



Alannah Brown is currently manager of the Down Sure Start Project. This is a secondment and she took up this post in August 2016. She will leave to return to her substantive post in May 2018 - where she is the Senior Practitioner for Safeguarding in a Family Intervention Team based in Newtownards.

Alannah currently manages a team of thirty five staff and has two managers reporting to her. She also oversees the budget and allocation of services for the project.

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Have you always worked in social work?

I completed a psychometric test in school which said that a career in nursing or social work would suit me best. However, I did not pursue either and did a degree in English and History. I then worked in publishing for a few years, followed by administration until I had my children in my mid 20's and wanted to stay at home. At that stage I became a childminder. As a childminder I worked with children, their families and social workers and my interest in social work was sparked. I began doing voluntary work with a local charity that worked with families and eventually decided to apply for the Degree in Social Work (the Degree). However, my marriage ended and I was left with two small toddlers. This meant undertaking a Degree would be very difficult financially. The charity I volunteered for, however, encouraged me to apply for the Trainee Social Work scheme as this route provided me with an income while I studied. I did apply and was accepted. I successfully graduated in June 2010 with a Degree in Social Work.

From the start I wanted to work in safeguarding and obtained a permanent post in the SEHSCT within a Family Intervention Team (FIT). After nearly 5 years I felt ready to take on more responsibility and was promoted to Senior Practitioner in my Team.

Training to be a Social Worker

I had been volunteering with Positive Futures for two years when I applied to do the Degree. I was able to draw on this previous experience during my social work interview and the experience helped me to decide that social work for the career for me. My experience as a single mother had also provided me with insight and empathy for the families I would eventually work with.

I completed the three year Degree in Social Work with the Ulster University and spent my first two years at the South Eastern Regional College (SERC) in Newtownards and my final year at Belfast Metropolitan College. The Degree included placements and my first placement was with Older People and my final placement was in Gateway. The Degree was demanding and I needed to commit much more effort than my previous degree.

Professional development

I completed my Assessed Year in Employment (AYE) with support from the SEHSCT training Team. I also attended a monthly support group with other AYE's. My first year as a Social Worker in a busy FIT team was daunting to be honest but I was passionate about social work and stuck with it. I went on to complete a post graduate certificate in Social Work and the Specific Award in Family and Child Care in 2014. I really enjoyed this post qualifying training as it gave me time for reflection and time to review my learning journey

since graduating. Originally I only planned to complete the compulsory element but enjoyed it so much that I completed the full qualification.

I then became interested in supporting other students and became an onsite facilitator for students within my team. I worked with two students and it was great to see their enthusiasm for social work. I think I learned as much from them as they did from me. I have recently started the effective manager course (Level 5) with the Institute of Leadership and Management (ILM). Keeping abreast of research, policies and legislation is vital as is reflection and I cherish opportunities to learn, reflect and improve my practice. On-going or continuous learning and envelopment ultimately benefits and supports the children and families I work with and is why I went into social work in the first place.

What would you say to someone considering a career in social work?

I would ask them why they want to do this type of job and ask them to really reflect on that. I think compassion, tenacity and empathy and anti-oppressive practice are all vital to social work. It is a challenging and at times mentally draining area of work. It is not 9 to 5 and there is a lot of juggling to balance work and home life. You have to be determined, organised and passionate to make it all work. The person would need to go into this profession with their eyes open to the demands of the job. I think some previous related experience, be it gained through paid or voluntary work, is very important, because it will help the person test if this is the right career or profession for them. Having said that, I love my area of work. I have also had times when I was close to quitting, but I certainly don't lack passion for safeguarding social work. It is still the best job I have ever had.

What challenges do you face in your job?

Lack of staff, case load pressures, aggression, very complex cases that move into the Court area, stress.

In what way is the social work profession rewarding?

When parents make positive changes and children's names are removed from the Child Protection register. Court work regarding permanence planning is my real passion – in terms of early intervention for the child and getting the child to their permanent placement as soon as possible, especially, when parents can't achieve the necessary changes. Working with a strong team of other social workers who support each other is also very rewarding.

How do you see your career progressing?

I want to bring the management experience that I have gained back to social work and progress my career within social work.

What does it mean to work in a regulated profession and be registered with NISCC?

It provides accountability within the profession. It provides assurance for the public and it gives a voice to promote social work.

Why did you choose to become a Social Work Ambassador and what do you hope to gain from this role?

I chose to become an Ambassador because I am passionate about social work and want to share this with others who may be considering a social work career.