

Wiltshire Employer Zone Podcast

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Hello, and welcome to Employer Zone Insights, a Community Care podcast where we speak to social workers and senior leaders about practice, training and how their experiences are shaping their offer of support to families, adults and children.

I'm Sharmeen Ziauddin, a career editor here at Community Care. In this episode we speak to Fiona Hayward, who has been a social worker for twenty years and currently serves as the principal social worker at Wiltshire Council. Fiona has worked for Wiltshire since 2008, and she describes her role as her dream job, promoting best practice and celebrating the profession.

And joining her is Cameron Drais, a child and youth voice worker also at Wiltshire Council. Cameron has been with the council for over two years. Being care-experienced himself, he is passionate about ensuring the best outcomes for young people across Wiltshire and making sure their voices are heard.

In 2020, Wiltshire's children's services changed the way they wrote up reports, after feedback from children and young people, avoiding using jargon to make reports more sensitive and thoughtful. Now their expertise are published in a book called *Principles of Practice*. The book chapter, Ways of Writing, gives examples of writing in a variety of scenarios, discusses its impact, and is a resource for students and practitioners alike. Fiona collaborated with Cameron and other young people to write this chapter.

Welcome to the both of you. First of all, can I ask how the two of you met and why you came together to write Ways of Writing? [0:01:37.2]

Fiona Hayward: Yes. It was several years ago now. So I put an email advert out to practitioners calling for young people to come forward and do a piece of work with me, 'cause I was really concerned that our paperwork and perhaps the way we wrote we needed some intervention and feedback from children and young people. And Cameron came along.

Cameron Drais: Yeah, so I heard about it through my personal advisor whilst I was at university, and I liked the sound of it. I thought it'd be a great opportunity to feed back my views.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay, fantastic. What are the main take-aways for social workers from the guidance you wrote? And how does it differ from traditional ways of case recording? [0:02:21.8]

Fiona Hayward: Ah yes. Really good question. Oh my gosh, it's so different. For a start, the practitioner writes directly to the child. So that is totally different. And we used to write in a way that was really strangely jargonistic. We would pinch little bits from the police and perhaps health, and then develop this really strange way of writing that almost

wasn't social work. And then if somebody came along, you know, I don't know, an alien came along or from another planet you would have no idea what we were talking about. So that was, I suppose, the first major part, writing to children.

It was always written in third-person. It wasn't really written to anybody. In a way it wasn't written to the parents or children. It was just sort of hanging there, really.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

So apart from the jargon and writing to the child, have there been any changes in the language other than sort of making it a bit simpler?
[0:03:21.6]

Fiona Hayward:

Yeah, very much so. In Wiltshire, one aspect of social work that's really important to us is trauma-informed. So the idea is that we look under the surface at perhaps the way a family or a child might be presenting to us. We don't just write the facts. We kind of look underneath that. So we're far more therapeutic and psychological, in a way.

So for example, you wouldn't write, 'Jimmy was really angry today when the headteacher said, "Blah, blah, blah."' You would go further and look underneath that and think, 'I wonder if...I wonder perhaps...'
So you'd make connections. So it's much more therapeutic.

I mean, there are so many aspects of change. And I think it sort of really helps with ownership as well. It helps with social workers' confidence, and of course our family key workers and PAs. So it's not just social workers alone. But it helps social workers...you know, we're dealing with really emotive subjects and they have to kind of own that. And by writing in this way it helps them to connect with what they're really doing every time and the impact that is having on the family, on the children. So that helps with empathy, advocacy, and just being really, really sensitive to families. We know you might have done this ten times as a practitioner, but for a family they're going through it once.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Cameron, as a care-experienced person, had you read things in your notes that upset you in the past? [0:04:57.4]

Cameron Draisay:

Yes, absolutely. And that was why again it was so empowering to be part of this Child Champions group which Fiona set up. It almost set it as a role reversal whereby myself and other young people had the chance to feed back and scrutinise professionals on the way they write to us and the way they kind of set up meetings and the way they kind of talk to any young people in any way. So it was a way to kind of really feed back my thoughts on that. And personally, from my case recordings there were a lot of things that I read that were vague. And when they're vague it's hard as a young person to really get to grips with your past, because case recordings are so essentially in kind of that trauma recovery, being able to read them, to really delve into your past. And obviously what professionals write is the only true reflection you might get of some big life event.

For me, a lot of it was when it was written quite vaguely about things like, for example, I'm going to read out a couple of quotes. So one of them stated, 'Cameron and his brother initially wrote to the judge with

support from the school to inform that they loved their parents but they are not being cared for appropriately.' So this is one example where it was a bit upsetting in the sense that I had worked with a lot of people at the school. So that was very vague in saying 'the school'. Like, who on earth was that in the school? A lot of young people work with many different people in the school scene, so it could be the school nurse, the pastoral support. So it's important to specify exactly who that is. So I can't remember their name but Mrs Smith, for example, helped generate those memories for young people. And then 'appropriately' is a term that is again...it's so broad. What's appropriate for one person, to another – or one family to another – is very different. So it's important as professionals to specify. So for young people reading back, they can really get to grips with what actually happened to them.

Just to show you the great impact the new way of writing has, I'm going to read to you a nice extract from my personal advisor. So I'm hoping that you'll be able to hear in this the kind of empowerment by writing to the young person. So this one states, 'Cam, you continue to take Sertraline 100mg on a daily basis. This is to manage your anxiety. You reported that you would like to slowly reduce the amount you are taking. I advise you to consult with the GP around this so that this can be done in a manageable and controlled way, and you agreed this was a great idea, and we chatted about how positive it is that you feel you are ready to do this.'

So this was very empowering for me to read. It still covers all the professional advice in there, like the advice to consult the GP so this is done in a manageable way. And then it just has that praise in there as well. So this is just an extract but the professional would then go on to talk about how far I'd come. So I'd got into university, I was doing well at uni, and I wanted to reduce the Sertraline dosage because I was feeling a lot more comfortable, my anxiety had reduced. So it's just really empowering to read as a young person, to see this on papers years down the line. And it really does reflect those one-on-one conversations I had with her.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Sensitivity and having empathy and, you know, speaking to the child or the young person can make such a difference. That's really useful, actually. How has Wiltshire embedded this way of writing in their practice? And how have social workers at Wiltshire responded?
[0:08:54.3]

Fiona Hayward:

I think they've done really well, actually. I think it would be fair to say that with really large organisations like local authorities it's actually quite difficult to embed things. And I think the key to our success was social workers' responses, practitioners' responses in how much they loved it. But also we've used expert practitioners within the local authority. So it is quite easy to get some famous or, you know, amazing company in to do a session of training for all the staff, then they disappear, all the staff are left. You have new recruits, students. They don't know. And then gradually it is just a few people who end up practising like that and it just disappears. We see that so many times, don't we, in big organisations? But the fact that Cameron got on board, we designed the training together, a family key worker, Cameron myself and a social worker, and we've got a really tight

group, the four of us. And we designed the training and deliver it across our children's services about every three months now, don't we? It was more frequent at the beginning but it's now less frequent. And it's a requirement. It's mandatory. And we can pick that up, for example, through progressions. Staff need to evidence that they're writing in this way or they don't progress. Also through our auditing process. We have a section where we're looking at case notes or just assessing in general writing in general, and is this a feature.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah, 'cause that's actually really interesting because I'm wondering, are social workers given any official training during their degrees or their ASYE about case recording? Or is it something that is just sort of assumed they'll know how to do? [0:10:43.9]

Fiona Hayward: That's a really good question, actually. I think it's rammed home. It's sort of in our DNA, the importance of case notes and what they're for, how frequently, how often, how quickly you should put them on the system. You know, all that sort of stuff. But you're absolutely right. I'm not sure they study how or what should be included particularly, actually. I'm not sure that is. So that's a really good question.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So are service users always entitled to see their case notes? Because I wouldn't have thought that many of them know that they're entitled to or they have access to. So is this something that they can do any time? [0:11:30.0]

Fiona Hayward: I think you're right. And I suppose I'm sitting here thinking, 'Ooh, is that the parents or is that the young person?' So I suppose when children are under eighteen parents could ask to see. They certainly get assessments and certain documents. But I would question how frequently parents actually ask that.

As I say, there are certain documents that are written about their family, so they would get copies of those. But in terms of...what do you think, Cameron, in terms of documents? I think it's a bit case-by-case, myself. What do you think?

Cameron Draisy: Yeah, definitely. For me as a young person I found it quite easy. I had a good relationship with my personal advisor, so she talked me through the process. And I simply just emailed data protection and then they responded very quickly and they kept me updated as to kind of the progress they'd made and then when they were going to send them back by. So it was really easy and I got access to them quite promptly, really.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: What has been the impact of writing in this new way on Wiltshire's children and families? Has there been an impact? [0:12:43.2]

Fiona Hayward: Yeah, I think there has. Some of the impact has been, in a way, not what we expected. I think our focus at the beginning was all on the children, obviously, that we want young people to come forward and look at their files. You know, it's filling in those narrative gaps. Perhaps if children have been separated we want to make sure there's that sort of therapeutic link.

But I think what we didn't quite appreciate was the impact on parents or families. We've had occasions where, by seeing it written the way it

is, it serves as lightbulb moments for families. 'Cause there's something about when it's written to your child and you're seeing the impact you think, 'Oh my God, that's something to do with me. I'm partly responsible for that.' So it has helped change.

And then another beautiful area, and an example I can think of is where a social worker wrote the most lovely account of a mum with her baby in hospital before they were separated. And it was just...showed the warmth, the love, the emotions and just, you know, you can imagine being somebody who's grown up, perhaps adopted, and then they go back and read these notes and see that they were loved, that just because children might be separated from their families it doesn't mean...this sounds a bit weird. I was going to say it doesn't mean they're bad parents, you know. You can still love your children but not be able to take care of them. And I think sometimes we can really lose sight of that.

So I think therapeutically...and if you think of perhaps children who might be in foster care or even adopted, if you're reunited later in life, what a wonderful way of knowing that your parents loved you and, you know, did want to keep you but there were circumstances that made that really difficult.

So they're some of the areas that have really pleasantly surprised us.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Do you think this way of writing has helped families change their perception of social workers? [0:14:44.2]

Fiona Hayward:

Yeah, I think it must have done. I mean, certainly what we're finding on the training – and Cameron will say what he thinks – we're getting feedback that staff are really passionate. They really love it. We were only in a meeting the other day and a social was saying, 'I love this way of writing.' Because I think it's like the knock-on effect. I think you think more about what you're saying and what you're writing, so then you're more relational, you're more...you think about being respectful and using sensitive language all the time. And that must have an impact on the relationship with parents because they will probably be able to understand your assessing, your reasoning better. And it's almost like a therapeutic experience for the parents as well.

Cameron Drais:

From my perspective and the work I do as a youth voice worker, speaking to some of the other practitioners – some ASYEs, for example – I was speaking to them only the other day, and they were saying how great it was to...they might see a situation. Obviously as social workers we appreciate you can sometimes experience some tough things. So for them to be able to go away – and this is what they were telling me – going away and being able to write that in such an empathetic way to the young person helped them as well. So it's going to help the young person in the long-term but as a practitioner, if you've experienced something difficult, writing it in such a way can help you to kind of get to grips with it more and really help you to kind of delve into how you're going to be able to help this young person.

Fiona Hayward:

I totally agree. Totally agree, Cameron. And there was some more feedback that staff have given us, is that when you're doing something really difficult and really horrible, it's a human temptation to

avoid telling the truth. That sounds really weird, doesn't it? Or ironic, really. So because you don't want to hurt the child anymore you sort of slightly make things up or don't really quite tell the truth, just to make them feel better. But of course we know it doesn't work. So actually, by writing like this the social worker is forced to say, for example, 'Your mum is really struggling with becoming sober. I'm really worried that because of this...' You know, that sort of writing is so sensitive and so...and the parents can read that and not feel judged. And it helps the social worker to really write down, 'Alright, what am I worried about?' and not skirt around the edges. And then of course that will help them in practice as well, when they're doing home visits, talking to children about some event that's going to happen. You know, it's not always removing children or separating children from their families. It can be any scenario. It almost helps them to deal with those home visits as well.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And has this practice been acknowledged by other authorities and the wider sort of other agencies that you work with? Have they taken interest in it? [0:18:01.4]

Fiona Hayward: Yeah, definitely. And certainly when I first saw it, it was a few years ago. We were in a peer challenge, and it was an independent reviewing officer that had written a letter to the child. And it was like, 'Wow! God, I've never seen anything like that before.' So that was my inspiration. And then obviously we found out more about it. But I know of other authorities who have tried and given up. They sort of haven't been able to sustain it. I've certainly spoken to other authorities who are like, 'Oh yes, we really need to do that. We really need to change that aspect of our practice.'

And I think one of the areas why local authorities can fall down and stop doing it is around risk, this idea that if you're writing to the child you're going to dumb it down and you're going to muddy the waters and you're not going to talk about the risks. And actually, it's not true. We've proven that. And I think our really good guidance, with examples, particularly around areas around risk has sort of given our practitioners confidence that, 'No, I can, I can write about this.' And now managers are behind it as well. 'Cause some of the managers were sort of slightly worried that, you know, as time's gone on, Cameron and I, we found that, you know, staff can be very clear on the risks. Yeah, so we're really pleased.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I mean, it does take a long time to change the something that you're used to doing. And it will take time for it to filter out, you know, to the rest of the world.

Fiona Hayward: Definitely.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: But outside of Wiltshire and other authorities, some authorities have similar things. But it's great that now you have it as part of a book and it's there in print as guidance for anybody who wants to take that on board and really use the examples that you've given to change their practice. But yeah, these things take time. [0:19:59.0]

Fiona Hayward: Yeah, absolutely. And I was speaking to a...we were in a workshop the other day, weren't we Cameron? And a social worker from the

health...she works in the health discipline, and obviously a very much medical model, not social model. They absolutely do not write like this. And she's going to go away and see if we can visit her team and they introduce it to their team. So you know, fantastic.

Cameron Draisay:

Yeah, absolutely. It'd be great to kind of spread the word, really, and make sure we hit as many young people as possible, like that positive impact. Just to sum it up nicely, so some feedback we've had from our Wiltshire children-in-care council, of one young person who captured it in a phrase, which I think is absolutely fantastic. And they simply said, 'It feels like we're being talked with, rather than about,' which is so important because they feel like they are at the heart of the conversation, they're being authors of their own story as opposed to feeling like there's a group of professionals just talking about them and making decisions on their behalf. They really feel like the new way of writing captures how they're feeling, has their views in their clearly, and it shows a lot more empathy from staff when they're making these very important decisions about their life.

Fiona Hayward:

Excellent. That's really powerful.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Thank you. I really admire the work you're doing and I wish you all the best with your children and families in Wiltshire. And I think it is helping to create a more positive perception of social workers generally. In the long-term I can see that happening. So thank you again.

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