STUDENT PLACEMENTS IN THIRD SECTOR ORGANISATIONS

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Iriss

CONTENTS

Background

This resource has been developed with the input from a range of Third Sector organisations (TSOs) in Scotland that host social work student learning opportunities, also known as placements.

The idea for this project was co-created by the organisation People Know How with Iriss, to explore the third sector experience of hosting social work student placements and connect across TSOs to share learning and resources with each other. The aim of this was to highlight the assets, practices and areas for support that can be built on to make third sector social work placements impactful and work well for everyone involved.

Iriss acknowledges and thanks all those who have contributed to the development of this resource through your time, reflection and sharing of experience and knowledge. Thanks to colleagues from People Know How for starting the work off with their ideas and professional curiosity, team members from TSOs, university colleagues from institutions across Scotland, current students and newly qualified social workers.

Who and what this resource is for

This is for anyone involved in social work student placements in TSOs: organisations, Link Workers, Practice Educators, students and university staff involved in supporting or arranging student placements.

> " *Even if we're the most shiny, super duper, all singing, all dancing placement, the student needs to take that opportunity and the university need to play their part. So it's all the components coming together and making it successful. If one part doesn't do their bit then the system doesn't come together around the outcome – the outcome is the student passing. They need to take that opportunity, and everyone has to do their bit around it.* — **Practice Educator**

The main purpose is to be an easy to pick up source of information, practice ideas and reflective prompts – all with the aim of strengthening the relationships, practices and processes that support a social work placement in a TSO.

For students and organisations alike, it aims to be another tool in your toolbox to help prepare for a placement experience.

Context

The third sector in Scotland is diverse, formed of national and local charities, social enterprises and community initiatives. TSOs contribute widely to the network of social support across the country, often with a focus on improving health, wellbeing and reducing inequalities. A number of TSOs also fulfil statutory obligations in the care and support of people.

Within any locality, statutory social work teams will have connections with local or national third sector organisations that provide a specific service or network of supports that people will need to access. TSOs are important in the support offer for people in Scotland, and often work alongside, or in complement to, the work of statutory social work teams.

> " *In placement is the best and safest way of [students] experiencing the real world.*
> — **Practice Educator**

Experience of working in the third sector can offer social work students the opportunity to put social work values into practice and gain in-depth understanding of working with people in a variety of settings and in partnership with other agencies. There is such a wide spread of services, groups of supported people and specialties across the third sector that the placement experience can differ greatly between organisations. This means students can gather different perspectives and insights as well practice generic social work skills, such as person-centred planning, risk

assessment, researching, critical reflection and analysis, writing case notes, using legislation and policies, partnership working and relationship building. Specifically, there are key benefits that a TSO placement offers students:

Time for relationships and relational work

> *...I think in the third sector... there's an opportunity for more relational work... we do have that luxury, let's say, of time to engage with people, to do that kind of radical social work... taking the time to get to know them, allowing for people to get to know us as well, working in a very person centred approach... that's the value that a lot of our students feed back to us, where they do have a lot of time to reflect as well, do a bit of group work, meet people where they are...* — **TSO manager**

Opportunity to learn more about a specific group of supported people and specific social work approaches

> *... we support families from ethnically diverse communities who are refugee, asylum seekers, newly arrived migrants... people are able to practice the anti-oppressive anti-racist side of social work... these are things we're able to delve into a bit more.* — **TSO worker**

Offering a perspective on social work beyond the boundaries of statutory interventions

> *Social work requires us to be as adaptable as possible and a third sector placement is always a good format for students to understand other professional dynamics and priorities.* — **Practice Educator**

In addition to recognising the value of a TSO placement for a student, organisations also value the contribution that students can make to the team and supported people while they are with the organisation. TSOs told us about the creativity and up to date knowledge that students bring to their placement, and recognised the rich contribution that students make to their work:

> *Organisations grow and learn too, and the fresh ideas and perspectives of a student can be really impactful in how we undertake our work.* — **TSO worker**

Making placements work well

A mixture of factors make for successful placements for social work students. A student placement involves many different people and organisations, working together with the student at the centre. Each university organises their placements differently, and there is often different paperwork that each institution requires. It's important for students learning

> " *[Placement] stays with us. My middle placement was a TSO, at Women's Aid, and the experience informed my practice for the rest of my career, it still does.*
> — ***Practice Educator and Social Worker***

that placements are valuable experiences; but it is also important for third sector organisations, and most importantly, the people they support. Placements are places of key learning for students, with knowledge and experiences staying with them throughout their career.
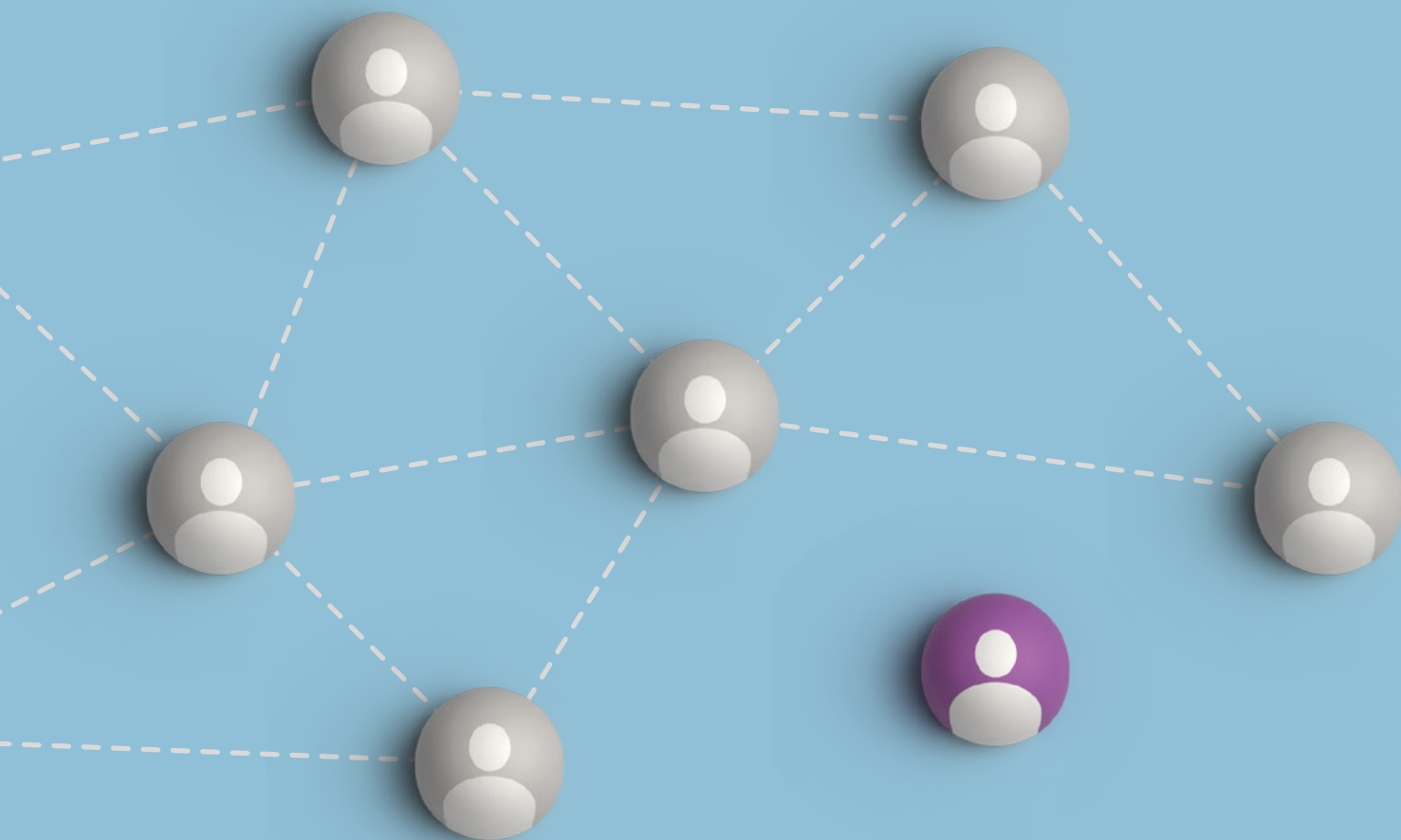
The following section of this resource is in two parts:

1. **Pre-placement**

2. **During placement**

Each part has two recurring themes – planning; and relationships, responsibilities and communication. Where there are clear activities for students, organisations and Practice Educators, and universities these are also highlighted so you can look at the sections most relevant to you.

Part one
PRE-PLACEMENT

Good communication and strong relationships between all of those involved can support a strong and successful placement for social work students, in turn benefiting the TSO and supported people. Link workers, practice educators, other TSO staff, university staff and students are all part of a student placement.

Planning

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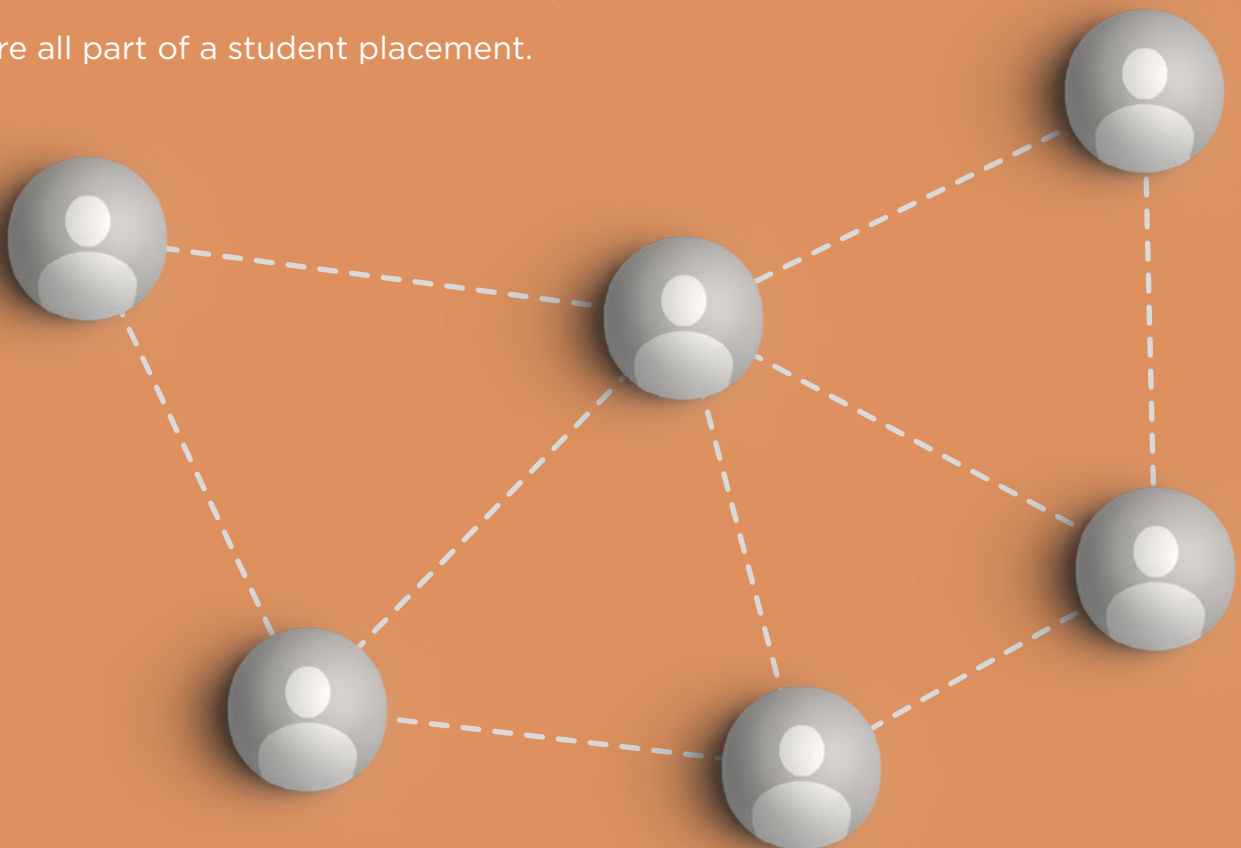
WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO:

Student Profile: Create a profile that really shows who you are, your interests, experience and skills, aspirations and areas of interest in social work and for your professional development. The profile is usually all that an organisation has to get an initial sense of who you are and what you're looking to get out of a placement, and if what they offer can fit with that. Ultimately everyone wants a good fit between a student and a host organisation so it's important for these to be clear, honest and informative.

> *What I find really useful is the profile. I know the students contact us, but then I usually make a telephone call or if they pop in to see me, so that I can set expectations really early. Because sometimes students don't' realise that we don't' have a social worker here, so it's about expectations. I don't want them disappointed but I also don't want them looking for lots of things that we can't offer them… – **TSO worker***

Learning Support Needs: Be aware of your learning support needs and communicate these to your Practice Educator/Link Worker. You don't need to disclose anything you're not comfortable with, but if a Link Worker and Practice Educator knows about your support needs in advance then they can plan support with you and be realistic about what capacity there is to support within that placement setting. It's harder to do this once the placement has started.

WHAT UNIVERSITIES CAN DO:

Organising placements is a challenging task. It requires the consideration of many different factors such as where students live, what statutory placements are available, and what the learning needs of specific students are, to mention only a few. Recognising this, there are some actions that make it easier for TSOs to provide a good, well supported placement experience.

Plan early: The earlier universities can notify a TSO of a placement, the easier it is for TSOs to support a student well. A rushed placement process can be tricky for TSOs, as they need to ascertain if they have the staff capacity to support a placement; plan for student support needs; and plan or allocate caseloads or work. TSOs often don't have dedicated IT departments, and so early notice helps get IT equipment ready for the day that placement starts. The earlier a placement is known about, the more able the organisation is to plan capacity.

TSO Presentations: Where possible, universities should begin or continue to invite TSOs to present to students on the course, so that students are clear on where TSOs fit in the social work landscape. This allows students to get familiar with the work that TSOs do ahead of their placements.

Student Profiles: Encourage students to create profiles that communicate to the organisation who they are, rather than being pieces of academic writing. Other creative ways of sharing about themselves, including voice notes or video as part of the profile, could be promoted to students, if these are accessible options.

WHAT ORGANISATIONS AND PRACTICE EDUCATORS CAN DO:

Agency Profiles: To support with matching and organising of placements, TSOs can make sure their agency profile is accurate and up to date. TSOs might have specific requirements, for example they may offer a gender-specific service or have a shift pattern that a student would need to be able to work within. These need to be clearly communicated in the agency profile to help students and placement coordinators make informed choices.

Similarly, it could be useful to share with universities and students what you'd like to see in a student profile, or what you'd like to know about the student, their expectations and what they'd like to learn.

> " *...I'd actually like to know more about what is your life experience? What do you think you could bring to this placement? What could this placement bring to you? — **TSO manager***

SiSWE: Plan out what the placement can offer in relation to the Standards in Social Work Education (SiSWE), by mapping the activities and work you do onto this criteria. This can include activities and work the organisation already does as well as where there's scope for new activities to be led by the student with support from the team. This planning will make it clear what is achievable within the placement and the types of opportunities available for students at different levels in their social work education (e.g. first or last placement, undergraduate or postgraduate). See more about planning a placement using SiSWE later in the resource.
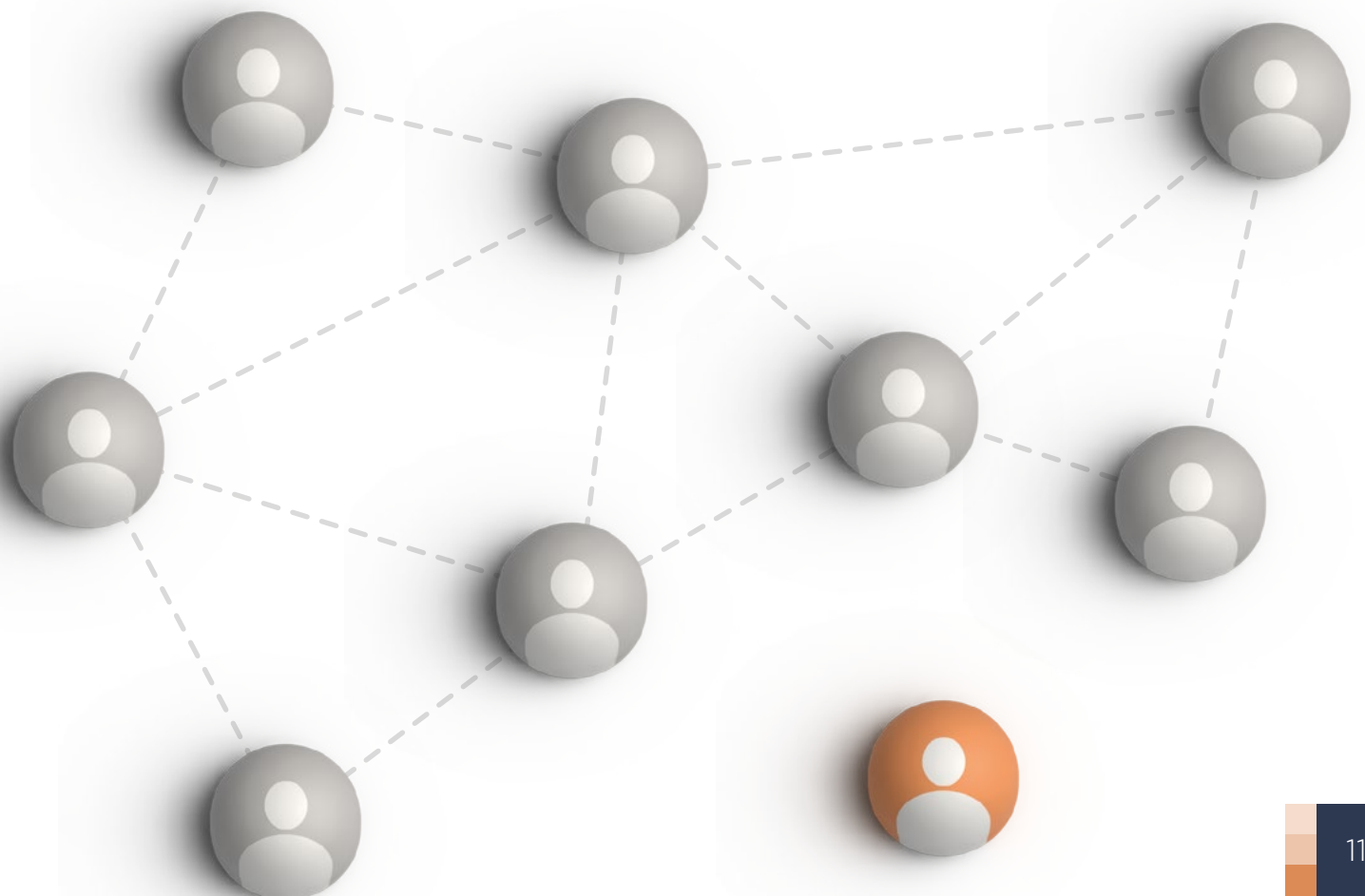
Relationships, responsibilities and communication

FOR EVERYONE

Check in on professional relationships: There might be work for a Link Worker and an independent practice educator (IPE) to do to build their own relationship, particularly if the IPE is new to the role, or to the organisation. The IPE might need time to get familiar with the values and work of the TSO as well as build a working relationship. Some TSOs have their own paperwork that sets out roles and responsibilities for students, universities, link workers, IPEs, to give clarity around the roles and responsibilities for everyone.

> *I think that there needs to be a really clear agreement between the practice educator and the link worker, around about whose roles are what, who's setting work, who's providing what levels of supervision – guiding, mentoring, that kind of thing? I think if there's really... good communication between the link worker and the practice educator it can work really, really well. – **Practice Educator***

Getting in contact: Timely meetings with TSOs, universities and students help to set boundaries and establish the relationships from the beginning of a placement. A strong foundation supports a strong placement to flourish, with the student and their needs at the centre.

> *Differing values or approaches with IPEs can be difficult. Challenges with fluid communication between the agency, IPEs and Universities. Students' readiness for practice – students not having a clear understanding of the standards or pieces of academic work that needs submitted. This adds a pressure to Link Workers and on-site Practice Educators. –* ***Practice Educator***

Support needs: Building in a meeting between student, Practice Educator, Link Worker to discuss and plan for support needs is an important step in ensuring that a placement will be able to support a student adequately. Students will be more able to make the most of the experience if their needs are met, ultimately benefiting the service and supported people as well as students themselves.

> *…sometimes, for example if English is not a first language, it's just expected that people will just be able to work with that. And actually it would be good to have an additional meeting just to look at what the support needs are. Do we need to put anything in place, do they need extra time for reflective logs and stuff like this? But sometimes I think that's just lost in the franticness of trying to find a placement… I've had some very frantic 'can you take a student next week' sort of things. –* ***Practice Educator***

Linking Up: If support is needed to plan a student placement, think about the TSOs you know that host students, and reach out to them. Similarly, if you are a TSO who feels able to mentor another organisation on how they plan and host placements, reach out and make the connections. There might be an option to continue your connected working into placements, supporting students collaboratively.

> *…if there's other organisations nearby, maybe there's something about the students all joining up together for some group supervision… –* ***Practice Educator***

Planning a placement using SiSWE

> *Begin with the mindset that the SiSWE can be made flexible to fit other perspectives of social work and are not just fit for statutory roles and associated paperwork. These skills are transferable and, with creativity, can be found within most settings.* – **TSO worker**

A well-planned placement gives students the best opportunity to flourish, know what's expected of them and meet the necessary learning criteria. This in turn should help the organisation make the most of having additional capacity as the student worker will have a clear part to play in the day-to-day activities of supporting people. It also helps anyone supervising the student be clear about the student's objectives and scope of work while they are on placement.

It's important for TSOs to think carefully about the work they do and map how it fits with the SiSWE; especially because we heard from participants that there are specific tasks or experiences that students worry about missing out on when on a TSO placement, comparing it to a statutory one. Some of these include crisis intervention work, formal report writing and presenting to a formal decision-making panel. Good planning can support TSOs to respond to some of these needs, as well as make clear to students what they can expect from a TSO placement.

Top tips from experienced placement hosts:

1. Have enough opportunity in the placement to allow students to meet the SiSWE, and be creative in thinking about how you might provide this through the work you already do, and what opportunities you might create.

> *… there will be some students that have that opportunity to write a report for a team around the child meeting, and go to that and present it, and for others not. So what we would do in that situation is I would get them to write a mock report on a case they've been working on… I've got them to present on that report to a meeting with myself and a couple of the other managers.. We've spoken to them as though we were at that meeting, so it's a mock meeting… I think there's scope within placements to be creative in terms of replicating or recreating these experiences. – **TSO manager**

2. Balance creativity in interpreting the SiSWE with ensuring that students don't have to stretch to make their tasks fit the learning criteria.

> *…I remember one of the things, I was like hanging a shower curtain. And you know, I don't mind getting involved in those sort of things – it's not that at all. But it's more just kinda, overall they hadn't necessarily planned out what we could do… in the end I ran some cooking groups and baking classes for the people, because they didn't really have anything like that on – so there were opportunities. But I just felt the organisation hadn't necessarily considered where we could have the most impact… I don't know how well thought out it had been, in terms of the ways you know that we could support the people that were living there. – **Student**

3. Where it's possible, make working links with statutory social work, and use these links to enhance your placement offer, by including some of the aspects that students might be concerned about missing out on.

> *…obviously they're looking to do report writing and risk assessing and all this kind of stuff. And although we do that, it's probably not to the level that they're looking for. So, I think for me, I'm always looking for tools and resources to kind of bring into student placements. I usually reach out to our Local Authority to ask, do you have a template that… the student could utilise. – **Practice Educator**

Pre-placement reflective prompts

1. How will the Link Worker and the rest of the staff team communicate about students and their support while on placement? E.g., regular contact between service manager and Link Worker in the organisation to check that they can support the students' learning needs before and during the placement.

2. Does your organisation's agency profile cover everything you need it to, so you can set expectations about what your organisation can offer, and also about what you need from a student worker?

3. Reaching out and having good relationships with your Local Authority social work teams can be helpful if you need additional resources e.g. examples of paperwork used in statutory teams. Can you think about how you could build this relationship?

4. Can the universities help with making collaborative connections between third sector and statutory teams, or advise on ways in which SiSWE can be interpreted?

5. Does your organisation's work fulfil SiSWE tasks, but perhaps just not in the same format as might be seen in statutory services? Can your local university or a Practice Educator be a critical friend to support your review of the SiSWE in relation to the activities that students could be involved in?

Birthlink

ABOUT

Birthlink[1] offers support and advice to adopted adults, birth parents, adoptive parents, birth families and other professionals in relation to adoptions with a Scottish connection. The charity employs a number of social workers. Interim CEO **Abbi Jackson** is a social worker and Practice Educator. In this case study Abbi shares some insights on what Birthlink does to host and support social work students on placement.

1   https://birthlink.org.uk
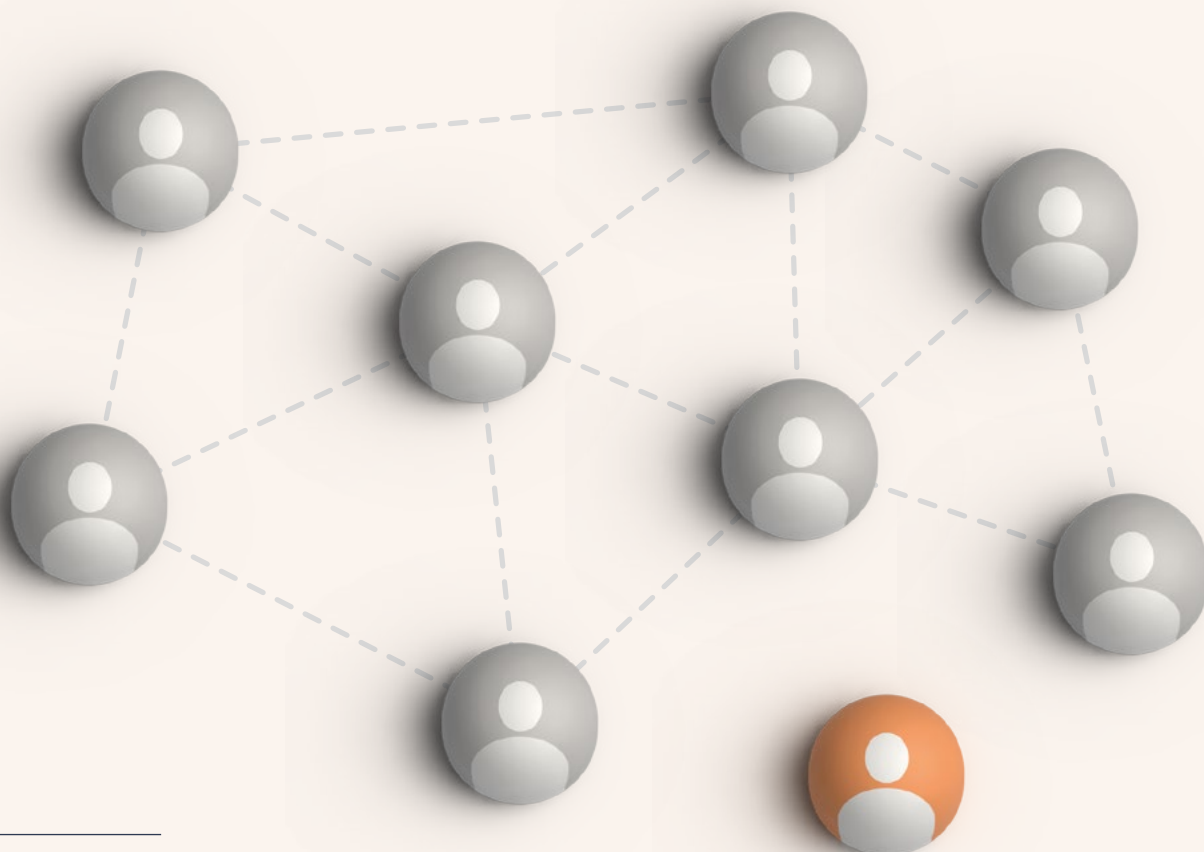
LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENTS

Birthlink offers two different types of placement:

1. Working in the Birthlink post-Adoption Service. This is complex work that requires a strong relational skill-set, so this is offered as a learning opportunity to final year students.
2. Community Social Work located in the Birthlink Thrift Shops. This placement was piloted in 2024 as part of a new community hub model that Birthlink is developing through its shops. It focuses on student social workers supporting community members as they access and participate in Birthlink volunteering opportunities. This is more suited to a first placement as it has a support work role.

USING STANDARDS IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION (SiSWE)

The placements have been developed with SiSWE learning opportunities integrated into the work. To develop the community social work placement I went through the SiSWE and mapped it to placement activities. I was thinking about where social work tasks such as assessment can be built in. I think any agency could do this to help them see what they could offer if they were thinking about having a student placement.

One example of doing this creatively with the standard 'presenting needs to decision making forums' is where the students have been working on development research tasks. One of them has been exploring 'I am me Keep Safe'[2] and the other has been exploring the 'Safer spaces'[3] to see if the charity shop hubs could become registered on these programmes as safe spaces for community members.

The students will be writing up a paper and presenting this to the team, setting out the risks and benefits, and pitching this to the shop managers. This will give them the experience of having a more measured professional

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2   https://iammescotland.co.uk/about-keep-safe
3   https://www.saferspaces.co.uk

debate about whether something is a good idea, and respond to counter arguments, mirroring what they'd have to do in statutory social work when advocating for resources.

Mapping the SISWE standards to the placement gives me a structure to work with for supervision, and makes it clear for the student to know what they're aiming for, and how they can achieve it through their work.

For example, in the charity shops, sorting and pricing clothes is not a social work task, so we've had to guide the students to support the shop volunteers to do that. Assessing need (e.g. what supports do the volunteers need) is the social work task they should be focusing on, and they just needed a bit of guidance to do that.

So it's not without challenge, but that's where students need to be able to see where they're doing the good work. Sometimes they're doing good work, but can't articulate it. They need to be able to look at the standards and make connections with their work. To support this, I ask students to write weekly on a different standard, so they are building up their understanding of how their work is meeting the standards, as well as be able to talk about it in supervision.

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

We try to take on 2-4 students at the same time, usually students from different universities. This gives them opportunities to share and learn with each other and not be 'the student' on their own in the staff team.

We have two students at the same time on the community social work project. This gives them the opportunity to take ownership of their work, develop it together and not feel they need to rely as much on other staff members. That way they're adding more capacity to the team, not drawing away resource – it's enhanced. It's working really well on the new community social work project, and I think for any future new placements I'd do the same and have two students.

HELP STUDENTS TO MAKE THE THEORY-PRACTICE LINK

During their induction I ask students before first supervision to make three lists under these headings – legislation, policy, theory. This shows me what the individual student is aware of and has learned about so far, or not! It gives us a starting point and makes sure I can see what their learning needs are. Then they can add to these lists as they go.

I also guide them towards theories that might be helpful and relevant to the work they're doing as a starting point. Giving a bit of direction to get going with applying theory in practice really helps students as a starter to help them write up their standards for their portfolio.

The Practice Learning Agreement should be used to support the student to identify what standards they meet as they go.

BE A CHAMPION FOR THE STUDENT

Students are taking on a workload, and this enables us as an organisation to have extra capacity, it helps us stretch our capacity.

Practice Educators and Link Workers have a role as being a champion for the student, to help them develop and build their capacity to be work ready.

All in all, a placement should be viewed as part of an interconnected system of people involving statutory, third sector, universities and practice educators who help develop social workers of the future to have the right skills, knowledge and qualities.

Part two
DURING PLACEMENT

Hosting a student placement involves considering how students are going to be supported while on placement. It's really important that students feel supported on placements and can access what they need, to make the placement positive for student, organisation and supported people.

Planning

WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO

Take responsibility: "Responsible learning" was described by a student, as being curious about how you can apply the SiSWE to the work you're doing, and being proactive in finding tasks that meet the SiSWE in your placement. Look for where the social work task is in your work, and ask for support if you're finding it tricky to make the links between your learning, and the TSO placement.

Get creative: A creative mindset will support you to make links between the SiSWE and the work you're doing. Think about the learning opportunities that are really specific to the placement, for example working with families who have a family member in prison, or supporting people who have refugee or asylum status; and take the opportunity to learn as much as possible.

> *Be curious, and keep an open mind. Critical thinking in your reflections will help you draw connections between social work roles and duties, and the work you're undertaking – Opportunities for learning, and corrections, are a part of the process and not a reflection on your ability. — **TSO worker***

Keep connected: Remember that your placement is an opportunity to experience the real world, in a safe and supported environment. Keeping this frame in mind can support you to make the most of the experience.

WHAT ORGANISATIONS AND PRACTICE EDUCATORS CAN DO

Whole Team: Getting the whole team ready to host a student placement can make it a much smoother process for all. Having a shared understanding of the expectations of a student on placement, allows the team to best support the student, and understand where a student can enrich the TSOs own learning and organisational growth.

Inductions: Providing students with a thorough induction to the organisation can really help them to familiarise themselves with the work of the TSO, creating a strong foundation to build from, and supporting the student to start undertaking work quickly.

> " *I send out lots of information in advance to them, I have a pack ready for them when they arrive. We have a small team that they tend to do a pre-placement meeting so that they're not coming in a little bit lost on day one... –* **TSO Link Worker**

Teaming Up: Some organisations set up buddy systems that give a student someone in the Team that they can go to for advice and support, beyond the Link Worker or Practice Educator. It can be helpful to set up shadowing opportunities for students with experienced staff members. In this way, they can learn in a safe and supported environment, before taking a more independent or lead role in working with supported people.

SiSWE: Be proactive and alert to opportunities that emerge for students to meet the SiSWE, over the duration of the placement. Take opportunities to strengthen the placement offer and the learning opportunities for students when they arise.

WHAT UNIVERSITIES CAN DO

Updating Link Workers and Practice Educators: Link Workers and Practice Educators may have completed their training some time ago. Some universities host workshops and sessions for both Practice Educators

and Link Workers, as opportunities to share up to date knowledge and information. Sessions like this might include introductions to new knowledge and understanding and updated social work approaches.

Academic work expectations: Universities can share any changes to the assessments and tasks set for students, so that everyone involved knows what students will be asked to work on during the placement.
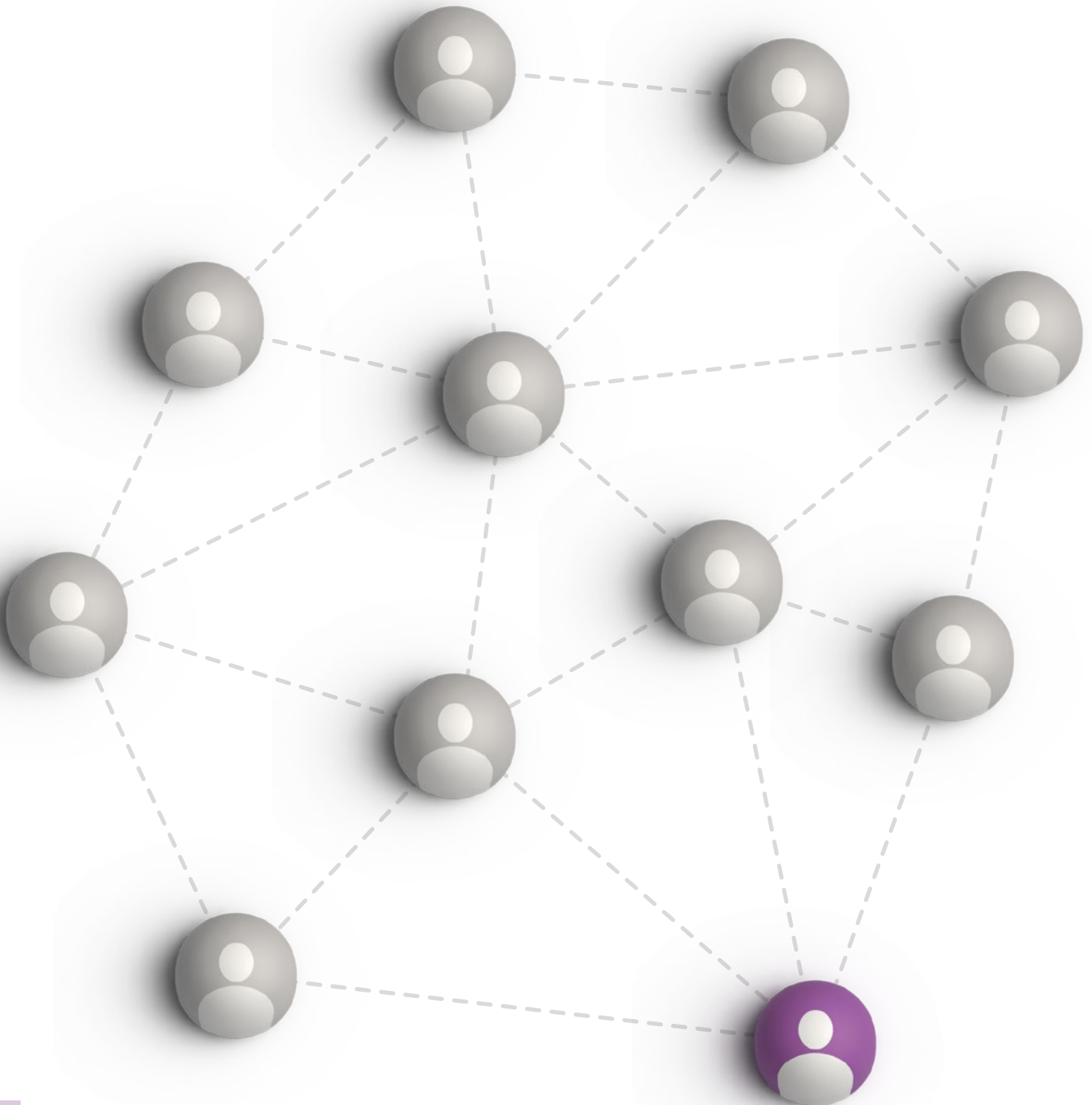
Relationships, roles and communication

WHAT STUDENTS CAN DO

Communication: Communicate concerns (and when things have gone well!) with the people that need to know, and be confident in asking questions of relevant people. Ahead of placement, ask your supervisor about the best way to communicate for different purposes e.g. emails, supervision, quick catch ups, and what you can expect from them in terms of feedback and day to day communicating.

WHAT ORGANISATIONS AND PRACTICE EDUCATORS CAN DO

Share your understandings: From the beginning of the placement, make space to think about social work in this practice setting with students. Sharing perspectives of social work in the third sector can encourage students to understand their placement in context, and builds on their understanding of social work.

> *As a practice educator, one of the very first things I do, is I ask the students to explain to me what their understanding of social work is here... I think it is really, really important to support students to understand that overarching sense of, what is social work? –* **Practice Educator**

Involve students: Create an environment and ethos where students feel involved and comfortable in the team; rather than being an 'add on' getting in the way. Having a place in the team can support students to grow confident in their work, to ask questions, and get fully involved in the activities of the organisation.

> **"** *My name's Mary, not 'the student'. –* ***Practice Educator***

WHAT UNIVERSITIES CAN DO

Lines of communication: Ensure that the lines of communication are open with students and placement providers while the placement is under way. Making it clear how both students and TSOs can communicate with the university can support everyone to understand how the placement is progressing, and ensures that responses to any issues can be timely, averting difficult situations or placement breakdown.

Placement Feedback: Encourage students to give honest feedback about their placement experience. Examining the work they are doing, and supporting them to link it with the SiSWE, should be balanced with the possibility that some placements may not be appropriate to meet the SiSWE requirements. Students might need extra support if they are concerned that the placement experience can't meet their learning needs.
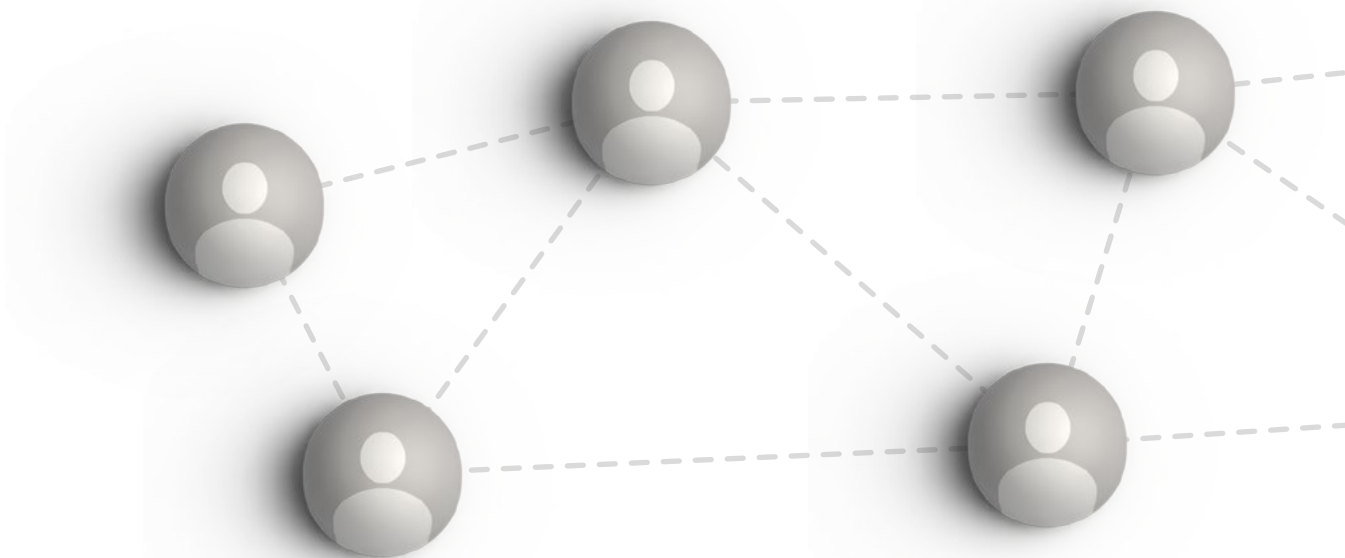
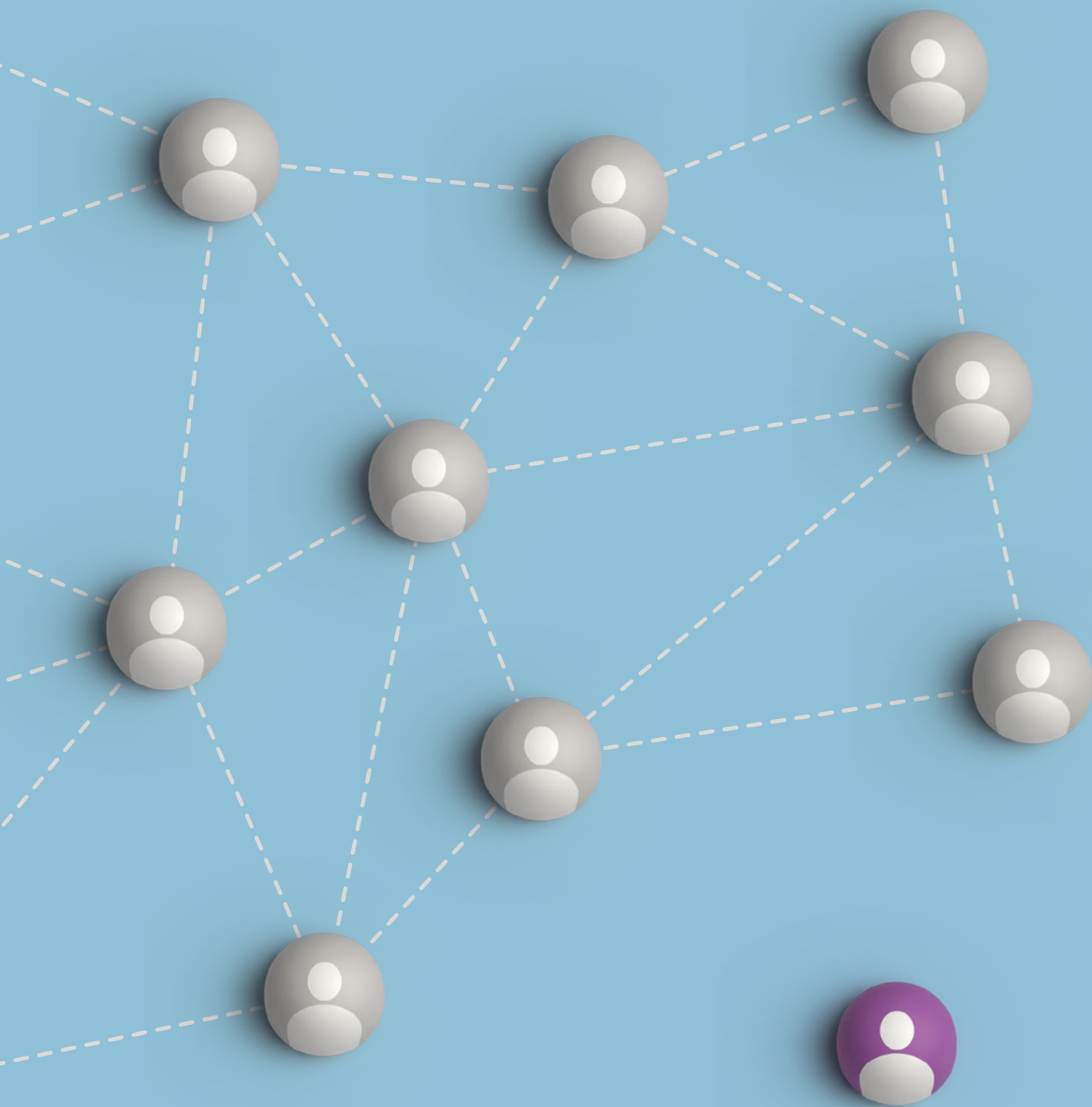# During placement reflective prompts

1. Using the SiSWE in supervision as a reflective tool. "What standard did you meet there? Talk me through it."
2. How are the relationships between everyone involved? If they could be improved, what would help make that happen, and why?
3. Is the right level and type of communication in place between students, Practice Educator, Link Worker and university? If it doesn't feel right, what would better look and feel like?
4. Do the people supported by the student have opportunities to share their thoughts on how it's going/their experience? How will you know if this is going OK, or if it needs to change? How do their perspectives feed into the student's learning and development?
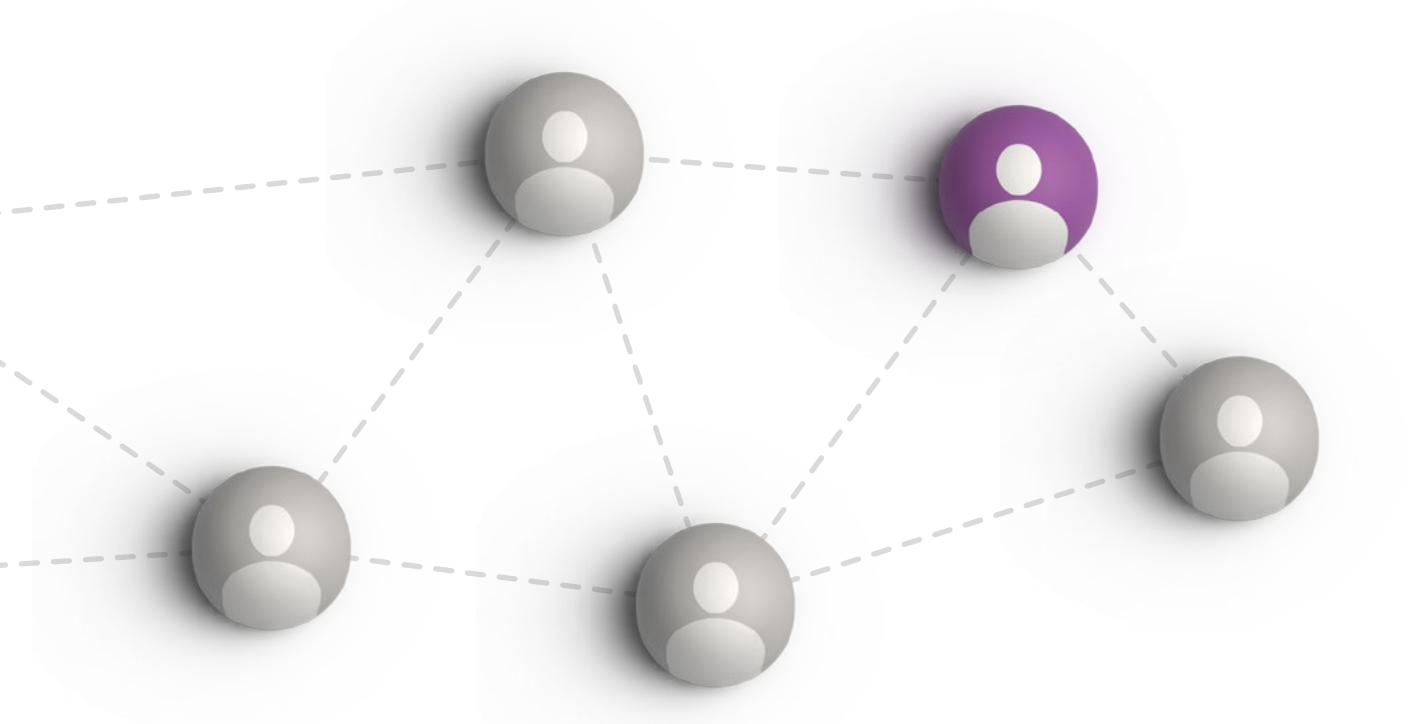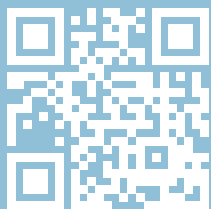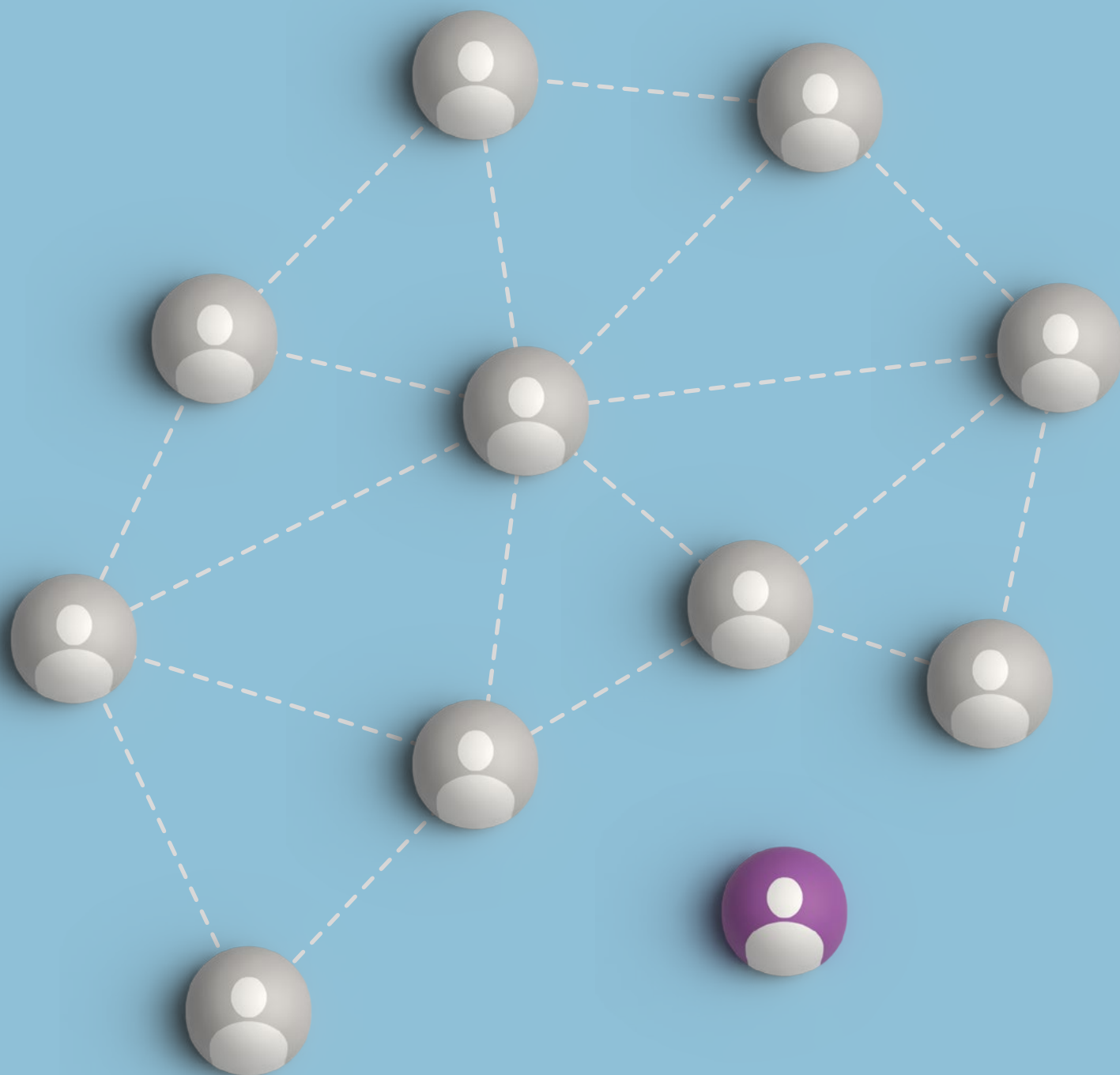
A final comment

> *As a Practice Educator... I ask the students to explain to me what their understanding of social work is and what they will often tell me is a list of statutory social work tasks, and I'll say right you've just described some statutory social work tasks, but can you just dial that back a bit and think about you know what is the essence of social work and think about then how do you find the social work role in the services we provide here... I think it is really, really important to support students to understand that overarching sense of, what is social work? And to me that is about working alongside people, empowering individuals to make their lives better, in whatever shape or form they see that better as being... it is about empowering people to be able to make decisions... I think that is the fundamental heart of social work.* — **TSO Practice Educator**