

Maria Emilsson – Principal Social Worker in Learning Development and Governance team. Previously worked in NSPCC as social worker and manager



Q How did you get into Social work?

I sort of fell into it by accident. I always knew I wanted to work with people in a helping profession but had thought that this would be as a psychologist. After finishing my psychology degree, I worked in a Social Services Child protection referral team as a Family Support Worker. I was able to use a lot of my knowledge and skills from my degree, with the families I worked with. I still thought I wanted to be a psychologist when I realised that working within Social Care gave more scope of helping in many different ways and I liked this. Instead of just focusing on the individual's mental health I was able to support around some of the reasons to why they were struggling, like childhood trauma, poverty, housing, bullying or violence. It represented more of who I was as a person and my values.

I did my Social Work degree whilst working for NSPCC here in Northern Ireland and that also gave me experience on using Social Work in a therapeutic setting. Best of both worlds. I now work for the WHSCT supporting social workers through training delivery and social work students when on placement.

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

My working day always starts with a coffee, and friendly chat with colleagues and looking at my To Do List. Social work is busy and fast paced job. People don't stop having needs or crisis just because our diaries are busy, so you have to be adaptable. When I worked with NSPCC, I would have my own caseload of different families consisting of a parent and child(ren) who had been referred for support in relation to their experiences of Domestic Abuse. I would have met with both together and separately to try and get an understanding of what their experiences had been like, how that had maybe changed their relationship, how they felt about themselves and each other and what was difficult. I usually met with families about four times to get a good understanding and then I wrote this up as an assessment that I shared with them. Often this also involved talking with other professionals, like school, social worker who had referred them, Women's Aid and sometimes the police.

We then agreed on a plan of how best to support them to get back on track, to understand better what had happened to them that it was not their fault and some of the feelings that they were still having. The aim was to support their recovery and although they could never forget some of the hurtful and scary experiences they had. Being able to understand why and how they felt and acted, and to feel safe again, helped them to process this and move forward with their lives.

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

I think your need to have a want to help others but to be realistic around your own role and boundary. You are only one part in the bigger picture, so you need to be able to work with others, communicate your views, be willing to change your mind

and challenge your own views and beliefs. You use a lot of yourself by being approachable, listen and being able to imagine what it is like from a different perspective. That can be difficult when some of the behaviours and actions we see and hear is hard to understand and listen to.

It is also important to continue to learn and develop, having an interest to read and use theory and knowledge to help you understand and do your job. Social Work can be a demanding job, because of the variety, the many different tasks we have to do, feeling a bit helpless at times because we can't help everyone and sometimes there is not the resources out there to support people in a way that they need. This can be very frustrating, so you need to develop support around you to help with those aspects. In my experience that often comes from very supportive colleagues and friends; but it is also good to have other interests outside work to give your balance. In saying that, I think the rewarding part of the work outweighs the challenges, and even working through a difficult situation and take learning from this, is rewarding.

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

I think it helps to start growing an awareness of some of the social issues that surrounds us. I would encourage people to start looking into what is being reported on in the community and wider press. Develop a good sense of questioning of why some things are like they are and is there other ways of looking at it.

Think about what it is about social work that is of interests, what experiences they have that maybe have contributed to their interest and what experience would be useful to seek out, to support the application. Look up Social Work values and think about what that looks like in action. So being open and honest, may be to have good communication skills and ability to talk about difficult issues in a clear and supportive way. Then to think, is that a strength I have, or do I need to think more about this. This could be with a friend, relative or in a more formal work setting. The course will support students to develop these skills, but I think it is important to understand the link between knowledge, skills and values as this is core to Social Work.

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

For me it is the opportunity to work with people even though that is also the most challenging part. I also feel that being a person that can bring a new perspective, a new way of thinking about something can be a real message of hope. Hope that things can be better, that they deserve better and that they are capable of better. I find the variety of working with different professionals, the fact that there is so many different career opportunities within Social Work and that you need to continue learning and developing as a social worker and person, is the top aspects of Social Work for me.

