



YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

The making of a children's social work professional

Sally Jacques, Senior Children's Social Worker,
Barnsley Assessment and Joint Investigation Team

Sally has been a qualified social worker for 6 years. Her path into social work started after she finished her A-levels. At that time she had decided that she wanted to work with children but not in an educational setting so she went to work as a Youth Worker in Barnsley.

“Working with teenagers gave me insight into children facing challenges in their lives – missing out on education, having difficulties at home etc. Although we would follow safeguarding procedures we would pass the kids most at risk on to social services which meant we didn't get much opportunity to really help the most vulnerable. Then a job as a family support worker came up - which I applied for and got - this meant closer working with children and families and a better fit with my desire to help teenagers, particularly more challenging ones.

“As a family support worker I worked alongside the social work team so I got to see first-hand what they did - going to case conference meetings, going to court, seeing the early help and positive things that could be put in place to support the children and their families and give better outcomes. This experience was great and it made me feel that I wanted to do more. To do the things I wanted to do I needed to be a qualified social worker. After 9 years in this job I decided it was the right time for me to step up and I approached the council to apply to be a social worker and they said yes.

“I remained a family support worker for Barnsley Council and enrolled on a 3-year Open University course, paid by Barnsley, with guaranteed placements - the first with the Adults Team in social care and then the Children's Assessment team. The course work was distance learning based - which was perfect for me because I had children - and we would go to Uni once a month. After I qualified I got a job 4 weeks later in Barnsley.

“After a couple of years as a qualified social worker, and bearing in mind that I'd been working in social services for Barnsley for many years, I decided that I wanted to experience working elsewhere and in different teams to broaden my experience. So I went to be an agency social worker which at the time worked for me and enabled me to work in different places and environments and with different people. It gave me good insight to see how other teams and procedures worked in practice.

“After 2 years I decided to come back to Barnsley and went back to the same team that I'd worked in before. Although agency working allowed me to move around and try other things which helped me continue to learn, I came back to Barnsley on a permanent basis to

progress, move up, something that agency working, working as a temp, does not offer. For me agency work is helpful for providing short-term support to teams but is not the long-term solution.”

Sally currently works in the Assessment and Joint Investigation team which is co-located with the Police Public Protection Unit. Her team is the entry point for all children’s social work cases into the authority before transfer to the next team/department. They have a maximum of 45 days to assess and determine the best plan and outcomes for the children and families involved. It is difficult work, fast-paced, and pressurised.

“We never know what will come through the door – for example an assessment of a teenager with behavioural issues, unaccompanied asylum seekers or Section 47 assessments of children at serious risk of harm – we deal with anything. Even though it can be very challenging and stressful this is what I love.

“Social work is difficult, there’s no doubt about it. On a daily basis you see the effects of social deprivation, neglect and families struggling but despite the challenges, when you see a glimmer of hope or get a positive response, even in a very small way, it is highly rewarding and makes it all the worthwhile. This could be making a small breakthrough in building a positive relationship with a family, to receiving a thankyou from someone when they’ve had a positive outcome.

“To be a children’s social worker, as well being committed to keeping children safe, you need to be resilient and able to adapt to ever changing situations. However, the most important factor is how you approach and deal with people. This means being able to see things from the other person’s perspective, being able to empathise with people and being non-judgemental. Experiencing confrontational situations comes with the territory so having the necessary resilience to deal with this is also important. Typically we still have to overcome the usual misconception that we are there to take children away/break families up. To help overcome this we must be open about what our role is and take the time to build mutual trust with the families we work with.

“What really helps us do our job is the team and how we work together – our support for each other makes a big difference. This also includes our team managers who know all our cases and support us whenever we need it, right through to visible and approachable senior management. For example, there’s no fear or anxiety about approaching the Head of Service or service manager. There are no barriers; everyone is really open and supportive across the whole service in Barnsley.

“In terms of our working environment and culture I’ve seen real changes, a positive shift, in recent years in Barnsley and across the region. There’s been a noticeable drive to progress social work as a profession with a visible commitment to good quality training and support. It’s benefitted me – since coming back to Barnsley I’ve progressed to being a senior social worker and I’m now starting my second year of Practice Educator training. I’ve also seen lots of ASYE social workers complete their training and move up. Obviously, there’s plenty more to do, for instance on caseloads, but with the investment in training and the supportive culture things are improving all the time.

“No day is the same, there’s always a challenge and the pace of the work can prove stressful however I could not imagine ever doing another job!”

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