

BCP Employer Zone

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, assistant career editor here at Community Care. Today's episode is in collaboration with Bournemouth, Christchurch & Poole children's services – that's BCP for short – and we'll be talking to their new principal social worker, Leanne Morgan, and Jo Fry, who is a children's rights and engagement manager.

Leanne trained in Wales many years ago but has been in England for the last five years. Her practice passions are motivational interviewing, practice development and co-production with children, young people and families.

Jo's passion lies in hearing the voice of children and young people at an individual level or within wider systems, especially focusing on enabling teams and structures to understand and incorporate what children and families tell them in order to improve what they do at BCP.

Leanne talks about why she joined BCP, we talk about Ofsted, how BCP are listening to the young people they work with, and how to incorporate self-care and wellbeing into your day in a busy and stressful job like social work.

So let's have a listen.

Good afternoon, Leanne and Jo. Nice to have you on the podcast. [0:01:35.6]

Leanne Morgan: Hello.

Jo Fry: Hi. Nice to be here.

Leanne Morgan: Great to be here.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Great. So let's start with you, Leanne. You joined BCP fairly recently as a new principal social worker. What attracted you to work for BCP Council? [0:01:53.2]

Leanne Morgan: Yeah. I've been in post a whole five weeks now, which has gone really quickly. What attracted me to BCP, I think, was the fact that there was opportunity for innovation and creativity, and I kind of got that from looking at their Ofsted inspection letters, which kind of illustrated to me the direction of travel in terms of progress and practice improvement. And in some aspects the pace of that.

So it kind of sat alongside some of my values in terms of transparency and accountability, 'cause I felt BCP were being very clear and open about what needed to change, what their aspirations were for practice and improving practice, and where they wanted to go, but they were also receptive to conversations before the interview stage around how they might get there and being open to other people's ideas and what knowledge and experience you could bring from your own practice. And just having that kind of conversation right up front was positive for me and I thought, 'Mm, actually I really like how that felt.'

And that's what kind of moved me from considering it to actually making the application. That and the fact that the local authority of course is by the seaside. I'm an absolutely avid paddleboarder, so in my head I'm thinking, you know, 'What better way to unwind after a day at the office than just heading off to the coast in the summer?' Of course, I should have thought about that I was joining in the actual, like, winter, but never mind! I can look at the sea and long for those hot days!

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

That sounds very attractive, actually, even though it is, as you said, winter. You mentioned Ofsted. How has Ofsted's rating from 2021, which is where BCP was recorded as being inadequate, although there's been many monitoring visits since where there's been improvements and there's a lot to praise, and Ofsted have made lots of very positive comments... Has that given you hope and is that something you were attracted to, the fact that there's room for improvement? [0:04:08.5]

Leanne Morgan:

Yeah, absolutely, actually. I've tended to gravitate towards improving local authorities for the whole of my career because there is room for change and innovation and understanding practice better and not just jumping into action. I feel there's more opportunity almost for not just practice development but for your own career development. And so I enjoy working for local authorities that are in that place. Again, what kind of married up with that in my head about BCP was the fact that they were open to conversations about direction-finding and they were looking for differing perspectives, experiences and knowledge from outside of themselves, and again being open to that, I think, is something that's really important and brings richness. And I kind of got that feeling, that that's where they wanted to go. And I've been here, as I said, five weeks and so far that's kind of proven right. I haven't met anybody that's put any big sort of barriers in front of me or who's stalled the conversation about practice improvement or has gone, 'No, actually we do it this way.' There's open to...not change for change's sake but for actually that more collaborative, co-production sort of conversation that's happening. And I've seen that at multiple levels too.

So yeah, Ofsted did play an important part because I think being in an improving local authority is quite an exciting place to be in practice, and it means that you bring some freshness and difference to that, some diversity.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

So you have worked in those...in similar local authorities where there were improvements needed. How has this role differed? And actually,

what is the role of a PSW? And I know it varies from local authority to local authority, but what is your role here at BCP? [0:06:19.2]

Leanne Morgan:

There is some flexibility in the PSW role in BCP because again this marries up to what I was saying earlier, is they want to ensure that it's the right fit. So there's no set-in-stone things around the role. It means it can grow and mould to the needs of the service and the social workers and the staff that we're supporting. So that's encouraging. I know that in BCP the principal social worker has accountability and responsibility for certain teams. So one of them is the workforce development and practice development team, which absolutely aligns to the PSW role around developing good practice, maintaining that consistently across our service for children and young people. So there's that.

There's also quality assurance, which for me links very much to learning, training and development for social workers because quality assurance is where we see the impact of that, and the transfer of the learning into practice.

And also, next year, not right now but I'm going to be working closely with my colleague, Jo, who's in the podcast today, around participation engagement and children's rights, and making that and keeping that meaningful and impactful.

So in actual fact, those three things have a little golden thread running through them, and I see them being very much connected. And so far BCP have gone, 'Yeah, absolutely.' So it's kind of like looking at, rather than being in silos, looking at the whole piece and having that sort of helicopter view. The PSW role is absolutely well placed to have that because I'm across multiple forums.

So importantly, though, I think the major part of the role is to engage, speak to, liaise, talk, you know, chew the practice fat with colleagues on the ground, 'cause that's my connection to practice and keeping it real. And so it's being supportive. And at the moment I'm kind of starting to become engaged in putting myself out there and saying to my frontline colleagues, 'Well come, come and tell me what you need from a PSW.' And again, BCP have been very supportive of having that conversation again in that area.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I like that, 'chew the practice fat'. I really like that!

Leanne Morgan:

Yeah! There's so much to talk about. That's one of...I think that's one of the big attractions of this role in general. I mean, I grew up in practice in Wales. I qualified in Wales. Wales don't have the principal social worker role. So when I came to work in England in other improving local authorities it was a bit of an eye-opener for me and I was thinking, 'Wow, what an opportunity having this connection between, you know, strategic leadership and frontline practice, a way of getting the voice of frontline and the experience right up there straight into the room alongside senior leaders.' It's quite a privileged position, and I'm really aware of that, and I do feel very lucky to be here as a PSW. I have to pinch myself sometimes. You know, importantly we've got to keep that connection going. There's got to be balance, and part of my role I see as being, you know,

communication, being a communicator. Not just the conduit of information but actually communicating and having the meaning, understanding the meaning behind the messages that are coming from our frontline colleagues.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Yeah. I mean, in the recent monitoring visit report from Ofsted this was recognised by Ofsted that social workers have seen stability and visibility in senior leaders, and as a PSW you can only sort of improve that going forward.

Let's turn to Jo. As a children's rights and engagement manager, you've been working on many different projects. What are some of the things BCP's been involved with in order to improve how it works with young people and to ensure that they're really listened to?
[0:10:25.6]

Jo Fry:

It's interesting what Leanne was saying about the threads of information, 'cause I think that's really key. There's been quite a lot of improvement work in the last couple of years on making sure that not only are we reaching out to young people to hear what they want to tell us, but actually doing something with it. So it's taking action as a result.

So for instance, we've got a care-experienced young person who's a co-chair on the corporate parenting board now, which in itself is a really good piece of work for them in terms of experience of learning how to do things differently, but actually we've used that opportunity to reshape the corporate parenting board so that it starts with the thread of what the young people think is important to talk about and then works backwards into what that means in terms of our practice as a local authority. So that's been really positive.

Some other pieces of work have been things like co-producing the last local offer. That's actually about to be reviewed again but the last one was done in a conversation between the service director at the time and care-experienced and in-care young people. So the impact of that was felt by the young people. When it was rolled out they could see some of the influence they'd had, which again means in terms of working together we're moving forward together, not separately. It doesn't feel like it's being 'done to'.

And as Leanne was saying, we're going to be doing more work next year about how we pull those threads together so that the practice of staff and the experience of young people are all working alongside each other to help inform each other.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

For example, I know BCP have care-experienced young people on interview panels when they're recruiting ASYE or when they're recruiting even senior management. That is real involvement. And I think that says a lot. [0:12:19.0]

Jo Fry:

Yeah, and it's kind of a two-way street, isn't it? These young people have got an option to...they talk a lot about relationships. A lot of the feedback from young people is actually about feeling valued and respected and in a two-way relationship with the worker. And all these kind of experiences not only build their skills but also remind us that that's the case, that these young people are more than just a case on

a case system. It reminds you that this is about relationships and people.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And what is the partnership you have with Bournemouth University to do with artists? Tell me about that. [0:13:02.0]

Jo Fry: Well, what actually happened was we got the opportunity to run a project last year with children in care and a third-party organisation called Wakey Wakey to run a project where the outcome was to hear the voice of children in care. So the question that we asked them was, 'What would you like to tell us about being a young person in care?' And it was put out to all children in care and we ended up with a dozen young people who are interested in performing arts. They had choices. It could have been kind of painting, it could have been sound, music, but actually they chose performing arts. And they spent a week using the facilities at the university, which are absolutely phenomenal. They allowed us to use their performance spaces and we were able to spend a week with the young people producing their voice in dance and drama.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Wow, that sounds really amazing, actually. They must have had such a good time. [0:14:05.0]

Jo Fry: They had an amazing time. And again, they also get to see that there's other things in life, so it's quite aspirational. So they got to look around the university, they got to meet people that worked there and that were students there. So again, as well as us hearing some really valuable input on what their lived experience had been like, it also gives them other opportunities for the future.

Leanne Morgan: What I liked about that when I heard about it and kind of, like, looked into it a little bit, I was a bit gutted that I didn't get to see any of the performances first of all, but it's a different way of representing young people's voices in that it's kind of non-traditional but it's also...it resonates with you in a different way. And I often think we can get quite formulaic about how we engage with young people. Even just saying that word, actually. I wish I could stop saying it. But how we work alongside young people, how we gather their thoughts and voice can be really traditional, for want of a better word. And then that gets sort of processed and turned into an evaluation report which might go somewhere. And by the time it gets to the end I often think we've taken out the human aspect to it. We've lost a bit of the warmth, we've lost a bit of the empathy. We've certainly lost something in terms of understanding the young person's context.

So when you have projects like this, that offer you that in a way that really does resonate with you emotionally as well as professionally, I just think it's kind of marvellous, really. And I don't know if they're going to...are they going to repeat it, Jo? 'Cause how amazing would that be?

Jo Fry: We're in discussions at the moment, actually, for two more projects. One will be music-related and one is about producing some content about how to support yourself in terms of mental health. It's all third-party, it's all working alongside other organisations, and it gives young people an opportunity to develop their skills at the same time.

So yeah, they are really good pieces of work and it does challenge the idea that when you're hearing young people, 'This is how you do it', there are loads of ways to hear young people. They are telling us stuff all the time. It's how we hear it.

Leanne Morgan:

Absolutely.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I'm glad you mentioned mental health and we'll come to that just after I ask you about Progress Forum. So that's the young people. But Progress Forum is for staff? [0:16:29.2]

Jo Fry:

Yes. So it's a very sort of similar way of doing things but it's based on the idea that it's important to hear people. It's important to understand their lived experience and to use that understanding to improve what we do and how we do it.

So we have a Progress Forum that meets monthly. We also go out and do workshops with people so people have the opportunity to drop in and talk to us about whatever they want to talk about. And we have three main areas. So communication and engagement is an area that has been flagged up generically by children's services staff as 'could be better'. Culture and connectivity, which has a lot to do with when people talk about sometimes feeling isolated or how things have changed, particularly since Covid actually, and developing that work. And we've got a health and wellbeing strand as well, because we find every conversation actually, when it comes to staff, ultimately it comes down to health and wellbeing.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I mean, health and wellbeing is so important for social workers. It's a very relevant topic because it's just obviously getting worse in terms of having to cope with so many different parts of the job, and we know local authorities are really strapped for cash and social workers are working really, really hard, harder than they've ever had to before. How do you cope with your own mental health when working in a sector like this and what advice do you have for those frontline social workers? [0:18:03.8]

Jo Fry:

I think it's really important to be open and honest with people and to feel like people are being open and honest with you. So in work in a day-to-day basis I think that's one thing that I always operate to try and ensure that even in times of change when people can feel a little bit that things are a little bit rocky that they trust the process.

And on a more personal level, this might make you laugh but I like going for walks. I always say that I'm a bit of a tree-hugger. We're very lucky in this area, actually. We've got some beautiful places to be, like Leanne was talking about earlier. So we've got a really beautiful beach that I will go down to. I particularly like it this time of year because it's a really good headspace and there's not so many people around. You won't find me in the sea. It sounds like you might find Leanne in water. I'm not one of those people.

Leanne Morgan:

Yeah, I agree. I think there's a danger that certainly when I was in frontline practice, you know, you get caught up there at the coalface. You're busy, busy, busy. Activities always fill the time you've got. And I think we forget sometimes to look after ourselves. And I would always hope that in a supervisory space, in your supervisions,

somebody's going to yank you away from that coalface and go, 'Well actually, how are you doing? How are you feeling?' So for me, first of all it's somebody around you cares enough to ask the question. And I think with Covid that team connectedness is a bit harder to achieve. We're all remote. We can't go to the kitchen together and make a cup of tea and, you know, talk about x, y and z or have a good giggle. But we have to be more aware of it, of finding those spaces for ourselves. And I think we're good at reflecting what's going on for our families. Perhaps we need to work on reflecting where we're at ourselves, and as Jo said, being honest about that.

And I think that's the biggest piece of advice or tool I've got, being open and being safe to say, 'Actually, right now this is not feeling good for me. I just need to take a time out. I might only be five minutes but after that five minutes I'll be in a better headspace.' And I do walking as well. I don't hug trees, Jo. I'm not a tree-hugger. But I do walk. And it's just to get myself away from the screen. I think it's important to build that in. A little Fitbit that kind of buzzes, tells you to get up. And how easy is it to ignore it? Sometimes I just ignore it all day long and I'm sat in one space, 'Flip, I haven't moved.' So if I can be disciplined with my diary around meetings and visit and... why can't I be disciplined around making some time for myself? And I found that when I used to build it in, when I was in practice, over time it didn't take that long for people to just respect. They kind of expected that that's what I was going to be doing. Once a week I just had this little reflective half-hour space. I still actually have it. It's called my 'research slot'. I'll listen to a podcast or I'll read a blog. But it's away from the day-to-day and it puts me in touch with something else that's going on out there, and I think that's important.

Jo Fry:

I think it's really important for people to give themselves permission to do that. And also the culture of the organisation that you're allowed to do that as well. It's certainly one of the things that I've noticed has changed for the better over the last few years, and I'm sure Covid's got something to do with that, but yeah, people understanding that in the roles when you're working with people you're giving a lot of yourself, and to do that you need to have a lot of resource in yourself. So you need to do the looking-after. And when we're really, really busy and you've got back-to-back meetings and there's lots of crisis calls coming in and all the things that happen with people, it's still really important to do whatever you need to do to recharge your own battery occasionally. And that's about giving yourself permission. We all know it's a good idea. It's about putting it into practice.

Leanne Morgan:

Absolutely. You're absolutely right. You have got to allow yourself that. And certainly when I came, and this was again a thing that's really encouraging, is that that went in my diary straight away from now until, you know, is set as a schedule for the next year. And I told my supervisor about that and she was really supportive. She was, 'Oh, that's good, that's good. Don't take that out. Make sure that's a non-bookable.' And that's how it's stayed. So even just having that being received well meant quite a lot to me about where BCP is in its attitude towards its staff and staff wellbeing.

And I've kind of seen... I haven't been to Forum. I'd like to go but I have seen lots of other opportunities for engagement and

collaboration out there. And I don't know yet how much they're taken up, is kind of like the bit that I need to connect. But the fact that the invitations are going out from the organisation seem encouraging to me.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Is there anything else BCP offer in terms of health and wellbeing? I know you've talked about support and there's a Progress Forum to discuss things. Is there anything else? [0:23:37.4]

Jo Fry: There's a health and wellbeing charter that was produced...it was rolled out about five, six months ago now. Part of what the Progress Forum is about to do, actually, is review to see the impact of that. There's, you know, quite a strong package. Leanne might be able to say a bit more about it from the point of view of somebody who's just come in. But where you've got your employment programme and there's various amounts of support and different routes you can go into. So for instance, there are lots of staff forums here for different subject areas. So menopause, women in menopause is one, for instance. LGBTQ+ is another, just as examples of different groups that are going on that you can get involved with, alongside the employee assistance programmes. And quite a lot of time has been spent trying to work out what would be helpful for people in terms of where you work. So where we've just mentioned that some people...that we work a lot more separately nowadays, just physically separately because of the way things have shifted a bit, and how to create opportunities for people to be together and different use of team meetings and things like that are things that spring to mind immediately.

Leanne Morgan: Yeah, for me I think, I know that they're just renewing the benefits offers but there is sort of telephone access to a GP 24 hours and there's, as you said, the employee assistance and that does, you know, talking therapy is part of that if that's what you need. But I think what is also apparent and when you dip into some of the more...the BCP wider staff community areas, as Jo's mentioned, you have got all of these little groups and forums where people are talking about issues, and you've also got...there's, I've seen some yoga, I've seen a group that meet for rambles and all of that going on on the periphery. So there is that sense of, 'Let's take care of one another,' as well.

What's interesting is when you have a conversation about wellbeing, wellness or emotional health, people are listening. Again, it's not closed down. They want to hear. They want to hear about it. They recognise that it's part of the profession and that we work in an environment that is emotionally laden, that is complex, there's lots of different facets. And you know, you're working with risk and you're working with some really vulnerable children and young people and families, and that does take it out of you. And Jo's right, you are the resource. You are going in there as the tool. You've got to make sure that you're in a place where you can be available to those people that you're working with.

So I guess what I'm trying to say in a really roundabout, rambling way – I do apologise, my Welshness is showing through there a little bit! – is that when I was first in practice and a social worker gave me this

piece of advice and she said, you know, 'Whatever's going on for, be aware of that. When you're going into a house, just even if it's two minutes you stop and you think, "Right okay, why am I going in here? What am I hoping to get over? What do I want the people in that room to take from my visit? What am I hoping they're going to get from it?'"', and just having those couple of little questions before you walk in the door often meant that I was leaving some of the other baggage about the assessment before or the court case over there outside, and I was in that space wholly with that young person and that family. That helped me a lot, and I still do that, that pausing, that pulling back. And I'm sure Jo's already heard me, actually, a meeting's going, 'Let's just pause and pull back a minute because before that we need to think about this.'

And that's stayed with me. And yeah, yeah, really...actually I've never forgotten that social worker. I learnt loads from her when I was just qualified. I've never forgotten her. She absolutely resonates for me. She's imprinted in my brain.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I think that's a really good piece of advice to take a moment before you're about to go into someone's home, you know, have a think and reflect about what you're going to do there. And I think that's a really great point to end the conversation. Thank you so much to both of you. [0:27:54.4]

Leanne Morgan:

Thank you.

Jo Fry:

Thank you.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I hope you enjoyed listening to that episode with BCP Council. If you want to learn more about BCP then you can do so by going to communitycare.co.uk and on the right-hand side you will see employer profiles of various local authorities and there you'll find BCP and you can find out more about them as an organisation.

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That's it for now. See you next time.