

Ask the Experts 6

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Hello. My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, senior careers editor at Community Care. And welcome to another episode of *The Social Work Community* podcast mini-series, called *Ask the Experts*, where we put your career dilemmas from social workers to a panel of experts.

In this episode, we ask, 'How do you go about recovering confidence after a placement breakdown?' Let's jump into the episode and find out what the experts said. [0:00:28.1]

My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, and I'm joined by our three experts, Dame Lorna Boreland-Kelly, Claire Barcham and Kayleigh-Rose Evans, who collectively have around 60 years of experience between them. Thank you so much for joining.

Before we jump into the introductions, I just wanted remind you that if you have a burning question you'd like to share with our experts, please email us at careersadvice@markallengroup.com with as much detail as you can.

And if you want to speak with peers in the community, we have a network called *The Social Work Community*. It's a free, gated community for social workers, which is designed to cater for those at the beginning of their careers, those at the cusp of qualifying, and those experienced practitioners with many years in the sector. You can join by registering at www.thesocialworkcommunity.com (all one word), which connects you with a host of social workers. And if you're on the community already, you'll find these episodes with the experts there too.

Now, back to our panel. Dame Lorna has over 30 years of experience in the sector as a practitioner, manager and workforce development. She brings a wealth of expertise as head of service at various authorities, and has established social work academies across the country. She's currently chair of a charity that is very much focused on supporting young people and amplifying their voices. So this is a warm welcome to you, Dame Lorna.

Now, like Dame Lorna, Claire has around 30 years of experience in the sector, initially qualifying as a generic social worker, to working as a specialist, including as a mental health social worker, and more recently managing an emergency duty team. Claire currently delivers training in children's schools and for approved mental health professionals. She also works for the Association of Directors of Adult Social Services in the area of policy, and is passionate about trying to join together both the practical experience of being a social worker

and the policy work at a national level. So it's great to have you here, Claire.

And Kayleigh. Kayleigh is an accomplished social worker, practice educator and best interests assessor specialising in adult's services. She holds a Master's degree in professional development in social work, and is dedicated to advancing the field through education and advocacy. Alongside her social work practice, Kayleigh works as an independent trainer, sharing her knowledge and experience with others in the field. She also shares valuable advice, relatable educational content and reflections on social work through her popular YouTube channel, also called Kayleigh-Rose Evans.

So we're pleased to have all three of you here with such varied experience and expertise. And today we're looking at the dreaded topic of placement breakdown. Now, it's always heartbreaking to hear from social workers that have started a new placement only to find that there's been some sort of challenges which has impacted on their confidence if there's a breakdown. And this is something that's happened in the following question that I'm about to detail.

So this comes from a social worker who said, 'How do you go about finding a new placement and recovering confidence after a placement breakdown?' So it's quite short but I'm hoping that you can give some advice. If I could start with Kayleigh. [0:03:55.2]

Kayleigh-Rose Evans:

Like you said, it must be really hard to be in that situation. And I think it's just about looking after yourself, like after that, before you go into your next stages.

But we're always learning and developing, and you don't know whether it was a breakdown from lack of support for the person or whether the person didn't feel particularly ready, you know, ready to work in that area. And sometimes even as a practitioner now, like, I know that I'm better in certain roles than I am in different areas. And with placements they're so broad, you could end up anywhere really. I know that you can sort of say where your area of preference is, but I think that's difficult.

So I know for me that the short-term work in the hospital that I'm doing now really suits me. But I think some people would find that fast-paced environment really hard. So I think some reflection on, 'Was it the environment that didn't work for me? And where do I feel my skills would suit?' if you are looking for other opportunities if you're being supported to look at elsewhere.

And then managing your expectations as well. You're only expected to be working at a certain level so don't expect anything too high of yourself, like if you feel knocked down. Sometimes having a little bit of emotional support can help or getting a social work-type coach or something. Like, some people go and do that, I know, when they feel that their confidence has been dampened by something. And looking for support groups. So there are various support groups for students, like the Social Work Student Hub, and there may be other people in the same position. And on social media and stuff I look out for things like that 'cause I think sometimes if you have got someone who's

been through the same, that can really help, and then working out what they've done to overcome it. Keeping informed of sort of updates in practice is still important. You don't want to fall behind while you're waiting for the next step to come across.

So they're just some initial thoughts I had on that.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Thank you. Dame Lorna, is there anything you'd like to add to that? [0:05:55.7]

Dame Lorna Boreland-Kelly:

Yes. I kind of see this very much as a two-part question. And I think a lot of what Kayleigh said in terms of the recovery is what I would have said. But the part about, 'How do you go about finding a new placement?' is the first step that I'd like to address. And I think Kayleigh, you know, you're right – the recovery is important before thinking about a new placement.

As a student, you're not alone. You're a student in a university. And the role of the university and the educators and the placement officers in the university is key and crucial to this. Thinking about students in universities and placements – and we've all been practice educators (well, I was a practice teacher many years ago but have run through the social work academies, have been very much involved in student placements and student selections and supporting universities in selecting students) – and what I do know is that every year in most universities there are struggles to find appropriate placements. And sometimes, if the student has not been supported to prepare for placement through their statements and through really thinking about, 'What area of social work do I want to go into?'... And it depends on which placement. Is it the first placement? Is it your final placement? But you shouldn't be on your own with this, finding a new placement. The role of the university and the specialist practitioners in the university, is key.

How did that placement come to an end? Was there some sort of fitness to practice issue? Was there some health issues? Or was there simply a personality clash between yourself and the practice educator? What lessons are there to be learnt from this breakdown? And how will that be taken into the next placement? How will the break of placement be explained to the new placement? All of that is something that you shouldn't be struggling with on your own. You should be being supported by the university.

And personally, I have supported through several of the academies, taken students where it's not gone so well for them in their first or in their last placement and there has been an interruption. I like to think of it not as a breakdown but as an interruption, providing there are not fitness to practice issues.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

I like that. Thank you, Dame Lorna. Claire? [0:08:39.7]

Claire Barcham:

I actually think a lot that I would have said has been said, especially by...well, actually by both people. But what Lorna was just saying about the fact that you're not on your own. You're part of a university community and they have an obligation to you as well. That is really important in terms of finding the next placement.

I think the only other thing that I would add is I do think sometimes it's important to step back and look at the reasons. What is it, as Lorna said, that led to the breakdown of the placement? What is it about the environment you were in? How much do you need to take on for yourself? And for some people, is it that social work isn't the right career for you? It's okay if it's not. It's not for everybody. And you have to be really brave to say that, particularly if you're halfway through a career and you've been paying for it, or maybe family have been paying for it as well. But if it's not for you, it's okay to stop and actually say, 'This isn't going to go anywhere. It's causing me harm. It's costing me a lot of money. I just need to reevaluate what I want to do and where I want to go.' So take some time. That would be my other suggestion, to actually think about, 'Well, what's brought me to this and what do I really need to do next?'

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Thank you so much. I mean, you're encouraged in social work to reflect so this is an opportunity to do that. And also to be...what I'm hearing from you all is to be a bit kinder to yourself. It is quite horrible to go through that. But to be brave, to step back, look at those reasons, reflect, give yourself permission. And I like what you said, Dame Lorna, about using the word 'interruption' as opposed to a 'breakdown' because that sounds quite harsh if you say 'breakdown'. But it could be something that could be resolved, and that comes through support. So thank you. I hope whoever sent that question this provides some direction for where they move to next.

So again, we've come to the end of a really interesting session. I want to remind people that if they have questions we're here to hear them. Please email them to careersadvice@markallengroup.com. And as we've said before, the conversation doesn't end here. So we'll be on *The Social Work Community*. So until next time I want to thank our expert panel. See you again next time. Bye.