

## #9 Ask the Experts – I'm scared of going back into frontline work

Kayleigh-Rose Evans: There's so many choices out there. Like, that's the benefit of being in social work. You have such a good skill set. And it's been mentioned about charities as well, like, you don't have to just do local authority work. And if you have that prior experience then you don't necessarily have to go and do the local authority work at this point.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:00:18.1] Hello everyone. Thanks for joining us for this 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 from the sector. My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, senior careers editor at Community Care. And I'm joined today by our three experts, Dame Lorna Boreland-Kelly, Claire Barcham and Kayleigh-Rose Evans (who you've just heard from), who collectively have almost 70 years of experience between them.

Before we jump into the introductions, if you have a career dilemma that you'd like answered, please share it with our experts at [careersadvice@markallengroup.com](mailto:careersadvice@markallengroup.com) and give us as much detail as you can.

And if you want to connect with your fellow social worker in a safe space, gain career guidance, download our social work CV templates and meet some other great social workers, join our free gated community at [www.thesocialworkcommunity.com](http://www.thesocialworkcommunity.com). You'll also find our episodes with the experts there too. And don't forget, you can also follow us on our social media platforms @communitycareofficial.

Now, back to our panel. Dame Lorna brings a wealth of expertise spanning over 30 years that includes working 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 welcome, 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 (or AMPs) and 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 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

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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 education and content, and reflections on social work through her popular YouTube channel. Welcome to you all.

So let's kick things off with our first question. Okay, so this question comes from a social worker who's asking, 'I was a child protection social worker and then progressed to team manager in a different frontline children's protection team up until two years ago. In total, I've been in the service for thirteen years with one authority. I began to get tired and I felt a bit fed up learning the same things. Also, I didn't have a good relationship with my manager at the time, which was new for me, and I also had a life change which affected my health. She started to discipline me and our relationship deteriorated. I then began to look for other work.'

I found a job as a social worker in a college, which fitted around my family situation better. I do miss a lot of aspects of frontline but I'm also scared to go back. I don't want to make a mistake or have a similar experience that could wreck things again. The job I'm doing now is good and management is fair and understanding, which goes a long way. There's not much room for progression and I just wondered what your thoughts are on my situation.'

So I'm going to put that question to Claire first. [0:04:39.6]

Claire Barcham:

Okay. First of all, thank you. I thought it was very brave to have that amount of honesty. I'd also say that it's impossible to have a long career in social work without having times where you do feel a little bit more despondent or you find yourself in the wrong situation. So well done for getting yourself out of that and into a different situation where you could regain your confidence and your skills.

In terms of going back in, there are a couple of things you could think about. One of them is talking to your current employer and actually saying that you feel that you need to update your knowledge, and see if you can get their support to approach a local child protection team and ask them whether or not you may be able to do some reciprocal work with them in some way.

I also think that you may...going back into a more stressful role is a stress. It can be scary. But it doesn't mean to say you will make mistakes. One of the things I would also say is, we all make mistakes all the time. That's how we learn. So the important thing is to find a team and a situation where you feel supported and where you can feel that you're being challenged and that professionally you're developing.

So start off by talking to your own managers to see whether or not they would support you to develop by having contact with local child protection services. And by doing that you may also find a situation that actually suits you.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

That's really good advice about seeking out reciprocal work to update knowledge. That's really good.

Dame Lorna Boreland-Kelly: Okay. Reciprocal network. It would be nice to know the role in the college. Is it a safeguarding role or are you working as a student advisor or a youth worker? Because of course, having had a long history of being the chair of a large further education college, I know that there are lots of roles within further education colleges that would be well suited to qualified social workers. So interesting to know what role you're doing.

And actually, you spoke about one of the reasons you're thinking of going back into safeguarding in children's services is the lack of progression within the college. Of course, I wonder if you've taken the opportunity to speak to the people within your college because there are lots of different roles in the college. This might not be what you exactly want to hear but further education colleges is one of my passions, in terms of the number of years that I spent chairing, and actually, as the chair of Peer Power Youth, we have a lot of young people who are currently in further education. So I wonder whether you've taken that opportunity to network and speak to others in the college about what opportunities there might be for you to move into a different role, a more senior role within college.

Having said that, that's not the question you asked. But before I answer the question you asked about going back into local authorities, I want to also talk to you about voluntary groups, like me own, Peer Power Youth. We employ a number of people with social work qualifications to support the young people that we're working with. So it's not necessary that you might think about going straight back into a local authority. You might want to think about stepping stones, in terms of building your resilience, in terms of using your values and using your knowledge and understanding while developing your own strength and supporting yourself.

Now, history, I believe, is a good predictor of the future and it's ignored at our peril. So before you think about going back into the local authority, look at the things that went wrong, the things that led you to come out of it. I'm one for Post-It notes, so I know people nowadays use computers for this sort of thing but Claire has done training with me so she knows that I still pull out the flipcharts and the Post-It notes and ask people to brain dump on those instead of on screens. Make a sort of map on a flipchart with some Post-It notes about your experiences, how you dealt with them, what support you sought.

For example, when you weren't well and this manager started to talk about taking you down a disciplinary route, did you reach out to your trade union? Did you reach out to colleagues to talk to them about what experiences they might be having or how they might support you? You may well have done that. So I'm not saying that you did or didn't. But think that through in terms of, 'What did I do? What could I have done differently?' This is all about building your resilience and building your strength. And learning. Using that history to learn and to plan for the future. Don't just think about, 'Oh look, there's a vacancy. I'm going to apply for that. They're short-staffed there.' Because social work is difficult and you are keen that whatever you do down

that route you don't become...I'll say the words, burnt-out or feeling less well. So it's important for you to plan, and plan carefully. Speak to other people. Join networks. Come to Community Care Live. Speak to us there. We're there to guide and support you. Speak to local authorities. Go to different stands and hear what they have to say.

But again, 'cause I'm dead keen on colleges, don't just wipe your college out and think, 'Ah, this isn't for me.' There is the Association of Further Education Colleges, and there are lots and lots of colleges. There might not be progression opportunities in your college, whichever it is, but the college next door may well have just the right vacancy for you. So have a look at that. So I'm not trying to put you off coming back to local authorities, 'cause I'm a very keen supporter of local authorities and the work that they do. I'm a keen supporter of the work that we do in our charities or any of the other many charities there are working with children and young people. But I'm also aware that when we want to progress and when we want to move, we might think, 'Oh, well I'll just go back to this,' rather than looking forward and looking to the future.

So I hope that this gives you some guidance and some support.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Thank you, Dame Lorna. And that's the beauty of this space that we have. You think you've exhausted all possibilities and then an expert comes out with a gem that, you know, you might not have thought of. Like what you said about not writing off your college. It might not be that college. It might be another setting. But there might be something there where you can continue and progress your career. So thanks for that, Dame Lorna.

Kayleigh, is there anything else you'd like to add? [0:12:10.2]

Kayleigh-Rose Evans:

Yeah. I think, whilst I'm not a children's social worker, I have worked in adults and I've also experienced some really challenging times in particular roles I've been in to do with issues that will affect children's services and adults, like retention issues and where you find yourself swamped with work or you feel like you've been given work that's maybe above what you feel comfortable with and then there's not the support there to enable you to feel confident in the decisions you're making, whether that be because of yourself or others around you, or just the situation. But I think that the reason I wanted to say that is it's a horrible feeling, and thinking that you're in this place where you're really well sorted but then you're also having these feelings like, that maybe you want to go back to that practice, that's really tricky.

But I've been in that place where I've been in a really supportive role but maybe you've felt, 'Oh, actually I want to push myself.' And something that I found really resonated with me was about the secure base model of social work. And that's based on a child protection team around how we need to feel secure within a team, we need to feel like we've got people who have got our backs – our peers, our manager – in order to go into the world and do social work and feel like we can be in new situations and stretch ourselves.

And I think if you were looking for a post you'd have to feel at least confident at the outset that you are going into that environment. And I think with the benefit of having a good position where you are, you can go and look at that 'cause you're not sort of urgently needing to leave. So you can put feelers out and speak to staff potentially in teams if you have some contacts available and see, 'Are they happy where they are?'

I always think that people on a team are usually quite open to telling you that, and that's what I've done when I've been looking to move teams. And if you see a post that you're quite interested in and it says, 'Contact this manager if you're interested,' have a chat with them or ring them up if they have time. And I think that that could help you.

In terms of something that's helped me think as well, it's...I know I'm going in on theories and stuff here, but the learning zone model. So when you're in your comfort zone, sometimes you can be bored because you're getting too much of the same thing. We don't want to be in the panic zone where we're in constant anxiety, and perhaps that's how you felt when you were in child protection in the end because you weren't being supported or whatever. But we need to be in the learning zone where we feel motivated, like the things that we're having available are pushing us and we're learning new things. And I think that you may get that from the college if you look at other ways of doing it.

Something that I've done myself is I've got a bit of an unusual situation where I am in a local authority and I work there some of the time. I also have my own business where I do bring my practice with the knowledge, and I like merging the two together. Like, I don't think I'd want to do just one thing. And that gives me a lot of satisfaction. So in a way, you can create your own week that you would like to do. Maybe you could drop some of your hours at the college and then do a little bit of independent work even. Perhaps could you do some practice educator, like, freelance work and take students in child protection? Or take children's social work and then you're still learning from that and you're getting into it a bit differently? Or take on some different work that way or...I've mentioned it in a previous video around BASW giving the free coaching. Maybe you could talk that through.

But I think it's understandable that you'd be concerned about moving into an unsupportive setting when you're happy where you are. But I think it's just about...you're in a good situation right now so you can look at the other options that you have available. But don't just go to, 'I'm either doing this or this and that's the only thing,' 'cause there are so many choices out there. Like, that's the benefit of being in social work. You have such a good skill set. And it's been mentioned about charities as well, like, you don't have to just do local authority work. And if you have that prior experience then you don't necessarily have to go and do the local authority work at this point.

Yeah, that's what I'd sort of add to the others.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Brilliant. Again, you've succeeded in providing such a wealth of ideas. I really like this, and I hope that this helps the social worker to explore these possibilities. It's always nice when we hear back from social workers that we've provided advice from. So if you're listening right now, please get in touch and let us know how you got on for this question.

So, thank you again Dame Lorna, Claire and Kayleigh for your insight, and we look forward to having more conversations about more dilemmas that you have going forward.

If you have a dilemma that you'd like help with, please email us at [careersadvice@markallengroup.com](mailto:careersadvice@markallengroup.com) with as much detail as you can so that we can respond effectively. And also head over to [www.thesocialworkcommunity.com](http://www.thesocialworkcommunity.com) to join the conversation. So once again I'd like to thank Dame Lorna, Claire and Kayleigh for their advice, and we'll see you again next time. Thank you.