



YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

An experienced professional's view of children's social work today

Lisa Chamberlain, Senior Children's Social Worker, Kirklees Assessment & Intervention Team

Lisa has had a long, varied and fulfilling career in children's social work, working in local authority teams, for herself and for agencies. She is currently working in the Assessment and Intervention Team at Kirklees.

She began her career in 1991 when she worked for the National Children's Home (NCH), now the charity Action for Children, as a resident community worker. Qualifying as a social worker in 1990, she left NCH to set up a small independent fostering agency which she eventually sold to a bigger agency. After a spell of work for the larger agency she then moved back to a permanent social work role within Leeds.

"A key driver for me to come back to working as a social worker on a permanent basis was that I wanted to build long term relationships with children and families which you don't get being an agency worker. Building long term relationships are much better for all parties and produce better outcomes. I also recognised that having agency social workers costs local authorities much more money – money that could be spent on vital services for children.

"On a personal basis, agency working was an attractive working option because I generally got better pay and more flexibility in working hours but things have changed a lot. Local authorities have recognised the need for flexible working and have worked to address some of the pay differential – with the recent change in tax arrangements and a general increase in pay, as well as the benefits of working with children and families on a long-term basis, it's much better having a permanent role in a local authority social work team. Being a permanent employee also means you get employee benefits such as holiday, sick pay and a pension amongst other things, which you miss out on working for an agency."

Lisa now works in the Kirklees Assessment and Intervention Team. Across the Yorkshire and Humber region, it is recognised that social work is not a 9 to 5 job and therefore working practices need to be more flexible and adaptive to suit people's busy lives. In Kirklees there has been a move to 'mobile, agile and digital' working where the social workers have flexible working hours and have the freedom to work from different locations. Multi-agency social work 'hubs' have been set up within communities to be nearer to the families in need of support.

Lisa adds "This move to a more flexible and mobile way of working has been a really positive thing for social workers and been key in encouraging people back into local authority social work teams.

“Being a social worker is a vocation. To make a difference in the lives of children and families you have to be committed to helping them the best you can which means working around their lives and therefore often outside a 9 to 5 working day. The flexibility in working hours makes this a lot easier for social workers and is making a real difference. Also, in the past I felt guilty when I clocked off at the end of the day, that I would not be there for the people I was helping – this isn’t an issue now. Having flexible hours also helps me in my own domestic life and I feel, like my colleagues, that I’m able to give much more to the job than I was willing or able to do in the past.

“My desire to get into social work started while I was working in the family unit of the NCH. My role involved doing family support needs assessments and community work. I enjoyed the work and did good assessments and decided I wanted to get into social work, but I wasn’t qualified. So, I enrolled with the Open University to do a social work degree. At first, studying and undertaking a placement in Leeds was a real struggle, and I hated it, but after a few months I found my feet and have never looked back – I knew social work was for me.

“Looking back on getting my degree and becoming a qualified social work I have realised that the qualification opens many doors to doing all sorts of jobs within social work and has been a key factor in me having a varied and progressive career. I also think that having a good qualification and gaining a range of experience helps you deliver on the wide-ranging role and demands of modern day social work - doing assessments, working in: the emergency duty team, adoption, fostering, youth offending and probation, child protection, child sexual exploitation, domestic abuse etc.

“Being a social worker these days, is very much a professional role and the path into becoming qualified is very thorough and more practice focussed. The statutory work placements give students real experience of what it’s like early on and then the Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE) and all the support give people a really good foundation for their social work career - much better than when I was starting out.

“Although Social work is a demanding career, particularly emotionally, being able to make a difference with often very difficult children and families is so good – it’s why you do it – it’s all about building good relationships with clients and colleagues.”

“As social workers, the way we work and support each other has changed and is a big improvement from the past. For instance, in Kirklees our assessment and planning of cases are SMART (specific, measurable, action led, realistic and timebound), which ensure our work is focussed on getting children and families back on track as quickly as possible. This is making a big difference.

“Needless to say, the paperwork side has always been a burden but this is also getting better. It’s not going to disappear, because having a record of what has happened and what you do is vital in making decisions and defending actions, but the removal of duplication is helping simplify and reduce the amount of paperwork we have to do.

“Handling a heavy workload with lots of cases is always a huge challenge too, and can at times feel overwhelming, but with experience, better processes and the support from your team and colleagues it gets easier to manage. The other thing that is helping in Kirklees and

elsewhere in Yorkshire and Humber is a much more visible and accessible leadership team. This has helped develop a working culture where everyone is much more approachable and listening, which has led to better team working and a really 'vibrant' and supportive working environment."

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