SOCIAL WORK: THE REAL LIFE STORIES BEHIND THE HEADLINES

BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES
INTRODUCTION

SOCIAL WORKERS WORK TO IMPROVE THE SOCIAL WELLBEING OF INDIVIDUALS, FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES BY EMPOWERING THEM TO:

- Live full, independent lives
- Keep safe and well
- Enjoy better relationships
- Have a sense of purpose and personal hope for their future.
THE ACCOUNTS OF SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE IN THIS PUBLICATION ILLUSTRATE HOW SOCIAL WORKERS HAVE HELPED A WIDE RANGE OF PEOPLE IMPROVE THEIR SOCIAL WELLBEING
EXAMPLES HAVE BEEN SELECTED FROM NOMINATIONS TO THE 2019 NI SOCIAL WORK AWARDS

This is an annual event promoting and celebrating excellence in social work. While only a small number of social workers receive awards, every social worker who was nominated is worthy of recognition for their work - as illustrated in this publication which we hope will raise awareness about what social workers do and the added value they bring to individual’s lives and, in turn, to society.

The practice examples are mapped against one of the four dimensions of social wellbeing (see diagram on next page). They demonstrate the wide range of and diverse needs of people who use social work services, and how good social wellbeing is relevant and important for all of us no matter what age or stage in life.

SPECIAL THANKS TO THOSE PEOPLE WHO HAVE SHARED THEIR EXPERIENCES OF WORKING WITH A SOCIAL WORKER ABOUT MATTERS WHICH ARE OFTEN PERSONAL AND PRIVATE.

THIS PUBLICATION WOULD NOT HAVE BEEN POSSIBLE WITHOUT THEM. PHOTOGRAPHS AND FIRST NAMES OF SOCIAL WORKERS HAVE BEEN USED WITH PERMISSION. SERVICE USERS HAVE NOT BEEN IDENTIFIED.
DIMENSIONS OF SOCIAL WELLBEING QUADRANT

RELATIONSHIPS & BELONGING

Promoting people's social inclusion and participation in society. This happens when people:

- Have stable, supportive and trusting relationships with others, including family and friends
- Have their own home or a place that feels like home
- Participate in social and community life and have positive life experiences
- Feel a sense of belonging

INDEPENDENCE & RESPONSIBILITY

Empowering people to take control of their own lives. This happens when people:

- Make informed choices about their life and how they are supported by others to live it
- Have, or develop, the confidence and life skills to take responsibility for themselves, and others as appropriate
- Have access to resources, services and opportunities that support their independence and inclusion in society
- Live as independent and fulfilling a life as possible

QUALITY OF LIFE 
SELF-WORTH

Enabling people to engage in meaningful and fulfilling activities. This happens when people:

- Access opportunities to pursue activities, including leisure, sport, educational, volunteering or paid work
- Feel valued and respected
- Have a sense of achievement, fulfilment and enjoyment
- Live purposefully and well
- Improve their life chances and outcomes

PURPOSE & MEANING

Supporting people to keep safe and well. This happens when people:

- Feel cared for, secure and protected by those close to them
- Are able to keep themselves and those they care for safe, well and healthy
- Feel safe in their own home and community
- Respect diversity and difference
- Are safe from harm, abuse and exploitation

SAFE & WELL
FOREWORD

SEAN HOLLAND, CHIEF SOCIAL SERVICES OFFICER

Social workers work to improve and safeguard the social wellbeing of individuals, families and communities by promoting their independence, supporting their social inclusion and participation in society, empowering them to take control of their lives and helping them to keep safe.


This statement reflects the purpose of social work in Northern Ireland and applies to all social workers wherever they work. It is based on the growing evidence base and consensus that where people live, the quality of their relationships, their sense of belonging, efficacy, purpose and meaning are among a wide range of factors associated with their life chances and ability to cope and thrive.
Working with some of the most vulnerable and marginalised people in society, social workers play an important role in trying to counteract or minimise the impact of factors that are detrimental to people’s social wellbeing or quality of life.

They also play an important role in helping to protect children, young people and adults who are vulnerable to risk of harm, abuse or exploitation.

This document showcases how social workers help people from many different backgrounds to improve their social well-being. While the examples may reflect every day practice for a social worker, the quotes from people who use the service highlight the extraordinary impact this has made on their life. And this is happening to hundreds of people every day.

A consistent theme throughout the case studies is the quality of the relationships between the social worker and those they work with. Relationships based on trust and respect and where, even in the most complex and challenging situations, social workers see the potential for change and offer hope.

I hope this document will be read by many as a testament to the great, but often invisible, work done by social workers. For social workers I hope it affirms the good work you do as change agents making a positive difference in people’s lives and inspire you to keep going. For those who are considering a career in social work I hope it excites and motivates you to take action and join a profession that can help transform people’s lives. And importantly, I hope these stories raise awareness and understanding about what social workers do and the difference they can make.

SEAN HOLLAND, CHIEF SOCIAL SERVICES OFFICER
Aisling stands in her (the child's) corner, accepted her for what she was and tuned in to what she wants.

Aisling works tirelessly with the children she is involved with to ensure that their voices are heard and to develop positive, trusting and long lasting relationships that make a significant impact on the lives of children and their families. Aisling undertakes this work in a challenging child protection field work team and is wholly committed to effecting meaningful change in the lives of the children, young people and families she works with.
Aisling has found me a great placement where I feel safe and I can talk to them. I go to a lot of places, I have learnt lots in the last two years and I trust my foster parents.

Aisling always has time to listen to the young people who she works with and she makes sure that we will all get heard. Aisling is a very funny, kind-hearted person! When you are down she always knows how to make you laugh.
Nora has created a positive relationship with her service users and continues to promote their rights to choice and seeks to ensure that they are supported to live as independently as possible given their needs.

"Nora has embedded a Human Rights based approach to my request in order to deliver appropriate service delivery to meet my needs fully."

"Edith brings humanity and positivity into people’s lives – often at times when service users are experiencing life changing circumstances. Edith will always advocate for service users...because she respects service users as individuals who have rights. She is always consistent in her approach with service users and families and it is this consistency that enables her to form meaningful therapeutic relationships which often is the key to service users believing that their lives can and will get better. She will often challenge the many layers of oppression that exist in service users lives and is fierce in this pursuit, believing strongly in social justice and equality for everyone that she comes into contact with."
They helped me get back to my family. I want to get a job and start working. They are helping me go down a different road.

The project addresses the needs of young men at risk of becoming involved in criminality and paramilitary influence by combining restorative practice and peer mentoring with targeted support in relation to employment, training, housing, health and social services.
Adam worked with a family where there were concerns about domestic violence and physical abuse resulting in the father residing separately and the children’s names being placed on the Child Protection Register. There were testing relationships with Trust staff and the father had refused to engage with social workers. Adam overcame these challenges and proved able to engage the father who stated that:

“He helped me to see the help was there, he explained it (the risk) in lay man’s terms…..he approached it in the right way…. he always asked my opinion and didn’t just tell me.”

This ability to work alongside individuals at their pace to facilitate change is typical of Adam’s practice. Due to reduced risks the court process has concluded and the father has returned to reside in the family home. The children now benefit from a safer home environment and their names have recently been removed from the Child Protection Register.
RELATIONSHIPS & BELONGING
A FAMILY SUPPORT AND INTERVENTION TEAM

- The team co-designed a child friendly framework with a group of young people, underpinned by person-centred approaches.

- The ‘My story’ framework and one page profile were developed to assist staff to assess children’s wishes and feelings in a consistent way.

“I think the relationship with my social worker was very important to me and my family

“I understand why people worry about me

The storybooks are child friendly and are completed by the social worker in partnership with the child by tuning into and applying each child’s preferred form of communication. Children’s views can then be presented at the child’s meeting to ensure the voice of the child is central to any review and they are more informed regarding their care planning.

‘My Story’ helps to reduce children’s anxieties about social work by setting out clear expectations of the role and empowering children by preparing them for social work visits and involving them in the content of social work records.
Ryan’s practice is always child focused and he kept the young person central to all decision making. Using the social work process and his exceptional analytical and evidence gathering skills, Ryan developed bespoke recording tools and put in place specific observational processes to help gather significant information about the behaviour of the young person. Over a three month period he brought the information to supervision and analysed the young persons behaviour. Ryan's strong social work values were evidenced in how he promoted choice in young person’s daily routines.
He always makes time to speak to us. I love it when he is in the Home... and he is very funny!

Liam’s work has been tirelessly dedicated to the looked after young people - promoting opportunities for inclusion and achievement for the most hard to reach and socially marginalised young people.

She has the ability to make young people feel safe and special, encouraging hope during the most difficult times...

As a manager of a Children’s home, Mary has created a therapeutic environment where children are the heart of the home...

...She is a champion for young people!
RELATIONSHIPS & BELONGING

PARENT & ADOLESCENT COMMUNITY SUPPORT SERVICE (PACSS)

The Parent and Adolescent Community Support Service focus on strengthening relationships, promoting long term family focused solutions, and encouraging families to become more connected to their community.

The team respond to young people and families who are in crisis, and the young person is on the brink of coming into care. The overall aim of the service is to improve the outcomes for young people, by optimising support and resources, to enable young people to live safely with their family, and within their community.

The service works with families in crisis to improve relationships, strengthen parenting capacity, generate hope, and reduce young people’s risk taking behaviour.

I felt the service really cared that things would improve and gave me hope when I had none. They helped me rebuild confidence as an individual and as a parent, and helped my son and I rebuild our relationship. We have reached the position of having a happy, relaxed house.

You kept me sane when I was at my lowest. You made me see things in a different way to help our family get back on track. I will always remember your strength, support and honesty, and can’t put into words how much we appreciate it.
INDEPENDENCE & RESPONSIBILITY

GATEWAY TEAM

The Social Worker drew pictures with our son and encouraged him to say how he felt. He was totally at ease with her. She really listened to him. As his parents this was all we wanted. Thank you for showing us such respect.

The Social Worker took time to find out about me as a person. He didn’t judge me but helped me realise that things that happened to me a child were still affecting me. Before this I had a very negative view of social workers.

This Gateway team is innovative in using a variety of approaches to engage children to ensure their voice is heard, including the Signs of Safety ‘three houses’ model to communicate effectively with children.

The team have a strong research focus and have incorporated the Adverse Childhood Experience Tool (ACE) into their practice, understanding that it enabled a more restorative and trauma focused approach to their work with parents. The team also routinely use ‘Talking Tools’ developed by VOYPIC to facilitate better communication with children through a card and board game, to great effect.

The Team have a direct link with the Family Support Hub. They have adopted a community development approach and this has had the positive effect of families accessing supports from within the voluntary and community sector rather than requiring ongoing social work intervention.
Mary uses her expertise to empower service users to keep themselves safe and works in partnership with service users, families/carers and professionals to ensure positive outcomes for all.

Mary works in a very inclusive and person-centred manner and ensures that the voice of the service user and their families/carers is heard. Mary considers consent and capacity when dealing with safeguarding issues and promotes a proportionate response by balancing potential risk with respect for the service user’s right to make their own decisions. She is a great champion and advocate for her service users and her excellent assessments inform a proportionate response.

The support that the family receive from Mary is invaluable. Mary helped my sister to make the transition from hospital to supported accommodation a positive one and took a lot of the stress away from the family. Mary keeps in regular contact with her and is always at the end of the phone if she needs her...
We work with children, carers and families to support children to overcome feelings which have led to them displaying harmful sexual behaviour. This consists of direct work with children aged 4-17 years old by providing an Aim 2 assessment and supplementary intervention if required.

We work with children to help increase their socially acceptable behaviour and support them to refrain from sexually harmful behaviour which may place themselves and others at risk. We consider the child’s strengths and concerns and explore the next steps in promoting all children’s safety and wellbeing.

We are practice led, drawing on attachment theory, psychodynamic, trauma and systems theories.

We strive for excellence in being the voice for children who often cannot speak their feelings but may communicate to us with their behaviour and we consistently endeavour to champion for the child making us an award winning team.

ONE PARENT COMMENTED:

She was the one person who kept me going through the whole process.
Bob has experienced the highs and lows in the lives of service users, has helped those who have experienced domestic abuse, left violent relationships, helped restore order in the chaotic homes of those who were experiencing low mental health and suicidal ideation...there is no doubt that Bob’s social work intervention has saved lives, prevented re-offending and enabled service users to feel they are cared for and accepted.

Many of the service users were excluded from mainstream services as a result of their offending histories. As a result they were socially isolated, experiencing poor mental health and addiction issues and at increased risk of reoffending. Bob worked to gain funding to establish a safe space within the community where individuals could come and be accepted and gain support accessing additional services and in developing their resilience.

In addition to delivering a programme of social activities and skills programmes Bob introduced reminiscence work and creative writing to enable the expression of thoughts and feelings within a safe space.
This trauma informed service is offered to children aged 4 to 17 years old who have been sexually abused.

CHILDREN AND THEIR FAMILIES ARE AT THE CENTRE OF ALL THE WORK WE DO

Examples of our child-centred work include the creation of therapeutic stories tailored to the child’s specific therapeutic needs, aimed at supporting them in processing the trauma they have experienced. The intervention is tailored to the individual needs of each child and that they have a say in what they want to happen next. This is especially important given that children often experience a loss of control through abuse.

I don’t think I would have coped with everything as well as I did if it wasn’t for you there supporting me all the way from beginning to end. Thank you very much.

Words can’t cover just how grateful we are to you for helping our child.
The Mentoring Programme embeds the interventive relationship model alongside three core elements which contribute to Children’s Services:

1. **Emotional support** e.g. building a relationship with each young person based on trust and respect to enable the young person to turn to the mentor when they need to be listened to without judgement.

2. **Informed advice and guidance** e.g. advice not only in relation to education, training and employment, but on a wide range of other support services such as positive mental health & emotional well-being, social inclusion.

3. **Hand-holding** e.g. mentors will go with the young people to access services.

I’m a lot more confident since working with the team. I’m doing well at school too, my attendance is high, I’m giving it my best in what I do, and I’m handing in homework on time.
Mummy said thanks for the lovely words you had to say about the family in ur report. U really helped me and mummy get to how good we are now and u helped me with my wee drama’s so thank u

Lisa

Lisa works with adolescents at risk of family breakdown. She engages with families with an emphasis on avoiding a care admission by focusing on the family’s strengths and the importance of the worker-service user relationship.

She has achieved this by utilising her own personal traits including warmth, compassion and respect for others. She always adopts an understanding and calm approach and this combined with her social work skills including assessment and analytical ability, advocacy and empowerment has resulted in excellent outcomes for families.

She has succeeded in avoiding care admissions for numerous children and young people and following her intervention has left families in a much more positive position.
The Team offer post adoption support to bring families together in attachment-focused group work activities. The aim is to provide an opportunity to engage with these young people and their adoptive parents.

Most if not all of these children have experienced early abuse, neglect, painful separations or other trauma prior to joining their families. The team recognized that adoptive parents sometimes struggle alone without requesting help and support. The team aims to develop relationships with them throughout the childhood of the child who has been adopted so as to enhance the therapeutic parenting that is available to the children and lead to positive outcomes for the children.

Feedback for families has demonstrated the effectiveness of these attachment focused groups on the relationship development of parents and children. The primary objective was to enhance the parent-child relationship, each of the groups exceeded this by establishing connections between families, creating opportunities for the children to talk to social workers about their contact or their adoption/life story. It enabled parents to share some experiences and support one another in their unique journeys through adoption.
Social Workers listen to service users and carers whose wish is to be in their own homes, connected with their families and their own supports in their communities.

The focus is on engaging with the person to hear their story in an often chaotic and busy setting. The challenge for hospital social work is to maintain a person-centered focus and to intervene with people, often at a time of crisis and trauma in their lives - when they have been faced with an unexpected admission to hospital, faced with a traumatic diagnosis or a change in their life circumstances.

The social workers in this team are privileged to work with people as they consider life changing decisions and they do so promoting the opportunity to reach personal goals and ensure that their aspirations are fulfilled to live their lives as independently as possible.
CHILD AND ADOLESCENT MENTAL HEALTH TEAM

The service connects young people to contribute to decisions affecting their lives. One to one interventions, group work and community development are used to support young people in improving their emotional health and wellbeing.

The aim is to promote young people’s rights, challenge inequalities and improve local supports. Programmes have provided an opportunity to develop independence and has enabled young people to write and professionally record music and develop skills in digital marketing and graphic design.

PSNI & IFA PARTNERSHIP

In partnership with PSNI and Irish Football Association, social workers in this project engage with young people in residential care though sports related activities. The aim is to reduce risk taking behaviours associated with being missing from care, drug taking, alcohol misuse and being vulnerable to child sexual exploitation.

Young people are able to learn about emotional wellness and focus on self-worth in a safe and supportive environment. The project enabled professionals to engage with young people outside of normal structures and help to break down barriers and stereotypes.
RELATIONSHIPS
& BELONGING

LEAVING & AFTERCARE TEAM

1. This Leaving Care and After Care Team work with care experienced young people who have frequently endured adverse childhood experiences. In order to try to reverse some of the negative effects of early childhood experiences the team work tirelessly and go above and beyond what is expected of them to build relationships with our young people to enable them to have more positive experiences of life and therefore improve their outcomes.

“For some young people our staff are the only consistent support they have. For example we had a young person in prison for a number of months and his personal advisor was the only visitor he received in that time”.

2. The team members are all very aware of the high risk to young people in terms of suicide and self harm and therefore really do try to build positive relationships in order to encourage and support them to take control of their own journeys in a way that will improve their opportunities in all aspects of life.

PURPOSE & MEANING

BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES
The team are passionate about including the voice of the child where the child does not wish to attend their review and will use techniques such as presenting a photo of the child, something the child has written or a recording or video of the child singing or reciting poetry. Young people are encouraged to attend meetings.

No-one ever listened to me before now...I didn't even know why I had Looked After Children reviews until my social worker took time to explain it to me and asked me what I wanted from today.

My social worker always tells me the truth no matter what.

"Working in hospital, Glena’s flexibility and skill means she can adapt from working with an older person in need of additional support upon discharge, to supporting and counselling a patient who has been the victim of domestic violence, to a UNOCINI referral of a child in need of protection, to a person with mental health problems, homeless and with no spoken English".
Caoimhe works as part of Substance Misuse Court based in Belfast. The aim of this court is to tackle the root causes of offending behaviour and create safer communities. Caoimhe provides an intensive treatment-focused behavioural change programme to tackle drug and alcohol misuse. The lives of people using the service are often chaotic and they have little support and feel stigmatised within communities. At all times Caoimhe is professional, non-judgmental, compassionate and puts the individual at the centre of the intervention.

She works on developing self-worth, self-confidence and instilling hope. In essence she employs a humanitarian ethos, viewing people with addiction issues as people first and aiming to re-establish the intimate connection that is often absent and drives addictive behaviours.

Caoimhe’s values and actions within this problem solving initiative provides hope for the individual, hope for the victims and community, hope for the family and hope for the criminal justice system. She treats clients and staff with dignity and respect.
Simon supports teenagers and young adults and their families throughout every step of a cancer journey, diagnosis, treatment, survivorship, palliative care and bereavement support.

Simon’s vision and creativity have helped him set up many groups:
- Award winning CrossFit,
- Donkey therapy,
- Drama
- Focus groups
- Games nights
- Fatigue groups …and more.

Emer has demonstrated in her practice with families a genuine partnership approach. She demonstrates a child centred approach utilising many of the signs of safety toolkit to ascertain the voice of the child. She has demonstrated a complete commitment and belief in empowerment of families.

Her practice is value based and informed. Her ability to connect with the child(ren) is evidenced in her direct work and her ability to engage children of differing ages and stages through ‘words and pictures’, ‘three houses’ and ‘three wishes’ has promoted the child’s voice in very difficult and challenging family circumstances.
The social workers are particularly skilled in crisis management and supporting foster carers sustain ‘stickability’ with challenging placements.

The adolescent fostering team provide a specialist fostering service for young people aged 12 to 18 years.

Adolescence can be a difficult time in relation to areas such as identity, self-esteem, education, relationships and sexuality. Such issues can be further compounded for children who have experienced adverse childhood experiences such as abuse, neglect, trauma and who are unable to live with their birth families.

Adolescents in foster care require support to navigate through this stage of their lives, whilst often trying to process experiences in their earlier years. They are supported as they prepare to move on to young adulthood successfully and to have positive life opportunities.

Through the establishment of trusting, secure relationships social workers promote resilience and independence via age appropriate boundaries, safe risk-taking and encouraging independence.
JANE

PURPOSE & MEANING

INDEPENDENCE & RESPONSIBILITY

Working within Adult Safeguarding, Jane advocates for the involvement of service users throughout the Adult Safeguarding process.

Jane has supported others through complex safeguarding investigations, empowering them to take ownership of learning and recommendations and working with staff across all levels of an organisation to bring about change and improvement for the benefit of residents and service users.

Commitment and visibility are particular strengths Jane has displayed, working alongside service users and staff to understand systems and agree together on a plan to support improvement and better outcomes. Jane meets adversity, resistance and obstacles head on and works collaboratively to develop support plans enabling people who use services to reclaim independence, their voice and most importantly their future. Acting as an advocate she challenges professionals to think differently about how to meet needs. She empowers others to regain control of their future and provides a sense of hope and opportunity.
Its good here cos I don’t need to hit myself or anyone else any more, staff like me and help me to go to school and hug me when I score a goal...My head and stomach don’t hurt anymore...I like me.
What I found most useful was knowing where I stood in terms of housing choices.

Universal credit was going to have a massive impact on young people leaving care as they transitioned from Job seekers to Universal credit. Most of our young care leavers didn’t have access to an email account and this was going to prove difficult for them. Michael in consultation with managers approached the Citizens Advice Bureau. He drafted a proposed plan and a service level agreement to ensure young people applying for Universal credit or any other benefit would not be disadvantaged in any way.

This service enabled many of our care leavers to access appropriate and suitable accommodation in an environment that was familiar to them.
The project works to support individuals aged 50+ to ‘make healthier choices about alcohol as they age’. This is done through a number of work streams including community-based prevention & education initiatives, direct support for those experiencing alcohol-related problems, programmes to build individual and community resilience. Family support is offered to family members of the over 50s who been impacted by alcohol misuse.

“COMING TO DRINK WISE AGE WELL HAS BEEN INVALUABLE TO ME, AND CONTINUES TO BE SO, IT HAS COMPLETELY CHANGED MY LIFE FOR THE BETTER.”

“THIS SERVICE HAS BEEN A LIFE SAVER, I DON’T KNOW WHERE I WOULD BE WITHOUT IT.”
We were scared, anxious and it is fair to say in a bad place at that time.

We were two parents who were struggling with addictions however we loved our children and wanted them home. Lauren was caring, warm and fair...she wasn’t afraid to challenge us and we needed that but she did it while working along with us, never patronising or making us feel belittled...she saw the best in us.

Lauren empowered us, advocated for us and enabled us to make life changing decisions. We could feel her energy and her optimism for us to do it. She always kept us grounded as to the difficulties we would face but we knew she would be there with us.

She put realistic plans in place, she reviewed these along with us and every step of the way we knew when and what was happening. If she said she would do something for our family she delivered.

She would ring us just to say we are doing well. She didn’t overreact. She would talk us through any issues and help us to look at the progress we had made and how far we had come.
With special thanks to the Health and Social Care Board, the Belfast, Northern, Southern, South Eastern and Western Health and Social Care Trusts, the Northern Ireland Social Care Council, the Probation Board for NI, and the Third sector organisations who support the Northern Ireland Social Work Awards by sharing the excellent practice examples from their staff.
BEST PRACTICE EXAMPLES