



## **Being a social worker – the early years**

Maud Morrish, Children's Safeguarding Team, East Riding

For a relatively new social worker, Maud has already worked in a range of social work areas. Since graduating in 2016, she has worked in drugs and alcohol, family interventions, antisocial behaviour, and children's safeguarding, both for an agency and for East Riding Council. Her desire to pursue social work as a career came about through a sense of wanting to make a positive impact to the lives of children.

"I think I probably got my first impressions of social work from watching The Story of Tracy Beaker TV series. When I was younger, and deciding what I wanted to do, I'd thought about doing politics, things that would evoke positive changes in society. It was my Dad who said to me that if I wanted to make changes like that, then I should think about the different jobs I could do first. So we came up with a list, and social work stood out to me.

"I looked up where I could study a BA in social work, found the course at Hull and it seemed like a good course. I didn't want to go anywhere pretentious, so I moved from Southampton to study there. It was a good course, really interesting. I had done philosophy at A-level, and this was putting it into a real-life situation. I felt like the work was really fulfilling, we had some fantastic people coming in to speak about equality.

"I struggled on my first placement a bit. I actually have dyspraxia which can affect my movement and coordination so on the placement where they still used paper files I found handling them really hard. I spoke to student support and they suggested I got screened for dyspraxia, and it turned out that I did need some support which helped me get through my placement. I fared much better in my second placement at the Drug and Alcohol support agency in Hull. I had such a good experience - every day was different, the people were fab, the support was really good, and I liked the client group.

"After graduating I got a job with the agency, starting out as a Drug and Alcohol Coordinator, and then I got put into the Family Intervention Team, which I loved. I did that for 18 months, and then I had to move on as the service was being disbanded and the job wasn't as family focused any more - I really wanted to be working with families and children.

"Next, I managed to get a job in East Riding as the Antisocial Behaviour Officer for Bridlington and I did that for a little while, but I regretted not going and doing my Assessed and Supported Year in Employment (ASYE), as it's important to do that if you want to have a career as a children's social worker. So I decided to do an internal switch to go and work in children's safeguarding and do my ASYE. I'm currently about two thirds the way through this

now – it was definitely useful to have had some post-qualifying experience before I started. There is a lot of support, you just need to make sure you ask for it and make people aware. It's been a really good experience so far."

In addition to the challenges of managing her caseload, working in East Riding means Maud also has to cover a lot of ground in a geographical sense.

"We're the team for South Holderness and we travel across East Riding which is a large county of nearly a thousand square miles. That means we have a really broad range of clients. You might work with some people who are very financially comfortable, or you might find some families who are really struggling and living in poverty. You start off with a fairly low caseload, but it increases as you become more experienced. Cases can be about all sorts of things such as sexual abuse, physical abuse or severe neglect but more often than not, we get small concerns where our job is to look into them to see what is really happening.

"When a referral comes in, we have 45 days to complete an assessment. I talk to everyone in the family, get their wishes and feelings, and address whatever the issue might be. It might be something like a child disclosing that a parent had physically chastised them – in that case we would do what we call a Section 47 investigation, and find out what happened. From there we would discuss next steps.

"When you first start going out to families you soon become aware of your own power and also vulnerability. In most cases families feel upset and angry that you are there but you realise this is part of your job and that it is your duty is to help find a way to make things better.

"Removing children when they don't want to be can be one of the most heart-breaking things that a social worker has to do – even the most experienced social workers will come back to the office and have a bit of a cry about the fact that a mother or father has been so distraught. It takes a lot for us to be so much concerned that we have no other option but to remove a child and even then – it is the last resort and needs court approval to do so. Looked after children are not what we want to see or see increasing by any means. I don't think anybody at any level wants children to be removed from their home. We put in so much support; the process is so long and families really do have plenty of opportunity to prove that they can look after the children. Our job is to weigh up the risks. Unfortunately, if the risks to the safety of the child are so great we have to make the decision that is best for the child."

Each day is a challenge, from coping with emergencies while staying attentive to the needs of other service users, but Maud knows she can always rely on her team to lend their support if needed.

"My biggest fear is that I might let my families I'm supporting down in some way. Sometimes it does feel as if you're just firefighting, and there are so many people who need your attention, but you've got to prioritise. Sometimes there will be people ringing you needing help and advice and you won't be able to get back to them until you sort out a major incident so I really hate the idea of people feeling like I'm not there for them.

“The support is so important. I’m really lucky in that everyone in my team is really supportive. You do become close friends and we do rely on each other. You need people who will have your back and if you’re going to be a social worker you need to be that kind of person.”

Looking at her career so far, there have been many rewarding, very satisfying moments. One that stands out was when Maud was working with a family who had a very chaotic life.

“In a previous role, I worked with a family who were so chaotic – both parents were using drugs and denying that they were, and the kids were just running around wild. They had never accepted any social work intervention before, they had never allowed anybody over the threshold, they were about to lose the house, it was all just crazy. Somehow, I managed to gain enough trust for them to admit that they had an issue, to get on a methadone programme, and to allow someone to come in and help them sort the children out. I actually saw this family recently and they looked so great. The kids looked clean, they all looked happy – I was so proud of them and what they had achieved.

“For anyone embarking on a social work degree I would advise choosing two placements that are quite different to one another, to get a nice range of experience. I’d also love it if social work students were more politically aware, because what’s going on above us dictates so much of what we do on the ground. I don’t think people necessarily have an understanding of that, and there are things that could do with being changed. I think if we were more aware of the reasons for that we’d be able to evoke more change.

“To be a good social worker, I think you need to be somebody who is able to constantly question yourself, and constantly be reflective on what you’re doing, because it is so easy just to fall down a rabbit hole. You need to be able to take a step back and ask for support. You need so much empathy. There will be people you meet who have done things which you really disagree with and that might challenge your values, and you still need to give them the same level of professionalism and care that you would give to anybody else. And finally, don’t go into social work if you’re impatient, you’re working with vulnerable families who often don’t want you there to start with, you need to see things through their eyes and work with them”.

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