



YORKSHIRE & THE HUMBER

## **My journey into children's social work**

Steven Hawksworth, Student Social Worker, Barnsley Children's Services

Steven Hawksworth is a student social worker. He is on placement with Barnsley Children's Services as part of his Sheffield University MA in social work course.

Steven's desire to become a social worker has grown since a young age - as a result of his childhood experiences and that of growing up in care locally.

"I knew early on that I wanted to help and protect other people from going through what I had been through myself."

At the age of seven, along with his older sister and younger brother and sister, he was placed into foster care to protect them from a home environment where they had experienced neglect and abuse. His younger brother and sister were later adopted by another family, while Steven grew up with the support and encouragement of his foster parents until he was 18. During this time, he also had the support of various people working in children's social work and other agencies. As he was leaving the support of social workers around the age of 16, his foster parents and personal advisors encouraged him to look at going on to higher education and it was at this point he began to see his own potential and what he could do in life.

"I wanted to improve my life and I realised that going to University would enable me to do that and give me a way out."

Steven went to study Education Studies at Sheffield Hallam University and graduated after three years with a 2:1 degree. During this time he helped support other care leavers at university and was invited to talk about his experiences at the House of Commons and with people from the Department for Education. He also received a Deans award of merit for his academic effort. To fill the large gap in his finances he often had to work full time hours alongside his studies to make ends meet but he did receive a small care leavers bursary and great support from the University.

Despite successfully qualifying, Steven felt that teaching wasn't right for him. He had decided by this point that he wanted to be a social worker and applied to Sheffield University's social work MA programme. Today, he is over half way through his course and has recently completed his first statutory social work placement.

“Although it continues to be a struggle financially, I’m really enjoying my course and work placement and know this is the career for me. The work I did with the children and young people’s safeguarding team in Barnsley really opened my eyes to the role of social work and the challenges, but it has also highlighted the great reward of being a social worker when you’ve been able to make a positive difference to someone’s life. I’m enjoying working with people and although it has brought back memories of my past, helping families has been really good – it’s challenging but I can relate to people which is invaluable.

“Now I am seeing the ‘other side’ it’s reinforcing my belief that I can make a real difference in helping children and families in need of care and support. When I was growing up, I was against social work, in my view they split my family up and despite the neglect and abuse we suffered, they were my parents and I didn’t want to leave. However, over my time in the care system and now seeing first-hand what social work fully involves I can see all the efforts that are made to make sure that children are safe from harm and how social workers support children and families and try to keep them together. There’s so much more to social work these days than I realised.

“On my placement, I got involved in most aspects of team activities – having contact with families, going to court, and shadowing a social worker. I could see that staff are motivated and committed to giving the best support they can even if circumstances are challenging and resources limited. As a student social worker you really do get a lot of support. Without my practice educators, Suzannah Rockett and Rebecca Whicker, I’m sure I wouldn’t have been able to successfully complete my placement. They’re inspirational and really are passionate about supporting students to get the most out of their placement experience.”

Drawing on his range of experiences Steven has learnt that social workers need to be:

- Emotionally resilient – in order to deal with often very emotionally challenging situations and remain objective and calm
- Open minded – particularly when experiencing some of the poor home conditions/environment some families live in
- Empathetic – show a good understanding of people’s feelings and emotions
- Respectful – of people’s feelings and views
- A good communicator – in listening and engaging with people at their level, in particular with children
- Resourceful – much of social work is problem solving and trying to find things that will help families. Having seen the financial constraints placed on social workers having the ability to find and source all sorts of resources to help families is very important.

Given the challenging nature of the job and the qualities and skills required, Steven acknowledges that being a social worker is not for everyone. His advice to those thinking about social work as a career is to do some research about it and do some community or voluntary work helping others. “This will help you find out if you have a passion and determination to help others.

“I know that being able to make a difference and knowing that you’ve kept a child safe and happy is what I want to do – you just can’t put a price on it.”

If you want to hear more from Steven on what he is up to and his views about childrens social work you can follow him at [@Careleaverviews](#)

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