

Willie Deery - Senior Social Worker in the Court team



Q: Tell us what your job entails.

I am a Senior Social Work Practitioner with the Court Team within the WHSCT. The Court Team has two dimensions - one is within private law proceedings which deals with issues such as where children live when their parents separate or when they can have contact with the other parent. My role includes mediating between parents to help them make the best decision for their children and as part of this I meet with children to find out what their wishes and feelings are in relation to their family situation.

The Public Law work of the Court Team deals with care proceedings which are mainly issued by the Trust when children have been assessed as having suffered or be at risk of suffering significant harm. This role can be emotive and stressful given the gravity of some of the decisions that have to be made; often we are working with some of the most vulnerable people in society whose experiences could include addiction, mental ill health, domestic abuse, neglect etc. I support and mentor social workers in frontline teams, helping them prepare evidence based assessments for court, advising them about giving evidence to the court, advocating for the best interests of a child within the judicial process and working as part of a multidisciplinary team alongside the judiciary and legal professionals.

Q: How did you get into this line of work?

I began my professional working career in the Family Intervention Service which is a front line Child Protection Team, progressing to the role of Social Work Manager, although I always missed the direct work with children and their families. In this team I had significant involvement with the court process as sometimes, after exhausting all other options to keep children safe, we would have had to initiate Care Proceedings which sometimes involved removing children from their parents' care. I then moved to the Court Team as a Senior Social Work Practitioner as I wanted to develop my knowledge and experience in this area - I recognised that it was an area where social workers needed extra help and I felt that I could be a source of strength and support for them.

Q: Tell us about your qualifications and training.

I have attained a range of qualifications and training throughout my career which has helped and supported me in my role. The most significant was my Degree in Social Work from University of Ulster. I thoroughly enjoyed the learning and experience that this brought. I had been working in Social Care and Residential Child Care prior to completing my degree but the learning helped cement the experience I had gained and brought everything together to a point where I could better understand peoples' experiences and use my own skills to effectively intervene in their lives.

After qualifying as a Social Worker it is important that you continue on a learning journey and this is something I have always embraced either through in-house training provided by WHSCT or through the NISCC PIP Framework. I had the benefit of completing the Practice Teacher Award which was challenging but hugely rewarding; this course helped me develop



my skills and knowledge around mentoring and supporting not just student Social Workers, but also newly qualified Social Workers.

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

Any job in social work will be challenging and can be emotionally tiring, but we have the privilege of being involved in peoples' lives, often in their darkest hours, and it is important that we always respond with compassion and understanding. We need to be able to build trusting, professional relationships with people if we have any hope of helping them build their capacity, whether that is to be a better parent, to bring about change or to keep children safe.

A significant skill that social workers need is the ability to respectfully challenge peoples' thoughts, behaviours, perceptions and insight into situations, as this is often key to their development. This requires balance as we need to be non-judgmental in our approach but also need to help people understand the changes that are required to improve the level of care their child requires or to reduce the level of risk and harm they are exposed to.

Emotional intelligence is also a key quality as we sometimes encounter resistance and even animosity when our core task includes challenging service users. We need to understand that people who have experienced trauma may find it difficult to regulate their emotions and may respond to situations from a place of fear. As social workers we need to see past the behaviour and not internalise or personalise this, as if we do this can become a block to working successfully with that service user to effect change.

Any social worker will be able to tell you about the importance of reflection but in my role I find it is really important. We are sometimes tasked with making life-changing recommendations about families and reflective practice helps us review our practice and learn from each intervention.

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

The most rewarding part of my job is seeing people work through significant adversities to reduce the harm their child could be exposed to and have their child returned to their care. Even at this stage of my career I continue to be shocked and astounded at peoples' capacity for change and their ability to overcome significant challenges, against all the odds.

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

Social work is probably one of the most challenging but rewarding careers. It requires a lot of self-care, self-regulation, adherence to personal and professional boundaries and a lot of support and understanding from family and friends. Social work is not a 9-5 job, it requires a lot of hard work, dedication, flexibility and sometimes it takes a long time to see the fruits of your hard work, but it's there - sometimes it's when you *never* see someone again that you know that you have done your best job.

