

*Claire Ball – Principal Social Worker in
a Primary Care and Older people team*



Q How did you get into this line of work?

For as long as I can remember I have been naturally drawn to caring for people. My first role in social work was as a social care worker in a residential assessment unit for children in care. I knew then that I wanted it to be more than a job. I wanted a career in social work and thankfully, I was inspired by the people I worked with to return to study and become a qualified social worker. I have worked as a residential social worker in children's homes and as a social worker and manager in primary care teams, where my client group was older people and their families.

Q: What does a typical day look like for a social worker?

Every day starts and ends the same way, with me re-arranging my online appointments diary and re-writing my To-Do list. A typical day involves juggling all of that with the unplanned tasks or calls that come in so I manage this by continually re-assessing, prioritising and attending to the most important or urgent need as I go along. Managers also provide supervision sessions with the social work team. This facilitates a safe, supportive, and confidential space to discuss and reflect on case discussion and practice issues. It also includes protected time for ongoing learning, personal and professional development, and planning. Occasionally, I accompanied social workers on a home visit, particularly in situations where there were complex circumstances or disagreement amongst family members. In this case my role was not only to support the person at the centre, their carer, and their family, but also the social worker in my team. In a typical day social workers and managers would attend meetings with other professionals to work together on wider challenges impacting on older people, carers, and families and, as my own continuous professional development is equally as important, I still attend training and learning opportunities. Somewhere in the middle of all that, I'm also reading and responding to emails. It's always a very busy day which flies by.

Q: What qualities are required for your job – personal and professional?

You need to be organised and good at time management. You need to be adaptable, flexible and will need to develop the ability to be calm, think clearly and respond appropriately in a crisis. Professionalism in social work involves owning and sharing responsibility and being accountable for your practice. It involves confidently and respectfully collaborating with others, challenging when necessary, whilst also recognising the limitations of your role and respecting the role of other professionals. In order to be a social worker you need to have integrity. For me this involves approaching every person, every interaction with humility, an open mind and honesty. It's about recognising all people as equals who become who they are for a whole variety of reasons such as when and where they were born, the opportunities they've had or the trauma they've experienced. It's about promoting

inclusion and fairness, knowing that not everyone enjoys the same privileges. It's also about recognising yourself as someone who may have knowledge, skills and a desire to help but who first of all needs to understand. Good communication skills are essential. How you make people feel in your presence is so important, especially if they feel vulnerable or worried. If you are genuine in your willingness to understand someone's story, they will feel that, and as a result are more likely to feel safe sharing it with you. That's a privilege.

Q: What advice would you give someone thinking about becoming a social worker?

Find out as much as you can about social work and the various roles available. There are so many rich opportunities associated with social work which is being recognised more and more as an essential service that promotes better outcomes for people. If what you hear from other social workers inspires you and you feel you want to play a part in helping people to live well, stay safe, achieve their goals and overcome difficulties, then you should go for it. Don't let negative stories put you off. There is no doubt that social work can be challenging and stressful at times, as is the case with many jobs, not just in healthcare. Social workers are not always recognised or celebrated publicly. However, good social workers know the value of the work they do. They know because they see the difference it makes every day to the people they work with.

Q: What is the most rewarding part of your job?

I can honestly say, I love social work. When I became a team manager, I discovered new ways and new opportunities to influence good practice. Personally, I have benefitted from working with inspirational team leaders who have been excellent role models for me. I also know how difficult it can be to feel unsupported and so I work hard to find a healthy balance somewhere between managing and leading and, like everything in social work, relationships are key. When you make a connection with someone and you find a way to remind them or help them realise that they have it within themselves to take control over a situation no matter how hard it seems, there is no better feeling. Even when people feel afraid, alone, facing a huge challenge or grieving there is always someone or something that can help. Social workers get to do this every day. It's true that where there is life, there is hope. If you can help someone to find hope again, is there anything more rewarding than that?

