

Shaping the role of the Principal Social Worker in Southampton Children and Families Service . . . walking in the shoes of Michaelangelo!!

Hi, my name is Jacqui Westbury and I have been qualified for almost 18 years – I've worked in a variety of teams and at different levels of the hierarchy around the south. I LOVE social work – I love the difference we can make – and no matter what my role, or my place in the hierarchy – my test is always *'Is what I'm doing making a positive difference for the outcomes for children?'*. As long as I can see that I am – I'm motivated and press on. . . I bet many of you can recognise this in yourselves.

In 2016, Southampton Children and Families Service created a stand-alone role for the Principal Social Worker – previously this role had always been attached to a more substantive post.

Although there was a job description I wanted to know more before I 'took the plunge'. I emailed Lee (our PSW chair) to try to make links to find out more – it was really useful – and it showed me straight away that the role would be for me to direct (with my organisation) as there wasn't any consistent approach nationally.

So – I took the leap of faith and one year on I can honestly say – it's been a journey – a great, supportive (and of course challenging) journey – one that, if supported by your organisation (like Southampton has done) can make such a difference.

The Impact: -

The canvas was blank, the job in hand massive – I wonder if this was how Michaelangelo felt when he started painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel!! -

But what an opportunity – I could see so clearly the difference I could make if I had the right support around me. Michaelangelo tackled the Sistine Chapel a piece at a time –and this was how I saw the role of the PSW; bite size pieces – a long 'to do list' – but step by step – little by little, helping to change and grow environments and cultures, to give social workers the platform they need and deserve to deliver the quality service we want for our children.

Seeing the paint I had and the paint I needed

I needed to see what 'paint' I had to use and discovered there was already so much there I could build upon – the staff were still so passionate, enthusiastic and determined, despite many of the challenges we all face in our work. The new senior management team were really keen to 'get it right' (as evidenced through the investment in a standalone PSW position). They were giving both support and autonomy – trusting my work and actively listening. Then there was the PSW network so full of different 'tubes of paint' – with patience for me when I asked many a daft question on email or in the network meeting whilst I try to complete a piece of work, step by step. There was also massive support from our neighbouring local authorities - working together and not in competition to reach the common goal of better outcomes for children.

So – what have we 'painted' in Southampton so far . . .

It took about 4 years for Michelangelo to paint the Sistine Chapel - and I do recognise I've still got a lot to do – but because of the rich and colourful palette (the varied support, engagement and energy) I believe Southampton has been able to create some really great scenes. Of course some still need a touch up, and some have barely started I had to consider which were the best tools to use - but within the first year some of what's been achieved so far has included: -

- Engaging the social work staff – creating an identity, which allows opportunity for respectful challenge in all directions in order to improve outcomes.
- Co-designing a Children and Families vision with the workforce
- A new focused induction offer
- An updated graduate ASYE programme – really focusing on reflection
- Building a core training programme
- A revitalised Supervision package.
- Making new relationships with key stakeholders at local universities – really investing in the student offer, the ‘grow your own’ mentality and the reciprocal learning offer (where we can attend some lectures, and also deliver others)
- Pushing forward the evidence based practice agenda – linking into Research in Practice.
- Being ‘on top’ of the transient national picture (as much as is ever possible!)

What’s great, is that our adults sector have now invested in a stand-alone PSW role too – Its early days but we are already working closely to see what we can do together to move forward as a whole organisation.

What I would tell any future Michaelangelos stepping into the PSW role?

I would say look in your shed and see what you already have – – you can often work with what you have around you to restore or create amazing scenes. Think about the preparation needed before you get started, and the tools that will help you (and then buy new ‘paint’ when you know what is missing). Be strong and brave – be the respectful advocate that is needed to remind all around you of what the focus is – to improve outcomes for children.