

Essex County Council: Embedding anti-racist practice

Kirsty Ayakwah: 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 children, families and adults.

My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, senior careers editor at Community Care, and this episode is brought to you in collaboration with Essex County Council. Essex County Council is our event partner for Community Care Live in London on 10th and 11th October 2023, and we're excited to share that Antonia Ogundayisi, who is the service manager for anti-racist practice for children and family social care at the council, will be one of our panellists, discussing embedding anti-racist practice on day one of our event.

If you can't wait until then, we have three exciting members of Essex County Council's adult social care team, who discuss why embedding anti-racist practice is a priority for the council. We speak to Alison Ansell, director of adult social care at mid-Essex, deputy manager Ganiyat Asiegbu, and development manager for race Phil Chiza, who both work in adult social care at mid-Essex. They explain why this work is leading to visible transformation in how social workers and managers tackle incidents of racism. We start with some introductions. [0:01:33.5]

Alison Ansell: Hi. My name's Alison Ansell. I'm the director of adult social care in mid-Essex. [0:01:39.3]

Ganiyat Asiegbu: Hi. My name's Ganiyat Asiegby. I'm one of the deputy team managers in adult social care in mid-Essex. [0:01:46.3]

Phil Chiza: And hi. My name is Phil Chiza. I'm the development manager for race in adult social care. [0:01:52.7]

Kirsty Ayakwah: Brilliant. Thank you so much for coming to speak to us on this episode. What I wanted to do before we started to talk about embedding anti-racist practice in Essex County Council was just to define what anti-racism means, and the difference between non-racist practice. Phil, could I ask you to expand on that? [0:02:13.6]

Phil Chiza: For me, these two are different. You know, being non-racist is seeing things and having thought about it and not acting upon what you're seeing. And being anti-racist, as you know, it's an action word or it's a verb. You know, you need to see things and then act upon them and make sort of strides towards addressing the issues around race and what you've witnessed and trying to make considered changes around that.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So why did you feel it was important to distinguish between those two when tackling the embedding of anti-racism? [0:02:51.0]

Phil Chiza: For me, I think what happens most of the time in the workplace or in practice is we see things and we hear things and we expect someone else to do it. So I think the key for me was around, you know, taking that ownership, like everyone, every team colleague will need to start doing something to make that change to address racism.

So personally, when the call came out around, you know, the work around the Quest, I saw the call from our leadership team and then I decided, 'You know what? I'm not going to wait for anyone else to do this.' I took the chance and volunteered myself to say, 'We need to create that change. And the best person to create that change is myself, from that lived experience. So I'll be able to highlight some of the issues and the barriers, and come up with, you know, the suggestions that I feel are necessary to bring about that change, which is anti-racism.'

Kirsty Ayakwah: Brilliant. And Alison, did you want to build on what Phil just said? [0:04:03.2]

Alison Ansell: Yeah. I think it always inspires me to hear Phil speak because every time he says it, it just makes me think more about the importance. And I think what Phil said about collective and individual responsibility is really important. I recognise I'm in a position of privilege as a white female leader here at Essex County Council and as a social worker. So I've always had a focus on anti-discriminatory practice. But I think what I chose to do was step forward and really start actively listening. Not actively listening to respond but to understand. And really take that responsibility to educate myself.

So I started reading different things, listening to different podcasts, watching different videos. And I think probably more fundamentally using that time and energy to make sure that I became educated and reflective in my approaches by listening to my colleagues who were not necessarily in the position to have the same privilege.

I very much saw it as an activity that I had to take personal responsibility for, and also encourage my colleagues to do the same. It's so important, I think, to role-model. Not for me to do it for someone to say thank you, but for me to do it because it's the right thing to do alongside my colleagues. And that focus on our-ship really resonated with me and made it really important that I can stand alongside and behind my colleagues and make sure that I can remove some of those blockages. And I can only do that if I understand from their perspective, from their words, from their experience something that I haven't experienced. But I want to stand with them in order to be the agent of some of that change.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah. Absolutely. I know that there were a few catalysts for that change to happen, and I wonder if Ganiyat, you could maybe elucidate on some of those? [0:06:09.7]

- Ganiyat Asiegbu: Of course. I think one of the main catalysts was around when the George Floyd incident happened. I think a lot of local authorities... I mean, I work for Essex County Council. They had to have that difficult conversation. But I think for me the most significant one that I experienced and noticed was the change in our leadership when we had a new director, Alison Ansell, come in. Because obviously in the past we've spoken about anti-racist practice but I haven't – I might be wrong – but I haven't physically seen somebody who's picked that up from early onset and looking to actually lead by example. So that was one of the major catalysts for me. That's what I experienced. A change in leadership, willingness to listen and then act on what was being said. And all of the things that Alison did mention earlier on when she started working [unclear – 0:07:04.5] was people seeing a familiar face, people knowing and hoping that they can achieve certain things. And she sat in on one of our conversations. She had to examine herself to see where she might have practised unconscious bias, and I think it was a lot for somebody to have that accountability and own up to having, you know, that kind of privilege. So yeah, that was one of the major events for me.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah. And that is really powerful 'cause it's an act of vulnerability, isn't it, Alison, if you're having to reflect? Yeah. [0:07:38.6]
- Alison Ansell: Yeah. I suppose it is. But what's so important is to recognise when you get it wrong, recognise when you've done things in a clumsy way. And the only way you can recognise that is actually to ask your colleagues around you. It's a gift, isn't it, to get that feedback?
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah.
- Alison Ansell: You know, from my perspective, to be able to be open to colleagues and say, you know, 'Help me to understand this more. Help me to get this right.' You know, that becomes then a two-way process for a conversation of learning.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: And I think Phil mentioned the Quest, so I think that's a good opportunity for you to talk about how that happened, because it was a sort of a fact-finding mission, wasn't it? [0:08:25.1]
- Phil Chiza: Yeah. In a way, Ganiyat's talked about George Floyd, and a lot of organisations suddenly started to think about these issues. But this has always been happening. And you know, for our organisation, you know, our corporate leadership team, they endorsed a set of ten recommendations, and one of them was created these listening forums. And our function, we decided to embark on this journey called the Quest, whereby a set of about ten volunteers were called upon to come and, you know, not only talk about these issues and discuss, you know, in these listening forums, but also have an idea in terms of, 'How can we bring about that change?' Talking is not enough.
- So for me, because of that I decided to join the Quest and say, you know, 'What is it that we need to be doing as an organisation?' and that willingness as well from our leadership team to release us from our day jobs, I think that was key as well. So the Quest was around

that, you know, that initial commitment from our leaders and our leadership team to say, 'You know what? Let's sit down and let's work this out together and see what sort of difference we can bring about to colleagues.'

Kirsty Ayakwah:

So could you explain to us in a bit more detail about when you were being released from your sort of day-to-day job, what was your day like and how were you finding this information? What were you finding? [0:10:01.2]

Phil Chiza:

Yeah. So what I started doing is I did find the people we needed to speak to, whatever their level in the organisation. We left no stone unturned to find out, you know, what are these, you know, these barriers? What are these issues that we need to be thinking about?

And at the end of the third or fourth week we had some things which were common themes around recruitment and retention, about progression, you know, the language and culture that we have as an organisation. And for there, we then came up with a set of recommendations to say, 'You know what? This is a vast and broad topic but we need to concentrate on certain areas that we can bring about the change.'

Besides that, we're still working on other areas as well. So as you know, issues around race and racism, they're all ongoing. It's a long journey. There's no simple bullets around this, you know. So change is still happening. Sometimes it's slow, sometimes it's frustrating, but as long as we are heading in the right direction.

So we understood from the beginning what the Quest is all about, you know. It wasn't just a tick-box exercise. We were in it for the, you know, long-haul.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Okay. So I know that, for example, some of those workforce issues may have been around promotion. Maybe that was one of the things that was spoken about. I think Ganiyat, you can expand on that? [0:11:36.6]

Ganiyat Asiegbu:

To be honest, before the change in leadership, prior to Covid as well, it felt that black workers had to work x5 to be recognised at all. So it felt like there was no advantage, and again there was no one that you saw that represented you in leadership, that would make you hope or aim that you could achieve that as well.

Sometimes it felt like if you were applying for a senior role as a black social worker, you had to have already acquired the skills, the knowledge, ability and already be performing before you were considered. But then on the other hand with our white colleague, it felt that they were allowed to learn on the job.

So I think at some point I think a lot of black workers were not even interested in seeking promotion. So that was one of the major issues that I experienced and saw colleagues experience prior to Covid and changing leadership.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So you had direct experience of that happening to you? [0:12:36.3]

Ganiyat Asiegbu: Yes, I had.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Are you alright to explain a bit more about what your situation is? [0:12:41.5]

Ganiyat Asiegbu: Of course. I joined Essex County Council with eight years post-qualified experience already, in 2014. And it actually took about, I think, five attempts before I was able to be promoted. And in that time I had seen people who were students within my team who had gone into senior roles even before I... So it almost felt like I had to push, push until I could no longer be ignored. That's how I felt at the time.

And that kind of discouraged everybody else from applying for senior roles. And even speaking out was a problem. People felt there was no point. When you make so much noise then you just get little crumbs. And as I said previously, you know, let's gather all the little crumbs and make it a loaf. Or let's act and speak up and follow up, you know. Things will not be done and things might not change. So that was my experience seeing people that I contributed to their training, people that I supported got the job but still had to be supported by me. But that was quite demoralising.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So what was the trigger for change for you, in your experience? [0:13:57.5]

Ganiyat Asiegbu: I think for me, I got fed up. And we had lost a lot of social workers, black social workers, in Essex County Council who were resigning, but because of the fear of consequences they spoke out. When they left, when they resigned, they would just say, 'Oh, I'm seeking better opportunities elsewhere.' But I was getting phone calls late at night of people complaining about how they felt and why they were really leaving.

So like I said, I felt something had...somebody had to speak out, something had to be done, and I was going to damn all consequences. But then what was more encouraging was the change in leadership. So that kind of encouraged me as well to speak up. But I think the most important thing was I had just had enough. I was at the point of resigning and actually got another job, but then I thought, 'No, I'm not going to go because of this. I'm going to go for something else. It wouldn't be because I'm black and I didn't feel supported.'

Kirsty Ayakwah: Did you have some senior leaders, though, that maybe encouraged you? [0:14:57.7]

Ganiyat Asiegbu: I did. I think by the time it was kind of the third time that I had applied, by the time the role that I'm in now, when the advert came out the first person that approached me was actually a manager from another team, who had approached me to say, 'Oh Gani, I've seen what you do in your team and I'd like you to apply for this role.' And it actually took a lot of encouragement because at that time I said I was done, I wasn't going to apply again. And then my team manager at the time

also said, 'Oh, I feel that you should apply for this post.' And my colleagues as well encouraged me to go for it. So that was, yeah, that's why I went for the post.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Okay, brilliant. And now you're deputy team manager, aren't you?
[0:15:37.3]

Ganiyat Asiegbu: Yes.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So I'm interested to know how that example, because of Quest you're able to now pick that information and use it for supporting other social workers. Who can...? [0:15:49.0]

Phil Chiza: From what, you know, Ganiyat said, these were familiar stories that we were hearing. And you asked us, you know, how do we go about that. So initially we looked at the data that we have, you know, as an organisation, and really interrogated it to say, you know, 'Why is it that at certain levels, for example, in the organisation there isn't representation? What can we do about that?' So you know, this glass ceiling that has been created, we wanted to address that, you know, to address that imbalance. And that was supported by, you know, stories like what Ganiyat is saying. And we had quite a lot more in terms of, you know, around cherry-picking and, you know, not being passed on for training, for example, opportunities. So in Essex what we are trying to do is actually we need to have sort of targeted programmes to make sure that all these things are addressed. And not only at an individual level but, you know, throughout the organisation.

So the Quest, as I say, it gave us that opportunity really to say, 'You know what? At certain grades there isn't any representation.' Like if you look at other organisations, it's snowy white peaks, for example, which is quite familiar in the NHS and other organisations. So in Essex, what we are doing now is to redress that imbalance. And part of that is the Quest. We are looking at, for example, inclusive interview panels whereby we're having colleagues sit on that panel with a clear mandate into looking at how can we address some of these issues to address this imbalance. And we are proud to say, you know, this has been launched quite recently this month, and after a few months I think we are going to come back and look at the data to see if there's any movement. If not, why not?

And then I think it's a continual learning to make sure that we don't have a lot more stories like what you've just heard. But also I think we need to have, you know, the good news stories as well around progression. Because if you continue sharing these positive and good stories, we will encourage other people to join the organisation, saying you know, 'Essex is the best place to work. And I feel included and I belong here.' And the more people you see smashing that glass ceiling, I think it will encourage a lot more people as well to apply for these roles. And if you can see it, you can be it, which is what we're promoting.

- Kirsty Ayakwah: I mean, can I ask about breakdowns in terms of demographic? Are there any stats that you're able to share with us about how many people make up particular communities in Essex? [0:18:42.2]
- Alison Ansell: Yes. So I can give you a little bit. So as a county, Essex is not a particular diverse county.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Okay.
- Alison Ansell: But it's becoming more diverse. So it's about 85% white as a county. However, what we've recognised is there are specific areas where ethnic minority groups are certainly developing, where communities are developing, where we need to actually work more specifically in those areas.
- Within adult social care as well, we actually attract quite a high proportion of ethnically diverse staff. So our newly qualified social worker programme this year, about 30% of colleagues within that programme are black or minority ethnic staff. So it's really important as an organisation that we have an eye on our communities but also an eye on our workforce, and make sure that those proportions aren't blocked at different levels within our organisation if we really want to develop that inclusivity. I don't know. Ganiyat, do you want to add to that? [0:19:51.1]
- Ganiyat Asiegbu: Yeah. I was going to expand on what Alison had said and what Phil has said as well. First, Alison. In terms of the increase to do with black and ethnic minorities, it's actually a massive increase. I mean, I've noticed a difference. Prior Covid, in [0:20:07.8], I doubt if we were up to 20. And now there's...obviously I don't have all the statistics but I walk into the office and a lot of familiar faces, I think probably x5 the increase, I would say, compared to before.
- And then going back to what Phil was saying around interviewing as well, after the Quest, I think that was when Phil's post was created, we would ensure that we had a black manager in every interview, especially senior interviews. And that on its own created a lot of hope for black people. I've had a lot of people come to me and say, you know, 'If Phil is in the interview then I know, even though he's just one black person, but then I know that I stand a chance, and I know that if I don't get the job it's because I didn't do well enough.' So I've said this to Phil before. I don't think even he realised how much hope his role creates for people. Yeah.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Phil, did you realise that? [0:21:03.9]
- Phil Chiza: Well I didn't but, you know, as I say, when I joined Quest, you know, I took that, you know, that decision to say, 'You know what? If you don't speak up, if you don't say anything, no one will.' So I think that's what we need to be doing or creating, you know, this anti-racist, anti-discriminatory environment and, you know, making sure that we give people the opportunity to progress, to flourish. Because once we have that sense I think it also means you'll be able to deliver a little bit more, in terms of the work that you're doing. Because you feel that

you're part of that organisation and you're not an outsider. So if you've got, you know, all those...that recognition and like what Ganiyat is saying, that chance to say, 'You know what? It's that inspiration I think that's what we need to create in the workplaces.'

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah. And Alison, I believe that you were involved in some reverse mentoring, weren't you? Yeah, I don't know if you can talk a little bit more about that. [0:22:15.4]

Alison Ansell:

Yeah, definitely. So the reverse mentoring came as one of the recommendations from the Quest. And I couldn't get in quick enough, I'll be honest, for the reverse mentoring. And I was mentored by my colleague Sylvia. Sylvia was a team manager in another area, and when we spoke we realised our commonalities. We were both mums with children about the same sort of age. We'd both qualified the same amount of time. The difference was that I was two grades higher than Sylvia because of some of those opportunities that I'd had. And it really made me think on the cherry-picking approach and mentality that Phil had shared.

So for me, reverse mentoring was absolutely a turning point for me to be able to understand from a colleague to mentor me, to afford me their time and afford me their views and their opinions, was absolutely fantastic. Quite a lot of our adult leadership team had a mentor for a while. I only stopped my reverse mentoring because Sylvia is now a direct report of mine. She was promoted. She's a service manager in mid, and she's absolutely inspirational. When I see her walk the floor, colleagues look and they recognise that you can see, 'cause you can be it. 'Cause Sylvia is there. So that's the only reason that we stopped our reverse mentoring. We've just got a different relationship now. But it was absolutely fantastic.

I think Ganiyat was going to give a few as well. [0:23:57.5]

Ganiyat Asiegbu:

Yeah, I was just going to add onto that because sometimes when you talk about progression for black workers, sometimes it comes across as always you want people to give you this promotion that you don't deserve. So that's not the case because Alison was a principal social worker. So she knew her stuff.

So Sylvia got the job. It may look as though it was the outcome of the reverse mentoring but it wasn't because like I said, Alison was a principal social worker. So if Sylvia did not qualify and could not carry out those roles she wouldn't have got the job. So I just wanted to make that clear.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

But do you think that the fact that this was something that Essex was focusing on just made it a bit more apparent? Even if Sylvia had all of those skills, she hadn't been given that opportunity before. [0:24:42.1]

Alison Ansell:

Yeah, I think so, Kirsty. And I think this is where I think I had to take a long, hard look at myself and my practice. If I'd surrounded myself by white colleagues, guess who I was going to give opportunities to? Those white colleagues. Guess who was therefore going to get the

promotion 'cause they'd had those opportunities. And it's going back to what Ganiyat and Phil were saying right at the beginning. It's actually making sure that you're surrounding yourself with different voices, making sure that there's real inclusivity in those opportunities for people. And sometimes stepping back and affording alternate colleagues opportunities to do that.

And I would say I'm thoughtful now in my approach to that. I don't think I was that thoughtful. I thought I was doing a great thing, actually. I thought I was doing a great thing giving people opportunities around me. It wasn't the giving people opportunities that was the problem. It was just that I wasn't being considerate in who was having those opportunities and therefore the impact of that decision, of those opportunities. And I would say the Quest was a major turning point in me being much more considerate.

Also, as an adult leadership team we learnt some probably really basic things about interviewing. So I remember a colleague saying to me, you know, 'Actually Alison, I'm not going to come in and look you in the eye in an interview.'

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Okay.

Alison Ansell:

Now, in the past I would probably have written down, 'not very engaged, didn't hold great eye contact, not very engaged in the interview process'. Actually, by recognising some cultural aspects and the impact that that would have, I took a very different perspective in the interview. So some of that is about listening, isn't it? They're very small things but that can make a fundamental difference and afford people opportunities that they wouldn't have had previously.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Absolutely.

Phil Chiza:

Yeah. Just to come in on that, Kirsty, I think it's about, as we mentioned earlier, it's about changing the culture, you know, that we have as an organisation. Those are some of the...we might think are small changes but they're quite powerful, especially these stories around this. I know it might appear as if that happened and it's done and dusted but up 'til now those relationships are still there, those mentoring relationships, they're still ongoing. And there's this now, we're creating a blog around, you know, those mentoring stories, share what happened, what's going on, what are you going to do better, that commitment. And I think it's the start of another journey as well, that we are all embarking as a workforce. So it's around our-ship. So it starts by understanding, you know, creating that environment around psychological safety and sharing what does it mean to be a black person in this organisation, for example. And having that opportunity to speak to members of the adult leadership team and share your experience. So that creates that ongoing dialogue and conversation but sort of in a safe space. And then from there, there is a lot more that you can do, you know, that our-ship, that journey, and also it can develop into, yeah, something more powerful, like giving you that confidence to go for bigger roles and, you know, addressing that, you know, that progression issue.

So yeah, I think it's something that we need to constantly share and talk about in the stories and the blogs that we are creating here in Essex.

Ganiyat Asiegbu:

I think just to add onto what Alison was saying in terms of giving opportunities to people around her, I mean, prior to recent changes that's happened and promotion, within the black workers you used to see, 'Can't they see, the senior leadership? Are they not questioning the management team? Are they not wondering why there's no representative?' And that's why I keep going on about change in leadership because that was when, you know, words were spoken and things were being seen.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Mm. I mean, it does sound like...you talked earlier on actually about that word, Alison and Phil, about anti-racism being active, and it sounds like it because constantly there's a revision and there's an assessment about what you're doing.

We've talked a lot about what's happened internally but I'm interested to know as a social worker when you're outside, going out and supporting the adults, what's that like and how has this Quest, the information you've gathered from that, how has that helped inform what you do and how you're supported? [0:29:28.7]

Ganiyat Asiegbu:

You know what? To be honest, prior to these changes I used to say Essex County Council was a hypocritical organisation because there was so much protection for workers if you experienced racism outside, you know, from the people that we served, from the adults that we work with, but no one had really looked inside and looked into the workforce until the Quest happened and things changed from there.

I think since moving to Essex I've had one experience with an adult where I'd walked into the room and the adult whispered to a family member saying, 'They've sent a black one. I hope she knows what she's doing.' And at that time I thought, 'I'm not going to take offence or address it. It wasn't said directly to me. What I am going to do is show you that I do know what I'm doing and you will be amazed by the end of this.' So that was how I dealt with it. I mean, somebody else would have dealt with it differently.

Alison Ansell:

Yeah. I think there have been some fundamental changes. It was really important for me and my colleagues that we were clear on our service offer about what was acceptable and unacceptable behaviour. Prior to a couple of years ago, if we'd have had a complaint from an adult we would have probably changed the worker, if the adult had complained. Now they were unlikely to ring up and say that they were complaining that the worker was black. But they may say they couldn't understand the person, they weren't sure about their skill. And I think we would have probably not addressed that in the way that we should do. We have a really clear service offer now that says we won't tolerate abuse, we won't tolerate racism, and we will treat it as a refusal of care if it's...you know. So we have changed our stance and position. We absolutely ensure that people complete the health

and safety documentation. We've got a really robust approach now to supporting colleagues who've been subject to racism. And we're trying to share that with our market and care providers as well because we know that in particular domiciliary care and residential care has got quite a high proportion of black and minority ethnic staff.

So we know this is an issue that our care providers are grappling with too. So certainly Phil and I have been part of a number of different events where we talk really openly with care providers. And personally, I've found it...when we start by saying, 'Essex County Council was racist, Essex County Council is racist and here's what we're doing to address it,' you can have a very different conversation because other organisations start to believe as well that they recognise the challenges that they have as a result.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So it's that honestly that maybe, hopefully encourages others to be honest and self-reflective? [0:32:16.0]

Alison Ansell: Yeah. I think so.

Ganiyat Asiegbu: Also, what's also happened is we, Essex County Council, has set out this anti-racism and anti-discrimination forum where everybody can attend. And one thing that's been promoted is because for black workers sometimes it's almost as though you expect it in certain situations. And lots of us are not speaking up enough. So what's been encouraged, we've encouraged the team managers to have frequent discussions with the workers to ask them if they've experienced anything that they have felt has been racist and they would like to talk about, and how that has been approached. So that is fed back. That's one major that's also come up from that forum is, you know, going back. Because you know, workers might not approach their managers to complain because it's expected, it's what they've always experienced. So now the responsibility has been put on the team managers to actually start those difficult conversations with the hope of some transparency, yeah.

Phil Chiza: Yeah. Just to input there, Kirsty, as well, you know, we recognise that, you know, racism sometimes is based on a power imbalance as well. So we are looking at, you know, the newly qualified social workers, even the students when they join our organisation. We are really clear from the beginning that, you know, any incidences, you know, make sure you capture that, you record, and we'll be able to address. So if we create that environment right from the beginning, I think it helps and it's helping. We are about to embark on, you know, some peer support groups as well, especially for the newly qualified social workers, to say, 'It's okay. We recognise that sometimes, you know, racism can be structural, it's within the systems. But also there's that power imbalance when you are a newly qualified worker or a student. You might have that fear to speak out and to challenge the system. But we are trying to create, you know, like an environment whereby we say first of all equip the managers that we need to capture this, we need to record it, but also we need to address it. And how do we do it?' So I think again, coming together

and creating that, you know, environment, changing the language and culture that we have as an organisation and to make sure that all these health and safety issues are picked up and addressed.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah. I know it might be early days in terms of being able to measure the impact, but you may have some anecdotal stories. I know Ganiyat, you mentioned that people were leaving and they weren't being clear on the reasons, the actual reasons why. Have you seen generally people returning or you've seen people being more vocal? [0:34:59.5]

Ganiyat Asiegbu:

Yeah, I have seen a few workers that have resigned have also come back to work. But again, we're trying to encourage people that it is actually safe to speak out and there are no consequences. Because I think that's one of the greatest fear, is, 'What's going to happen if I said anything against somebody who's influential?' So I think we're still in the process of working with people and encouraging people that they can speak out. And because of the changes that they've also seen, it can provide some sort of hope that, you know, it's not just a moaning session. You know, issues will be looked into and people will not be treated differently because they've chosen to speak out.

Alison Ansell:

I think as well, Kirsty, we've certainly seen an increase in deputy team manager and team manager level who would identify as black or from a minority ethnic background. So that's a fantastic achievement. We've also seen an increase in our service manager level of colleagues who are black and minority ethnic. We've still yet to crack our adult leadership team. But what we have now is we have the voices of our colleagues. When you have the voices of your colleagues you make different decisions. So I'm absolutely sure, and I know my colleagues are as committed as I am, to actually change and ensure that we're always talking about diversity and inclusion. But we have certainly seen progression opportunities through to our middle management level, which is fantastic.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

That includes Sylvia. Is she an example? [0:36:29.6]

Alison Ansell:

So Sylvia's an example but I could also name Frances, I can name numerous team managers who've got positions, you know, well-deserved positions. And I think that's the bit that Ganiyat has said. What we didn't do as an organisation was bring a company in to tell us what we needed to do. What we did is the answers came directly from our workforce. So the phrase that we use is that the Quests are led by our workforce and supported by our leaders, and that's very much how it is. And Phil spoke about power earlier, and that power very much shifts when our Quest is 'come, talk'.

We've also had to make some other changes. So imagery in our campaigns – it's really important.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah.

- Alison Ansell: Making sure that we're diverse when we do quizzes, when we do events, that we're really supportive of different cultural opportunities and religion and, you know, within our teams. So it grows like...it's grown like a network.
- Ganiyat Asiegbu: You can see the change. I mean, it was Ramadan a few months ago and I've never seen a post...I'm Muslim and I've never seen a post around the floor that I work on around Ramadan and Eid. So it was quite exciting to see it being posted up and telling people to be aware and if you wanted to learn more...and it was spoken about, I think, in a live event as well. So those changes are quite apparent now.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah. Sounds it, very visible. So I'm interested to know what happens with Quest now. I know you did a lot of the gathering. How is that going to be fed back into practice and even other teams? [0:38:08.2]
- Alison Ansell: So interestingly, we started with a Quest for race. We've had other Quests since.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Okay.
- Alison Ansell: We really liked the approach so much that we focused on other protected characteristics. So we've also had a Quest for LGBTQI+, for age and for disability. And we plan one for mental health next year and then we've got one more after, topic to be confirmed. So we've certainly developed the approach.
- We've also made sure that it feeds in with our EDI strategy within our wider Essex County Council. And I wouldn't want to leave this podcast without talking about the fantastic work that our children's services do. So Phil's colleague, Antonia in children's services, is their anti-racist practice service manager. And we really aspire to follow their approach, to make sure that we start embedding this further in the work with our adults as they come through and everybody that we work with.
- So there's still a long road for us to go.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah.
- Alison Ansell: We started with our workforce. We're seeing some of those changes. Phil tirelessly updates his plan. He tirelessly pushes every week on the things we've not been able to achieve yet. We're a large county council. Things can seem quite slow. But as Phil said, this is about taking steps forward, and some of those steps you can do quickly, some take longer. Some you need your colleagues to link arms with and do them together. So it's still a work-in-progress for us. But a real achievement for where we've got to. But we want to do so much more. Our aspiration can only be inspired by our workforce, who actually expect us as leaders to do much, much more because they expect that for themselves, for their colleagues, and fundamentally for the adults that we work with. 'Cause that's what we all come to work for, to make a difference in people's lives.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Absolutely. Phil, is there anything you'd like to add? [0:40:12.1]

Phil Chiza:

Yeah. I mean, I think it's been great that we're now talking about this, and especially focusing on race. You asked a question earlier on what's now. This is an ongoing journey. But also we realise that there's some intersectionality as well. The things that affect me as a black man are different from the things that affect, you know, Ganiyat as a black woman, you know, especially in the workplace. So the Quest is about, I think, recognising that intersectionality approach and how best we can address these barriers.

For example, if you look at the policies, it's something that we are working on and we had to make sure that when other Quests got on board, you know, we are all looking at it from the same lens in terms of, you know, anti-discriminatory approach. So this is something we're doing. There's still a long way. There's still work being done around making sure people disclose, for example. You know, the disclosure rates are still quite low. They are not there, where we want them to be. People join the organisation to say, 'I'm proud to be black African,' for example. We still want that information so we are able to tailor all these things that, you know, we are saying we're setting out to do. So we are still continuously encouraging our colleagues to disclose that but also, you know, the work that we do out there in the communities that we serve, we need to understand that we come from diverse backgrounds. So us as staff, we are confident in sharing where we coming from, I think, it needs to make sense when we go out there to support, you know, the citizens.

Funnily enough, when we started about this Quest, I used to share with Alison that these issues to do with race and racism are...it's like a river. It's got its barriers, you know. You hit the river bed, the walls, and there is the meandering. But we should keep on going. And what we need, as I mentioned earlier as well when we talked about the Quest, is we need allies in the form of tributaries in a river. 'Cause us alone, we won't be able to address all these barriers. We need the allies to push this agenda forward, you know, in the form of those tributaries. So it's ongoing.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah. That's a really nice image, isn't it? 'Cause you can just imagine how it feeds into that activity and this being pushed forwards, otherwise it becomes stagnant. So that's really nice. [0:42:53.9]

Ganiyat Asiegbu:

I think just to add onto what Alison and Phil have said, for me the most important thing is it's been a difficult conversation for a very long time and nobody has wanted to dive into it. So I'm quite glad that we are talking about it now. It will be a long road but we will get there, or somewhere near the end.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Well definitely we'd love to see how this develops, and hopefully we can feed back in with you to find out how that has evolved and also maybe speak with children's and see how they're getting on?
[0:43:25.1]

Alison Ansell:

Yeah. We'd love you to do that. And maybe next time we can talk with our children's colleagues and our colleagues from our corporate centre who are involved in our EDI strategy. 'Cause I think that

suddenly then starts to get really, really exciting, when you've got a corporate approach, an adult social care focused on workforce, and a children's social care focused on social work practice. So that's where I think we can make some fundamental differences by that join-up. So we'd love to talk to you again about that in the future.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Brilliant. Thank you so much. Sorry Phil, were you going to say something? [0:43:59.0]

Phil Chiza: Yeah. I was just going to say the future of Essex, yeah, we're just trying to create that environment whereby everyone's given that opportunity and that chance to flourish and make a difference. That's the whole idea of the Quests and EDI and, you know, anti-racism, you know, to make sure we create that environment. And this is our dream at the moment because we have got this appreciative enquiry approach in things. We need to dream about where do we want to go but then how do we get there. So I think we're in the right space at the moment. There's still work to be done but we just need to create, you know, that dream within, you know, the workforce to say, 'You know what? We are here to address these imbalances, anti-racism and anti-discrimination, and we are in this together.'

Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah. And it sounds like, based on what Ganiyat was saying earlier about hopefulness, it feels from what she was saying that the workforce feels hopeful and feels like they'll be supported if they share their experiences. So we wish you all the best from Community Care on this journey and we look forward to speaking to you about this again.

Alison Ansell: Thank you so much. Thank you for your time.

Ganiyat Asiegbu: Thank you.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Thank you.

Thanks for listening to Employer Zone Insights, a Community Care podcast, and hearing from Alison, Ganiyat and Phil. You can learn more about Essex County Council's investment in tackling racism within its workforce at our Community Care Live event on 10th October, where Antonia will be speaking at a panel entitled *Anti-racist practice: how to showcase and share best practice nationally*. Visit our website www.communitycarelive.co.uk to book your place. We hope to see you at CC Live next month. Bye for now.