



Supporting Overseas Qualified Social Workers in the UK

An Evaluation Report on the Overseas Qualified Social Workers Support Programme in Sutton

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Executive Summary

Context

The UK social work sector faces a persistent workforce crisis, with vacancy rates as high as **17% in children's services** and **8.8% in adult social care in the year of 2024 (Oct 2023-Sep 2024)**. High turnover and burnout have compounded these shortages, threatening service quality and continuity. Against this backdrop, the **Sutton Social Care Internship for Hong Kong Social Workers** was piloted to address two converging needs:

1. **Support overseas qualified social workers (OQSWs)** already residing in the UK to overcome systemic barriers to registration and employment.
2. **Alleviate local authority staffing shortages** through inclusive workforce strategies.

Major Findings

Programme Effectiveness

- Combined **academic learning** (Kingston University's adapted CPD module) with **supervised practice** in Sutton Council teams.
- Enabled interns to meet **Social Work England's (SWE) practice-hour requirements** and enhanced their knowledge of UK legislation and statutory frameworks.

Outcomes for OQSWs

- 33% were already registered with SWE at the time of admission, and all the interns who were not registered at the time of admission **continued to want to register with Social Work England** after completing the internship;
- **Significant perceived growth in competence** (mean scores >4.5/5) in safeguarding, case triage, and applying UK legal frameworks.
- **Confidence in job applications and professional practice** increased markedly (mean scores ~8/10).
- Interns reported **identity rebuilding and improved transcultural learning**, supported by peer networks and inclusive supervision.

Organisational Impact

- Strengthened Sutton Council's **reputation as an inclusive employer**.
- Created a **replicable model** for workforce development integrating local authorities, higher education, and community organisations.

Challenges

- **Limited statutory practice exposure** in Children's Services compared to Adults' Services.
- Administrative **complexity in Social Work England registration** remains a barrier.
- **Timing** over holiday periods disrupted continuity.

Policy Implications

National Level

- Establish a **national support framework for OQSWs**, complementing overseas recruitment by leveraging skilled migrants already in the UK.

Local Authority Strategy

- Invest in **practice-based transition programmes** combining academic and supervised learning.
- Ensure structured placement matching and continuous shadowing opportunities, especially in statutory settings.

Regulatory Alignment

- Social Work England should provide **clearer guidance on evidence requirements for updating skills and knowledge** to reduce administrative burden.

Scalability & Sustainability

- The Sutton Model demonstrates replicability for other councils, contingent on:
 - Strong local partnerships.
 - Flexible funding streams.
 - Cohort sizes aligned with supervisory capacity.

Community Integration

- Programmes like this foster trust and inclusion, positioning councils to meet rising demand for culturally sensitive services among BN(O) visa holders approaching settlement milestones.

The Sutton Model

The Sutton Model is a **community-oriented intervention** integrating four core components:



- **Practice-based learning:** Structured placements in local authority teams.
- **Mentorship and supervision:** Dedicated supervisors and buddy systems.
- **Peer learning:** Informal support networks among interns.

- **Classroom learning:** CPD modules delivered by local universities.

Surrounding these elements is a framework of **community engagement and cross-sector collaboration**, ensuring that professional transition is culturally informed and inclusive.

Conclusion

The Sutton Model offers a **scalable, community-oriented approach** to workforce development. By integrating academic learning, supervised practice, and transcultural learning, it provides a critical pathway for OQSWs to re-enter the UK workforce while strengthening local authority capacity. National adoption of similar models could mitigate workforce shortages and promote inclusive, culturally competent social care services.

Introduction

Social work workforce in the UK has been experiencing a persistent shortage, that it further depleted post-COVID19 pandemic (Foster, 2023; The Guardian, 2023) and is described as in 'a state of crisis' (Murphy et al., 2025). The high vacancy rate, agency use, staff sickness and burnout have impacted on the quality and consistency of service, jeopardising the trust and rapport built between social workers and service users (Ibid). Between 1 Oct 2021 and 30 September 2022, the **vacancy rate reached 20%**, meaning **one in five children's social worker posts in England was vacant**, showing a significant rise from the previous years¹ (Department of Education, 2023). While the vacancy rate has declined slightly since 2022, **by the end of September 2024, it remained as high as 17%** (Department of Education, 2025). The adult social care sector faces similar pressures: in 2024, there were an estimated **1,600 vacant social worker posts** in local authority adult services in England, with a vacancy rate of **8.8%**. The turnover rate of social workers in adult social care is as high as 12.8% (Skills for Care, 2025).

These ongoing challenges indicate the need to improve the working conditions, pay and support for social workers, to attract, recruit and retain talents. Only when the workforce is replenished, social workers would no longer need to work with 'dangerous workload' that harms both their wellbeing and service outcomes.

To alleviate the pressure on social work workforce, Department of Health and Social Care once provided extra funding (£15m) to support local authorities to recruit social workers from overseas (Community Care, 2023). The current practice of overseas recruitment often involves local authorities recruiting directly from overseas sites, through recruitment agencies, but little consideration has been given to social worker migrants who have already moved to the UK and intend to re-enter the workforce.

Overseas qualified social workers in the UK

UK has decades of history recruiting overseas qualified social workers to fill vacancies persistently appearing in the social care workforce. Moriarty et al. (2011) documented a sharp increase in the number of overseas qualified social workers registered with the England regulator (then General Social Care Council), between the 1990s and 2000s, in the context of decreased enrolment to qualifying courses and expansion of EU. In the past years, we have witnessed another surge in the number of overseas qualified social workers seeking to register in England –from 611 applicants in 2019–20 to 1,684 in 2021–22 (Community Care, 2024). Between 1 December 2019 to 30 November 2020 and the same period in 2021–22, Social Work England recorded a 175% increase in the number of overseas applicants to register. From 2021–22, the number of Nigerian social workers on the register grew by 31%, the number of South African social workers by 29%, the number of Indian social workers by 22% and the number of Zimbabwean social workers by 21% (Ibid).

Representatives from the British Association of Social Workers spoke openly that 'a national support programme for the growing number of overseas social workers in the UK should be

¹ It is 17% in 2017, 16.5% in 2018, 16.4% in 2019, 16.1% in 2020, 16.7% in 2021

“seriously considered” (Community Care, 2024). A similar call for support was advocated in the 2000s as well (Welbourne, Harrison and Ford, 2007) to ethically help overseas qualified social workers to transition to the local workforce and ensuring local practices are embedded in their knowledge and skills. The need for ongoing support in the workplace, including a tailored induction programme and mentoring is also identified in research and induction guidelines produced by the BASW Diaspora Social Work Special Interest Group (2023).

Hong Kong social workers moving to the UK

Following the social and political unrests in the 2019 Hong Kong and further crackdown on civil society and people’s freedoms, the British government launched the British Nationals (Overseas) (BN(O)) visa route on 31 January 2021. When it was first introduced, it allowed Hong Kong citizens who were born before 1997 and their spouses and dependents to migrate to the UK; and later, it included those who were born after 1997, whose parents are BN(O) holders, to apply independently. By 31 March 2025, 163,400 BN(O) visa holders have already arrived in the UK (rounded) (Home Office, 2025). If calculated by the proportion of social workers in Hong Kong’s general population, which is about 0.37%, there is a rough estimate of more than 600 Hong Kong qualified social workers who might have already moved to the UK through the BN(O) route.

In a training need survey (Kong and Chow, 2023) conducted with Hong Kong social workers (N =324) who have moved/ are planning to move to the UK, it shows that 98% (318) of the respondents completed a social work professional qualification in Hong Kong, with more than 89% of the respondents having had a bachelor or a master’s degree in Hong Kong. For those who were planning to migrate to the UK, 96% of them would like to re-enter the social work workforce within 5 years. These social workers rated ‘not understanding the legal and service frameworks in the UK’ and ‘language barriers, such as accents and slangs’ as the greatest barriers to rejoining the workforce; meanwhile, the most in demand training is in the areas of ‘social policy’, ‘professional capability framework’, ‘law’ and ‘children/adult safeguarding’.

Social workers from Hong Kong, like many migrants, tend to focus on settling their families before they consider their career in the new country. By the time they settle the children in the UK school system and find themselves a stable accommodation, many of them might have left their practice for more than a year before they have the capacity to consider registering with UK social work regulators. This career gap often means additional hours required for Updating Skills and Knowledge (USK) if Hong Kong social workers want to register in the UK. By the regulation of Social Work England (SWE, 2023), it would also mean 30-60 days of Continuous Professional Development (CPD) learning, depending on the time when the qualification is obtained, with no more than half of it being private study. The rest of the USK days will then need to be either ‘formal study’ or supervised practice (Kong and Chow, 2023).

This is the context in which the **Sutton Social Care Internship for Hong Kong Social Workers** was created to provide the support needed to enable Hong Kong qualified social workers to register with Social Work England and continue to practise in the UK.

The Overseas Qualified Social Workers (OQSWs) Support Programme in Sutton

Rationale and objectives

The **Sutton Social Care Internship for Hong Kong Social Workers** (hereafter, internship programme) was developed in response to multiple converging needs within both the local authority of Sutton and the broader UK social work sector. At its core, the programme aimed to address acute workforce shortages while offering meaningful pathways for overseas qualified social workers—especially those from Hong Kong—to transition into regulated social work practice in the UK.

Following the introduction of the British National (Overseas) (BN(O)) visa in 2021, Sutton Council recognised the opportunity to engage with an emerging population of Hongkongers in their constituency. Many of whom held social work qualifications and professional registration in Hong Kong. While many accredited social work programmes in Hong Kong are compatible with the accredited programmes in the UK, these Hong Kong qualified social workers continue to face systemic barriers to register with Social Work England hence further difficulties in joining the UK social work workforce. These barriers included limited access to UK-based placement experience, unfamiliarity with English legislation and statutory frameworks, and the lack of tailored support to bridge professional and cultural gaps.

At the same time, Children's Services and Adult Services in Sutton were experiencing difficulties in recruiting and retaining qualified social workers. Like many other local authorities, Sutton had vacancies across various frontline roles, leading to increased caseload pressure on existing staff and concerns about service continuity and workforce sustainability.

The Sutton internship programme goes beyond traditional overseas recruitment strategies – grounded in a vision of **mutual benefit**, it pioneers a programme that aims to provide local authorities skilled social work practitioners while offering migrant social workers a dignified, supported, and meaningful route into the UK workforce.

The rationale for the Sutton internship programme was therefore threefold:

1. **To improve Hongkongers' transition to the local workforce in Sutton** through a social work employment support programme
2. **To meet local workforce needs** through engaging, supporting and developing a pipeline of talent from overseas qualified social workers already in Sutton
3. **To create a structured and replicable professional transition programme** for overseas qualified social workers—using Hongkonger social workers as a case for model development

Aligned with the rationale, this pilot programme also has the following objectives:

- 1.1. To promote community and workforce inclusion via this innovative employment support programme

2.1 To increase the number of successfully registered overseas qualified social workers in the region.

3.1 To generate and test a replicable model of support for overseas qualified social workers for other councils and stakeholders interested in similar workforce solutions.

The internship programme is developed by Sutton Council, in collaboration with UK Welcomes Refugees and Kingston University. It includes an academic element and a practicum element, underpinned by a culturally informed approach to transnational learning.

The academic element is a short academic course (modified from the existing ‘Restoring Social Work Practice’) delivered by Kingston University focused on core statutory knowledge, legislative frameworks, cultural reflection, best practice models and casework skills. **The practicum element** is a local authority-led practice placement that included team integration, buddying, shadowing, and structured supervision aligned with the registration standards set out by Social Work England.

Partners in the internship programme

Partner Role and Contribution

Sutton Council Lead partner and host employer. Sutton Council designed and coordinated the overall programme, including identifying workforce needs, selecting participants, and providing supervised placement opportunities within its social work teams. Council staff offered mentoring, buddying, and structured supervision to help overseas qualified social workers (OQSWs) adapt to UK practice environments.

Kingston University Higher education partner responsible for delivering classroom-based teaching. Kingston University developed a bespoke 15-credit CPD module based on their existing ‘Return to Social Work’ course. The curriculum focused on legislation, ethics, local policies, and UK casework practices. In this model, the university provided academic grounding while Sutton Council facilitated practical placement. Kingston considered the programme a worthwhile investment when cohort sizes reach 10–20 participants.

UK Welcomes Refugees (UKWR) A UK-based charity supporting migrants and refugees across the country. UKWR served as a key engagement partner, maintaining close contact with overseas social workers, particularly those from Hong Kong. They facilitated outreach and pre-programme communication through established networks, including a Signal group with over 600 Hong Kong social workers and a WhatsApp group with over 90 UK-registered social workers. UKWR also offered employment navigation and peer support.

Local Members of Parliament (MPs) Policy engagement partners who supported the strategic positioning of the programme. Local MPs helped link the project’s findings and goals to broader parliamentary discussions around workforce planning, immigration policy, and labour market access. Their involvement ensured visibility at the national level and helped align the project with long-term policy goals.

Required resources

£35,000 was committed by the Council, via the Invest to Save funding, to set up the infrastructure, including partnership with Kingston University and extra human resource for programme coordination and supervision. With this funding, a supervisor post was created for half a year in children services to support Hong Kong qualified social workers who are placed in the Children services for their placement. In adult services, two supervisors were identified from the existing team to support the two interns for 12 weeks.

A key resource was the time commitment at senior level of management, including the Director of Children's Services, Head of Safeguarding & Principal Social Worker (AMHP) and Principal Social Worker (Children's), to secure grants, negotiate with partners and design and quality assure the programme.

With this resource input, the programme has successfully recruited 8 Hong Kong qualified social workers:

- 5 interns in children's services
- 2 interns in adults services
- 1 EIO placed in adults services

All recruited interns and EIO completed the programme. More information about the internship programme, including the structure and timeline of development, please refer to the Appendix 1.

Evaluation Methodology

The evaluation of the Sutton internship programme was designed to capture both **process** (formative evaluation) and **outcome measures** (summative evaluation), with a view to understand the effectiveness of the programme and to inform future replication and improvement. A **mixed-methods approach** was adopted, combining qualitative and quantitative data to understand not only *what* the programme achieved, but also *how* it was experienced by interns and stakeholders. The latter question helps us discover mechanisms that give rise to the intended and unintended outcomes.

The evaluation also aims to capture multi-stakeholders' perspectives, so to shed light on the process and the outcomes as well as challenges to further rollout of the programme. The evaluation incorporated three layers of stakeholder input:

- **Local Authority Perspective:** Views from Sutton Council on programme design, implementation, workforce impact, resource investment, and sustainability;
- **Higher Education Perspective:** Feedback from Kingston University staff on course design, academic delivery, participant readiness, and challenges in teaching overseas qualified social workers;
- **Participant Perspective:** Reflections from the recruited social workers on their experience of the placement, classroom training, and transition to the UK social work context.

This multi-perspective approach allowed for a comprehensive understanding of both **system-level impacts** and **individual-level experiences**, offering a well-rounded evaluation of the Sutton internship programme. More importantly, the multiple perspectives further allow us to build the Sutton Model that shows how different sectors can work together to promote an inclusive social and professional environment for overseas qualified social workers to thrive and meaningfully contribute to the UK social work workforce.

Research team

Dr Sui-Ting Kong, from Durham University, was an advisor in this evaluative study. Leading alongside Hei Chow and Alan Dei from the UK Welcome Refugees, Dr Kong contributed to the research design, data collection and data analysis to assess the programme's effectiveness and replicability. Hei Chow and Alan Dei led the data collection, preliminary analysis and co-wrote the report with Dr Kong. Sutton Council also advised on the research design and the final report, so to ensure suitability and relevance of the research to the local partners.

Mixed-methods design

The study takes a sequential mixed methods design to explore the experiences of social workers participating in the internship programme. The quantitative element involves a survey that consists of a range of outcome measures (summative); meanwhile, the qualitative element includes different sets of questions to explore not only intended and unintended

outcomes but also experiences and mechanisms that might have led to those outcomes (formative and summative).

Quantitative data (February 2025)

A structured **questionnaire** was distributed via [Google Forms](#) in **February 2025** to all participating Hong Kong qualified social workers. The questionnaire focuses on perceived change because it could be administered only at the completion of the programme.

It aimed to assess:

- Interns' **intention** to work as social workers in the UK;
- Self-reported levels of **confidence (10-point Likert scale) and competence (knowledge and skills, 5-point Likert scale)** relevant to UK social work practice;
- Their perceptions of the **training quality** and **support mechanisms** offered during the programme.

7 programme participants, out of the 8 recruited to the programme, returned the questionnaire: 4 from the Children's Early Help team, 2 from the Adult Support team, and 1 is an Enabling Independence Officer (EIO). As the EIO was a paid support role without frontline placement, their data was excluded from the analysis to focus on interns who experienced supervised practice. The EIO was also not included in the interview stage.

Table 1: General data of survey participants (N=6)

Registration status	Count	% of Total (n=6)
Registered with UK regulator (Yes)	2	33%
Registered with UK regulator (No)	4	67%

Plan to register	Count	% of Total
Plan to register in next 6 months	4	67%
*No plan / blank	2	33%

* These interns had already registered with SWE

Internship route	Count	% of Total
Children Service (Route A)	4	67%
Adult Service (Route B)	2	33%

Qualitative data (Feb to May 2025)

The interviews were conducted after the completion of the programme (March–May 2025) and aimed to explore interns lived experiences, professional growth, and challenges encountered throughout the programme lifecycle.

In-depth **interviews** were conducted with three key groups:

- **6 interns** who completed the Sutton internship programme;
- **2 Sutton Council Social Services staff** involved in programme design and delivery;
- **1 Kingston University academic staff** responsible for course design and facilitation.

Interview questions

Sutton Council and Kingston University: What are the challenges arising from the implementation of the internship programme? What worked and what didn't? What are the necessary conditions that enable the initiative? Would you do this again and why?

Hong Kong qualified social workers: How did you experience the programme (starting from learning about the programme to admission and getting trained)? What have you achieved in the process and at the end of the programme? What enabled those outcomes, from your perspective? Are there any unmet expectations?

Table 2: Demographic data of Interviewees

OQSW interns	Pre-Migration Social Work Experience (Years)	Previous Roles / Sectors	Internship Route
Alpha	10+	NGO Social Work in Family Services, HK, plus voluntary work in UK	Children
Beta	10+	Medical Social Worker in HK Hospital Authority	Children
Gamma	10+	School and Youth Social Worker, family service centre in HK	Children
Delta	5+	Youth Worker in residential unit for teenage boys in UK	Adult
Epsilon	10+	HK Social Work in Youth Centre, later voluntary work and care assistant in UK	Children
Zeta	10+	Worked in elderly services, including both community and residential	Adult
Internship programme	Titles	Roles in the Internship Programme	
Michael Radley	Principal Social Worker (Children's) and Therapeutic Hub Service Manager M	Coordinator of the Internship Programme	Sutton Council
Debbie Brough	Head of Safeguarding & Principal Social Worker (AMHP) Adult Social Care People	Chief Supervisor of the internship workers	Sutton Council

	Directorate, London Borough of Sutton		
Sue Lansley	Senior Lecturer Step Up Course Lead School of Education, Midwifery and Social Work, Faculty of Health, Science, Social Care and Education Kingston University	Lecturer of the study programme in Kingston University	Kingston University

Data analysis

The quantitative data are descriptively analysed with MS Excel 2023 by Hei Chow, showing the average scores of perceived improvements after the completion of the internship programme and the average scores of satisfactions towards the quality and the process of the programme. Both the range and the median are reported alongside the mean scores for process and outcome measures.

Qualitative data are thematically analysed by the research team (Sui-Ting Kong, Hei Chow and Alan Dei). The team first met to discuss the themes that emerged from the data after their first reading, and the data were further categorised manually by Hei Chow and Alan Dei according to the themes. The data under specific themes were further analysed by Hei Chow and Sui-Ting Kong to ensure accuracy, relevance to the research questions and comprehensiveness.

Member checking was carried out in Oct 2025 with Sutton Council, including leaders from the children services and adult services, as well as a local MP. Modifications of the analysis were made if they enhanced the accuracy of interpretation, relevance and transferability.

Results I: Process Evaluation

This section focuses on the implementation processes, starting from cross-institutional collaboration to programme design and delivery and communication and engagement across different stages². Drawing on the in-depth interviews with multiple stakeholders (N=9) and survey data (N=6), the process evaluation uncovers the perception and the nuanced experiences of interns about the programme's design and delivery. It helps us understand what worked and what didn't, shedding light on future improvements and roll out of the model.

Cross-institutional collaboration

The programme benefitted from a strong existing relationship between Sutton Council and Kingston University through the Southwest London Developing Together Teaching Partnership. This allowed for joint planning and swift coordination in tailoring the 'Restoring Social Work Practice' module for overseas qualified social workers.

'Well, we already have a pre-existing relationship with Kingston University because they're part of our regional teaching partnership. So, in terms of that was a pre-existing relationship that we had, so that really wasn't any hardship to build that.' - Michael, Sutton Council

'Sutton and Kingston are part of a wider SW London and Surrey Region teaching partnership. So, we have the southwest London developing together teaching partnership and that means we have close links with our local organisations and there are, you know, our local authorities in our region. So that was sort of the context in which we were together anyway.' – Sue, Kingston University lecturer

The social work teaching partnership in the region has brought together charitable organisations, local authorities and Higher Education Institutions to plan for social work education and share information on their independent and collaborative developments. This existing partnership became an enabling condition for resources identification (i.e. Kingston's Return to Social Work programme previously run for Surrey Council), exchange of ideas and innovative practice, leading to the birth of this OQSW internship programme.

The design of the internship programme

The internship programme followed a **carefully designed sequence**, flowing from an early induction to classroom learning, placement, recall days, and a final reflective session. This structure supported interns in connecting practical experiences with academic learning.

Many social work interns reported that this progression **deepened their understanding of UK legislation, case management expectations**, and local authority procedures, helping them to make sense of their prior knowledge in a new context and reflect on what they learned in the classroom.

² Details of the different stages of development, please refer to 'Timeline for programme and evaluation development' (p.11).

'So, they started in November, they did two days with us. Then we did like a recall day, they had a daily university in December, they had two days in January and then two days in February. And that felt to us a good balance because, you know, once we'd given that initial, you know, welcome to social work in the UK, you know, getting them back into that sort of study mindset. It felt really important to us that they then had that lived experience of working within the local authority and then they were able to, you know, marry that against some of that academic stuff that we were looking at. So that's how we structured it.' – Sue, Kingston University lecturer

'At first, I attended a couple of classes but didn't connect much with the work yet. But after starting work and then returning to [the] classes, I had more to relate to, so I gained more from it.' - Beta

'Structurally, the programme is fine. The design where learning alternates with placement and regular classes is good—it encourages discussion and sharing experiences, which deepens learning.' – Gamma

Admission and placement allocation

The admission process for the Sutton internship programme was led by Sutton Council, with support from UK Welcomes Refugees (UKWR) and advice from Durham University. Promotion of the opportunity was specifically targeted at Hong Kong qualified social workers living in the UK, using community networks and communication platforms such as WhatsApp and Signal groups organised by UKWR. A formal call for Expression of Interest (Appendix 2) was launched after a public information session and a subsequent Q&A event organised by Sutton Council. A total of 8 Hong Kong qualified social workers were recruited to the programme, with 6 placed in early help children services and 2 placed in adult support services.

The admission process was generally **smooth and well-received** by interns. The initial information session and Q&A events played a key role in creating a **welcoming and inclusive atmosphere**. Many interns expressed that these sessions helped them feel heard and respected, with some highlighting how meaningful it was to be invited to share their personal journeys and motivations. This **early engagement successfully built trust and appreciation**, with several interviewees explicitly stating their gratitude for being considered in such a supportive initiative.

However, while the recruitment process was broadly clear and positive, there were some inconsistencies in how **placement preferences** were handled. Not all interns were asked about their preferred service area (e.g., children services or adult services), and among those who were, a few noted that they were ultimately placed in teams that differed from their stated preference (n=2).

'I mentioned that I preferred working in adults but ended up in children's services. I'm not sure why. I did learn things, but initially it was quite uncomfortable.' - Delta

This mismatch did not significantly affect overall satisfaction, but it was noted as an area where better alignment could have improved motivation and readiness. Future cohorts may benefit

from a more structured matching process to ensure intern preferences and team needs are best aligned.

Classroom learning

The internship programme featured a carefully phased structure, designed to support overseas qualified social workers in building contextual understanding of UK practice. The programme comes with a 10-day course at Kingston University. The module itself is modified from an existing course on Restoring Social Work Practice. In addition to classroom learning, there was an assessment that includes a presentation and a reflective essay.

The 15-credit module, *Restoring Social Work Practice*, delivered by Kingston University, was specifically adapted for overseas qualified social workers. The course included ten teaching days spread across the programme period, covering key themes such as **UK social work legislation, safeguarding, professional ethics, risk assessment, case management, and working with families and adults**. Particular attention was given to interpreting statutory duties and aligning them with UK-specific frameworks like the Children Act 1989 and Care Act 2014.

Interns engaged in **interactive seminars, presentations, peer learning, and applied tasks**, allowing them to reflect critically on the similarities and differences between UK practice and their home country experiences. The course aimed not only to meet Social Work England's overseas study requirements but also to foster **confidence, critical thinking, and professional identity** in a new social work context.

Interns particularly appreciated **the balance of theory and discussion**, and the integration of reflective elements based on live practice. The classroom learning was enhanced by having guest speakers who were also frontline social workers. OQSWs felt more prepared for placement after they learned about the social workers' experiences of implementing legislative frameworks and navigating the complexities.

'The real challenge is the implementation, and that's why having guest speakers who shared practical frontline experience was timely and very helpful — it filled those gaps we experienced when actually doing the work.' – Zeta

'I'm not sure how much this applies to me personally, but, like I mentioned earlier about self-neglect, there happened to be an afternoon session where they invited a scholar specialising in self-neglect to give a talk. This person also has a lot of frontline experience. That afternoon's sharing session, I saw many students—even those in child protection—really enjoyed it. Even the colleagues in the children's team found it valuable, so I think a bit more sharing of frontline experience like that is quite important. Of course, I know it's not always easy to connect with frontline experience directly, but having someone come and share their experience like that was really great—an excellent talk that covered both sides well.' - Delta

Sue from Kingston University also agreed that **the gap between classroom learning, policies or theories, and practice must be addressed** to make any restoring social work training successful. While Sue deliberately brought practitioners into the classroom to fill this

learning gap, she remained to see that a comprehensive learning experience shall involve actual doing of 'statutory work':

'Statutory social work. The only thing I would say about that is that if a lot of if the interns, if their main area is wanted to know about legislation and policy, and then you're wanting the practise to link back to that to the teaching if they're in a because this is the feedback that we get from our undergraduates that are on BA and MSW courses and they have their first placement in a voluntary setting, they'll say I didn't feel I got enough around legislation and policy, didn't it didn't give me that learning.'

'So, if we're saying that when the interns from overseas come in and say they want to get that knowledge around legislative policy, yes, I can teach it in the classroom, but we're still in that. That's still in that situation where they're not being able to apply it' – Sue, Kingston University lecturer.

'Exactly, once we really started doing the work, that's when the setup showed its strength. I no longer needed the background knowledge — Sue's initial classes had already given us all that. We knew the laws and frameworks we were following.' - Zeta

The **multi-cultural learning environment** in the classroom enhances peer exchange and critical learning of local policies and practices. This is fostered by learning with another intern who was qualified in the United States, to share their practice experiences across contexts. These **cross-cultural interactions** introduced comparative perspectives on system values, professional ethics, and cultural sensitivity in social work. Interns noted that these sessions prompted rich dialogues around handling complex cases and navigating differences in service user expectations across international contexts.

Cultural diversity embedded in classroom learning also fostered an open environment to discuss the differences between social work practices and systems in the UK and Hong Kong. For example, stronger emphasis on the agency of service users, contextual safeguarding and voices of children are described as cultural shock to the social work interns.

'Safeguarding was the most useful topic. In Hong Kong, I had less exposure to safeguarding, so learning about it here was very helpful. They focused on some issues that were clearer and more prominent than what I had seen before. I also learned about 'contextual safeguarding' which covers wider social issues like drugs — that was a new area for me and really expanded my knowledge.' - Gamma

'So, whilst they were all very familiar with, you know, sexual exploitation or grooming, they've not heard the term contextual safeguarding. So, we looked at quite a lot of the research around that.' – Sue, Kingston University

These comparative dialogues help Hong Kong qualified interns realise the differences in professional practice between Hong Kong and the UK. For example, they consistently mentioned how assessment of needs, risks and mental capacity in Hong Kong are somehow less regulated, and many expressed an interest in furthering study in this direction.

The lecturer of the course at Kingston University, Sue, is an experienced social worker and educator. Her knowledge about what overseas qualified social workers need and the ability to

explain both the legislations/policies as well as the historical conditions leading to them are strongly complimented.

'Exactly, because besides the legislation itself, the background and history of social work in the UK are also important for how we equip ourselves. Each piece of legislation actually stems from certain social events, and honestly, as new immigrants, we're definitely not familiar with the social conditions and situations in the UK.' - Epsilon

With all the gratitude and admiration expressed by the interns, they also highlighted **the good qualities of social work educators** for supporting overseas qualified social workers:

- Able to explain the legislations, policies and practice models by engaging with OQSW's professional experience
- Do not assume the understanding of the historical backgrounds that lead to UK legislations, policies and practices
- Conscientiously integrate legislations, policies, theories, models and frontline practices
- Continuously create and provide cross-cultural dialogues

Flexible course adaptation

Kingston University adapted its existing 15-credit CPD module to match the needs of internship programme, ensuring it met Social Work England's requirements for registration.

'...it was really the study hours and then the practise hours. To register with social work England. So, I've already run this module a couple of times, and it was with social workers in the main from Caribbean countries...We looked at the existing module that we've got because of course at university I can't move too far away from that existing module. So, it's about how do you, how you tweak that, so it fits the need.' – Sue, Kingston University

Sutton Council also mentioned that any modification of the Restoring Social Work Practice course to suit the internship programme depends on the existing partnership and trust built between the local authorities and the higher education institutions in the region.

Access to university resources

One element highly valued by interns was access to Kingston University's library services. This provided crucial academic support and materials for self-directed study, especially for those unfamiliar with UK-specific frameworks and terminology. Interns described this as essential in building their confidence and competence during the programme.

Practice-based learning

Organisational support for OQSW interns

Throughout the internship, interns received practical and emotional support from colleagues in the placement sites. The structure of this support varied slightly between teams but generally included individual supervision, access to experienced mentors, and a culture that

promoted openness and flexibility. This system aimed to provide a safe learning environment where interns could navigate a new professional context with confidence.

Supportive Organisational Culture

Many interns described Sutton Council's **work environment as supportive, collaborative, and flexible**. Staff at all levels were willing to assist with questions, share expertise, and create a learning environment conducive to growth. New staff, including interns, had access to a clear induction process and online systems and received day-to-day operational support.

'I appreciated that the induction process was clear and well-organised. There's a dedicated induction team helping all new employees understand Sutton Council's structure... the systems work well.' – Gamma

'Their online support is quite strong. They have chat groups for IT support... especially helpful for new people joining the council.' – Epsilon

'The reason I stress that this is absolutely brilliant and deserves high praise is because the team manager carefully considered who to assign our cases to and who would supervise us. That person is not only competent but also genuinely committed to teaching us and engages with us in a meaningful way.' – Zeta

Interns' strong intention to rejoin the workforce and specifically Sutton Council social services shall be contextualised in the persistent demonstration of care, openness and inclusiveness to migrant communities by regional leaders in social services.

Supervision and mentoring structure

In **Children's Services**, all six interns were supervised by a dedicated supervisor, additional to the existing team. The programme included formal individual supervision throughout the internship programme, supporting their general development of skills and knowledge including casework. Interns reported that they could ask questions freely and that team members were responsive and encouraging when providing support.

In **Adults' Services**, the two interns were each paired with a qualified social worker from the existing team. They are often referred to as a 'buddies' or mentor who supported them through the first six weeks. A new mentor was then assigned for the second half of the programme. Regular formal and informal supervisions were offered by the buddy/mentor, and placement experiences were structured to gradually build case handling confidence.

At least 4 out of 8 interns (Gamma, Zeta, Epsilon and Delta) explicitly mentioned the quality of the **supervision as 'excellent', 'thorough', 'responsive' and 'adaptive'** to their learning needs. Their opinions represent experiences across children and adult services.

'During our personal supervision sessions, [the supervisor is] always willing to talk through our difficulties... willing to do home visits with us, which we really appreciate.'
– Epsilon

'Despite the heavy workload, I received excellent support from the teams. The managers arranged for two senior social workers to be our supervisors and provided regular one-to-one supervision sessions. The entire team—from managers to frontline social workers—was very approachable and willing to answer our questions, offering all-around support.' - Delta

The buddy system, either used for providing supervision or informal support at workplace, is clearly an effective system to motivate self-directed learning among interns.

Because of cultural proximity among interns, the buddy system was informally extended to include peer support among the Hongkonger interns. With many of whom were placed in the same team, they met regularly to share their learning experiences and challenges, becoming a key source of emotional reassurance, confidence-building, and practical knowledge exchange in a new and demanding work environment.

'We shared the same language and culture, so we could ask questions and help each other. ...yes, since we spent eight hours a day together, facing challenges side by side, we helped each other solve problems. Having buddies was great, but if the group is too big, others might find it hard to approach us.' - Beta

'Informal groups are very important. Family's support helps too. My method is to keep talking to people and realise I'm not alone. Support groups help find outlets for anxiety and uncertainty.' - Alpha

While this sense of community helped ease initial anxiety and supported daily problem-solving, some interns reflected on the problems of these group dynamics. They particularly pointed out that placing too many interns of the same/proximate ethnicity together may have unintendedly reduced their interactions with the wider team.

'But I think there were too many people. For example, in Early Help, we had five people, which created a subgroup. ... If there were fewer people, say two or three, it might be easier for others to approach [us] or to mix [with other people] more.' - Beta

'Yes, definitely. Being able to speak Cantonese made it easier to communicate, especially when you're new and unfamiliar with the service. We could quickly ask each other simple questions and get answers and offer emotional support by sharing our struggles. But with five of us together in Children's Services, it sometimes felt a bit like a big group, which can make it harder to reach out to other colleagues. I think having just two or three people might strike a better balance — providing support but encouraging engagement with other team members.' - Gamma

Several interns suggested that a smaller grouping (e.g., two or three per team) would be a better balance between peer support and deeper engagement with colleagues in the wider team.

Learning and practice opportunities

The internship programme provided meaningful hands-on experiences to help OQSWs adapt their professional skills to the UK context. While both Children's and Adults' Services offered interns real-world exposure, the **depth and breadth of opportunities varied significantly** between teams, affecting learning outcomes.

'...when an experienced colleague came along and explained how they handled things, shared actual case studies from their own work, everything clicked. Even though some examples didn't exactly match the specific cases I was dealing with, knowing the general thought process helped a lot. It gave me a clearer idea of what to do next.' - Zeta

Interns spoke highly of placements that present opportunities to shadow a variety of practices, to handle complex cases with support of experienced colleagues and to listen to case experiences from colleagues of a range of roles.

Children's Services: Limited Exposure to Frontline Practice

Most interns in Children's Services were placed in the **Early Help** team (Tier 1 & 2 services) that provides early support to improve outcomes of children and prevent further escalation of risks that amount to statutory interventions. While this setting provided opportunities to undertake initial case assessment and triage, interns **faced limited opportunities for shadowing frontline statutory practices** (e.g., Tier 3 and Tier 4 services). A planned shadowing rotation only occurred on the final day of the programme.

'Our centre wasn't in the main building, so we only saw Tier 2 services. I'm not very familiar with Tiers 3 and 4, which are more frontline social work. I'd like to learn how they handle emergencies, apply laws, and work with hostile families.' – Alpha

'Actually, the shadowing was just one day towards the end, when we visited the Locality Team. It was a sharp contrast to Early Help. The cases were much more complex and the workload heavier, which gave a real sense of what social workers handle. We also sat in meetings where multi-disciplinary cooperation was very evident.' – Gamma

Due to the voluntary nature of Early Help cases, the number of active cases varied among interns. Some interns had only one or two cases throughout the programme, limiting the breadth and depth of practice.

'At first, we were each assigned two cases, but Early Help is quite voluntary — clients can drop out anytime if they decide they don't want the service anymore. So, some colleagues [other interns] had cases drop out, and they ended up with just one case. Originally, they expected us to handle six cases, but so far many of us have only done one or two.' – Beta

'At the start... They mentioned caseload depends on how many days you can work per week. For example, if you said you could work four days, you'd have about two cases per day. Later, there were some adjustments, based on supervisors' views and

stress levels. Initially, each person had two cases, and if you could handle more, you could take more.' - Alpha

Despite efforts from supervisors to support learning, the ongoing restructuring in Children's Services during the programme period reduced the interns' exposure to most needed experiences in statutory practice, such as home visits, statutory assessment and multidisciplinary conference for children at risk. These learning opportunities are particularly crucial for OQSWs because these are sites where they translate their previous experiences into local statutory practices and pick up the language used in home visits and formal statutory meetings.

Adults' Services: More Diverse Case Experience

In contrast, the two interns placed in Adults' Services reported significantly more practice opportunities compared to their counterparts in Children's Services. From the beginning of the placement, they were actively involved in **home visits, triage assessments, and case discussions**, with responsibilities gradually expanding over time.

'From the beginning, we had to accompany social workers on home visits. We weren't just observing — we were encouraged to talk to the service users, write down notes, and then discuss the case with our mentor afterward... In the last few weeks, I chaired a couple of meetings myself. At first, I was nervous, but my mentor encouraged me and helped me prepare. Afterward, we reflected on what went well and what to improve.' - Zeta

Interns were given increasing autonomy and direct engagement with service users and professionals. This included chairing meetings, leading discussions, and drafting case notes.

This arrangement allowed interns to experience the **realistic pace and complexity** of adult social care in the UK. They handled diverse and sometimes complex caseloads, benefitting from regular support and reflective supervision.

'The social workers' cases were definitely more complex than those handled by the EIOs (Enabling Impediment Officers). But the supervisor understood that since we were working towards registration, we needed to be supervised by a qualified social worker. So, she assigned a colleague who was both very experienced and genuinely willing to teach us. That colleague really guided us closely — we would have regular discussions, and she even booked a room to have a proper, formal supervision session with us that lasted for a few hours.' - Zeta

Additionally, the interns felt well integrated into the team and their contributions were valued.

'I felt like part of the team. People asked me for my input in meetings and didn't treat me like just an observer. I think that really helped me grow as a professional.' – Epsilon

Overall, the Adult Services placement provided a **richer and more immersive practice experience**, offering insights into statutory procedures, inter-agency collaboration, and frontline decision-making that mirror mainstream UK social work.

'We learned that with the right support, some of the participants could take on tasks that made a real difference... so yes, there's longer-term benefit for the workforce.' - Jonathan, Sutton Council

The internship in Adult Services demonstrated that when adequately supported, interns could undertake meaningful, complex work, suggest long-term workforce benefit if the programme is replicated at scale.

Timing

While there is overwhelmingly positive feedback from interns, one caveat is that the programme was run over the period of Christmas and New Year. Soon after the internship programme started, things were paused because of Christmas and New Year breaks. For some, it interrupted their learning in relation to continuity and motivation.

'There were time restrictions. I'm not sure if it was poor organisation or just their mindset, but we started receiving cases around December, which coincided with Christmas when staff and schools were on holiday, so there were fewer visits or meetings scheduled.' - Gamma

It was recognised it would be better for the programme to run continuously, hence not overlapping with Christmas and New Year.

Overall perception of the learning process

The survey findings also confirm that the interns were **most positive about the supportive supervisory relationships** (8.8), the learning content which includes legal (8.8) and theoretical knowledge (8.6) as well as feeling able to use their previous professional experience (8.6). While interns **mostly agree that they felt 'their overseas social work experience is appreciated'** (7.8) and '**supported in the learning process**' (7.6), these two items are rated the lowest among others.

Table 3. OQSW's Learning Process Perception

Process Measure	Mean	Median	Range
a. feeling supported in the learning process	7.6	7	4
b. feeling able to use your previous experience and knowledge in the UK contexts	8.6	8	2
c. feeling your oversea social work experience is appreciated	7.8	7	3
d. feeling able to discuss differences between social work practice in your home	8.4	9	3

country and the UK with your colleagues			
e. feeling able to share worries with your supervisor(s)	8.8	9	3
f. The project provides me with the theoretical knowledge required to practice effectively in this county and context.	8.6	9	3
g. The project provides me with the legislative knowledge required to practice effectively in this county and context.	8.8	9	3

Meanwhile, interns in **Adult Services (Route B)** consistently reported **higher scores in the process measures** compared to those in **Children's Services (Route A)**:

Table 4. OQSW's Learning Process Perception by Training Pathways

Process measures	Adult Service			Children Service		
	Mean	Median	Range	Mean	Median	Range
a. feeling supported in the learning process	10	10	0	7	7	2
b. feeling able to use your previous experience and knowledge in the UK contexts	9.5	9.5	1	8.25	8	1
c. feeling your oversea social work experience is appreciated	9.5	9.5	1	7.25	7	1
d. feeling able to discuss differences between social work practice in your home country and the UK with your colleagues	9.5	9.5	1	8	8	2
e. feeling able to share worries with your supervisor(s)	10	10	0	8.5	8.5	3
f. The project provides me with the theoretical knowledge required to practice effectively in this county and context.	9	9	2	8.25	8.5	2
g. The project provides me with the legislative knowledge required to practice effectively in this county and context.	9	9	2	8.5	9	2

This aligns with the qualitative findings, where Adult Service interns described richer, more hands-on experiences, while Children Service interns noted limited exposure and shadowing of statutory work only happened at the end of the placement.

Result II: Overseas Qualified Social Workers' Outcomes

The outcomes perceived by participating OQSWs are multifaceted. Some of them are actual outcomes clearly indicated by OQSWs meeting the registration criteria and continued intention to rejoin the UK social work workforce. Meanwhile, some outcomes are related to their perceived growth in professional confidence and competence.

While these actual and perceived outcomes are measured in the quantitative study, the qualitative data also help us shed light on unintended outcomes as well as the mechanisms and practices that led the identified actual and perceived outcomes.

In this section, we will first present the actual outcomes and the perceived learning outcomes in terms of confidence, competence and commitment. Following that, we will further elaborate on the mechanisms by which these key outcomes are achieved, based on our qualitative analysis.

A critical pathway to registration with Social Work England

The most significant benefit reported by interns was the opportunity to meet the practice hour requirements of Social Work England (SWE), which is a major barrier for many OQSWs. Prior to joining the Internship Programme, most interns found it difficult to access statutory placements or opportunities to demonstrate their competence that align with the criteria set out by Social Work England ([Link](#)).

'The reason I've been out of the field so long is because it's really hard to get placement hours. I have a family and it's tough to find a full-time job to build up those hours. So, this helped me get the hours, which is the most important thing.' – Beta

'Before this, I just didn't know how to begin the process. Now I know what I need to do, and I feel like I'm one step closer.' – Gemma

This structured placement was described by some as 'the only option available' that realistically allowed them to complete the academic and practice components required by SWE, particularly for those who had been out of statutory roles or social work practice for several years.

Perceived growth in competence, knowledge and skills

The internship programme has positively impacted on OQSW interns' perceived competence, knowledge and skills, with all the items rated 3 or above (see table 5) and most beyond slight improvement (>4.3). Areas that see the most significant growth are 'signposting service users to relevant support available' and 'providing early help to adults/children and families' (both scored 4.83) followed by 'practising according to the social policies' and 'legal frameworks' (both scored 4.67). The area that has the least significant growth is 'practising according to the principles of equality and the anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approach' (scored 4).

Table 5. OQSW's Perceived Growth in Competence, Knowledge and Skills

Score Description: 1- Greatly worse; 2- Slightly worse; 3- No change; 4- Slightly improved; 5- Greatly improved			
	Mean	Median	Range
Conducting Triage of cases	4.17	4.5	2
Signposting service users to relevant support available	4.83	5	1
Providing early help to adults/children and families	4.83	5	1
Communicating with colleagues in Adults/Children Services	4.5	4.5	1
Working in partnership with colleagues in Adults/Children Services	4.33	4.5	2
Communicating with service users in Adults/Children Services	4.5	4.5	1
Working in partnership with service users in Adults/Children Services	4.5	4.5	1
Communicating with other service partners outside of your organisation	4.33	4	1
Working in partnership with other service partners outside of your organisation	4.5	4.5	1
Practising according to the social policies related to Adults/Children services in the UK	4.67	5	1
Practising according to the legal frameworks related to Adults/Children services in the UK	4.67	5	1
Practising according to the principles of equality and the anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approach	4	4	1
Achieving profession capability frameworks of UK regulators	4.25	4	1

Table 6. OQSW's Perceived Growth in Competence, Knowledge and Skills by Training Pathways

Score Description: 1- Greatly worse; 2- Slightly worse; 3- No change; 4- Slightly improved; 5- Greatly improved						
	Adult Service			Children's Service		
	Mean	Median	Range	Mean	Median	Range
Conducting Triage of cases	4.17	4.5	0	3.75	3.5	2
Signposting service users to relevant support available	4.83	5	0	4.75	5	1

Providing early help to adults/children and families	4.83	5	0	4.75	5	1
Communicating with colleagues in Adults/Children Services	4.5	4.5	0	4.25	4	1
Working in partnership with colleagues in Adults/Children Services	4.33	4.5	0	4	4	2
Communicating with service users in Adults/Children Services	4.5	4.5	0	4.25	4	1
Working in partnership with service users in Adults/Children Services	4.5	4.5	0	4.25	4	1
Communicating with other service partners outside of your organisation	4.33	4	0	4	4	0
Working in partnership with other service partners outside of your organisation	4.5	4.5	0	4.25	4	1
Practising according to the social policies related to Adults/Children services in the UK	4.67	5	0	4.5	4.5	1
Practising according to the legal frameworks related to Adults/Children services in the UK	4.67	5	0	4.5	4.5	1
Practising according to the principles of equality and the anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive approach	4	4	0	4	4	0
Achieving profession capability frameworks of UK regulators	4.25	4	0	4.25	4	1

These significant areas of growth echo with interns' widely acknowledged benefit of the internship design – one that combines course work and placement in a sequential manner. It allowed them to **develop a grounded understanding of UK legislation, policies, and practice expectations**, especially in how laws are applied in daily practice.

'Yes, because the first important thing is the law and legislation. When we come over here, we're really unfamiliar with the legislation on the UK side. So, this helped me a lot. Even when we do social work, many times we need to apply the legislation when doing certain tasks. This helps us understand why we have the right to do those things.'
– Alpha

'Now when I read a case, I think about capacity assessments, safeguarding thresholds, mental health frameworks — before, those were just words.' – Zeta

Overall speaking, these scores demonstrate that the internship programme had a **positive effect on participants' perceived growth in competence, knowledge and skills**, hence readiness to enter the UK workforce.

Rebuilding confidence through practice

At the completion of the internship, OQSWs registered a relatively high level of confidence in applying for a job in Children's/Adult Services the UK (8.14), registering with SWE or other national regulators (8), reaching out for appropriate career support (7.71), practising in Children's/Adult Services in the UK (7.71) and practising in the UK as social worker (7.57). The most highly rated areas of confidence highlight how interns' learning could foster professional job application and professional registration, as the major initial steps for OQSWs to re-enter the UK social work workforce.

Table 7. OQSW's Self-Rated Confidence

Score description: A scale marked by 'Absolutely no confidence -1' and 'Absolutely confident -10'			
	Mean	Median	Range
To register with Social Work England or other national regulators	8	8	0
To practise in the UK as social worker	7.57	7	4
To reach out for appropriate career support	7.71	8	5
To apply for a job in Children/Adult services in the UK	8.14	8	4
To practise in Children/Adult services in the UK	7.71	8	4

Like other measures, interns placed in Adult Support consistently display higher scores compared to interns placed in Children Early Help.

Table 8. OQSW's Perceived Confidence by Training Pathways

	Adult Support			Children Early Help		
	Mean	Median	Range	Mean	Median	Range
To register with Social Work England or other national regulators	9	9	2	7.75	7.5	2
To practise in the UK as social worker	9	9	2	7	7	2
To reach out for appropriate career support	9	9	2	7.25	7.5	4
To apply for a job in Children/Adult services in the UK	10	10	0	7	7	2
To practise in Children/Adult services in the UK	9	9	2	7	7	2

While these outcome measures indicate the levels of confidence at the completion of the programme, the interviews provided further insights into how OQSWs rebuilt their professional

identity and adjusted to the UK context during the process. Many began the internship with **self-doubt**, especially around **English proficiency, cultural expectations, and legal systems**. Through structured learning, supervision, and direct engagement with real cases, they reported a **progressive gain in confidence**.

Beta shared the tension between her own learning style and the 'learning-by-doing' approach adopted by the internship programme:

'I think theory alone isn't enough — you have to actually do it to know how. The programme did give us real case work. I feel it aims to build our confidence to work as social workers... But from my culture and previous learning, confidence comes from understanding first. That's why I prefer to know and observe before doing.'

She further reflected on systemic barriers, noting:

'I think I'm ready to give it a try, but I also see many systemic difficulties and challenges that social workers face here, which worry me. However, the programme did increase my confidence to try and see if I am suited for it.'

Alpha added:

'I think exposure could be broader... But just being in the service, understanding who does what, it made things real for me.'

This shows how **confidence is strongly related to experiential familiarity** that OQSWs have **in relation to local practices and learning styles**. It is through embedding themselves in the systems and the processes, interacting with professionals for a prolonged period of time, OQSWs then gained the comfort and skills in conducting themselves professionally in UK's social services and to see if they are 'suited for it' – in terms of professional standards, workplace culture, communication styles and team dynamics.

These are crucial tacit knowledge that cannot be easily acquired through self-study or online courses. This also explains why, in Gemma's experience, a lack of practice opportunities might reduce her confidence in returning to social work practice in the UK.

In addition to practice opportunities and experiences, interviewees highlighted how **a culturally inclusive environment can boost their belief in their professional potential**. Zeta described how such an environment can be promoted in everyday professional practice and the emotional impact it had on her:

'So, the reason why this programme has really given me a lot of confidence is because, before coming here, I already knew my English was pretty poor... But this programme has really restored a lot of confidence in me...I remember my mentor telling me, 'Just be honest with the case and say English isn't your first language.' That gave me strength — it doesn't mean my care or attention is any less.'

Zeta's experience particularly highlighted the importance of a culturally inclusive environment in practice. By acknowledging English is not the first language of the social worker, we are adjusting both the expectations on the part of the speaking practitioners and those who are

listening to them. OQSWs' burden to speak 'perfectly' and their peers' as well as service users' expectation to understand 'perfectly' are lifted and reframed to a more open and dialogical process for making sense of each other. This worked as a mitigating factor for those who are still building their confidence in using English (see table 5).

Identity rebuilding

For many, the programme was more than a bridge to professional registration, but an emotionally and personally awakening process. OQSWs were made more aware of how they conduct themselves, such as their habitual communication style, expectations and interactions, when interacting with peers, colleagues and other community members in the internship programme.

'We're still adjusting to life here and our identity, so we're sensitive to clients' responses and feedback. Our supervisor might not have understood why we were so scared, because we were facing a culture shock', Alpha continued, 'Being a new immigrant, you face lots of insecurity and uncertainty, so sharing with others who understand makes a big difference.'

'We are fast! I don't know if they see that as 'pushy' or 'too fast'. For example, when we chase teachers for replies, it might come across as pushy to them. So, I'm not sure how they see it.' – Beta

While many OQSWs mentioned issues around language, the underlying motives seem to vary from seeking ways to negotiate and practise professional and personal boundaries to identifying differences in cultural and professional practices in Hong Kong and the UK and their legitimacy and identity as a citizen/member of the British society.

'Sometimes supervisors or colleagues don't fully get why we worry about language. But when we share together, we realise it's not just language barriers but also how we see our identity here—not fully British citizens but working in social roles—which can feel strange. Talking more helps us brainstorm and understand these uncertainties.' – Alpha

Delta shared how gaining access to an office space enabled her to **rebuild her professional identity and a sense of belong**:

'We have full access, with ID cards to get in and out. We have official identity — apart from our own team, everyone else treats us as colleagues, which is important. It gives us a sense of belonging and recognition as we build our professional identity here...I found, hmm, okay, I can work in the UK. This affirmation is very important — to be able to do what you really want to do. I guess the second thing is recognition, external recognition.'

Zeta shared a similar empowering process, giving a strong indication that the internship programme might have served also as a community intervention for boosting a sense of belonging among migrant professionals:

'Just being part of the team, even if temporarily, changed how I see myself. I'm no longer just someone 'trying' to be a social worker in the UK — I've already started.'

Experiences of Hong Kong qualified social workers, across training pathways, testify that their identities as migrants and professional social workers are intertwined. The precariousness in their citizenship colours their sense of legitimacy in a professional role; meanwhile, their membership in a professional community, even partial, can reinvigorate their sense of belonging and sense of professional efficacy.

Language beyond proficiency

While most interns had sufficient conversational English to function in the workplace, many expressed difficulties in understanding **professional jargon, sector-specific abbreviations, and technical terms** frequently used in statutory social work settings.

'Sometimes during meetings, people used a lot of abbreviations that I wasn't familiar with, like CIN, CP, or MASH... even when I understood the context, it took time to process everything.' – Delta

This language barrier went beyond daily communication and became a challenge when reading case files, attending meetings, or completing formal documentation.

'Reading case notes was hard in the beginning — the way they write is very different from how we used to write in Hong Kong. It's like a shorthand that takes time to get used to.' – Epsilon

Interns highlighted the need for orientation or glossaries to support OQSWs' understanding of commonly used terms and acronyms in social care.

While interns generally had a good level of English proficiency, a lack of confidence in conversational English was still persistently experienced when it came to their accent and mistakes in use of words. The fear is heightened in the context where careful use of words is emphasised, such as in trauma-informed practice:

'This isn't exactly cultural but related to language. Here they have 'trauma informed practice,' so they are careful with language. Some words might trigger clients' emotions, especially given their backgrounds which we might not know. Since I started working here, I have become more aware of this. Not only does my English need to be good enough to express myself clearly, but I also have to think carefully about the wording to avoid negative feelings. This requires extra effort to refine my language skills.' – Beta

Beta emphasised the need for social learning to determine appropriate use of language in a cultural context where social work is practised. This further highlights the importance of shadowing home visits and hosting meetings to building OQSWs' capacity for the rapport building and delivery of care.

Result III: Organisational Outcomes

Sutton Council sets out three major aims for the internship programme (see p.8), intending to generate positive organisational outcomes in terms of expansion and enrichment of local social work workforce. While this evaluation study cannot provide a full understanding of these outcomes, the findings still demonstrate some indications of success in terms of interns' continuous commitment in joining the UK social work workforce, local authorities and specifically Sutton Council's social care services.

All the interviewed interns expressed a clear commitment to continue working in the UK social work sector, ideally within Sutton Council if opportunities become available.

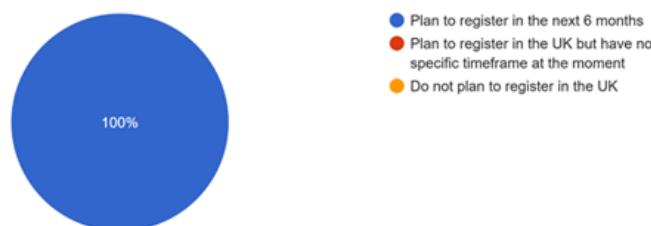
'Yes, definitely. Sutton Council offers a lot of good training. The location is convenient for me. And the atmosphere inside is good — there's a supportive environment where colleagues help each other...We're a group of people they trained because they were short-staffed, and maybe after this, some of us could come back and work for the council. So, it seemed like a win-win.' – Beta

'I think the main thing is not to waste our past experience. It's still within a familiar area, and there's still the passion to contribute to society. And like I said, I think having the opportunity to work in the council is quite precious — it's definitely worthwhile for me, yes.' – Epsilon

The qualitative feedback is verified also by the survey data, indicating a sustained intention to join the UK social work workforce. Among the 6 interns who responded to the survey, 33.33% (n=2) had already registered before they started the internship programme, while the remaining 66.6% (n=4) had plans to register in the UK post-training. 100% of them intended to register within 6 months after the completion of the internship programme (diagram 1). Among those who **expressed an intention to register**, 3 have already actively pursued registration since completing the programme.

Diagram 1. Plan to register post-training

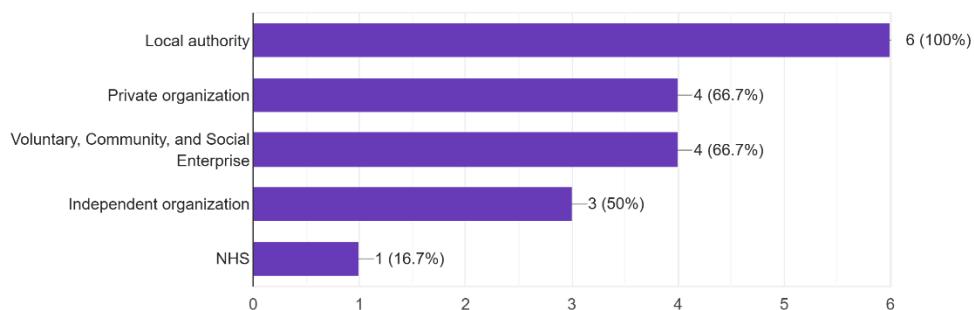
My plan about registration



Among the interns (n=6) who responded to the question on the settings that they wanted to practise in, 100% chose the local authority, followed by Private Organisations and VCSE (both 66.7%) and 50% preferred independent organisations. Least chosen setting was the NHS (16.7%) (diagram 2).

Diagram 2. Preferred settings of practice

If Yes, choose the settings that you would like to practise (multiple options allowed)



The **overwhelming preference to work in local authorities**, which are often seen as more stressful settings, can be the result of interns' positive experience with Sutton Council.

'Despite these limitations, I truly admire the social workers here. In Sutton, which might be a special case, I found many colleagues who are extremely dedicated and passionate about their work. The morale and professionalism among social workers here felt stronger and more focused than what I have seen in many offices back in Hong Kong.' – Delta

After the completion of the programme, **2 interns returned to Sutton Council** as EIO on contract while waiting for the outcome of their social work registration. While this study shows positive indicators for the interns to rejoin the workforce, there are no data to understand the actual experience of professional registration, job application and career progression of these interns.

Despite the internship programme has provided all the appropriate learning opportunities, that match with the registration criteria set out by SWE, interns and Sutton Council **continue to identify challenges on the road to registration**. The level of evidence required by SWE is not always clear, and there have been numerous requests received by Sutton Council to provide further details on interns' placements and their assessed practices.

'Filling in that 'updating knowledge and skills' form for SWE — it's really exhausting. You have to break down every daily task and get it signed off. Colleagues didn't really understand how serious it is for us.' - Gamma

These reflections indicate a need for clearer post-programme communication and greater institutional understanding regarding the unique administrative challenges faced by overseas qualified social workers. Ensuring that programme staff and supervisors are well-informed about SWE requirements may reduce participant frustration and improve future cohorts' experiences.

Council's feedback also suggested that, despite the valuable experience gained, the interns would still require further practice—potentially another year—before managing a full statutory caseload independently. This highlights a wider systemic challenge in transitioning overseas

qualified workers into frontline practice, even when supported by structured training and placements.

'They've had experience at the front door. It's the whole journey, you know, and they've had experience of safeguarding in adults, you know, around...around consent, overriding consent, the risk and things like that. So, they've been immersed in that. But they haven't seen the whole customer journey, you know ...they haven't experienced conducting a full Care Act assessment or doing a Mental Capacity Act assessment and things like that. So, they would need support around that. But I think anyone would need that, you know, a newly qualified social worker coming in and I think.' – Debbie, Sutton Council

Community impact

While it is too early to definitively assess the full workforce impact of the internship programme, initial indications suggest that the programme has delivered value on several fronts, particularly in terms of cultivating community trust, local authority reputation and strategic workforce development.

Cultivating community trust and local authority reputation

The programme originated from a direct community request—championed by the local MP—to support Hong Kong qualified social workers in accessing UK employment pathways. Sutton Council responded proactively, developing a model that addressed both community needs and workforce demands. As noted in interviews, the initiative was supported by senior leadership and aligned with the council's values:

'The programme was very much supported from the top, and that helped... It aligned with our broader ambition to reflect the communities we serve.' - Michael, Sutton Council

'The council showed it can think ahead. This wasn't about plugging gaps; it was about building something with integrity' – Debbie, Sutton Council

This has built significant trust and visibility among the local BN(O) population, contributing to Sutton Council's reputation as a forward-thinking and inclusive employer.

Strategic workforce development and community capacity building

With more than 163,400 people have arrived in the UK ([Home office](#), 2025), and the **first wave of BN(O) visa holders approaching their five-year settlement milestone for Indefinite Leave to Remain (ILR)**, the demand for culturally sensitive advice on welfare and care services is expected to remain strong. Supporting the professional development of Hong Kong qualified social workers, that leads to registration, can future-proof council services and build bridges with underrepresented communities.

In this context, Sutton internship programme demonstrates strategic foresight. Hong Kong qualified social workers who have undertaken the internship programme will be **uniquely positioned to meet this rising demand for advice and support from the Hongkonger community**. Whether these interns eventually join the Sutton Council social services or remain a member of the local communities, their ability to bridge resources and communities will continue to benefit the Hongkonger communities in the next transition to citizenship. Programmes, like UKWR's upcoming 'Community Champion' scheme, are already considering ways to **mobilise this talent pool** to support wider Hongkonger communities across the country.

Towards a Sutton Model of Support for Overseas Qualified Social Workers

Learnings from the Sutton Social Care Internship for Hong Kong Social Workers allow us to reimagine a community-oriented approach to support the professional transition of OQSWs. Hereby, we call it the Sutton Model:



The Sutton Model of support operates as a community-oriented intervention that integrates multiple stakeholders to facilitate the professional transition of overseas qualified social workers. At its core is **practice-based learning**, which combines four interconnected elements: **placement within local authority teams**, **structured mentorship**, **peer learning**, and **classroom learning** delivered by local universities. This cyclical design ensures that theoretical knowledge is reinforced through real-world application, while peer and mentor support fosters confidence and cultural adaptation. Surrounding this core is a broader framework of **community intervention**, highlighting the model's dual purpose: addressing workforce shortages and promoting an inclusive community. By engaging migrant communities, local authorities, and higher education institutions in a collaborative process, from design to deliver, the Sutton Model creates an innovative pathway for integrating skilled professionals into UK social care systems.

The Sutton Model differs fundamentally from the traditional routes of support, which focuses primarily on recruitment and retention, as it

- ❖ Is set up for promoting and cultivating an inclusive community as much as for enhancing recruitment and retention to the UK social work workforce
- ❖ Requires cross-institutional collaboration and sustained engagement with the migrant communities to identify service and support gaps, and flexibly adapt the 'practice-based learning' to fill such gaps
- ❖ Considers OQSWs as both a professional and a person experiencing transitions in personal lives
- ❖ Perceives the pre-migratory professional experiences as resources rather than weaknesses
- ❖ Emphasises the importance of peer learning and collective capacity for cultural brokering practices

While these ideals inform the design and the implementation of the Sutton Model, we have also identified key enabling and disenabling conditions for this model to operate optimally.

Enabling conditions

- ❖ Existing strong local partnerships that maintain communication among governmental bodies, charitable organizations, educational institutions and community groups
- ❖ Upfront resources input to build rapport with the migrant communities and the infrastructure for the support programme
- ❖ An innovative and dynamic culture cultivated by the leadership of the Local Authority
- ❖ Readiness and experience in the workforce to support OQSWs, including constructive ways to approach differences in cultures and language and availability of appropriate practice opportunities
- ❖ An inclusive work and learning culture
- ❖ A wide range of opportunities for shadowing and supported practice
- ❖ Individual factors also matter, including curiosity, openness and reflexivity in learning about new practices that emphasise collaborative and rights-based approach, service users' autonomy, participation and consent

Disenabling conditions

- ❖ Period of restructuring or other structural changes in the services
- ❖ Reduced staff capacity to support and mentor OQSWs
- ❖ Limited shadowing and practice opportunities appropriate for OQSW interns
- ❖ Concerns over racism and misunderstanding during the delivery of service to clients

Scalability

The Sutton Model has demonstrated that it is **possible for local authorities to support overseas qualified social workers (OQSWs)** to rejoin the UK social work workforce. By providing a practice-based learning programme that emphasises local partnerships, transcultural learning and social inclusiveness, the Sutton Model has successfully improved professional confidence, competence, knowledge and skills of interns, enabled rebuilding of professional and civic identities and foster community trust.

For other councils considering similar initiatives, this model is both **relevant and replicable**, with thoughtful consideration of the following factors:

- ❖ Local needs for social workers and the availability of OQSWs in the area
- ❖ Timing and organisational cultural and structure for initiating the internship programme
- ❖ Existing local partnerships that offer key components of learning
- ❖ Right-sized cohort that fits the local needs, resources and staff capacity

Concluding remarks

Tackling the UK social work workforce issues require a multitude of change. Social workers have the highest level of stress and burnout among all other human professions in the UK and are chronically exposed to poor working conditions. Dangerously high workload, relationships with peers, management and service users and how change is communicated continue to be main stressors, and they have impacted the wellbeing of social workers (Ravalier et al., 2021). The vicious cycle continues when these poor working conditions lead to absences due to sicknesses as well as high rates of turnover and vacancies; and hence higher workload and worsen working conditions. Replenishing the UK social work workforce requires a total rethink of government strategies to boost recruitment, retention and recognition, matched with appropriate and targeted investment.

The Sutton Model presents an effective local government-led initiative to support recruitment to the UK social work workforce, focusing on the support for overseas qualified social workers residing in the UK. While it does not solve all the problems facing overseas qualified social workers in their professional transition, it provides a critical pathway to professional registration and empowers them with local professional experiences, knowledge and skills to practise. The Sutton Model further demonstrates how flexible funding at local government level can foster creative interventions that boost community trust and promote inclusive social work and social care workforce.

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Appendix1: Basic Information of Sutton Social Care Internship for Hong Kong Social Workers

Duration: 18 Nov 2024 – 28 Feb 2025

Commitment: At least 3 days/week (Mon–Fri)

Places:

- 6 in Children's Social Care
- 2 in Adults Social Care
- 2 paid Enabling Independence Officer (EIO) roles

Remuneration:

- Unpaid, but travel expenses covered
- Kingston University course fee fully funded

Training:

- 15-credit module: *Restoring Social Work Practice*
- Mandatory attendance on 18–20 Nov, 9 Dec, 13–14 Jan, 10–11 Feb

Language: English proficiency required (IELTS 7.0 or equivalent)

Timeline for programme and evaluation development:

Date	Events
Oct 2023	Practice briefing published: <u>Concerns and Experiences of HK Social Workers in the UK</u> by Durham University and UKWR.
Nov 2023	Pre-programme survey launched to assess interest from overseas qualified social workers in Sutton
22 May 2024	Information Session for HK Social Workers hosted by Sutton Council
Aug 2024	Official Internship Advert released
17 Sept 2024	Virtual 'Question and Answer Session'
Aug – Oct 2024	Application & Candidate Selection conducted by Sutton Council
Mid-Nov 2024 – Mid-Jan 2025	The internship programme took place, including workplace shadowing/placement in Sutton Council
Feb – May 2025	Post-placement Survey and Qualitative Interviews conducted with participants, Sutton Council, and Kingston University
Jun– Nov 2025	Evaluation Report Drafting in collaboration with Durham University
Jan 2026	Final Report Dissemination and Stakeholder Roundtable

Appendix 2: Call for Expression of Interest



Hong Kong Social Workers: Information session with Sutton Social Care

The Director of Children's Social Care in the London Borough of Sutton invites any Social Work qualified member of the local Hong Kong community to join us for an informal information sharing session.

Sutton Social Care is aware of the challenges facing Social Work qualified Hong Kongers who are seeking to gain their Social Work England (SWE) registration, but need access to relevant training and supervised practice in order to do so. We are hosting this event to explore how large an interest there is within the local Hong Kong community to gain their SWE registration, in order to see how and if Sutton Social Care could assist.

This event is open to Social Work qualified Hong Kongers who live in South West London and who may be interested in working for Sutton after they gain their SWE registration. We have a number of Social Care vacancies within our People Services Directorate, which is a supportive and rewarding environment for those that wish to build and develop their career.

This will be an English speaking event but a Cantonese interpreter will be present should they be required.

When: Wednesday 22nd May 2024 from 6pm until 7.30pm

Where: Sutton Civic Offices, St Nicholas Way, Sutton, Surrey, SM1 1EA. Ground floor, rooms G1a and G1b.

Cost: Free to attend. Light refreshments will be provided.

Agenda: An overview of Sutton social care will be provided followed by an opportunity to discuss what the needs of Social Work qualified Hong Kongers are. This will be followed by a question and answer session.

Please register your intention to attend via the following form:

<https://forms.gle/AMhDjy2DcN9GVkVq9>