

Shahid Naqvi reports from a conference on BASW England's 80:20 campaign

Lisa-Marie Graham, Tammi Jankowski, Kevin Makwikila and Angela Frazer-Wicks are parents who have had child protection interventions. As advocates for parents panels – created by the Family Rights Group – they use their experiences to help improve social work practice

After being in care herself and an abusive relationship as an adult, Lisa-Marie's own children were taken into care.

"There are two things I would like to say which are important to me as a parent and other parents: do with us, not to us. When you are listening to us, listen to understand not to answer. Give us that platform for us to explain how we are feeling rather than saying this is actually how you are feeling, because I had that quite a lot.

"There were seven social workers involved in my case. It was a circus. Nobody would talk to anyone else. I was over-social worked."

Tammi was initially grateful for the support when social services got involved after her ten-year-old son with special educational needs became aggressive at school.

"We were on a child in need plan. The social work team supported us and didn't judge. They did what they said they were going to do. My children trusted them too. When my son was diagnosed with autism we were transferred to the disability children's team. They came in and gave empty promises. My son was getting worse and worse. We lost trust quickly. I came close to a breakdown and couldn't understand why there was such a difference. They took me to court and I lost my eldest daughter for six months because I was deemed unable to protect her from my son.

"I became increasingly angry and frustrated. We came through and I got two apologies from the authority and my daughter returned home.

"I would say if you are going to promise a parent something, it has to happen. I am struggling now to get my daughter to trust another social worker whereas before she would happily speak to the children in need social worker."

Social services became involved in Kevin's life when he became a father aged 17.

"I wanted to be a good father but as I got involved attending child protection meetings I realised I was a ghost in the room. No-one listened to what I had to say and no one gave me the opportunity to speak. I found father voices are empty in social work. You are supposed to be doing this work for families but it felt like they were just there for mums.

"When myself and my ex-partner split up things became more complicated and we were back in child protection. The system isn't very easy for fathers. I realised how easy



Lisa-Marie Graham

'Do with us, not to us'

it is for dads to walk away. But I wanted my son to be involved in my life.

"I would say if there is a dad present, communicate with them. Listen to them. That only happened with me because I became a little bit challenging, asking why they were doing things and not telling me. There are so many fathers out there who do not have a clue what local authorities do and don't understand the system.

"For me relationships should be at the top of being a good social worker. Family Group Conferencing is a good way of engaging with fathers."

Angela has a history of mental health, drug and alcohol issues and experienced domestic violence. Two of her children were taken into care 15 years ago.

"Funding cuts meant my family support worker left and I didn't build the same relationship with the social worker who stepped in. The results were catastrophic.

"As part of the parents panel, even those of us who have the most negative experience of the system just want to help to build those relationships we know are key. Even families who don't agree with the outcome of cases, if they have had a positive relationship with their practitioner they are able to accept it and move on.

"We agree the voice of the child is fundamental, but we're saying it shouldn't be heard in isolation from the wider family. Sometimes supporting the family is best for the child."

'I realised I was a ghost in the room'

IN FOCUS

...n aiming to switch the balance of social work from admin to direct practice

How do you make it relationship-based?

Answer: ask Brighton and Hove...

Four-and-a-half years ago Brighton and Hove's children's services took a look at itself and didn't like what it saw.

Families were saying they were fed up with frequently changing social workers and having to constantly retell their story. Social workers said they didn't have time for direct work in a system they felt was too bureaucratic and didn't value or support them.

"We also knew from our own quality assurances we weren't performing well," says Tom Stibbs, principal social worker for children and families at Brighton and Hove council.

"So we developed a vision of what good social work might look like. That vision was relationship-based practice."

Turning this into reality was not just about "sending our social workers on a training course" but implementing a "whole system change" informed by guiding principles of:

- Continuity – of workers between practitioners and families rather than constant change
- Consistency – families knowing there is always someone they can contact in a team
- Collaboration – between professionals rather than working in silos
- Culture shift – from one of blame to a learning culture inspiring "trust and confidence"

To make this happen, the authority recognised a service redesign was required. Teams were restructured into pods consisting of a manager, two full-time equivalent senior social workers and up to five social workers, a newly qualified worker and a business support worker.

Focus was put on supervision, both one-to-one and within groups to aid collaborative "reflective decision-making".

A "one story" model of assessment and recording information was introduced so families no longer had to keep repeating themselves and to reduce form filling.

Social workers were expected to do direct parenting work with families themselves rather than referring out to 'social work resource officers' as previously happened.

Stibbs says: "It was a contentious decision not to have that anymore because we want social workers to do direct work – to pick up children in care and transport them and have those conversations you have in cars, to do the direct parenting work with parents because that is how you build relationships. Having social workers working with the



Tom Stibbs

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whole family not just being the child's social workers."

The cultural shift was critical to success, says Stibbs.

"What we were aspiring to do was build an idea of relationship-based management and leadership. We wanted a culture that is based on trust and openness."

Stibbs says providing 'containment' for staff against the pressures of being a social worker is crucial.

"It's containment of working in stressful situations but also around organisational anxiety. Worrying about deadlines, timescales or being on the front page of a tabloid. If organisationally we can help social workers be the best practitioner they can be that might mean they can go off and help families be the best that they can be."

One innovative way of achieving this was through 'reflective practice groups'. Once a month all staff meet for an hour 15 minutes to explore the "felt aspect" of their work. To ensure the culture shift is embedded, these run through the whole service, including managers at all levels.

So has it made a difference? Brighton and Hove say compliments from service users and other professionals have gone up from 14 in 2015/16 to 108 in 2017/18. The number of children on child protection plans has reduced 17 per cent from October 2015 to January 2019, those in care by 21 per cent and children subject to care applications went from 26 per quarter in 2016-17 to 15 in 2018-19.

Social workers seem to like the new way of working too. Ofsted notes "social work morale is high". Perhaps most tellingly of all, at a time where nearly half of social workers at some local authorities are agency employed, Brighton and Hove has none.