

# ***Solution Focussed Practice in Workforce Development***

***By Inge Nijkamp***

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## **Introduction**

As Workforce Development Advisors we develop and facilitate learning, deliver training and advise colleagues at a strategic level. In recent months there has been a shift to create closer links between practice and learning departments and we collaborate more closely because of this. My role is to mediate and engage staff to support the overall knowledge and skills enhancement within the workforce, including social work development. This article aims to set out my first, tentative steps to use Solution Focussed practice at work.

The Solution Focussed Approach stimulates outcome focussed thinking in professionals as well as individuals in their personal lives. It supports the individual to step away from the issues and problem and create their own preferred outcomes. I strongly believe that if we don't know where we are going, we don't know how to move forward either. We can't move on if we don't know what our preferred outcome would be. I have found the Solution Focussed approach supports this. It has helped me as a parent to get my children to focus on their own wishes and preferred future as well as a professional developing my own career.

## **How I Use Solution Focussed Ideas at Work**

### **USE IN MEETINGS**

Corporate meetings often focus on what is not working well, followed by long discussions around the extent of this. However, when aiming for solutions, again I find that the discussion revolves as one solution is dismissed by one person and vice versa. I can see the importance of sharing views and learning together, however, if there is not an outcome focus or pragmatic approach to reaching new ideas for planning, it is hard to move forward. Meetings often end with no further progress on steps to take or ideas around moving in new directions.

To counter this, I use Solution Focus to look at the concept of the preferred future in meetings, to establish what it is that the group wants to achieve, "What does good look like?" I link this to Signs of Safety, an innovative strengths-based, safety-

focussed approach to child protection casework. It considers where the journey should lead to and creates a path to get there.

## **Example**

During a steering group meeting to implement a “neglect assessment” tool, I asked the group to consider what they wanted to see instead of what they saw now and note their thoughts for group discussion. This helped the group to think concretely about where it needs to act, asking what works well and what isn’t working well. Rather than messy idea generation, lacking a clear idea of how we are going to achieve success, the group had a clear idea of the areas for improvement and what this should look like. Creating the ‘aimed for outcome’ helped create a vision and enthused the group to move it forward. People started to take responsibility for parts that they could lead on.

I used a scale to establish the level of commitment from group members and to identify how much they felt included in the implementation process. I asked the group to write down for themselves a number from 0 to 10, where 0 represented a lack of knowledge and insight into their role and involvement in the implementation process within the neglect assessment tool, and 10 being total clarity and insight. They answered individually to surface their thoughts, and then shared them with the others. Scaling helped to establish their view on the current process.

They next answered preferred future questions to establish what it was that they would like to see. I asked them how they would know things are improving, and if all was going well, what they would notice? This had great results. They generated their own simple and straightforward solutions; this empowered them to take the solutions back to their teams.

Ensuring there is a clear shared understanding about the preferred future is important. An issue I have found is that individuals find it difficult to listen patiently before interacting, as there is often an overlap between different stakeholders and they wish to share their own thoughts.

## **USE WITH STUDENTS**

Student social workers frequently share concerns and worries, and often want solutions to be given, however I deem this unhelpful in the long run. The preferred future questions have helped to guide the students to consider, “What you want it to

be like?" I follow this with questions like, "What would it be like on a day when all this would be happening?"

I see Solution Focussed ideas as a tool to support and develop social workers to become independent and autonomous professionals. It:

- Helps them to build on their own problem-solving skills rather than being reliant on the organisation or other professionals.
- Supports the development of their reflective skills and therefore the ability to help their own clients focus and reflect.
- Learn the power of being outcome focussed rather than dwelling on all the challenges and negativities that come with the role as a Social worker.
- Build resilience and make them more balanced social workers.

Resource based questions like, what is going well? Or what are you doing well, have become some of my favourites. It makes the students think about alternatives to the negatives, giving them the headspace to reflect on their own practise, which supports their work with the children and families.

### **Example**

One of our students kept worrying about the need to attend more training as she felt ill equipped to do the tasks. She needed much reassurance and guidance to get through her placement, to help break her "cycle of doom thinking" and her self-image of not being good enough.

In a meeting I asked her questions about what her best hopes would be from our conversation. She found this difficult to answer but concluded she wanted to feel more confident and skilful. I next asked her a preferred future question, "So if you would wake up tomorrow, a miracle has happened, and you are the best you can be, what would be the first thing you'd notice?" followed by, "What else?", and "What would others notice?".

She hasn't sent any emails or called me with questions since. Before this SF conversation she contacted me at least weekly. This indicates she is starting to see her own ability to resolve things and feels more confident in her ability.

## Use with Newly Qualified Social Worker's – Case Study

### Background

Suffolk Council (a county authority in England) run “Assessed and Supported Year in Employment” (AYSE) sessions to support the newly qualified Social Workers (SW) in Suffolk. I have run this programme in the past and am aware of the difficulties SW encounter when settling as a professional in a demanding job after the sheltered and protected environment of university.

During their first year there are monthly sessions focussing on different elements of the Professional Capabilities Framework and Knowledge and Skills framework. I was asked to support the group with a session using appreciative enquiry to explore the issues and concerns they are facing in their first year. I decided to include some Solution Focussed ideas.

### The Solution Focussed session

The aim for the session was to have the social workers focus on positives and outcomes. From experience I know how, after 6 months, the pressures and the reality of social work demands overwhelm and sometimes paralyse the social workers. Their caseloads increase, and they get more responsibility in relation to Child Protection cases. I find they feel incapable, and not ready to take on this level of responsibility. Supervision isn't always as effective as it could be. In these scenarios the Social workers drift into a negative spiral of unhappy and debilitating thoughts.

With an explanation of Solution Focussed ideas, and the signs of safety approach combined I set the task outline. As they wanted to identify their worries, I had to ‘work a little closer to the problem’ before being able to look at the preferred future.

I gave the group the task to work in pairs and write down:

- Their worries during this year
- Something true and positive about their work
- What their best hopes were for the ASYE year.

I opened the session with the question, ‘what are you worried about?’ I wanted to have a reference point from where to work towards a solution and a preferred future. This felt somewhat strange as it didn't focus on strength and positivity to start with. However, as this was signs of safety combined with Solution Focussed ideas it was interesting to move the boundaries and mix the two up. Having started with the

exercise in pairs I knew that their thoughts had already been probed to consider positives and what they would like, even if they didn't have any answers yet.

For example, if a worry was, "Getting it wrong" I followed up with the question, "What would happen instead?" Met with silence, I asked questions like, "What would you notice?", "What would others notice?", "What would that look like?" which caused the conversation to become more solution focussed.

Answers included, "I would be asking questions", or "I would be working quicker as I would have more confidence". At this point I asked them to think about this, and imagine, that they would wake up and that a miracle had happened, and all those things would be in place. I asked them what they would notice first, followed by what others like their family or their colleagues would notice.

I then asked them to list ten positives. As expected, this was now easier than at the start of the session.

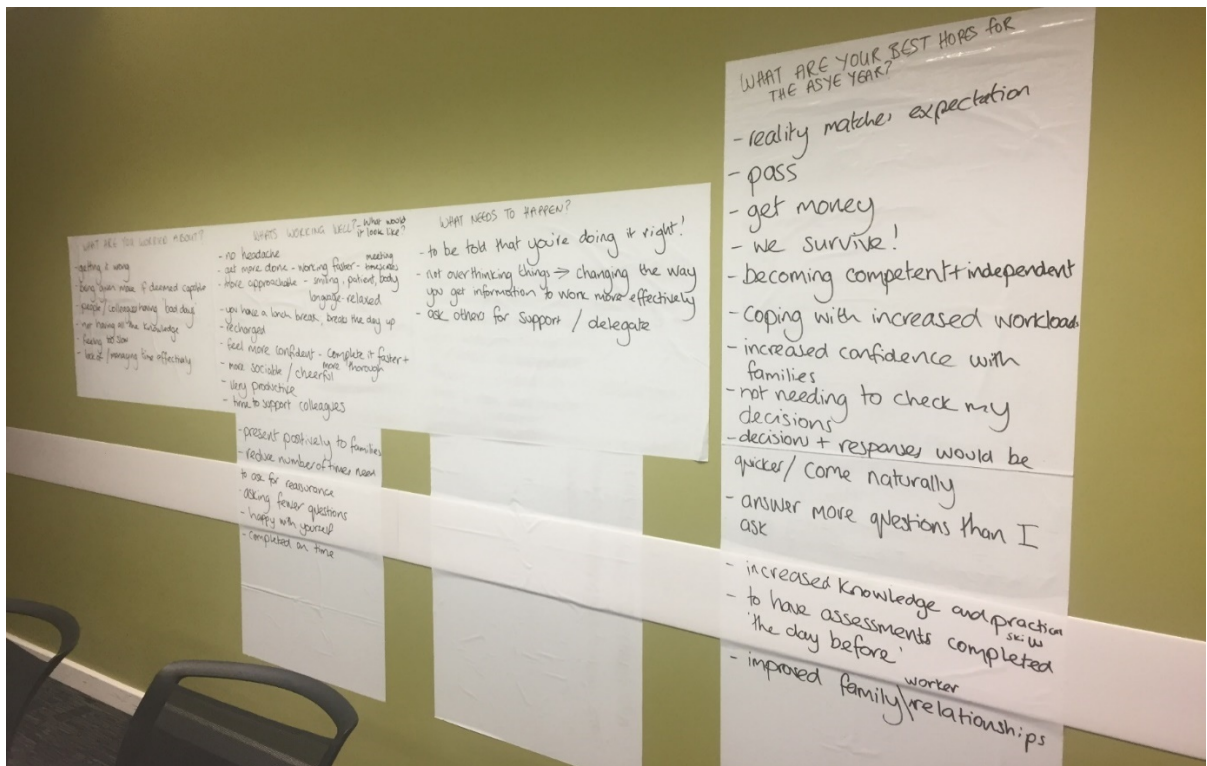
I asked questions in a persistent manner, like, "Go on", "What else", "What would others notice?" I didn't accept their first answer as they needed to broaden their thinking for it to have impact on their thoughts and outcomes.

To end, I asked how they might notice they would be at their best during this first year in employment. This was followed with a conversation around feeling more confident. One of the Social workers shared that she wouldn't be overthinking everything so much. I probed this with, "What would you be doing instead?" She thought hard and said she would be more confident in making decisions and analyses. I asked her how others would notice that she wouldn't be overthinking things, which prompted her to think about what behaviours she would demonstrate when this change was in place. Her fellow workers commented on this as well. It was very clear at this point that the solution focussed questioning allowed the social worker to see that she is already making changes and nearing the point where she wants to be. This appeared empowering and she started to smile.

Looking at, "what works well" and the "best hopes" got great answers that were thought through carefully. Initially I was concerned that the "usual" suspects like, "My manager never gives me supervision", or "My caseload is too high" would come up and it would be a session of dumping negative thoughts. Good preparation ensured I used the right questions. The group quickly picked this up and was happy to go with it. Their thinking patterns were clear, and they improved their formulations of answers as we went through.

Considering the feedback, I think it worked well and we achieved what we set out to do. I believe that this approach, though not used in full but as a mix with the Signs of Safety model would support their long-term development of resilience, outcome focussed thinking and autonomy.

Solution Focussed practice targeted the social workers' skills, challenging their thinking, turning it upside down and adopting a more solution focussed approach in their profession and likely their personal lives too.



### Feedback on the session

*"I wanted to thank you very much for the session you facilitated last week. I thought you led the session in such a way that drilled down to the issues that this group are currently facing and supported them in visualising a preferred future of how it could be for them. All aspects of their 'working day' came up from cases, supervision and support, social work practice and emotional well-being. Your questioning techniques encouraged perspectives from the social workers themselves, as well as their colleagues, managers and own families. The next steps for the group were implicitly in the message that you emphasised during your summary and I have decided to do*

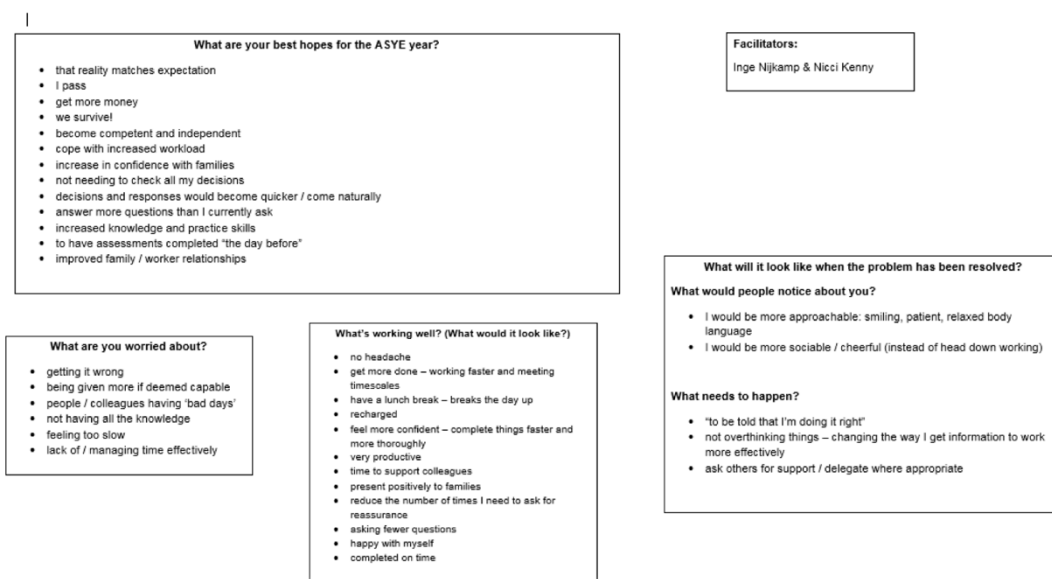
*this type of session again in August as they are nearing completion of their ASYE to see what changes have taken place.” ASYE Coordinator*

*“Inge delivered an insightful and thought-provoking session whereby she encouraged us, as a group to question/ think about where we are individually in terms of our professional development adopting a signs of safety approach. The session left me feeling enlightened and made me consider whether I am too hard on myself and also where I can be kinder to myself in regard to my learning. ” (NQSW ASYE)*

## Conclusion

Working in this way could potentially support the recruitment and retention programme. We continue to struggle with relatively high numbers of social worker vacancies each year and this approach to learning and support might contribute to the overall job satisfaction for social workers, if they learn to be outcome focussed and stay close to their own beliefs, strengths and skills. I believe this is possible even when working in a stressful environment highly regulated and governed by laws and regulations.

I will continue to support the ASYE sessions and motivate others within the local authority to adopt the BRIEF Solution Focussed approach as a tool within supervision, self-reflection, practice with the families and children that we work with and with colleagues. As a Workforce Development Advisor, it fits well with my role to incorporate this way of working.



## About the author



Born in The Netherlands, Inge moved to the UK when she was 24 years old. She trained as a social worker in the Netherlands and went on to continue her studies in the UK at the University of East Anglia, gaining a postgraduate BA in Arts, Children and Families and an MA certificate in leadership and management.

She worked for the local authority as a social worker and later as a senior practitioner in front line child protection services. She went on to manage the leaving care team before working as a consultant and now as an advisor for the workforce development team.