

“My role involves balancing leadership and strategy”

Name:

Emma Walker

Role: Mental Health Support Team

interim service lead

Employer: Children and Family Health Devon



How did you get into this role?

My career in mental health nursing spans over 22 years, during which time I have worked across a range of clinical settings.

Early on, I was drawn to the meaningful, person-centred nature of mental health nursing and had the privilege of providing evidence-based interventions to individuals experiencing complex emotional and psychological challenges.

I developed a particular interest in working with children and young people, recognising the impact that timely, compassionate support can have on long-term health outcomes.

This led me to focus on early intervention, where the opportunity to make a meaningful difference early in a person's life is both profound and rewarding.

As I progressed in my career, I became increasingly interested in how leadership at different levels influences the quality of care, staff wellbeing, and the culture of services.

I saw how strong, values-based leadership could create the right conditions for teams to thrive, and for young people and families to feel genuinely supported.

As I have moved into senior leadership roles, a transition shaped

by experience, formal education and mentorship, my understanding of system leadership has significantly influenced my approach to working within complex, interconnected healthcare environments, particularly those supporting children and young people.

It has strengthened my ability to advocate for early intervention as a core part of system-wide mental health transformation.

What is a typical day for you?

Each day brings something new, but generally my role involves balancing operational leadership with strategic development.

I spend a significant amount of time in meetings, whether with internal teams, partner organisations, or system-level groups working to align our services with wider mental health strategies that meet the objectives set out in the NHS 10-year long term plan to enhance prevention and early intervention.

People are at the heart of my work. I focus on supporting staff, enabling collaboration, and ensuring that patient experience remains central to decision-making.

I also prioritise time for reflective practice, which I have found essential for sustaining compassionate leadership.

What are the best things about your role?

One of the most fulfilling aspects is having the opportunity to influence positive change on a broader scale.

Whether that's improving access to services, enhancing staff experience,

or co-producing solutions with young people and carers, the scope to make a difference in my role is significant.

I also value the collaborative nature of system leadership. Working across organisational boundaries to tackle shared challenges brings a sense of collective purpose.

It reminds me that effective leadership isn't about control – it's about convening people around a common goal.

What are the most challenging aspects of your role?

Healthcare systems are under constant pressure, and navigating the tension between operational demands and long-term strategic goals can be challenging.

There are also times when priorities between organisations or stakeholders do not fully align, and part of my role is to help bridge those gaps.

Emotionally, the job can be demanding. Decisions carry weight, especially when they impact staff or service users.

Staying grounded in kindness and fairness, while also being decisive, is a balance I always strive to maintain.

Why would you encourage someone to choose this role?

If you are passionate about improving mental health care, not just at the point of delivery but also at a structural and strategic level, then this is a hugely rewarding path I would urge people to consider.

Leadership in mental health nursing offers the chance to shape services, support teams and influence policy in ways that directly affect people's lives. ■