



YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

## **Stepping up to Social Work – a social work student’s perspective**

Arron Batley-Simpson, Student Social Worker, Barnsley Disabled Childrens Team

Arron is a student social worker in Barnsley’s Disabled Childrens Team. He is on his final work placement as part of the ‘Step up to Social Work’ programme. Step Up to Social Work is an intensive full-time, fully funded, training programme to fast-track people into social work. Arron is due to finish the program in 2019 and qualify as a social worker in March and can’t wait to get started working full-time with children and families.

Arron’s view and experience of social work and the role it plays in helping children and families is very positive but this wasn’t the case before. Arron was placed in foster care at the age of two and after a brief time back at home he went back into care where he stayed for the remainder of his childhood. Reflecting on his early years, Arron said “Growing up in care, I never had a good experience with my social workers except with one social work assistant who did a lot for me. But, I stayed and grew up with the same foster family, who I call my real family now, and I was really lucky in that respect.

“My journey into social work came about, by luck really, while I was working in Barnsley Council. I had just finished a Master’s degree in teaching and was doing a job in the council involving housing repairs. It wasn’t what I wanted to do – I wanted to get a job in the Leaving Care Team to help others in a similar experience to what I had been through. Then by chance I met Monica Green who happened to be a senior manager in social work. I had emailed the Barnsley Leaving Care team asking for advice on how to go about getting a job in their area and Monica got wind of this. We met up for a coffee where we got chatting and she told me about all the options available, gave me a push, and opened a lot of doors for me. Up until then I didn’t think I’d be able to be a social worker – I thought that being in care and the fact that in my childhood I’d got into trouble, been fighting and got a record, I thought I’d be ruled out straight away – I didn’t think it would be possible.”

As Arron didn’t want to go back to University to study and pay student fees again, he did some research – looking at courses such as ‘Frontline’ and ‘Step Up to Social Work’ and what types of jobs you could do in social work, to help think about what area he wanted to work in. This led him to apply and get on the Step Up to Social work 14-month training programme which he is in the latter stage of now. The accompanying bursary with ‘Step Up’ has made it possible for Arron to get into social work. Without this financial support he wouldn’t have had the means to fund and support himself through the course.

Although, it is a demanding course, Arron is really enjoying it. “The course is a mix of university study and work placement. Although the course is through Salford University, we do the course work in Leeds. It started with assignments and readiness for direct practice course work, then a 70-day work placement, more course work and then a 100-day placement, which is what I’m doing at the moment. At the end of this placement I will have

a final block of study and then I'll qualify. It is demanding, doing a day's work and then studying in the evening but it's worth it and I'm really enjoying it. The hands-on work helps apply the theory and the practical work helps reinforce the learning. It's also good mixing with other students and sharing each other's experiences from their different placements.

"My current placement is in Barnsley's Disabled Children's Team. It's different. I'd never imagined working with disabled children and their families but it's really good plus I get to experience all aspects of social work from screening, all the way to adoption. All my interaction with families has been rewarding. In particular, there is one family I've been helping where two of the three children have difficulties – autism/ADHD and development issues – and the dad is sadly receiving palliative care. Before I went in, their life was a bit chaotic – for example they weren't communicating with the school because they weren't getting along with school support. Although I've only made five visits, I've been able to give them support that helps. Each visit is task-centred with things I have to do and they have to do, so we can work towards a target. I had my last visit the other day and I got observed on it and the feedback they gave was that my support has really helped them turn things around. It was really nice to hear – It felt like I'd done a good job."

Now Arron has seen the other side of social work it has changed his perception of the profession. "When I was younger I thought my social workers were rubbish - I can see that social work and social workers are not like that now – it's completely different. You can see how much everyone cares and the extra mile they go to help families. Previously, I worked in Rotherham and saw how they have been changing things for the better and also in Barnsley. It's really noticeable the support you get from colleagues – managers and senior managers are visible, they back you up when needed, and everyone is there for each other. You also get flexibility and autonomy to organise your day that best fits with the families you're supporting. As long as you get the things done you need to you can go and see a family when it's better for them and it can make domestic arrangements better for me. You're not stuck to a 9 to 5 working day.

"When I first told my friends that I was going into social work they were surprised, surprised partly because I'm male, which seemed unusual to them, and because of my personality – I go out with the lads and play football. They immediately thought that it was all about taking kids away – far from what we're actually trying to do. Even now they don't fully realise what social workers do and how difficult it is. I've also experienced other professions having misconceptions about social work. On a child protection visit we arrived to meet a very nervous mother who had been told by her GP prior to our arrival that we would be taking her children away from her – it took a lot of reassurance and explanation from us about what we were there for and how we would be helping/supporting her. It's also a shame that the media still portrays such a negative and unrealistic view of social work. The Kiri TV drama series didn't help regarding the image of social workers either – the social worker character seemed like a nice person and then was seen drinking and visiting service users – that would never happen – it gives people the wrong impression and reinforces negative stereotypes. The media's view needs to change drastically."

Now Arron is nearing the end of his training he wants to move into the preventative side of social work, in particular child protection and even specialise in it. "I like working with families, they can see that I know what I'm on about and take me seriously and being able to make a difference is really rewarding.

“I’d recommend anyone thinking about following a career in social work to go for it. In my view you need to be committed, hard-working, organised (although I wasn’t when I started but I am very much now), passionate and you’ve got to want to genuinely help people. I love it - it’s the best thing I’ve ever done.”

This case study has been captured as part of Children’s Social Work Matters campaign [‘Improving Lives’](#).