



YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

Helping children and young people is what I love to do – my social work story

Fiona Demain, Social Worker, North Yorkshire's Ripon & Rural Safeguarding Children's Team

Fiona is part of the Ripon and Rural Safeguarding Children's Team in North Yorkshire. Before deciding to pursue a career in social work she worked with children in a range of roles, which helped her to discover a passion for supporting young people through difficult times.

"I left school with very few qualifications with a dream to go and work abroad as a holiday rep, with kids. So I went and ran a youth programme in Ibiza for a summer, and then I worked on cruise ships running youth programmes for another three years.

"There were a few significant events that happened during that time that really changed my view of the world. In particular, on one trip some children lost their parents at sea, and the impact that it had on them was the first thing that really opened my eyes to the fact that tragedy happens in the world. I had to try to support the kids through a very traumatic and difficult time.

"After working on the cruise ships I came back home and landed a job at Young Carers, where I absolutely fell in love with working with young people. I worked there for four years and enjoyed every minute, but one of the frustrating parts for me was that I couldn't do more for the young people. That's when I decided to become a social worker.

"I did a lot of research on where to study. I lived in Harrogate at the time and I wanted to stay local. I applied to the two Sheffield universities, Huddersfield, Manchester and Hull, and got accepted by them all. I chose the University of Hull and I loved it. I remember during my interview they asked some really tricky questions and put me on the spot. It was clear that they wanted me to be honest and aware of my own background. For me, that's what social work is about."

The response from family and friends to Fiona's decision to go into social work was mixed, and throughout her career she has found herself having to address the continuing misconceptions about social work as a profession.

"My Dad's response was unreal! It was as if I'd told him I was going to go and be society's worst enemy. Some of my friends also used to ask me if I had removed any kids, and I always said, 'No I haven't, that's not what we do!'. It's part of the job but it's always a last resort. In my career as a social worker so far, I've never had to remove any kids, I've been able to work with a family and help them through each situation.

“When I was a youth worker, working for Young Carers, and even later working in residential care, people were happy to see me but now, with me being known as a social worker you experience a lot of suspicion from people. I’m still the same person, I still work in the exact same way, it’s only my job title that’s changed!

“There seems to be a stereotype of a social worker as this older woman, a busybody who pushes her nose into other people’s business. I would hate to be thought of in that way. So I show up to visit people with no makeup on, in jeans and trainers, because that’s who I am. I don’t want people to think of ‘The Social’ as being that stereotype. We’re all real people! I always tell parents my job is the same as theirs. My job is to help keep their kids safe.

“Being a children’s social worker has many challenges but also can be very rewarding, none more so than with a case I’ve been working on with a boy since he was 13. We had concerns about him being exploited, he was going missing for weeks at a time, and he ended up in residential care as his parents didn’t feel they were able to keep him safe. I invested so much time in that lad and managed to establish a great relationship with him. While he was in residential care on the other side of the county, I would go through every couple of weeks and hang out with him, do some baking, or go to the seaside. Eventually, we managed to bring him and the family back together and we’ll be closing his case soon. He’s back home and there are no further concerns about exploitation. For me, my greatest achievement was sticking by him when nobody else believed him. It will be one of the hardest things for me to close that case, but I’m also so pleased that he’s made it back home.

“The most difficult thing about this job is when I feel powerless. People look to you for the answers, for the solutions, and you don’t always have them. That’s hard to deal with because it throws up barriers. On a personal level, even with the boy I’ve been working with, I often felt completely powerless. I invested time, I went out with the police in the middle of the night to look for him, I did everything I could, but I couldn’t convince his mum to take him home, I couldn’t stop him going missing. All I could do was put myself out there and hope that he would work with me.”

Fiona’s team at North Yorkshire has also been through some challenging periods, but in the long run this has helped foster a supportive culture where Fiona and her colleagues look out for one another.

“I’ve worked for North Yorkshire since 2013. We’re really fortunate in our team, we have an amazing group. For a while, we had quite an unsettled management situation, our caseloads were ridiculously high but we managed. Over time this has led to a close-knit team – we’re solid as a rock. We’re good friends, we know each other inside out. Our office is the safest place for us. It’s an amazing place and it’s really nurturing.

“We’ve also got a good and stable management team who give us the consistent support we need which for us is crucial. If I were ever to leave this job, replicating a team like this would be really hard to do, so I’ll probably be here til I’m 90!”

For anyone considering a career in children’s social work, Fiona has this advice:

“Do it if you have a love for helping people. The reason I’m a social worker is that I love fighting for the underdog. I love standing up for people and helping them to be heard. If you feel like that’s a fight that you want to fight, then go for it.

“Social workers need resilience and a good sense of humour. You’ve got to be able to look after yourself and make yourself a priority. If you’ve got motivation and energy you can do it. You can learn the job, but you need a passion for it to get to where you need to be. You don’t need to be massively academic, you just need to be real. Be the social worker you’d want on *your* doorstep.”

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