

## Series 3 Episode 1

“People who need it should be able to access social work support”: The contribution of social work to older people’s wellbeing. A conversation with Gerry Nosowska and Paul Willis



[00:00:00] **Lesley:** Hello and welcome to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work. I'm your host and my name is Dr Lesley Deacon.

[00:00:13] **Sarah:** And I'm your other host and I'm Dr Sarah Lonbay. So we hope you enjoy today's episode.

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### Introduction

[00:00:28] **Sarah:** Hello everyone. Today we have two guests with us, Gerry and Paul, and I will let them introduce themselves and what they do. Gerry, if we can go to you first, please.

[00:00:38] **Gerry:** Sure. Hi, I'm Gerry Nosowska. I'm a social worker and my background is in social work with older people in local authorities. I now work for myself. I have a small social work consultancy called Effective Practice, and I was part of the research team that led the Social Work with Older People research project. And my role was to support engagement and dissemination of the research findings and also to chair the expert advisory group.

[00:01:04] **Sarah:** Excellent. Thank you very much and thanks for joining us. And Paul?

[00:01:09] **Paul:** Hello, I'm Paul Willis. I'm also a social worker and I'm a Professor of Adult Social Care at Cardiff University. And during this particular study, the Social Work with Older People study, I was based at the University of Bristol. The University was a collaborator, and I was a member of the

research team and co-investigator on the study, and I worked with and supported the researcher who was undertaking the fieldwork in our rural site.

## **Background to the work with older people**

[00:01:38] **Sarah:** Great. Thank you. And thanks again for joining us today. So, before we get started talking about the project specifically we'd really like to hear just a little bit more about your own backgrounds in terms of social work with older people and, more broadly, why you were interested in doing this research and why you're interested in this topic. I don't mind who starts. Paul, do you want to start off this time?

[00:02:01] **Paul:** Sure. So I've had a long-term interest, as a social work academic educator, in social work and social care support for older people. I've led a number of research studies looking at the care and support needs of older lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans people, and looked at their experiences of contact with social care, particularly in care home and long term care settings, and also their experiences in relation to contact with healthcare professionals. And so, yes, I've built up a long term interest around issues around sexuality and more broadly about social inclusion and ageing and what the experiences are like of ageing for older people who are socially marginalised and belong to minoritised groups, as well as a wider interest in the care needs of older people and their carers more broadly and how we might enhance social work practice with older people as well as supporting what good practice is already happening.

[00:02:57] **Sarah:** Brilliant. And I know a lot of that came out from this project, so we'll be getting into some of that detail as we go through the conversation. Thanks, Paul. And how about you, Gerry?

[00:03:07] **Gerry:** I became interested in social work with older people when I was a student studying social work. And I think the primary reason, probably, was that I have some very amazing older people role models in my family, particularly my Nan, my English Nan, and also Polish great aunts and Irish great aunts. And I think my first degree was in history and languages, and so there's an interest in the learning and the stories and the wisdom that people have over a long life course, but also at that time when I was studying my social work course in Sheffield, Alan Walker was one of the people involved in the university and was doing a lot of work around challenging ageism and marginalisation of older people. And so that kind of inspired me as well. And so

I chose placements and a dissertation that supported that interest and then went into that area of practice. And I think since then, although I've done a lot across all areas of social work and across the whole of the UK, particularly with the British Association of Social Workers, I've always kept that real interest in later life.

[00:04:14] **Sarah:** Yeah, thank you, I think that's interesting what you just said that it was someone when you were studying who really inspired you to focus on this because I think we'll all be aware, and it was highlighted in the information I looked at about your project, that social work with older people is neglected in the curriculum and within social work education often.

[00:04:34] **Gerry:** Yeah, I was really fortunate. Margaret Holloway was also at Sheffield, she was my supervisor on my dissertation, so I think it's a little bit of luck, isn't it? You know, if you come across people that can inspire you in that way.

[00:04:46] **Sarah:** Yeah, that's great. Thank you very much.

[00:04:48] **Lesley:** Yeah, because I don't remember it being a topic when I was, because I was trained as a social worker as well, and I don't remember any focus on it actually *at all*, is how I remember it.

[00:05:01] **Gerry:** It was really limited on the kind of formal teaching side because you've got to cover all of the law and you've got to cover all of practice and it was only a small bit of that, but because of having people in the department with that interest that helped shape the placements that I went on and then, yeah absolutely the support for the dissertation was really key as well.

### **Social Work with Older People research project**

[00:05:19] **Lesley:** Yeah. So I was going to ask you to talk about this particular project, I don't know who wants to start that off, who's the best person, Paul or Gerry, but if you can tell our listeners about what it's about, how the project emerged, what it's about, why focus on that area, obviously you have your personal experiences as well, but anything you think would be helpful for people to know about?

[00:05:46] **Gerry:** Maybe you start, Paul, because it came from work you were doing before, didn't it?

[00:05:50] **Paul:** Sure. So I'm part of a special interest group in social work called the Gerontology Eight, and it's a group of social work academics and professors who have committed the majority of their academic careers to developing social work with older people, teaching, enhancing teaching about social work with older people and developing more research on this particular field of practice. And Denise Tanner from the University of Birmingham is also part of this group and Denise was the principal investigator at Birmingham for the Social Work with Older People study that we're talking about today. So, we worked up a small funding application in 2018 to the NIHR School for Social Care Research. And that school, based in England, funded us to do a small scale study, a 12 month study. It was led by myself and Professor Liz Lloyd at the University of Bristol with the Gerontology Eight group, and we focused on some case studies about innovative social work practice with older people. So looking at new forms of service delivery in relation to supporting older people's care needs. Some were in relation to hospitals and discharge processes, some were more based in the community, such as family group conferencing models for older people and their families. And so we looked at about five case studies. We were able to gather some data from social workers who were involved in the delivery of these services, but also some perspectives from other professionals who are working alongside with social workers, so occupational therapists, nurses, people in managerial roles who came from different health and social care disciplines. And a number of key things stood out. One key thing was the importance of timing, thinking about timing in relation to when is the best time in terms of providing support to older people for social workers to be involved and the ways in which social workers can speed up processes for older people who might be stuck in particular systems or particular situations. And as well as the ways in which other professionals working alongside social workers really valued the contribution and the knowledge and skills that social workers brought to their support and their work with older people. So from this preliminary study, Denise and I collaborated to put in another bid to the NIHR School for Social Care Research, Gerry came on board as a collaborator and a co-investigator, and we were successful in 2021 to commence the current two year study. And really at the heart of the study is about getting a deeper understanding of what social work with older people looks like in practice.

## **Social work practice with older people**

[00:08:40] **Lesley:** Because you mentioned the time issue there, because I that's what I was quite interested in, like the time at which social workers get involved. Was that something that has emerged from the study as to where that key point is? And I'm jumping Sarah, I know I am, I always jump around.

[00:09:01] **Paul:** Do you want to speak to that, Gerry?

[00:09:06] **Gerry:** Sure, yeah, so the, the study was looking at trying to make visible what social workers do, and when they do it, and how they do it, and what difference it makes. And the interesting element of that is the connection between the capabilities social workers have, and then the impact on wellbeing for older people, within this very complex context. And in terms of when social workers get to do their social work, that's really crucial, isn't it? Because that's about deploying a really scarce resource in the best possible way. So making sure that people have access to social work at the time when it's going to have the most impact. What we found was that that's very often when things are already complex and in crisis and quite unstable. And there is a really important role for social work there. Partly it's the well-known coordination and marshalling role that social workers have. But there's also a huge element of therapeutic input within that, which tends to get hidden and masked by the practicalities of what social workers are doing. But what older people and carers say is that that's absolutely crucial to them, the reassurance and the support and having someone on their side at those times. We also found that when it's possible for it to happen, social work input earlier on, to provide advice and guidance and information and to guide people into social care and health, into that complex system, makes a huge difference as well. But that is, I think from this research, but also more broadly from what we know about the evidence of how social work works, that's less likely to happen. And I think that's a gap. One of the things that we would say is that deployment of social workers shouldn't just be when everything's going wrong.

[00:10:59] **Lesley:** When it's wrong.

[00:11:00] **Gerry:** Let's get social workers in earlier, to help people.

[00:11:04] **Lesley:** Do you think some of that relates to the issues around the funding of services and then the thresholds? My background is in safeguarding children, but the thresholds just get higher and higher for when you eventually get the social workers involved. I think you said deploy that scarce resource almost.

[00:11:21] **Gerry:** There's a number of things. So there's definitely a scarcity problem, that came through quite strongly in the context of information, and that's broadly known, so the Skills for Care research at the moment around social workers and adult services is that there's an 11.4 percent vacancy rate. So there's a scarcity, a known scarcity, a known gap, but that's of a scarce resource anyway, because the number of social workers proportionately in adult services and in older people's services is lower than it is in children's services in any case. Now, our hypothesis about that is that that's an ageism problem, that there isn't the same level of investment in professionals with that particular expertise, because it's not seen as, as important in later life, and that's borne out from research over decades, isn't it? So that's an issue. And then that's partly linked to older people, carers and families not knowing to ask for social work as well. So we also found that there was an awareness issue, and an awareness issue across the whole system, actually, that health colleagues and other organisations wouldn't necessarily know what a social worker could offer. So I guess that goes back to the primary purpose of the research, which is to *show* that, to make that visible. What is it that social workers can and do offer to people in later life?

[00:12:44] **Lesley:** Because there's an issue, isn't there, about people in wider society understanding what social work is and what social workers do and where they come in. So it's across the board, isn't it, that there are issues with people not knowing that at this point, ah, this is when I should call the social worker and get them to come in. Is there anything else? Sorry, I interrupted you about the time issue, sorry. So, Paul, did you want to go back on any of the other key findings from that? Or Gerry, do you want to draw anything else to our attention.

[00:13:15] **Gerry:** In terms of the findings?

[00:13:16] **Lesley:** Yeah.

[00:13:17] **Gerry:** Overall. We have jumped around a little bit, haven't we? So...

[00:13:19] **Lesley:** Yeah, sorry. That's always me. That's me.

[00:13:22] **Gerry:** Paul, did you want to kind of maybe try and summarise some of the findings?

## **Social workers' positive impact**

[00:13:26] **Paul:** Yeah, I can do that. So one of the key themes, one of the key findings of the study was the ways in which social workers made positive contributions to the lives of older people and helped produce positive outcomes and benefits for older people that mattered to older people and their carers. And we looked at the Care Act 2014 outcomes in relation to wellbeing and the definition of wellbeing and we mapped our data against those outcomes, as a framework for helping us to make sense of our findings. And we found that social workers in their practice brought a number of psychosocial benefits for older people, often through the importance of building and maintaining really meaningful relationships. So there was a lot of therapeutic support and reassurance to older people, particularly older people experiencing high levels of uncertainty, feeling stuck in a system or situation, or experiencing high levels of anxiety because the future is uncertain, and they're not sure what the best way forward is going to be. But also lots of really tangible material benefits to improving the lives of older people as well. So, for example, social workers helped to reduce older people's distress, but provided reassurance at that time of worry and uncertainty, supported older people to be more connected to others and so helping to reduce social isolation, and very much keeping the dignity and worth of the older people at the heart of their practice and their relationships with older people.

### **Adult safeguarding and the social work role with older people**

[00:15:02] **Paul:** In relation to protecting older people from abuse and neglect, social workers provided really comprehensive, realistic and ongoing assessments of risk that again were about supporting and promoting older people's rights. And they very much played a key role in working with older people to weigh up what the risks might be in relation to older people's rights and safety and making sure that older people are informed throughout the process. They provided information to older people and their family members to help them make informed decisions about what was the best way forward for them and to help older people to stay in control over their day-to-day life. And this is where their legal knowledge was really critical, having that high level of legal literacy is really important particularly in relation to accessing the kind of entitlements and support that older people can benefit from and access.

### **Supporting community engagement**

[00:15:54] **Paul:** They supported older people around contribution to social systems that matter to them. So, for example being able to be part of a care

home or participate in a day centre, being able to participate in religious ceremonies or connected to religious organisations and churches that mattered to the older people in terms of their spirituality. We also have to recognise that when we talk about participation and contribution to society, that older people have *already* made a lot of contributions to society. And so we don't want to be giving huge amounts of emphasis to the fact that older people should continue to have to do that, particularly when they're experiencing higher levels of care and support needs. But nonetheless, social workers are really critical in enabling that to continue where it mattered to older people and their family members.

### **Financial and practical support**

[00:16:45] **Paul:** And in relation to social and economic well being social workers helped provide access to financial support, assisted older people and their carers with financial planning and accessing welfare benefits, and helped older people and carers to navigate some really complex, tricky legal and financial frameworks associated with their care arrangements.

[00:17:05] **Paul:** So for example, in relation to power of attorney processes or court of protection.

### **Holistic practice**

[00:17:10] **Gerry:** I think one of the things that I found really interesting about the findings was that the individual little components of what social workers did, you could imagine that somebody could come along and do that. But it's the combination that we found was really crucial. It was bringing together their commitment to human rights with the knowledge about the law and the practical knowledge and the knowledge about aging and that awareness of later life and the life course, alongside those skills about building relationships and working therapeutically and bringing that all together, allow people to do work that can sometimes be described really simply. You know, you hear social workers say things like, "I just had a conversation with this person, and now this is happening". And it's that little word, "just", that kind of undermines all of the expertise that's behind it. And I think the examples that we have in the study, we have ten social workers working over a six month period, we've got seventeen in-depth situations that we looked at, we've got the observations of those from the researchers and then all the interviews that triangulate how that experience was for the social worker, the older people, the families and the other professionals. And what you get is this really rich tapestry of

expertise that enables these things to happen, and doesn't allow you to then think, "oh, the social worker just did something". You can see the depth.

## Relationship building

[00:18:36] **Lesley:** Yeah. Like what it meant to them, because the relationship aspect I think is the bit that is not something that is easy to contextualise it. It's fluid and it changes depending on the interaction between the social worker and the family, the individual and their family around them. And that's what came out from, I think, for me, from what you were saying that that therapeutic relationship building aspect, it sounds like that's really the key element to the work and the *difference* in the work. Because I reflect on my experiences working in safeguarding children and frustration about not being able to spend that time on the relationship, and that people didn't want me there. They *don't* want me there. The impression I got from what your research was, there was the social work role and the social worker provided something that was almost sort of priceless to the individual, that it was so meaningful. Would that be fair to say that?

[00:19:37] **Gerry:** Yeah, I think some of the same hurdles and barriers exist within adult and older people's social work because they do in children's, so we did have people who were very upfront in their interviews about the fact that they didn't really know what social work was, they didn't really want it, they thought it was something for other people, they thought it was more about control. And they're wary of it. So there is that same kind of hesitancy. And also people told us that asking for support and accepting support was really difficult after a lifetime of managing, and getting by. And so again, that's another reason why the social work role has to be so carefully undertaken. And it was interrupted, wasn't it, Paul? We had problems with social workers being able to offer that relational support?

[00:20:26] **Paul:** Yeah. So there are a number of barriers that got in the way of older people being able to maintain that support. We heard very clearly from older people and their carers, who were mostly family members, that what they really valued was having the same social worker. So being able to maintain that relationship. And we also heard it from other professionals. For example, healthcare professionals and occupational therapists who are working alongside social workers, that they also really valued working with the same social worker, supporting an older person *together* as a multidisciplinary team. But of course, one of the key barriers to that is that constant churn in

relation to workforce and the constant change in social workers allocated to older people and their families. Or where there are long delays in people being allocated a social worker, for example, where people were waiting for hospital discharge. So this is one particular barrier that got in the way of good social work practice. And one of our key recommendations, unsurprisingly, is the importance of continuity in these relationships. And where we can look to reduce some of the more bureaucratic systems across social care and health care as well that get in the way of social workers spending more time with the older people they're working with and supporting, rather than spending, a disproportionate amount of time in relation to navigating some of these systems and the paperwork involved and all the administrative requirements that currently accompany social work.

[00:22:10] **Lesley:** Did you find anything particular about that Paul, in your research, around the impact that that was having on the social workers, or was that separate?

### **Social work calendars and time management**

[00:22:21] **Paul:** Yeah, so one of the things that we looked at as part of the research design is we tried to get a better understanding of how social workers allocate and use their time across the working week. This sounds straightforward. It wasn't straightforward, because social workers' calendars are a moving feast, unsurprisingly. And we first of all looked at social workers' calendars with their permission, they shared their calendars on email calendars, for example. But again, what's in their calendar doesn't necessarily match how they spend their time. We placed a lot of demands on the 10 social workers who took part in terms of their participation and the time they gave. So we had to be very careful about not expecting too much in terms of, for example one method could be keeping a time diary, but that would be particularly burdensome for the social workers taking part. So we were able to get some rough idea of how social workers allocated their time and the amount of time they spent working with older people and families compared to the amount of time they spent in relation to wider administrative tasks. And I'm trying to think of the, Gerry, do you have the rough percentages we came up with?

[00:23:37] **Gerry:** It was something like 17 or 18 percent of time spent on direct work with older people and carers and families, and then time that was related to those situations brought it up, I think, to kind of around a third of

people's time, but then there was an awful lot of other administrative tasks and other things that people need to do. And of course, you know, you do need time for professional development, for support, for supervision, for being part of an organisation, for driving around, all of these things. But there are some really clear messages from the research about how to shift that proportion of time. Because there are barriers that could be removed.

[00:24:23] **Lesley:** That's across all aspects of social work as well, isn't it? Because I think that's really an important finding, because it's something that we've kind of known about but not had that kind of evidence base to say, look, this is what's going on, this is what it looks like. Because I think when you come into social work, I know the interviews we do with future students, it's all about, I want to help people, I want to work with people, and the reality of that when you go into, especially statutory organisations, is that will be a very small amount, relatively, of your work. Most of it will be everything else that goes with that and what goes on behind the scenes, which is not really why people go into it, I don't think. That's maybe just my opinion.

[00:25:09] **Gerry:** Some of the recommendations are absolutely about trying to remove those avoidable barriers. Things like streamlining the amount of paperwork that people do, this has been around for a long time but there are some clear duplications. There's issues around health and social care systems lining up and people being able to access things they need. There's issues around just awareness, if more people understood what social workers did then their work would be made more smooth. There's a lot of issues around lack of care services and the time that that takes up, which are bigger and maybe more medium-term, long-term. But the shorter-term trying to make people's work more proportionate and manageable, and make the interfaces work better, I think that there is real scope to change those. And there's scope to change the continuity problem of shifting people between social workers, because local authorities set things up in different ways in different places. And although it's quite often put in the kind of "too hard to do" box, if older people and carers themselves, the very people that we're trying to support, citizens that have the right to this service are saying this problem, then we need to look at it again.

[00:26:27] **Lesley:** I'm going to stop asking questions, Sarah, I'm going to let you, sorry it's just really interesting.

## **The spaces and places of social work**

[00:26:32] **Sarah:** It's alright, it's been interesting sitting and listening, I've been making some notes on some things that I wanted to pick up on, but while we're talking about some of those barriers and difficulties, what struck me when I was reading the briefing was firstly, the incredible important and valuable work that social workers are doing and they're navigating really complex situations and providing that support. But alongside the barriers that you've just mentioned, one of the things is actually about the practicalities of where they're doing their work, which I was quite surprised by in terms of actually lack of desk space, and there was a mention about needing to do these administrative tasks in inappropriate or unsuitable places. Was that something that you found was quite common in, in your sample then?

[00:27:14] **Paul:** Yeah, we found that a lot of social workers wanted to spend more time in the office, but with a hybrid working model and less availability of office space as part of that shift that that wasn't always possible. So social workers were often working between home and the office, and of course out and about in the community in terms of visiting older people and their families where they were situated. So, yes, a lot of social workers missed that informal conversation and debriefing on a regular basis that happens in the office with their social work colleagues. A few social workers in our sample liked the flexibility of being able to work between home and the office. So we should add that sometimes that does work for some people, but a kind of overwhelming message from the majority of the social workers was that they missed those office conversations that you can't really replicate in the same way online. And for the rural site, we had two sites taking part in the study, an urban site and a rural site, the rural site, there was additional challenge of traveling long distances to be able to visit older people. So there was additional logistic that takes up additional time in social workers' days, and that can also sometimes lead to an additional level of isolation because you're spending more time working alone and not in contact with colleagues and team members. But there's also a lack of space in the spaces where social workers met older people. So, for example, trying to have a meaningful conversation with an older person who's in a hospital bed, in a ward, where there's no available silent spaces or private spaces to meet and continue that conversation. So just trying to, again, use the communication skills that social workers have built up over time to have really important conversations in really quite often busy and loud and sometimes a little chaotic environments, which really again highlights those therapeutic skills that social workers build up over time to be able to keep going with those conversations and make sure that they happen in less-than-appropriate environments.

## The involvement of older people within the research

[00:29:43] **Sarah:** Yeah, thank you. I've got a question, I think this is maybe aimed at you, Gerry, with how you described your role in the project at the start. How were older people involved in the work that you did and what were the benefits and challenges of how you engaged with older people throughout the project?

[00:30:03] **Gerry:** There were two key ways that older people were involved: they were involved as participants and they were also involved as advisors. I'll talk about advisors but just to mention Paul might want to pick this up about the participants. We made real effort through the ethics and the design and the execution of the project to make sure that older people's voices could be heard really clearly in the research. We also had people with lived experience involved in the oversight and the leading of the research project, and that was principally through the expert advisory group. We also had local advisory groups, one in each site which had older people and carers involved in them to provide a kind of local perspective on what the researchers were doing and what was emerging and to kind of provide a bit of context and sense checking around that. The expert advisory group was a group of people who we recruited through the university Expert by Experience forums and also through the British Association of Social Workers, and we had a small group of people, seven people, who had a blend of lived experience as older people or as carers or as social workers. And I think everyone had some of each. It was a really interesting group, really rich group, diverse group in terms of identity, and also a fantastically questioning and challenging and passionate group of people. So that group came into the project basically in week one, as soon as we had funding to bring people together. We were originally supposed to meet four times a year, but actually we met more frequently because the role of that group, which was really to act as the critical friend, it grew into a support, a really crucial support around engagement and dissemination. So the advisory group looked at the way that the research was being planned and put together, because we didn't start field work till six months or so into the project, looked at what was coming out of the research as it was being undertaken, the sorts of messages that were emerging and the kind of findings that might lead to and the recommendations that might lead to, and provided a, again, a sense check, but a real kind of question and challenge around that. So that was a crucial element of what they did. There was also a crucial element around making sure that older people's voices and experience, and that of their families, was right at the centre of the research. And so they were a kind of check and balance, you know a real kind of holding us to account

around, we were making sure that that was the experience that was coming through. And that was a really important dynamic, because it was a research project focused on social work practice, working through social workers, observing social workers and following them. And so there's always that risk that social work becomes the principal focus of what we're doing when actually it's the wellbeing of older people, it's the "so what?" of social work that we had to keep in mind. And alongside that centring of older people, the expert advisory group were very practical around things like language and how we talk about older people and how we describe what's happening. And then, yes, when it came to starting to have things to say about the project, which actually happened really early, they've supported us with blogs, one of the expert advisory group members has kept a poem going throughout the project, we've had lots of support around creating resources and products to share the messages and also to take part in dissemination activities, again from quite early on, being involved in conferences and events and presentations, and the expert advisory group even made a film. So it's been a really incredible engagement.

[00:34:10] **Sarah:** Yeah, sounds like that was invaluable and that people really connected with the project and their involvement in it, which is fantastic because, again, that comes down to what you were talking about before in terms of the social worker role, but that relationship building and bringing people together isn't always easy when you're forming a new group that's going to work together quite closely.

[00:34:31] **Gerry:** We did hit some challenges. I think there's a fundamental issue, which is that you can't involve experts by experience and remunerate them until you have funding. And you have to have done the bid before then, so people very kindly gave some time beforehand but of course it then means that you're trying to accommodate questions and challenges when the project has already kind of taken some shape. It would have been brilliant to be able to bring people in earlier. And the other thing is of course that personally and professionally there's a need to be really open and really, I guess flexible and even humble around what the project is and how it's working when you've got this expert, quite critical at times, challenge and question coming in. And that's really enriching, but it also can test you, definitely. I think we were quite open about that in the group, that it's a space where people could really say what they felt and thought about things. But that's social work, isn't it? It's, you know, it's quite a kind of challenging dynamic sometimes to hold.

[00:35:42] **Sarah:** Yeah, absolutely. And I think it is probably testament to how that group was formed and set up that people felt able to bring those challenges and comfortable to do that. And that's exactly what you would want from that group as well. Yeah, that sounds fantastic. Was there anything else about, because did you want to say anything about the participants, older people who were involved on that side as well?

[00:36:05] **Paul:** So the fieldwork for this study happened across two sites, as I mentioned before, one rural local authority and one urban local authority. And we deliberately selected those two sites because they had some contrasting features. So, for example, the urban location had a higher proportion of people from ethnic minoritised groups. So much more diversity, the rural site had a higher proportion of older people in the wider population but had a much larger population of white British people, and less ethnically diverse in relation to equality and diversity. So we shadowed five social workers in each service over a six month period, the majority of social workers taking part have been qualified for a number of years, were experienced or highly experienced social workers, but we had a small number of those ten social workers who were also newly qualified and still kind of finding their feet in terms of getting their head around the various social care and health system processes. And then we had a focus, through those 10 social workers, we had a focus on seventeen older people. Often quite a few of the older people that took part didn't have capacity to give informed consent, so we looked to the immediate family member, their carer, to act as a consultee and to contribute and represent the views of the older person, as well as their perspective as the carer involved. And that highlighted the complexity of social work practice with older people, particularly in the rural site where the majority of social work practice was with older people who had varying levels of mental capacity in relation to day-to-day decision making, who were experiencing high levels of frailty, high levels of care and support needs. So it was really important to be able to ensure that we did have those perspectives from people receiving social work services that were able to receive the informed consent from consultees and have their participation in the study as well. So the seventeen older people were our "clusters", we labelled the people taking part as clusters meaning in each cluster we were interested in what the social work practice looked like, what older people and their carers valued about social worker input, and we also spoke to other professionals involved with that older person's care and support. So that included care home managers, where older people have recently transitioned into care home settings or were briefly staying in care homes. That included people in nursing and other healthcare roles, particularly

when there were processes of hospital discharge. And there are other social care practitioners involved, such as occupational therapists or social care assistants or social work assistants, which we know there's increasing numbers in the workforce. So across those six months, we were able to follow those seventeen older people and their situations and circumstances. And our researchers across the two sites observed social workers having conversations, older people in their homes, in care homes, in hospitals. They had lots of interviews with other professionals involved, and of course they had lots of interviews with the social workers themselves and lots of kind of reflection on practice in the moment. So, for example, the researchers would accompany social workers in their car to visit an older person in their home and then have lots of reflective conversations immediately after the visit, in terms of the social worker's impressions and initial thoughts and how they experience those conversations with older people and family members. So through all these different methods, observations, interviews, looking at the case notes as well of older people taking part with their permission and consent, we were really able to build a really in-depth and detailed picture of what social work practice with older people looked like.

[00:40:22] **Sarah:** Yeah, fantastic, and that's a really interesting approach to really get that detailed picture to combine those different methods and combine actually going out and witnessing that practice as well rather than just hearing about it afterwards in the format of an interview or something, so that sounds great. I'm just conscious of the time and how long we've been recording for so I wonder if we want to just skip ahead to our last couple of questions, as one of the key things that we always ask our guests towards the end of the conversation is around what key recommendations, because we're hoping we'll have a wide listener base, but we're primarily aiming our podcast at social workers. So for any social workers listening, what key recommendations or messages would you want them to hear about the work that you've done?

### **Practice recommendations**

[00:41:11] **Gerry:** Should I start? Yeah, so if you're a social worker working with older people, try and do as much of the things that older people and carers and families value as you possibly can, and that's the time to listen to them, the reassurance, the feeling of being there, so being contactable, and the knowledge and the practical getting things done. So I suppose for that, develop your capabilities around later life, and then strive to carve out the space to use

them in that way. And I think for that to happen, there's a kind of second order message for social workers, which is keep doing the amazing supporting of each other that you are doing, that came through really clearly in the research, that the peer support, the mentoring for new social workers, supervision by social workers with experience of practice and leadership for people who really *got* what social work with older people was and what it could be and the values that underpinned it. That's absolutely vital, and that really held the whole thing together, and helped people to do that amazing work. And so then there's a kind of third order thing to say to social workers, which is let's support each other to push for the conditions that we need for this to happen. And we did a policy briefing with the British Association of Social Workers, which sets out what needs to change to make this kind of good social work, this kind of impactful social work really possible. And some of those things are very doable, it's about policymakers actually remembering that social work exists. It's about awareness-raising, we're doing some of that through this project. We've created resources to help with that, like an animation and a leaflet about what social work with older people is. It's about bringing this into the curriculum and having opportunities for learning and development. And again, we've got resources out there that will help with that. And then there's a much bigger job of tackling the ageism in society. And so I think for social workers, that's about allying ourselves with organisations that are doing that. There's currently a brilliant campaign from the Centre for Ageing Better, which is all about stopping ageism, there's a day of action on the 20th of March. So there's a real, I feel like the time is really right for social work with older people to kind of emerge from the shadows to some extent and be more visible and be more supported and be more appreciated and understood. Because we have an ageing population, so I suppose the other recommendation to social workers is take heart. You know, there's really great examples in this research about the work that you and your colleagues are doing. And if you can keep doing what you're doing, it's amazing. And we'll keep chipping away at the context to try to make it more possible.

[00:44:12] **Sarah:** Fantastic. Thank you for that. Paul, do you have recommendations or messages that you'd like to add to what Gerry's said?

[00:44:20] **Paul:** I think one other thing I would add, that's on the back of the findings in the study, goes back to the importance of social workers, having that up-to-date legal knowledge, having that and maintaining those high levels of legal literacy. And I know other social work academics have talked about this too, so Michael Preston-Shoot, for example, has spoken about the importance

of legal literacy, and we know it's foundational to social work education at pre-qualifying level but it really needs to be maintained and social workers need that protected time for that continuing professional development, because it's one of the key things that stood out that other professionals valued about social workers' input, was their knowledge of social care law. And not just the law more broadly in terms of legal principles and duties, but their knowledge of how the law supports and protects older people's rights, is really, really important and stood out. So we need to make sure that social workers are well supported in terms of maintaining that knowledge that they bring as unique to their contribution to multidisciplinary working.

[00:45:24] **Sarah:** Excellent. Thank you very much. Just very quickly, just to circle back to something you said, Gerry, as well, because you mentioned all the resources that have been developed off the back of this project. Do you have a website where those are hosted that any listeners could find and access those resources? Or how, how do people come across these?

[00:45:45] **Gerry:** Yeah, we've got a website for the project which you can easily search for if you just search for Social Work with Older People research, but the site I think we'll share the link with this podcast, won't we, but it's <https://swopresearch.wordpress.com/>. And that's got the findings summarised and then all the resources, which are set out firstly as the resources for older people, carers and families, which includes the animation and the leaflet about what social work is. And then resources for practice, for education and continued professional development, and that includes the capabilities resource that we've produced, which is stories from the research and how you can use those to reflect on your skills and knowledge and values. Also the film from the expert advisory group. And then there's the findings, and depending on the depth of your desire to understand social work with older people, you can read a summary or a main findings report or the full thing. So if you were doing a dissertation, for example, I would have found this so helpful back in the day. You know, we've got a really long report with all the things that we know so far about social work with older people. And then there's also the policy briefing and a two page policy ask, which you can use to talk to your family and friends about how things need to change. Because yeah, we've got a population of people with some political clout, you know, people who are ageing and the population is growing. Yeah, this is a real chance to be saying that social work is an important part of the safety net and the support for people going into later life and to be pushing for that, across the board.

[00:47:29] **Sarah:** Thank you so much. It's been fantastic, and I actually would love to talk to you more about this because I'm sure there's lots more we could explore. Is there anything else?

[00:47:39] **Lesley:** Yeah, I had more questions, but I'll hold them.

[00:47:42] **Sarah:** I know I did as well, but I think we've probably kept you chatting long enough. Is there anything else that you would want to share with our listeners that you haven't said yet, or anything else you'd like to add?

[00:47:51] **Gerry:** I mean, the, the fundamental thing for me is that older people who need it should be able to access social work support, *specifically* social work support. And that's what I would want. And it's what I would want for my parents or for other people that I know who are facing challenges in later life. Not everyone's going to need social work support, later life isn't necessarily difficult, but when it happens, the social workers in our project said, these are people who've been dealing with things their whole life, and now they need a bit of help, and they deserve it. And that seems to me like just a really important message for our society.

[00:48:35] **Sarah:** Yeah, absolutely. Thank you. Paul, were you going to say something else?

[00:48:41] **Paul:** Yes, I just completely agree with what Gerry has said. We're an ageing population, we know that there's increasing numbers of older people with care and support needs, we know that older people are the largest group accessing adult social care services and requiring social care support. So in many ways we know that this is a field of practice that deserves more resourcing and that will require more resourcing and finance to make sure that older people get the care and support that they deserve.

[00:49:17] **Sarah:** Yeah, absolutely. Well, I think it just remains for us to thank you very much for taking the time to come and speak to us about the project this morning. And it's been lovely to see you and thank you.

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[00:49:32] **Sarah:** You have been listening to the Portal Podcast, linking research and practice for social work with me, Dr Sarah Lonbay.

[00:49:40] **Sarah:** And Dr Lesley Deacon. And this was funded by the University of Sunderland, edited by Paperghosts, and our theme music is called, *Together We're Stronger* by All Music Seven.

[00:49:50] **Sarah:** And don't forget that you can find a full transcript of today's podcast and links and extra information in our show notes. So anything you want to follow up from what you've heard today, check out there and you should find some useful extra resources.

[00:50:03] **Sarah:** See you all next time.

[00:50:04] **Lesley:** Bye.