
Children's Social Work: Brighton and Hove's Vision

**Supporting Safe and Stable
Family Lives**

**The Right Child in the Right Place
at the Right Time**

June 2015



**Brighton & Hove
City Council**

INTRODUCTION

Since the Autumn of 2014, managers in Brighton and Hove have been looking at implementing a model of practice across Children's Services to improve outcomes for children. At the beginning of this year we held workshops with all our staff and a *Relationships in Practice Conference*, which included presentations by Jenny Molloy and Professor Donald Forrester. At the beginning of June 2015 we published a consultation for all our staff regarding proposed changes to support this model. This document spells out why we think we need to introduce a model of practice, our vision of what we think good social work is, and the service re-design we have proposed to achieve this.

THE VIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

"It makes you feel neglected, when they keep changing. – What's the point of getting to know your new social worker when she will probably be gone soon? It's really difficult when your social worker keeps changing and when it comes to your new social worker you don't know them. I have had 6 or 7."

(Quotes from young people in Brighton and Hove Children in Care Council and Munro, 2001)"

Children and young people have consistently told us, both in Brighton and Hove and nationally, that the most important thing about social workers is the relationships that they build with children and the **continuity** of these relationships. Children and young people say that what they want most from social workers is honesty, reliability and **consistency**.

The children and young people involved in Brighton and Hove's Children in Care Council have given us their views of what constitutes excellent social work practice and have told us that they want social workers:

- who listen;
- who have time for us;
- who respect our privacy;
- who do the things they say they will;
- who see us regularly and build a relationship with us so we get used to them;
- who get to know us;
- who we can trust;
- who are kind;
- who help us to understand things and explain things in a way that makes sense to us;
- who stay with us;
- who learn from other social workers;
- who are honest;
- who understand how scary things can be for us, especially when we come into care;
- who can make decisions themselves; and
- who are committed to us and matched with us.

THE VIEWS OF OUR STAFF

Social workers in Brighton and Hove have also told us their aspirations in terms of social work practice as part of our social work reference groups:

- To be people focused not system focused;
- To be flexible, innovative and creative;
- To have space and time to reflect;
- To work closely with all professionals involved and create shared outcomes for the child and family;
- To value the relationships social workers build up with families;
- To have continuity of social work through the child and family journey;
- To have trust in autonomous, knowledgeable, emotionally aware practitioners;
- To be solution-focused;
- To comfortably hold tensions and manage risk;
- To feel valued within the organisation;
- To have the time to support and plan effectively with families;
- To be outcome and impact-focused.

However, the feedback provided by social workers, and other key staff, suggests that our current systems do not support this kind of excellent social work practice. Social workers have stated that they are prevented from establishing relationships with young people by the **administrative demands** placed on them. Staff members have also reported that they do not feel able to develop **expertise** as they do not have the opportunity to use the training they have received and their personal development is not prioritised. In addition, social workers have explained that they do not always feel that they receive clear **support and guidance** from their managers, supervision is not typically **reflective**, and that there has been a culture of **individual blame**.

RELATIONSHIP-BASED PRACTICE – HELPING PEOPLE

“At its best, what social work can offer to people in need of help is a supportive and understanding relationship which will enable them to resolve their difficulties and to feel enhanced rather than undermined in the process (Ruch, 2010).”

Eileen Munro’s review of the child protection system highlighted that social work practice had become over-bureaucratized and procedural, with a focus on recording and compliance rather than direct work with children, young people and families. In order to challenge this, and social workers’ current experience of working for our service, we want to introduce a practice model which allows social workers to build relationships with families and not just records about them. We want to develop an organisation which supports

social workers to spend as much time as possible with children and families and also recognises and contains their professional anxiety.

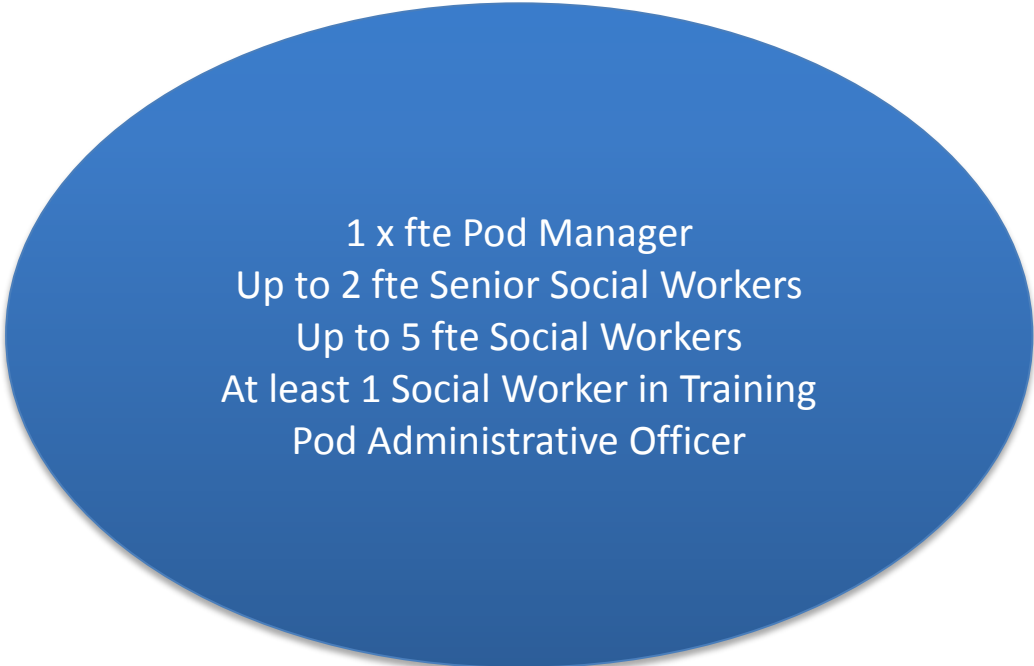
Relationship-based practice is founded on the notion that a social worker's relationship with the family is the most powerful tool to facilitate change and that these relationships, when they are trusting, empathic and authoritative, can be reparative. Relationship-based practice is not about a specific intervention or way of thinking but is about prioritising direct work with families, moving away from social workers co-ordinating cases to social workers working cases, and applying a range of skills and interventions in a thoughtful and purposeful way. The approach is also underpinned by a confidence in professional authority, expressed by working in partnership with families with a focus on outcomes and being explicit about what needs to change – social workers need to be confident and skilled at holding difficult conversations with families. It is important to emphasise that a social worker's relationship with a parent is not an 'end in itself'; the relationship is the means by which a parent can be helped to effect change which improves his or her quality of life, but most importantly the quality of life of the children of the family within the children's timescales. If such change is not achieved then it will be necessary to take whatever steps are required to act in the child's best interest. **Relationship-based social work is about creating relationships with families, which provide opportunities for them to change, and which are clear about the consequences if change cannot be achieved.** Poor social work practice is procedural, good social work practice is relationship-based, and excellent social work practice uses relationships to provide an opportunity to families to change.

CREATING AN ORGANISATION THAT PROMOTES EXCELLENT SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE – HELPING PEOPLE TO HELP PEOPLE

Social Work Pods: A Team Around The Relationship - 'An emotionally informed thinking space' providing 'organisational containment' (Ruch, 2007).

To create the organisational change necessary to support this model of practice we believe that we need to consider changes to our structures to facilitate these cultural changes. We recognise that social workers rely on the networks and systems around them and that in the past these systems have not always been supportive of responsible and reflective practice. Within our model of relationship-based practice, the social work relationship becomes the main practice tool, at the heart of a system of relationships built to support the child and family – what we are calling the 'team around the relationship' model. Therefore, our model of practice promotes the importance of reflective practice and good quality supervision throughout the organisation, recognising that supportive relationships between social workers and their managers enhance relationships between the worker and the family and these relationships in turn have the power to impact positively on relationships between parents and children.

In order to facilitate these relationships, we are currently consulting with our staff on a proposal that Children's Social Work will be restructured into small teams or 'pods':



1 x fte Pod Manager
Up to 2 fte Senior Social Workers
Up to 5 fte Social Workers
At least 1 Social Worker in Training
Pod Administrative Officer

The current MASH service will stay as it is but the pods will then support children from the assessment stage through the whole of their journey through social care, thus providing **continuity** for children and families. In addition, the pods will work in a collaborative way, so that children have a named keyworker but that the pod members know each case and use their skills to support all of the children within the pod and support their colleagues to ensure families experience **consistent** social work involvement. This sense of **collective responsibility** will also be fostered by group supervision, which will take place on a weekly basis, and will be led by the Pod Manager. This will ensure that all cases are reviewed regularly to prevent drift or the needs of some children being lost due to the priorities for other families. This structure will also provide **clarity of accountability** as the Pod Manager will be responsible for decision-making within the pods and lead on group supervision. Responsibility and decision-making will be delegated into the pods and closer to social workers and families, providing increased autonomy for social workers but within the supportive structure of the pod. The pods will be based on collaboration and co-working and a culture of purposeful relationship-based social work, including embedded observation of, and feedback on, practice. Social workers will be encouraged, and expected, to develop their skills so that they can provide an **expertise** in a particular area within the pod and contribute to practice development with Lead Practitioners and the Principal Social Worker, who will also ensure that all staff have access to reflective practice groups. At the same time the Business Support Officers will be providing **additional administrative support** to social workers to ensure that they can spend more time working directly with families.

The proposed structural changes will be supported by clear leadership from a Senior Leadership Team, itself based on the principles of the pod, group supervision and collaboration in order to promote accountability and transparency. Fundamental to these changes are a wish to move towards a just and open organisational culture, which itself promotes and models the values of relationship-based practice and the values of Brighton and Hove City Council. Social work is at its best when it inspires trust and confidence in children, parents and other professionals. This requires social workers to have trust in themselves and the organisation that employs them. The new practice model is designed to achieve this aim, supporting the development of practice expertise and authority to act in the best interests of children and families.

We believe that this model of practice will support us to provide a more efficient and effective service and in doing so will help us to achieve the various outcomes referred to above, including:

- enhancing the experience of children and families;
- developing the skills and satisfaction of our workforce;
- improving the rating of our service against key performance indicators;
- and, most importantly of all, safeguarding children by identifying those children whose families can be enabled to make changes and the child kept safely at home and those whose situation cannot be resolved within their family and who require good permanency planning to ensure they are not harmed further through delay – the Right Child in the Right Place at the Right Time.

A robust programme of workforce development is also in place to drive practice development and these cultural changes. This includes:

- support in implementing and evaluating Reflective Practice Groups from the Centre for Social Work Practice;
- training for all managers in systemic and reflective leadership from the Tavistock Centre;
- developing a Teaching Relationships in Practice partnership with East Sussex County Council and the Universities of Brighton and Sussex to provide a learning pathway to support relationship-based practice across the Professional Capabilities Framework, including innovative Student Units and Practice Research Units, an accredited training offer and access to an academy for experienced social workers; and
- ongoing training to support reflective management and coaching and mentoring approaches.

We believe that these ambitious changes will make Brighton and Hove an exciting place to work, placing us at the forefront of changes to social work, and increase staff morale and job satisfaction.