

Wiltshire Live 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 careers editor here at Community Care. This episode is a special one, as it was recorded at Community Care Live 2023, which took place in October at the Business Design Centre in London. The session, titled *Working with Parents: breaking down barriers to engagement*, was run by Wiltshire Council, where social workers, practitioners, care-leavers and service-users all took part in the discussion. So here it is. [0:00:50.1]

Okay, welcome everybody. Good afternoon. I hope you've all managed to have lunch or get a bite to eat at least. So I'm Sharmeen Ziauddin. I'm one of the careers editors here at Community Care. Thank you so much for coming to the seminar, which is supported and led by our sponsor, Wiltshire Council.

First of all, just a reminder to everyone that the audio of this session is being recorded, as it will be published as a podcast for Community Care's Employer Insights series. So please do put your phone on silent if you haven't already.

So, in this session, *Working with Parents: breaking down barriers to engagement*, we'll be listening to and speaking to people not only with lived experience of being in care but also having their children taken into care.

So, there's going to be an opportunity to ask questions towards the end. Firstly, we're going to have some introductions, some keynote speeches, and then a discussion about the projects that Wiltshire's been running and having success with.

So let's introduce the team here. We've got a few people here, as you can see. So firstly we have Joe Sutton, who is the participation manager of the child and youth voice team at Wiltshire. Joe is also care-experienced himself. Joining him are Holly Wallace-Philp and Cameron Draisey. Cameron also works for Wiltshire Council in Joe's team. His team are finalists for the children and young people, now Social Care Team of the Year Award. So that's great.

So Joe and Cameron and Holly, would you like to come and talk about what you've been up to? [0:02:29.7]

Joe Sutton:

Hello. Thank you. Great to see so many people here, and I think that really shows to us actually how many people really care about building relationships with the people that you're working with and with family members. So thank you a lot for coming.

So, as already mentioned, my name's Joe Sutton. I'm the voice and participation manager at Wiltshire Council. So in that service we have family voice, so working to get families' views and to improve our practice at Wiltshire Council. We have SEND voice. We have child and youth voice, so mainly for the Children In Care Council and children that are on plans and assessments. We also have the volunteer service, with schemes like the IV scheme in there as well. So it's quite a broad remit.

But I just wanted to start off by sharing a little bit about my personal experience to get to this point. So my journey first started when I was eleven, sort of going into care, feeling a bit afraid, unsure, scared. And actually feeling a little bit annoyed and frustrated because people weren't listening to me. I was saying lots of things but I didn't feel that I was being listened to.

A couple of years into my care journey I was fortunate enough to join the Children In Care Council, and this really sort of opened a door for me. Before that I was, 'I'm going to join the army, you know, I'm going to have this sort of macho lifestyle.' And actually, joining the Children In Care Council made me realise I've got other skills in my toolkit. You know, I've got my voice and it's powerful. I was getting heard, I was getting listened to. I got opportunities that I wouldn't necessarily have got. I went to go to an open day at a university and then the university kind of took me under their wing and I sort of went on and studied there and got a degree. And then I got a job working in social care. And again, really powerful using my own lived experience to help me shape what I was doing, and remembering how I was treated when I was in care, and making sure that the people that I was working with never felt that way, never felt alone, isolated, scared, always had a relationship with me, always go the extra mile for them, relationship first. And I think this is something that's going to be a real golden thread through this conversation today, is relationships always have to come first.

So the keys to how we work as a team is relationships with workers. Building that relationship is the first thing that we do. Being listened to and listening to people, what people are telling us. And trying to dig a little bit deeper into that. And kindness. Being kind doesn't cost anything, actually. And from what I remember from my care journey, was those acts of kindness. I didn't remember, 'Oh, my worker was so good. They got their report in on time.' You know, actually I remember those workers that went that extra mile for me, that invited me over for Christmas dinner when I had nowhere else to go. You know, those workers that, after uni when I thought I was potentially going to be homeless, actually finding me somewhere to live and actually living with them for a while. These sort of going the extra mile, building those relationships and putting me on a path to where I am now.

So, these are the values that we use in our team and in our work, and that we are thoroughly embracing in Wiltshire. And I'm going to hand over to Cameron now, who's going to go into a little bit more detail around what we do with children and young people. And bear with us – there's a clear pathway onto families, but we want to start at the

very beginning for you to get a real kind of flavour of the session. So over to Cameron. [0:06:57.2]

Cameron Draisey:

Thank you, Joe. So at Wiltshire we're very passionate about the voice of the child and making sure that's fully embedded, and making sure their views are heard. So there are many ways we do this in Wiltshire. So the first example is ways of writing. So over the last few years we've been working hard to develop the way we write our reports for young people. So we write making sure we're writing to young people. And this allows us to make sure we're putting ourselves in the young people's shoes and also being much more empathetic, so we can sort of reflect upon their experiences. Obviously every young person has a right to read their case files, so we want to make sure we get it right and that's why we're sort of working very hard to create their life story, their narrative, and making sure that's done in the best way possible.

And there's many sort of other ways we get the views of young people as well. So you might have all heard of the app Mind of My Own, which is essentially a fantastic tool to get the views of young people, and they can sort of send in statements 24/7. So that empowers young people. It gives them the opportunity to reach out sort of in between visits and when they feel they need to sort of share important views with us.

So for this we've had, over the last three years we've had over 1,000 statements a year. So that's really embedded in our practice and we train up lots of staff in this.

We've also got the Children In Care Council, which we've developed over the last few years as well. So we started that off as a sort of really fun, activity-based session. So going back to relationship-based practice, making sure young people feel comfortable, that they're in a safe space. They build that relationship with us as the child and youth voice team, but also an opportunity to build relationships with other children in care and build their confidence. And now they've been a part of that for a couple of years, they feel confident and they're able to engage in lots of other things we do. So giving their voice, which is really important in coproduction. So we have established a young person's fostering panel, for example. So young people are obviously the experts. They've lived through this. They've experienced having foster carers or social workers themselves so they get an opportunity to sort of be part of that interview process but also be involved in the two-way dialogue where they can sort of give top tips to foster carers, different professionals to sort of, yeah, allow them to have those sort of skills in their toolkit so they can best engage with young people.

And also we've got sort of meet your leaders sessions, so it's really great in Wiltshire. So all the sort of senior management are very invested in the voice of the child and we have regular sort of meetings where young people get to meet with, like, the directors and sort of the Wiltshire councillors, deputy Wiltshire councillors and, yeah, sort of hold them to account making sure they're able to sort of deliver what the young people sort of want from their own views and words. Making sure we're involving young people in that coproduction which is, yeah, fantastic.

Yeah, so now I'm going to hand over to Holly, who's going to sort of talk a bit more about how she's been involved in sort of that coproduction in Wiltshire. [0:10:25.0]

Holly Wallace-Philp:

Yeah, so hi, I'm Holly. My journey started in 2013. I was eight. I was what I'd say one of the more fortunate ones. I moved in with one set of carers and never left, even to this day. But one of the key things that I have learned is that the first relationship that you develop as a child in care is of your foster carers. They are, in essence, the first set of people that you can go to day or night. And then after that is typically your social worker. But surely, well, a fact really, is that they move around a lot, and you don't really get a chance to bond with them. But when my social workers were moving around a lot is when I started Children In Care Council. And I had Joe and Cam there all the time, whenever I needed, whatever I needed to discuss, whatever I needed to talk about, whether it was emotional or just about little things that I was feeling or what was going on in my life. They were there. And that is when I realised that I actually did have a voice and my voice did matter in our council.

So what I do now is...part of my role is helping to advocate for young people, helping to put my experiences into words, and making sure that all of those young people who are much, much younger than me also do have, in essence, a voice. So that all of the workers in Wiltshire, as much as I can get to, in essence, know that actually there are always things that you can improve on, and there always things that in our minds you can do better. But even within, what, three years of working with Children In Care Council there's been a lot of changes and it's been amazing, just because they're listening to us and specifically our very recent voice.

But yeah, so the other relationships that you develop which are just as important are of when you turn sixteen, your PA. They are with you up until you're 25. And they take you through college or sixth form, university, actually going into adulthood. And they are the ones who, no matter how many times you may move carers, how many different social workers you have, they are the ones who are there for you as you develop as a young adult. And I think having that one person that is always there for you, that isn't going through a carer, that isn't going through 100 other people just to speak to you, and it's just you and them, is the best thing that could ever happen.

But altogether over the past few years I do think Children In Care Council has been the best thing that has happened to me.

Joe Sutton:

Thank you. And I just wanted to sort of pick up on that and...I think what we're trying to do is highlight getting it right early, building those relationships with those people whilst they're in foster care, giving them the skills that they have to succeed. I learnt so much during my time working as a voice ambassador and then moving on into this role, and what we really want you to do is build that relationship and empower those people that you're working with to be the authors of their own stories as they move on into adulthood. So I'll just hand back over now and we'll have a chance to answer some questions at the end. [0:14:25.0]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Thank you so much. Yeah, we'll have a discussion shortly. That was Joe and his team. On this side we have a few other people, as you can see. We've got Helen Tubb, who's an assistant team manager and project lead for Wiltshire Council for families and children. She's managed a number of projects in the last two years, two of which are the focus on today's session. That's *Born Into Care* and *Dads Matter Too*. With her is Ceri Evans, a qualified youth worker who's been a senior keyworker in safeguarding for a number of years. Ceri has been involved in the *Dads Matter Too* project for almost two years. Ceri has also been a foster carer for eleven years. Joining them are Arron Chun and Luke Wort, who have been supported by the *Dads Matter Too* project. So if I can invite you here to talk about what you've been doing in the projects. [0:15:19.7]

Helen Tubb:

Hello everyone. Thank you for joining us. So a couple of years ago Wiltshire Council made a bid for some Covid recovery fund money, and with that we were able to undertake two projects that have really transformed the way we think and the way we've really tried to include parents that we work with.

So what we've heard already is the beginning of people's journeys, coming into care and having that experience. And now what we're going to talk about is people who have almost come full circle and the support they need.

So we have the *Born Into Care* project. We don't like the term 'born into care'. I don't know who came up with that. We prefer to call it the *Pre-Birth Intervention Team*, 'cause really the whole point is we get in and we work with people who've had some really adverse experiences. They could have had adverse experiences as children. They could have been through the care system themselves. They've had their children that they've had previously are not living with them anymore. So they have been just round and round and had all these previous experiences, which really impact on their ability to trust us, to want to engage with us. They fundamentally think we're just there to take a child away and see no purpose to building that relationship. So we're really trying to turn it on its head. And I like to think of it as a twofold thing, that actually if we can support parents to be parents, that doesn't mean their child has to remain in their care, they will be a parent throughout their life. And it's really important that we empower the parents we work with, we give them some hope to think that this is a possibility. So if their children are with a family member or in foster care or adoption, they will still be their parent, and it's giving them a voice and confidence to feel that.

So we don't just try and think of people as parents. We think of them as individuals, as human beings, as a mum, as a dad. All of those roles and all of those things that they bring to the table are really important. And it's those that we really try and focus on.

So the two projects, we originally looked at them as being quite different. One was focusing working with mums, one was focused working with dads. But actually, they're parents. It doesn't matter if you're male, you're female. What matters is what you are to that child, and that is what we tried to focus on. So actually, the projects have really merged over time.

So the *Dads Matter Too* was born out of an article, *The Invisible Men*. I'm not sure how many people have read that. If you haven't, it is amazing. It's really worth thinking about, and I know that these guys are going to articulate much better how that feels to them, that this is real. This isn't just an article that was written. As a dad they have often felt invisible, unheard. So we have tried to turn that on its head, and I just want to acknowledge that the people that I work with in the project are family keyworkers. They are not social workers. So that is a very different starting point. So social workers have time constraints, they have statutory responsibilities. They're the people that fundamentally have those really difficult conversations with parents. They're the ones who are able to make those decisions. So for us, we have time, which lots of social workers would love. I think what we do is probably what everyone in this room went off to university thinking they were going to do when they come out the other side, and actually then find out if you're a statutory social worker, it's not happening. But we all want to. We all want to build relationships and actually, even having difficult conversations and going through that process with people is just about being honest, being a human being and still having that relationship, no matter how difficult it is. And we want to talk to you today about some of the things that we've learnt on that journey.

So as I've already said, fundamentally we're not the people who make decisions that affect mum and dad's lives. But what we can do is make relationships that we hope will affect them. Sometimes our work is the only positive relationship model that they've ever had, the only person that they've ever felt has listened to them. So we spend about the first 6-8 weeks getting to know them, trying to walk alongside them. We're not going to pretend we can walk in their shoes. We can't. We don't know what they've been through. And we don't expect them to tell us. What we want to know is how that felt for them, where they've been, where do they want to start. Because quite often what we've realised is the parents we work with have been here before. They've had a social worker before. They've heard of a plan before. What does that mean to them? They didn't make these decisions. Lots of the reasons they're here and working with us is because things have happened to them, not because of actually things they've done themselves. So it feels really unfair from the start.

And what we know is there's lots of barriers because not only have they worked with us before but they've also worked with lots of the agencies that their child's social worker is expecting them to engage with again. Well, substance is still a problem. Why am I going to trust a drugs and alcohol support agency? So we're expecting them to do all of those things. So we just start at a point of, 'Where are you and what is it you want to do?' Because actually, we all know to be a good parent you need to be a happy person. And actually, that rubs off. And you're having this mirror. So what we try to do is be that mirror for that mum or dad and support them. So fundamentally that's our ethos, really, and our starting point.

And we thought at the beginning we knew what we were going to be doing, and actually what we've quickly realised is it doesn't matter what we think or what we want to do. What matters is how it feels to

the people we're working with and what difference we make to them. And one of the most important things we've put in place is group work. So we've actually linked all of our parents up. They can have a WhatsApp group. We run groups. Mums whose children are no longer in their care are able to see those children when they have family time and bring them to a group with other mums whose children are still in their care, and talk about how they feel. And that's something fundamentally they don't get anywhere else. When that child is no longer in their care they lose so many other opportunities that go with that to be a parent or how they perceive parenting should be. So we've worked really hard to try and achieve that.

So I just wanted to give some statistics quickly before I hand over to Ceri. And in our pre-birth intervention we have now worked with and closed 40 mums. And out of those 40 mums, only four no longer have their children in their care, and they all came in with really high projectory. So all of them had previously had children. Some of them have had a number of children. One woman had had six. One had assaulted her social worker and was told no one could ever work with her again. Her child is now six months and still in her care. And she really wanted to be here today but didn't have any childcare and we were like, 'You're not bringing your baby to London, as much as you'd like to show him off. It's probably not appropriate.'

So two of those mums actually had their children in their care for at least a year before they weren't. And two had their children for a few months. Again, so we worked really, really to try and support them. But I think fundamentally the most important thing is that all four of those mums still engage with the service, with the process. And if they come back into our service I'm hoping this will make a significant difference and they will trust and build relationships with us again in the future.

So we have worked with 62 dads and 80% of those have engaged. And they were all high-end, non-engaging fathers who had had, again, previous experiences themselves of being in care, CP plans or have children no longer in their care. So we are really quite proud of those statistics.

So I'm going to pass onto Ceri. [0:23:10.1]

Ceri Evans:

I just want to touch on something that Joe and Cam just said. And I'm going to speak as a Wiltshire foster carer. These boys work tirelessly. So I've got two lads, and I'm going to have to say 'my good lady' 'cause this is recorded and she might get to listen to it! So my good wife, if we're ever struggling to get the boys to one of the Children In Care Council meetings, to one of the voice meetings, she'll phone Cam and she'll pick his ear. And he's there. He comes, he picks them up, he drops them off. They go over and above. So thank you, guys.

[applause]

Ceri Evans:

Anyway, back to us. Right. And on another reflection, I was looking...the seven of here, people who haven't experienced care, are a minority. Four out of the seven are all care-experienced. It's only Helen, myself and Arron that aren't. And I think that speaks

masses, huge volume. Not only have these guys overcome their adverse childhood experiences, they're flourishing. They're doing amazing in what they do. And they're helping their peers and those young people coming through. You can't get any better than that. Anyway, I'll shut up about that!

Yeah, *Dads Matters*, right. So, as Helen touched on then, it was born from some funding from the Covid recovery fund and DfE. And we set about looking at how and what we were going to devise in order to do this. All of the dads that came through were deemed hard to work with, non-engaging, difficult. So with that, we set about – and I think Helen touched on it earlier – we have the luxury of time. If it takes eight weeks to get a conversation going, it takes eight weeks. That's absolutely fine. It's at the time and the speed of these guys. Which is a real luxury, particularly in children's social care.

When we go out and we see them, we definitely take a mentalisation stance. That empathy, that validation, tell me about it, look at it. But within that mentalisation we pay a particularly focus to epistemic trust. And all that you see is probably not what you see. I'll give an example. Myself. I'm a 6'1", 40-year-old bald man called Ceri. I phone people. Don't answer me. They don't miss the call. They just look at the phone ringing. There it is. So I text. People reply to texts. They answer texts. So I'm like, 'I'm going to come and see you. Are you alright with that? Cheers, Ceri.' And like, 'Yeah, no problem Ceri. Alright.' There's a very short-cut of the whole conversation.

So I'll turn up at the door, knock at the door. They open the door. And I'll look at them and I'll think, 'What's the matter? Not the five foot blonde you were expecting? Let's get a broom, cupcake!' and that breaks the ice and we're in, and we're building that straight away. And that is really important. So we use epistemic trust massively. And I'm going to try and show you a remedial version of epistemic trust. It always goes wrong 'cause there's lots of ie's, e's and u's in there, right? But we'll take Luke. So Luke knows Luke. He knows his feelings, he knows his experiences. He knows what's happened to him and he knows his values, he knows his thoughts. He meets Ceri/Arron. They have a conversation. After a little bit of time Luke starts to think, 'I reckon you see me. I think not only do...you can see what I'm going through, you can see what I'm feeling.' Luke/Ceri: 'I've got you, fella. Do you know what I mean? Tell me more. Let's explore this.' Luke then takes a shift. 'I see. Now I see that Ceri/Arron can see me.' At this point, the matching process starts. And it is...when it happens you can feel it. It's a two-way process. So Ceri/Arron needs to trust Luke. Luke needs to trust Ceri/Arron. And in order for that to happen and build epistemic trust and the matching process, there needs to be conversation, there needs to be reality between them.

So an example of this, this boy here tried to stitch me up yesterday morning about coming here, right? Ten o'clock, I sent him a text, 'Alright lad? I'll be around eight o'clock in the morning.' To be fair, it's a three-hour drive for us to get here, so it's quite a trek. So fair play to these boys. They've taken the day off work and they've done a six-hour round trip to do that.

Anyway, 'Cer, I can't do it. My foreman's broke his leg.' 'Luke, what are you talking about? We all arranged, we all agreed, you're on the list.' He's like, 'I can't, I can't do it.' I'm like, 'Luke, I'm getting a proper wobble on now, mate. Do you know what I mean?' So with that epistemic trust...you could feel my anxiety through a phone call. And he's like, 'Alright, Cer. Leave it with me, leave it with me.' So he made some phone calls and, to be fair, the main site manager stepped in and covered it for him in the end. But it was only 'cause that trust was there. Luke was in a bit of a crisis. He called me. I was having a little bit of a wobble. 'What are you talking about? You're, like 50% of my boys that are coming on this thing. You can't not come.' And he did. So that was amazing.

And I've heard the word 'relationship' about a million times. You cannot underestimate relationships. It is the most powerful tool you will have in your kit. It is the most long-lasting. It is the most beneficial. And it will, 'cause let's face it, we're all here for the children at the end of the day, it will make better things. If the professionals can have a better relationship with the parents, 100% that will make all the difference in the world.

So Luke's been dreading this, right? So bear with him. He's offered to do this, to speak from the heart and to tell his story where he's up to. This is one of his first times of doing that. So I think we need to get behind him. These guys are amazing but they've done it loads, right? Yeah, cool. But this is one of Luke's first times. So I'll hand to you, my friend. [0:30:29.7]

Luke Wort:

Thank you. Thank you everyone. Like you said, it's the first time for me, so please bear with me. I will be looking at the paper a lot.

So I've previously been in foster care with my sister at quite a young age. Bounced around a lot of foster homes. Started off with emergency, which is sort of protocol. And then you sort of try to get that long-term. And yeah, I did bounce around a lot. I fell out with a lot of foster carers, even at a young age. I mean, you're ripped away from your family and that's the only life you know.

At the end of all that, I think it was the seventh placement which was the longest, which was just over a year. I bonded that much I am still in contact with her now, because there is a relationship. She put herself out there. I took that and, yeah, we still talk now on a weekly basis. To make sure I'm brushing my teeth and everything!

[laughter]

I had a very difficult childhood after sort of the foster carer. My Nan got a guardianship for me and my sister. Growing up through sort of teenage is the worst time to be growing up, especially for my Nan to deal with, considering she already had six boys she previously brought up in her years. She is the age of 62 when she had me and my sister. I gave her all hell and back. I turned to sort of, like, criminal, fighting. You name it, I probably done it. She was still there for me.

I then decided rather than relying on my Nan all the time that I would step on my own two feet. I sort of made myself homeless in a way. I went to a place called Amber House, where it's like a homeless

hostel, but it's where they can sort of teach you the basics and the tools you need to stand on your own two feet and move on with your life. I was there for just over a year. And then I met my partner. We had two beautiful children. Unfortunately with previous involvement with my partner, my two eldest are now in long-term foster care. I do see them nine times a year, which is brilliant. I've got good relationships with the social worker and the team manager. Relationships are definitely key, especially for social workers and parents. Dads, we feel left out. We're working, we're the bread-bringer. Maybe the mums are working and the dads are dealing with it. But for me, I did feel really left out. I wasn't included. And it wasn't until *Dads Matter* stepped in and helped me voice louder. It was like Ceri was my megaphone. And I had a part to play then. I could show how interested I was and how much effort I wanted to put in. And yeah, you just amplified what I wanted to do. *Dads Matter* has been absolutely amazing for me. Ever since he first came to my door I didn't really think that it was a service that was going to last much. 'Cause you get these services where it starts and then they finish six months' later due to funding or not practical. But it did keep going, luckily. I formed a really, really good relationship with Ceri. I started off with giving him tests to see if I can actually trust him. Obviously he passed all those tests 'cause I still see him now!

[laughter]

But yeah, it's building that trust. And it's not coming in and criticising every little thing you've got or if your house is dirty or if you don't have money or if you don't have a lot of food, it's that help and support that I needed. And it was there, offered to me. And it does...Ceri does feel like family to me. I mean, I'm still waiting for that roast dinner. But it doesn't look like it's going to happen anytime soon. But yeah, no, relationships are key and just try your best to get on with dads more, include them more. We're not an entity. We are a person. So yeah, do include us. Thank you. [0:35:26.6]

[applause]

Ceri Evans:

We'll leave Arron...I brought Luke and Arron along today because they're two ends of the spectrum. Luke and I have been working together for about 14, maybe 15 months. And Arron and I have only been working together for about six weeks. So I think Arron's going to put his voice to the questions that are going to come, as opposed to do any speech there. But cool. That's us. Thank you very much. [0:35:55.6]

[applause]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Thank you for your powerful contributions. So we're just going to do a Q&A, and then if we have time we can open the floor to questions. But first of all I just wanted to ask Luke and Arron, when Ceri first got in touch with you, introducing *Dads Matter Too*, what did you think when he first called or got in touch? What was your initial reaction? Given your past experiences. [0:36:31.3]

Arron Chun: For me, it was a case of I just started social services, like, system bit. And I didn't know nothing about it 'cause I'd never been in it myself. So it was nice to have someone on the side to tell me what I can do, what I can't do. And he's helped me out a lot. I'm seeing my kids quite a lot due to his help. And that's what I wanted, really. I wanted to see my kids and he's made it happen. So spot on, really. That's... [0:37:02.0]

[applause]

Luke Wort: When he first appeared he didn't have a badge. A badge is quite intimidating to parents, especially if you have the old Karen neighbour which likes to know everyone's business. Yeah, that's a trust builder because you're not shouting out, 'Look at me, I work for Wiltshire Council' or whatever council you're representing. It's, 'I'm here to help you. I'm not here on a payroll.' Yeah, it was, like, peeling back the layers, which obviously Ceri is really good at 'cause he's good at breaking the ice. And yeah, Ceri himself, I mean, if I could duplicate him, I really would. I could make a buck!

[laughter]

But yeah. [0:37:51.8]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Thank you. You mentioned, Helen, barriers to engagement. What have been the barriers to engaging with social care in the past for both of yourselves? Like, what's stopped you? Yeah, for you guys. Sorry! What had stopped you from engaging previously? And what's sort of different this time? [0:38:15.5]

Luke Wort: Trust. Definitely trust. I've had quite a lot of...they say one thing to me but write another thing down. Which is massive, really, because I take literal into what's said to me. So if it's, 'Luke, I need you to stop working six days a week,' but then they put down that Luke's denying to work six days a week, I find that, like, I just don't agree with it. Write down what you say.

And yeah, trust is a major factor. And that's how you build relationships. And that's how you get more engagement. [0:38:57.7]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah, 'cause you said something about how people viewed you as a dad and not feeling your role as a dad was really viewed as important or taken into account. [0:39:08.5]

Luke Wort: Yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Do you want to say...? Sorry, yeah, no. [0:39:11.8]

Luke Wort: Yeah, no, I've always been felt sort of like I'm a side-line and not taken very seriously. Yeah. Yeah, my brain's gone, I'm not gonna lie. [0:39:26.8]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay, so you mentioned trust and relationship building. If you could give one bit of advice to a social worker working with a dad, what would it be? And actually, Holly and Cameron, I'll ask you the same question when it comes to working with young people. What advice could you give to social workers who are facing challenges and

connecting with young people because of, you know, various different reasons? But I'll ask you guys first. [0:39:54.7]

Luke Wort: Be honest. Work with us, not against us. Try to understand we are all...we all possess the information and process it differently. Put trust into us to do the right thing. Again, trust is in capital letters. You can't get anything out if you don't put it in. I can speak for the majority of dads, that we want input. We just don't know how. So perhaps trying to put the tools in place to help us progress up the ladder. And yeah, the main thing is, yeah, trust. [0:40:37.5]

Arron Chun: Yeah, I really repeat what Luke just said. Obviously you need to have the trust there. It just seems, in my experience, it seems awfully one-sided towards the mum a bit, and the dad is supposed to be, like, innocent until proven guilty but it seems like you're guilty and you have to do everything to prove and the woman doesn't need to do anything at all to prove anything. But the dad's guilty straight away. And that's the trouble sometimes, like, for me. Like I say, I may not see my kids for a few weeks, which was very hard for me. But then I've got...a lot of it wasn't true and X, Y, Z. And Ceri's helped me move on to actually spend time with them, which has been lovely. So yeah. That's about it, really. [0:41:27.6]

Ceri Evans: I can add a little bit to that. So quite often when I'm going out to see dads, two in visits last week said to me, 'It's like if you're female, if there is conflict then there is trouble and there is strife. If you're female and you get in there first, whether that's speaking to the social worker or speaking to the police, then the other person is the bad person.' And it's a really battle for them to come across it. Like, we worked so hard with Arron. 'Cause a picture's been painted. And it was of mum's narrative. And it's not helpful to be anti-mum, and she's lovely, to be fair. Not that Arron thinks that. But I think she is!

[applause]

And it is...so the story is painted from mum's narrative into a service. And mum has everybody around her supporting her, whether that's domestic abuse work, however that looks and feels. And I suppose what struck me was I felt they were right. It was like, if you're female and you get in first, you're believed. Your story is the one continued. Even if it's not wholly true. I'm not saying it's all untrue. But if it's not wholly true, and we're all guilty of a little bit of romance in a story, taking it to our favour, using our agenda to fulfil. So I just think it needs a little bit of abstractivity and objectivity from the social workers when they're unpicking things. [0:43:01.7]

Joe Sutton: Yeah. I think just don't give up on the first hurdle. You know, the...especially working with parents and often it will take two or three or four attempts to even get through the front door. But you know, people will notice. You go around there, you knock on the door and a week later you go around there and you're knocking on the door again. A week later you're knocking on the door. 'I want to be here because I want to help you. We want to be able to support you.' Being open, being honest, being transparent. If you're going to do something, don't wait until the next review to do it, you know, or a week before the next assessment's due. Do it...if it's a quick job do it

then. You know, do it...I've got a five-minute rule. If it takes less than five minutes, just do it there and then, rather than just waiting and waiting and waiting. Because these things, you know, for you it might be, 'Oh, I'm busy,' or, 'I've got loads on, I've got a massive caseload,' but for that family who's kind of hanging on your decisions, actually to have a quick win or a quick something that you've done just shows that you care, you know, and you are there for them.

And I would always say weekly check-ins as well. So even if you can't do something straight away, even if it is going to take months, just provide a weekly check-in, even if it's, 'Sorry there is no update this week but I'm still thinking about you and I'm still thinking about your family and your situation.' Just being able to give that time, text message. You can even set up, you know, these text messages to go automatically, you know. So it's just a way of thinking that they matter. In terms of children and young people, we like to keep it silly. We like to always start off with a bit of an ice-breaker. Sort of, 'What's your favourite pizza topping? Don't say "pineapple".' That kind of thing. But you know, going into people's houses, looking at the pictures on the walls, looking at, 'Who's that?' You know, 'Who are those people? Do you have a good relationship with them?' before going into, 'Right, it's business time,' actually going in and going, 'Okay, who are you as a person? Let's find out a little bit about that and let's cut beneath the surface.' And yeah, being able to build that relationship.

And the last thing I'd say on this is that if you look at the cycle of change of somebody's behaviour and looking at where lots of parents and children and young people sit is this pre-contemplation, 'I'm not doing anything wrong. Everything's fine with me. You should go and see Janet down the road,' etc. If somebody's in that situation, if somebody's working in that space, they are not going to be ready to work towards a plan that we're setting for them because they don't see anything wrong. It's about moving around that cycle, supporting them to be in a place where they're ready to take action. And to do that, it's about building relationships. [0:46:15.2]

Cameron Draisey:

Yeah. So to sort of add to that from the young person's perspective I would certainly really echo what Luke was saying about trust. Sort of we're all humans at the end of the day. Making sure you're getting down on sort of the young person or the parent's level. And a really good example for me, so I had...when I was a child in care I had a consistent social worker for about sort of six years, and she was phenomenal and she still is. It's amazing to work with her in my role now and see all the good things she does with other young people. But the thing for me was she always sort of made herself, like, human rather than the professionals trying to help me, which was key. Like, I remember one day I was sort of playing FIFA and obviously we appreciate that as professionals we might need to ask lots of questions to get to the bottom of things and make sure we can write up our reports. However, she took about half an hour to sort of just talk to me about FIFA, 'What's going on there? How are you doing?' all those sorts of things. So before...and then she told me things about herself as well. Like learning about sort of her favourite colour, what she likes. Obviously as a young person you're being asked so

many questions so it's lovely to sort of, yeah, as the worker, a key takeaway is probably making yourself human to the young person. Tell them a bit about yourself. Give them that sort of pen picture and just, yeah, that goes back to the sort of relationship base. If you know each other then you have that trust which Luke was talking about. And yeah, I think that's key. Yeah. [0:47:48.3]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Holly, did you want to add anything? [0:47:51.0]

Holly Wallace-Philp: I just think the main thing is treat us as a person and as a friend. We all know that you have a hundred other kids around you that you need to also deal with. And we know that you've got a checklist that you have to go through. But it's the fact of treating us like we're not just a tick in the box, like we're not just this one thing that you have to do and then you just move onto the next kid and completely forget anything that we've spoken to you about until you've written up your report. I think that's just the main thing. Make sure that you treat us as a friend. And like you would your own kids. Because we matter just as much as they do. [0:48:31.5]

[applause]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Thank you. Going back to Luke and Arron, what differences to your life has engaging with *Dads Matter Too*...what have been the differences in your life, if you can share with us? And Cameron, you shared an example of how your social worker made a difference to your life, and Holly, if you can share an example as well, that would be great. [0:49:00.0]

Luke Wort: Yeah. So *Dads Matter* has given me a voice in meetings. And obviously in meetings there's every professional. So you do feel outnumbered, in a way. But you have someone on your side that's there to back you up. And that's helped me to evolve into the person I am now, where I'm not competent of the process which you as social workers have to go through. But as well as what I have to do to make sure that we're on the same wavelength. And to make sure that all the tasks can be completed. Yeah, *Dads Matter* has absolutely been amazing, and if you don't have it, get it. [0:49:48.8]

[applause]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Brilliant.

Arron Chun: Yeah. For me, like the same as having your voice heard. Like I say, with Ceri it was nice that he can talk and get my points across, 'cause I don't know how to word it sometimes as best as some people can do it. And he helped me with that an awful lot. And like I say, I feel like in previous meetings after I met Ceri that actually things are changing and people are actually listening properly. Which is obviously a good thing. So yeah, like I say, thank you very much Ceri and *Dads Matter* group. Yeah. That's sort of it. [0:50:31.1]

[applause]

Cameron Draisey: Yeah, I think just sort of goes, yeah, back to that sort of relationship-based work again. I remember sort of working with my social worker, like always just picking up, making sure I was comfortable. So for

example, she realised that I wasn't maybe giving sort of...wasn't giving her as much, answering as many questions when I was in school. So she explored this and then sort of, she was like, 'Is there something you've, like, never done that you really...?' I was like, 'I really want to go to an American diner, have a massive burger, New York cheesecake.' So she took me there and then it was sort of after that and then in the car journey on the way home where I really sort of opened up to my worker. And I think that's sort of key. Like, the car is...like, in my work now, that's when I find young people open up the most sometimes. Like, when you're not making that direct eye contact but you're sort of chilled-out. It goes back to that sort of five to thrive, that sort of play, having a chat, getting comfortable, doing something you enjoy and then sort of moving onto sort of those conversations when a young person's comfortable. So yeah. [0:51:47.8]

Holly Wallace-Philp:

I think for me what my social worker used to do was make something just ours. So one of my old social workers, we would always go to Whitehall, like, near us. We would always get a coffee and we would always get a cake. And that would just be our thing. And then around birthdays and Christmas she'd buy me, like, a cactus or something that she knew would be dead in six months but she did it anyway.

[laughter]

Yeah! But I think making something that is going to make you memorable as, like, a good experience for the young person would make their experience with you completely different. [0:52:29.5]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Thank you. She sounds amazing.

[applause]

Okay. Because we're quite short on time, if anybody has any questions we can take those or we can carry on the discussion. So if anybody has any burning questions, just put your hand up. Yes, over here. [0:52:47.3]

Audience member:

Okay, you can hear that? Yeah. It isn't really a question. It's kind of rephrased kind of statement. Hearing what you said about feeling second place when it comes to, you know, the relationship, I mean, I'm a children's social worker. Well, I'm a social worker. I work in child psychology now. And the law says that women are born with parental responsibility and that's the problem with men, unless we're on the birth certificate or we're married we don't get that. And I've always been aware of that. And I think I was aware that there was a kind of injustice to it. But never kind of...hearing you say that and put it into context, and with the case that I'm working on at the moment which is with a same-sex couple, and I can tell you, there's no ladies in that relationship. That dichotomy is not there. But it's two men. So it's like, 'Is it about the fact it's a man?' No, I think it's about the fact that it's a woman. And you saying that has just made me gel those things together and it's been kind of a eureka moment, and it's maybe going to give me a handle on how I'm going to kind of work with this family and their young boy, who's not very well at the moment. Anyway, I just wanted to say thank you. You've given me a real light-bulb moment. [0:54:01.1]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Thank you. I think the lady in the middle. [0:54:05.5]

Audience member: I just wanted to ask you about...sorry to get technical and a bit law-y. I'm a social work manager in Staffordshire for children's services disability team. I just wanted to know how you got around getting the parents together, in terms of, you know, sharing sensitive information. In Staffordshire we're working with families and I've got a group of parents, and in my head I'm thinking, 'I'd love to link you with you with you with you.' And I'm just thinking, how did you actually do that legally? And I might be asking a really ridiculous question but... [0:54:50.3]

Ceri Evans: Yeah. No, no, no. So when we did the group work, i.e. we'll take the dads. We had six to eight dads and they were happening about once every six weeks. It was a case of...the dads they own that information. If they choose to share, they choose to share. But we as workers would not...even on the way up, these two know each other but I'm like, 'Luke, I'm not sharing your story with Arron, and Arron, I'm not...unless you boys are giving me the green light.'

Audience member: So it started as, like, a group...anyone that wants to attend, come along, this is what it's all about, and then it just spirals? And it's the ripple effect, the pebble in the pond and now it's growing? Yeah, [0:56:32.9]

Helen Tubb: I was going to say, and then they set up their own WhatsApp group. So we didn't share that information. They made that decision. So there was one dad in particular who was like, 'Right, come on. Why don't we all communicate? I'm going to start up this WhatsApp group.' So they then shared that information themselves. We never passed anything on. So it was very much led by them, at their pace. [0:55:55.4]

Audience member: Yeah. That's brilliant. I don't know whether anyone remembers the *Fathers for Justice*, you know, where the guys...and it's just like, I've just loved listening to your stories. It's just like, it's got me in there. It was just brilliant. So amazing work. Yeah, it was good to listen to. [0:56:09.6]

Luke Wort: So just to go with the meeting as well, there's...obviously there's different processes that each dad is in. Like, one might be just met a social worker. One might be in pre-proceedings and it's helpful to let the other one know what it could come to and, 'Right, don't do this because it's the wrong way of doing it. Try it this way. Or try and find something that's more comfortable.' So in a way it's...yes, it's sort of around sort of *Dads Matter*, but we're helping each other in mistakes that we've made to make sure that they don't make them. [0:56:42.6]

Audience member: Yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Thank you, yes.

Audience member: Just a comment, really. Listening to the dads in particular reminded me of the importance of reflective supervision. Because so many of us are women in the social work profession, and many of us have also had experiences of controlling or abusive men in our lives. And sometimes I think we can put that onto the people that we're working

with. And we really need to reflect on that in supervision about our biases and what's happening if we're exposed to very human anger at times in these situations. You know, I like to have those conversations with the men that I'm working with about how I feel when I hear your voice raised and how others might feel when that happens. So I just think that reflection in supervision is key, really important. [0:57:36.7]

Helen Tubb:

Yeah, that's a really good point. And I think what we've also done is a lot of learning in terms of trauma responses. So quite often, you know, we'll get reports and you dads get reports that you're violent, you're aggressive, 'They behaved like this in the meeting so it was stopped,' you know, 'Oh, your child can't see you now.' And actually they're not aggression. It's a trauma response. Is it frustration? What are you really seeing? You know, we hold trauma in our muscle. So if we raise up like that it could be a trauma response to what somebody is saying. And if you don't know people, you're going to say things that could trigger them and you're just not going to know it. So that's why we talk about really the importance of relationship but also having that trauma-informed understanding. And mentalisation we use a lot 'cause it's holding that other person in mind. So not thinking about what we want to get out of it or what the end goal is. It's, 'How do we support that person to get there? What experiences have they already had?' So thank you for that. [0:58:30.3]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

On the theme of gender, was something we've discussed a few times, about how maybe projects like *Dads Matter Too*, is it helpful for the dads to have male keyworkers, male social workers? And we know that social workers are sort of, I think the statistic is about 84% female. Is there a need to have more men in the profession to engage with dads? Does it make it easier? It's not particularly a question but if you want to comment on that, feel free to. [0:59:00.5]

Luke Wort:

I mean, I think me and Ceri have spoken about this quite a few times, that if it wasn't Ceri I probably couldn't guarantee the outcome of the relationship that it is now. But everyone's individual. Some find it easier to talk to women, some find it easier to talk to a man. I mean, I treat Ceri like a father, so I talk to him about anything and everything. And that's what makes it easier for us to get down to the bottom of problems. But yeah, it's just down to the individual dad themselves. [0:59:33.1]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Thank you. I think our time is up, so I just want to say thank you to all of you, and especially Luke and Aaron and Holly and Cameron to share your personal experiences with all of us. And thanks to everybody from Wiltshire. And thank you all for coming.

[applause]

Thanks for listening to *Employer Zone Insights*, which is a Community Care podcast. This podcast is available on most platforms so you can visit us at www.communitycare.co.uk for all other episodes. Don't forget to follow so that you can be notified when a new episode is released. Bye for now.