Newly Qualified Social Workers

A Practice Guide to the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment
Chapter 1

Please mind the gap

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How many times have you heard the familiar words ‘mind the gap’? In the late 1960s it became impractical for London Underground staff continually to warn passengers about the gap between train and platform. The equivalent phrase in France, Hong Kong, Singapore, Australia and the United States highlights the same problem – trains do not quite fit their stations. Likewise, newly qualified social workers often find they do not fit comfortably into their new organisations. Whether you have qualified as a social worker in England (Bates et al., 2010), Ireland (National Social Work Qualifications Board (NSWQB), 2004) or Australia (McDonald, 2007) appears to make no difference – the breach between qualification and first post is likely to be significant. Newly qualified social workers (NQSWs) often describe their first year in practice using very graphic terms (see also Skills for Care, 2011).

- Frankly, peer support from other NQSWs has been the life saver (Carpenter et al., 2011, p37).
- It was a baptism of fire (Bates et al., 2010, p21).
- I constantly felt I was just keeping my head above water (Revans, 2008, p15).

Whether you are a newly qualified social worker or someone who is about to qualify, this book will help you to ‘mind that gap’ and make the transition towards your first Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE).

Most social work textbooks focus on social work practice, social work skills or on how to study for your social work degree (see Parker and Bradley, 2010; Trevithick, 2012; Walker, 2011). Few texts directly address the gap or crucial transition period between finishing off the social work degree and managing the first years of practice. As such, this book offers down to earth, practical guidance on applying for your first post and managing your first few years. It includes useful sections on topics such as ASYE, induction, supervision, dealing with conflict, court skills, report writing and team working – and is written by a group of over 30 authors with extensive qualifying and post-qualifying social work education, and social work practice experience – be they people who use services, carers, managers, academics or newly qualified social workers.

Our interest in this transition period was fired initially by our research project tracking the learning and development needs of 22 newly qualified social workers in the South West (UK) region (Bates et al., 2010). It is to this research project that we turn briefly.
The first social workers to graduate with the new degree did so in the summer of 2006. Later that year, Skills for Care commissioned Bournemouth University to track newly qualified social workers in the South West region through their first year of employment. They asked us to do three things:

- to evaluate their perceptions of the effectiveness of the new social work degree;
- to evaluate their perceptions of the effectiveness of their induction and/or probation periods;
- to track their progress towards post-qualifying social work education.

We also sought the perspective of people who use services, carers and line managers on the learning and development needs of these newly qualified social workers. What we found out through the use of multiple questionnaires, interviews and focus groups surprised us.

Blewitt and Tunstall (2008) raise the question whether generic qualifying programmes enable social workers to work equally well in children’s and adult services. Some research suggests the answer is ‘no’; just one-third of newly qualified children’s workers believe their degree course prepared them for their jobs (Sellick, 2008). However, in our sample (all from local authority children’s or adult services) about three-quarters of newly qualified social workers and their line managers agreed that the social work degree provided workers with the right knowledge, understanding and skills for their current post – a finding that remained almost constant over the nine months of the evaluation (Bates et al., 2010). The recent evaluation of England’s social work degree reports a similarly positive experience of teaching and learning (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualifications in England Team (ESWDQET), 2008; Orme et al., 2009). Yet, this study and Bates et al. (2010) report negative findings. About a quarter of our sample did not feel prepared by their qualifying programme in areas such as assessment, report writing, dealing with conflict, and care management; the issue that stood out though was the development of court skills (Brown et al., 2007; Bates et al., 2010).

About three-quarters of our sample underwent a workplace-based induction. Yet, during interviews it became clear that few had been given a structured induction – that is, one that helped them move into their new role in a clear, planned and organised fashion. Finally, three newly qualified social workers claimed to know nothing about post-qualifying social work education – this, of course, was not confirmed by their line managers.

You will notice from the contents page that this practice guide is a result of and a response to these research findings, and we have used your colleagues’ experiences to structure it. These findings even fuelled debates in the House of Lords (Hansard, 2007). Subsequent to these debates, the government asked the then Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) to develop a three-year pilot programme (£27m) for newly qualified social workers working in children’s services to help them strengthen their knowledge, skills and confidence (DfES/DH, 2006; CWDC, 2008, 2008a). This programme started in 2008 and, alongside Skills for Care’s programme for social workers working in adult services, has only just finished. These programmes have been replaced by an Assessed and Supported Year in Employment, or ASYE, for all newly qualified social
workers. The other key differences are that ASYE is open to the statutory, voluntary and private sectors and involves assessment against ASYE capabilities as part of the new Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF) (TCSW, 2012). The PCF provides social workers and employers alike with an understanding of the appropriate capabilities to be developed as part of continuing professional development. So, this practice guide is also a response to the ASYE-level capabilities in that all of them are covered to a lesser or greater extent throughout.

These welcome interventions in ASYE and PCF come at a time of continued change in the world of social work practice resulting from radical reform of the public sector (Jordan and Jordan, 2006). Since the New Labour government was first elected in 1997, the social and health care sector was subject to a ‘modernising’ agenda heralded by the Department of Health (DH) White Paper *Modernising Social Services* (DH, 1998). This agenda focused on public service improvement through increased regulation, inspection and monitoring (Parker, 2007). The fiscal crisis which started in 2007 caused shockwaves throughout the world of social welfare and social work and, since the coalition government came to power in 2010, services have been rationalised, some prioritised, and some integrated with others. Children and families’ services have, in many authorities, been separated from adult social care. There is a continuing emphasis on working collaboratively with other disciplines and agencies to improve services rather than being constrained by their professional roles (Barr et al., 2008; Quinney, 2012). The involvement of carers and people who use services in designing and leading services continues to be promoted. The Care Standards Act 2000 and the Health and Social Care Act 2012, in particular the transfer of social work’s regulatory functions from the General Social Care Council to the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC), require commitment and adherence. Employing agencies will require social workers to contribute to performance assessment frameworks and service inspections to promote improvement and development (Sinclair, 2008). Treading a path through such a complex world requires models of social work practice that maintain the value base, yet can also facilitate the development of services and their management and promote personal and professional growth.

This practice guide should help you tread such a path. The flow of the chapters that follow has changed somewhat from the first edition. Importantly, each chapter starts with a statement about how the text will help you to demonstrate certain ASYE-level professional capabilities. Chapter 2 starts with ASYE and the concept of continuing professional development. Chapter 3 highlights the transition period between finishing off the social work degree and starting a new job. This chapter will help you to think through issues not only around choosing your first social work post, but also tips on how to apply for it. Chapter 4 will help you to clarify your expectations regarding induction, probation and supervision – and sketches out your role and responsibilities within these processes.

Chapter 5 addresses specific personal issues such as self-awareness, stress and the management of conflict whilst the final two chapters focus on the workplace. Chapter 6 reiterates the team, partnership and multidisciplinary nature of social work practice working, while Chapter 7 will help you understand your potential contribution to the development of services within the context of business planning, managerialism and learning organisations. The appendices pick up on those findings we mentioned earlier and those ASYE-level capabilities that are not covered in the above chapters – they are
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designed to be helpful snapshots for newly qualified social workers into issues such as assessment, diversity, social justice, safeguarding, court skills, writing skills and child protection; providing signposts along the way. If you would like to gain a deeper understanding of ASYE, please read the following chapter alongside Appendix 1. This appendix has been written by two of Skills for Care’s ASYE project managers and contains much helpful insight. Further reading sections, practical tasks, critical commentaries and case studies within both chapters and appendices, written by managers, people who use services, carers, experienced practitioners, newly qualified social workers and academics bring alive the above topics – and make this book what it is intended to be – a practical, down to earth practice guide for newly qualified (or about to qualify) social workers entering their first years of practice.

NB: Please note that many of the names of the newly qualified social workers, carers and people who use services have been changed.

Skills for Care has given over part of its website to ASYE. Available from: www.skillsforcare.org.uk/asye

The College of Social Work has a designated website section for the Professional Capabilities Framework, including a link to the ASYE statements. Available from: www.collegeofsocialwork.org/pcf.aspx