Rural Social Work in Cumbria: An Exploratory Case Study

Summary report (June 2020)

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Overview

This short summary report provides a brief overview of the findings and recommendations from a small-scale study of rural social work in Cumbria. The study comprised a review of the international literature, and focus groups and interviews with social workers. Readers are encouraged to access the full report for a more detailed account of the study[1]. Questions about place and social work remain marginal to national debates, despite the fact that practising in communities that are both rural and geographically dispersed, poses distinct challenges. The small-scale study aims to promote dialogue about how place matters in social work practice, with a focus on rurality.

Acknowledgements

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[1] Information about the project, including links to the full and summary reports, is available on the webite of the Centre for Child and Family Justice Research, Lancaster University: https://www.cfj-lancaster.org.uk/projects/rural-social-work-in-cumbria-an-exploratory-study

Introduction and Background

Department for Education funding enabled the formal establishment of the Cumbria-Lancaster Social Work Teaching Partnership in 2016. This formal partnership consolidated pre-existing joint working arrangements and relationships between Cumbria County Council and Lancaster University. Through these opportunities for closer working arrangements, a number of the context-specific challenges faced by social work practitioners in Cumbria began to emerge and appeared to be linked to the rural context and/or remoteness of practice settings. An exploratory overview of the academic literature revealed sparse information and research on social work in rural and remote settings in England and the UK, but a broader international literature. A small-scale, exploratory research project was undertaken to consider social work practice and services in relation to the rural context of Cumbria.

Findings

Qualitative data was collected and analysed through focus groups and interviews. We identified six core themes from the data:

1. Extensive travel

Extensive travel is a defining feature of social work practice in Cumbria and is the issue that was talked about most by our participants. To be a social worker in Cumbria is to travel, typically to drive, alone, in your own car, for very large parts of your working day. The extent of work-related travel presents challenges and opportunities for social workers with regards to several issues. Firstly, extensive travel has a significant impact on how social workers manage their workload and typically means that they are:

- working longer hours and extending the working day
- working on the move
- paying very careful attention to time and diary management
- relying on effective team management to recognise this demand and mitigate through workload allocation

A second aspect of extensive travel relates to workers' feeling about personal safety. Lone working in remote and isolated places exposes workers to travel-related risks resulting from both adverse weather and poor road conditions. Poor mobile telephone reception exacerbates these perceived and potential risks for social workers, working alone. Our participants shared that they very much appreciated the Council's warning systems related to travel in adverse weather conditions. These are very well implemented in practice and were felt to be very helpful when making decisions about travel and weather-related risks. Thirdly, and linked to the same theme, social workers talked about the financial impact of using one's own car for work. Social workers experienced the removal of essential care users' allowance for some social workers as a pay reduction and felt that the policy around using a hire car or own car to be unrealistic or insufficiently flexible to support the social work role, in some instances. Fourthly, for some participants distance and travel impacted on professional development opportunities – although this barrier was not consistently described. Finally, regardless of the extensive travel required by social workers creating significant challenges for their role, driving was also considered to provide opportunities to reflect, de-stress, and appreciate the beauty of the landscape. Travel could also provide space between work and non-work life.

2. Service provision

Alongside the extensive, solitary travel, shortfalls in service provision was the second most prominent theme in our participants' accounts of the lived experience of rural social work. Our participants reported some major service gaps, given the difficulty of commissioning and delivering services that have a very large geographic spread. Social workers reported that they often felt under huge pressure to find solutions to the lack of services in a particular area and at times felt stressed and frustrated because of these challenges. The lack of service provision in some rural and remote areas resulted in social workers having to rely on informal support for service users. Whilst at times social workers talked about how this enabled more creative and bespoke arrangements for service users, it also created a number of challenges such as:

- extensive time spent negotiating, mediating and planning arrangements due to the relative informality of some arrangements
- potential instability of arrangements requiring extra monitoring, reviewing and risk assessment of arrangements
- informal support networks are not available to all members of communities

The issue of how Cumbria supports informal networks is however, noteworthy. The challenges of commissioning may actually be prompting the Council to undertake innovative work to build resilience and sustainable informal support mechanisms and this warrants further analysis.

3. Working in small communities

Small communities present social workers with a distinctive field of practice that presents its own set of challenges and opportunities. Much of these relate to the need for social workers to manage their personal and professional identities because working in small communities means anonymity can be hard, if not impossible, to maintain. Professionals in small communities will find themselves engaging in multi-faceted relationships with members of that community so could find themselves being both the allocated social worker and a neighbour of a service user. These 'dual relationships' can be challenging to manage for both social worker and service user. Working in small communities can also enable more productive relationships between professionals and the wider community as long as privacy is carefully managed. Overall, we identified the sub-themes below:

- dual relationships between social workers and people who use services
- dual relationships between social work service users and professional carers
- protecting the privacy of people who use social work services
- managing the risks of lone working when making home visits
- close working relationships between social workers and other professionals
- increased public visibility of social workers
- strong, distinctive, place-based identities of communities in Cumbria

4. Dispersed teams

In our participants' accounts, team work arrangements were strongly linked to wellbeing at work and to considerations about staying in or leaving one's role. For some of our participants, working in a dispersed team resulted in a sense of isolation and a reduced sense of team identity. Some social workers also talked about how working in a dispersed team resulted in reduced opportunities for support and team learning. However, some participants also talked about how working in a dispersed team contributed positively to their experience of work because it helped mitigate other work-related challenges such as extensive travel. Teams

which do not physically share an office or workspace could still be positive, but this required team members to actively and intentionally focus on its cohesion and identity.

5. Living in Cumbria

The practice of working with and for people of Cumbria was an important factor in people's accounts of what they find positive, rewarding, beneficial and sustaining in their work. For many participants, a desire to work in Cumbria followed a desire to live in Cumbria. Living in Cumbria, and by implication working in Cumbria, is about fulfilment, self-actualisation and the happiness that can be gained through benefiting from the environment of Cumbria whilst also delivering public service. Participants, particularly those with a long history of living in Cumbria, indicated a strong connection to Cumbria, its landscape and associated lifestyle opportunities. Participants also spoke of being attracted by the small size of Cumbria's communities and by the nature of social relationships within small communities.

6. Social work as intrinsically rewarding

Participants spoke about the ways their work and profession are experienced as intrinsically rewarding. Participants talked about loving their work and deriving enjoyment and satisfaction from it. They felt their work was important and worthwhile and indicated a sense of privilege when working with people who use services. Here, the commitment to social work might be considered not particular to Cumbria, but to be widely felt among those drawn to this profession. Participants also valued relationships with other colleagues, the opportunities they felt they had to work autonomously and to develop both professionally and personally.

Suggestions for Policy and Practice Development

We have drawn out the following 14 policy and practice implications from the findings of this research. They are listed below and discussed in detail in the full version of this report. We are aware that as a consequence of on-going initiatives and impact of the Teaching Partnership that some issues are already being addressed in the County:

1. Work with local social work education providers to encourage local people to consider social work as a valuable career choice.
2. Recruitment campaigns to focus on those most likely to commit to working in Cumbria.
3. Support for newly appointed social workers to adjust to rural practice.
4. Awareness raising, among team managers, regarding the impact of driving on both time and wellbeing.
5. Consideration of a contribution towards the financial cost of personal car use and/or provision of equipment for winter driving.
6. Consideration of more flexibility around the hire car process.
7. Review of lone working policies within the Council and local teams.
8. Continued advice and recommendation about adverse weather threats.
9. Renewed focus on the 'time off in lieu' (TOIL) policy.
10. Continued development of resources to enable positive agile working.
11. Review of the further potential role of technology, to enable connection, communication and training opportunities.
12. Formal opportunities for connection with team and management (for example supervision, peer supervision, team meetings).
13. Informal opportunities to bring teams together (for example coordinated monthly team lunch times).
14. Review of and possible adoption of a community model of social work in some areas of Cumbria.