



## Social work in 2022 with Essex County Council

### Speakers:

- Alison Ansell, director of adult social care, Mid-Essex, and principal social worker, Essex County Council
- Michelle Hayden-Pepper, director of local delivery, West Essex children's services, Essex County Council
- Mithran Samuel, editor, Community Care

Mithran Samuel:

Hello, and welcome to a special episode of Community Care's Employer Zone Insights podcast. My name is Mithran Samuel, and in this episode we'll be zooming out to look at the key issues for social workers and social work in 2022, and looking ahead of next month's Community Care Live.

This year we're marking the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our flagship event in the profession, and for the fifth year in succession our event partner is Essex County Council, whose support is invaluable in delivering the learning, networking and experience that Live provides.

So it's entirely fitting that today I'm joined by two leaders from Essex: Michelle Hayden-Pepper, who is director of local delivery in West Essex and oversees the Essex Social Care Academy, ESCA, which is also celebrating an anniversary this year, its tenth; and Alison Ansell, director of adult social care for mid-Essex and the council's principal social worker for adults.

Michelle and Alison will be talking about where they see UK social work in children's and adults' services in the context of the national and global challenges we face, how Essex is responding to these, and about its ongoing support for Community Care Live.

So, social work is never without its challenges. From the experience of more than two years of a pandemic, which we are still living with, followed by a cost-of-living crisis, this has reached new levels. Michelle, what's it like leading and practising in social work in this context? [0:01:27.5]

Michelle Hayden-Pepper:

Well, I think it's lots of things. It's exciting because there's lots of change happening. But it's been a tough couple of years, particularly for frontline social workers, who worked tirelessly through the

pandemic. I think we've got lots of worries about the workforce, about retention, and we've got lots of people leaving the profession, so we want to keep it interesting and exciting, and use these changing times to bring new people into the profession. I think we've got a fairly tired workforce, so we're really focusing on wellbeing, taking care of our staff and developing our staff. And we'll talk to you a bit more about what Essex does and intends to do going forward.

Alison, what's your reflection on adults'? [0:02:08.3]

Alison Ansell:

Yeah, it's quite similar, Michelle. I think there are so many synergies across our workforce. I think it's been really challenging. Our workforce is so amazing, aren't they? But they're really tired. I think we absolutely recognise the importance of excellent approaches to wellbeing, as you've said, a great approach to recruitment and retention, and supporting excellent practice, which we know is really important to us across adults' and children's.

I think in adults' we also recognise our communities are really challenged. Our providers are struggling in places and we're working hard to make sure that we contact everyone we need to so that we meet our statutory responsibilities. All of those things have just been compounded by the unprecedented times we had during Covid.

So, I think for me there are times when leading in such a complex environment is challenging as a social worker and as a leader. But I know our workforce are brilliant, our providers, our partners are supportive of collaboration, and the times we've worked through I think have given us some real strength and creativity. We've seen some really creative practice from our workers. And in adult social care we've got real opportunities afforded by the new ICSs (integrated care systems) and working in neighbourhoods, so with alliances. For me, that's what makes social work so amazing. Supporting at times of adversity in a strengths-based way that's focused on assets is really what we do in adult social care, and I know so much of what you do in children's. [0:03:27.6]

Michelle Hayden-Pepper:

Absolutely. And I think, as well, we are coming out of a pandemic but we still are managing Covid, and the workforce is affected in waves by that. So that's an ongoing challenge, isn't it? [0:03:39.3]

Alison Ansell:

Definitely.

Michelle Hayden-Pepper:

And also, the cost of living. We're really seeing that impact on the families which we support, but also on our workforce. With the rise in petrol it's really affected some of our workers on their standard of living. So, we need to acknowledge that, and we're trying to find ways in which we can support them, thinking about their claiming of the mileage. And again we're still working from home some of the time, so we're trying to offer a flexible workplace so again that can keep their outgoings down. [0:04:08.0]

Mithran Samuel:

What makes the most difference to you in protecting their wellbeing, would you say? [0:04:12.7]

Michelle Hayden-Pepper:

Well, there are lots of things that we think about. We had a big focus on wellbeing. Here at Essex we have an excellent CPD offer. ESCA

is nationally known for being excellent. We offer a lot of career development. So, we allow staff to move around into different parts of the organisation to develop, rather than leave the organisation. We have reasonable caseloads so that social workers get the opportunity to stop, think, reflect and impact on their practice. We have a big focus on supervision, a lot of management oversight. And because caseloads are reasonable, people are able to take that time to really think about their practice.

We also have a lot of focus on the system. We make sure that we aren't slaves to the system, but the system works for us. And also, we have excellent support services in Essex. So, a big emphasis on early help and other support services that social workers can access for their families. So, we've spent a lot of time and development on how we can allow real social work to flourish in Essex. [0:05:12.2]

Alison Ansell:

That's right, Michelle. And so many of those things transcend across. So, wellbeing's really important to us in adults as well. We've got lots of ways, as Michelle referred to, we've got flexible work patterns for our existing staff and people who join us. We've got a wellbeing hour that people can have every week and they're encouraged to take photos and share what they do. There's lots of active support such as yoga, check-ins and team events. We've got a great focus on wellbeing on our intranet with some really good advice, information and guidance. Plus, there's some specific support services that we commission for people who are really struggling and need some additional support.

I think the other bit is we recognise success where we can. And that's one of the things that's really important to us as leaders, to recognise when people do a great job, to thank them, and to be alongside them and support them in what they're doing. I think the best bit for me as well, we had a talent show during Covid in adult social care – *Adult Social Care's Got Talent*. And actually, that had a massive morale boost for our staff, as well as us finding out quite a few talents and skills...

Michelle Hayden-Pepper:

Exactly!

Alison Ansell:

...that people had that we didn't know before. So having that approach to some light-hearted fun as well as working really professionally and supporting excellent practice is something that we try to do. [0:06:25.7]

Michelle Hayden-Pepper:

We ask the staff, don't we? I mean, we've just done a huge staff survey, and we asked staff what's important to them, and then feed it back into the system. And actually, this survey has come out better than the previous one two years ago. So, it does tell you that we are focusing much more on wellbeing and staff are noticing that. [0:06:43.0]

Alison Ansell:

I think the key bit for us as well, we had a massive boost. We got Social Work Employer of the Year last year at the awards, and that's been fantastic for our workforce and a real recognition of the effort that everyone has put into supporting our most valuable asset, which is our people. [0:06:59.3]

Michelle Hayden-Pepper: Yeah.

Mithran Samuel: That's really great to hear. So if we just move onto looking at what's going on in social work, and there is a lot, isn't there? Michelle, let's start with children's services. [0:07:08.5]

Michelle Hayden-Pepper: In my whole career, some 25 or more years, it's been the busiest year in social work. You know, we've had the national review into the murders of Arthur and Star, and then the independent review of children's social care, which is huge. It's difficult to know where we're going with this at the moment. We want to stop and reflect. We put on some workshops around the national review, and there's been a lot of press around social work, particular children's, and some quite negative media interest. So, we want to hold our staff. We know it's a difficult job, and it's even more difficult when things are out there in the press that impact when they go and visit families.

So, we put on some workshops around the national review into the murders of Arthur and Star, to just get into a dialogue with our staff about that. And as for the independent review, there are some things that really resonate with Essex. We're very big on early help, and so this is not new to us, some of this. It's how we practise.

There are other things that we're a bit more questioning, but we don't know what the DfE's response is, so we don't want to be knee-jerk. We want to think, reflect, and then we will certainly be part of any implementation of that. We do a lot of sector-led improvement work, and because of that we're very well-connected with the DfE, so any kind of implementation we will absolutely be part of. It is an exciting time. We haven't seen an independent review of children's social care for a long time. So, I think we've just got to wait and see. There has been no guarantee of how the DfE are going to implement yet, but we certainly will be at the forefront of that. [0:08:38.6]

Mithran Samuel: That's great. Have staff been fairly receptive to the thinking in both reports? [0:08:44.5]

Michelle Hayden-Pepper: Yes. I think there are some controversial bits in it, but I think what staff need to do is just think and reflect. As I say, we don't know which parts of it are going to be implemented, and once they are we will be talking about it much more. I think the national review into the murders of Arthur and Star was a very difficult read. But also, some of the outcomes are not new to other reviews that have been done, all about communication, how we work with partners. And we are doing a lot of that work already. So, I don't want to jump into anything new. We already have invested a huge amount of money in early help, and we absolutely look at our families through the lens of support. And I think that's really what the care review thinks is the right thing to do. [0:09:27.7]

Mithran Samuel: So Alison, in terms of adult services, again there's a lot in the pipeline. The government issued a white paper last year on adult social care reform, and there are the long-awaited changes to the funding system with a cap on care costs and related matters due to come into force next year. Then we've got the replacement of DoLS, the Deprivation of Liberty Safeguards, with the Liberty Protection

Safeguards. No confirmed date for that as yet. And then a change in the NHS with the introduction of integrated care systems and integrated care boards replacing clinical commissioning groups. So, what's this all meaning for you in Essex and how are you and colleagues responding? [0:10:10.2]

Alison Ansell:

Michelle and I have spoken numerous times and said that if there was a theme it would be a little bit of uncertainty. And change. And how do we lead through that change at a time when nothing else stops? We're engaged in lots of planning, reflection, and we've been using the systemic leadership training that we've all undertaken in adult social care to support us and to inform some of that thinking. We've spent a lot of time engaging on the feedback, on the Liberty Protection Safeguards. We know there are some pretty fundamental changes in there. Again, something we're doing with our children's colleagues. But really trying to understand what that might mean for our workforce, but also services we commission and our partners.

And we're also considering what we're going to have to change, if and when the care cap comes into force, as you say. That's going to be a fairly fundamental change, not just for us in social care but for our markets. And that means we're having to look at our potential demand, which is a real challenge at a time when we know there aren't lots of social workers in the market. So, all of these things we're having to think about.

It's interesting for us in Essex County Council with regards to the integrated care systems, because we're part of three ICSs as the local authority, and that adds some complexity. How do you make sure you've got an equitable offer across when you're working across a number of places? But the development of work in our neighbourhoods with our alliance partners...so with integrated care boards we focus as alliances, which is much wider than health and care. It includes our districts and boroughs, our voluntary service colleagues, but also our local businesses, our local institutions like schools, just to make sure that we do the right thing for local people.

And that's really exciting for social work. I think we know that working in a personalised and strengths-based way is really at the heart of social work, and the focus on local assets is what makes it really interesting for me. And that's the feedback I have from our workforce.

So, we've also been looking about how we're part of the alliance in an all-age way. I certainly work really closely with one of Michelle's colleagues in mid-Essex to make sure that we get the best outcomes for people. And fundamentally it feels to me that social work's at the heart of that.

So, if I were going to sum that up I'd say lots of changes, lots of uncertainty, but quite a lot of opportunities as well for us to balance, reflect on, and manage when they come into force. We're working at the moment, aren't we, in a little bit of an unknown position with regards to politics, with regards to the country and the world in general, so I think Michelle's advice about stopping, reflecting, pausing, thinking feels really important, and certainly something that we're trying to do as well. [0:12:48.9]

Mithran Samuel: I think that's good advice for everyone out there. So you mentioned the systemic leadership training that you're doing. Could you tell us a bit more about that? [0:12:56.2]

Alison Ansell: Yes. We're following the success of our children's colleagues who very much have systemic thinking at the heart of their practice. And in adult social care we've trained our service managers and we're going through a big training programme with our team managers, deputy team managers and our adult leadership team. We've commissioned some specific, focused support looking at systemic approaches and how we can start thinking in a different way. It's very easy, I think, in adult social care in particular with challenges on acute hospital discharge and those crisis, emergency positions like market failure, to not think in a systemic way. And for us, having time as a leadership team to focus on systemic models, systemic practice and bring us back to thinking in a different way, and questioning in a different way, has been absolutely brilliant. And it also means we've got a language that transcends across our workforce into children's.

Michelle Hayden-Pepper: Yeah, I think that in children's we're slightly further ahead. So, there was a big focus quite a few years ago to offer training to every single team manager. We feel that team managers, they're crucial in holding the workforce. So, we felt that it was really important to really invest in that line of staff so they could then deliver that systemic supervision and think about children and families in that more systemic way.

And then ESCA is adults' and children's, so we felt there were lots of things that we were delivering that we could share with our adult colleagues. And then, as Alison said, we have a shared language. And we do it right the way through now. So, we do systemic practice and systemic leadership and systemic supervision. So, there's a big, big investment in developing our staff, because that is our practice model. So really thinking about, 'What's the impact of the work when you join the system? How does that change?' And we are agents of change in social work, so we want workers to think about that. And using that as a tool in supervision has been hugely beneficial, and the feedback from the workforce has been really positive. [0:14:51.1]

Mithran Samuel: You've both mentioned a couple of times how in Essex you're very much a believer in social work as a single profession, rather than something that's sort of divided by age between children's and adults'. It would be great to hear a bit more about how you make a reality of this. So Alison, would you be able to tell us a bit more about that? [0:15:08.7]

Alison Ansell: Yeah, absolutely. So, it feels really important to recognise the commonalities and the shared values that we have in social work across our children's and adults' services. I think we've mentioned that shared language, but also one way we do it is certainly through our social care academy. It's really important that anything that's great, that we share.

Michelle Hayden-Pepper: We share.

Alison Ansell: And there are maybe some small tweaks or additions that we need for separate workforce groups, but actually there's a real commonality in that single approach that ESCA can bring to us.

We've also underpinned that with some of our approaches. We've got a social care capability framework that all of our staff work on. There isn't a different one for children's or adults'. We know that a social worker is a social worker. And we link really closely in with the PCF (professional capabilities framework) as well as our values and behaviours. So, we do a lot together on the social care capability framework.

Again, things like apprenticeships, we very much make sure that people do their placements across children's and adults', even if they've worked for us before in one particular area, to make sure we've got that commonality across. And I think Michelle's already said about some shared CPD examples. But there are some great ones. So, if you think, equality development and inclusion, all of those things actually transcend across our service areas, so it feels really important that when we look at diversity we look at it across our workforce.

For me, I think the learning from each other's invaluable. And actually, that's what helps us to develop as individuals, teams and services. [0:16:34.6]

Michelle Hayden-Pepper: Yeah, and I think also it sets a value base that we can work closely together. You know, when we're working with children and families there are adults in those families that sometimes are involved with adult social care, and we want social workers to be able to link up and work together and see the whole family, rather than just that single person. So doing these things, first of all, creates some good relationships, allows our workforce to co-create, and then people feel able to go to their colleagues and talk about families if they are concerned or if they want some advice, even. That's what we're delivering to the people of Essex, regardless of whether you're an adult or a child. So, we want that much more joined-up. And we model that by working closely together as a leadership team as well. [0:17:19.3]

Mithran Samuel: Community Care Live is all about the profession of social work as a single profession, and the support of Essex in delivering the event, planning the event, is invaluable. Michelle, can you tell me about why Essex supports Community Care Live and what you see its value as being for social work? [0:17:35.1]

Michelle Hayden-Pepper: Well, I think we've had a longstanding relationship with Community Care Live. It's always a really great event. We run masterclasses. As I said, we're very involved in sector-led improvement. So, we have lots of ideas and things that we roll out that we want to share with the profession. We also want to attract people to social work and to Essex, and to talk about what our model is. So, it's really important that we are part of the event, and that adults' and children's are both part of that.

So, this year we're putting on some great masterclasses. We've got one on supervision, and this is really sharing some of the learning that we've had over time. You know, Essex went from inadequate right the way through to outstanding, so we've been on a whole journey with Ofsted and with our workforce, and we take that feedback. So, supervision's absolutely crucial and, as I say, we invested hugely on that line management in order that social work practitioners get really good quality supervision.

We're doing another masterclass on thinking tools. So, these are fairly small sheets that just get you thinking about, for example, doing a pre-birth assessment. We've got quite a young workforce. We've got a lot of people coming through that maybe only started work during Covid, and so we need to give them the confidence and the skills. And sometimes these thinking tools assist when they're doing certain types of work, whether that's an assessment or they're working particularly with mental health. So, these thinking tools are really great, and we're happy to share them and talk about them.

And then the other one we're doing is OT in children and families. So really exciting. We've got some really good things that we can share and talk about, and we want to get into a dialogue with the whole workforce and social workers as a profession, and get that feedback about where it's going and what we're doing.

I think this year at Community Care Live is going to be really exciting because as you say, hopefully we'll have something around what's the outcome of the care review, where are we going with it, what's the implementation. So, I think, yeah, we're going to have some really good discussions at Community Care Live this year. [0:19:28.6]

Mithran Samuel:

Brilliant. Alison?

Alison Ansell:

To put in a push, really, for our masterclasses as well. So, you've heard us talk about systemic practice. That's one of our masterclasses in adult social care. And I'm really proud that we've got a masterclass on our quest on race and allyship. So that's going to be delivered by a group of frontline staff who've volunteered to step away from their day job for five weeks and really dig deep into racism, race in our profession, and also how we can look at allyship. So as the sponsor of that, I'm really excited to be able to share that with colleagues.

And again, it's lovely to invite occupational therapists this year. So, our OT session is going to be on learning disability and autism. So, we're sure that people will be really interested to come and join us. We're really excited to be able to share some of the great work that's been going on, and practice that we're so very proud of. I think we'd both love every social worker to come and join us at Community Care Live. Come and see us at our stand, but also come to the masterclasses. We're really keen to talk to people. [0:20:29.9]

Mithran Samuel:

Fabulous. Well, thank you both for joining me today. It's been a real pleasure hearing your thoughts on social work, Essex and our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary Community Care Live. So just to let everyone know, the event takes place on 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> October 2022 at the Business



Design Centre in Islington, North London. Please do find out more about the event at [www.communitycarelive.co.uk](http://www.communitycarelive.co.uk) and if you've not already done so, please do register for your place, which is free to social workers or social work students, occupational therapists, local authority workforce staff and teams, managers and directors. We look forward to seeing you all there. Thank you.

Michelle Hayden-Pepper: Thank you.

Alison Ansell: Thank you.