



Women in Leadership Case Study

Jenny West, Locality Reporter Manager

I think my upbringing had quite an influence on my career as my mum was professional in the early 1980s. She was an architect and she was one of the only mum's at the time who wasn't at the school gate. So her job was equal to my dad's and it was my dad who took on a lot of the traditionally 'female' role – he did a lot of the school drop offs and collections and if I was sick it was his office I was told to go to. I remember my mum speaking of the barriers she faced working in a traditionally male industry and also in work more generally. She also couldn't get a mortgage herself even though she was working in a well-paid professional job – because she was a single woman! She did originally apply to become a pilot but she wasn't allowed because she was female. It's strange hearing stories like that now as it really wasn't that long ago. My mum's career is most definitely an inspiration and she was a bit of a trailblazer for women at work so she has really inspired me, as has my dad taking on a lot more of the 'female' role. I think it's this upbringing and my really good childhood that's freed me from a lot of the 'mum guilt' when I had my kids and I don't feel guilty using breakfast clubs, after school clubs and holiday clubs as I know how important the example that I set is for my kids perceptions of gender and work.

After school I went to Durham University to study politics and sociology not knowing fully what I wanted to do. After I got my degree I considered my options and ruled it down to two possibilities – postgraduate law or social work. I decided to go for social work because I've always had a sense of social justice and wanted to help improve people's lives (and it was also funded so it was better financially as by this point I had student debt!). It was whilst I was doing my social work qualification that we had input from a Children's Reporter and listening to her speak I knew it's what I wanted to do so I went and spoke to her after the lecture to find out more about the job and what I'd need to do to become a Reporter.

“Speak to people who do the job that you'd like to do – learn about what it entails, what qualifications and experiences you need to do it and what you should do next. Their insight will be much more helpful than reading websites or speaking to careers services. Listen to what they have to say and think about what you can do to develop your skills.”

I obtained my PG Diploma and MSc in Social Work from Glasgow University and I remember speaking to a Reporter after I'd completed this to find out what type of social work would be best for me to practice in to better my chances to become a Reporter. So I ended up working as a children and families social worker in Inverclyde and I did this for about two and a half years. At the end of 2005 a temporary Reporter post was advertised in Hamilton and I applied but wasn't successful. Then another temporary post was advertised in Glasgow and I was successful. I have to say that going from a permanent social work post in a local authority to a temporary post with SCRA was a bit of a leap of faith and I was a bit anxious but I decided to take the leap as I figured that I could always go back to social work if it didn't work out as there's always social work vacancies.

So I found myself as a Reporter in Glasgow and this became a permanent post. I did this for six years and, during that time I acted up as Authority Reporter (as it was at

the time) for a short period a few times when there was restructuring. When there were vacancies. Although temporary and very short-term these gave me a real opportunity to see what the management post was about and get some valuable experience under my belt.

“Temporary posts, even very short-term ones, can be incredibly valuable for your career prospects in future. Take every opportunity made available to you, no matter how small or insignificant they might seem because it all adds up, and it shows that you’re willing to step up when it’s needed. Visibility is important for progression too.”

After six years I was feeling like there really wasn’t very many opportunities for progression so I started to explore my options and I recognised that I hadn’t done any major personal development for a while. In 2010, I decided to do a PG Certificate in Child Protection at Dundee University which was supported by SCRA. Just as I started this course the organisation went through a bit of a restructure and the Senior Practitioner role was created and I remember feeling really quite professionally frustrated as I knew my husband and I wanted to start a family. In 2011 I was pregnant and a Senior Practitioner post came up. I applied for it and I have to say I was very sceptical as by the time of the interview I was heavily pregnant but I was successful and got the Senior Practitioner post for North Strathclyde. The post was backfilled for the year of my maternity leave. I have to admit to it being very daunting coming back from maternity leave to a new promoted post and, had I not pushed myself to do the interview when heavily pregnant, I don’t know if I’d have persevered.

When I came back to work after maternity leave I requested flexible working but this was refused for operational reasons so I came back full-time working compressed hours. However, after I’d been in post for a while and shown that I could both do the job and could likely to it in less hours I applied for flexible working again and went down to 0.8 FTE over three days. I have to say that SCRA’s approach to flexible working is really good for balancing the responsibilities of work with the responsibilities at home. I was also still studying and obtained my PG Diploma in Child Protection in 2013.

Four years later, in 2016, I had my son, again taking a full year of maternity leave. I went back to work on the same hours 0.8 FTE in 2017. It was at this point that I started to think about progression again and the obvious step was Locality Reporter Manager. The parts of the Senior Practitioner role that I really enjoyed was the mentoring and supporting of colleagues and also influencing policy. So I spoke to my line manager regarding the Diploma in Public Service Leadership that SCRA had just advertised for the year. I applied to do this and started in 2018, by which point it was not the Professional Managers Programme in Public Service Leadership and finished this qualification in 2019.

“Make use of all the support your employers can give you, including any policies in place to help with your development. SCRA has specific development opportunities that it regularly offers to staff at all levels of the organisation but there’s nothing to stop you seeking out opportunities elsewhere – I’ve done both and SCRA have been supportive in both instances.”

During my studying for the leadership qualification my manager was aware that I wanted to progress, so I spent time shadowing her and another LRM within North Strathclyde in both internal and external meetings and I also put myself forward for as much strategic partnership work as I could. I also took on the development of staff



who needed to improve their practice and what I was learning on the leadership course was really helpful for that as some of this involved quite difficult conversations. The benefit of the course was also that I got to meet a great group of people from all over SCRA and they were an incredibly positive and supportive group and we are all still in touch – three of which are now managers since completing the course.

About half way through the course an LRM post came up and I applied but was unsuccessful. But then a temporary LRM post was advertised in Edinburgh in April 2019. This was quite a big step as I live in the west of Scotland so it was going to be quite a commute. However, I realised that there were not many LRM opportunities and so I had to take what was available. Plus it was temporary and I was aware of restructuring at senior management level with the Senior Operational Managers so thought that may bring some opportunity down the line so I thought it would be worth the short-term pain. So I applied and was successful and began the long commutes and worked long hours over four days a week. I was lucky to have a really supportive family and partner; it would've been difficult without this.

“The next job in your progression may not be the ideal one, but view it as a stepping stone to something that better suits you and your needs. If you're not happy with your choice you can always change it later but if you let it go by you might regret it. It's really helpful to have a think about what's going on in your organisation more generally – now and in the future – as often big moves above will present opportunities below. Think in the mid- to long-term rather than the short-term.”

As I anticipated, movement at senior management level resulted in an LRM post in Kilmarnock becoming available in October 2019 which was only half an hour from home. It was only temporary, but again I thought ahead as there were more changes looming for the senior management team and I successfully applied. Thankfully I had six months to get to know the team and settle in before COVID-19. I joined Kilmarnock in what was quite a challenging time in the midst of a major property refurbishment so there was a lot for me to get to grips with around staff engagement and support. It was a really interesting time to start in a new office. We got to launch the refurbished office and Hearings Centre and had a Locality Development Day in February 2020, just before the first national lockdown.

I've enjoyed all the new aspects of the role that COVID-19 has brought about, but it has been a very challenging time. But these new challenges have given me new skills, particularly around bringing the team together and supporting people. I think now is the time for me to consolidate what I'm doing so I don't plan on moving posts for a while (unless of course I have to). I recently attended the virtual Women into Leadership Annual Conference in February 2021 and I came away from that feeling really energetic, enthused, inspired and committed – personally and professionally. I want to keep learning and I want to keep implementing new ideas.

“Even if you're happy and settled in your role and have no plans for progression in the near future, it's always good to stay engaged in learning and development, if not for your career then for yourself. You don't need a new job to bring about change, it can be done from your existing position and it can also inspire change in your personal life too.”

