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Not an **ASYE** leap to frontline

Sheila Lewis, a newly qualified social worker in London, looks at England's Assessed and Supported Year in Employment programme and finds not all get the soft landing into the the job it's supposed to deliver

Everyone who has studied a social work qualification and then embarked upon the profession will tell you the transition from student to newly qualified social worker (NQSW) is not easy.

Most employers want you to be ready to hit the ground running – and whether you like to or not, this is how most social work journeys begin.

But in all professions, it takes time to adjust. Social work, we should remind ourselves, is a very stressful job and one in which we make difficult decisions about other people's lives. These can be life affirming and life changing. We operate within an increasingly complex social context, with new challenges to our work such as social media.

The unique complexity of our task is the reason why the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) was recommended by the Social Work Task Force's 2009 report. Agreed by the Social Work Reform Board in 2012, it aims to enable NQSWs in England to gain confidence in their new environment through reduced "protected" caseloads. The idea is to give new recruits the space to learn and to be assessed against the BASW-owned Professional Capabilities Framework outlining expectations of skills at different career stages.

It's a reform that is very much backed by government: "Social workers play a vital role in society and can transform the lives of vulnerable children and families," says the Department for Education which is responsible for its implementation with children and families social workers. "That's why we are supporting them in their education and training, particularly at the start of their careers."

According to a mini guide on ASYE produced by Skills for Care, which is responsible for the programme with adults, the 'S' in ASYE stand for 'supported'.

So why is it that this so often appears not to be the reality on the ground? Often when I ask colleagues on an ASYE programme if they are enjoying it they just roll their eyes.

"I am half way through my ASYE and I have been on a steep learning curve as a LAC social worker in a busy



'I don't have protected caseloads – I'm up to 29 cases'

London borough," says Angela Angel, a NQSW in London.

"This has been an exhausting experience. I have asked myself almost daily whether this job can be sustainable and whether I am choosing this lifestyle."

Helen Brown, a NQSW in Birmingham, says: "Social workers and social work managers are so overstretched that NQSWs are often teaching themselves the job. ASYE is pointless and just a burden to me trying to get to grips with a very difficult job. I don't have a protected caseload, I'm up to 29 cases."

Ashley Smyth, a NQSW from London, sums up well the hopes and aspirations of those joining an ASYE programme: "I expect to have a reduced caseload so that I have time to reflect on my practice and improve it, rather than be expected to 'hit the ground running', to have regular supervision and guidance, a space for me to ask

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The Professional Capabilities Framework which can be downloaded from BASW's website

questions or raise any issues that I may have. I hope there is excellent practice that I can observe based on social work values and ethics, that the ASYE will give me the chance to hone my skills and be the best social worker that I can be, feeling happy within myself.”

For some the ASYE has turned out to be an aspiration met. Elizabeth Njenga, who started a NQSW job working with adults in Berkshire, said: “I thought the ASYE was not really necessary and that NQSWs could be adequately supported via supervision for one year. However, as I’m currently half way through my ASYE, I now see the value of the ASYE programme as it offers a structured framework that facilitates reflective practice and professional development in a way supervision alone cannot achieve.”

Sadly, it seems ASYE programmes vary dramatically according to the employer and how they implement it.

Jackie Anderson (not her real name), an experienced social work academic at a London university, believes many employers of NQSWs are not committed to the values of social work training. She says ASYE schemes should have a restorative element and mindfulness should be incorporated into the ASYE programmes. She also believes there is need for a greater understanding of the transition into the job from being a student.

“The first year in social work can be make or break for some NQSWs, with many deciding in that year if the social work profession is for them,” she said.

The Government says this is exactly one of the factors the ASYE is designed to address.

“The aim of the ASYE programme is to improve the level of training for NQSWs in their first year of employment and ultimately encourage retention of social workers in the profession,” said a DfE spokesperson. “How the ASYE is valued is up to individual employers.”

Again, we are back to the inconsistent approach in implementing the programme across employers.

Another variable highlighted by NQSWs that makes a

difference is the level of commitment and experience of the social worker assigned to be their supervisor.

“My supervisor, although an experienced social worker, had never supported a NQSW on an ASYE before, meaning that she was learning as she went along and did not understand how to effectively implement the ASYE programme,” said one social worker. “As a result I felt inadequately supported, which in turn made my transition from student social worker to NQSW incredibly stressful.

“I resigned from my first NQSW post after six months. It also left me questioning the social work profession.”

As can be seen, there is a lot riding on the experience of this transitional year. As well as having the potential to make some practitioners prematurely leave the profession, the quality of delivery can have career implications since assessors have the power to pass or fail those on the programme. While not linked to ability to practice, there is a possibility of creating a two-tier workforce of those that have the accreditation and those without. Which only goes to underline again the need for consistency in delivery.

The Government says it is putting more money into the programme to ensure this. It provides £2,000 to employers for every NQSW they support. But participation is optional and in some areas, such as London, the number of ASYE places does not match the number of new recruits.

The Government says it is committed to improving quality and access. “To help the ASYE programme support newly-qualified social workers in child and family services effectively, we are investing more than £1.3 million in work with Skills for Care to give participants high quality support,” said the DfE spokesperson. “This includes tailoring their caseloads to their skills and experience and making sure they have the right level of supervision.”

ASYE has the potential to make a real difference to those newly arriving in our profession. It remains to be seen whether its implementation warrants a pass or a fail.

Sheila Lewis is a NQSW and a freelance journalist

‘It offers a structured framework that facilitates reflective practice’