



A new career pathway for social workers

Host: [0:00:0.0] Hello, and welcome to another episode of Community Care's Employer Insights. My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, and in this episode we explore how one London borough authority is supporting the training and development of social workers. Every social worker remembers those key people in their team that were pivotal in helping them learn and develop practice in the early stages of their careers, and how important that input was. The London Borough of Newham does too, and has introduced a new role – practice development social worker – that allows experienced social workers with the passion for supporting education and learning to progress their careers. Principal social worker in children's and families Beverley Halligan, who also heads up Newham's Social Care Academy, tells us more about this new training and development offer, and we hear from two social workers – Jane and Jessica – who will be two of the five PDSWs at Newham.

So Beverley, practice development social worker can be considered an additional pathway for social workers. I'm quite interested to understand how that sits within Newham as a whole, and can you tell us more about the role and why Newham felt it was necessary to create it?

Beverley Halligan: Okay. Hi. It's good to be here today to tell you about the practice development social workers. They're experienced social workers who will support and work with other social workers to help them to develop their skills and knowledge, and build their professional capabilities. They're not case-holding roles so they'll have all of the time available to them to support social workers in developing their skills and knowledge, but they will work alongside social workers, so they'll be working alongside in their casework as well.

So the practice development social workers will support other social workers to develop their knowledge and skills through a variety of means, whether that's through the more formal expectations of learning and development, such as workshops, training programmes, but also in very live casework ways by going out with social workers on their visits and supporting them in developing tools to work alongside social workers to develop their interventions with the families that they're working with.

Host: [0:0:02:29.4] So where does it sit within the hierarchy of different roles within Newham?

Beverley Halligan:

Okay, so in the last six months Newham has spent a lot of time thinking about the career progression pathway for social workers and developing that, and we now have a very good example, I think, of a very varied career progression pathway for social workers, who can take a variety of routes beyond their assessed and supported year through to building their social skills and then moving on to becoming experienced social workers and advanced social workers. And we were hearing in Newham that social workers who'd been with us for a number of years were asking us, 'Well what now? I've been a social worker here for three or four years. Where does my career go now? What can Newham do to support me in progressing my career?'

So we spent a lot of time looking at that very carefully because we very much valued the social workers who had stayed with us, and we also wanted to attract other social workers to join us.

So our career progression pathway can actually take experienced social workers through to either progressing down the management route through the senior social worker roles that we have in Newham. Also we have a route to becoming a family therapist. So we very much value systemic ideas in terms of supporting and enabling social workers to support families to make the changes that they want to see. So we support social workers to go on and gain accredited qualifications in systemic family therapy, right through from an introductory course that we run here, a five-day course, through to the one-year foundation course, Year Two, and also we support a very small number of social workers to go on and do their MSc in systemic family therapy. We work with the Institute of Family Therapy to pursue all of those accredited qualifications. So that's another route for social workers to take here in Newham.

But the third route that we have introduced, and this will be our first team of practice development social workers, and that takes social workers through to the education and training route pathway of the advanced social worker. And when I'm referring to 'social worker', 'experienced social worker', 'advanced social worker', 'strategic social worker', I am specifically referring to the professional capabilities framework, and Newham's career pathway reflects that PCF.

So the practice development social workers are experience social workers who can concentrate on the education side of social work and supporting other social workers to develop their knowledge and skills, and build their own careers around their professional capabilities framework. But ultimately, of course, in terms of supporting social workers to have the knowledge and skills and the tools to do the job, this ultimately will improve outcomes for families.

So we have this wraparound offer in Newham now for social workers and ultimately to improve outcomes for children and families. We have family therapists to support social workers who are working with families and children, who offer consultations to support social workers in using systemic ideas and tools when they meet with families that they're working with, and now we also have practice development social workers, who will concentrate on everything else in terms of social workers' knowledge and skills beyond systemic ideas and theory.

Host: [0:06:15.3] It definitely sounds really exciting. There's a lot there to learn, and it's really great that we have Jane and Jessica, who will be joining with the PDSW roles. So if I could start off with Jane, what drew you to that role?

Jane: I think what drew me to the role was I wanted to progress in my career in social work but not in a way that necessarily went through a team manager route, and to have a sort of wider impact on services for children and families than just rooted in my own practice.

But I think what particularly drew me to this role was the idea of, as Beverley said, working alongside social workers. I think the aims and ethos of the team are very much about working in partnership with social workers, so although many of our priorities might come from the senior team, I think that we'll also be reflecting experience on the ground. So it won't be a top-down service. I think as a team we're experienced in frontline practice and we know the challenges of social work, we know how hard that can be. So it's not just about focusing on social workers and how they can develop their practice, but how we can develop the system around them to support that practice. So we might identify barriers in the system, for instance, that are making things difficult for social workers.

And we can share examples of good practice across teams. We know there are loads of good examples of practice in Newham but we don't always get to know about them, and that could save a lot of time when we don't have to reinvent the wheel every time as social workers.

I think one of the ways that we want to work in the team is, as Beverley said, we might use some more traditional methods in terms of training and development, like workshops etc., but we're also wanting to use a sort of co-delivery model as well, and that's something that I've found really helpful in my time at Newham.

And if I give you an example of that, we were really lucky to have a pathfinder project focused on domestic violence for a few years in Newham, and that amassed a whole load of experience of working with men who'd used violence. I know from my work with men over the years that often feelings of shame can create barriers between men working with social workers and feeling that they're going to be judged and they're going to be criticised etc. So we, as a social work team, we were asking that that project produced a toolkit that would help us carry on that work with men and ultimately help to support the ending of domestic violence in families.

And not only did the team produce the toolkit but we've been able to go on after that and have support from family therapists to co-deliver those interventions. So it's one thing providing a toolkit, and that's helpful, but having that support to actually work alongside a family therapist to deliver those interventions until we feel confident to deliver them on our own I think is great. And that's one of the models of supporting social workers that we want to use within the team.

Host: [0:09:16.4] It sounds like a really good model, and I think you're in a unique position because you already work at Newham as well. I'm

interested to find out, Jessica, because you actually are coming into Newham, you don't currently work there, so what has drawn you to this role?

Jessica:

I was really enjoying being a practice educator and working with social work students, and it was an element that I really wanted to develop further. But similar to Jane, I'd kind of gone as far in my role as I could without going into management. And again, for the same reasons that a lot of social workers think about, I didn't quite feel that I was ready to give up working directly with families. So I was really excited when I saw the job description and just thought it was a perfect fit, really.

I'm also really drawn to the idea of working with my colleagues at the Newham Social Academy and working together to become a centre of excellence in 2023. So they were all things that really drew me to it.

Host:

[0:10:07.1] Brilliant. So just moving forward, if we could go back in time, how having a PDSW could have supported your career progression...Jane, if you'd like to start.

Jane:

I think it would have been easier for me to get help with areas of practice I didn't feel strong in, of which I think there are many throughout anyone's social work career. It's a really challenging role and we often feel really strong in one area but not in others, and I think it would have helped me to get help in those areas without feeling that I was expected to know and be able to do everything and hit the ground running from the end of my NQSW year or taking a lot of time to research my own solutions and develop my own practice. I'm hoping that as a team we're going to be able to help people shortcut some of that by learning from the experience and the things that other colleagues have developed.

Host:

[0:10:56.5] Yeah, absolutely. And Jessica, how do you think that having a PDSW could have helped you in your career?

Jessica:

When I was thinking about this question I was kind of thinking that I feel like I've had lots of different elements that, if they were consolidated, would have been a practice development social worker, 'cause I've had some really kind of systemic managers that have drawn on systemic theory in supervision and creatively when working with risk, and have supported me to think about moving from a place of uncertainty to safe uncertainty. And I also have had, throughout the ASYE process, social worker managers coming out and modelling these things that I've found really helpful to develop my practice. It kind of just ticks all the boxes but in one role, and I think it would have really helped to develop my practice, I guess, a lot sooner.

I think also one of the things that I think it would help with is when you finish university. When you're at university you've got access to lots of research and academic literature, then you almost seem to fall off a cliff edge when you then start to practice, and I think having a team that can really help us to embed some of those ideas and think about the new research that's coming out and models and how we think about that critically and bring it into our practice I think would have been really, really helpful.

Host: [0:12:05.3] And Beverley, was that a consideration when thinking about the PDSW role, being able to support social workers when they move?

Beverley Halligan: Oh gosh, absolutely. Jessica's reference to having time to actually look at the research, which there's massive research out there within the social work profession, yet those practitioners who need to know about it to actually use it to affect change in families often don't have time to do that. So this is going to be a great opportunity, and I hope that the team of practice development social workers will have time allotted to them to scan that research that's going on. We subscribe to Research In Practice, so working very closely with them to take that very recent research and evidence-based knowledge out to social workers.

I really hope that they will be enthusing social workers, regenerating passion amongst social workers. The enjoyment, that's what I want to come alive in my profession. But it's a difficult profession. But the more new ideas that we can use, see the impact upon families, the greater energy that I think that will infuse across the profession, and that's what I want to see more of in terms of the social workers that I work with – smiles on face that they feel alive in the work that they're doing. And I really sort of have great ambitions and aspirations for the team of PDSWs to inject that into the social work workforce in Newham.

Host: [0:13:42.3] Absolutely. And just lastly, do you see that opportunity to progress quite clearly in the roles that have been demarcated for you both?

Jessica: I think that's one of the beauties of social work, is there are so many different avenues and kind of ways that you can go, and you can develop and foster your interests and your passion.

My main thing at the moment is that I'm really, really excited about joining a team that hasn't existed before, and as Jane spoke about, building it from the bottom up. So I'm really interested in looking at where that goes, and which avenues that opens up for me.

Jane: So likewise, I'm not looking beyond this role as yet. But what I'm aware of is that we've got a really wide range of options now in Newham, and that's really exciting. But I know the options are there for me if I want to progress into further practice development or management roles.

Beverley Halligan: If I can just come in there, Kirsty, I think that the PDSW roles are just...the sky's the limit in so many different directions. So they're launchpads to go...yes, it's well-suited to if you want to go through the management route. So you've remained close to practice and developing knowledge and skills. So going back through to the management route of assistant team manager, team managers. That's open to you.

With the practice educator element of it you can move through the education role, work with universities and other HEIs. You could move in that direction.

Or the team will have very close links with the team of family therapists. As I've said before, that's access to accredited training and systemic therapies, family therapies there. So it can take you down that route as well.

So absolutely fantastic, those three or more different routes that the PDSW...in those roles I definitely don't see them as being pigeonholed.

Host: [0:15:48.5] It does sound like there's lots of opportunity for creativity and for you to sort of focus in on a specialism. And it's interesting because Jessica has come from a different pathway to Jane but both of them will be able to bring a lot of richness, I believe, to the role.

Beverley Halligan: Oh, absolutely. So there's a team of five practice development social workers that are all experienced social workers with a range of different specialism, areas of interest, if you like, and that's what again was our aspiration, that it would be a team with many strings to its bow. And I have every faith that that's what we've created.

Host: [0:16:35.2] Brilliant.

Beverley Halligan: Our six Cs, those being our practice framework in Newham, because of the knowledge and skills that they'll be bringing, adding clarity to the role and to support social workers in developing clarity in the work that they're doing, building confidence of others, encouraging professional curiosity, and helping to very much build a community of practice.

Host: [0:17:04.5] Brilliant. Well I wish you both, Jessica and Jane, all the success in your new roles, and it would be great to revisit and find out how you both have got on, and how that is reflected in how you support the families and the children in the borough.

Automated Voice: Thanks for listening to this Community Care Insights podcast. To listen to more podcasts like this, visit www.communitycare.co.uk.