



YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

### **A lot has changed in social work over 30 years**

John Hutchinson, Independent Reviewing Officer, Barnsley

John is an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) with Barnsley Council. He has been a qualified social worker for nearly 30 years.

John's strong sense of fairness and justice was a big part in motivating him to choose a career working with children. His interest in children's social work came from his experiences working in his first job in a residential children's home, where he was struck by the challenging circumstances facing the children he was working with.

"I left Polytechnic in 1982 with a degree in Politics and History and had no idea what I wanted to do. I went home and didn't do a lot all summer. My mum thought she'd found me a job in the local paper for a residential childcare officer, so she encouraged me to apply, and I did. I went for an informal look round the children's home, in Sheffield, which is long since closed. I did like the look of it, and I didn't want to work in a factory. I was quite interested, politically, in working with disadvantaged people, but I really didn't have a clue how to go about it. Then I got an interview, and after not hearing anything for weeks, I got a phone call from one of the service managers to say they had some work lined up for me. This was about October '82. I had a contract till that Christmas but stayed for seven years! Even though it was incredibly stressful and incredibly hard work, I loved it.

"We had a lot of young people with varying degrees of difficulties, about which I knew nothing at all. I knew there were lots of people in society who had a really bad time, but until I worked there I didn't appreciate how bad a time they actually had. I made some mistakes, I learned a lot, I like to think I made a lot of good relationships. The novelty wore off, but it was a learning experience and a lot of good times as well as the not so good ones.

"The kids were visited by their social workers, and they never looked forward to it. These people seemed really quite distant from the kids. By and large, the social workers at the time seemed to me to be very middle class and their background knowledge seemed even more limited than mine – I thought I could do a better job than them. I'd also got to the point where I'd got married, had kids and so I didn't want to keep working night shifts. As it happened, the department I was working in ran a scheme where they would second you to go to university to do what was then called the Certificate of Qualification in Social Work.

"I was lucky in that I was offered a place the first time I applied, in Leicester. So I went to university, did my social work degree, which I really enjoyed. I thought it was a really good course, it was quite experiential. It was academic but we did lots of practical stuff as well."

After qualifying as a social worker in 1989. John's first social work job was in Rotherham, in a general team working with older people, people with mental health needs and with children and families. In his current role, as an Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO), his job is to review cases and challenge decisions to make sure every decision has been made in the best interests of the child.

"At Barnsley we have an expression, 'check and challenge'. The role of an IRO is to oversee the progress of looked after children and their lives, for as long as they're looked after. We have a role in challenging the profession and challenging the local authority about their decision making. I became interested in the role when I was a social worker in a looked after children's team in Sheffield. I went to many looked after children reviews that were chaired by IROs, and I saw that they had more ability to stop or make things happen.

"I enjoy my job and I can do the challenging parts. IROs are independent and it allows me, to a degree, do the job in our own way. I do it in quite a gentle way, I don't do confrontation, but I will stand my ground for the kids.

"The most rewarding part is seeing change. A recent example is three children, for whom I'm their IRO, were in care for about eighteen months. There were lots of long-term issues with Mum and Dad, and the family generally. Me and the social worker really like these people, the kids are lovely. Some seeds were sown, a huge amount of work was done, the bulk of it by the social worker and the parents, and the kids got to go home in January. The longer they're home, the better it's going to be, and Mum and Dad have worked really well. They know they can parent in a different way. Their old ways of doing things were really entrenched, but the rewards have been worth the effort.

"I came into the job to work with children, some of whom are now in their 40s. That's still why I do it. I like kids, and kids get a raw deal, and kids from disadvantaged families get a double raw deal. Anything I can do to help these kids have a nicer childhood, that's my motivation. Also, to help them think that there are some adults around who want to help.

"To be a social worker you've got to be able to build, make and break relationships. You've also got to be prepared to be part of a process where very difficult decisions about people's lives are made. You've got to feel strong enough to ask challenging questions and advocate for kids. It's a job for anyone who feels strongly about making a difference for families and kids. You need a sense of humour, a sense of justice, and a lot of resilience. If you have a sense of proportion, you'll do alright.

"At the end of the day, as a social worker, seeing positive results is all the reward and motivation you need, that's why I'm still a social worker after all this time."

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