

Amplifying the voice of social workers

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:00:0.0] Welcome to Employer Zone Insights, a podcast from Community Care showcasing social work practice and leadership from around the country. This edition is brought to you in partnership with West Sussex County Council.

In this episode, we speak to Darlington Ihenacho, principal social worker in West Sussex County Council's children's services, about the improvement journey the council is on. Darlington talks about why the appointment of Lucy Butler, executive director of children, young people and learning, was a strong draw for him to join the council. He also talks about how he is helping to put the social work voice and experience at the heart of the organisation and leadership of children's services.

So welcome, Darlington. Thank you for giving us some of your time.

Darlington Ihenacho: Thank you.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:00:57.7] So I know you're not new to being a PSW. Could you just explain to us a bit more about your role at West Sussex, please?

Darlington Ihenacho: My role includes having to look after the academy side of the service, where we support the ASYEs, we support the students from the step-up programme, the apprenticeship and students that join us from the university. We ensure that they have a very good placement experience with us, and we provide post-ASYE support to the ASYEs after the first year of the programme.

I also support and I oversee the MOSAIC system, and that MOSAIC system is very much looking at the best practice and making sure that the system works for us, not us labouring for the MOSAIC system, and ensuring that we capture good records for children.

I also oversee the policy and practice within the service, and that is to guide us in the work that we do, and taking into account the legislative requirements that we have, and to ensure that there is consistency within the service or across West Sussex because what we do have is a very large borough and we want a situation whereby we're all practising in the same way and ensuring that the children's needs are being met at every point.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:02:11.9] Okay. I'm keen to find out what drew you to working at West Sussex.

Darlington Ihenacho: What drew me to West Sussex is the Children First outcomes values, and I appreciate the fact that the senior leadership viewed the best outcomes for children as the way forward, and also the wider region that it covers, and I really wanted to push myself into delivering resources for a larger workforce going forward.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:02:44.0] Okay. And I think also having Lucy as the DCS was another draw. Is that right?

Darlington Ihenacho: That's correct. I learnt that Lucy had joined West Sussex at the time of my application and I was fully aware of the impact she'd had in Oxfordshire and in leading on delivering the family safeguarding model. From conversations with peers and friends that have worked in Oxfordshire, they were very appreciative of her leadership skills and I really wanted to be a part of that. And I was enthusiastic about applying and wanting, really wanting, to join West Sussex.

And since joining it is very evident that Lucy's very personable focus on best outcomes for children has shown through in developing a strong workforce going forward.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:03:37.2] Absolutely. Yes, you've talked about her personable nature in the past, very friendly and open.

Darlington Ihenacho: That's correct, and Lucy and the leadership team also value the wellbeing of social workers, as well as their mental health, which is something I'm very passionate about in driving wellbeing in West Sussex. And West Sussex has come on a journey and this was the perfect time to begin to implement some level of restorative leadership, and that is what we're seeing within West Sussex now. And in having to build a learning culture within the organisation. So Lucy and her team have taken big strides and bold steps in making sure that this is what's being delivered for social workers within the service.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:04:26.6] Excellent. I know that one of the other reasons you've mentioned is amplifying the voice of social workers, and being the PSW has allowed you to be able to do that. I'm quite interested to understand about your different roles.

Darlington Ihenacho: The core foundation for creating the PSW role was recommended by Alan Munro, was for PSWs to represent the voices of social workers at senior leadership and strategic meetings, and my experience as a PSW is that within West Sussex they've taken that to the letter. In my previous role as a PSW I was not at that table to be able to share the voices of social workers, so I really appreciate the fact that within the West Sussex leadership team they've seen the value for having to hear directly from social workers and using various mechanisms, feedback methods to be able to gather that information and represent that at senior leadership team meetings is very key.

But that is not to say that all information has to come via the PSW. There are other ways these views are represented, but primarily the key issue is that the leadership team they listen to what's going on on the ground. They've got sources to understand so that there is that connection between social workers who are doing the day-to-day work, the frontline work, with the leaders who are making those strategic decisions, because that helps the leadership, like I said.

And as a PSW, part of our network, I represent that network as the vice-chair. And we're very keen on amplifying the voice of the social workers on various platforms, which we do discuss and take away and encourage social workers to talk to us, making sure that those

voices are heard. Real, practical issues are what we'd like to discuss going forward, and to support social workers. And as you would know, some of the work that I'm doing around the mental health of social workers and wellbeing for social workers is that we're trying to promote and encourage this with the whole sector.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

[0:06:41.3] Yeah, absolutely. And I know that you've created a BAME circle and a focus on wellbeing, as you mentioned. So are these some of the examples of areas that you're able to take back to senior leadership?

Darlington Ihenacho:

Yes. The BAME circle is one key area that has resulted from issues around social injustice and diversity. And as we all know from the George Floyd murder from last year, that has enabled the voices of BAME social workers to be heard, and the issues. And that takes us into anti-racist practice, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory practice. So I created that group in January here in West Sussex, and that is to encourage BAME social workers to share their experience, to talk about how they feel, and so that they're being heard. And the outcomes from those meetings, those circle meetings, also get tabled to the senior leadership team. So they know what's going on.

We also have various other groups, and one of the key things that I brought in when I started was the online yoga, which has really helped a number of social workers within the service. And also having team time. We've got two representatives that go to various teams to try to support social workers, to talk about issues that they're experiencing. As well as mindfulness. Mindfulness is one very key, useful tool that we've also rolled out within West Sussex. So this has been a collective effort to ensure that social workers' wellbeing is being heard and being addressed. So there's one thing about listening to their concerns, it's another thing about putting practical measures in place to address them.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

[0:08:23.6] Are there any examples that you can pinpoint where you working with social workers and being able to run all that information to senior leadership has resulted in transformation that is supporting the social worker?

Darlington Ihenacho:

One example that comes to mind is within West Sussex we've got what we call 'pay and progression scheme' that we've just launched, and we're in the process of rolling this out. And being part of those conversations with the team, putting this together and liaising with social workers was such that I was able to represent social workers' views within that scheme, and for the leaders that were putting it together to understand where social workers think about the process, think about what needs to go into that and how that would be beneficial. That is not to take away from the fact that there has been a consultation process. But being that initial link to make sure that the views are being represented within that process has been very useful to minimise any disruptions or people that do not really benefit from the process, or to make it more streamlined and make it more accessible to all staff, and to make it beneficial. It's also part of our recruitment strategy as well, to encourage social workers to come and join us, and to bring us some power with the regional area within which West Sussex is located. And one of the key issues that we've

had within West Sussex before now is about recruiting, and recruiting the right level of social workers within the workforce.

Kirsty Ayakwah

[0:10:00.0] Mm, mm. So what has been the feedback from social workers then, if they obviously feel like they're more involved in decision-making?

Darlington Ihenacho:

The feedback from social workers has been very positive. It's been very good. One of the highlights from the Ofsted report was the disconnect between social workers and the senior leadership team, and I wouldn't want to take credit from my rival for things being changed, I would also want to highlight that the senior leadership acknowledged this and have been able to put measures in place to address that. One of those measures was having to get me in post to be able to support that connection between the social workers and the senior leadership team. And I get a lot of feedback, a lot of emails that highlight the positivity and the impact that they feel from me being in post and having to link up with social workers and represent their views at the senior leadership team.

We also have various methods. Lucy for one does what we call 'listening to social workers', and there are various events every four to six weeks where she listens directly to social workers to also gather their views. So these measures and these processes do help social workers to be able to voice their worries and also to celebrate good practice, 'cause it's not always about concerns, it's also about celebrating what's going well, what we could do better, and communicating the journey that we're currently on.

Kirsty Ayakwah

[0:11:29.8] Well that segues us nicely into talking about the improvement journey. I mean, what is going well, and can you tell us about the development since Ofsted's feedback? I think it was in 2020, going back to December where they basically pushed back on West Sussex becoming a Trust.

Darlington Ihenacho:

Yes, there have been various things and activities going on within West Sussex. One of the key activities that has taken place since January is the rollout of a management assessment programme where all the managers within the service, including myself, have been assessed, assessed for our leadership skills and our management skills, and then we've received feedback as to what that assessment tells us. And with that feedback we get a development plan, and that plan enables us to become better leaders and better managers in the work that we do. Now that has been a very successful programme. It's just concluded in May, and we are now going into a phase whereby we're currently rolling out a management development programme for all the managers.

And what we do know about this management programme is if you have strong, good managers, good strong managers will look after the social workers. So it's a strategic move to try and ensure that we're looking after our social workers and we're doing that in the best possible way going forward.

We've also had the family safeguarding model initial processes being started, to be able to help support practice within West Sussex. And

what we do know from the family safeguarding model, which we're all really excited about, is that it's about supporting children to remain with their families, getting them the best outcomes. Which fits in very nicely with our Children First outcome value.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:13:18.9] So what more can you tell us about how the model is developing? What stage are you at and when do you see it being implemented?

Darlington Ihenacho: We're currently at the initial stages, looking at the whole structure, the whole service. And we anticipate that we would have this up and running by January 2022.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:13:36.6] Brilliant. Excellent. In conclusion, I'd like to find out how you feel about working at West Sussex.

Darlington Ihenacho: I have to say it's been really amazing. I've only been here for six months. It's a lot of work that we're embarking on. Very positive activities that we're doing. Social workers feeling values, feeling motivated to do the work that we do. And I just get the buzz from having to support the strategy thinking and the strategic implementation of most of the activities. I feel like a million bucks, I have to say, because of those meetings and the engagement with the senior leadership team, and the fact that they listen. Because one of the key things is having to share that information and do something about the information, so it's an authority whereby we say what we do and we do what we say. So it's really exciting to be part of this team. And going forward, I think the sky's the limit, and we're beginning to see some of the progress going forward.

We've recently had an Ofsted monitoring visit, and we believe that the outcome of that will be good, showing steps in the right direction.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:14:44.6] So it sounds like if social workers are thinking of what life would be like working at West Sussex, there is a lot of support from not just yourself but also senior leadership, and their voices are acknowledged and heard, and that does transform into actual results. Would you agree?

Darlington Ihenacho: That is correct, yes. Because what we find is that when you've got strong leadership it filters through the whole service. And role-modelling is one key area in trying to make sure that this is captured throughout the service. So there's a lot of emphasis on the value of the work that we do, and in ensuring that we get the best outcomes for children within West Sussex.

Kirsty Ayakwah: [0:15:28.3] Thank you so much for your time.

Darlington Ihenacho: Thank you.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Thank you for listening to Employer Zone Insights, a podcast from Community Care showcasing social work practice and leadership from around the country. We will be sharing more podcast interviews with you, so please visit us at www.communitycare.co.uk. Thank you.