



Working together to be stronger for children and families

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Welcome to Employer Zone Insights, a podcast from Community Care showcasing social work practice and leadership from around the country. My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, and this edition is brought to you in partnership with Birmingham Children's Trust. In this episode we speak to Jenny Turnross, director of practice at the trust, and Lizzie Simpson, who is a senior social worker in one of the safeguarding teams. Both talk about how over the last eighteen months the Trust has been developing a framework to ensure social workers have the right tools to support children and families. They call it the 'Stronger Families Model'. We find out more here.

Thank you so much for joining us today, Jenny and Lizzie. I believe the sheer size and diverse culture and demographic of Birmingham means that as a social worker you can start your career and develop the breadth of knowledge and skill and experience. Could you tell us how Birmingham has been able to reflect that in shaping its family safeguarding model and how it meets the needs of its population?
[0:01:12.4]

Jenny Turnross:

Well yes, Kirsty. I'll start. So this is Jenny. And I'll probably talk a little bit about the framework that we work within in Birmingham. So this is Birmingham Children's Trust. So we've been commissioned by Birmingham City Council to run children's services for children and families in Birmingham. And that's early help services, right through to all of the family support and the statutory services that sit within a usual children's services in a local authority. And we run a really big service. We look after approximately 10,000 children at any one time. We've got 2,000 staff, nearly 800 social workers who work within the Trust. So it's really important that we have an infrastructure for social workers to be able to effectively have a toolkit for practice, to ensure that for every eventuality, really, in our very diverse and heavily populated city, social workers have the best means of being supported to do the best job that they can.

So what we've been doing over the last eighteen months to two years, we've been effectively building an infrastructure that supports social work practice. And that infrastructure is now known as the 'Stronger Families Model'. So this is something that is very, very individual to Birmingham. But fundamentally what it is, after speaking to our social workers, after talking to children and their families, after talking to our early help and family support services as well, we've



recognised what those needs look like, and we've made those into reality.

Now these are not things that are new or different to what many local authorities have, but what we've done is made the connections for children and families, and we've delivered those to social workers so that they understand what fundamentally they can offer to children and families.

The most important thing that we have done is we continue to work really, really to ensure that our social workers have manageable caseloads where we think about the complexity of the children and their needs that they're looking after, and we ensure that through our recruitment and retention practice, and our learning and development practice, our social workers have a healthy caseload. In fact, our caseload average is the lowest in the region, the West Midlands region, and some of the lowest in the country. So that's really important because social workers cannot do a good job if they've got unmanageable caseloads.

But in saying that, the most important thing is that we want social workers to work in a really relationship-based way. So it's really important that relationship-based practice is at the centre of their thinking and their practice. So that means that the social worker is central to that child's journey, that child's lived experience.

But it's important that social workers are also able to draw on a number of other services. So the family drug and alcohol court, our strong family group conference offer, our safer families offer, which is an offer for newly isolated families to have somebody to befriend them. Our breaking the cycle offer, where women – and also men – have lost children through adoption. And our therapeutic offer, thinking about future parenting. The work of the practice hub as well, which is very much the learning and development, and the Trust academy. All these things are just some examples and bring together a whole package of support for social workers to be able to draw on, to practice effectively in Birmingham.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Thank you so much, Jenny, for that overview. Lizzie, how as a senior social worker is that put into practice? [0:05:16.6]

Lizzie Simpson:

So I think there's a few things, really. I think there's two sides of it. So there's the work with the families but also being supported to carry that work out. And just thinking about some of the stronger families offer that sort of Jenny was mentioning, I think there really is a strong

family group conference facility that I find...I work in the safeguarding team so I'm working with children who are on child protection plans or child and me plans and we'll hold those cases up to an interim care order. So we're trying to keep children with their families and at home when the risks levels are really high. And I think what's fantastic is we can tell there's a lot of availability in that family group conference. For every single family that I've worked with, pretty much on child protection, bar one, has been able to have a family group conference to offer that support and that stability within that family. Now actually, that one family who hasn't had that family group conference because of a lack of family network around them, has been able to be plugged into Safer Families because they're a Jamaican family, they have very little network over here in the UK, and they've now got a really good group of volunteers around them who are able to support them practically, emotionally, and have really relieved a lot of pressure on that in terms of her parenting and caring role, which was causing a lot of issues in the family home.

I think for me, the integral part about being supported to carry out the work is about the team and about the team structure. And I have got a fantastic team manager and a fantastic team of social workers around me, and it's not about doing the work in isolation because I think we all know that this job is really hard. We deal with a lot of emotional stress from others and in yourself. And so being able to work alongside others and learn from them and their practice, as well as carrying out your work individually. And particularly for me. So I finished my ASYE in October 2020, so relatively recently. So I was doing my newly qualified year in the height of the pandemic, which brings in a lot of challenges. But I didn't feel at any point unsupported. I always knew that I had a team around me that I could ring, that I could ask for help. I had social workers offering to come on visits with me when I found the content of what was going to be happening more difficult. And that's something that we've carried on being offered to each other. And we've really been able to sort of learn from each other's practice and then implement it. And I think it's those relationship-based tools that you pick up from each other that maybe you don't always see or notice when you're sort of working individually with a family.

For example, I was supporting a colleague on quite a complex matter where he was meeting a dad for the first time following his daughter being police protected. And this dad had just come out of prison and there was a lot going on, and he was really able to sort of put across to this father that he was worried about his behaviour, but also not

blaming him and sort of taking into consideration dad's worry and anxiety, and working with him in a collaborative way. And that was all very much down to his tone of voice and the way that he managed that.

And so I've been quite mindful when I've been going to work with the perpetrators of domestic abuse, how then the tone of voice, the way that you're putting that across to families is really important, and being able to then implement what I've seen modelled by my colleagues.

So just for example, I've been working with a dad at the moment who really struggles to take responsibility for his domestic violence. And so we've done quite a lot of tasks looking at the impact of domestic violence on children, and looking at it from his children's perspective. Because I really believe – and I know that this is the Trust's view as well – that parents don't want to be bad parents, they don't want to cause harm. And actually, when you put it across to parents in that child-focused way, that's the time in my opinion they're more likely to be able to reflect and see what's going on, and then engage with that support and that offer.

And there is a lot of training which has been offered. For instance, for me, something I've been really fortunate to take part in is following my ASYE I'm on the pilot scheme of a Year 2 programme, which is working towards becoming an accredited child and families practitioner, but also looking at building on your skills and the training that you get with your ASYE, but continuing to look at that in a bit more depth and going on training days and learning from colleagues, and learning from the apprentices and the care-leavers who are now working for the Trust about what good social work practice looks like, which I think is a really unique and valuable model that I'm really happy to have that learning from.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah. I mean, it sounds like it. Jenny, can you speak to the other types of specialist roles that are available to social workers that want to deepen their learning? [0:09:51.7]

Jenny Turnross:

I absolutely can, yes. So we've got the largest youth offending service in the country. So youth offending social work is a real skill in itself, and our youth offending workers work really closely with our social care social workers. So that's really an area of interest that we've really developed.

We're doing a lot of work around parenting assessment and pre-birth assessment. Lizzie herself, as a safeguarding social worker, will complete both pre-birth and parenting assessments for the courts. But actually we're trying really, really hard to move away from independent social work assessments that often, sometimes the court asks for.

So what we've done, we're just in the process of setting up – and we've already got people, actually – who are using motivational interview techniques, really specialist parenting assessments. Now again, that doesn't mean that our frontline workers are not doing that really important work. So we don't want to de-skill our staff. But actually, some of our social workers, you can move into those areas of more skill. We've got a 'no recourse to public fund' service where social workers in that space are working with our families who come and have no resource to public funding in this country. So again, really specialist work. And we've got a big unaccompanied asylum-seeking support service as well for our unaccompanied asylum-seekers. So because of the size of our organisation and the diversity we really have got many opportunities, really, for social work practice to be developed outside of the usual operating model, really.

I think the other area I'd want to reflect on as well is picking up with what Lizzie was saying around the learning and development offer, which is something we're really good at in the Trust, is getting the messages out, really, and the opportunities for learning and development.

I run a monthly webinar, a practice-focused webinar where we look at key areas of practice. We have lots of learning and development webinars where we look at policy, at practice standards. And then we follow those up with the real-life experience of social work practice. So fundamentally I will talk about the theory behind certain areas of practice, and then social workers will join the next session talking about what that means for them.

So I think really just in terms of communities of learning and communities of practice, these are areas that we feel very proud of in Birmingham. We want to give our social workers, who are doing the toughest job at the moment, particularly in terms of the pandemic, we want to give our social workers the space and the time to reflect on their learning, to think about their learning, and as Lizzie said earlier, to learn from each other really about things that work and things that don't work. I'm a qualified social worker and I think it's really important

that when you go through your learning and your training at degree level, you walk out of university, you do your ASYE, your learning doesn't stop there. So we're really, really working hard through the practice hub and through the learning academy, to build an infrastructure where learning and continuous professional development is really entrenched and engrained in the work that we do.

We've got a very, very strong NAS offer. So the accredited social work offer. We've put almost 200 of our staff already through that programme, and we had a 97% success rate. 97% of our staff passed first time. And that's a credit again to the Trust academy and our NAS coordinator, Sophie Gilbert, who really well prepared our staff.

But also it tells me that the staff in Birmingham Children's Trust are really, really well supported and well trained to do the best job that they can.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

And I think it speaks to your core values as well, collaborating and working between professionals and families. And it seems to come across in what you've, both of you, been speaking about today. [0:14:10.9]

Jenny Turnross:

Yeah. We work very hard to work with families and not against families. And I think again one of the underpinning values of the Stronger Families model is really remembering that children, regardless of the trauma that they've experienced, really should stay safely within their families or their wider families. That fundamentally is the construct of Birmingham Children's Trust, to work with families, to help them through their resilience.

We've put a number of key posts within our safeguarding services. So family support worker post. So if you're a social worker in Birmingham, you know, you can call upon a family support worker to work alongside you, to do some of the practical work that's required for some families. We've put domestic abuse workers in the front door of children's services. We've got very strong links with our housing partners so that if there are any issues around housing and temporary accommodation we can manage those safely. And we're working currently with adults to get some adult mental health workers in, in our services as well.

So what that says for us is that when we work with families – and I'm sure Lizzie'll want to say more about this – we don't just work with the child. We work with the family, the whole family. Because it's about us

really promoting resilience within parenting, within that child's own network, that's sustainable and long-term, so that families don't need our services over and over again.

Kirsty Ayakwah: And I'm sure, Lizzie, you can speak to that and the feedback that you've had from families from receiving that support. [0:15:54.2]

Lizzie Simpson: I mean, yeah. I think quite often you go in, don't you, and I think particularly for me I'm often meeting families at the point where there might have been an initial child protection conference. You know, we know that despite all workers best efforts that families are going to be feeling really worried and anxious. They're going to be thinking, 'Are you here to take away my children?' And their backs are going to be up. And for me, the key thing to do is just always take that time to listen and to hear what families' anxieties are and what their worries are. 'Cause like I said earlier, parents always, always want to do the best for their children. And so if you're able to get to a point where you can help those parents to understand why you're worried about what you're worried about, and I think particularly looking at it through the lens of the child is particularly helpful because, like I said, parents want to do what's best for their children, then you can get to a stage where you can move really positively forward.

I think there's a lot of tools and resources that are out there in Birmingham as well. For example, we work with a lot of families, and teenagers in particular, where there might be relationship breakdowns. I think particularly over the pandemic, lockdown's been, as we know, a boiling pot for a lot of the issues that we often deal with, and then it's sort of all spilled over and people sort of questioning the feasibility of their families living together. But the Families Together Plus service, which is an intensive family support service in the Trust, have really been positive at coming on board with a load of other families that we work with, and delivering really intense work with them around the relationship alongside us.

So I think there are the tools, there are services to refer to. I don't think we often are in a situation where we're thinking, 'I don't know where to go with this.' But it's always that sort of collaborative work in practice that I think is really important, and is also really encouraged as part of being a social worker for the Trust.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Well it definitely sounds really exciting working at Birmingham. And I know that we've said in the past the sheer diversity of the area means that there are a lot of different ways that you can deepen that

knowledge. Where do you see yourself going forward in terms of developing your skillset? [0:18:03.8]

Lizzie Simpson:

Yes, such a good question. To be honest, at the moment I genuinely feel really happy in safeguarding because there's the breadth of learning and experience that I get. My caseload has a diverse range of risk factors or types of families that I work with. I feel that I'm developing quite a wide range of skills due to that diversity and that breadth, and that I'm able to sort of focus in on specific areas that I'm interested in.

So for example, when I was completing my Master's I focused my dissertation on how we can effectively work with perpetrators of domestic violence to address those risk factors, and I'm now able to be the domestic abuse champion for my team as I go to specific meetings for the domestic abuse champions across the Trust and then feed that back into the team. And so I'm sort of able to develop that area of knowledge and expertise.

But I think the honest answer is where I am at in my career at the moment, having just become a senior social worker with the Trust, that I honestly feel that I'm getting the breadth of opportunity and experiences to continue developing my skillset because of how big Birmingham is, because of how diverse the community, every family looks different.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Well that is good news. Jenny, I didn't know if you wanted to comment further on that. [0:19:26.8]

Jenny Turnross:

I will comment further on that. We're very proud to have Lizzie in the Trust, and I hope that all of our other social workers and senior social workers in the Trust have the same sentiment. I guess for me the clue is in the title of my job. I'm the director of practice. So my role is to listen to our staff about things that work for them in their practice, to enable our staff to have the best tools to do their job, to be creative and innovative in our practice, and to learn as well from our staff and from children and families about things that work and that don't work.

So Lizzie's point about domestic abuse, you know, domestic abuse has been a real challenge. The number of families who have experienced domestic abuse during the pandemic has been a real concern to us. So very quickly what we've done with that is we've placed domestic abuse workers in our social work teams. We've also established a domestic abuse lead in the Trust, which is a full-time permanent role. So just thinking about those specialist roles again.



The opportunities in the Trust are really great. I've worked in local authorities for nearly 30 years, and I've never really worked in an organisation where we can truly be so innovative and really keep thinking about doing the right things for our staff so that they can provide the best offer of support to children and their families.

I'm really proud of the work that Lizzie and her colleagues do in the Trust. So I'll continue to listen and I'll continue to learn. I'll continue to run our practice forums and our learning hub. I'll continue to promote our communities of practice, where social workers and their leaders have the opportunity to talk about their practice and what practice means to them. And I will continue to drive our conversations about relationship-based practice and the importance of working in a relational way with our families, our partners and each other. And also think about going forward, the next steps for social work practice as a profession, as we come out of a pandemic, the impact of the pandemic on children and their families, and we'll be working really hard in Birmingham to influence the national care review. We have a lot of views about how the profession should be supported, and we'll absolutely, in our huge city with our many social workers, make sure that our key messages around really being proud of our profession, really being proud of the work that we do to support families, is made very, very loud and clear at every opportunity. 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 visit us at www.communitycare.co.uk. Thank you.