

Ask the Expert

Episode Two

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Hi and welcome to another episode of the Social Work Community podcast's mini-series called 'Ask the Expert' where we put career dilemmas from social workers to a panel of experts. In this episode Ruth reads out a letter from a social worker who is struggling to keep motivated and enthusiastic about a role in child exploitation. The writer of the letter asks how to pivot out of child exploitation and what other options there are for them. So let's have a listen.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

I'm Ruth Hardy-Mullings, head of content at Community Care, and I'm joined by our three experts, Dame Lorna Boreland-Kelly, Claire Barcham, and Kayleigh Rose Evans, who have a wealth of experience in the social work sector.

If you'd like to share your own thoughts or experiences on the career dilemma raised today, please head over to The Social Work Community. This is a free, gated community site for social workers, whether you're a student on the cusp of qualifying or an experienced practitioner with many years in the sector. We have regular discussions and advice threads there and we'd love for you to be part of it.

And if you have a burning career dilemma yourself, please do email it over to us at careersadvice@markallengroup.com and we will put it to our expert panel.

So, without further ado I'm going to go into our question for today. So this social worker writes, 'From qualifying in 2018 I have always worked within the children looked-after team 13+ for the last 5-6 years. I have passed Practice Educator 1 and I am in the process of completing paperwork to obtain my senior. I have experience in working with children at risk of exploitation. However, I'm struggling to remain motivated and enthusiastic in my current role. I have not ever had child protection experience as a student or in employment, and I do not feel I want to go into child protection. I am thinking of either moving to support carers and fostering, rather than work with teenagers, or move into adults but am really unsure how, as my experience is with children looked-after and I worry I may not be successful in securing a role in other areas.'

So, a really meaty question to get into today. So Claire, do you want to go first on this?

Claire Barcham:

Certainly. This was a question that I felt strongly about because, having been a social worker for 30 years, we have all had, I'm sure, times when you just think, 'Oh, can I really do this for much longer?' Particularly if you are in a team where you are dealing with long-term cases. So there can be challenges to doing assessment work where it's very quick and very fast, but there's also challenges to working with people on a long-term basis.

I would also ask you to think about a few questions. One of them is, 'Is it this particular work that you're struggling with or is it the organisation? Do you want to stay in the organisation?' If it's that you like your organisation, it may be there are other roles that you might want to think about. So for example, I wonder if you would think about transitions, because that could give you some of the experience, including for example, something like maybe training as a best-interest assessor, which is a skill that adult social work would find really valuable, but you're working, still using your talents and the experience you've had in the children and looked-after field.

If it's that you're not happy with your organisation, maybe think about what it is about that. If you don't have really good supervision and opportunities for reflection, it can be really difficult to maintain your enthusiasm because actually, it takes a lot out of you. Being a social worker is about dealing with people and people's emotions and their crises and their lives, and that is not easy unless you have good supervision.

I think sometimes it's worth even thinking about things like, 'Do I need a break?' You've been a social worker since 2018, you've had to go through all your ASYE, you've done all sorts of other cases. Is it an option to take some time out? Most employers will consider that if you ask that of them, and it certainly seems to be a popular thing to do, I think, among some social workers, is to work for a few years, take some time out, even go to the other side of the world – Australia, New Zealand – and actually work as a social worker or work in an area that you feel passionately about.

And that's probably the bit that I'd actually finish with, is actually sit down and think about what brought you into social work. What made you passionate about it in the first place? And where can you go back to to regain that passion? Because ultimately, as social workers, we all came in for one reason or another. There was something we wanted to change, something that mattered to us. And I'd be asking, 'Well, what was it that mattered to you?'

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Thank you, Claire. I love that advice, 'cause you're right, I think after a few years in a role it can be really easy to become bogged down and forget that initial reason for why you chose this career in the first place. So I think that's excellent advice. Lorna, do you want to come in next?

Lorna Boreland-Kelly:

Yes. Just to follow up from Claire, something I always say to employers and to organisations I support. Claire's heard this one before. Social workers are not widgets. We are human beings and we bring with us ourselves and a wider picture of the world outside. So our families, our friends and our other organisations that we're involved with. And I say this to pick up from the point that Claire raised about supervision, appraisal and how important that employing that...you know, that those factors from the employer are.

So I'd say to this social worker, 'Having said that to your employer, I would like you to consider your wider picture, the wider picture of your life, and what's going on for you now, and how that's impacting on how you're feeling as a social worker. Having done that, consider

seeking some professional help. And I don't mean counselling; I mean find a mentor or a coach and get your employer to pay for it. You're entitled to it. Go to your HR department and say to them, "I've hit a bit of a chasm at the moment and I'd just like to have someone to help me think this through." So don't rush into anything. Get some professional help in finding your way through.

And consider why you're choosing to look at supervising social worker because I assume that when you talk about supporting carers and fostering, rather than working with teenagers, that you're thinking about becoming a supervising social worker in the local authority or with a private fostering agency. That's an assumption I've made. But whatever it is that...career choice that you're thinking about, get some help in thinking it through and thinking, "Why am I choosing to go down that particular road at this particular time?"

And this is where that idea that Claire spoke about in terms of a sabbatical could also fit in nicely. Is it time for you to do some research, write that piece, go into training and education, or what is it? And that takes me back to the coaching and mentoring, that's getting someone to help you see through the forest. Yeah? And just having that little robin on your shoulder saying, 'What is it that I'm seeking to achieve at this time?' Five years is quite a long time to be in a particular role. And it reminds me of a conversation I had not so long ago with quite a senior retired police person who I've known for many years who was, at one time, heading up the child abuse and investigation service in Croydon where I was a manager at the Mayday Hospital.

And he said to me, 'I can never understand sometimes why social workers get in and stay for so long because they don't in the police. They move around, especially when they specialise. And there's a reason for that.' And the field that you've been working in, in child sexual exploitation, is particularly demanding and difficult. So you need to have that correct supervision, that correct guidance.

Something that I'm quite keen for colleagues to do is to speak to their HR, their human resources departments. They're not just there to guide your employers. They're there for you as well. Speak to them and see what options there are for you within the authority. They'll know where there are vacancies and what other alternatives there are.

And something that some of my colleague managers could never understand why I did this, but whenever I employed social workers one of the first things I always said to them is, 'Now, you need to join a union. Not because I'm a terrible manager but because I do believe that in this field we need to belong to either the trade union or a professional organisation or both.' So you will find that although I'm differently employed, I'm still a member of BASW. I'm also a member of the Association of Child Protection Practitioners. And so it's important to have that belonging, to have that place where you can go to colleagues. This is why I linked on and liked Community Care, because going once a year to Community Care Live and meeting colleagues and being able to talk to them about what's going on for

them in their authority is reinvigorating and stimulating, and we all need that.

And so this question from this social worker, I know it's not very popular to say this but I wanted to reach out and give you a hug and say, 'Don't despair. We all feel like this sometimes.'

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Thank you, Lorna. And yeah, I think actually just reflecting if someone's joined the profession in 2018 it's been a...you know, we had the pandemic from 2020, there's been the cost-of-living crisis, it's been a really tough time for local authority budgets. So it has been maybe a particularly challenging period as well to be in your first few years of practice as well. Kayleigh, would you like to come in now?

Kayleigh Rose Evans:

Yeah. I think they've been great answers and it's given me a lot to reflect on as well. But something I would say is that when you're taught as a social work student how you should treat people, I think we deserve the same back as social workers, and I think if we're not, that can make it very difficult for us to do our roles. And I think sometimes if you are struggling in a particular role you can feel like, 'Is it just me?' But then sometimes it's good to think, 'Oh actually, why am I struggling here?' And like was mentioned, is it the organisation and all those factors as well?

So I learnt about a couple of things on my practice educator training. One of them was the secure base model, a bit of research around attachment and how we need to feel secure and safe in our practice, and that we need to feel that we have teams and we have peers that we can rely on, we feel that we have a manager that we can speak to. And I feel one of the most important things from a manager is feeling like someone has your back, because often in social work you feel very exposed, you feel quite vulnerable yourself, especially maybe if you are trying your absolute best but you feel maybe you've made a mistake or you need some advice very quickly. You need to know that that's there and who to go to.

And I think that sort of feeling heard, listened to, valued, not feeling oppressed yourself, like, they're very important things and we do that for other people but if you feel worn down in that respect I think that can be very difficult.

So a bit about me. I have chosen to move roles quite a few times during sort of my initial years of practice. So I've done a couple of years in various areas but I have worked for the same organisation. And to be honest, that's been brilliant for me, and it's kind of made me feel...I never feel trapped. And it's also given me sort of a varied view on different management styles and also different teams and how they work and exactly what type of work suits me as well. And I think some people who have stayed in the same team for a long time can sometimes end up feeling a bit more trapped in that way. And I'm not saying one way's right and the other way, because I know that other people may have had brilliant opportunities just working in one place 'cause maybe they wanted to get into management and then they're perfectly placed to manage that team, for example. So people have done all different things.

But for me, I am a naturally really enthusiastic person and social work is what I love, but I haven't always felt enthusiastic. I've felt quite lost at times. And I think I'm someone that can beat myself up if I feel I've made a mistake. And having...I've had some really strong managers who have put me right and stopped my overthinking, and I think that that's what you need. And at the moment I'm juggling being a new parent, so you know, it's very important to me to leave on time, and I am in a role where I can. It's short-term hospital work and I don't carry things for a long time. I find that that really suits me at this point in my life. And I sometimes think it's really useful to consider that sort of thing because certain roles can mean that you do just have to stay. And I've found that this is working for me. But sometimes chatting to people and finding out the nature of the type of work is really useful.

And I think something else I think that's useful is about the Learning Zone model. So I found that if I had a lot of work that was putting me into the panic zone, I felt very, very stressed a lot of the time. But if I had things that were just...it was just things that I was used to doing and it was in my comfort zone and I never felt pushed, I found myself pretty bored in practice. So it's getting that sweet spot between the two. And I think sometimes you can find opportunities to develop your knowledge and your understanding whilst staying in the same role. I've done a Master's and I chose to mostly self-fund that. It was hard work doing that alongside practice but going and getting those additional modules in things I was interested in really gave me enthusiasm. I feel like it...my professional identity was strengthened by doing that. I felt I could go away from the organisation I was working for, really reflect, and have the support of academics, which a lot of people around me, like, sort of didn't have. And it just, it gave me that confidence to feel like, 'Oh no, I'm doing alright in these situations I'm in. Actually, you know, this is what's important to me. This is why I came into practice. And what do I want to do?'

So it's about remembering that you are a professional. Even if you are working for an organisation think, you know, 'What do I need to work effectively in this environment and is this role working for me?' And if not, look for roles where you are going to be supported, 'cause there's lots of different opportunities out there for social workers.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Thank you. And yeah, thank you for sharing your own experience. I think it's really useful to hear that perspective actually, and what's worked for you in terms of, you know, moving around. And it's such a good point that, you know, as your life changes, the role that's right for you at that point might change as well. And giving yourself the space to explore that as well.

Brilliant. Was there anything else that Claire and Lorna, that you wanted to add before we wrap up?

Thank you very much for all your perspectives. I think that's been a really useful discussion and I'm sure will be relevant to lots of people watching as well, who are maybe navigating those first few years of your career. So yeah, thank you very much to our expert panel, Dame Lorna Boreland-Kelly, Claire Barcham and Kayleigh Rose Evans. Thank you for watching and as I said, please do join the discussion on The Social Work Community. We'd love to hear if anyone has

experience of maybe doing a sabbatical or having some time out or changing teams around that sort of five-year point, and how that worked for you. And please do send us your careers questions as well for future episodes of *Ask the Expert*. Thank you for listening, and see you next time.