



**Regulation Matters:
a CLEAR conversation**

Episode 41: Starting Fresh – the Journey of a New Specialist Regulator **May 11, 2021**

Line Dempsey: Welcome back to our podcast, Regulation Matters: a CLEAR conversation. Once again, I'm your host, Line Dempsey. I am the current Chief Compliance Officer with Riccobene Associates Family Dentistry here in North Carolina. I'm also the chair of CLEAR's National Certified Investigator Training committee.

As many of you are aware, the Council on Licensure, Enforcement and Regulation, or CLEAR, is an association of individuals, agencies and organizations that comprise the international community of professional and occupational regulation. This podcast is an opportunity for you to hear about the latest and greatest and important topics in our regulatory community.

Our guest for today's episode is Sarah Blackmore. She is the Executive Director for Strategy, Policy and Engagement with Social Work England. We're so glad to have you with us today. Welcome.

Sarah Blackmore: Thank you so much. It's great to be here virtually, for the first time taking part in a CLEAR podcast.

Line: Well, we are very glad to speak with you, and let me also thank our listeners for joining us today.

Recently, CLEAR shared an article in our regulatory news blog about how Social Work England is considering moving towards a “whole profession” approach to regulation, looking at the whole career journey of a social worker and supporting that transition from education to practice. So, we'd like to hear more about that. But maybe first, we can start with a little bit of background. What is Social Work England, and how and why did it come about?

Sarah: Thank you. Yes, it's particularly good, I must say, to be amongst listeners who really understand regulation and the impact that it has and its importance in protecting the public, but also in raising confidence and standards in the professions that it oversees. So Social Work England is the new specialist social work regulator, which is now responsible for the regulation of almost 100,000

social workers across England. And it took over from the Health and Care Professionals Council on the 2nd of December 2019.

Social work regulation in the UK has had a very checkered history, and we came from a series of social work reform initiatives by the UK government in Westminster, following a series of very high-profile cases where, sadly, children lost their lives at the hands of their parents and serious case reviews identified multiple professional failings, including by social workers. Also from a couple of reports on the state of education and training provision for social workers in England, where it was found that actually this was well below par and not equipping social workers for the realities of the job that they would be faced with.

So, we are still a new organization, and we've literally been building it around us, watching the desks and chairs and the computers come in. And we are proudly based in Sheffield, which is towards the north of England, although sadly many of us can't get there at the moment. And we've gone from a group of about 5 or 6 to more than 170 staff members, plus more than 200 partners who work with us.

And we're also building our culture, which is one that is firmly rooted in the values and principles on which the social work profession is based. At the very start, we carried out a substantial consultation process on our standards and rules, where we did a mini tour of the country, as well as a large online consultation to ask our sector what they thought of our professional and education and training qualifying standards, and our rules on registration and fitness to practice. The standards set out what we expect from social workers, and the rules govern how we operate as a regulator. We had a great response to this, and we published the changes we made to the draft standards and rules as a result. And it was a really proud moment for us when the standards were signed off by our Secretary of State in Westminster in July 2019. For the first time, our profession has a set of standards that were created and developed by the profession itself and by those who use social work services. For me, that's something incredibly exciting.

Line: Well, you know, I understand that you have a focus on co-production and dialog. So I guess, maybe, can you say a bit more about that?

Sarah: Certainly. Yes, that's very much at the heart of what we do. And the consultation process that I've just spoken about was very much a first step for us in what we see as an ongoing and evolving process of dialog and collaboration with our sector and all of the key people within it. And it was an early learning point for us in our co-production and engagement journey. And it's also been a real labor of love for us as we established the foundations of our organization on a firm baseline from which to move forward and start to regulate. Our ongoing dialog and collaboration with social workers will take many forms, and that was just the first part.

We also worked with our Professional Expert Group and our Experts by Experience Group who provided excellent advice and constructive challenge on our journey so far. We also worked with our

colleagues in social work regulation in Northern Ireland, Wales, and Scotland to understand their standards journey and ensure our collective standards are aligned where possible and appropriate. They have a slightly wider mandate than we do. We have a unique approach in terms of a team of eight regional engagement leads, who are all registered social workers. And they've been out and about (or were, albeit it's a bit online now) working with a range of partners, including employers, people with lived experience of social work, social workers themselves, and education and training providers. And they, together with our education and quality assurance team, are raising awareness and helping to ensure the consistent implementation of our standards, including sharing analysis of when social workers or education and training providers fall short of those standards. And they will continue to drive forward engagement across our regions.

We have also just concluded the first Social Work Week of its kind in England, a week where social workers and those with lived experience could come together, celebrate, reflect, and simply pause. The week consisted of 76 events, keynote speakers, well-being activities, speakers' corners, and more, and it was co-produced from start to finish.

One interesting unintended consequence of the pandemic and the consequent move to an entirely online program is that we had many more attendees, several thousand in fact, than we might have had in a face-to-face series of events.

And at the heart of what we do and the creation of Social Work Week and everything else that we do as a new regulator is our National Advisory Forum, which is made up of people with lived experience of social work, of academics, student social workers, and social workers themselves. And they continue to provide advice, support, and critical challenge to us on the implementation and delivery of our corporate strategy for our first three years of operation. So, it really is something that is central to who we are and what we do as a new regulator.

Line: So, would you, in essence, consider yourself a specialist regulator? And if you do, how do you define that?

Sarah: Yes, sure. I think part of the checkered history of social work regulation meant that social work in the past had been regulated by an organization that was also responsible for the regulation of 16 allied health professionals. So, we see our approach to specialist regulation as one where we're really focused in on our sector. We understand the nuance and the particular challenge that social workers are faced with on a day-to-day basis in their practice.

And so, we see our role as spanning a number of different crucial areas of regulation. So obviously as I've described, we set the professional standards for social workers in England, including continuous professional development or CPD standards. We hold the register for about 100,000 social workers. So, if somebody wants to use the protected title of social worker, they need to be registered with us. You can't just call yourself a social worker in England; you must be registered.

We set initial education and training standards and approve qualifying courses. We evaluate social workers' CPD. We also approve post qualifying courses in the mental health arena for those who want to become approved mental health professionals or best interest assessors; we can annotate a person's registration based on whether or not they have achieved that qualification. We handle concerns raised to us about a social worker and assess whether or not their practice has fallen short of the professional standards.

So just in terms of those standards again - and I'm laboring a bit about them, but they're so important that I think it's worth your listeners really understanding how they came about. And they were developed, as I mentioned previously, with a range of people, including those that lived experience of social work. They are a series of Statements of Commitments that social workers must make to ensure that their practice meets our standards. And committing to these professional standards will help us, as a specialist regulator, underpin our objective to increase consistency and raise standards in social work practice. And as a social worker myself, I can see myself in these standards and see myself as able to sign up to the Statements of Commitments and hold true to them as I continue to develop my own practice.

Line: That's excellent. Well, I know you mentioned, very briefly, you talked a little bit about education. So maybe on that slant, what about social work education and training? How does regulation come into play in that area?

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely; it's a good question. And in terms of the education and training standards that we develop, these are just as important, ensuring that the right people are coming into the profession at the earliest possible stage. And as a former social work manager in children's services, I've often experienced social work students coming in on placements and thinking, 'How on Earth did you ever get on that course to begin with?' And by that point, of course, it's often too late.

And I know that's not unique to the social work profession. So, through our admissions requirements, our expectations around support for students, curriculum content, and ensuring people who use social work services are engaged at every point of the course, we will again ensure consistent raised standards of social work education and training provision across the country. And where those standards are not met, then we will take action to address that.

To do that, we've developed two different sets of education and training standards. The first are broadly similar to what education and training providers were used to from the previous regulator, and that was to recognize that, really, it can take a bit of time to make changes to a curriculum. And we wanted to work with social work education and training providers on this.

The second set of standards, which was slightly delayed because of the pandemic but will come into force in September this year, are more aspirational and reflect our aim as Social Work England to raise standards and work in a different and more creative way.

So, why does any of it matter, really? And I'm very now into the more broader context, but I'm sure this won't be unique to the English context either. Social work as a profession is at a crossroads. Even without the pandemic, there are currently significant vacancies across the country and untold pressures on budgets that result in early help and intervention services giving way to more expensive, shorter term acute and emergency responses.

Gaps elsewhere in the system mean that there's a risk of dilution of the vital social work role, and the many good news stories and amazing work being done by colleagues across the country is often not seen, can't be told, or is undervalued.

And we also know that in terms of standards and guidance, it's a bit of a crowded landscape for the social work profession in England. There's a lot of documents; there's a lot of guidance; there's a lot of different frameworks in place. Actually, it can be quite confusing. So, we're currently looking at the post-qualifying landscape and the whole of the professional journey, from student right the way through to veering into a consultant practitioner level or a management and leadership pathway for those who want to take that, and looking to try and streamline on the line where possible.

So, we feel we have a moment in time, actually, for social work, where a new specialist social worker can, together with the profession, shine a light on what it means to practice social work in England and the difference it makes.

Line: Well, it certainly sounds like you guys have been working on a lot of things. I guess looking into the future, what's next now that you're established?

Sarah: Well, we have. It's been a very busy startup phase and the main things for us were to get our foundations in place and introduce ourselves to our sector and really show and demonstrate that we are committed to that co-production and ongoing dialog. So, the next steps are, well, they're numerous really, and some of them I'll touch on in more detail later on in the conversation. But, we really want to explore in more detail that "whole professional" journey, so that a social work student, once they come into their course, understands really clearly what the options are for them, what the pathways they can go down in terms of their future practice, what the expectations are of them at every stage of that pathway. And bringing some clarity and some simplicity to what has become a very complicated professional journey - a professional journey that, in many ways, is not clear. I think one of the beauties of the social work profession and the many local authorities in England who employ social workers is that they're very good at growing their own terms of managers of the future. But they're often kind of thrown in at the deep end once somebody has a few years of experience.

And actually, what we don't do in this country enough is we don't recognize the increasing sophistication of social work practice itself. So one of the things that we would like to do is to create a dual pathway whereby those who want to go into management and leadership can do so (and that's absolutely valid - we need good managers and good leaders in social work), but also where somebody

who wants to stay in practice and really build on the sophistication of their social work practice, that they can be recognized for doing so in the same way, for example, that you would with a medical profession. So you can see a doctor would potentially work their way up from being an SHO to a registrar to consultant, and they get the recognition of each step of that journey. We don't have anything like that in social work. And we don't want to replicate what happens in medicine, because social work is its own profession. But we want to look at ensuring that we have good experienced social workers who can remain in practice and get the acknowledgement that they're developing practice brings to them and to the people that they're working with, most importantly, and that people are not just moved off into a management and leadership track.

So that will be one of the key things to focus on. As well as that, we'll be building our register, ensuring that there is good CPD happening across the profession, that the public are protected - which is, of course, the primary objective and underpins everything that we do – and that our fitness to practice processes are working well and working effectively and people are not caught up in the system, and that they are working in a proportionate manner. So, one or two small things to do.

Line: No doubt! Well you know, at least here in the States and I'm sure it's worldwide, but, you know an important area that a lot of organizations are paying more attention to recently is equality, diversity, and inclusion. So, how does this feature in your approach to regulation?

Sarah: Well, I mean, this is really important for us actually because social work, as with society more broadly today, is not an equal profession. The current global context and the aftermath of the horrendous murder of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter movement has challenged many professions and many organizations. And social work, and we as the regulator, are no different and must act.

And as with everything that we do, our aim is to be sector-leading in this and every other area. We know we have a lot to do here internally as an organization, and collectively with the sector. And we're hearing from across social work at all stages how people are experiencing discrimination and disadvantage, from the black student who has no academic role model and whose class might receive an hours teaching on anti-oppressive practice, to the black male social worker who was more likely to experience disciplinary processes from his employer or to be referred to a formal fitness to practice process.

We're hearing from social workers from black and minority ethnic backgrounds that the same opportunities to progress are not open to them via promotion or access to leadership programs, LGBTQIA+ social workers who are discriminated against, their pronouns and identity ignored. And we have heard from those who have had to give up social work courses due to inaccessibility, while they see allowances that would have helped them being given to other students, and those who have not been able to take up placements or jobs for similar reasons. And all this is before you consider issues of intersectionality.

We have a lot to do here. And as the historian David Olusoga said recently, 'There are some uncomfortable truths that we need to hear.' I think we all know that we've all been here before. We've had this conversation before. And when the media attention drops off, the conversation dries up. This time, it really must be different. And there must be some real, meaningful, and tangible sustained change.

So, what have we done? Well, in line with our commitment to dialog, collaboration and co-production, we've listened carefully to students about their views on the inclusivity of their courses; the support for students who experience inequality, discrimination and oppression; and their expectations for the future. In regard to the robustness of anti-discriminatory practice training and qualifying courses, we will review this through our work with providers, as we refine our approach to social work education and training courses.

In our immediate work, we have asked for more information about the makeup of student groups from course providers. We've sought advice about how we might support more inclusive learning experiences for students and have developed new research projects that will engage with students about issues relating to equality and inclusivity. We have also invited student groups to come and speak with our newly established Education and Training Advisory Forum, and we meet regularly with the Anti-racist Social Work Education Group who consists of academics who have coalesced to focus in on this issue.

We are working with the UK Principal Social Worker Network on issues of quality, diversity, and inclusion across the sector. We've also been speaking with the leadership in Children's Services in England about this also.

Internally, we've established our own equality, diversity, and inclusion steering group to lead the development and implementation of our strategy in this area. We've recruited a professional associate to support us as a subject matter expert, and we've just recruited a head of equality, diversity, and inclusion as part of our senior team. We've also set up staff groups, such as our Race Equality Network; our mental health group, Think Well; and our LGBTQIA+ group. Our Education and Training Advisory Forum and National Advisory Forum discuss equality, diversity, and inclusion as a standing agenda item at their meetings.

We have signed up to the national charity Stone Wall's Diversity Champions Program and to the English Employer Network for Equality and Inclusion so that we can use their expert resources and benchmark our progress.

All social workers on our register are required to uphold our professional standards. And those standards make explicit our expectation for social workers to challenge the impact of disadvantage and discrimination and to promote social justice.

But we fully recognize how personal experiences can also impact on how social workers practice. Both societal and health crises resonated with us powerfully when Yixian Brown shared her experience of being a Chinese British social worker during Covid-19 in a [blog on our website](#). Her honest and moving account painted a stark picture of anxiety and concern for herself and her family when reports of hate crimes against Chinese people increased as the virus spread.

As social work continues to discuss its role in challenging the inequalities that people face, including each other, we will be involved and actively seek conversations, talking about the role of the regulator, upholding safe and fair practice for the public, and continuing to assess our own work to promote fairness across our regulatory functions.

We will deliver state of the nation reports illustrating this and holding a mirror up to those who need to recognize where change needs to happen, whether that's through resourcing or other areas. And in January this year, we published the first one of these, [Social Work in England](#), and I'm happy to provide a link if that's helpful.

And not just in terms of equality, diversity, and inclusion, but in terms of social work more broadly, we will continue to be present at the table where national policy decisions are being made that will impact on social work. We will continue to be vocal about social work and about all matters to do with equality, diversity, and inclusion, and how we're progressing as a regulator. And, we will work with everyone who has an interest in social work on all parts of the system to affect positive change and raise standards of practice.

There is a real gap in data and intelligence around social work and the social work profession in England. And through what we are beginning to build up, we will be able to speak authoritatively about social work as a profession and the impact it has. Not just the statistical - how many social workers, where they are, where they trained - but the very rich anecdotal evidence from across the country about what's working well and what needs attention.

Look, we know we're not always going to get it right. We're a new organization, and I often tend to say, we're taking our baby steps. And like any baby or toddler, we will stumble at times. But we will learn from them, and we will keep talking to our sector and those experts who use social work services who have guided us so well as we've established.

Line: Wow, it's excellent work. Really looks like a great plan. I think this also has been a really great conversation. So we thank you, Sarah, for speaking with us today.

Sarah: Thank you. It's been great to be a part of a CLEAR podcast. And like I said, I'm very happy to provide any other information that your listeners might want once they've listened today. Thank you.

Line: Absolutely, and it has been a pleasure. I also want to thank our listeners for tuning in for this episode. We invite you to continue the conversation through our CLEAR Discussion Forum. This podcast episode will be posted in the CLEAR Communities, and members can reply to the post with

comment. As fuel for thought, here are some things for our listeners to think about and maybe discuss. How is your organization looking at the transition from education to practice? Does the regulator have a role there? And how is your organization responding to issues around equality, diversity, and inclusion? We'd love to continue this conversation on CLEAR Communities.

And we'll be back with another episode of Regulation Matters: a CLEAR conversation very soon. If you're new to the CLEAR podcast, please subscribe to us. You can find this on Podbean, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Stitcher, Spotify, TuneIn, Alexa for Amazon Echo devices, iHeartRadio, Player FM, Listen Notes, and Pandora. If you've enjoyed this podcast episode, please leave a rating or comment in the app. Your reviews help us to improve our ranking and make it easier for new listeners to find us.

Feel free to visit our website at www.clearhq.org for additional resources, as well as a calendar of upcoming online programs and events. Finally, I'd like to thank our CLEAR staff, specifically Stephanie Thompson. She's our content coordinator and editor for our program. Once again, I'm Line Dempsey, and I look forward to speaking to you again very soon.

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