



The law and social work in Scotland

The family services unit

Nick Balneaves:

The Family Services Unit or FSU is a nationwide voluntary sector social worker organisation, they have been active in Scotland for over 30 years providing services specifically geared to support the most vulnerable and disadvantaged children and families. Marina Shaw is a social worker who is employed by the FSU and when I meet her I asked her to explain to me just what her job involves.

Marina Shaw:

The FSU has several projects throughout Scotland and the one that I specifically work in is called "The Hearth", and the Hearth Project works with families that are affected by drug and alcohol issues, and the crucial thing is, it's not a drug and alcohol project, it's actually a children and families project where drug and alcohol impacts probably negatively on their life. So the children are referred through various different agencies from West Lothian and on a voluntary basis we offer support and thankfully most of them accept it.

Nick Balneaves:

Who's the prime focus of your work? Is it the parent or is it the child?

Marina Shaw:

Oh we're family centred. I mean it's laid out in legislation that the welfare of the child is paramount. So obviously we're led by the needs of the child.

But then again, no matter how poorly children are faring in any family, there is a natural urge for them to be with their parents. And whatever maybe other members of society may think of how they're fulfilling that parental role, the children themselves want to be with that parent. You know, that children don't necessarily want to be removed from their parents. What they want is their parents parenting capacity to improve and then their lives will improve.

Nick Balneaves:

A lot of people who don't have experience of the situations you deal with might think that addicts could never make good parents. Does that put any pressure on the Hearth Project?

Marina Shaw:

Yes it does, because what we do not want is a section of society that is marginalised as drug addicts are to go underground as it were. Right now they can be open about being drug addicts, but because of you know, the horrible things that have happened, that death of that wee boy through taking methadone, the young girl in Glasgow that was taking heroin. Already there is a fear in my mind that we'll have addicts going underground, it will be far harder to engage.

I work in a job that's very borderline. There's some people who have never worked in that sector who would perhaps go into some of the houses that I go into and be rushing towards the Children's Hearing System. But it's about being very aware of the fact that not all the answers lie in the statutory system.

Nick Balneaves:

How do you make that judgement?

Marina Shaw:

For the children who I consider that their needs are being met in as feasible a way as possible, and that there's improvements being sought by the parents, then I wouldn't refer.

Nick Balneaves:

In what circumstances would you have to refer a child on?

Marina Shaw:

When, for example, there was one child that was getting into my car every week at school, and this boy would walk out of the classroom smiling, and take one look at me and start crying. Then we got in the car and he could not say word.

And his, his mother was a particularly hard end drug user, using a lot of heroin, injecting and smoking and she had all her friends came to the house and did the same, and she also dealt drugs. He was an only child in the house.

And we'd go down to McDonald's, he'd eat a meal with tears running down his face, and eventually, after you know, three or four times, right, after the third time I was really, really worried, was that part of me thought is this how I impact on this child, you know, is there something about me?

And eventually through a whole set of tears round about the fourth time, he managed to acknowledge this, because how mum makes him feel. School is a safe place, is a good place for him to be. He comes out of school, he goes home and he faces this kind of lifestyle. And mum had given him permission to speak to me and this for the first time he was gonna be vocalising on how he felt. Now we did some work together and it was quite clear, he was a very, very angry young man, but a very silent, angry, young man. Now for me, that had to go to the Children's Hearing System, because I was taking this back to mum, and she was just, she was just annoyed with him that he was crying and not telling me why he was crying, and she couldn't understand why he was crying.

So, of course she, she had no intentions of changing her ways, I then said: 'No, we're going to the Children's Hearing System with this'. You've got to ensure that the children are visible and that you're, you know, ensuring that they're not affected by their parents' drug use, you know, in a detrimental way.

Nick Balneaves:

Can you talk me through how you become involved with a family in the first place? Are they referred to you?

Marina Shaw:

They're referred to us, yes. There's several different agencies out in West Lothian that would refer to us. In fact anybody can refer. They can even self refer. However, the vast majority of referrals come from local authorities social work teams.

Nick Balneaves:

Do they have a choice in that referral?

Marina Shaw:

Yes, yes. I think sometimes, especially when it's come from the local authorities social work services, they perhaps feel that there isn't the same choice and then you've got to be really careful to make sure that they do understand it's a choice.

Nick Balneaves:

Do families have a different response to you because you're from the voluntary sector?

Marina Shaw:

Yes they do because perhaps the statutory sector is almost seen as a bit big brother-ish, a bit too powerful for them. The voluntary sector aspect, in which we very clearly talk about to them, gives them an element of choice they feel, and I'm very clear about it being an element of choice, and that seems to bring them on board with in a much better way.

Nick Balneaves:

Because a lot of families will have experience of more general, wider social work services, won't they?

Marina Shaw:

I think that every family that I work with has experience of statutory social work services and it's not often been great experiences. That might be about the clients as opposed to social work. But I mean I'm working with adults who are, who are in their 40s who were actually in care themselves and it was an extremely poor, you know, relationship they had with social workers.

Nick Balneaves:

How does that history of involvement affect your ability to build relationships with people?

Marina Shaw:

They don't trust easily, and then that's up to me to use my engagement skills to feel that they can trust me to work with them in the way that I say I'm going to work with them. Because what we've got to be very clear about is we all have to work to the same Child Protection guidelines, and some of the information that they give me will have to be shared.

So I do not want to lead them up the garden path, you know, 'and don't worry, you can trust me with everything that you've got to share with me and it's not gonna further' - that isn't what it's about, it's about a working relationship and it's even about teaching them to trust me enough that if I refer to statutory local social work organisations, it's because I've concerns about the children and I will help them with these concerns. This is again about turning a negative into a positive, but I've got to do what I have to do.

Nick Balneaves:

You mentioned trust. How do you build that trust?

Marina Shaw:

Crucial thing is honesty and even some of the less and desirable things that you have to say to them - being honest about it. And do remember, some of the things that I'm saying to them. I mean it's very, very hard for them to hear, and you've got to be clear to them that this isn't just your judgement about what they're doing as being wrong, it's you know, it's a much broader judgement. It's basically what the law says is wrong, so you know, this isn't a personal judgement by me on you.

Nick Balneaves:

You must come across occasions where a parent is engaging in criminality?

Marina Shaw:

Yes.

Nick Balneaves:

Do you have an obligation to report that?

Marina Shaw:

We have this battle with this all the time, because in terms of having an honest relationship often means knowing about parents' drug use. And not only do we learn about where they're buying the drugs illegally, we actually often hear about who's dealing the drugs illegally. So, with regards to the client, I am always very honest in saying you do realise you could end up in court and perhaps your children could end up being accommodated. So, no I don't go to the police. Although, obviously if there was child protection issues that would be something different.

Nick Balneaves:

And what about the effect on the children in that environment?

Marina Shaw:

I think it must be terribly, terribly difficult for them. When they know that their parents would probably put the need for drugs above their own needs. Now children probably couldn't vocalise on that but they feel it. I mean it must be pretty frightening to be a child and have your parent not able to actually act like parents, you know. And in actual fact what often happens is the children actually have additional responsibilities, far more than any ordinary

child at school, cos they actually start to look after their parents. And that's one of the rules that you've often got to reverse when you're working with the families.

Nick Balneaves:

So how do the children cope with that?

Marina Shaw:

They're, very often their coping mechanisms, are that they get tougher to deal with it, or they become very insular in themselves. What I tend to find is that by and large the children have become tougher to cope with it. You know, they've got protective shells around them.

Nick Balneaves:

That must make it more difficult for you to engage with them?

Marina Shaw:

I actually find it fairly easy to deal with challenging children and Cos I understand why they're doing it. And then once you discuss why they're doing it as well, with the child, in the language that the child can understand, then basically you get beyond that. So, but it's still very hard for the child to, to reveal what it's doing to them, but yes, I've found it possible.

Nick Balneaves:

Talk me through how you would try and engage a child in that circumstance?

Marina Shaw:

It's sometimes achievable in one interview, This is absolutely incredible, cos some of the children are burdened by it and want if you can create a safe atmosphere and a safe place and say, 'Okay, mum and dad have given their permission for you to talk about how you feel about you know, what mum and dad are doing.' It's amazing how quickly they will see how it is what is the feeling.

Which of course you can then start to say: 'well, if that's how you're feeling, come on, we'll go back and speak to mum and dad'. And it's often painful for a mum and dad to actually hear that that's how the child's feeling, so.

Nick Balneaves:

Do you have to go about that in a gentle way?

Marina Shaw:

Well of course cos what you don't wanna do is give them the excuse for the drug use to spiral because it's the horrendous thing about being drug addicted is more negatives don't necessarily mean that you're gonna turn around from your drug use. So it's about a balance you speak about, saying 'I understand that you want the best for your child, and this is what you're child's saying, so may be if together we can you know, for example, even get you on to a methadone programme and start to stop the illegal drug use', and so, and there's always a balance we're taking maybe what's negative and hopefully turn it into something positive.

Nick Balneaves:

What do you get out of your job, Marina, on a personal level?

Marina Shaw:

On a personal level I don't get an awful lot of money out of my job, but I get an awful lot of satisfaction. At my age I've worked in several kinds of organisations in my life and nothing brings me so much satisfaction and sometimes so much stress, but still I love it.

NICK BALNEAVES:

What advice would you give to young social workers coming into the profession?

Marina Shaw:

Join a union and demand more money. (LAUGHS). For young social workers coming into the profession, I would say read everything there is to day. The theory definitely underpins the

knowledge you require for practice, no doubt about it. Having said that, you continue to learn in practice. Not everything is in the books, but it certainly informs your practice.

I, on a personal level, have found that you have to be aware that you can't fix everything. I remember feeling as though the clients' problems almost became my problems and I almost felt this impetus to fix it. And you know you can't, you can't. At the end of the day it is their responsibility.

NICK BALNEAVES:

Marina Shaw thank you very much.

Marina Shaw:

Thank you.