TOP TIPS

From Social Work Practitioners to Make Time for Social Work a Reality

Part of BASW England's 80-20 Campaign

80-20

Campaign
Promoting relationship
based practice

BASW England
The professional association for
social work and social workers

Introduction

BASW England's 80-20 campaign is all about time for social work.

Social workers continue to tell us that too much of their time is spent on administrative tasks and not enough time is spent on direct relationship based social work and reflective practice.

The 80-20 campaign is our opportunity to push for the changes that are needed to ensure that social workers are well supported and have the time to develop, and sustain relationships with children, young people, adults, families and communities.

A series of Top Tips resources have been created with BASW members, people with lived experience and key stakeholders from across the sector. This Top Tips resource has been created based on contributions from a diverse range of social work practitioners and builds on learning from the BASW England 80:20 campaign surveys carried out in 2018 and 2021.[1]

What is this resource?

Therapeutic, reflective, relationship-based practice is the best way for social workers to bring effective and positive change to the lives of children, families and adults.

This Top Tips from Practitioners resource sets out what needs to happen or to change to enable social workers to develop, support and embed relationship-based practice and enable time for social work.

Who is it for?

Social workers, team managers, senior and organisational leaders, employers, and key stakeholders at a local, regional and national level.

How can it be used?

Flexibly. The Top Tips from Practitioners can be used to highlight what needs to stay and what needs to change to make time for direct work and relationship based social work a reality.

The Top Tips resource can be used to campaign and lobby for change as a standalone document or in conjunction with the other 80:20 campaign Top Tips resources.

Top Tips ▶▶▶

1 **For direct work to be recognised, valued and supported as a priority**

What Practitioners say:

"Direct work is often done outside of normal working hours as I try and make sure I see my kids more often/spend quality time doing good direct work. I must prioritise office work often".

"The term 'relationship based social work' is not an add on, it is fundamentally about building relationships and that takes time, investment and commitment. More direct contact is what children, young people, adults and families are telling us they need - we need to listen to what they are telling us".

What needs to happen:

● The Knowledge and Skills statements for Child and Family Practitioners and Adult Social Workers[2] make explicit the reference to direct work as a knowledge and skill commensurate with the role. Within both of these post qualifying statements there is recognition and a commitment at a national policy level for direct work as an integral element of social work practice. Therefore, support for social workers to do direct work and practice in ways which recognise the

intrinsic value of this approach where proportionate and appropriate as a way to build relationships is key.

- Support opportunities to do groupwork. There is a body of evidence which shows the value and importance of group work as a model of achieving positive outcomes for young people and adults through the development of key relationships.[3]

- Ensure that social workers do not end up financially disadvantaged as a result of undertaking direct work to build relationships. Employers need to create systems which can enable a small budget to be accessed by social workers to take young people or adults out or to meet somewhere for a drink, snack or to do an activity together.

- Investment in creative resources and practice approaches that support relationship-based practice through direct work with children, adults, families and communities. There is a strong evidence base about the outcomes that can be achieved through the use of resources such as Kitbag in building relationships[4] and in the approach used in Family Safeguarding.[5]

2 Create the right conditions for relationship-based practice — manageable workload

What Practitioners say:

"Social workers have the skills required to engage in relationships-based work but are not afforded sufficient time."

"High caseloads holding too much risk and complexity"

46% of social workers responding to the BASW annual survey for 2023 felt that excessive workload was their biggest pressure.[6]

What needs to be in place:

- Social workers should feel supported in prioritising their workload in order to spend time with children, families and adults. Initiating a conversation in supervision when caseloads are too high and agreeing how work can be reduced and introducing the use of monthly "summary recording" as a way of supporting prioritisation.[7]
- Transparency and joined up ways of working are needed in relation to the allocation of work that recognises the value and importance of time for relationship based social work in a context of increased demand and pressure on resources.

- Active diary management as a strategy is encouraged and used to protect direct work time and is supported within the organisational culture.
- Organisational culture reflects the values of relationship-based practice. Supervision should be a supportive process that is relational and enables time and space for critical reflection and not viewed or treated as a bureaucratic process.[8]
- Relationship-based practice requires skilled and reflective use of self, informed by critical reflection and analysis, and augmented by creativity and curiosity. Such relational, reflective practice cannot happen in a vacuum and must be supported by an organisational environment that encourages learning and creates spaces for emotionally informed and supportive supervision.[9]
- Activities such as assessments of need and the development of care or support plans should be in partnership with the child, family, adult and others who are involved. Investing time in building and nurturing relationships must be supported and recognised as a preventative way of practising which reduces the risk of break down and moves away from crisis management.[10]

3 Relationship based culture is prioritised over bureaucratic measures of performance

What Practitioners say:

"Activity is process and stats driven. Leaders pay lip service. Stats are more important to leaders and regulatory bodies."

"Performance driven targets that are only meaningful to regulators."

"Senior leaders place more priority on the paperwork to evidence improvement so that is where the energy is used."

What needs to happen:

- Performance to be measured by talking to children, families and adults about what they have experienced whilst being sensitive to the impact of trauma. Measures to be informed by the voice of lived experience and not by solely reading reports and case notes written by social workers, managers and other professionals or representatives from services involved. See the learning and outcomes from Hertfordshire's Family Safeguarding Model.[11]
- The focus needs to be on practice and the value of the relationship built with children, families and adults, capturing the outcomes being achieved as a result of this.[12]

4 Record what matters rather than what is counted

What Practitioners say:

"Bureaucratic paperwork that has so much duplication and is process rather than people driven."

"It is neither the systems nor the law that create the rigid framework which sees social workers 'feeding the beast' with the required data. National and local reporting sees social workers having to record some very odd information."

"IT systems used in organisations are not person centred by design. Social workers are often forced to select the best fit from a structured list of options which make little sense in the context of the person's life."

What needs to happen:

- One approach could be to lobby for central funding from government for a national recording system that is shaped and informed by the voices and experiences of children, young people and adults together with social workers. There is a need to ensure that the impact of relationships, people's stories, views and wishes can be captured and recorded and that systems are designed to support this.

- Forms or templates should contain questions that are meaningful and reflective of the relationships in the context of the life of the child, adult and family.
- Records about a child or adults life should be accessible, simple, concise, timely, relevant, and analytical.[13]
- Regulators and senior leaders to value information that is captured naturally by the social worker as part of conversation and observation as evidence that reflects quality through the impact of the relationship.

5 Digital systems to be underpinned by social work values and ethics

What Practitioners say:

"Investing in better IT systems which don't require duplication. The most common reported IT problems were slow running computers, unreliable equipment and case recording systems going offline."

"Better, less time intensive IT systems that support social workers and less duplication. The system I use is definitely of benefit to managers rather the child."

"Plans for Transition are too long and need to be more accessible – they are approximately 20 pages long."

What needs to happen:

- Challenge managerialism in support of a relationship based culture. Technical bureaucratic tasks should not be conflated with relationship-based social work.
- Recognise that when system changes have not been achieved in the ways hoped for, workarounds lead to onerous bureaucratic tasks which fall on practitioners. A relationship-based culture seeks to prevent this.
- Social workers need more time to engage in direct relationship-based work. Some aspects of recording and data driven practices are intrinsically linked to anti-oppressive practices and can't be separated from the role.[14]
- Social workers need to be supported to develop technical and data literacy knowledge and skills which could enable more critical engagement with systems and any proposed changes to ways of working.[15]
- New challenges present themselves such as interoperability issues linked to the integration of health and social care systems. Social workers need to recognise their role as data citizens in a data driven culture. It is vital that social workers take a rights-based approach, empowering people to understand ways in which systems and data are used.[16]
- Children, adults and families, their views and experiences to be included, and to inform the design and development of systems which have a direct impact on the lives of citizens.[17]
- There needs be a way of sharing information and reports in accessible formats for children, families and adults to ensure the information is meaningful. Social workers must raise challenge if information is produced in ways that makes it inaccessible.[18]

6 Effective administrative support is in place to free up social workers time and capacity

What Practitioners say:

"Controlling the volume of administration by having dedicated admin staff. Most social workers agree that they currently do tasks that can be done by an administrator. Examples including minute-taking, typing, scanning documents".

"We know admin teams have been cut back, leaving remaining staff stretched or social workers expected to do their own admin. But by cutting down on unnecessary admin and providing team administrators to assist, social workers can be left to do the real relationship building work, thus cutting down the workload and reducing the need for extra, arguably more expensive, agency staff".

The problem:

- A trend towards practitioners spending too much time on administrative tasks is undeniable.[19]
- Administrative and other support roles have been reduced year on year and many roles have been subsumed within the practitioner job description.
- Increased demands have not been met with increased resources. This leads to inefficiencies that increase the administrative burden on practitioners.

- Financial systems and the interface with social work practice result in less time available to spend with individuals and families.

What needs to happen:

- The provision of good, dedicated administrative support to assist with phone calls, diary management, support with IT systems, arranging meetings and taking minutes. This would free up time for social workers to focus on building relationships.
- Roles within teams that can provide support with basic signposting, information and advice and low-level triaging. These roles to have the flexibility to assist with administrative functions and quality checking basic information gathered and generated by Artificial Intelligence.
- Working arrangements to support opportunities for all team members to be co-located at points during the working week to get to know more about the individuals and families that the team work with. This would enable staff in support roles to respond to generic enquiries freeing up social workers time to spend with individuals and families.

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    NB: It is recognised that groupwork may not be suitable for all individuals, teams or situations.
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