



Effective Practice

Example of work: Social Work with Older People (SWOP) research project

"I don't think perhaps the complexity of what we do is recognised. Because all of the complexity of human relationships and all of those things don't stop just because you get older." (Social worker)

This research is the only observational study of what social workers working with older people actually do. It is the first time this has been seen in detail. Researchers followed 10 social workers across two local authorities. We conducted observations and interviewed social workers, older people, carers and other professionals, and looked at records. We asked: what do social workers do; what is their impact; and how does their context affect their work?

The project was led by the Universities of Birmingham and Bristol and my company Effective Practice. I was a Co-Investigator and a central member of the project leadership team. I had specific responsibility for leading on the Communication, Engagement and Dissemination strategy. As part of this, I convened and chaired the Expert Advisory Panel of Experts by Experience and social workers, which provided insight and guidance throughout the project.

The research comprehensively demonstrated that social workers have a unique set of capabilities that make a huge difference to the lives of older people and their families.

Social care is under increasing pressure. Social workers have a central role in ensuring older people can access the social care they are legally entitled to. The research has [demonstrated the positive difference](#) social workers make to the lives of older people, carers and families. It has [led to recommendations](#) about how social workers can be developed, deployed and supported so they can do more of what older people, carers and families need and value.

The research has increased the visibility of social work and understanding of what social workers do. Building in communication, dissemination and engagement from the start, and having dedicated time and funding for this, has extended the reach of communication, diversified the outputs and increased impact. Ongoing impact includes the research being used to inform policy, support professional development and underpin additional research and impact work to improve practice.

"Gerry brought exactly the right knowledge, skills and experience to this project. Her extensive and up-to-date knowledge of social work practice guided the analysis and helped us to generate implications based on a realistic understanding of the pressure points and opportunities in current practice. Gerry is a strong and committed advocate for social work and this gave power and authenticity to our policy and practice messages. Her extensive networks gave us easy points of connection to key people and organisations. Gerry showed excellent facilitation skills in enabling and supporting an Expert Advisory Group that met throughout the project. It is to Gerry's credit that all members remained actively involved, attended regularly and became involved in activities far beyond those originally planned. Gerry was proactive in her planning. She produced a detailed communication plan at the outset, updated this regularly and kept us all 'on task'. She set up and managed the project website, wrote briefings, blogs and articles and gave presentations, demonstrating excellent skills in communicating in a range of formats for different audiences. At the end of the project, she has not walked away but is actively planning next steps for the research.

Gerry has also been a warm, supportive, reliable and responsive colleague. We could not have achieved as much as we have without her, and I cannot think of anyone who would have been such a perfect fit."

(Dr. Denise Tanner, Associate Professor (Social Work), University of Birmingham)