



The all-encompassing role of a children's social work manager

Sophie Coggle, Safeguarding Team Manager, East Riding

Sophie is the Team Manager for East Riding's Beverley and North Holderness Safeguarding Team. After deciding to pursue social work as a teenager, she took a direct route into the profession, progressing straight from sixth form to a degree course at the University of Hull.

"As a child, I didn't know much about social work to be honest. It was my mum who had an interest growing up, I think she wanted to be a social worker herself. So when I was looking at going to university, she showed me the prospectus. The attributes they were saying you needed to be a social worker, things like being good at talking to people, wanting to help people, enjoying people's company, all sounded like something I would be good at. I went straight from school to college and then to university, so I was only 21 when I graduated. I'm originally from Hull and Hull University had a good reputation for social work so that's where I studied."

Initially, Sophie worried that being younger than many of her fellow students might put her at a disadvantage when applying for jobs, but she was able to find a route into the profession through a related role with East Riding Council.

"I graduated in 2009 and went for a number of job interviews. If I'm honest I was a bit scared, particularly because of my age. I almost left the course as I wasn't sure if I could do it – a lot of the people on my course were older, had more life experience and more knowledge. I applied for family support roles which were less qualified to get my foot in the door. I was successful in getting a family support role with East Riding, and within a couple of months, I thought, "I can do this, this is really what I want to do" and moved to social work. Eventually I progressed to Advanced Social Worker, and then later I became a Team Manager. I was a social worker for four years, an Advanced Practitioner for two, and I'm still learning things now as a Team Manager, which is something I really enjoy."

As someone with a wealth of experience in social work, Sophie has noticed a few changes to both practice and the public's impression of social workers.

"I do think social work has changed since I started. I think it depends how much you get involved in terms of the media. I have quite a positive outlook on this career. We do a good job and I'll argue with anyone who says otherwise! It's challenging, it's hard work, of course there are times when we could learn lessons and better our practice, but I think there is a real willingness to learn and improve. The media coverage of social work is usually few and far between but if there is a negative story, they run with it. I certainly think we've come a

long way, I think there's more to be done still as there are still a lot of people who view social workers negatively. Unfortunately, that will always be the case, but I think we do a good job. We help people make positive changes.

"Looking at practice, I think within our team and social work in general, we are more reflective, and that comes back to always wanting to better ourselves for the people we support. Especially when it comes to the Signs of Safety model (a strengths-based, safety-organised approach to child protection casework), we do try to include families as much as possible and that's a different approach. We are walking with people on their journey, trying to empower and inform them to make good decisions, and show that we aren't against them."

As a Team Manager, Sophie's role requires an understanding of a wide range of issues and risks, as well as supporting her staff in the work they do with vulnerable children and young people.

"I manage six social workers and advanced practitioners day to day with their casework. A general day for me would start with reviewing my task list. I look over and make decisions on any referrals that have come through to the team from concerned neighbours, family members, friends as well as schools, police, health and other professionals. The cases we are involved with tend to be child protection - children who are at risk of emotional, physical or sexual abuse, or neglect. I make decisions on open and closed cases to determine what happens next. I supervise social workers as they support families through the process. I chair team meetings, and what I'm passionate about is learning within the team, looking at what has happened before and learning from those experiences and from research.

"What we do is so varied. Children we work with may have disabilities, mental health issues, drug issues, anything you can think of that might have an impact on their wellbeing would come in to my team."

When there are difficult moments and challenges to be overcome, the Safeguarding team puts a lot of emphasis on teamwork and support from colleagues.

"Support from your team is so integral. I talk about this no end, it probably annoys my staff. You're making big decisions about people's lives, and they have big implications. It's like the saying, a problem shared is a problem halved. I'm very comfortable speaking to the team, letting them know what I'm thinking on a particular issue, and listening to their view on it. Teamwork will come up in social work job interviews time and time again because it's just so important to the role. You wouldn't be able to do this if you weren't a team worker."

While the everyday successes in social work are an important source of motivation, Sophie's proudest achievement came at the beginning of her career.

"For me, in social work, I think the biggest thing that I did was actually finishing the course. That was my main barrier, really, to my learning and progression because I really doubted myself at times. I think finishing that course when I was so young was a positive thing for

me. In my career, I think the little things are the best. For example, if you're working with a family and you've repeatedly had the door shut in your face, you're not getting anywhere, the breakthroughs are when you've made that little bit of progress where someone responds to your text, you've persevered, and it's paid off. I think sometimes people might presume that getting a child adopted is a positive thing for us, but that can actually be quite a sad day. The media perception is that we want to remove children, but that isn't the case at all. Wherever we can keep a child with their family, I would say that's the most triumphant thing within the role. If a child can go back to their family because we've made a breakthrough, those are the most rewarding days."

In addition to her management role, Sophie is also a practice educator, mentoring students and newly qualified social workers and helping them to improve their skills and build confidence.

"I support a lot of students now, and I always laugh, because I was obviously very young when I qualified, and it was always picking up the phone that stressed me! It's about perseverance and confidence really, knowing that you can do it and seeing it as just a normal conversation you'd have day to day. Some of the conversations we have are difficult, but there's always support there in the profession. I've never once felt like I didn't have support, throughout my career. One of the most important things in this field is telling someone if you feel like you need support, because there will be times when things clash with your own values.

"With students we undertake several observations, where they'll be out with qualified practitioners on visits, and they'll be critiquing whatever they've done. We always agree with the student when it's the right time to take the lead on a conversation. I would never put someone in a position where they weren't comfortable, but I do think it's important for them to push themselves."

Based on her experience as a practitioner and practice educator, Sophie has advice for anyone who is considering becoming a social worker:

"I don't think it's for everybody. People should research it and understand the role before they go into it. It is challenging, but it is so rewarding. There are going to be times when you're put into difficult situations, there will be difficult conversations, and it's about being resilient and robust enough to do that. Personally, I love it. It's about that passion and that drive to help people, and if you have that then you're off to a good start.

"Social work is about seeing the positives in people. People pass comment on people day in and day out, in all aspects of life. It's about understanding where people are coming from, being non-judgmental, and finding ways to help people bring about positive change. I think communication is key as well. A good social worker can articulate what their worries are and also turn that into an opportunity for something positive."

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