



Ask the Experts

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Hello everyone, and thank you for watching our *Ask the Expert* series here on Community Care, where we put career dilemmas from social workers to a panel of experts in the sector.

I'm Ruth Hardy-Mullings, head of content at Community Care, and I'm joined by our three experts panellists, who have a wealth of experience in social work, Dame Lorna Boreland-Kelly, Claire Barcham, and Kayleigh Rose Evans. Thank you very much for being here today.

And if you're watching and you'd like to share your own thoughts and experiences on the career dilemma raised today, please do head over to The Social Work Community. That's our free, gated community for social workers, everyone from students to experienced practitioners, and it's a space where you can share your dilemmas, get advice from other social workers in the sector and is a kind of forum for professionals working in social work.

And if you have your own career dilemma which you'd like to put to our panel, please email careersadvice@markallengroup.com and your question could be featured on a future episode of *Ask the Expert*.

So, without further ado, I'm going into today's question. And this is actually...we've had a few questions from social workers who have trained in the UK but worked abroad and are returning, or from social workers who have trained abroad and are looking to work in the UK.

So I wanted to talk today about what advice the panel have for international social workers who are seeking to secure a qualified social worker role in the UK. We've had questions from practitioners in Australia, Uganda, Zimbabwe and South Africa about the process of registering with Social Work England and sharing relevant practice experience in the UK. So what advice would you give to international social workers in this situation?

And in particular there was one letter which I wanted to highlight, which I'll read out. So this is a social worker who's registered with Social Work England, who joined a county council in the UK in 2023. After a year in a particular team, they were invited to a formal final supervision meeting, where their contract was terminated because 'I

did not perform to the expected level. After that, I got a post in another council and I requested a reference letter from my manager. The manager provided a letter and it was written that I was unsuccessful in my probation at the former council. This has affected my new post and the offer was withdrawn. I got another post and the manager forwarded the same letter. Is this the standard practice in the UK? Does it mean that if I fail to reach the level needed in that team I cannot be offered another opportunity to practice as a social worker? I have no previous misconduct or any pending misconduct issue. How best can I get out of this situation? Any post I get is likely to be affected by the standardised reference letter, which is negative.'

So, lots to get into today. So I'll go straight to Lorna for you to give your perspective. [0:03:11.1]

Lorna Boreland-Kelly:

Thank you, Ruth. Now, this is a very complex subject that need not be complex, and that is overseas recruitment. When overseas recruitment is... I will come onto the specific and try to answer the letter. When overseas recruitment is done well, it's very positive and can be supportive in lots of ways. It can help employers here who are struggling to fill vacancies to fill vacancies, and it can help to broaden the knowledge and experience of social workers from overseas who wish to work in another country. And it's happened for many years. Here in England we've employed social workers for many years from as far afield as Australia, Africa, Canada and the United States and the Caribbean.

The important issue here is that overseas recruitment, unless you have a right to remain and work in the United Kingdom, is governed by very complex rules set down by the Home Office. And I...in answering this question I'm going to be trying to help the specific social worker as well as their employers, social work employers.

Now, local authorities and employer has clearly a duty of care to service users, as indeed...which is one of the reasons why we've got Social Work England. Having said that, one of the ways that they exercise that is through safer recruitment. And this is where references are key and important. Many employers are now simply saying, 'Lorna was employed with me from May 2020 to June 2020.' And if the person who wishes then to recruit me wants to find out, 'Well, what was Lorna doing in that period?' that person may well have to make a phone call to the person writing the reference, who may just be an HR officer who has no idea of what Lorna was doing in that period, and that's all they will have.

Now, that's not good enough in my view in social work because of that duty of care to the public. I'm going to deal first of all with the social worker who has written this, and some of the assumptions that I have drawn from this.

In terms of after a year in your team you attended this final supervision meeting where your contract was terminated, it sounds to me as if there would have been other supervisory sessions which would have been talking to you about the work you're doing, the expected standards and what you needed to meet. And I wonder what sort of training and support you had in the intervening period.

What was your induction into the UK and into your specific local authority, your county council, and into the specific service that you were going to be working with? At what point was it recognised that you were struggling? And what measures were put in to support you? What steps did you take to highlight any concerns that you had? Did you those concerns to your manager's managers or did you just simply take it that you were failing and allowed this final supervisory session to happen and for it to be terminated? Because it feels and sounds very brutal. And while I am not saying that this didn't happen in that way, because of industrial law I can't imagine that there would not have been warning letters given and so on.

So that's one level that I want to address. So for managers, how do you support your overseas workers? What induction do you give to them? How do you help them to understand the legislative framework within which they're working? And how do you help them to understand the standards that are being set and how they can fulfil those standards?

So as an employer I have a duty of care. As well as a social worker you have a duty and a responsibility to work within those.

Now, you have applied for another job and got the job and then, as a result of this reference, that job was withdrawn. Now, the question I have to ask is, 'Did you disclose the circumstances under which you left that employer?' Because as a receiving employer, as a new employer, I have a responsibility to look at gaps. So if you came to me and I saw that there was a gap, I would want to know, 'What were you doing in that intervening period?' And then you would need to tell me, 'Well, I worked for X authority but I didn't do too well in that service and I left and in fact the post was terminated. But since then, what I have done is I have looked at what I didn't do so well with. I've applied for some courses, I've done a lot of reading, I've spoken to colleagues.' So you know, it's...I'm not wishing to put words in your mouth, but what have you done in the intervening time since being dismissed? Because let's be clear, that's what happened. You're dismissed because you failed your probation. What have you done since then? Did you disclose? Was the first time that the perspective employer find out that you were dismissed was through the reference? Because you asked, 'Will you always have this reference?' and the answer is yes, because that employer, you did not challenge that and prevent them from actually having that as your ending, because you accepted it that you failed...that you were unable to meet the standards that they set, and as a result you were terminated. So that will always be there.

So the duty will be on you to demonstrate what you have done to improve in order to meet the new employer's requirements. So you can counterbalance that. But it's really important for you to be honest and open. Because if I interviewed Claire – sorry Claire, I'm not picking on you! – but if I interviewed Claire and, you know, the panel, Kayleigh, Ruth and I, and we were really impressed with Claire, and as a senior recruiting manager I then got this reference that flagged that Claire was terminated through, you know, unsuccessful probationary period and Claire hadn't disclosed that prior to me receiving that reference, I'm afraid I would see...I have to be very

honest and tell you I would see a huge red flag. And then it would bring into question all sorts of things for me, and I would withdraw the offer. I wouldn't come back to you for any further discussion. I would withdraw the offer.

So that's the reality of that. So it's about...although you have no previous misconduct or any misconduct issues, you do have the responsibility to be open and honest about what happened in all of your previous employments.

So, what you have to do is to demonstrate... if you are a social worker who has had your probationary period ended or you've been terminated, you very much have to take responsibility to demonstrate what you've learned and what you have done to move on in the intervening period. Thank you.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Thanks, Lorna.

So Claire, did you want to pick up on any advice to someone who's experienced a negative reference or failed their probation, and how they can then come back from that and secure a different position? [0:15:34.9]

Claire Barcham:

I can think of a period in my life where I don't think I would have got a positive reference and I had to choose to move sideways in order to go forwards. And I think there is something important about that. And building on Lorna's really wise words about, 'Well, what are you going to learn from this? And how do you actually show that you have developed the skills and knowledge that social work is seeking?' Which includes self-reflection, the ability to understand yourself and what went wrong.

I think that what you're trying to do is, until you've got another job who can give you a different sort of reference, that will always be the first place that any employer will look. So if you are in that position, think about, 'Is there something that you can do that provides a sideways move where you can evidence that you've developed those skills and abilities?' Because if you can't, you really are in a really difficult position. And at the end of the day, we owe it to the people who we're here to support and protect for social workers to be the best they can be. Which is a bit harsh. But try thinking sideways. That would be my advice. There may be other ways that you can develop the skills that you need outside of statutory local authority.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Brilliant. I think that's really salient advice. Thank you, Claire. And Kayleigh, is there anything you'd like to add? [0:17:28.3]

Kayleigh Rose Evans:

Yeah. So just thinking about the international social work aspect. So I think it has been mentioned already but understanding the regulatory framework. So if you want to work in the UK you have to be registered with Social Work England. It's different from Scotland, Wales, Northern Ireland. Each have a different regulatory body. So it's a starting point, really. You could look and see how you go about that process, and it's on their website.

And then we've mentioned BASW in another video. They can give advice as well for people looking to practice in the UK. The standards for both are relevant to look at to get an understanding of what the expectations of social workers in the UK are.

Informally, people are always asking me questions about this on my YouTube channel and asking for really an understanding of what social workers in the UK do. So I've put out videos around sort of that we do community work, we do duty work, different types of working. I think that from reading, if you read Community Care or something, you can get an idea around what social work practitioners do, and then there's various top-up courses you can do, so if you've got your qualification in a different country. I think they're called 'return to practice' courses generally, but if you contact a university directly they'll be able to let you know if they provide that. And I think that's the same for people who maybe have had a gap in practice that are UK-based as well. And if people have got a degree in one country they may choose to do a Master's in social work in the UK to add to that as well. That would then get your foot in the door, so to speak, if you wanted to do placements in UK social work to get that statutory experience, and then it may make you more employable to show that you have that understanding of UK legislation and things.

And I think it's just about, you could get careers advice from different people in the UK and find out a bit more about what the opportunities are, and just to get a picture of what the differences are between social work here and where you're from as well. There will be transferable skills – communication, relationship-building, all of that is key – but I will say that if...I've considered working in Australia, for example, a few years back and I was interested to find out what the differences in legislation were because I think that's fundamental to the confidence you would have in taking that step. So I'd be looking for how I could equip myself to know that.

And then when you're in the job, once you secure a position, you can then undertake the relevant training as part of your role as well. So it's just getting there that's the thing.

Ruth Hardy-Mullings:

Perfect. Thank you, Kayleigh. And obviously a really complicated area of practice and sort of overseas recruitment, and it's something we're looking to cover more on Community Care as well, so do look out for advice on that, anyone listening as well.

Okay, perfect. Thank you very much to our expert panellists, Dame Lorna Boreland-Kelly, Claire Barcham and Kayleigh Rose Evans. And as I said at the start, if you have anything to add please do join the conversation on The Social Work Community and send us your career dilemmas to careersadvice@markallengroup.com and we'd love to answer them on the next edition of *Ask the Expert*.

So thank you for watching, and goodbye.