

How one local authority uses community social work approach to shape support for families and children

Kirsty

Hello and welcome to the Social Work Community Podcast where we speak directly to social workers about the topics and issues impacting them and shaping the profession. My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, the Senior Commercial Editor at Community Care and in this episode, we introduce you to the final segment in this three-part mini-series in collaboration with North Lincolnshire Council's Children and Families Service that explores career progression, well-being and social work practice. In this episode, two practitioners talk about North Lincolnshire's community social work approach and how it embeds into the statutory service.

The local authority is committed to working collaboratively with families through its One Family Approach practice model which uses co-production to shape support for families and works collaboratively with other practitioners. Practitioners Steve and Shabnam kick off the conversation with some introductions.

Steve

(0:58) Hi, I'm Steve Murphy and I am a social worker in North Lincolnshire's Children's Services case management team.

Shabnam

Hi, my name is Shabnam and I am an independent conference and reviewing officer with North Lincolnshire Children's Services. So Steve, how long have you been part of North Lincolnshire Children's Services?

Steve

So I started with Children's Services in 2007. I worked in youth justice for a lot of years and in 2021 I started a social work apprenticeship which I completed alongside my role as one of the managers in Youth Justice Partnership, which is the newly formed youth offending service.

(1:45) In 2024, I successfully completed my degree and managed to get first class honours which I was very happy about and since then I have been in the case management team being a frontline social worker and that's what I'm doing today. So yeah, it's been a different journey from youth justice into social work but a very exciting, challenging one. Yeah, and I'm still going today which is good.

Shabnam

(2:08) That's amazing, congratulations on your first. Thank you very much.

Steve

So, what about yourself?

Shabnam

So I have recently started my role here as an independent conference reviewing officer.

So, I started at the end of April but I also, really similar to yourself, am familiar to North Lincolnshire Children's Services. I actually completed my social work training here back in 2010 and then I stayed as part of the case management team as a social worker for a couple of years before moving to a leading children's charity for just over 10 years and then, like I say, came back in April. It's a totally new and different role for me and that's I suppose what attracted me to the role and to come back to North Lincolnshire.

(2:53) Yeah and it's been a great opportunity to think about using some of the real core social work skills that I had the opportunity to develop whilst I was here the first time round. But also apply lots and lots of the skills that I've had the opportunity to learn and develop in my time at the charity. One of the things I suppose for me about returning to North Lincolnshire was this idea, this feeling of how North Lincolnshire practises. So my work at the charity was very much about a community social work approach, a community social work model.

(3:27) We were going out meeting children and families in two of the most deprived wards in the UK to think about what services they needed to be able to make changes and difference and then co-creating them services with children and families themselves and yet I think for me North Lincolnshire very much feels like that community social work approach in a statutory service. I don't know for yourself how you find that in your role as a social worker?

Steve

(3:55) Yeah it's what we do in North Lincolnshire in terms of our one family approach and creating a vision and a system that works for all children because our key priority is that children thrive in the homes and the schools. So that is very much what we do.

(4:11) It's a few best fit model so we want the best support for each family, and I think what you just said there about ultimately the plans are the family's plans and it's about them having ownership of it and we listen to them and what they need help with.

(4:26) I suppose just in terms of your experience North Lincolnshire vision now is a lot different to when you were in case management previously.

Shabnam

Yeah it is yeah I think especially starting new there's a want to get things right and to learn all the statutory roles and responsibilities that you have to fulfil as a social worker when your core functions and I suppose that's what lots of my energy and practise was built on.

(4:53) However I think what I see now especially as we move towards the family's first reforms and North Lincolnshire being in line with that and also prepared for that it is really about using the strengths and the resources available to the children and families themselves and thinking about not how we do social work to children and families over there it's about how we as a community really build that village around child to think about their safety to think about their opportunities to think about their resilience and I can really see how that's being created and developed in the time that I've been away.

Steve

(5:24) Yeah and I think just over the sort of what's four years really since I started my degree and the transformation has been huge in terms of the offer and what is available. I think that we were moved away from social work just being social work on its own and the child and

family having a plan and then doing that plan and I think we've now got the opportunity where we can explore a lot more options for example through the family hubs.

And just an example of a case that I recently closed where there weren't significant concerns to the point where the child and family needed statutory planning and there were three children under four years old in the house and I knew that they needed that additional support and I completed a referral to the North Path Way through the family hubs.

(6:19) They're now a worker who they engaged with and that was my step out plan and that meant that I finished working with that family knowing that they had something in place for them. And I think as well over the time you're working with a family you build up a lot of trust for them and I think once you've built that trust they trust that you're pointing them in the right direction. And quite often they're willing to work with other services.

(6:40) And yeah I think it's just it's good to have those options and it is nice closing a case where you know that they've still got that ongoing support.

Shabnam

And you know I see lots of plans coming to conferences and lots of recommendations of ideas from people about what they want to see in the plan.

(6:56) But for yourself Steve working with the children and families directly how is it building that plan with them you know and thinking about what they want to achieve given the approach that you've just described how does that feel and look like?

Steve

(7:05) It's good because you have got so many options when you're creating the plan and I think one of the things when we have a staff engagement days where you've got all the different parts of the council together is your knowledge as a practitioner and then your practice supervisor's knowledge and so on is a lot wider now so we can think outside the box in terms of what that family want. And if the family do want something we can always explore it and we've got that option now. I think we're in a position where we can build a more robust plan but a succinct plan as well. I think because we all sort of work so closely together we know who the best person is to do that work where we're very mindful that we don't overload the families with professionals. And I know from previous experience in youth justice and in social work families don't always understand the plan because there's too many professionals involved in it and now we're more streamlined where it is the best person to do that piece of work does that piece of work.

And they don't have to be there forever they don't have to be there for the whole plan sometimes and we have it quite a lot at the moment where families might be struggling with benefits for example and we know there's someone in their local authority you can support with that and they can go in and do that piece of work help them and then they can step out so I think we've just got a lot more opportunity now in terms of what's available and knowing where to get the help.

Shabnam

And I think that's something that I'm definitely seeing in terms of chairing conferences endorsing children's plans thinking about is this the best plan for the child and family.

(8:34) So there's definitely a focus on celebrating family strengths recognising their strengths building upon their strengths we can't ignore the risks you know we've got to recognise we have a statutory service and there's reason for involvement but I think all the things that you've just spoken to that notion of longevity sustainability it's starting with what the family actually want to change and what they have got access to in terms of resources themselves and building upon that rather than creating a whole new plan and a whole new network.

(8:59) And where children and families haven't got that so through the family solutions model is what I see lots of social workers referring to at conferences so that would be where we're thinking about everybody in that child's network already to build on the strengths but where families haven't got that I think what I've noticed coming back to North Lincolnshire is there's definitely a real ambition from everybody in the community of North Lincolnshire so we're thinking about schools we're thinking about the family hubs we're thinking about community assets like church groups mosque organisations to really think about what they can do to support a plan.

(9:32) I recently had a family where I chaired a transfer child protection case conferencing from a different area and this parent hadn't engaged with any of the child protection processes in the previous authority.

I think that's because she was really scared and worried and fearful about what that meant so she wasn't letting the social worker in for visits therefore they couldn't complete assessments but for whatever reason it just wasn't working productively.

(9:58) She did attend the initial conference the transfer in North Lincolnshire the social worker made real great effort to go and build a relationship with this parent and children and in the time of conferences. And then we recently did the reviews where the children came off a plan but mum said you know she felt that school had become part of their extended family and that was really really lovely to hear because this is a parent and children who haven't got any extended family in North Lincolnshire and now the school are going to continue to support this family without the need for a social work involvement at child protection level.

(10:36) So I think the commitment from all services and agencies as part of North Lincolnshire to really wrap around the child I think has stood out to me coming back to the area.

Steve

(10:45) Yeah and I think one of the things we do all the time is have a strength-based approach because you think families who have suffered the traumas have suffered and they're in the case conference and it can be a very daunting experience and I think what you want to see is that natural progression from case conference down to child in need or whatever the future plan is.

(11:08) And I think we do go into the work with the families focussing on the strengths and the protective factors because and like I say before we don't ignore the risks but it's about them taking some ownership and realising that actually they are doing a good job.

(11:17) And it's about that natural progression to like say utilise what's around them and I think we've got a really good link with the schools in North Lincolnshire I think the fact that we sit on the same floor as them and we're connected and we can just go and have a conversation with them it's really positive.

(11:36) I think that if you've got any questions about anything regarding education there is someone who will help you and there's a massive focus on children increasing their hours because they're visible in school they're safer in school and a lot of the time that's maybe a gap that's missing so I think the connection we've got is really positive offering that additional level of support.

Shabnam

(11:55) And I really like that word connection that you've used because I think for me coming into the authority I'll return to the authority but being in a role which is independent something I think could quite easily happen would be to become isolated in that role. But that hasn't happened so I think there's a real ambition and commitment from social workers from heads of services from the directors to connect us all together as well.

(12:18) So I know that I will have lots of conversations with social workers between conferences between reviews to connect together we as an independent reviewing service are meeting on a regular basis with assistant directors and the director also to think about connecting together and shaping the service as a way forward.

(12:38) And there's also that commitment to connect with children and families more so so whether that's for me as an IRO going out to visit children and families if they've not attended conference to share the plan whether it's having telephone calls with them to think about how we can prepare them for the conference it's that real filtered approach to everybody connecting together and things not happening in isolation that I think for me again speaks to that community feel and community approach.

Steve

(13:03) Yeah I think one of the strengths is the connection between sort of the social workers and the IROs like yourself. And I think one thing we don't have in North Lincolnshire is that gap between say your three months or six months between conferences where the IROs don't know what's going on and I think we do connect.

(13:18) And I know that for the IROs that sort of work with my cases I'm constantly sort of checking in giving them updates and I think you benefit from that and I think moving forward there's going to be more connection in terms of how the links strengthen between the IROs and the social workers.

Shabnam

(13:35) Yeah I think there's a real ambition we recognise you know I know we came to your team meeting not so long ago. And there's lots of new faces different faces and also when we can understand one another's role better and then we can work better together through some of them really prickly moments that you know happen regardless in social work.

(13:54) So in the new year I know that each IRO will be attached to one of the social work pods. And we'll be thinking about whether it's social workers in that pod being able to just pick up the phone drop us a Teams message to say you know I know you're not IRO for this family but I just wanted to ask your opinion on this.

(14:08) Or whether it's an opportunity to learn from one another and share that practice wisdom about an area of interest it's all them add-on bits. I think that we recognise everybody has so many different strengths and things to share and how can we find a way to do that more consistently.

(14:24) Because we're doing it as you say for the children and families that we're working with that we're connected to. But how do we connect outside of that as well and I think hopefully fingers crossed in the new year that's something that we can wait to see.

Steve

(14:39) Yeah and that it sounds like a really positive approach because I think sometimes for example you do get stuck on cases don't you. And then it's just having like someone who's on the outside just to give that advice and guidance.

(14:49) And I think I know one of the strengths within our pod is we have weekly pod meetings and we often discuss a case that someone might be stuck on. And then you're getting five different opinions on what could help that and then adding sort of someone like yourself in there as well can just that can only strengthen that.

Shabnam

(15:08) Yeah definitely I think it is about that shared understanding as well because there'll be moments and times where we do have a difference of opinion professionally. And that's absolutely okay and needed and that is why we have different roles. But if we can create them moments to reflect together and explore that more for the child I think that's where we then get to better outcomes for the children and families. So it's definitely about trying to build them in more so I think as we move forward together.

Steve

Yeah 100%.

Shabnam

(15:35) Thank you for listening to this the final episode in our podcast series with North Lincolnshire Children and Families Service.

Kirsty

(15:40) If you'd like to find out more about working with North Lincolnshire Council please listen to episodes one and two which highlight how North Lincolnshire Council supports its workforce's career progression, explores how the council prioritises well-being and helps its workforce to achieve a positive work-life balance and find out more about joining the team at North Lincolnshire Council by visiting jobs.communitycare.co.uk and type North Lincolnshire in the search box. Bye for now.