# **Full transcript of three digital stories undertaken by Rosie Megginson from the Social Work Education Partnership (SWEP)**

## **Interview with Karen Armstrong from Families Outside**

I’m Karen Armstrong and I’m Practice Learning Coordinator and practice teacher at Families Outside.  Families Outside is a third sector agency who work with families affected by imprisonment around Scotland. We started providing social work student placements just over two years ago, so we’ve been having placements for about a year before they were suspended due to the pandemic.

Interviewer: Great and could you tell me a little bit about the placements that you’ve been with during the pandemic?

**Karen:** Since placement resumed, we’ve taken two students on placement and we’ve got another two starting this month.  Learning opportunities tend to centre around three main areas. Firstly, working on our national helpline which involves assessing the needs of callers, providing support on the helpline, or planning a package of support for them. Secondly, there’s family support work which involves providing support to family members that have more complex longer-term needs. And thirdly involvement in Our Voice which is a peer support group for children and young people affected by imprisonment and this group meets monthly.

Interviewer: And what have they looked like during the pandemic?

**Karen:** Well, the placement environment has changed dramatically during the pandemic and students have been working remotely from their homes for the bulk of the placement whereas previously placements would have been office based and so students have worked on the helpline from their homes normally they would be in an office with a team around them as they took calls.

Family support work which has previously taken place in the community has been undertaken remotely by telephone or through the Zoom platform, and group work which took place in a community setting is now being undertaken by Zoom, so all very different.   And we’ve introduced research as a placement activity to supplement learning opportunities and our current student is doing some research around the use of digital platforms and supporting children and your people one-to-one during COVID 19 so this has not only provided the student with opportunities to evidence her standards, but it will inform our practice going forward.

The way direct observations are done have changed, and previously direct observations would have been undertaking in community-based settings now they are all done remotely, and we’ve used a number of platforms to do this with the consent of the callers to our helpline we’ve used a telephone listing in service for direct observations on the helpline and this facility enables both sides of the conversation to be heard.  After the student has made the call, I’ll get in touch with the caller and get feedback from them and this has worked really well.

We’ve also used Zoom platforms to observe students leading a group with our children and young people and this has worked well, and we’ve made use of breakout rooms to get feedback afterwards.

We’ve also had a student record a one-to-one session that she was doing with a young person on Zoom platform as a direct observation so I watched that after the event and that worked well as a direct observation as well and I think the practice skills that students have demonstrated during these direct observations has reinforced that good learning opportunities and practice can be achieved even in the midst of a pandemic.

Working remotely on different platforms has also opened up opportunities for example geography is no longer a barrier to the work that students are doing so for example through Zoom we’ve had students from the east of Scotland involved in group work that would normally have taken place in the west of Scotland.

Interviewer: That sounds fantastic and what have been the vital ingredients in making the placement a good and successful experience for everybody involved?

**Karen:** A good support network is critical for students it’s important they don’t feel isolated when they’re working so remotely and so we have a buddy system where a member of the team calls the student each day to have a chat and a check-in.  Additionally, students have a list of go-to people that can contact throughout the day if they have any questions or if they need a debrief after a call.  Students have also been included in team WhatsApp and Slack groups and this has really helped them feel part of a team and feel informed about what’s going on both within the team and the wider organisation. Weekly supervision sessions have also provided support, these have been on Zoom platform and include a focus on student’s emotional well-being and resilience, and at times we’ve used a well-being reflective tool to monitor how things are with the student’s well-being.

Interviewer: Great, so what advice would you give to anyone preparing for placement in the current climate?

**Karen:** Well, the resumption of placement guidance on the SSSC website has been key in informing all aspects of placement planning. It’s also been a great go-to document during the placements and this guidance has really shaped the adjustments that we’ve made in areas such as assessment direct observation support and it’s really given us confidence in the changes that we’ve made to the placement.  Additionally, I think working in collaboration is key we worked closely as a team to look at how we could adapt learning opportunities, the assessment of students and we’ve also learned from others who were supporting students during the pandemic, so networks play a very important part in preparation.

Interviewer: Great, that’s really useful well thank you so much for sharing your experience and thank you for agreeing to be involved.

**Karen:** Thank you

## **Interview with Jack Kelly from East Dumbarton Council**

Hi, my name is Jack Kelly I am I’ve been a qualified social worker for a number of years but for the last only four about years I’ve had a post as a practice teacher/placement coordinator and my primary role is about identifying placements within East Dumbarton for social work students and being principally the practice teacher for most of those placements and as I say I’ve been doing that for just over four years.

Interviewer: So, could you tell me a little about the placements that you’ve been involved with?

**Jack:** Well I think we work in cooperation with the learning network and they allocate a quota of placements to us on a, you know, on a twice annual basis along the lines of the university academic year and so we on average probably take between 10 and 13 in a normal academic year but in the last year obviously that has been limited due to the COVID-19 pandemic and we have had two placements which were successful prior to the end of 2020 and we’re currently supporting two further placements with the three further ones due to start in the very near future.

Interviewer: And how have these placements been different from your pre-pandemic placements that you’ve been involved with?

**Jack:** There’s been quite a few differences I mean I think obviously the change in government guidance has resulted in, you know, quite significant issues.  We probably had a starting point where I met with the practice teachers and link workers last year and the initial thought was that things are pretty grim really about our ability to offer placements during the pandemic but we’ll continue to have discussions and I think that what we notice is that they can differentiate so it’s obvious there’s a restriction to office-based contact and that gives a worry about the ability to offer the proper learning experience to students but what we have has been able to kind of strike a balance with that. There is obviously limited contact what brings that limited contact with colleagues, and that is, I think, a big learning positive for students because it gives them the chance not only to have contact with a link worker or the practice teacher but also other colleagues that helps them have a good understanding of the role so that’s some of the things that have been different and I think there’s a change in nature of the guidance and it’s also something that is significantly different.

Interviewer: So, what have been, in your view, some of the vital ingredients in making the placements kind of good successful experiences for everyone involved, from the student and for the team hosting them?

**Jack:** I think the last one you mentioned there is a key to the thing, I think it’s seen as a team and I think as everybody working together and clear up what the goal was certainly within the placement that I was involved in was in a what’s called the hospital assessment team and they were really at the front line of working with, in terms of social work, with the issues around about the pandemic one of the advantages that they had to have a significant office presence throughout the pandemic and during the placement so that was an advantage was that the student was able to come into the placement relatively regularly.  There was this close collaboration with, I think, all key people involved was the student, with the team manager, with a very, I have to say, a very committed and very able link worker and also, and also the university.  The university tutor has worked for a number of occasions and obviously know how we both know how we work, and it was just through the placement there was a clear message that, that she was accessible to take a look at things.  There was also, I think, a kind of flexibility roundabout.  I mean there, I wouldn’t say challenges, but there were issues that came up maybe just trying to think about issues round about whether we need to think about isolation periods or times away just due to some issues that may have come up where there are possible positive tests and the link that that would have to the placement, but those were addressed through just being flexible around the arrangements.  I think also we are at an advantage in East Dumbarton and probably maybe some authorities, you know, for various reasons don’t have this, that we had quite a good established system with their IT department.  There was very good support from them which ensured that the students had mobile phones and also, we also work with laptops anyway so that was already an established practice but that certainly helped ensuring that the student was accessible and contactable and able to work easily from home.  I think also what contributed was the student and I know from the other placement there, the students themselves obviously there’s going to be various degrees of what would you say, stages in the learning that the students will have but certainly the students came and very much gave a strong impression of being committed, motivated and gave that across to the team so it means that increasingly she was contributing to the team environment as well as making it a very successful placement.  So those are some of the areas that I think that made it made it work and made it a positive experience.

Interviewer: Fantastic, and what would your advice be to anyone who’s preparing to either host a placement or as a student go out on a placement in the current climate?

**Jack:** I think, well, I suppose for students and for everybody just prepare to be flexible, things will maybe take longer than maybe what you would be usual for instance I’m saying that the IT systems work relatively well but they maybe took longer to just we just had to have a bit of patience to get things up and running, you know, that certain training that’s key was up and running.  So just about flexibility was a thing and I think, and I think if anything I would say it’s just been, you know, certainly as someone organising placements, or looking to identify placements, it’s just being open and honest with everyone, you know, like this is what we’re working with, you know, the reality that there may be limited experiences as opposed to previous years.  There may be some challenges in terms of work-based opportunities, there may be changes to the learning opportunities that’s around but it’s just being open and honest with people and prepared to work in a flexible and a collaborative manner and as I say certainly from last may when you probably thought well we could see yourself at least until the turn of the year of not having any placements we’re not in a position we’re going to offer some.

Interviewer: That’s fantastic well thank you very much for sharing your experience that’s been really insightful, Jack.

**Jack:** Okay!

## **Interview with Jessica Proctor, Avril Mooney and Taiwo Oladimeji**

**Jessica:**  Hi I’m Jessica Proctor I’m the student placement program manager at Four Square Homelessness Charity in Edinburgh and also for the last 15 years I have worked as an independent practice educator across the central belt of Scotland including with the student that you’ll be meeting in a minute.

Interviewer: Thank you. Tee?

**Tee:** Hi, my name is Taiwo Oladimeji I prefer to be called Tee, and I have just completed my master’s degree in social work from Napier University.  I had my last placement at Open Doors Accommodation Project in Livingston, and you will be meeting my wonderful link worker, Avril.

Interviewer: and Avril?

**Avril:** Hi I’m Avril Mooney and I’m a service manager at Open Door Accommodation Project and was Tee’s link worker.  I’ve been a link worker for over seven to eight years, and I had the opportunity to work with a lot of students so it’s really nice working with Tee.

Interviewer: Thank you, Avril could you tell me a little bit about the placement setting the agency?

**Avril:**  Like I say, we’ve took on quite a lot of students over the years and we work with young homeless people from 16- to 26-year-olds and we have three services which accommodates; we have a homeless unit, a hostel – 10 bedded, 16 young people in our supported flats and about another 37 that are supported in our community outreach scheme.

Interviewer: Thank you, and so Tee, what helped you prepare for and complete this placement?

**Tee:** When I got the notice that I would be having my final placement at Open Doors Accommodation Project, I hadn’t heard of them so I went online to check what they were about and the university helped prep me by making sure that I had completed a risk assessment form which I think they shared with Open Doors before they agreed to have me as a student on placement there and reading about the work that they do there, it interested me although I was scared to believe because I’ve never worked with young people but when I had my pre-placement meeting with both my PE Jessica and my link worker Avril what was expected of me was laid out what they wanted me to do was laid out, what I wanted for them was communicated to them we had the meeting and we came up with a flexible plan for me to have a good placement for them, speaking to them, meeting the staffers as we were going through my induction week it really helped, the staff over there were amazing, they were accepting, and it just felt like home after 15 weeks.

Interviewer: Fantastic, and Jessica someone who’s been involved with practice learning for quite some time how has this placement felt different from placements pre-pandemic?

**Jessica:** Well in some really positive ways and in some maybe challenging ways as well, I think I’ve gotten used to being almost an adjunct to agencies in the time that I’ve been an independent practice teacher and I vale those relationships and the contact that I have with them and also the impartial way that that allows me to observe students in the setting and the young people as well it’s my real only access with service users is through observations and going to settings so in this case I was socially isolating throughout and although there were options for Tee to be in the agency.  I had opted I had two shielding parents so I was basically protecting them as well and took the decision to work strictly from home so I did miss out on some contact I think and that informal observation that you can do about how students integrate within a setting and just being able to inadvertently observe how they’re reacting and how they’re interacting.  But, on the other side of that I felt like our supervisory relationship was stronger than ever very – in a way – the ideal supervisory space and time where it really does feel like it steps out of the practice and steps back from it and creates a safe separate space to truly reflect and connect back, to contextualize the experiences and reflect on the experiences that have been happening and share that space with Tee was actually very special and observations were another real surprise where we were able to, I was able to Zoom into an observation where Tee and the young person were in the room together though socially distanced, wearing masks, screen between them and I was a face on screen and they ignored me most of the time.  I was able, you know that ideal observation where you’re not in hitting the dynamic, you’re not changing the dynamic so that you can see something that’s really true and valid was so much easier in that way so some good, some bad.

Interviewer: Fantastic and so what would be your piece of advice, each of you, for anyone as an agency who’s preparing to host a placement or a student who’s about to embark on a placement in the current climate? We’ll go back to you Jessica first.

**Jessica:** Okay, I would say that flexibility and listening to each other is 100 percent a requirement. I think as Tee Pointed out one of the benefits of the time that we’re in and the fact that we’re rewriting how placements may work it gives us the opportunity to tailor them to make them much less onerous for people who have caring responsibilities, who have lives and challenges outside of the placements they’re undertaking, even commuting which can be a real challenge we have this opportunity to mould how and when and where we do things to allow may more people in much less stressful way to take part, but it really requires listening to each other taking on board what the limits of the service are what the limits of the person are but it’s a real opportunity to do that in a new way. So, yeah.

Interviewer: Great how about you Tee what would your advice be?

**Tee:** My advice would be for the student to have an open mind and also to have a positive attitude and have a professional curiosity and use their link workers as well as their practice teachers ask questions and don’t be afraid to tell them if you’re feeling low.  I had a week where I was so low and I just told my PE I said I’m feeling this way I’m so low and if you’re truthful today if you tell them how you feel then they can support you and she was great, Avril was great as well the support got me through that week and I think that really made a massive impact on me because it shows that they cared about my mental well-being as well they care about the outcomes of whatever it is I was dealing with at that moment because it was time for me was hard, the longer, it was hard for everyone to be a student, to be a mum, a teacher, a cook all in in that confined space it was hard but they were there, they listened, Jessica said they listened and they asked questions, “how can we help?” every meeting was telling me “how are you feeling?” and it’s good to know that someone wants to know how you’re feeling, so students shouldn’t bottle it all up speak up.

Interviewer: Thanks, that’s really important you’re right and Avril how about you what would your top tip be?

**Avril:**  I think for the student I have to say just similar to what Tee says, when you go in to meet your placement and you go into the organisation be open be honest with the link worker and the practice teacher.  Let them know what your needs are because it is not all about the organisation, it’s so important to the organisation that we learn the needs of the student so that we can learn to adjust like we did for Tee, and Tee coming into the organisation was a fantastic time for us to say and we were honestly, Tee saying “you need to tell us if we got this right” because we’ve been doing this for a few months you’re coming in with the first, sort of, pair of eyes that’s clear and saying “what’s going on here?”, so look at your risk assessments that are there and make sure that you understand them and follow them for the organisation just take that student on and just embrace the learning that they can actually bring because that’s what I found it doesn’t matter where the student comes from what year of their placements that they’re on they’ve all got so much to give and I know that our staff absolutely love working with the students and they always say, “I knew that but I didn’t quite know why I knew that, or how it fit in”.  But they’re great for helping staff realise the job that you do and the theory that goes with it and that’s where the student helps.  So, it’s a lovely combination.

Interviewer: Yeah, it sounds like it, well thank you all so much for sharing your experience and your wisdom and thank you so much for being involved it’s been lovely to meet you all!

**Tee:** You too

**Jessica:** You too Rosie.

If you have any questions or would like to know more about hosting a social work placement, please contact: rosie.megginson@swepscotland.org.