



Children's social work – my calling

Jen Sebright, Children's Social Worker, Looked After Children Team, Leeds

Jen works on the Children Looked After team at Leeds City Council. She has been a qualified social worker for four years. Before retraining, she worked in housing and youth offending, where working alongside social workers played a part in convincing her that she would be well suited to a role in children's social work. Like many people, Jen's first impressions of social work were formed when she first encountered social workers as a child.

"My mum had MS, and she had an adult social worker, so I had an idea of what a social worker was. My perception was probably quite negative as a child, but coming into working with children and young people I came into contact with social workers as a professional.

"I started working in housing in 2000, and then moved to working with young offenders. They often had social workers in the youth offending service, and we would work together. At that point I saw a different side to it and I thought, 'actually I'd quite like to do that job'. They were working in a different way, it wasn't all child protection, it was more about working with children and families."

For Jen, the decision to retrain as a social worker was a long time in the making. "I always had an idea that I would like to do the qualification but it was really difficult to find the time to get into it. Eventually, when my youngest child was 3, I decided to see if I could get onto the Masters, and I did! I didn't look back from there and now I'm really proud of being a social worker because it took me a long time to get there."

Overall, Jen feels that her own personal ethos and values are shared with both social work as a profession, and Leeds as an employer. "It's essential to be caring, and have an awareness of equality and fairness. If you work with a family you need to show that you're there to help keep them and their family safe and happy. My dad wasn't surprised at all when I told him I was going to be a social worker. I've got three siblings and I'm the only one who works in the public sector."

Recent reforms in the field of social work, as well as progress being made locally, have helped to create a more positive culture around the profession. "I use Twitter quite a lot, and I do notice that in discussions on Twitter people are talking the profession up more and being more positive about it. I think day to day you might not notice a change, but Leeds City Council's leadership is good at being positive, so every year they hold a conference celebrating social work. When there was the good Ofsted report there was real positivity around Leeds and around social work."

Jen's role involves working with children and young people from a wide spectrum of backgrounds and circumstances, which is not without its challenges. "I'm in a Children Looked After team of 13 plus, and a typical caseload might be around 15 young people. It's really varied. Young people I work with are generally aged 13 to 18, and they might live in a range of different places: at home, with parents, in residential units, or with foster carers. I also work with a couple of unaccompanied young asylum seekers as well. The most difficult thing for me is worrying about a young person when you're not sure they're safe. If you think there is a chance that someone is unsafe, you can take action, but coming to that decision involves some anxiety at times. Although it can be tough to keep on top of things and juggle commitments, I think that pace of work suits some people. It's never boring, but it can definitely be a handful at times. If you didn't have a good team, it would be quite hard in this job, so I'm lucky that I have a team that I really enjoy working with."

While working on the Children Looked After team can be demanding, for Jen it is the relationship building aspect of the job, and the rewarding breakthroughs this provides, that make it worthwhile. "What I enjoy the most is just talking to people and spending time with young people. The best part of the role is when we're advocating for young people, helping them to get into the school they want, working with their families. The rewarding bit is when you've got an established relationship and it's fun to spend time with young people." Leeds has a focus on restorative work which is all about building relationships and that is something which is important to me."

One situation stands out as an achievement: "There was one particular family – at first the mother wouldn't communicate with me at all. She would ignore me, and only let me in at times of crisis. There were some concerns that there was ongoing domestic violence within the family home. Alongside the fear of having a social worker involved with her family I wasn't surprised that she was trying to hide from me. The breakthrough came when she was pregnant and wanted to attend a mum and baby group. She was talking about having to go on the bus and seemed like she might change her mind, so I offered to drive her to the class.

"Taking the time to do that was worth it as it gave me time to understand her, and her time to trust me. By the time she had the baby we had built up more of a relationship and the conversations I could have with her were very different. The whole experience taught me that relationship building was absolutely key, and it was a big part of why I moved to the Looked After Children team, as you get more opportunities to build those longer term relationships.

"That's the way I define success. It definitely isn't by saying, 'this is how many children I've removed from harm.' It's by my success in building relationships and helping families believe they can make positive change themselves."

As someone who came into the profession from another career, Jen has found that waiting until the right moment for a change of direction worked in her favour. "It's ok to be cautious about getting into social work and you should make sure it is definitely something you want to do. It's a brilliant profession, but it's very hard. I know there are lots of brilliant young social workers out there, but I'm glad that I was nearly 40 when I finished my training. I

think having the experience of being a young carer and being in housing was really good for me.”

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