people to step out and also think about their development needs and what they want to do".

This does raise the question as to whether the Think Ahead CSW post will only ever be a temporary secondment for practitioners, a 'chance to step out', for those looking to reconnect with students, strengthen their own practice learning skillset or as an opportunity to improve on their management skills. It was notable how many CSWs talked of 'going back' to their original teams and/or roles as a result of either personal choice or the decision of the agency not to participate in forthcoming cohorts. This is not necessarily problematic, and may be quite healthy, in terms of broadening involvement in the programme and refreshing it, but it does present a continuing challenge for Think Ahead and host agencies in terms of ensuring that others are prepared to take on this key role.

6. Programme Delivery and Practice-Based Learning

6.1 Practice-based learning and development: structure and content

The practice learning/professional development elements of the Think Ahead programme are agency-based in nature, and involve structured and intensive placement-based learning (Year 1), leading to the professional social work qualification; followed by integration into the agency workforce as a newly-qualified practitioner, undertaking the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) alongside other new recruits to the profession (Year 2). The two placements in the first year are modelled on the expectations which apply to mainstream qualifying programmes, with the addition of a 30-day 'contrasting learning experience', in a child and family service setting.

The focal point for learning in Year 1 is the 'student unit', led by the Consultant Social Worker, who is also responsible for convening 'case consultations' with participants collectively, individual supervision, and assessing practice learning.

In parallel with their work-based learning, participants were also expected to attend a series (24) of practice skills days, where more detailed 'off site' teaching was offered around particular aspects of practice, including a number of specific interventions, including connecting people, family group conferencing, solution-focused brief therapy and motivational interviewing. Additionally, interventions based on these methods were to be assessed.

The evaluation of this element of the programme was organised around a series of site visits, focusing on the experiences and progression of participants, the views of Consultant Social Workers, and the perceptions of a range of key agency-based stakeholders. Material for this aspect of the evaluation was generated through interviews, observations (of group case consultations/supervision) and analysis of written material (practice learning documentation).

Six sites were visited in Year 1. Four of these were visited again in the second year of the programme, along with four additional sites, selected from those which joined the programme in Year 2, making ten sites in all and 14 visits in total.

6.1.1 Reflections on graduates

There is a lot of material from site visits in relation to stakeholder reflections on the participants involved in the Think Ahead programme, and much of it is incredibly positive. Whilst there are also some observations which recognise challenges and potential limitations, these are to be viewed in a context of predominantly positive findings.

It will be helpful here to consider the responses of agency representatives and educators under a number of headings which represent the acknowledged potential of Think Ahead participants, their engagement with this element of the programme, and the extent of their progression and preparation for a professional career, under the headings: Qualities, Preparation, Engagement, Quality of Teaching and Learning, Outcomes.

6.1.2 Qualities

Here we focus on the views of agency representatives, colleagues and educators (Consultant Social Workers, in particular) on the personal and professional attributes they identified amongst participants.

As well as reflections on the Think Ahead cohort of graduates there are also comparisons drawn with other qualifying students and students who have come through placements from traditional social work courses:

> *"Well they've got one chance, haven't they? Because actually, the way we see it, from day one we've had these high expectations. These are the elite group. They're the best there is out there. Yes, so you have these very, very high expectations when they come in and obviously you want to be seeing someone that's performing. You still have to bear in mind that they're students, but you're wanting them to perform basically to what you would see as a third year social worker or nursing student ready to go out into practice".*

> *"Personally, the four we've got, I think one of them may struggle. We've got one who, two of the [participants] that we've got, they're just amazing. One of them, we would definitely offer a job to, in fact, I think we'd probably offer the job to two of them if we have the option. I can really see them kind of working in a team".*

> *"What I also liked is the, I suppose, reassuring again, the keenness that students have to think about and, you know, hopefully we don't lose it as experienced people, but think about the person. Think about, you know, what is it about their condition that affects his day to day that affects his relationships. Keen to explore that, which is a positive and it holds him in good stead in terms of, you know, maintaining that curiosity when he's actually in the role".*

"They've really taken a keen interest from day one. And that's really good because you don't always get that with students. They kind of sit back a bit sometimes and kind of don't ask questions. I know that I met with them all in groups of two. The amount of questions that were brought to me. They've been really interested in the roles, they've really taken it up".

"The four that we've got in our organisation from spending time with them have got experience in both at work and life which has reinforced their values. And they're all very much value-based practitioners."

"They're [the TA graduates are] brilliant. They're really passionate, they care. It's really nice actually because there's none of that… If you give them negativity, I'm not a negative person, but people become complacent in their jobs. They get critical. We all kind of say, oh not her again. People do that when you've worked with the service users that are historically not changed but constantly need the service every year. It's really nice because they're really refreshing. Obviously, they're new to it but at the same time they're really taking everything on board. I don't think any issues, for any service users either".

The qualities identified by agency representatives were not evenly distributed, understandably, and this was reflected in some of their comments. Partly because of the group-based model of the student unit, some staff acknowledged how the practice of hosting participants together had drawn attention to both strengths and weaknesses of individuals more so than was usually the case on other placement arrangements. It was noted, that there was '*nowhere to hide with this model*', as a result of working together, studying together and being so closely supervised, where differences in ability, competency, experience or outlook existed they were illuminated under the 'unit spotlight':

"the feedback also I've got and, you know… actually is that out of each cohort, there's been one in each cohort who's struggled for various reasons"

"And I think the problem is that you have three fantastic students so the one just stood out a bit more. And I'm not sure whether that means to say that he was off track. It could just be three exceptional students".

"With one of our students, we've got a lack of, I think, flexibility. That might not be the right word. Much more criticality of aspects of the program that they're not particularly willing to engage in, or see as relevant. Whereas, I think, with the other three, there is that appetite to learn to do something"

6.1.3 Preparation

Importantly, too, agency representatives had something to say about the level of preparation of Think Ahead participants, offering insights into the apparent contribution of the Summer Institute and other prior experience from a different perspective. For some, it seemed, their academic level was significant:

> (Q) So your perceptions as to these TA students compared to other students, how do they compare? *"Oh, totally different. Kind of, they're at a different level, aren't they? Because the other students were coming from colleges or, you know, universities that were just doing the BA or BS, but these are Master's level"*

> *"They seemed very prepared actually. Which was good".*

> *"Well they seemed well prepared anyway. They seemed knowledgeable. Very eager to ask questions, very eager to find out what was going on, very eager to go out on visits. And always accepting of new cases, new clients. So that's… Yes I got the sense that actually they were prepared and enthusiastic, and wanting to learn, and had a relatively good background knowledge".*

> *"I think some of them, you could perhaps see the ones that had more experience than others, and confidence wise…. I think they'd done a lot of research before coming here as to what the team did. How we functioned? Whereas other students can kind of come in, and not really know a lot at all….*

With the exception of a few identified areas for improvement (e.g. co-delivery of teaching on the Summer Institute, consistency in academic tutor provision) interviewees were generally positive about the 'quality of teaching' on the Think Ahead programme. When asked if there were any areas which had been neglected by teaching the responses were very similar to this:

> *"No, I don't. I think they came with good knowledge…..It was almost like they just needed to get on with the practical side of things. They appeared ready when they came [into their placements]"*

Some respondents, on the other hand, did feel that the Think Ahead programme could have enhanced the level of pre-placement preparation, by involving agency members more directly. Whilst discussing the Summer Institute, a number of interviewees suggested that there was potential for more integration of employer-based expertise, knowledge and experience in the teaching programme and that this could easily have been addressed by adopting a co-delivery approach. In other words, employer-based staff could have teamed up with academic staff to deliver sessions to ensure both academic and employer perspectives were included. One interviewee did recall being asked to present in Leeds, but she stated that the lack of notice and geographical distances involved had precluded her involvement on that occasion. Subsequently, it became possible to draw on Consultant Social Workers to deliver practitioner-led learning.

We know from our observations of the first Summer Institute that some combined teaching did go ahead, but it was clear from site visits that staff involved in various roles within agencies, were eager to assist with the academic programme:

> "I get a feeling that there wasn't a lot of employer involvement, much in the Summer Institute. And I know… I mean, I went up for a couple of days and did… But I just wonder whether there could be a bit more integration of… I could do a session around the Mental Health Act. I could just hang about with the person doing the lecture and add in a few employer bits".

Our subsequent observations of the redesigned second Summer Institute suggested that these issues were then addressed by the Think Ahead leadership team and the lead educators.

Overall, representatives of host organisations felt that graduates were well prepared for their practice placements. Whilst, experience amongst graduates clearly differed, an ability to adapt and integrate into teams was noted and appreciated by the agencies where they were placed.

6.1.4 Engagement

Not only were Think Ahead participants observed to be well-prepared and to have appropriate personal and professional attributes, but there was also general approval at agency level of their willingness and enthusiasm to engage with the sometimes challenging learning opportunities provided by the programme:

> "They're fantastic. They've come in, they've really absorbed… They've really taken a keen interest from day one. And that's really good because you don't always get that with students. They kind of sit back a bit sometimes and kind of don't ask questions. I know that I met with them all in groups of two. The amount of questions that were brought to me. They've been really interested in the roles, they've really taken it up".

> "My kind of initial impressions were, kind of, altogether I thought they were mentally and physically well. You know, they could handle the kind of stuff that was thrown at them, or would be able to handle whatever we, kind of, threw at them. They came across as an intelligent bunch. They were curious and kind of wanted to know the ins and outs and how things worked. Very analytical and understood the concept of the work they were going to be undertaking".

Importantly it seemed that initial levels of engagement and commitment to learning were sustained throughout the period of practice learning. This appeared to be the case in spite of a number of recognised challenges and pressures. Examples of the stigma associated with fast-track graduates causing tangible difficulties within teams were few and far between but it was noted in some sites that

the demand to keep participants in units of four, and by that be housed and seated together, did cause practical difficulties in some organisations which had limited desks and spaces.

> *"Initially I think staff members were concerned. Certainly other members of the team. I think as I said, I was a little bit concerned at first. Largely it's about to do with space, and the building size".*

The demands of balancing academic work and practice were also noted:

> *"I think it's been quite difficult at times for them. I know that they've spoken about essays that they've got to do, and reflective pieces…. You… Yes, they're doing lots of kind of work on top of the work here. And that's been observed".*

> *"I think it was around Christmas time, they had quite a lot of work they had to get done. And lots of deadlines, which I think was quite stressful. But that seemed to… They didn't seem to have quite so much as that as the time went on. It seemed that they could focus much more on practice".*

Whilst it was widely understood that the design of the course meant that there was the necessity to work on both academic and practice elements jointly, several interviewees raised concerns that materials and information were being squeezed in:

> *"I do feel they're cramming a lot in, so… I think around the interventions, it has felt a little bit like they're trying to squeeze a lot of stuff in and now we're getting closer to the end, it's squeezing and squeezing and squeezing them, really".*

In some cases, the problem of 'engagement' was not so much an issue arising from the expectations of participants but it was associated rather with the wider complexities of running a smooth operation in terms of providing effective and consistent graduate support. When talking about relationships with academic staff during site visits, we were mindful that relationships were in development with this being the first year of a new programme. On the whole, experiences had reportedly been very positive, however there were a few instances and examples given of where things had not run according to plan and where problems had been encountered as a result of staff turnover and academic tutors changing during the programme:

> *"So, all I can say is from our point of view from the CSWs, you know, it would be nice to have had a consistent tutor to have worked with during the first year".*

> *"So Pxxx was really, really supportive, but Pxxx had less time to support… so there has been, there was this void I think in terms of the academic support that our students, our cohort received, compared to others"*

Whilst, these changes in personnel had not had a detrimental effect on participants or academic provision according to site staff, it was felt to have been unsettling and problematic for graduates as well as consultant social workers who noted that in the first year they had relied significantly on tutors in an effort to understand the academic expectations on participants and processes involved in the

course. Furthermore, all tutors were said to have had their own approaches and in each case of changes of personnel there was an associated period of getting to know that individual and their preferred working patterns.

It was apparent at some sites that tensions were present in relation to the uncertainty of Year 2 plans, especially with regards to where graduates would be placed, on what type of contract, staff were on the whole confident of the levels of commitment to the course:

> (Q) Are students still committed to the TA programme? *I think so. Yes, they seemed to have retained that kind of commitment, and that desire to learn, and that kind of enthusiasm. So that's turned out good, yes".*

6.2 Quality of teaching and learning

During each site visit, agency-based respondents were asked to think about the extent to which the programme enabled the linking of theory taught on the academic programme to practice and roles undertaken within the host institution. Conversations in relation to this theme often centred on the importance of relationships between all the partners (i.e. CSW and Academic tutor) and the role of supervision in maintaining and developing the links between theory and practice. The benefits of this kind of focused and intensive approach to learning were acknowledged. However, it was also noted that such intense supervision and case consultation group arrangements may cause problems at later stages of the programme:

> *"[I lead] joint case consultations. Sometimes I'll do joint supervision, depending on which students are in, but not that much, I try to do individual supervision, and they'll just pick up any problems. And obviously, when I first started, I was doing joint visits with them"*

> *"So obviously I have supervision with them once a week, and then we have case consultation as well once a week. It doesn't always happen once a week, sometimes it happens less frequently than that"*

> *"So I think that's what worries me I think they are very protected. They've been allowed to… Whereas next year, they'll be given bigger caseloads*

As a core theme of the programme, linking theory with practice was discussed at all site visits. Whilst the majority of employers felt that graduates entered their placements with detailed knowledge of interventions, the theoretical foundations of these methods and a desire to apply them to practice, in reality interviewees talked of various challenges present in local settings which sometimes precluded application in practice. For example, opportunities to apply interventions were not always forthcoming

in all services due to lack of opportunity to work with families / clients in specific ways, lack of time to engage clients, or paucity of willing clients to undertake such work with the service:

> "they're starting to find that actually the intervention that I was offering, I'm not able to do that now because A, I don't have time, and B, the patient won't engage with that"

Practical difficulties aside, Think Ahead participants were felt to have been given excellent opportunities during placements to work on the academic components of the course and to reflect on, and integrate theory with practice as a result of having a protected caseload. In addition, managers and team leaders spoke of the concerted effort to give participants interesting and appropriate cases from the team caseload in order that they could experience a range of situations and use these opportunities to complete their academic objectives:

> "The thing is with our students is they're quite protected. So they've got very small caseloads and they may have, you know, we've specifically added cases for them that they can work well with, they've got specifically added pieces of work so that they can meet their objectives and follow the process that they need to".

In addition, it was noted in more than one site, that the extended nature of the placement, gave graduates opportunities to experience various services offered by host institutions and to follow cases through the different stages of assessment, follow up work, referral and/or discharge:

> "It's not kind of a real short-term placement; it's been a long term placement. They've [students have] been able to see patients through lots of different stages. So being in hospital, to being in the community, and they've been able to work with lots of our kind of differing sites. So they've really kind of got to grips with all that we offer. Which I think has been really important. Which I think quite often with other students, nursing students, they're only very small placements, and quite often they miss lots that we do. So I think in that respect, I think they will be quite well equipped".

One element of the placement which was felt to be central to linking theory with practice was supervision. The vast majority of staff interviewed were of the opinion that graduates were incredibly well supported whilst in their host organisation as result of having unparalleled access to a mentor in the form of a Consultant Social Worker working directly with the 4 individuals in the unit. This arrangement combined with regular weekly supervision on a 1:1 basis as well as regular group case consultations was felt to give exceptional opportunities for theory and practice to be discussed.

> "Jxxx spends a lot of time with them, even groups efficient sessions. And I know that they're doing a lot of kind of theory and practice. A lot of kind of in depth studies and that happens regularly. Again, I think that they are asking questions. And when they're not doing more of their clinical work here, they are writing reflections…"

Views were mixed across units as to whether the structured supervision programme should be as prescriptive as it is requiring mandatory weekly sessions for instance, when considering that participants have other local provision, such as team meetings, which also allow for support and discussion of theory. In addition, some staff were concerned that the supervision programme was insufficiently tapered towards the end of Year 1, which in their minds was an opportunity missed, given that graduates would have less supervision and support in Year 2 and that ideally the programme should be preparing the graduates for this transition:

> "And when you're working in a team where you've got... something like intense supervision. That will reduce. They'll [students] be having an increased caseload. They're going to have to ask for a lot more support from colleagues that they're working with. So I think a lot of the protection will go. And that does worry me".

Nevertheless, the supervision offered to participants was recognised as being critical for enabling graduates to think about the integration of theory and practice, and an important component of the programme which enabled consultant social workers to keep track on graduate progression and in several instances tailor apparently needed support to individuals on the course:

> "She's [the CSW] done some really kind of intensive work with this one student. And they are improving. So when I say I've concerns, I don't think by any means they're going to fail. I think they needed a bit more support for their development".

The practical challenges to agency staff and CSWs in particular of sustaining a very intensive model of supervision were also identified as potential areas of concern. Its identifiable benefits then also posed some further questions, both in terms of the future working environment of participants and the pressures on educators:

> "I think it's been great for them to be together. They bounce off each other. They've been quite involved as a group together. So yes, they are kind of going to go from having that support off each other to having support from colleagues. Yes, and the expectation is that you're going to be at the same level. I'm not stressing that any one of them couldn't cope. I think they're all capable of that but they'll need support.

> "In terms of management, we've got a supportive management structure. I can't guarantee it's going to be like that going forward. So I am concerned about the fact that we're having to still do weekly supervision right up until the end of placement two, because I don't think that's realistic, and I have raised that with TA. Because my feeling is that we should drop it down to fortnightly. Because of that, really, I want to prepare them for practice, I don't want it to be a shock to the system".

6.3 Outcomes: preparation for professional practice

Our initial evaluation visits between April and June 2017 coincided with the point in the programme where units and partners were starting to discuss the arrangements for the students in the second year of the programme. According to the Think Ahead Programme Handbook, *"in Year Two [students] will be employed in their host organisation as a newly-qualified social worker, and will complete their Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (*ASYE)" (p.12).

In practice, some uncertainty about the precise nature of these arrangements was evident in some areas, with a degree of variation in the 'offer' made to participants at the point of qualifying and moving to employed status in a mental health setting. Beyond differences in relation to where graduates would be working and the nature of support they would be receiving, discussions held during site visits also identified potential differences in how students would be employed across sites. For example, contract lengths of between 12 and 15 months were likely to be offered to graduates, usually dependent on local ASYE circumstances and provision. Similarly, some graduates were to be offered permanent contracts whereas others would most likely be offered temporary fixed term contracts. It was anticipated that host organisations would need to exercise a degree of flexibility in this respect, depending on their size, location and existing workforce requirements. This did to a degree of variation, of course:

> *"Yes, year two seems more fluid and there is a potential for, yes, distinct differences across the units and that begs the question, then, to what extent is it a consistent programme*?"* (Operational Lead)

Plans and arrangements were not confirmed in all sites during our visits in 2017 and this has generated a degree of uncertainty for participants who, it was recognised, needed to make concrete decisions about living arrangements and personal commitments fairly urgently at this point.

Employers did also raise the potential issue that participants may leave directly after training, given that some graduates relocated in order to take part in the programme and that some may be using the scheme as a potential springboard to another career.

Whilst it was apparent within some sites that tensions were present in relation to Year 2 plans, especially with regards to where graduates would be placed, on what type of contract, agency managers were on the whole confident of their levels of commitment to the programme, and continuing to pursue careers in mental health social work.

Notwithstanding these practical concerns, our first phase interviews discussed what the developing plans were for graduates in the second year within the Trust/Local Authority, opinions were shared in relation to how well staff thought that participants would cope as well as potential challenges in Year 2.

Similarly reflections on the design of the programme were offered as well as thoughts and suggestions on how the programme could be enhanced at both a national and local level.

Overall, the sense amongst those interviewed was that graduates were ready for Year 2, and although the year will be very different especially in terms of workload and differences in level of support and tuition, staff shared the view that the majority would find it challenging but rewarding. Notwithstanding that some were more ready than others:

> "I think some will find it easier than others. But given the right support and the right team, I think they'll be fine".

> "I don't think that any of them will not do well, I'm sure. If they get the next 12 months, they get some really good grounding within a service in a team and they get the right support from the right people and they hit the next 12 months off, I think they'll have fantastic futures. I really do".

Staff seemed well abreast of the challenges that would present themselves in Year 2, notably the increased workload alongside the pressures of participants completing both their ASYE year and a Masters qualification. These challenges were considered tough enough, leading one interviewee to remark that she "*didn't envy any of the students over the next 12 months…I can see their lives being on hold*". However, others felt that the greater risks to graduates were expectations from within services, and a potential lack of protection and support:

> "And when you're working in a team where you've got, I can't remember what it is, something like intense supervision. That will reduce. They'll be having an increased caseload. They're going to have to ask for a lot more support from colleagues that they're working with. So I think a lot of the protection will go. And that does worry me".

> "one of the main things is to be sensitive and sensible about caseload versus team demand, because we're all stretched. But at the same time, these are new people coming in, who are at a certain point at this stage in terms of experience. I would want them to have a caseload to reflect that, but I need to talk to team managers about, you know, identifying beforehand, so we can be realistic".

Some respondents though were much less worried about the participants' capacity to adapt to the demands of practice as a qualified professional, sounding if anything quite buoyant:

> "I don't actually have any concerns. They [students] kind of have that knowledge they're building from what they learned in the classrooms, and they kind of are familiar with the work they've been doing. Since it's not going to be a completely strange thing they're getting into. So I think they have that ability and confidence to move on. I don't have any concerns. They're still going to have support from Think Ahead and moving into year two, they're still going to have, kind of, us if they want some advice. You know, kind of, they still... I don't see any issues. There may be some around academic work, because they're going to be focusing on theses and stuff, so there might be some issues around that. But in terms of day to day work, I don't see any issues. They

can do care assessments. They can do, you know, kind of, care plans, risk assessments. They're familiar with the pattern, so I don't think so."

Indeed, the sense of confidence in the qualities and overall 'readiness' of participants for the next step in their move into mental health social work was widespread:

"Like you can see the difference in them as time has gone on. Yes, you can certainly see that growth. Perhaps they're more willing to pick up things…So perhaps them putting their hand up and volunteering for more things…They're presenting in the team meetings; they're leading on the allotment programme".

"I suppose it was reassuring in a way [to observe a TA graduate at a panel presentation], because I'm used to qualified staff presenting. So it was reassuring, because then it goes back to this being about this group of students being special. But it was reassuring that he was actually, I think, at an appropriate place for his career, despite being on this fast-track master's course. You know, he presented a social work student who was learning and I think that was appropriate. There were things that needed to be picked up and I think if he had more experience, he could've… probably would've"

Whilst discussing impressions of graduates, interviewees often drew comparisons between Think Ahead graduates and other students, frequently these comments focused on the enhanced skills and knowledge of the Think Ahead cohort, their readiness for practice and eagerness to engage with teams. Working in the team, taking on a caseload, not being a burden to other team members were all attributes of Think Ahead graduates which were clearly valued by colleagues and discussed during site visits. For some, the integration of graduates into host teams, the support they received from their Consultant Social Workers had led some to comment that graduates were working as though already qualified:

"Well some of them in particular, are practicing as if they're… They are qualified in work, and they've reached that stage, which has been really good to see".

"they'll all get stuck in, one of them has been taking on some complex cases that you'd only expect a qualifier to take on".

"They became very much part of the team. And I think that's what they've always tried to be, part of the team. I think that's what's been quite nice.

In some instances, it did appear possible to differentiate between the levels of achievement and progress made by participants, although as one respondent noted, that might be because in some cases their work appeared to be of an excellent standard:

"And I think the problem is that you have three fantastic students so the one just stood out a bit more. And I'm not sure whether that means to say that he was off track. It could just be three exceptional students".

It was suggested that graduates with more confidence were eager to take on cases in the early days but in all sites confidence of participants was felt to have grown leading to graduates playing a fuller part in team caseloads and shared work.

However, in some instances interviewees drew attention to the 'elite' stigma often associated with fast track programmes and the resultant high expectations placed on Think Ahead graduates. Clearly, this has implications not only for agencies in terms of how they manage the balance between competent graduates eager to take on caseloads and ensuring appropriate levels of protection, but also for participants and the pressures they feel to uphold these high expectations and the lengths they will go to in order to deliver work at the expected levels.

For those who were experiencing problems of one kind or another, the close-knit nature of the student unit held both advantages and disadvantages, perhaps. This element of the programme can have both positive and negative consequences, it can be positive where weaknesses are identified and can be addressed through intensive supervision (as was the case in some instances) and yet it can be demoralising for those facing shortfalls in skills, knowledge or experience within a unit of four. As highlighted in the educator interviews, the result is that graduates are potentially under greater pressure and scrutiny whilst in placement, where comparisons with their three counterparts are inevitable.

Finally, with regards to impressions of the Think Ahead graduates, staff were asked about the leadership focus within the programme and, similarly, whether evidence of management potential was visible at this stage of the programme? The majority of respondents felt it was too early to identify future managers, many suggesting that graduates were understandably focused on their two-year course. On the other hand, however it was noted that the placements had given participants the opportunities to develop leadership qualities:

> *"I suppose it's difficult to say [if any of the students will take on future leadership roles] at this time. But I think some of them, they are… Now they're carrying cases, but you could, well I guess they are managing cases actually. And there is that potential, and they are… They talk much more in meetings, they're reflecting on their cases in front of the team. So I think a lot of those skills have enhanced the leadership side of things. I don't know whether I've seen any kind of specific skills evident at the minute".*

6.4 Learning and Implementing Social Interventions

A hallmark of the Think Ahead programme is its emphasis on learning and implementing empirically-based social interventions for people with mental health problems in practice. Thus, the design of the

curriculum included teaching and learning about interventions at the individual level, specifically Motivational Interviewing (MI) and Brief Solution-Focused therapy (BSFT); with families, specifically Family Group Conferencing (FGC), Systemic Family Therapy (FT, working with families and social systems); and Connecting People (CP), which aims to integrate individuals with their community. In addition, the programme provided teaching on co-production and working with carers, and community development, although these were not presented as evidence-based interventions.

In the Summer Institute, participants were introduced to the importance given to these interventions in the programme and their potential for promoting a specific social work contribution to mental health practice. They were presented as 'social interventions', although MI and BSFT can be seen as more individualised in focus and 'psychological' in methods, although they are used across disciplines. Once the participants were in their placements (from September in the first year) they attended an academic programme on specified recall days (24 in all). The interventions MI, BSFT, were taught in two-day blocks to participants in London and Birmingham. Participants were expected to implement the interventions on placement, with the support of their Consultant Social Workers (CSWs) and to present reflective accounts of their work using these interventions in their midway and final placement reports. The CSWs had been provided with a one-day teaching on implementing evidence-informed social interventions and had the opportunity to attend the participants' teaching.

These findings in this section are drawn from interviews in two sites with eleven participants: eight in the 2016 Cohort (Years 1 and 2) and three in the 2017 Cohort (Year 1).   Two case consultation meetings were observed. Eight participants agreed to share their (anonymised) placement reports. Three Consultant Social Workers, three team managers and three senior managers were also interviewed. Finally, the teaching and learning of two evidence-based social interventions for Cohort 1 were observed: the Connecting People intervention (November 2016) and Motivational Interviewing (February 2017); the former was the best example and is reported below.

6.4.1 Learning a model of social intervention

Observations of teaching the Connecting People intervention demonstrated a concern for participants appreciating the value-base of the model as well as its theoretical basis, innovative features and empirical grounding, and its use in practice settings. The presenter, the course director and the developer of the model explained how it had been developed from theory (social capital) and practice research. He asked open questions of the whole group, inviting them to consider how it could work in their own practice settings. He stressed that it was a person-centred approach, intended to reduce power differentials through joint practitioner-service user tasks: this is <u>not</u> just "*what social workers do*

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anyway." Challenges in implementing the model were anticipated: "*You need to get wheels in motion*". This was explained using an elaborate interactive PowerPoint display to map the model and identify 'barriers' which they would need to overcome: "*We want you to be aware of them so that you can remove them*". But support would be available: "*You will be supporting each other in your units and getting support from your CSW"*.

The presenter stressed the importance of 'fidelity' to the model and taught them the ingredients. Participants were attentive, but most were passive, leaving others to respond to questions. He presented his own research on the effectiveness of the intervention using charts and statistics, but many participants' reactions indicated that they were out of their depth in understanding. Video testimonials of practitioners who had been using the intervention and of service users who had experienced it were quite accessible and appeared to be more convincing https://connectingpeoplestudy.net/the-model-2/

The teaching was supplemented by a detailed and well-produced Practice Guidance handbook https://connectingpeoplestudy.net/the-model-2/practice-guidance/ to which participants were encouraged to refer during the rest of the session. Participants then applied the model first, experientially, by working in pairs to map their own social networks and then through group discussion of case studies in which they were able to ask for help from facilitators, including the presenter. These elements of the teaching were evidently very engaging for the participants.

Overall, the teaching sessions were well structured and employed a range of methods of teaching and learning, including active listening and supporting, challenging and self-disclosure. Methods were in accord with adult learning principles, emphasising reflection and application.

6.4.2 Using the models of social intervention

Participants' implementation of the social interventions are considered in relation to three themes: their beliefs about the intervention; the applicability to practice in mental health social work; the support they received; and the impact of assessment.

Participants' beliefs about the value and usefulness of the models of social intervention varied. They were often apologetic when they were not using the model "with fidelity" – but nevertheless considered it a helpful perspective. For example:

> *"Connecting People? I think yes in some sense it is [useful]. Probably not with much fidelity…. But I think even if I don't use that model as intended, it did give me much greater awareness of thinking about how people interact with their community and how people could be more interlinked".* (Participant Cohort 1, Year 1)

Most participants described the interventions/techniques as being like *tools in a tool kit* and that they could select the one you needed for the task.

> *"Things like motivational interviewing, I could dip in and out of sometimes if I feel that that might be appropriate to somebody, but I feel I've got to go away and refresh my memory about what I need to be doing".* (Participant Cohort 2, Year 1)

It obviously helps if participants 'buy into' the interventions. For example, one participant had evidently made motivational interviewing integral to their practice:

> Motivational interviewing: "*I find it really useful because it's something that I can do without it almost feeling like an intervention. It's a way of talking… now it's very much part of my conversation. So, when change is part of everything it kind of leads the conversation in a certain way as opposed to just getting information and trying to filter it. You're almost trying to get someone to start talking in a certain way to be able to understand how you can support them better".* (Participant Cohort 2, Year 1).

Participants were aware on the wider significance of these models, but recognised that they may not always be feasible for some service users, for example those experiencing psychosis:

> *"The premise of Think Ahead is to sort of I guess <u>enshrine the social model of social work</u> more within our more medicalised teams. So, bringing in the social interventions that we've been trained to do. And, that's been a little bit more challenging because a lot of our clients [in a psychosis team] are quite unwell. So, to utilise those sort of techniques, I guess can be difficult at times. But where we have been able to, I think they've been really effective".* (Participant Cohort, Year 1)

There was a particular challenge in the application of Family Group Conferencing to work with clients lacking mental capacity:

> *"Working in the dementia service ….the models need completely re-working. …the thing that distinguishes family group conferencing is the private family time…to try and work out a solution without a professional in the room. [It's] really powerful. But I've only been able to use it with one highly motivated family".* (Participant from the 2016 Cohort, Year 2)

One participant pointed out that adapting the model in effect, undermined that premise of using evidence-based interventions:

> *"The ethos is you take these interventions…the reason you're using them is because they're evidence-based, but they are evidence based in a particular and structured form. They're not evidence based as a general concept. So, you're no longer using that intervention but you've started taking little bits and pieces and messing around. So, it might be a useful thing to learn and*

> *… to practice but, in terms of using that intervention in a way that we've been told …., I think we need to do a little bit more".* (Participant from the 2016 Cohort, Year 1)

Reflecting critically on the programme's emphasis on social interventions, this consultant social worker commented:

> *"Everyone is very keen to <u>do</u> the intervention. Whereas the main bit of the intervention…is actually being able to see the world from the client's perspective. And that you know is the problem with all these way of teaching social work as "interventions". Because I think what it does, is [that] it makes the students think<u>, what am I going to do</u>? Rather than, <u>what's going on for this person</u>?"* (Consultant Social Worker Cohort 2 2018)

In contrast, this participant had found Motivational Interviewing not only appropriate to their practice setting but also an effective way to understand their service users and to establish a positive therapeutic relationship. Asked about using social interventions in a community mental health team, this participant answered:

> *"We've had a very good level of opportunities, actually. The motivational interview, kind of almost all the time….The 'miracle questioning' is always great. I just used it this morning with my client: Listening out for that change talk, being able to reflect back on people. But I think it just really needs a good sounding, a good relationship. I've really enjoyed building those relationships with the clients".* (Participant from the 2017 Cohort, Year 1)

In general, the more structured the intervention (e.g. CP and FGC), the more challenging to adapt and apply in certain contexts. This was to be expected, because these interventions, with their focus on families and communities presented a challenge to usual ways of working in many mental health services. The more individually focused the intervention (e.g. MI and BSFT) the more straightforward it seemed, so long as the service user had the mental capacity and willingness to engage.

However, the relevance of these social interventions to mainstream mental health social work role was questioned, not least by some service managers. For example:

> *"We will train these [participants] with an expectation that they have the opportunity to use the different intervention models that they've been taught. And then actually, we'll stick them in a service and they will be doing safeguarding, community care assessments and funding assessments. And they'll be working as care coordinators. And they won't have the chance to use those skills". (*Senior Manager – social work Cohort 1 2017)

This is an important observation which anticipated some of the responses of participants in the Closing Survey. Many of the participants had on completion of the programme, taken jobs as care coordinators and were indeed facing the more procedural tasks inherent in the role, as described above. Others had

sought jobs in services which had adopted therapeutic models, such as 'Open Dialogue', a model of family/systemic practice which was not actually included in the programme, or had moved into child and adolescent mental health services.

Another important conclusion is therefore that if a model of intervention is to become embedded in a mental health agency, there has to be commitment from service and team managers and the capacity for supervisors (i.e. consultant social workers) to provide adequate clinical supervision. In other words, CSWs must buy into it too and have the understanding and skills required. To this end, they are provided mandatory training in the interventions by the programme and it is also offered to the operational leads, but one at least was clearly doubtful:

> Connecting People? "I think, probably has a lot of relevance to the work of a mental health social worker, but whether you have the time to apply it in its pure form… I'm not so sure. [But] I still don't quite get it as a model. I'm not sure if it's trying to make something out of very little or… [trails off]" (Consultant Social Worker Cohort 1 2017)

Perhaps surprisingly, other members of the multidisciplinary team could be much more positive, in principle at least. For example, a senior nurse manager remarked about Think Ahead participants' use of social interventions in a multi-disciplinary team:

> [Think Ahead] it's very different from nursing and that's probably the beauty of having them [participants]. So, they're coming in with this sort of different perspective…So, I think that's fine, you know, and she [CSW] will have translated it into the real world if that's the right way for me to put it, you know. (Clinical Manager – a nurse Cohort 2 2018)

Thus, applying models of intervention to one's role as a social worker in a multidisciplinary team with a particular client group (e.g. psychosis, dementia) were issues for managers and CSWs as well as participants. If a participant did not have support, e.g. because, in spite of the training, your CSW "didn't get it" or the team manager didn't think it was your role, you had a problem. In these instances, the other members of the unit, your peers, could be very helpful, as was observed in 'consultation group' sessions. These often revolved around the challenge of finding a 'suitable case' to demonstrate your ability to use it – not least because it was a task for your assessment. This was often resolved by framing the case in terms of one of the models. For example, one participant described work in a contrasting learning environment (CLE), Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, in terms of Family Group Conferencing, albeit rather loosely because what follows would not appear distinctive to CAMHS practitioners:

> "Working at CAMHS provided me with more opportunities to complete work with families which meant using skills developed from the Family Group Conferencing (FGC) model. Buford and Hudson (2000) highlight a key concept of FGC is for the 'coordinator' to meet with all family members, and

relevant services who are involved in in order to appropriately prepare all parties for the meeting in a transparent and structured way. My experience of using these methods when working with families allowed me to consider the importance of preparation and to ensure that each individual is provided with the opportunity to have their views heard". (Contrasting Learning Experience (CLE) Placement Report Stage 2.)

However, the requirements of assessment encouraged many participants to provide a more convincing account of the use of social interventions, in this example, of Connecting People:

"I have also spent some time working with X in relation to her connectedness and social networks to aid her recovery…. we drew an ecomap together detailing her relationships and networks that she is a part of, and discussed how she would like this to look in the future. I helped her create her own achievable goals to increase her social capital, drawing on concepts from the Connecting People Intervention (Webber et al. 2016)…. It was helpful to see the various domains of her life that impact on her identity. It also helped me to aid Lxxxx in thinking about her wider network of interactions, such as with her son's school, and how these may influence her. I signposted her to community-based projects such as a local women's group and recovery college, where we attended an open day together. Within this intervention, I ensured that I not only empowered her to set her own goals but also helped her to alter her current identity. I encouraged her to view herself in networks where she is not a mental health service user, but instead a mother, an artist and a student". (Participant's Final Report Placement 2)

And finally, assessment, and the programme as a whole appeared successful in encouraging participants to be reflective about their practice, as the following illustrates:

"The feature of my learning that I have been the most conscious of has been recognising the complexity and depth of nuance that surrounds every aspect of the social work role….. Whilst I find social work theory really interesting, there are elements of practice, particularly the minutiae that are hard to learn about other than by observing. Seemingly small things like how certain questions are prefaced, or who to address when there are several people in the room can make or break a meeting/assessment and so observing how experienced practitioners manage these complexities has been really valuable. I think my knowledge of relevant theory, research and interventions is growing slowly, but do feel like I have something of a mountain to climb". (Final Placement Report Cohort 1, 2017).

As this reflection reminds us, learning about social work practice and how to use social interventions requires attention to the complexities of social interaction as well as fidelity to a model.

6.5 Year 2 reflections

During the second site visits in order to follow up with how graduates were getting on, we spoke to considerably more team managers than we had in previous visits; recognising that in Year 2 the 'units' and graduates were split across different teams and regular contact was between graduates and team managers and less with their Consultant Social Workers.

As had been largely expected, the transition period had required graduates and agency-based staff to reassess and approach the second year of the programme with a renewed perspective. Unsurprisingly, some graduates had coped better than others and there was a sense that moving teams had in some cases made things easier for graduates where they could enter a team and assert themselves as a newly qualified member of staff as opposed to re-joining a team where they were already known as a student:

> *"I think she's had a difficult time because she's fitting into the team that she was in. So she's had to change her role, if you like, from a student to full time worker, which she's actually done really successfully, but I think that's been a real challenge for her. I think she'd slotted into another team and it had been easier"*

> *"I think the risk is that you're treated as a student and then you've got to suddenly be treated as an employee"*

Others recognised that irrespective of what team someone enters, as newly qualified social workers graduates are still going to have to learn and embed themselves in the team and that asking for help is part and parcel of the learning process, as it expecting a caseload which will stretch you:

> *"But they're well-protected, though, aren't they? XX sometimes says to me they're not, but, I mean, I think they're well-protected, really. And at every opportunity talk to anyone. That's the other point, you know. If something's too big, you just sort of go to the first person and say, I can't do this; you know, I need help. I think that's what you… Otherwise, if they have that, then they can take on stuff. And if they feel as though they can't do it, then they come back to the team. Then we support them. But that's the only way they're going to learn, isn't it?"*

It was also noted that expectations may be higher for Think Ahead graduates as a result of their personal and professional competencies as well as the extent to which they are known as competent graduates, or the '*crème de la crème*' and as such pressures on teams and workloads could potentially pose a risk:

"they're competent to, to do stuff, but actually, you know, there, there is various things, there are things that can only be sort of learnt through that experience of, of the role, and you're not going to come across every scenario within, you know, your First Year. Um, so I guess that's something for us to be mindful of. Um, and yeah, they, the expectations of them are, are possibly raised slightly through, through them being competent and from them being billed as, you know, the crème de la crème of [laughter] social work student".

At the time of our visits, it was too early to say whether graduates' experiences of their first year as a qualified employee were any different to the experiences of other newly qualified staff but from an agency perspective it was apparently the case that the programme did have a positive reputation which led managers to willingly take on a Think Ahead graduate:

"because they're the people managing the teams and the feedback is so positive that I think all of those team managers want to be taking those people. And I think that's a reflection of them as individuals but the programme as well, a combination of the two".

"she's been an advocate of Think Ahead which has been really helpful. And I think she's also had influence upon the other team managers, because when it came to finding the second year, I say placements, they're not placements in the second year, it's a 12 month employment contract, I thought oh we're going to kind of like really have a bit of a battle on our hands here because are the team managers going to be saying 50% protected caseloads, time off for doing ASYE, time off for doing that… Well I had to find someone to pick up 25 cases and you know it was completely the opposite of that".

However, views were mixed as to whether programme expectations and in particular the requirement to join a new team as a newly qualified member of staff, complete a Master's as well as complete the ASYE programme were realistic:

"I think the program needs to look at whether the students or the newly qualified social workers need to do a research proposal for their master's, as opposed to doing actually a piece of research. Exactly, but the pressure it puts on the student to actually do a piece of empirical study is massive, alongside ASYE, alongside getting used to a new team".

Although only 36% of the first cohort undertook the research module in Year Two, the alternatives involving a substantial report on their approach to systemic social work practice (with families or with networks and communities) were similarly demanding.

"I think the thing as well we're supposed to find 10% case load relief or 10% workload relief, for ASYE. So the candidates can do ASYE but if they're using all that time to do their masters instead…"

"I had reservations about whether this is possible, but I think if you get the right, right people. But I'm not aware that any have got kids and families which would, would make it really difficult…For someone I think, if they have other commitments then, you know, I think have to dedicated yourself to this, um, and to have anything outside of that would be a struggle".

"They've all cried at different points... And felt completely overwhelmed and come in Monday and they've got bags under their eyes, they've been working all weekend. But they've all continued to come in. They all... Yeah. I think there's something about the process that you go through in the beginning, where they... The interviews and the understanding, I think... I cannot fault the quality of the participants. And they have managed a really demanding workload and academic studies at the same time. So, I think that's about the recruitment process. It's obviously really robust, you know".

Reflecting on the impact on organisations of hosting the programme, views were generally very positive and it became clear that a combination of an internal advocate for the programme as well as the experience of competent and capable graduates showcased the strengths of the programme, leading to what one interviewee called *'pockets of brilliance'.*

Nevertheless, there were some concerns over the extent to which partners would retain graduates at the end of the course and speculation as to what a successful retention rate would look like:

"I think ideally, because it is quite a large commitment in terms of time and effort, ideally we would aspire to, you know, 100% retention wouldn't we? So that we're growing at that rate. It's always going to be difficult though, isn't it? Because if people decide to leave you can't actually shackle them to the desk can you?"

"So I think whilst 50% you've got one, we've got one. XX stayed with us and has a permanent contract with us. Because one of the other things we did when we identified posts we weren't going to give them a fixed term contract. We were going to say we'd like you to stay, we'll make this investment"

"I think there's a thing that say if we across the eight that we've got in cohort one, if we ended up with say two at the end of it we'd have to sort of question how much benefit then sort of long term did we get through our investment. But if we keep most of them the feedback is very positive as well that we would… You know, we see these as really capable social workers who will progress, who are our leaders of the future and we kind of want to I suppose benefit sort of in a slightly longer term from it".

"So in terms of workforce planning, having something like this is really good. But as I say, I think it is quite intensive, yes. But hopefully, the benefits for the whole system, so if they don't come to us, but if they go to either of the local councils, that's really good. Q Yes, would you still consider that a success? Oh yes, oh, I do, I consider that a success. And actually, hypothetically, it won't be a success for us as an organisation, not organisation, but as a partnership that they leave. But then again, as long as they become a social worker, same social work, mental social worker".

Clearly, geography was considered to play a significant role in overall retention:

"We have got one guy who comes from xxxxxx and he commutes and he's got family in xxxxxx. I think he's married and he's got kids. So he... You know, it's partly the fact... I suppose if you had Think Ahead operating in every area I mean people would get much more choice, wouldn't they, about where they go. So it's partly of the fact, you know, how many areas... We've got about 20 areas participating or something. So obviously for some people they're going to have to make hard choices about if I go on the programme I'm going to have to go there".

"Well, I think there's an issue about mobility in the sense that where... So we've been lucky in one way in that someone who's moved to xxxxxx feels that it's somewhere they want to stay. We have the other person who stayed is somebody who was from xxxxxx anyway. So geography perhaps has... And the other, the person who's staying who wasn't from xxxxxx hasn't got... She's not married, she hasn't got children, she hasn't go those ties. So there's that part of it. The second thing is that one of the people was never going to say in xxxxxx. That was always quite clear and I think they just chose to jump quicker. So I don't think it was necessarily the program, I think it was more about staying in xxxxxx another year. We've got one student this year who continues to live in Derby and commutes".

Despite the uncertainty about overall retention at the end of the programme, there was a clear sense amongst agency staff interviewed that the Think Ahead programme had been a success and that on the calibre of the graduates who had progressed so far that the future was bright for future mental health social workers:

I think it's a bit early to say this, but it sort of put social work and mental health a bit more on par with other disciplines. I think that until you get to AMPH stage I think social work is sort of seen as having much less expertise, knowledge, skill around mental health. I think when people go onto AMPH training that's when they get a lot of specialist mental health input and I suppose they come out with that status and those statutory powers. But outside of that it sort of feels that maybe social work is slightly devalued compared to other professions which have got much more specialist mental health training as part of the profession. So this sort of does that as a counter

balance to that and I think the practice experience that comes through being in mental health placement really gives people so much day to day experience as well as the kind of the more academic content from the curriculum, that they're combining that with practice.

I'm fairly confidently saying as far as I'm able to at this stage that, you know, you can have some good future social workers out of the cohort that we've got here.

7. Progression and Perspectives

7.1 Retention and early progression

Of the initial cohort of 96 who commenced the Think Ahead programme, 89 achieved a social work qualification, matching the completion rate of 93 percent for those following mainstream undergraduate or postgraduate routes to qualification (Skills for Care, 2018, p.2).

The figures gathered by Think Ahead on participant progression show that for Cohort 1, 85 percent of students moved to Year 2 of the programme, although for Cohort 2 the progression rate to Year 2 had fallen slightly to 83 percent. Whilst this suggests a robust completion and conversion rate for Think Ahead participants, the reasons offered by those leaving or feeling uncommitted to remaining in mental health social work were variable, encompassing both personal circumstances and criticism of the programme itself, notably the learning environment. These are explored further in Section 9.4.

Following initial qualification, the retention rate at the end of their ASYE was 79 percent for Cohort 1 including 6 percent (5 participants with extensions, deferrals or leave of absence) who were still expected to complete all elements of the programme.

The great majority of those recruited to the first cohort of the Think Ahead programme completed the qualifying requirements, moved into practice in adult mental health settings and remained in that role on completion of their first year in practice following qualification. Despite the higher cost of the programme, this needs to be viewed in the context of a higher 'conversion rate', that is, taking up a position as a social worker (at least 86%), relative to the figure of 74 percent for those completing mainstream undergraduate or postgraduate qualifying routes (Skills for Care, 2018, p.2).

7.2 Survey findings

A baseline survey of Think Ahead participants was launched in October 2016, following the Summer Institute and the start of the participants' practice placement. In total, 38 participants responded, and findings need to be considered in the light of this relatively low response rate (35%). The follow-up survey a year later received 40 responses; the response rate (42%) was higher because 13 participants had left the programme either during the course of the first year or on receiving their professional social work qualification. As explained previously, only 16 Think Ahead participants responded on both occasions. Consequently, what we present in this section are two snapshots of a sample of the

participants at different stages of progression through the programme. A third short closing survey was carried out with a largely different set of questions. This is reported in Section 7.3.

Nine out of ten respondents were women and the same proportion was White. Ages ranged from 21-40, with a median age at baseline of 26. This demographic profile was very similar to that of a comparative sample of 39 participants recruited from three generic postgraduate university-based programmes. As expected, almost all Think Ahead respondents at baseline reported that they hoped to work in mental health social work, compared to six in ten participants on the generic courses. The most important factors in their choice to train as a social worker were: "Help other people", "Wanted to work with people with mental health issues", "Funding was available for the course", "A stable job", and "Consistency with my political or ideological beliefs" and "A decent salary" were most common. Compared to students on generic courses, Think Ahead participants were more likely to rate a decent salary as an important factor (66% versus 42%) and a long-term commitment to social work (63% vs. 53%) and less likely to rate personal experiences in their lives (47% vs. 61%) and consistency with their political and ideological beliefs as important at follow up 57% vs. 74%).

One year later, three-quarters of Think Ahead respondents remained firmly committed to mental health social work; the remainder anticipated working in an alternative, social work-related career. Looking three years ahead, most respondents saw themselves working as practitioners in mental health social work; only one in ten saw themselves in an unrelated career.

7.2.1 Self-Efficacy

Respondents were asked to rate their confidence in being able to apply a wide range of knowledge and skills in social work practice, with particular reference to mental health. Examples included being able to carry out an assessment, plan an appropriate intervention, engage effectively with professionals from other agencies and be responsible for their own professional development. There were 12 items and rating were made on a scale from one to ten (where 1 =not at all confident and 10=extremely confident). The measure was adapted from a measure developed and validated previously by the research team to measure self-efficacy in child and family social work (Carpenter et al. 2015). Figure 1 shows the distribution of total scores on the measure; a score of 78+ translates as "confident" and 96+ as "very confident". Each box displays the middle 50% with the line in the box representing the median; the whiskers denote the top and bottom 25% of respondents. Thus, at baseline, when the Think Ahead participants had just started practice in their units, over a third of respondents (68%) were "not confident". The whiskers indicate quite wide variation. At follow up, the end of the first year, over

three quarters of respondents were now confident (50%) or very confident (23%), leaving 18% still "not confident".

Figure 1 Self-Efficacy at Baseline and Follow up (Possible range 12 to 120)

The mean ratings for each of the 12 items on the scale are shown in Fig. 2. At baseline, respondents were in general least confident in their ability to carry out the following core tasks: record, assess and manage **referrals**; to carry out in-depth and ongoing **assessment** of social needs and of risks to service users and others; promote active service user and carer participation, draw on the contributions of other professional disciplines and critically analyse all necessary information to produce assessments that comply with statutory, organisational and local multi-agency requirements; **plan and co-ordinate** the support and intervention required, ensuring positive engagement of service users and carers; take part in **formal meetings** such as statutory reviews and decision- making forums, providing information based on the plan, about a service user's needs and to critically **review** all information against plans to reduce identified risks and meet the needs of the service user in order to evaluate achievements and outcomes and identify required changes. At the chart illustrates, at follow-up one year later, there had been clear improvement in confidence relating to all these tasks.

At the end of the first year of the programme, respondents in general were significantly more confident in all core tasks (statistical tests are shown in Technical Appendix A1.) They were now generally

confident (ratings over 7) in their ability to **communicate** clearly, sensitively and effectively with service users, using appropriate communication methods which are engaging, motivating and respectfully challenging, even when people are perceived to be hostile and resistant to change. This included accurate reporting and **recording**. Likewise, they were confident in their ability to build purposeful, effective **relationships** with service users and carer. In particular, they were substantially more confident in identifying the needs of service users from diverse and **disadvantaged groups** and communities. Participants reported substantial increases of confidence in **multi-disciplinary and multi-agency working**, which is especially important in mental health services.

Professional development is a key component of Think Ahead. At follow up, the majority of participants were confident that they could recognise their own professional limitations and know how and when to seek help; to critically evaluate the impact of their own belief systems on practice; and to use self-reflection, supervision and development activities to improve their use of research to inform complex judgements and decisions. Finally, the majority of respondents felt confident that they could demonstrate the principles of social work through **professional judgement**, ethical decision- making and actions within a framework of professional accountability. Overall, compared to baseline, participants at follow up were significantly more confident in managing referrals, assessment, formal meetings and reviews. However the median ratings (7) indicated that up to half were at or below 'confidence'.

Figure 2 Self efficacy items - Mean ratings at Baseline and Follow up

7.2.2 Role clarity and role conflict

Role clarity includes having clear, planned objectives in your job and being certain about how much authority you have. It is an important outcome for social work education programmes and subsequent professional development at an early stage of their careers. It is measured by a validated scale comprising six items which are rated on a scale of 1 (very false) to 7 (very true); a score of 4 = 'not sure'. Scores can range from six to 42, with a total score of 30+ indicating being "clear" about their role overall.

Results from the baseline and follow-up surveys are presented in Fig. 3 (the two dots indicate statistical outliers, i.e. exceptionally high and exceptionally low scores). These indicate that although mean total scores had improved slightly from 22.1 to 24.8 at the end of the year survey, this difference was not statistically significant (details, including confidence interval provided in Appendix A2). In both surveys,

fewer than a quarter of respondents gave an overall rating of "clear" (30+). This is likely to reflect the challenges in establishing a clear and distinctive social work role in a multidisciplinary mental health service. As one respondent to the closing survey at the end of the second year of the programme remarked, "*I still do not understand what makes a social worker different from a CPN (community psychiatric nurse) apart from the fact that social workers are able to do less e.g. depots [injections].*

Figure 3 Role Clarity at Baseline and Follow up

In the literature, low role clarity is often associated with higher role conflict, which arises from competing demands, inadequate resources and incompatible requests. Role conflict was similarly measured on a validated scale, with eight items. Thus, total scores can range from eight to 56. We can see from Figure 4 that role conflict increased at follow up, from a mean of 26.0 to 32.8, which was statistically significant (Appendix A3); almost one in three respondents were reporting moderate to high role conflict (total scores 40+) at the end of the year.

Figure 4 Role Conflict at Baseline and Follow up

The item by item breakdown (Fig 5) shows higher mean scores on all role conflict items at follow-up compared to the baseline, five of the eight items being statistically significant (Appendix A3). Resource constraints emerge as a significantly increased concern, along with conflicting demands and having to undertake unnecessary tasks and having to work with two or more groups which operate quite differently. There seems to be a recurrent issue, here, mirrored in the participant interviews and the closing survey, of uncertainty about what exactly is expected of a social worker in a mental health setting, which, we believe is much more to do with the uncertainties endemic to these settings than and inherent qualities of the Think Ahead participants themselves. Their responses were, in fact, very realistic.

Figure 5 Role conflict scale items - Mean ratings at Baseline and Follow up Stress

7.2.3 Stress

In the light of these finding about relatively low role clarity and significant role conflict in some participants, it is not surprising that levels of stress, as assessed by the General Health Questionnaire (GHQ-12), were high. The GHQ is a self-report screening tool widely used in research studies to identify individuals experiencing mental health issues, including symptoms of anxiety and depression, for which it would be appropriate to seek professional help (In an occupational context, it is used as an indicator of stress. At baseline, 45 per cent of respondents were above the threshold for stress; in the follow up survey, the figure was 55 per cent (the difference was not statistically significant ($z=-0.906$, $p=0.18$). This compares to around 15 per cent in the general population, however social work and comparable professions in health care and the police are known to experience high proportions of stressed practitioners. For example, a study of child and family social workers undertaking the Newly Qualified Social Worker programme, the predecessor of the ASYE also showed high levels of stress (Carpenter et al. 2015). Using the same measure, the proportion reporting stress was between 33 at the start and 40 percent at the end. Another study, of a large sample of mental health social workers by Evans et al. (2006) suggested that working in mental health services was particularly stressful; this study reported that 47% scored above the threshold. The authors concluded that "the main determination of the high

rates of stress and emotional exhaustion appear to be high job demand and not feeling valued for the work that you do. Other factors, such as number of hours worked... and feelings about the way in which social work is perceived within mental health services, are also important determinants of stress and features of burnout" (Evans et al. 2006, p.78). Although this study was conducted some time ago, its conclusions about social work in mental health are likely still to be relevant. Indeed, the organisational features of mental health services were evident in some of the Think Ahead survey respondents' experiences, reported in the closing survey presented in the next section. In other words, the stress experienced by Think Ahead participants is not unique to the programme. But it is also evident from the closing survey that some participants found aspects of the programme as well as the work organisation stressful. Of course, these survey respondents may not be a representative sample of all Think Ahead programme participants so these findings should be treated with caution. Nevertheless, the suggestion that around half were experiencing significant levels of stress is still a cause for concern; it is something which a training programme in mental health would want to want to seek a good understanding and monitor closely.

7.3 Closing survey – October 2018

Following completion of the Think Ahead programme, participants were invited to complete a short survey about the Think Ahead programme overall, their current employment and their career goals and aspirations. The survey also included an optional section on dealing with expectations of the job. Participants were not asked to provide any background information such as age, gender or ethnic background. Links with responses from the baseline and follow up surveys was not attempted. The online survey was open for a month; twenty-three out of 73 possible participants (31%) answered all the questions with requested ratings and most offered free text comments to explain their responses. Because the response rate is low, it is not possible to say how representative the views are; it was not possible to contact participants who had left the programme for the purposes of the survey.

7.3.1 Reflections on Think Ahead programme

Participants were asked to rate ten areas of the Think Ahead programme. Responses were coded into the following three categories: 1= very good or good; 2= neither good nor poor; 3= poor or very poor.

Overall, over half the respondents (13/23) rated the quality of academic provision very good or good. Six respondents were equivocal and four rated it poor or very poor. Ratings for preparation for practice

were less positive (10/23 = good or very good) but six poor or very poor and seven equivocal. For example, one enthusiastic participant commented:

> "I think it is a fantastic programme to gain experience in social work. However, the limited time means that for some skills taught there is not time to consolidate and learn how to put [them] into practice. Or the practice may not provide the opportunity to use the skills…and they become obsolete".

The major criticism voiced was that the academic programme was not sufficiently in touch with what some respondents saw as the 'reality' of social work practice in mental health.

> "Many of us were not adequately prepared for the disconnect between social work and mental health services. Think Ahead would do well to have honest conversations about the culture across England's mental health services…namely, the presiding medical model".

> "In hindsight, the programme isn't very situated in practice realities. We spent an awful lot of time running through quick and dirty interventions rather than unpicking why things are the way they are and developing basic skills such as listening and communication".

Nine out of ten respondents (20/23) rated as very good or good 'understanding service user needs and perspectives' and eight out of ten (18/23) rated as very good or good 'learning about social work values':

> "[The programme} has given me the social work values and passion to aspire to be a leader in social work and to create meaningful change".

Two out of three respondents (15/23) rated as very good or good 'learning about social work skills and methods for working with adults with mental health problems:

> "So think ahead has been a fantastic, valuable experience which has taught me so much…".

> "It's widened my understanding for the systemic role in well-being and MH. The TA programme allowed me to specialise in Open Dialogue by agreeing to let me choose it year 2 in my systemic module. I have since learned a great deal about myself through that journey and how I wish to practice when working with families in times of crisis".

Around half the respondents (11/23) rated the 'quality of practice learning' as very good or good. Five rated this poor or very poor and it was clear that practice experience had been quite variable.

> "The Think Ahead programme has been really positive, and I have had the benefit of a great consultant social worker, very strong unit and excellent learning opportunities on placement".

> *"I think the placements need more monitoring to ensure they are providing the experience required. Unfortunately my placement people did not want us to shadow them and my consultant social worker did not have a caseload, so we spent many days with nothing to do. When we raised this with Think Ahead we get told to be "more proactive". This should be for CSWs/TA to resolve rather than students hassling/begging workers".*

Less than half of respondents rated the following areas as very good or good: 'preparation for practice' (10/23); 'learning about the context of social work practice' (9/23); 'understanding organisations and systems' (9/23); and, 'variety of practice learning opportunities' (9/23). Only one in four (6/23) rated as very good or good 'learning about social work skills and methods for working with children and families' (moreover, one out of two respondents (11/23) rated this area as poor or very poor); although some comments were offered to the effect that the programme did offer useful transferable skills:

> *"I feel that working as a social worker I have developed transferable skills such a having difficult conversations and supporting people working with a range of people with different views or perspectives etc".*

> *"I feel a lot of the skills are transferable and specifically on the job learning would be beneficial for roles such as practice educator".*

7.3.2 Employment as a social worker

All but one respondent (22/23) had secured a permanent, full-time, job as a social worker, with three out of four reporting that this was with their Think Ahead host agency and with the Team in which they practiced in Year 2 of the Think Ahead (16/22 and 17/22 respectively). Six out of ten (13/22) work for a Local Authority and four out of ten (9/22) work for an NHS trust with mental health. Four out of ten respondents (9/22) reported that the main focus of their social work post is community mental health (recovery) team for working-age adults, whereas three out of ten (7/22) report social services mental health team. Three respondents reported an assertive outreach team, crisis resolution and home treatment team, or general older person's mental health team. Three respondents reported 'other': community mental health children's (CAMHS), early intervention service, and homeless community mental health team. The following job titles were reported: social worker (8) care coordinator (4); mental health practitioner (2); mental health social worker (2); NQSW (2); social worker/care coordinator (2); mental health social worker/care coordinator (1); and, qualified clinician care coordinator (1).

The one respondent who did not have a job in social work reported that they were currently thinking about their future and/or taking a break and did not provide any additional information on the reasons for this.

7.3.3 Career goals/aspirations

Respondents were asked about their career goals and aspirations in three years' time. Four out of ten respondents (10/23) saw themselves as a specialist practitioner in mental health social work; one in five (5/23) both saw themselves either in the same or similar post in mental health social work or an alternative career, which was social work related.

> *"I plan to continue to work in mental health social work for the foreseeable future. Although will be looking for a new mental health social work role in a location (Local Authority - social worker)"*

> *"I am training to be a psychotherapist and hope to combine this with social work (e.g. running clinics or groups within mental health services), or working within a perinatal context where the two combine well. In my view, the only way to (psychologically) survive the current climate is to specialise. Being a "care coordinator" is a terrible job." (Local Authority - Social Worker)*

> *"I continue to have a strong interest in psychology and am currently exploring further learning in either therapy or clinical psychology. I find social work a vague approach in my current work setting. As a care coordinator … it does not provide much opportunity to specialise although over the last year I have had the fortunate opportunity to embark on a [specialist] foundation course in Open Dialogue…. It's widened my understanding of humanism in MH which is a radical difference to the prescriptive, expert centred approach in the current paradigm. ….Think Ahead has been a fantastic, valuable experience which has taught me so much but I know my learning will continue it's just a matter of which avenue that will be for me." (NHS Trust - Mental health practitioner)*

One respondent reported that they saw themselves in a different post in social work and one indicated an alternative career outside social work. One respondent was uncertain. Later in this section we report the reasons which some participants were planning to leave.

7.3.4 Career development

Respondents were also asked to state how the Think Ahead programme has prepared them for further career development. There were 21 responses, the majority of them positive, referring to transferrable

skills acquired in placement, providing an avenue to further training and employment and a determination to provide leadership to the field.

> *"The Think Ahead programme has prepared me for career development in supporting me to become a qualified social worker. The significant amount of time on placement has also improved my self-confidence and analytical skills which will help my career progression." (Local Authority - Social Worker)*

> *"I feel a lot of the skills are transferable and specifically on the job learning would be beneficial for roles such as practice educator" (Local Authority - Mental health social worker)*

> *"Having the PgDip and MA has helped me secure further training (in family therapy) and helped me get my new role in Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services." (NHS Trust - Social Worker)*

> *"Think Ahead has given me the social work values and passion to aspire to be a leader in social work and to create meaningful change" (NHS Trust - Social Worker)*

Others were less sure:

> *"I don't think the programme has helped me with future career development. It has been very helpful getting me where I am now, but I don't think it has been helpful for future development." (NHS Trust – Qualified Clinician Care Coordinator)*

> *"Think Ahead has not prepared me for career development outside of having given me a professional qualification which opens doors to an extent. Any creativity in terms of thinking about the future has been very much as a result of my own research." (Local Authority – Social Worker)*

Think Ahead offers membership of an alumni network which is a potential resource for CDP, but this was not mentioned by respondents.

The leadership development sessions came in for criticism:

> *"Past becoming qualified as a Social Worker, I don't feel it [Think Ahead] has prepared me for future development. The leadership development [sessions] was not clear in objective and how that linked to the programme as an outcome. Initially it was thought to be around being managers in social care then we were told it was about leadership qualities as Social Workers, however, the teaching around the leadership was confused and it was not clear what the programme was seeking to achieve in regards to this." (NHS Trust - Social Worker / Care Coordinator)*

> Feedback to the programme was generally critical of the leadership programme and this was completely revised in the second year.

7.3.5 Likelihood of looking for a new job in the next year

Six out of ten respondents stated that it is fairly likely (5/23) or very likely (9/23) that they will be actively looking for a new job within a year: 11 stated that this would be within mental health social work, but in another agency or role, for example:

> "Having worked for an NHS trust during the course, I no longer feel this is where I want my career. Whilst I want to continue working as a social worker in mental health, I will look for roles in the charity sector."

> "I do not think I will remain in my current team for more than a year as the pressure is too high, but I think I would move sideways into another mental health team as a social worker or as a generic care coordinator."

One participant, now working as a care coordinator explained:

> "The job of a Care Coordinator is impossible to do well, so I feel like I am failing half of my caseload and I am terrified that something will happen to a service user and I will be blamed for not completing the huge amount of assessments, forms and visits as expected. Although I have seriously considered leaving the frontline I am going to try and get a role in a specialist service before leaving completely for a mental health related role elsewhere. I would love to stay, complete my AHMP training and move into a senior post but due to the corrosive nature of the cuts, low morale and pervasive blame culture unfortunately I think I will have to leave."

Others stated that they would be looking outside social work, e.g.

> "I love social work values and aims but feel that it is not possible to make changes as a social worker due to role restraint and lack of resources. I think I would like to move out of social work and find a career where I can make more of a difference."

> "I am pursuing training in family therapy and aspire to be a qualified family therapist working in mental health."

7.3.6 Dealing with the expectations of the job

As comments in the previous section indicate, many participants had found the job of a social worker or care coordinator very pressurised. As one commented:

> "The job is ridiculously stressful" (Local Authority - NQSW)

Other respondents highlighted that their experience of combining the academic and assessed practice with the job in the second year of the programme was highly stressful:

> *"The stress in relation to completing the MA paper, alongside a full-time position and portfolio work to complete the ASYE [Assessed and Supported Year in Employment] programme has been a hugely stressful time. I feel there are many gaps in my knowledge as a social worker in this team that were not addressed in first year. This led to panic attacks and consulting my GP who has prescribed me medication. I feel there is lots more "ironing out" to be done on the programme."* (NHS Trust - Mental health social worker)

And yet another responded, explaining that the requirements of the academic programme and professional consolidation (the ASYE) were combined with pressure from an overloaded working environment:

> *"The pressure of this final year has been intense. There is no way that anyone who has not gone through having a caseload in a team which is permanently in crisis, completing an ASYE and a Masters could understand. I feel that it is too much to expect participants to complete this in the time allocated. After completing two years I feel exhausted and approaching burnout because I have not had a weekend off for months."*

In Sec 7.2.3 we reported that the proportion of participants self-reporting significant levels of stress on validated measure in the first two surveys was very high (45 per cent and 56 per cent respectively. In the closing survey, 22/23 participants completed the same General Health Questionnaire (12-item version) as before: 14/22 (64%) were above the threshold for stress.

Of the 14 respondents indicating that they are fairly likely or very likely that within a year they will be actively looking for a new job, 12 reported scores above the threshold of stress. Self-care is important in any job, as one respondent explained:

> *"I am ambitious and I completed this course to give me the grounding to expand my career options. I cannot see a way to stay in frontline CMHT practice and preserve my own mental and physical health, so unfortunately, I am looking at alternative roles in more specialist areas. If I still feel the same levels of stress, I will be leaving the frontline for a job in a social care related role."*

7.4 Final comments

Participants were invited to provide any additional feedback. All twelve who responded to this question were thankful that they had had the opportunity to take the programme and to have completed it. Nine

respondents offered substantial comments, including comments on aspects of the programme which they considered required improvement.

> "As a career changer, I would not have become a Mental Health Social Worker without Think Ahead. I am so glad I did. I feel like I have found my purpose and vocation. It has been transformational in terms of career but also to my sense of self. I have no regrets despite undertaking a pay cut which totalled around £20K over the two years. I am already a Band 6 in the NHS due to my experience from two years in practice." (NHS Trust - Social Worker / Care Coordinator)

> "I am glad that I have done Think Ahead. I feel that it has been a good experience overall. I have learnt a lot of skills and developed knowledge I would not have had the opportunity to gain otherwise. However, I feel that this could have been significantly improved with some changes in the way Think Ahead operates and teaches." (Local Authority - Social Worker)

> "I am grateful that I was able to take part in the Think Ahead programme. Without it I would not have been able to afford to become a Social Worker. I have been wanting to go into Social Work since I was at university several years ago and when I saw this I was delighted. However, I have been disappointing in the quality of the course and the support offered during the two years. Academic staff and Think Ahead have been reluctant to make changes and the result has been disengagement from many participants from the course and a culture of antipathy between 'us' and 'them'." (Local Authority - Care Coordinator)

> "I feel very lucky to have been given the opportunity from Think Ahead, without which I don't think I would have been able afford to do it independently and source as fantastic a placement as I found myself in. Being in a team with 3 other amazing and inspiring Students from the course contributed a lot to creating a great supportive / reflective space. I found the teaching mixed and on reflection didn't feel as prepared for my role in a CMHT as I would have hoped and part of this was perhaps as a result of my own confidence but also lack of role play scenario-based activities in the sessions. I would have also have liked to have learnt more about social work theories." (Local Authority - Social Worker)

> "I feel well supported in my current role and have goals for the future within my career. I feel the Think Ahead programme could offer more academic support when in our roles through tutorials. I feel there were significant issues in terms of what was expected of us in our final year academically which resulted in confusion and this was not supported when voiced. It was disappointing and I hope that going forward Think Ahead will consider the implications of this when students are working full time and the stress this can cause." (Local Authority - Mental health social worker)

"I hope Think Ahead focus on improving the academic side of the programme. Much of the teaching we had was…- a waste of time…. I wish more time and energy could have been focused on this.... I also hope they can… recognise that the participants… do not need to be micro-managed …. This has been one of the most frustrating parts of the programme….. Saying that, I would not have been able to afford to do the course without TA and would probably not have been able to become a social worker, so I am very grateful for the opportunities and particularly the stipend that allowed me to choose this option." (Local Authority - Social Worker)

"Positive aspects - I feel happy with the skills, knowledge, diploma and Master's qualification that I've gained from the course and feel that it will put me in good stead for my future career. I'm proud for getting through it and think I've learnt a lot about myself. I've benefited from the support of my peers on the course, and have felt that staff at York and Think Ahead have been quick to respond to queries." (Local Authority - Social Worker)

"The TA programme has been really positive and I have had the benefit of having a great CSW, very strong unit and excellent learning opportunities on placement. However, I am concerned that a lot of our teaching days weren't relevant or there was too much of a focus on certain things, and not enough on things relevant to practice (benefits, housing law, statutory social work duties). There are certain things that I am finding out now that I wish I knew whilst I was in training.   It also felt that apart from academic tutors, we had next to no contact or support from TA in the second year. There was absolutely no emotional support and practice specialists seemed very detached. At times it felt like issues could not be escalated as practice specialists had no idea of the contexts/organisational systems and pressures that we were working in. Despite this, my overall experience on TA has been positive and I am glad I have had opportunities to contribute to assessment centres and various other wider TA events. My current post is positive and I feel fairly confident in myself as a Social Worker." (Local Authority - Mental Health Social Worker/Care Coordinator)

One respondent, who does not currently have a post in social work added:

"I think it is a fantastic programme to gain experience in social work. I'm currently traveling for 3 months to digest the 2 years and have some 'head space' to think about where I go from here in terms of employment. But overall, I have no regrets completing the course and am very proud to be qualified."

8. Graduates' Experiences and Outcomes

Conversations with Think Ahead participants[5] during both site visits centered on personal experiences of the programme. It is fair to say that whilst graduates were hosted in units of four and by the nature of the Think Ahead model worked closely together, experiences within units differed depending on individual disposition, personal and professional capabilities and skills as well as previous experience and commitment to not only the course but also social work in general. As such reflections were in no way homogenous, however a number of themes emerged which are presented here.

8.1 Initial expectations

Initial course expectations were varied amongst the graduates interviewed. This is perhaps unsurprising given that the Think Ahead programme was in its first year of delivery and the cohort recruited were the first to progress through the course. Consequently, there was limited information in the public domain and no alumni to consult or reviews of the programme to read. Whilst some felt that they had a clear sense from the programme literature about the course prior to starting; the fast track nature of the programme, working within partner organisations, others recalled feeling less sure of what to expect. Nevertheless, the appeal of the course was said to be the integration of academic learning and practice experience:

> *"I think I knew it would be full on, I think I knew, especially being a fast track, I think that, sort of, actually made it appealing at first, because I quite liked the academic challenge on top of practical learning. So that was quite appealing".*

8.2 Reflections on the Summer Institute

Earlier in this report, we presented the views of participants who took part in two focus groups at the Summer Institute and these reflections were particularly insightful and provided in real time. During site visits we also asked graduates to reflect back on their experiences of the Summer Institute. However, these reflections had the advantage of time having passed and opinions being informed by experience of other elements of the programme.

Mirroring the findings from the focus groups, the majority of graduates interviewed stated that there were parts of the Summer Institute that they liked and aspects which they were disliked. Overall, the

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[5] At this point, participants would have completed their professional social work qualification but not the academic component of the programme leading to the Masters award.

consensus was that whilst the six weeks were intense the Summer Institute was a useful part of the programme.

On a positive note, a number of interviewees welcomed the opportunity that the Summer Institute gave them to meet peers, be introduced to the programme and start their academic journey:

> "I think it's a useful like, situation for getting to know the other people in your cohort and getting to know, kind of, the academic tutors are there, and like, starting to recognise everyone and feeling more like a cohort, and obviously you're getting the basis of, like, the teaching, so you're starting to understand a bit more about what you're doing".

In addition to the benefits of being co-located for six weeks, graduates felt that the practice orientated days were particularly useful:

> "what was brilliant at the Summer Institute [was] the frontline day…because what they did was, it was a full practice day, a lot of it, there were lots of role plays in larger groups, so I think more of that on the other days would've been really, really helpful, I think".

> "The day I found the most helpful was actually when the Frontline people came in…the woman who had gone through all that kind of stuff herself and she was doing the role plays, and it was, kind of, gave us… I feel like it was the first true reflection of what we may be facing, kind of, and the situations, we might be facing".

Whilst not everyone's favourite element of the Summer Institute, role plays were considered valuable by the majority of participants that we interviewed:

> "we did do lots of different role plays….But they're really helpful, aren't they, in getting feedback and then trying to turn the theories and everything into practice"

The common criticism of the Summer Institute from graduates was that it was overwhelming at times. From graduates' perspectives the six weeks were packed full with information and activities, some participants were more familiar with material than others, some individuals dealt with the pressures better than others and some felt they needed more time to digest and process the information they were receiving:

> "[The] Summer Institute was quite intense, and we were given a huge amount of information in quite a short amount of time, which then, I think it just takes time for you to sort of understand that and for that to sort of filter down into practice, so I think maybe at the beginning it can feel a bit overwhelming".

> "whereas the six weeks is just so fast, and every day is a different and you're just like, not taking anything in, really".

> "I don't feel like I took an awful lot in from it because it's such an intense situation and you're having so much thrown at you. And then there was, like, sessions in the evening, and then you're trying to write essays, and it's, like, quite chaotic really".

Clearly, learning styles differ across a cohort of this size, and individuals' abilities to manage workload, information and required tasks were tested during the six weeks; some would argue that this is a reflection of the nature of the working environment that graduates are entering and therefore not only valid but necessary. However, there were other contextual and personal factors which made the Summer Institute a difficult experience for some:

> *"I found it quite difficult because I was moving…sadly [I] came into it terrified and like really anxious. So not everyone found this, obvious it wasn't everyone's experience but it was just a personal thing …I'd moved from a place I was living for like 17 years and I was in this bubble with people, I think I just lost all my confidence, I felt quite isolated and lonely, so I actually had a bit of a miserable time at the institute…It wasn't a very positive start for me and I think that, kind of, led into, luckily it got a lot better…it's taken a long time to try and get a connection with people, whereas other people, you know, obviously connected on those six weeks".*

An issue of annoyance raised by several interviewees was the degree of absenteeism which occurred during the six weeks and the sense that this was unfair on those who attended all classes. Whilst interviewees did acknowledge that some candidates missed sessions in order to work on assignments, this was felt to be unfair on those that maintained attendance and demonstrated ineffective course management:

> *"The only thing that annoyed me was that a lot of people skived sessions… I don't feel that they [participants missing sessions] got reprimanded for that.[6] And we were being paid to be there and you wouldn't get away with that in another job, so that did annoy me,"*

With regards to suggested improvements, a number of points were made in relation to using more practicals within teaching, increasing the amount of small group working especially involving service users, reviewing the length of teaching sessions and facilitating more group work within unit colleagues:

> *"I think I would've preferred more experience, practical experience in the Summer Institute, so not just having sort of nine to five lectures but actually meeting service users, because I haven't really worked in this sector or area before, so going to meet the service users is quite a big deal for me, so if we could've been sort of more easily transitioned into it during the Summer Institute, perhaps. You don't really get the chance to do that in a room with 100 people, to have that one to one conversation with them".*

> *"I feel like some of the sessions were dragged, they were unnecessarily long, I think was a bit of a problem, like I felt we'd covered everything within the first hour, but for some reason it was a two, three-hour session, it felt unnecessarily dragged out".*

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[6] Think Ahead report that there was a system of attendance monitoring in place, and those with poor attendance were subject to 'individual and private' reprimands which may not have been apparent to other participants.

"In the Summer Institute they [Think Ahead] didn't put us in our groups and they didn't ever make us work together, and you form more natural friendships and alliances in situations like that which, for whatever reason, chance, and everything didn't happen to be with the four people that were placed in XXXX, so maybe in the Summer Institute Think Ahead could maybe manipulate that a little bit and get that together".[7]

The realities of the course and programme registered with many that we spoke to when they made the move from the Summer Institute to their host authorities, as the interviewee below explained, attention quickly moved from learning and acquiring knowledge to applying the theory in practice:

"It went from very intense and motivating [at the Summer Institute] to then, ok, how are we going apply this in practice [in placements], and when? I think that was the key thing for me, when do I need to be applying these things?

8.3 Experience of working in host institutions

Whilst discussing how graduates approached their placements in host organisations it became apparent that some treated this phase of the programme as an extended job interview and almost all acknowledged that there was a period of adjustment:

"I approached it more of a, my attitude towards it which potentially might not have been right, was that it was more of a job, it didn't really seem like a, especially when I first started I more saw it as potentially more, I would behave more as if I was in paid employment so I was trying to help other people".

"The first six weeks or so…. you're all around different people who are all interested in the same subject and, yes, and then you got into a placement and then that, I think that when it first kicked in for me……oh, my gosh, you need to try and apply all these things, and actually you realise it's a lot slower than you, just like starting a new job, you've got to build your way in and then you start applying as you go further down the line, so, yes, it went from very intense and motivating to then, ok, how are we going apply this in practice, and when? I think when was the key thing for me, when do I need to be applying these things?"

8.3.1 Reflections on the unit model

The realities of being 'hosted' within an institution were many and varied and perceived differently by graduates largely in line with whether they considered the experience a positive or negative one. For instance, whilst some felt that the units of 4 afforded them security and support whilst working in this new environment, others discussed the 'distancing effect' that they felt this had in terms of keeping them

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[7] This point was acknowledged by Think Ahead and learning groups were adapted accordingly for the second and subsequent cohorts.

separate from teams and colleagues, and also making it harder for organisations to source shadowing opportunities for instance:

> *"[Placements have] worked well, I think it would have been too many to have four within the placements that we were put into…I don't know if it would have been a bit too much overpowering with the collective identity of students, if there's four of you, that's a big... You walk into an organisation and there's four of you, four students, you become known as the students, whereas I suppose you don't get that as much when there's only two of you, so there's that element of it"* [the four participants were split across two sites in this host agency].

> *"I think because there was four of us, it wasn't so easy for them to integrate us, so shadowing for instance… like some of them were really good at offering it, but they'd be like: I've got this, but decide between you who is going to come, which made it a bit awkward and we like, tried to organise it so like, we'd take turns to go but like, not everyone was offering shadowing, so there wasn't much going".*

> *"Rather than going to a professional which will be quite intimidating, and I think for me, asking for favours, asking for someone to go and fix some medication or to the pharmacy for one of your service users, it's a bit less daunting asking them [students in the unit], while if you went to ask a professional he's probably busy, got cases".*

> *"But I think at the start, because we were four, which I get the benefits of… we were quite like, separate or they [colleagues] felt like we were separate. We didn't intend to be, I always tried to like chat on with them and stuff, which got easier as it went on because we weren't all on the team at the same time, because we were busy, so we would be in and out, and doing duty and stuff which made us feel more part of the team".*

> *"I think the induction period was a bit hard because you, sort of, want to get stuck in, but you just sort of… you can't, and it depends a lot on the team you're put in, so if your team have a very busy people that aren't able to take you out, then, you're just sort of going to be sat around. [And is that what you felt like in the beginning?] I wasn't really sat around that much because I had quite enough and there was quite a few people that were all willing to take me out but I know some of the other girls felt like they were sat around a bit".*

Whilst discussing work activities it was evident that graduates had a good sense of what other units were doing and would compare their own experiences and opportunities to those in other organisations:

> *"[work planning is] out of your control, so it depends what service users you're working with, the cases you've got, so if you're working with people who self-harm or are suicidal, then you're going to get more skills in that area, whereas other people perhaps have done more assessments. Because if you compare us to the local authority, so in XXXX they've done loads of assessments and initial assessments of service users, and we've not have the opportunity to do that".*

"I think it's frustrating as well because you hear about other units and they're in, it's greater teams and some of them are care coordinators, so they can go out and work, do direct work".

Clearly, there were some participants who were not as positive about their host organisation as others and this largely came down to their sense of having opportunities to work on the types of social work cases they had believed they would be working on, or the degree of variability within their work:

"most of our friends are in community mental health teams and they're doing the conventional stereotypical mental health social worker role, and I know we're not talking about the placement I'm on now, but I don't feel that is conventional social work either because we're just doing assessments, we purely do assessments. So between the two placements, I don't feel like we've actually had a conventional social worker role at all"

"I feel so jealous, I feel like I'm not getting a very good experience and, kind of, feel a bit bitter about that sometimes. And I, kind of, feel no-ones checked that or no-ones checked out, you know, what's going on [in terms of opportunities at the host]"

One participant did not feel that there was much evidence of progression from one practice learning setting to the next:

"I've not had that much, I suppose autonomy, compared to what I did [in the previous placement - untypically this participant's placements were split across two sites], I feel like I've not been given that much, really. And that's not always because, like, they're not giving me the work, I just don't think the work is always there to be done. I think a lot of it's been around family, like arranging visits and things like that, which I'm not saying it isn't important. But I think it's, sort of, just such, maybe better for a first placement, as an introductory, sort of, one… I don't find it overly challenging".

8.3.2 Variability within placements

The knock-on effect of variable placement opportunities was reportedly the ability to utilize and adopt interventions taught on the academic programme. The ability to apply theories and use interventions taught on the academic part of the programme within practice have been readily available for some and this is in no small part due to the nature of the teams that participants have found themselves in. For others, the opportunities have been lacking and this understandably has caused frustration:

"the social work team, mental health team is literally an assessment team. You don't do a lot of direct work, you do your assessment and then you refer that to someone else. I think it's frustrating as well because you hear about other units and they're in, it's greater teams and some of them are care coordinators, so they can go out and work, do direct work with you, from our

interventions, where literally our remit is to go out, do an assessment, write it up, recommend them stuff, refer to support workers or say, no we can't help if that's the case".

"I think that's one thing that I have felt really come through, is you know you've got this theory, but you're now trying to apply it. You know, in your practice and I personally find it like really helpful, like oh yes but then when you see it in practice, it's working, that's when it's come to life and it's been really good".

"Observations are a bit awkward because I think when you're actually working with people you can't go into an observation and say this is what we're doing because, like, for instance all my observations have gone slightly off because one of my service users found she had cancer, another one had been beaten up the day before, so, I had just gone with my agenda, and they obviously needed to talk about different stuff. So, like, I get that they're trying to implement their interventions, but I think sometimes they're just trying to, kind of, pigeon hole them into situations".

Despite these local variations, the majority of graduates interviewed felt that the placements had been useful and that they had been able to make a contribution:

"We held caseloads as well, so, I worked with some people right from the beginning of September to when I've just finished now. So you develop like, really good relationships with service users. And you get to know them really well, and get to know their families and what's going on and it's really good because you get to think of ideas that they might not have thought of, of how we can help"

"I think it's a really useful way of learning in terms of applying what we're learning in practice and being in a permanent role, plus learning over time, it was a useful way of doing it".

"I think you just adapt to it, to the additional work pressure and responsibilities given to you, for me it started off quite slow, like, I was quite nervous about doing it, but then the more you sort of immerse yourself in it and sort of put yourself out of your comfort zone I found it sort of, it just came a bit more naturally then".

"I feel less of a student than I thought I would. I think, yes, I think professionals perhaps do respect us and I think it's because we're doing the same role so we are doing sort of referrals, we are doing the financial assessments and things with service users that we work with, which professionals would be doing anyway, so I think because, I think with the traditional route you don't have a caseload and you're not working, you don't do much join work, ah, lone working, I think having that responsibility makes you feel more part of the team and makes you want to sort of support other team members more".

"Currently it's more getting to know the role, because we haven't worked in MDT, so a lot of it is around that, so I've done a lot of shadowing of the other professionals, which has been a really good insight for me, especially like the psychology and stuff like that, I used to do that, so it was nice to, sort of, go over that'.

As one would expect there are risks to the delivery of the programme in host institutions and these relate to the degree of variability across placements and the ability of graduates to undertake training requirements as well as protecting those who display competencies and an eagerness to get involved:

> *"Yes, and of course they expect, yes, of course they do expect big things….on my CLE I get called the Step Up student, so I've been asked to do things that I'm fine to do but other qualified members of staff have challenged my supervisor about saying you shouldn't put a student in that situation, and they said she's a Step Up student, she can do it. So the expectations on me at CLE, I think, are far higher than the expectations on the other students".*

8.3.3 Working with Consultant Social Workers

Supervision sessions were discussed favourably by the majority of the graduates interviewed. In particular, the value of supervisions was felt to be the time allowed to discuss cases, share ideas and hear different perspectives:

> *"I think I mentioned earlier that she's got more sort of references and ideas for her own cases, and if it helps with reports, assignments, like, when you share references, and I think that was the point of being in the unit for, because you can share and support each other, I've definitely seen that from you guys. I couldn't be with a better unit".*

> *"So it was clearly structured, we'd normally have some piece of work that we were going to bring, so we kept a diary, like, critical reflection diary, which was really good. So I enjoyed, I really enjoyed supervision there, it was very fuelled around, you talked about your cases and some of the stuff you wanted to do….So I felt like it was a good, sort of, relationship between student and supervisor".*

> *"I think the way the CSW does it [supervision], it's quite structured, and I do, I like that sometimes… it covers a lot of bases so it's good, it's really, really thorough…'*

> *"I've benefited a lot from having regular supervisions with our CSW and also meeting with the team once a week, as in the four of us [Think Ahead participants].... Because there are four of us and the CSW intensively working around us becoming qualified, it feels like the social model is very much there.'*

8.4 Reflections on working with academic partners

Academic staff were said to be on the whole supportive, approachable and flexible to needs. For this first cohort, there were some issues, since resolved, with regards to staff turnover and inconsistencies in provision of academic tutors. From the graduates' perspectives in many cases the balance between support and autonomy has been proportionate and helpful:

> *"she let us choose when we wanted to help, kind of thing, so rather than fussing over you and going are you okay, are you okay, she would leave us to it and we would ring her and say, actually, we don't know how to do this, can you help? But, yes, I did like the independence of that because I felt like we were doing lots of the work and therefore we were actually, like, valued and useful"*

Whilst the choice of what to cover in academic seminars appeared to be collaborative, a number of graduates said that they valued the repetition of teaching material and chance to consolidate learning on the teaching days:

> *"I think especially when they're revisited at the teaching days in more depth because then you can actually apply it more directly to your practice, so that you've got the basic theoretical concept in your head from the Summer Institute, and best practice, so things like co-production, you're aware of your ideas but actually doing that in practice isn't easy".*

Whereas some others were more critical of teaching days and in particular were frustrated with the length of time used to cover some material as well as apparent misalignment of teaching day content and assessments:

> *"I found some of the teaching day to be very slow. You know, what they taught in two days could have been done in a day. They really taught at such a low level, I just, you know, you're kind of keep going over the same thing again and again"*

> *"The teaching days haven't lined up very well with what we're learning about. So, we'd have an assignment and then two months' later we'd have a teaching day of it. You're like, that's not right and then, all the assignments were at the very beginning, which they already said they're changing it next year"*

Graduate experiences of placements also led some to reflect on a perceived gap in academic provision and teaching relating to 'professional identity'. The quotes below demonstrate the desire by some for the course to equip participants with the confidence to deal with difficult questions and be given the chance to reflect on and build their own sense of identity:

> *"You know, going into the first day I had absolutely no idea what to expect because I didn't feel like we'd actually been taught what a social worker did. If anyone asked me what would your role be as a social worker in a team, I wouldn't have known"*

"You could tell [the host organisation] was health led and I remember one of the first things that got said to us by the team when we first started is: "Well what's the point in a social worker? Why are you even here?" And starting a new job, not really knowing what a social worker did either so we couldn't even respond to that"

8.5 Commitment to the Think Ahead programme

Evaluation sites visits in Year One coincided with the period when most sites were preparing for Year Two of the programme, and graduates had either been involved in early discussions about possible arrangements or had been told to expect such discussions in the near future. As such, there was a degree of anticipation across all sites and some graduates clearly felt more reassured and informed than others about the forthcoming second year of the programme and their host teams.

In terms of commitment, almost all graduates interviewed reported being committed to the course and intended to progress to the second year, except in one or two cases where graduates were genuinely concerned about the nature and type of placement potentially available in their second year:

"Well, we don't know what team we're in, if it's in a psychosis mental health team then I feel really competent, but if I was working perhaps in a 328 or in dementia or, you know, early intervention, because we don't know, then perhaps not so. But that's possibly natural to feel like that"

"so we've just all been told there is just four places at the council. Again, the training needs assessment team short or long term, so. They have said if something comes up here we can apply for it, but it's going to… probably not very likely…it's the first time I was considering looking elsewhere and to be honest the only reason I don't want to its more for the hassle. I think my plan at the moment is to see if any jobs come up here and if they don't then… And I haven't, kind of, I'm not actively like seeking anything else, but if something else comes up, you know, in the next couple of months I might consider it. But I don't want to leave here because I want to continue my masters, you know, I was quite looking forward to doing that. So, I think it would be a case of yes, unless something comes up, unless I get a job here, I'll have to work to the council, yes and then"

"Personally, I think I will stay in social work but I know a lot of other people on the course who are already planning to go into other things"

The perceived lack of clarity in some units in relation to Year two positions and teams caused additional anxiety given that participants were being asked at this juncture to decide on academic modules without a clear understanding of the teams, roles, areas that they would be working in in Year Two:

"I don't know whether I'll be in [locality], or [locality] so it just makes it more difficult. And at the same time they're asking us to choose our modules, which I think is difficult when we don't know what type of team we'll be in…"

The lack of clarity on Year Two arrangements caused practical issues for those who had relocated and made living arrangements on the basis of a two year course starting and finishing in September:

> *"Well, we very recently found out about the contracts. I think there was a lot of anxiety, especially from myself, because obviously when we got told the ASYE wasn't what it was going to be, and for myself I had a contract to live down here for a set amount of time, my partner was a teacher, so were essentially moving back and it seemed to be that I was expected to just work around the course. I'd, sort of, been told it was two-year programme, so then we came into one meeting and they were, like, ASYE is from December to December, which I was, like, well I thought it was September. So I think in terms of we had very little communication about the second year, I think we're just, sort of, seen as you just roll into the second year"*

This previous point raises important questions in relation to retention, and the degree to which people will relocate once training is completed or whether opportunities within their host institution, including the lure of a full-time contract, encourage participants to stay in the area where they trained. Our work in other studies has shown that retention is a multi-faceted complicated issue, and as the quote below indicates, training close to home is not always a guarantee of retention:

> *"even if I was placed at home it doesn't mean I'm more likely to stay or less likely to stay….But at the same time if they're moving home then they're moving back to a mental health team, it's still doing, it is still helping the sector and helping mental health in general, which is the main idea, I think, it's not supporting the local authority, it's supporting society"*

> *"I don't know whether… because I'm from XXXX, whether eventually I'd move back there. I think it just depends on what my teams say, because I quite like driving… that drive because it gives me a chance to reflect and then that helps me, like, put work behind me, think of home"*

8.6 Year 2 Reflections

8.6.1 Transition week

According to the Think Ahead Programme Handbook, the purpose of transition week was to '*reflect on your learning and progress through Year One and preparation for Year Two*' (p.71). There was a sense of frustration with Transition Week from the graduates interviewed in that some elements were considered useful, other contributions were felt to be overly-idealistic and requirements for support which had been discussed were not forthcoming in practice:

> *"Yes, there was parts of that were really good, I think, and then it went a bit too... into too much depth or, one, I think a social worker, he was trying to talk about sort of really wide changes in an organisation and almost like management at that sort of level, which for a newly qualified social worker is completely unnecessary"*

"I think that Think Ahead didn't prepare us for a job wait of what would be coming, and I think that they also didn't put any mechanisms in place there for us for support, when we were going through that, because it's a big juggle. Because in the three days that we were there in the transition week, there was a lot of conversation about the support that... the kind of support that people would need"

Graduates suggested Transition Week could have been more useful if more time had of been given to the academic work required in the second year in relation to the Masters Programme. Specifically, graduates reported that assistance with ethics or designing/developing ideas for an empirical study would have been useful at this point and potentially could have avoided delays experienced later on in the year[8]:

"I won't go into details, but I have to get approval from the research team here that I had to get my ethics back from obviously U of York because I could even apply for the thing. So I'm still not... haven't started my research. It's due in four months. It might not even be feasible. I might not be able to finish Think Ahead programme with my master's because of that, and it's because they didn't really get us to apply for ethics until sort of January"

"In October we could've gotten... been getting on with our ethics and could've submitted maybe by November, then I'd be in such a better position. And now it's just... everyone's the same. So my tutor says everyone's in the same boat. It's not just me"

"Don't know what they could have done to make it easier going from student to qualified in a team but maybe what would have been helpful is if they had prepared us for the research in advance. I think they were quite relaxed about that and then suddenly it was like you need to do this now. And I think really we weren't aware of how much preparation work was involved in turning in that piece of work, so if they could have told us a lot sooner, you need to seriously think about what you're going to be doing"

The programme team reported that this arrangement had been changed the following year in response to this feedback.

8.6.2 Coping with competing demands

Clearly, coping with competing demands in Year Two was causing challenges for several graduates interviewed, evidenced by the quote below which demonstrates the difficulty that graduates have in managing their priorities. In this instance, workload was directly encroaching on study days:

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[8] This point was made in feedback to the course team, and reported to have been addressed for the second cohort.

"I think for me when I initially started I was having regular study days and that's not happening now. So I was having one a fortnight and then the extra Masters one as well and now it's just feasibility with my workload really. So I am just not taking them"

Others reported similar workload pressures especially when discussing the ASYE programme and the difficulty in reality of taking a reduced caseload within their teams, especially where teams were already under pressure:

"I get one day every two weeks study leave, which I take but there's also talk of an additional day for your Masters dissertation which they didn't clarify what that was about so initially I started taking it but then I've stopped because it wasn't clarified and it was quite a lot of time out of the office"

"I think it's really difficult now in the way that it wasn't last year because I think for me anyway there's some guilt about being employed by the local authority, because I work with people who get paid a lot less, just simply because they work for the NHS. And so I feel like we are well paid members of staff and we should be contributing to that team so I find it difficult to take the study days and justify that and be valued in the team, and feel like you're doing your fair share. I feel like it's been difficult because there's been such a high turnover and so many people leave, so the other ones are under a lot of pressure and I think it would be really unfair for me to not do my fair share of that like everybody else, especially being employed by a local authority"

"I think for me my issue has been when I moved into year two management of our team was not in a good place and it seems that it's only now that that's being addressed, so I think I only found my feet recently but before that I felt a bit isolated in terms of support…, but how you actually advocate yourself within the team has been... and I suppose I've taken it on the chin so theoretically like I said, those study days are actually part of my contract. The reality is that the whole team is under pressure and comparatively, compared to everyone else I'm not as under pressure as everyone else so you feel bad, things like that really"

8.6.3 Contractual arrangements

In terms of the process for joining teams in the second year of the programme, graduates across sites had different experiences dependent entirely on the structures and processes within their host institutions. Some graduates underwent formal appointment processes involving interviews compared to more informal discussion-based decision making:

"we knew there was places in the council for us, we knew it'd be one of two teams, and we were asked to give choices and things"

> *"it was an exercise where we were just asked questions and stuff, we were discussing about where we wanted to go, where was our career pathway and stuff like that. And then I think it was just done... I suppose we all have to be interviewed for a job in some way, which is fine, do you know what I mean, but I just felt the whole process to be a little bit not real"*

> *"It was the one thing for me where I thought we always knew that come the end of August 2017 jobs needed to be met, so that was the one thing I thought maybe things could have been planned better"*

In much the same way that processes differed across sites, job offers for the second year also varied greatly amongst agencies, with some offering Think Ahead graduates permanent contracts whereas others offered fixed term 12-month temporary contracts. In one site, graduates believe they have been given permanent contracts in error so there is uncertainty about whether they will need to interview for their jobs if they choose to stay.

Clearly, this is the first time that the programme has engaged with employers and whilst local HR processes are understandably being deferred to, and have their own timelines, graduates reported a number of complications which have caused delays and stress:

> *"Because it's not the normal process that they go through in the council, so in terms of getting my paperwork done and having me ready for my position, that's what caused the delay, because I didn't go through that formal process [overtalking]. Yes, so I was left for two weeks, so I... personally, it kind of scuppered me up because of all my bills and stuff, because I wasn't being paid for those two weeks and I had to find money to cover that time period, and I wasn't recompensed for that, either, despite having asked several times and been promised that it was going to be given to me, it still hasn't been given to me"*

> *"So I haven't had an induction process and things like that. And it was really difficult, because I had worked there in the placement on the team, I think that they thought that I knew that I was doing what I was doing already. So new members of the team that were being brought in were being given equipment, talks how to use the equipment, talks how to do certain processes, and I wasn't. So it kind of set me back a little bit"*

> *"Yes and so the Trust decided to think ahead so the Trust made a commitment to provide the jobs and similar to what Charlotte said, I think management were trying to give us as many opportunities as possible and they also felt that presenting the Council vacancies was positive for us because there would be more money but actually in practice, because there were three counsellors and two NHS…we had a real dilemma that one"*

All of the above, led to a number of interesting discussions about the extent to which graduates felt part of the Think Ahead programme in the second year of their course. It is fair to say that opinion on this matter was mixed. The comments below represent individuals who felt very strongly that they had been cut off from the programme:

> "*I was really disappointed, because I thought if we're umbrella'd under Think Ahead for two years, then two years we should be supported. I would say I don't even feel like as if I'm part of Think Ahead. So it does almost feel like I have left Think Ahead programme, even though I haven't and even though I shouldn't have been just cut off*"

> "*The honest answer is there's zero support. I have not have any contact from Think Ahead since September, apart from, like I said, generic emails. And I find that shocking, like you said we're still under them, but we're not at all. Practically, we're not. But in terms of belonging to Think Ahead, I just feel like as if I'm not in the programme anymore, that's it*"

Others, of course, felt that they were adapting to their new working environment without expressing this kind of concern. So, the shock of being given "*a lot of responsibility*" from the start was seen as daunting at first, but, as one participant explained:

 "*in terms of your professional development, [it was] really good… I'm glad that it's happened that way… and I feel like I'm part of [the wider] team*".

8.6.4 Programme reflections

Reflecting on the programme in a wider sense, graduates in their second year were more critical of elements of the course than they had been when interviewing them in the first year. One respondent, an outlier in terms of responses, even questioned the extent to which the Think Ahead programme could prepare graduates for a social work career in comparison to a conventional two or three-year course:

> "*I really, really question, I seriously question what is the point of Think Ahead? What is it that Think Ahead is doing that a three-year degree is not doing? And I really feel like students that are coming in after doing their three-year degrees are more grounded.* "

The majority were much more positive about the "*work-based*" nature of the programme, and the fact that they moved into practice learning feeling prepared for the specific expectations of a mental health setting:

> "*Social workers on a sort of generic or normal course would not necessarily have placements in mental health and be able to apply [for work in that setting]*"

"As a career changer, I would not have changed career to become a Mental Health Social Worker without Think Ahead. I am so glad I did. I feel like I have found my purpose and vocation. It has been transformational in terms of career but also to my sense of self. I have no regrets despite undertaking a pay cut which totalled around £20K over the two years.

In Year One, it was apparent that graduates had a good grasp of the ways in which other units were run, and this continued into the second year. Clearly, units and graduates converse and were well aware of course variability, leading some to acknowledge that they had been '*lucky*', compared to others, especially in relation to the extent to which they were supported by CSWs:

"I think we were quite fortunate really because we had quite a good Consultant Social Worker so she was very supportive and very supporting of things ahead in general... so because of that we stayed motivated with it I think but speaking to others, I think it was inconsistent in terms of support and how much support they were getting in general. So generally I've had quite a positive experience"

It is fair to say that those who were in less supportive contexts raised more concerns about their own readiness to practice. Participants also drew attention to the consequences for their employers of participating in the programme and in one case questioned whether the scheme could be called a success:

"Because they had a cohort of four that came in, and they only have two that remain...But then also the organisations, I think, are expecting that they're going to get something else, that they're going to get dedicated people who really want to be in social work and that's not the point..."

Against this, though, the contrary view was also expressed very clearly:

"Positive aspects -   I feel happy with the skills, knowledge, diploma and master's qualification that I've gained from the course and feel that it will put me in good stead for my future career. I'm proud for getting through it and think I've learnt a lot about myself.   I've benefited from the support of my peers on the course, and have felt that staff at York and Think Ahead have been quick to respond to queries."

"Having the PgDip and MA has helped me to secure further training (in family therapy) and helped me to get my new role in CAMHS mental health services.   I think it looks attractive to prospective employers, particularly in light of all the training opportunities Think Ahead provided. As I was trained in a variety of approaches i.e. solution focused, narrative therapy, Family group conferencing- this is something which I have spoken about widely in job interviews as well as in my application for family therapy training. I would also have to give credit to my host organisation xxxxx for providing me with a lot of training opportunities as well such as Open Dialogue which has also enhanced my CV, development and career prospects."

8.6.5 Ability to be change makers

When reflecting on the programme, graduates also referred back to the original aims of the programme and the expectation that participants would be equipped with the skills and experience in order to become change makers within their host institutions and as social workers. Many of the graduates interviewed in the second year held strong views about the extent to which this aspiration was realistic or feasible:

> "this picture that's portrayed is that you're going to be this happy-clappy social worker and you're going to come in with your magic wand - and magic wand is used quite a lot in a lot of the interventions. But you're going to come in with your magic wand and fix everything and it's going to be lovely, where you're going to be able to sit down and have cups of coffee and chat with your people and take them to places and introduce them to this, that and the other. And it was a very idealised picture of social work"

> "I think Think Ahead, I think they could have been a lot clearer around what social work looks like in practice at the beginning. Because when we finished some students went out and the different cohorts and different units were doing really different types of social work. And I think it would have been helpful if Think Ahead had explained to us what it was like on the ground and why it's so different depending on your location and your authority and your NHS Trust. And that would have potentially just managed people's expectations"

> "what was sold to us of the picture of what we'd be doing, I think we've been very lucky in that we've got closer to that picture than a lot of the units. But we still have not got – probably just naive – but we've still got not particularly close – and again within thinking of that, maybe I have to make improvements in my practice but I don't really feel I'm doing the accompanying work with people, the empowering, building skills but it all depends – all this that was sold to us and again I think I have a part to play in that but it doesn't really feel like I'm able to do that work"

> "But then the thing is that it sets up to think that you are actually going to be able to be an agent for change. Where they set you up thinking that you're going to be able to be a champion to change certain things. And I think there's been a couple of cases of mine where systems are letting them down and I find that there are no mechanisms in order for me to be able to... make those changes that need to be made"

Whilst it is not possible to say whether these ambitions alienated any individual sufficiently to drive them to leave, it is clear that graduates do not feel able to change behaviours or processes at this point in their career.

Neither Think Ahead, nor anyone else involved in social work education, realistically expects qualifying students to be able to 'change the world' on their first day in practice, of course. There is a tension

though, undoubtedly, between the laudable aspirations of the programme ("We're getting people to see that this is the place to come if they want to change the world." – TA promotional literature) and what may be experienced as the harsh realities of practice. The risk, as pointed out by the respondents below, is that some graduates become disillusioned and demotivated:

> "what you're going to get is people just wanting to... leave, which again, you kind of think it is hard, because actually it's not an easy task to kind of realistically tell them what's in store"

> "Thinking that they are going to be these champions that go out to make these changes, and they're not able to affect those changes can be quite disheartening"

Others, were more positive recognising that whilst the ability to make changes as an ASYE was limited, that there may be opportunities in the future:

> "I think there's a lot of pressure on us and I think again it's dependent – there will be some people that will be more change agent-esque than others, and some teams that will be more open to that than others"

> "Maybe down the line it could be. I think we're ASYEs at the moment but we won't always be that and hopefully some of the knowledge and education from Think Ahead will stick and will still be there. So maybe further along in our careers"

8.6.6 Sustaining a commitment to social work?

The question of the participants' continuing commitment to social work was also discussed, as the following extract from a group interview illustrates:

> Q   But did you yourselves question whether you were going to continue?

> P1   Yes, even till today.

> P2   I basically... this sounds really melodramatic, and I don't mean it to be, but I kind of felt as if... I had no other option, because of my personal circumstances and just nobody... I meant as in I've come at this a bit later in life, I've spent a lot of time, effort, money, I've moved to a whole new place for this. I didn't really feel that... I thought it's not really possible, I felt, at that time, to kind of go and do something completely different or start training for something new.
>
> And I... so I did kind of want to, in a way, so if someone had given me a kind of get-out clause, I would've definitely left. But I kind of felt like, actually, not I don't have a choice, but it's more heavily weighted to like you needed to stay and finish this year, get it all done and then reassess sort of thing.

> Q   ...reassess at the end of the second year?

> P2   Yes, because I think... in terms of... obviously the workload is a lot at the moment because we're doing… ASYE and trying to do a job, as well. So it... I think it is sensible for me, personally, to reassess once I'm out of that really busy period. Because then I might think actually, I really like this job and I want to continue.

So, for some, at least, a realistic understanding of what is in store would be advisable:

> Q   Would you recommend [this programme]....?

> P1   Yes, I think you have to be quite resilient and I think it is a huge workload and you have to be quite resilient to stress and just being able to do a lot of work really. I think you can be intelligent but that might not necessarily mean you're going to get to do the course.

> P2   Resilience and about seeing the work and hearing different things not... because you're trained in therapy and things like that but you need a lot of supervision about that and I'm not sure that we did really. I know that... but we're having difficult conversations on a daily basis and that's another thing that you have to face.

These observations reflect a recurrent tension in social work education, by no means restricted to the Think Ahead experience. Qualifying social workers are, inevitably, being prepared for the world of practice as it should be, rather than as it is; and the disparity between these has to be managed without painting an unrealistically rosy picture on the one hand, or simply putting them off, on the other.

9. Stakeholder Perspectives: Service Users, Educators, Comparators and Leavers

9.1 Service Users: overall picture

We have attempted here to think about how user involvement has worked well and in what context; recognising areas for improvement and including suggested recommendations:

Mirroring the chain analogy and thinking about the strength of the links making for positive outcomes and experiences, for all involved, we have observed and received feedback about many areas of user and carer involvement. Parallels can be drawn between the participant experience and its relationship to the Think Ahead organisational structure and the service user experience over time. When communication and clarity of role are clear and service user supervision/support is present, there is a sense of being valued and the quality of engagement in the programme is impressive. However, where these break down, and service users feel unheard and marginalised or feel that there is a lack of responsiveness from the organisation, then this tends to replicate their previous experiences of being devalued.

9.1.1 Structure and set up

Considerable effort could be seen to be put into the structural arrangements, both nationally and at the point of delivery to ensure that service users were at the heart of the Think Ahead programme. Service user involvement has occurred right from before there were any applicants and reflected values stated in Think Ahead's original booklet describing the opportunities for people who've experienced mental health problems:

> *"We welcome feedback and ideas from people who've experienced mental health problems and used mental health services themselves. If you've got a question, idea, or suggestion you'd like to share with us, please email us on hello@thinkahead.org. From time to time there are also opportunities to join our Service User and Carer Reference Group (SUCRG), a community whose knowledge, experience, and advice fundamentally shape our work".*

The service user reference group (SUCRG) was set up at the outset, it had strong membership and clearly worked well together. It was described by one member as '*a breath of fresh air to be taken*

seriously', reflecting Think Ahead's reference to the group as a body *'whose knowledge, experience and advice fundamentally shape our work'.*

This was clearly demonstrated early on, with service users being impressed at the effort Think Ahead put into consulting on user involvement. They felt listened to and treated as equals, and they appreciated the extent to which expertise by experience was valued, and incorporated into programme delivery.

However, as the programme developed, there were some members who felt that difficulties had emerged by the summer of 2018:

> *"This hasn't been the most pleasant year between SUCRG and TA".*
> *"[There were] issues that snowballed and perhaps [they were] not dealt with in the correct manner".*
>
> *(Service Users)*

This may have been to do with uncertainty about the precise role and expectations of the reference group, whose enthusiasm certainly waned. By the summer of 2018, four years after its initial establishment, there were signs of the group beginning to 'peter out'. Subsequently a concerted effort was made on the part of Think Ahead to redress this situation, and rekindle interest. This included the appointment of a new independent chair.

9.1.2 Programme delivery

There is something of a contrast between the advisory group's growing concerns, and the experience of service user involvement in teaching and learning which was almost always extremely well received by participants:

> *"[It was] really useful having the service user involvement". (TA Participant)*

This was also reflected in the closing survey results where nine out of ten respondents (20/23) rated as very good or good their 'understanding service user needs and perspectives' (see Chapter 7).

Indeed, participants were keen for further opportunities to be educated by those with direct experience. Service users also knew that their input was highly valued by participants, who:

> *"came up asking for feedback and advice about what was needed from them in future. This was impressive, so early on". (Service User)*

Six key themes have emerged from the service user experience of being involved in the different aspects of the programme: ownership of role, communication, support, recognition, purpose and experiences. Each one we have looked at in terms of context, success, improvers and recommendations.

9.1.3 Ownership of Role

A sense of ownership was evident in the following roles:

i) User-led station at assessment centre stage.

Although not directly within the remit of the evaluation, this was something that service users referred to positively as an indication of the organisation's intent to put them at the heart of the programme. Improvers. The lead role in this part of the process was particularly important in their view, and needed to be 'backed up' in a material sense. Pay disparities caused some concern, for example (see 9.1.6)

ii) Strategic direction and advice was clearly sought from SUCRG by Think Ahead. This seemed to be their valued point of difference. It was also clear from the outside that SUCRG did hold a clear and valued position as a service user and carer reference group. This point of difference and ownership of this role however, seemed to get lost over time to SUCRG members and Think Ahead both. It seemed that all concerned became reactive and caught up in details of (valid) concern. This coincided with changes to staffing ('support') and was the starkest example of links in the 'chain' coming under strain and weakening, if not breaking.

In this context, it is important to maintain a focus on the group as a means of leading service user and carer input into the programme rather than becoming preoccupied with internal process issues. A decision to go back to basics and re-establish the purpose of SUCRG, so that their role could be clarified, was needed. The relatively recent appointment of a new Chair can be expected to help to reset and repair working relationships.

iii) Summer Institute (sessional) involvement. User-led/co-facilitated sessions were provided, in the main, by the service user group most closely linked to the academic partner, in the first two iterations, this was University of York collaborator, SUPA Group. This seemed entirely logical, as the working relationships already existed, as did some of the educational products. Additional sessions were then sourced from UCLan's partner, Comensus and Think Ahead's SUCRG.

Successes were readily identifiable. Service user educators, when booked to provide 'existing products', that is, input which they had delivered previously, worked well and were highly valued. Most of these

seemed to be well established examples of 'co-facilitated education' working at its best (for example, looking after yourself/social work and recovery). Involved were academics/practitioners delivering sessions alongside those with direct expertise of mental illness and social work services. Some new alliances also worked well (personality disorder/depression) and demonstrated strong links of communication and support, with a clear purpose.

Areas for Improvement:

· There were examples, however, where co-delivery attempts failed (stigma and discrimination) and strong feelings of exclusion were (unintentionally) recreated by an academic who left little room for user contributions. Attempts to 'force' co-production or offer opportunities that then get taken away, without support, should be guarded against, in order to protect links between role, purpose and experience. True co-production only works with careful planning and a sharing of power among all those involved, as was often the case over the course of the programme.

· The different roles open to service users and carers varied and those involved, though able to influence to some extent, were not the decision makers. Clarity about roles offered (and 'who got first dibs' and why) would strengthen trust, communication and help with a sense of ownership over a person's input. Whether co-facilitating a session on hearing voices or playing a part as a service user actor/assessor, ownership of a person's role improves their sense of purpose and commitment to the whole. It might have been helpful for the programme to develop an initial portfolio of service users and their particular expertise that can be drawn upon to work with, which could serve to build upon service users' strengths; this was reported to have been put in place for the third cohort.

iv) Summer Institute assessment exercise.

Successes:

· The days in the Summer Institute that required a larger number of service users to be involved were the communication skills assessment day, where service users were to be 'interviewed' by participants and then to assist in the assessing of interpersonal skills demonstrated by the participants. There were over 90 participants, and so people were recruited from all three user groups.

Areas for Improvement:

· There was some criticism from participants in cohort 1 around the inconsistency of interviewing experiences and subsequent assessments, which raises the possibility of using professional actors for this exercise. Feedback from service users, however, strongly opposes this, suggesting that there is greater authenticity in their ability to assess interpersonal skills, especially the ability to sense

social work values and attitudes. Should the programme decide to continue using service users in this role, marking criteria need to clearly reflect their contribution in this respect, as in 'expert knows best'.

Improvements were noted in cohort 2, mainly in terms of clearer preparation for those involved and in the structure of the assessment day.

9.1.4 Communication

When channels of communication were clear, involvement worked well. Service users with direct links to those involved with designed and populating (or delivering) on the Summer Institute fared the best. However, the complexity of the programme structure and the multiplicity of roles at different levels, perhaps inevitably meant that confusion could arise.

Inclusion in formal processes can require engagement with some of the trappings associated with this, such as large quantities of preparatory reading with inadequate time to review. Perhaps thought could be given to other ways of working, which are more immediate and engaging.

Systems (support) needs to be in place for when communication breaks down. This needs to be timely and responsive to avoid damage to links. It was noteworthy though that there were attempts to redress the problems of the first Summer Institute. This is a matter of embedding good habits into the everyday processes associated with different aspects of the programme. Improvements could include a programme wide reference point ('broker'), in the form of a key person to liaise across all user groups and people involved.

9.1.5 Support

Successes:

· The service user groups associated with the academic partners maintained the strongest links in terms of feeling supported. SUPA Group and Comensus had the advantage of being well-established prior to the programme, and having key support staff in place. To some extent, they were also readier to forgive 'hiccups' because of this strong base.

· In contrast, of course, Think Ahead had created a user/carer reference group (SUCRG) from scratch, and this meant that the group relationships were being established at just the time they were required to respond to a very full agenda associated with the initiation phase of a complex and

extensive programme. Over time it became noticeable when some SUCRG members felt support was missing, and early enthusiasm became dulled. Members looked to each other for support, which meant that an objective eye remained elusive. The need for formal debriefing (supervision) was recognised by SUCRG members and was requested more than once, according to some.

'Someone on our side and available to listen' was the message, when group members were asked what they needed. Creating a time and place for professional supervision/debriefing is a way to formalise this need. This serves to strengthen the links between communication and purpose, and improves people's overall experience.

9.1.6 Recognition

Remuneration for involvement roles is fundamental to valuing service users' unique insights, knowledge and experiences. In this context, notably, the issue of pay and allowances arose again, as is frequently the case with service user involvement in educational settings. In this instance, though, professional advice was commissioned from an independent consultant. This resulted in the development of payment procedures suitable for the majority, a confidential helpline being made available and template letters to help those who needed them. How an organisation values service user expertise is reflected in how that is rewarded. Think Ahead is to be commended here for listening and responding to SUCRG members' early concern over different payment allowances. It was a true collaboration and resulted in an excellent piece of work, with clear agreement about pay rates achieved. Think Ahead skillfully navigated the tricky waters and made those involved feel recognised and rewarded for their expertise, knowledge and input, without fear.

However, the service user-led station at the assessment centre was subsequently discovered to pay less than the equivalent leads of the other four stations. Although this could be explained by the differential time commitments and additional responsibilities of panel members, the problematic perception was that service users are valued as *less than*. This disparity may have arisen for a number of reasons, but it does highlight the need for continued vigilance in these areas which act as an important practical and symbolic touchstone for service users' perceptions of equitable treatment. As the role of service user assessors evolved subsequently, Think Ahead did take steps to respond positively by raising their rates of pay to the same level as those for other assessors.

Awareness and understanding around how much energy is expended during participation, could be increased. It is not simply a matter of fair pay, of course, as one service user put it: *"giving of ourselves is sometimes painful..."*

Those involved [in the Summer Institute] are experienced educators, however the emotional aspect of what they do, can easily be taken for granted. A formal thank you of some sort would be highly valued and nice touch of appreciation: *"…a letter of thanks would be nice"*.

We recognise that this represents a microcosm of the continuing challenges for many organisations in ensuring fair and respectful involvement of people who use services; and despite the acknowledged difficulties, Think Ahead did go to considerable lengths to seek to achieve this.

9.1.7 Purpose

Successes:

· Service users and user groups have a wealth of insight and knowledge about how they can best be utilised to forward the education of mental health social workers. Direct experience of receiving social work services, makes those people uniquely placed to advise and offer insights that are not visible to others. However, there were times when all three user groups felt insecure, by being unclear about the purpose of the other user groups. It seemed that prior thought had not been given to the potential for role confusion and misunderstandings between the groups. It would not be difficult to define boundaries for the involvement of different people and groups, whilst keeping the purpose of SUCRG clear, but perhaps there is also a need to promote active communication between the service user groups.

Think Ahead could have perhaps made more of the strategic potential of service user involvement, where highly experienced experts by experience could have played a fuller part.

As one person commented:

*"It was nice to be involved, it would have been better to be asked **how** we would like to be involved"*

The comment above seemed to sum up one group's feeling, who were, as they put it, already 'recognised internationally' and experienced in good practice.

9.1.8 Experiences

It was clear from the beginning that Think Ahead was committed to involve service users in as many areas as possible. There have naturally been highs and lows, as a new programme of this magnitude would expect. Factors involved for good experiences, or otherwise, may be difficult to duplicate, on the

one hand, or address, on the other. When the links in our chain are strong, we see better outcomes in terms of the quality of the experience.

Successes:
· No doubt as to the value felt from participants about user involvement. There were many comments to the effect that service user input was the 'best' aspect of the Summer institute learning experience, for both the first and second cohorts.

· Service users were initially impressed at the effort Think Ahead put into consulting on user involvement. People felt treated as equals and listened to as experts in their field.

"It is a breath of fresh air to be taken seriously and treated as equals" (Service User)

· Individually, experiences were positive, in the main, especially when people were involved in a way they were used to. Experiences did vary over time, however, and especially when people were coming to terms with new roles and responsibilities, which led to certain challenges.

Improvements could be made in the following areas, we believe:

· More input from experts by experience was desired by participants:

"It would have been really useful to have more service user involvement in the teaching and learning [recall] days" (TA Participant)

More regular and sustained acknowledgement of service user input would make difficulties more tolerable and experiences remembered more positively.
"We worked hard to provide details of what we could offer and we did not hear back"

· Dealing with unknowns and unanswered questions can easily be challenging for some, and there is a risk of mimicking prior negative social care experiences.
. Clear leadership is needed from Think Ahead in terms of purpose of user involvement. Reassess who is being asked to do what and why. The undoubted value of what has been achieved underlines the potential to further develop and embed service user alliances in all areas: advisory positions, recruitment, education and assessment. We have seen user involvement that is both professional and creative whilst demonstrating powerful educational impact.

It is important to recognise that people have different levels of need with respect to each of our identified key themes. What is important for some, may be less so for others. That is not to detract, however, from the importance of attending to the challenges highlighted.

Ultimately, what determines the quality of user experiences is the quality of the relationships; whether of a working, supportive or peer nature.

9.2 Educator perspectives on the learning process

During the first year of the programme we interviewed representatives from both the University of York and the University of Central Lancashire; the institutions responsible for the delivery of the programme in its initial phase. Whilst these arrangements have subsequently changed, with a new provider commissioned for the fourth cohort, we believe that these observations offer some helpful insights.

Educators were asked to comment on the participants' 'learning journey' and their own contribution, as graduates progressed from a more academic environment into practice settings.

There were positive perceptions of the relationship between the two universities, and their ability to collaborate and provide coherent and consistent input. The partnership worked '*really well*', according to one educator; and another said: '*this is actually a new experience for me, to work with another university in a partnership, and it's wonderful*'.

Views on the volume of material taught at the Summer Institute varied, ranging from views that graduates coped well with volume and were accepting of the need to be introduced to concepts yet 'park them'; to be returned to and consolidated later on in the course, others felt that there should be less content and it be more focused to avoid overloading participants. For one educator, it seemed to be an issue of the self-expectations of participants: '*Sometimes… they just overwhelm themselves more than necessary… it was pressure but most of the people did fine*'.

This sense of reading participants on the course was said to be possible due to the more intensive, closer working relationships that academics had with their allocated units of four graduates resulting in them having a greater degree of familiarity than is usually the case: "*we know our students really well*" [*more so than on other courses due to the frequency of interaction*] *with participant/tutor meetings every two weeks as a minimum*".

Recognising that disruption caused by internal staff changes was not ideal, and that some units had been passed between staff, several interviewees did not consider this to have caused fundamental problems for participants, whereas others were more reflective and unsure.

The perceived co-productive nature of the model (i.e. asking students and/or CSWs for what they would like covered in tutorials) means that academics, employers and participants are engaged and involved in designing the learning programme; although as we have observed elsewhere, fuller use could probably have been made of input from experts by experience at the design stage.

Graduates were described by Educators as being very capable. However, given the nature of working in units of 4, it was noted that the spotlight can fall on 'weaker ones' – who interestingly on other programmes probably would not be considered weak. Nonetheless, the assertion was made that graduates could not be on a more supportive course – despite the geographical challenges of being distanced from units. Interestingly, many CSWs similarly commented on the extent to which the course (deliverers) provided extensive support in the way of supervision and case consultations.

Educators at both institutions were confident that participants were able to link academic theory to practice in their placements and that 'graded exposure' for graduates would allow them over time to work on complex cases thereby providing the opportunity for graduates to implement the taught interventions. Nevertheless, there was a recognition that local contexts and organisational factors could potentially impinge on graduates' ability to access opportunities.

The programme leadership and relations between the academic and strategic elements of Think Ahead were generally said to have worked very well. One said: '*I've never seen a programme so responsive as Think Ahead*'; although, another was somewhat concerned about what was seen as a limited amount of communication between educators and Think Ahead ('*Think Ahead don't consult us enough*'). Similarly, there were conflicting views as to the extent to which the programme was providing sufficient opportunities for graduates to focus on and improve their leadership skills. One respondent, referred to this aspect of the programme as being a bit '*hit and miss'.*

It is fair to say that Educators were well aware of the disparities in messages and guidance given to graduates in relation to assignments as a result of institutional differences and we were assured that modifications to the process were being introduced. On a similar note, interviewees were also acutely aware that 'pinch points' and unnecessary pressure due to assignment deadlines had caused stress to participants and could have been mitigated[9]. Whilst such situations undoubtedly affected cohort morale, others problems and programme teething issues were felt to be amplified by a small minority of

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[9] These observations were taken into account and for subsequent cohorts attempts were made to rectify the problem of 'pressure points' where multiple programme demands coincided for participants.

participants who reportedly felt a 'sense of entitlement'. This was felt to especially be the case in relation to placement opportunities and experiences, elsewhere in this report we have reflected on this in terms of placement variability.

Overall, at the time of the Educator interviews, respondents were generally very positive about the programme and problems foreseen related to the potential availability of jobs in the sector and whether participants would be able to secure work beyond the course. Several interviewees acknowledged that there had been an 'acclimatization period' for everyone involved which was to be expected with a new programme, but that the 'product' was a good one which could be improved for the second cohort; as, indeed, appeared to be the case on our return visit to the Summer Institute and observations of recall days in the second year.

9.3 Leavers

It seemed important to gain some insight into the experiences and motivations of those who left the Think Ahead programme before completion, so we approached all those (13) who were known to have withdrawn before or on completing the qualifying year, and of these five agreed to be interviewed. It is clearly a relatively small number, although the consistency of their responses does lend weight to their views.

All those we spoke to had formed a positive view of Think Ahead, and seemed well-motivated to take part in the programme. One, for example, had decided to pursue a long-standing interest in mental health social work, and gave up a fairly senior role in another sector to do so.

Another respondent spoke very enthusiastically about features of the programme that she had found particularly valuable: *'the model of the CSW in the unit… was very supportive… I really enjoyed the lectures… they were really special'.*

The general sense gleaned from these comments was that 'leavers' were not fundamentally critical of the Think Ahead model, but that their concerns had been much more to do with contingent factors, and the very variable and often disconcerting nature of the experiences to which they had been exposed. One, who had experienced the transition from first to second year, noted the considerably reduced level of support available, for example, and felt that commitments to a reduced workload had not been

followed through. Here it was felt that the lack of support from the Think Ahead meant that: *'it didn't feel you had any representation if you were having an issue with the host [agency]'.*

Another leaver spoke similarly of feeling unsupported in the relatively vulnerable position of a student social worker. In one instance when she wanted to raise an issue about the level of service being provided by the agency, she was disappointed that: *'my CSW [Consultant Social Worker] does nothing about it… as a student, all the stuff we'd been told about being able to influence and shape the way things are… improve how social work is perceived… work around relationship-based practice and… systemic change. None of that was possible, and it felt like there was a lot of blockages'.*

In this case, the interviewee was very clear that if things had been different, she would have continued with the programme. She felt that the particular practice setting to which she had been allocated was not suitable as a learning environment, and sought to move elsewhere: *'I needed to move to an authority that was integrated and worked with health… health and social work together, for the clients, rather than against them'.*

The point made here about the lack of integration at service level was echoed by another participant who had left the programme, and if this was the case, it seems that the experience for these members of the initial cohort was not as promised or agreed with local providers. Here, it seemed, promises and indeed commitments made at very senior levels of the hosting partner organisations were not replicated in the team where the participant was based: *'the team manager and the senior practitioners in the team weren't on board and were quite hostile towards us… it just emphasised to the rest of the team that they could treat us that way as well'.*

The consequence for this individual was significant and she came to the point of wondering: *'whether it was worth it… It completely knocked the [passion and commitment] out of me'.*

Another leaver spoke of an oppressive practice setting, where she felt '*scared'* of the authority vested in agency staff and the Consultant Social Worker. The frustrations were compounded by the knowledge that for many other Think Ahead participants the experience was proving to be very positive and rewarding: *'If everybody got the same experience it would be fine, but it was so different. And most people having such a positive experience, so it was almost just that resentment of, why did I end up with the crappy one'.*

This sense of frustration was echoed amongst the other leavers interviewed. There were substantial problems identified within local agencies, some of them to do with the perceptions of potential colleagues, and a reluctance to take the graduates seriously, or welcome them into the practice setting.

For several of the respondents, the quality of relationships was an important factor, but so was the recognition (or lack of it) of their position as learners, with specific needs. Some were frustrated, for instance, at being relatively underworked, with small caseloads and relatively basic tasks: *'I basically did care assessments and carer assessments, and that was pretty much it… you do the assessment, you make the recommendations, you try not to spend money, and then you move on'*. This was not the comprehensive model of relationship building and purposeful intervention that participants had been led to expect, and in most cases experienced.

In another case, the problems seemed to originate with a lack of coordination and preparation at agency level, where the interviewee described a breakdown in communication between partners, with the result that the host agency was not able to offer anything in the way of a clear trajectory into a qualified role. This, combined with frustration at not being permitted to undertake some of the more interesting and rewarding aspects of the agency tasks was another source of frustration.

There was some disappointment, too, that Think Ahead were unable to help resolve the problems encountered. For one respondent, who wanted to stay with the programme but in another location, this appears to have been *'categorically'* ruled out. The practice specialist was supportive of the possibility, it seems, and the interviewee believed that there were *'areas that have lost participants that might be willing to take someone on again because… they would have an agreement to take four participants'*. This was not possible, it seems.[10]

Leavers were also disappointed that there was less provided than hoped in terms of what might be called pastoral support. Whereas there was a good level of personal support provided during the Summer Institute, this was not available to the same extent subsequently; and for those who were experiencing this kind of issue, this could be problematic, and for some, it seemed, it played a part in their capacity to remain on the programme. Here again, the issue raised is the level and extent of support which it is reasonable to expect from Think Ahead, and/or the host agency where participants are experiencing difficulties. Although the delivery agreement briefly refers to the expectations in this respect, including the pastoral role of the Consultant Social Worker, and the option of referring

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[10] Think Ahead policy on this point identifies potential unfairnesses in allowing transfers to take place, and there are undoubtedly arguments on both sides.

problems to Think Ahead if necessary, this was not sufficient to address participants' concerns in some cases.

10. Concluding Discussion and Recommendations

10.1 The analytical context

In order to give as full a picture as possible of the Think Ahead programme, its development and its achievements to this point, we have decided to adopt the relatively simple analogy of a chain. In effect, the programme depends for its success on a series of interlocking elements, each of which plays a critical part in determining the overall outcome; but at the same time, each depends at least in part for its own contribution to the whole. We have identified five links in the chain, representing different facets of the programme, namely: Think Ahead students (participants); their preparation for practice; the partnership and hosting arrangements; the practice learning experience; and the professional context for their learning.

The linkages between the elements and their mutual interaction are themselves multi-dimensional, so that, for example, different teaching styles interface with different participant expectations. Think Ahead participants are clearly central in terms of the qualities and experiences, but it would be unwise to concentrate on them or their attributes alone. All the evidence we have gathered suggests that the factors which are significant in contributing to positive outcomes (or otherwise) cannot be readily or exclusively located in just one aspect of the process; and more than that, their interactions are equally important, so that, for example, decisions on whether or not to leave the programme are not simply individual ones, but relate to the learning environment and the infrastructure as well.
It is better therefore to ask the question as to whether the 'programme' is successful as an integrated project, rather than whether individual participants do well, or not so well. This leads us, inter alia, to question the value of simple comparative analyses of participant characteristics or progression, which do not give sufficient weight to other contextual and programme factors which shape the overall 'learning experience'.

Given these considerations, for the purpose of the evaluation, we have utilised a range of methodological strategies to address the specific questions relating to each link of the chain, whilst applying an analytical framework which enables us to establish and account for their interconnections and mutual influences.

10.2 The participants' experience

The recruits to the first iteration of the Think Ahead programme were expected to have a certain level of academic achievement (degree at 2:1 or above), significant relevant experience, and demonstrable personal qualities suited to the social work role. The high level of initial interest from applicants and the robust recruitment process ensured that the first cohort comfortably met the relatively demanding criteria specified. They did have good first degrees in most cases, and higher academic qualifications in some instances; they demonstrated considerable commitment to practicing in the area of mental health; they were ready for the rigours of a fast track qualifying programme; and they had a range of relevant prior experiences. In many respects, they were similar to those recruited to other fast track qualifying programmes, such as Step Up to Social Work and Frontline. There were some indications, too, that Think Ahead did generate interest amongst some who might not have initially considered social work as a career, notably a number of psychology graduates, and possibly some who had previous personal knowledge of mental health issues.

As the course progressed, we were able to observe the participants' engagement with the taught element of the programme, their experiences of moving into student units, their development as learner practitioners and their initial transition into the professional working environment. Their progress as a cohort was good overall, according to the survey findings and their own accounts, endorsed by the comments of practice educators, colleagues and senior agency figures. Understandably, within this generally positive pattern of progression, there were some sharp variations, which could be accounted for in a number of ways. The variety of backgrounds and especially different levels of prior experience meant that while some welcomed the provision by the Summer Institute of a substantial amount of taught input from the ground up, others felt decidedly unstretched by what they saw as quite basic teaching. For them, the disruption to their lives and the sheer volume of what they saw as repetitive material meant that this felt like time wasted to some extent; on the other hand, it also seemed to be a necessary investment on the part of the programme in order to ensure that all participants felt prepared for their move into a practice learning environment.

This paid off to the extent that most agency staff and practice educators (Consultant Social Workers) felt that participants were 'ready' to move on to their initial placements. For most, too, the initial experience of practice learning was very positive, and CSWs rated their initial performance and their capacity to apply systematic interventions, very highly. This was sometimes observed to be the case even where there were problems of integration with existing multi-professional teams, where a degree of initial uncertainty and even resistance was encountered. For a relatively small number of participants, the

agency environment was not conducive to constructive learning, and they found it to be an alienating experience. For most of the relatively small number who left the programme during the practice learning phase, the experience was very negative; in one or two cases, the decision was forced upon the individual concerned because of personal circumstances. Negative experiences were variously accounted for by a range of contextual factors, such as: changes in key agency personnel, agency reorganisation, a lack of preparation or contingency planning, hostility from other professionals, and the absence of what might be termed 'escape routes'.

Think Ahead seemed to have provided some helpful resources to anticipate potential difficulties, such as the provision of 'reserve' CSWs, which proved extremely helpful in at least one case, and the 'offsite' support of practice specialists. However, other provisions, such as a facility to 'transfer' participants to more beneficial learning environments, and more active 'troubleshooting' seemed less readily available.

Alongside the agency placements, the Think Ahead cohort were also offered additional teaching by way of a series of recall teaching days, at two reasonably convenient geographical locations. These were practice-oriented in the main and sought to provide supplementary learning relating to specific interventions and social work methods, as well as specific input on the topic of 'leadership'. Whilst much of this material supplemented the participants' practice learning helpfully, there were concerns about the unevenness of what was provided, and the value for those at a distance of giving up a large part of their working week. The reliance on 'guest' lecturers meant that the participants were exposed to a variety of different teaching styles, and the input provided did not always connect readily to their self-identified learning needs, to do with working in complex organisations, for example. It was also apparent that service user input into these sessions was limited to one two-day teaching block on co-production, despite the acknowledged value of the service user contribution to the Summer Institute.

Despite these concerns, for most participants the transition from their pre-qualification status into practice as newly-qualified social workers was successful, although agencies in some cases seemed rather unprepared in terms of the exact role to be offered to Think Ahead participants. Despite this, the view of agency staff and managers was that the participants were particularly well-prepared and highly capable as they took on the demands of qualified professionals, and moved into the ASYE (Assessed and Supported Year in Employment). For some participants, though, the break point at the end of the qualifying period offered an opportunity to rethink and move on. This did not necessarily imply a move out of social work, but might involve a change of location or a transfer into other specialist areas of practice. Overall, there is no doubt that agencies were highly complementary towards the Think Ahead

cohort, recognising their contribution not just in terms of professional competence but also in raising the profile and securing recognition for social work in mental health settings.

Our final survey of participants at the expected completion of all phases of the programme (including the Masters qualification) revealed a considerable diversity of experiences overall. Once again, there was a predominantly positive view of the programme, and the opportunities it offered; although at the same time there were a considerable number of comments suggesting areas for improvement. For those who found the experience disappointing this must have been felt more acutely because of their awareness of the positive experiences of their colleagues in other settings. The responses offered at this point did seem to mirror earlier findings, notably the views of agency staff and educators, underlining both the qualities of the participants and the challenging nature of the programme itself in many respects.

10.3 Achievements and challenges: a summary

We conclude, then, that there are substantial merits in the underlying model at the core of the Think Ahead programme, although fidelity of delivery and consistently positive outcomes depend, as we have observed, on ensuring that each link in the chain is robust and well-integrated. The partnership framework and the learning model (intensive induction phase, student units, and recall days) offer a sound and comprehensive basis for participants to achieve the necessary professional capabilities and adapt to the multi-professional setting. The quality and potential of the participants themselves is evident from their demonstrable progression (the learning curve), and this is endorsed by agency staff and Consultant Social Workers. The depth of knowledge and level of preparation for practice in a specific setting is unquestionable, although we are not entirely convinced that the 'generic' aspects of a social work qualification are covered as fully as they could be, for instance in the limited exposure of participants to alternative practice settings.

That aside, though, participants' engagement with practice learning, their application of the specific methods prioritised by the programme, and their evident creativity and commitment were impressive by all accounts; and as a result, the social work profession stands to gain a considerable number of highly capable new recruits whose practice is likely to influence perceptions of the role and contribution of the profession more widely. This, though, remains a challenge, particularly in those relatively few contexts where Think Ahead participants and the programme itself did not appear to be well understood, or particularly welcome.

We have not been asked to attempt to calculate the financial costs and benefits of the Think Ahead programme, and we are doubtful that this kind of exercise is particularly helpful in any case, given the number of variables (internal and external) that would need to be taken into account. Instead, our longitudinal approach has enabled us to consider from 'end-to-end' the process by which an ambitious project has been implemented, adjusted and further developed. By adopting a multi-method, linear approach, we have amassed sufficient evidence to assess each element of the programme as well as their integration and its overall impact; and, we suggest, taken together this suggests that the ambitions of the programme are being realised, in terms of the development of a new cadre of capable confident practitioners, the establishment of robust partnership-based models of practice learning in complex working environments, an effective and integrated teaching and learning collaboration with HEIs, positive and highly-valued engagement of service user educators, and an effective model for learning and improvement as the initiative progresses. However, each link in the chain is crucial to the realisation of the programme's potential; and this requires constant attention to ensure that it remains serviceable and effective. This suggests that there will be a continuing need for close attention from the centre to these maintenance and support tasks and roles, given that the challenges both of sustaining the model and building new partnerships, whilst continuing to recruit and educate new cohorts of high-quality recruits, will not diminish.

10.4 Recommendations

Our recommendations relate both to the organisation and content of the Think Ahead programme, and to the contextual and structural arrangements which are necessary to ensure effective delivery. It is the latter which we believe require more urgent attention, as the underlying programme model has demonstrated the capacity to provide a robust and effective introduction to social work practice in mental health settings, so long as the supporting infrastructure is itself sound and reliable.

Strategic issues
The following are key strategic issues which need to be considered in ensuring that delivery arrangements are robust and sustainable:

- Maintaining programme fidelity across units and access to placements / opportunities to practice interventions and ensuring a degree of consistency of application of contractual arrangements
- At the same time, keeping these obligations to a minimum to ensure there is room for flexible application of the model in light of local circumstances

- A greater focus on how Local Authorities and Trusts work in order to aid transition from Summer Institute to host organisations and in particular to focus on addressing the differences between a health-led model and Local Authority model
- Closer oversight of 'critical periods' such as the transition points at the beginning, middle and end of the programme
- More active structured dialogue between Think Ahead and the participant group throughout might be helpful in terms of anticipating and addressing possible obstacles, and allaying participants' fears of being somewhat 'cut off'

During our site visits and interviews a number of points were made about lessons learned and specific things that respondents wanted to see changed for future cohorts. We have grouped these into the following themes: pre-entry, in placement, transition phase.

Pre-entry

The issue of expectations in relation to practice and entry level requirements for prospective graduates was an area identified as needing further consideration. The difficulties that some participants experienced in placement were felt to be driven by cases of individual lack of experience/knowledge of the social care sector.

Summer Institute

The Summer Institute was clearly modified between the first and second programme cohorts, and seemed to have adopted a less didactic and more inquiry-based approach to learning. The teaching programme itself was more coherent and assessment tasks better integrated. With further development of the programme to be expected, the task remains to ensure that diverse prior experiences are catered for, and input is pitched at the appropriate level for each participant as far as possible - perhaps there is a place for individual learning plans.

The highly regarded service user input was a clear strength of the programme in its initial phase, and we strongly support its continued inclusion at the level and frequency already observed.

In Placement

It was apparent that hosting arrangements specified by Think Ahead, did not suit and fit with local services in some instances and that as a result some organisations felt that there had been a 'pocket of brilliance' within their authority but that the benefits of the programme had not been cascaded or felt beyond the service directly involved in the programme. This might mean placing greater emphasis on active liaison with a wider number of organisational stakeholders than those directly engaged with the programme.

The role and remit of 'reserve consultant social workers' was also identified as an area of the programme requiring revision. In several sites, the role of the reserve CSW was felt not to have worked, with reserves finding it hard to carve out a role for themselves or engage in a meaningful way with the units.

Similar issues arose with a lack of clarity about the role of the practice specialists, and the extent to which they were expected principally to support CSWs, or participants. This may need greater clarification.

We are also aware that for some participants, things went wrong in the placement phase, and it does seem that greater flexibility and responsiveness on the part of Think Ahead might be required in such crisis situations, which are almost certain to arise, however robust the initial programme arrangements.

Transition phase

Concerns were repeatedly raised about the balance between protecting students and giving them a 'truer flavour' of workload and likely supervision arrangements in the second year of the programme. There may be a need for greater clarity about the level and sources of support to be offered in the second (ASYE) year, where Think Ahead participants will have academic commitments over and above those of other colleagues. It was also suggested that supervision and case consultations could be reduced in intensity towards the end of the first year, in order to prepare graduates for the changes in support that they would experience in Year Two. Despite this, there was also considerable evidence of the recognition of participants' capacity to respond to practice challenges and to take on difficult and demanding work by this point in the programme.

There is clearly also a need to inform graduates as soon as possible of options for their second year, delays and lack of communication causes unnecessary anxieties and demotivation. Inconsistency in the 'offer' made by local agencies to participants also needs to be avoided wherever possible.

11. References

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12. Technical Appendix

Comparison of means

Tables A1 to A3 present the mean scores reported in the Baseline and Follow up surveys. The statistical significance of differences between mean scores on each survey was tested using the t-test for independent samples. Note that this version of the t-test was used instead of a paired-sample test because only sixteen cases were represented at both time points. The independent samples t-test is the more conservative test.

Table A1 – Self efficacy rating scale item means at Baseline and Follow up (independent samples t-test)

	Baseline (T1)				Follow up (T2)				Difference between mean scores (T1 - T2)					
	N	Mn	Sd	Md	N	Mn	Sd	Md	(T2-T1)	SE	95% CI	t	df	Significance
Referral	38	4.8	1.98	5	40	6.7	1.66	7	1.9	0.41	1.08 - 2.72	4.6	76	p < .0001
Assessment	38	4.8	1.98	5	40	7.0	1.67	7	2.2	0.41	1.38 - 3.02	5.31	76	p < .0001
Planning	38	5.0	1.64	5	40	7.1	1.51	7	2.1	0.36	1.40 - 2.81	5.89	76	p < .0001
Formal Meetings	38	5.1	2.09	5	40	6.8	1.70	7	1.7	0.43	0.84 - 2.56	3.95	76	p = .0002
Review	38	4.9	1.89	5	40	6.9	1.41	7	2.0	0.38	1.25 - 2.74	5.32	76	p < .0001
Recording	38	6.7	2.03	7	40	8.1	1.44	8	1.4	0.40	0.61 - 2.19	3.53	76	p = .0007
Communication	38	7.0	1.67	7	40	7.9	1.30	8	0.9	0.34	0.23 - 1.57	2.66	76	p = .0094
Relationships	38	6.9	1.99	7	40	8.1	1.30	9	1.2	0.38	0.45 - 1.95	3.17	76	p = .0022
Multi-Agency working	38	5.9	2.14	6	40	7.3	1.46	8	1.4	0.41	0.58 - 2.22	3.39	76	p = .0011
Disadvantaged groups	38	5.9	2.04	6	40	7.4	1.43	8	1.5	0.40	0.71 - 2.29	3.78	76	p = .0003
Professional Development	38	6.6	1.76	6.5	40	7.4	1.60	8	0.8	0.38	0.04 - 1.56	2.10	76	p = .0388
Professional Accountability and Ethics	38	6.3	1.85	6	40	7.5	1.28	8	1.2	0.36	0.49 - 1.91	3.35	76	p = .0013
TOTAL	38	69.9	17.6	73.5	40	88.1	13.2	88.5	18.2	3.52	11.23-25.23	5.19	76	p<.0001

Note: Mn=Mean; Sd=Standard deviation; Md=Median; SE = Standard Error CI=Confidence interval; DF=Degrees of Freedom; P=probability.

Table A2 – Role Clarity scale item means at Baseline and Follow up (independent samples)

	Baseline (T1)				Follow up (T2)				Difference between the observed means (T1 - T2)					
	N	Mn	Sd	Md	N	Mn	Sd	Md	(T2-T1)	SE	95% CI	t	df	Significance
I am certain about how much authority I have	38	3.4	1.22	4	40	4.2	1.39	4	0.8	0.30	0.21 - 1.39	2.70	76	p = .01
Clear, planned goals and objectives exist for my job	38	3.7	1.29	4	40	4.1	1.47	4	0.4	0.31	-0.23 - 1.02	1.27	76	p = .21
I know that I have divided my time properly	38	4.1	1.44	4	40	4.5	1.18	5	0.4	0.30	-0.19 - 0.99	1.35	76	p = .18
I know what my responsibilities are	38	3.8	1.41	4	40	4.6	1.32	5	0.8	0.31	0.18 - 1.42	2.59	76	p = .01
I know exactly what is expected of me	38	3.5	1.57	3	40	3.9	1.48	4	0.4	0.35	-0.29 - 1.09	1.16	76	p = .25
Explanation is clear of what has to be done	38	3.5	1.45	4	40	3.7	1.35	4	0.2	0.32	-0.43 - 0.83	0.63	76	p = .53
TOTAL	38	22.1	6.83	23	40	24.8	6.23	26	2.7	1.48	-0.22-5.67	1.84	76	p = .07 (NS)

Note: Mn=Mean; Sd=Standard deviation; Md=Median; CI=Confidence interval; DF=Degrees of Freedom; P=probability.

Table A3 – Role Conflict scale item means at Baseline and Follow up (independent samples)

	Baseline (T1)				Follow up (T2)				Difference between means (T1 - T2)					
	N	Mn	Sd	Md	N	Mn	Sd	Md	(T2-T1)	SE	95% CI	t	df	Significance
I have to do things that should be done differently	38	4.00	1.76	4	40	4.4	1.74	5	0.4	0.04	-0.39 - 1.19	1.01	76	p = .30
I receive an assignment without the staff to complete it to your job	38	3.20	1.66	3	40	4.1	1.59	4	0.9	0.37	0.17 - 1.63	2.45	76	p = .02
I have to bend or ignore a rule or policy in order to carry out an assignment	38	2.50	1.41	2	40	3.0	1.72	3	0.5	0.36	-0.21 - 1.21	1.40	76	p = .20
I work with two or more groups who operate quite differently	38	3.60	1.97	4	40	4.7	1.94	5	1.1	0.44	0.22 - 1.98	2.48	76	p = .02
I receive incompatible requests from two or more people	38	2.90	1.86	2	40	3.9	1.88	4	1.0	0.42	0.16 - 1.84	2.36	76	p = .02
I do things that are apt to be accepted by one person and not accepted by others	38	3.40	1.83	3	40	4.2	1.81	4	0.8	0.41	-0.02 - 1.62	1.94	76	p = .06
I receive an assignment without adequate resources to carry it out.	38	3.50	1.84	3	40	4.6	1.96	5	1.1	0.43	0.24 - 1.96	2.55	76	p = .01
I work on unnecessary things	38	3.00	1.92	2	40	4.0	1.79	4	1.0	0.42	0.16 - 1.84	2.38	76	p = .02
TOTAL	38	26.0	11.2	22	40	32.8	1.0	32	6.8	2.40	1.99-11.56	2.82	76	p = .006

Note: Mn=Mean; Sd=Standard deviation; Md=Median; CI=Confidence interval; DF=Degrees of Freedom; P=probability