

## Norfolk County Council Children's Services Podcast

### Benefits of a relational approach

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Hello. You're listening to the Workforce Insights podcast. This is 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 careers editor here at Community Care.

Today's episode is in collaboration with Norfolk County Council. We will be speaking to Kate Dexter, who is the assistant director of family help and high needs in children's services at Norfolk, and also Sarah Hewitt, who is a team manager for the life beyond care team. Welcome to the podcast. How are you both? [0:00:42.5]

Kate Dexter: Good, thank you.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Nice to meet you too.

Sarah Hewitt: Yeah, I'm good too. Good to see you, Sharmeen.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Let's start with talking about how Norfolk has been adopting a more relational approach in their practice and what are the benefits of that approach. [0:00:58.4]

Kate Dexter: Yeah, so I think the benefits of the approach means that we can effect change more quickly, more effectively and sort of sustain lasting change. And that's with each other and with families. So we know that change occurs most likely when we have a relationship with somebody, the trust that it builds, the responsiveness that it creates. And so for Norfolk, relational practice and that relationship-based approach has been absolutely essential in how we've changed the way we work with families.

So it's all about working with, not doing to. It's about listening to families and letting families – and particularly children and young people – become the centre of their progress, their journeys with social care, but also enabling them really to make decisions about safety to enable them to make decisions about what they want to achieve, what they want to do as they move forwards, what their goals are, what their aspirations are. But Sarah will be able to talk about it in practice, being a sort of frontline manager.

Sarah Hewitt: Yeah, definitely. I mean, our foundation of our team starts with relationships. So we start that from the very first when people join our team. We talk about how we work together as a team and then how that translates into how we work with the children and young people we're supporting. All of our supervisions, our group supervisions, start with a conversation about the relationship the practitioner has with the

young person, how that works, how they're building it, where there's trust. We work very hard to be open and honest with young people to make sure they know exactly what's happening, why it happened, being clear about what we can do and what we can't do, and not giving false hope or promises that we can't keep, but equally being really aspirational for young people and talking to them about those aspirations that we have for them.

And those relationships continue with working with other practitioners within different teams or other agencies, and with the young person's network, whether that's family, friends, foster carers, work colleagues. Whoever it might be who supports them, we try to build relationships with those people too so that young people can see the trust we have in each other in supporting them. And it all comes back to trusting each other, and you can't have that if you don't have good relationships.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Relational and restorative practice, you'd think it's a given. But unfortunately when you get bogged down with forms and assessment it does get forgotten, and I know a lot of local authorities are trying to have a relational approach. Do you provide training for your staff so that they can adopt this kind of approach? [0:03:34.9]

Kate Dexter: Yes we do. So it's part of our induction for every new staff member who comes into the authority, irrespective really of their history and their background. We pay particular focus for those who are newly qualified who are just embarking on their social work journey, and practitioners who come in from all walks of life who may not have a social work qualification, so this may be a newer concept to them. And really, what we focus on is not just how to work in a relational and restorative way but also why, why it's so important, how it helps to change things, how it helps to support children and young people and their families to move forwards.

I think in corporate parenting, so for those children who are looked-after, it becomes particularly essential, where it's so important we work on not just our relationships with children and young people but also their relationships with their family. It is so important that we really focus not just on sort of family time and seeing their family but also that reparative and restorative work in bringing them back together, helping them to forgive each other. We often see parents who are frustrated with their children for having disclosed what was going on at home, and we often see children who are really hurt and upset and feel rejected because they're in care, particularly where they perceive it to be something a parent has or hasn't done.

But we're also taking that further now because we think it's so important to continue on this path of restorative work. It is the only way for people, human beings, to function, is to function in relationship. And so restorative practice becomes an absolutely integral part of that.

And so we've developed called the 'restory relationships services', which enables our young people who are exiting care, and other young people actually who've not been looked after but open to services, to begin to learn how to work in a restorative way with other

families. So it kind of continues their understanding and their learning, which they then apply to their own network, their own family and friends.

But equally, we continually talk about it in different meetings, different conversations. It's become a real expectation and a baseline for everything that we do, and how we talk about people and with people. Again, not just young people and their families but also how we interact with other colleagues, not just in our own area but across the service and across the multi-agency service because if we don't have that ability to work in a restorative way we won't have the challenge that we need. We want challenge to be respectful, constructive, helpful so that we become each other's critical friend. And restorative work and relational practice is very much at the heart of that. So it enables us to be bold and to have courageous conversations without causing upset and to maintain and continually focus on respect for each other, listening and learning together as one group really across Norfolk, regardless of which agency we're from.

Sarah Hewitt:

A lot of that starts in group supervision. So it's us modelling that as a team, as a small team in group supervision to model that, those restorative conversations, conversations about relationship but also modelling challenge and being able to challenge each other respectfully and kindly but firmly as well.

And then what I see as a manager is the confidence in my practitioners to do that in meetings with other professionals. But it comes from a shared understanding that the reason we're doing it is to support children and young people, and to make a difference to their lives, not to just get at each other.

And I think our community of practice approach has helped that 'cause we've moved away from specific, 'It's not my job to do that,' or, 'It's your job to do that,' to, 'Actually who is the right person to do that for this child or young person?' And because that's now shared amongst the multi-agency group, this understanding, it's made it much easier to have those respectful conversations, and the young person's voice within the middle of that. So the conversations are more likely to be, 'Well, I might be the social worker but actually this young person gets on better with their targeted youth support worker so is much more likely to hear this message from them better than from me. I can help you do that, but could you have the conversation?' We've come a huge distance in being able to do that from where we were a few years ago where it was much more siloed in the way that we worked with young people.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

So the multi-disciplinary approach and the multi-agency approach, that's something that Norfolk has been working and uses that multi-disciplinary approach. How has that helped the work that you do with children and young people and families? [0:08:06.6]

Kate Dexter:

Yes, so following on very much from what Sarah was just saying, the multi-disciplinary approach really is about who's got the best relationship with a child or young person – or a parent, depending on what we're working on at the time – and who is best placed to have the conversations to support families. I think we know social workers

are very, very busy. They struggle at times with the workload that they're presented with, and so we want to make sure in Norfolk that they've got other people they can call upon. So it's what we call the 'team around the practitioner' model. So you'll have heard over time people talk about the team around the child model, and there's a range of professionals working with the family. But actually, I think we've started to realise in Norfolk our practitioners need that too. And it's not just social workers; it's any case-holding practitioner really does need the opportunity to invite services in where we need particular expertise or to just feel supported, like they're not just holding that situation on their own. I'm sure many can... this will resonate with many but I remember as a newly qualified social worker – not even just when I was newly qualified actually – but holding some really risky situations with a family and trying to effect change and feeling incredibly isolated, that it was just me and the situation and a family who may be a bit stuck, and you're heading towards a path of maybe having to escalate into care or proceedings, and that feeling very heavy, weighing incredibly heavily on me as a practitioner. So the team around the practitioner model and that multi-disciplinary approach is making sure we've got the right services and the right professionals not just working around that family but that practitioners can call upon for advice, guidance, support, and at times to offer direct interventions to the family.

And so we've developed a number of in-house services – targeted youth support service, support for success that works with looked-after children, New Roads is one that's really key to talk about – and they can work alongside the case-holding professional to support the family. And then, as Sarah was just talking about, it's about who is the best person to do that work, who is the best person to have that particular conversation. And it just helps us to share collectively the risk that we're holding with families, which we hope takes some of the pressure off individual practitioners and helps them to feel held and supported so that we're not just focusing on the family but we're focusing on our staff wellbeing too.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Could you give an example of the benefits of having a multi-disciplinary approach? So how you've worked with different organisations in help or education. How have you done that?  
[0:10:46.4]

Kate Dexter:

Yeah, so perhaps if I start and then bring Sarah in to talk about a family that she's worked with directly. One that I could really relate to is our unaccompanied asylum-seeking service. So this is for children and young people who've arrived in the UK, no family with them, they're on their own. And we brought in all the partner agencies and all the different professional groups within Norfolk County Council as well to work together in the community of practice, as Sarah spoke about earlier.

So the idea is that we're all holding the young people together. We're all planning together, we're sharing information, we're supporting each other with tricky issues, we're supporting each other with capacity issues as well. And it's a really powerful way of working when everybody in the room has the same focus and the same desire to support children and their needs, and to focus not just on our

statutory duties within the county council but when you bring that professional group together it's really powerful 'cause we get to focus on their aspirations and their goals as well, and we work together to achieve those.

But let me hand over to Sarah to talk about an individual example.

Sarah Hewitt:

Yeah, so I'm thinking a young person we're working with at the moment and actually a very high-risk situation, lots of missing episodes, a young person who's in semi-independent accommodation, lots of missing episodes, is at high risk of criminal exploitation and is involved...has got some convictions for drug use and drug selling. And actually, we work really closely with the young justice team, with targeted youth support team who have known this young person for four years and are, I would say, probably their safe people. And also with our multi-agency child exploitation police officers and our missing police officers. And what we have, we co-op into this team around this young person education when education needs to be involved. And what that has done is, in what feels like very risk situations, we have a shared responsibility for this young person and everybody recognises it. We are able to share information and reflect. But actually, what we've also been able to do is build some really good, solid relationships with this young person. So even though it feels risky, we know the strength is that that young person will always come to their team around them. They have at least two members of that team they will speak openly about what is happening in their life. And that creates a little bit more safety, where if we didn't have that team, that multi-disciplinary team, sharing information, being able to reflect with each other and hold the risks together, which I think is probably the most important part of it – none of us feel like we're alone in holding that risk – I think we'd be in a much more unsafe position than we are at the moment. We have a lot more security in knowing that things are really rocky at the moment for this young person but we see a lot more hope because of this team around them who...and they know that team is there. So although they get very frustrated and angry about us what they think as talking about them, they know everything that we're saying. We share our worries with that young person and they are able to respond and still reach out to people when they need to. And that creates a safety.

Kate Dexter:

And I think we would say actually that team around the practitioner, that approach, for us we feel like that emulates the family. So for us it feels particularly important for looked-after children and care-leavers who maybe don't have the same level of family engagement, family support that other children in the community might have. I think for us, we feel that the way we relate to each other and interact with each other and support that young person emulates a family approach to anybody who's experiencing difficulties or struggling. So it's really important to young people to know that they've got that kind of family community network around them as well.

Sarah Hewitt:

I think so. That young person knows that we care about them. And they will, even in the moments of their deepest anger, will be able to say, 'No, I know you're doing this because you care.'

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

You mentioned the New Roads service. How does that help the children and young people that you work with? [0:15:03.6]

Kate Dexter:

Yeah, it's a good question. So New Roads services is one that we're particularly proud to have in Norfolk. It started with the No Wrong Door project that North Yorkshire developed. So we were one of the kind of early local authorities to pick it up. But it was very much an adopt-and-adapt. So we wanted to make sure it works with the way we work in Norfolk. So New Roads is particularly focused on the adolescent cohort, that 12-17 group of young people. And they provide really down-to-earth, pragmatic interventions. Which again sounds like common sense but it's so powerful to watch in action.

So they are residential practitioners, so people who work in children's homes but also provide outreach to families. So the majority of children they work with are not looked-after but may well be on the edge of care if we're not able to effect change. And they bring their very down-to-earth way of caring for children day in, day out, and looking after children. They bring those strategies, those tactics, that understanding, that knowledge into the work they do with families. So New Roads will work with young people, alongside them, support them, build a relationship and then really start to work on the fundamentals. So self-esteem, confidence, self-worth. Because we know that behavioural challenges, mental health difficulties, emotional wellbeing really is rooted in a child's sense of their identity and their sense of self-worth and self-esteem. But at the same time, New Roads will work with the parents or the wider family network to bring them back together. So it's what we were talking about earlier, that restorative relational practical in action, and helping to bring back together a family unit who are experiencing difficulties or crisis for whatever reason. But because they are children's residential practitioners they know the whole kind of range of behaviours that might be seen. They look after children routinely who have experienced trauma, who are maybe presenting that in maybe a number of different ways, and they bring all of that great knowledge and learning to their work with families, which really helps them to come alongside young people and engage them in a different way, in a really positive way. It also helps them to engage families and to give them strategies and understanding that may be incredibly useful to them.

But the most important thing with New Roads, I would say, is they have specific provocations, specific things that they're focused on. And the main one is stickability. So what stickability means is that we're not going anywhere. You know, as a young person you might be struggling, as a family you may be struggling. We're going to be there for the long-haul until things start to feel better, until we start to see you fly again as a family, until you don't need us anymore. And that's incredibly important to the young people, really reassuring to parents, and it really helps us to support families when they're experiencing relationship breakdown, when they're experiencing some of the other challenges such as exploitation and other risks that we really need to step in and support families to address.

Sarah Hewitt:

Yeah. We have young people who have been supported by New Roads in terms of having been within their residential setting, who are

continuing to have that support now that they are...one of them is post-18 and he continues to have that outreach support. And he's just flown in terms of where he was, from really struggling to maintain any kind of placement to managing his own tenancy and is now looking to join the army and, you know, he's held down a job for the last eight months, he's paying all his bills, he's making new friends, and it is that foundation that he had. He was in the New Roads trainer flat at one of the hubs. And so that foundation of being able to build up his independent skills while having that outreach support and that's been ongoing has been the making of him, really. It's been fantastic to see.

And equally I think I'm always amazed at 1) how down-to-earth New Roads are in terms of their thinking around what might work to help a young person, but also how creative they can be sometimes as well. Really thinking out of the box and helping us be brave about making decisions that we might feel a bit wobbly about and thinking, 'Actually, this is going to be okay 'cause we know that we've got that support behind us with the New Roads team helping us make those decisions.'

Kate Dexter:

And I think it is that skill that they have in holding risk. And another kind of key provocation is, 'Which risk are we managing? Are we managing a risky young person or are we managing professional anxiety according to what we're seeing?' And I think they're really good at challenging us and really good at support us to have a different relationship with young people, but also a different relationship with risk. I think it's really easy when you see a, I don't know, 14-, 15-year old who's out past curfew every night, who's really struggling and not wanting to talk to us about their friendship group. And kind of as a professional group getting highly anxious and having safety plans in place. I mean, they're constantly reported missing to the police, there's lots of intervention. And young people tell us routinely, 'We just want to be children, young people first and then open to services or looked-after second.' And I think New Roads are really good at steadying that down for all of us as professionals and challenging us to make sure they are children and young people first, and to help us to hold in mind what's reasonable for an adolescent to expect from us and what's reasonable in terms of planning.

So I know as a teenager I was out past curfew almost every night. Certainly when I was 15, 16. Nobody called the police. Nobody ever thought to report me missing. Nobody put a restrictive safety plan in that I must be home at 8:30 every night. Yet we have a tendency as professionals to do that for children that we work with or look after. And so New Roads bring that understanding and that approach to the conversation and to the professional group working with the family. They're really integral in how we practice and how we support children and young people, not to mention of course the direct work they do with families themselves.

Sarah Hewitt:

Yeah. And I think they've helped...being challenged by New Roads has helped me be more challenging when I'm talking with providers, support workers, foster carers when they're asking me to do a full assessment on whether a young person of 17-and-a-half can stay overnight with their new best friend. That's not reasonable, you know, that's not what this young person wants. They want to be able to

phone up their foster carer and say, 'Can I stay around so-and-so's tonight?' and their foster carer to say, 'Yes, that's fine.' So it's really helped me, really helped me.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

And let's talk about the life story work that Norfolk does. I know Kate, it's something you're quite proud of. Do you want to tell us about that? [0:21:47.8]

Kate Dexter:

Yes, sure. And it is, it's not just something that I'm proud of. I think all of us in Norfolk are really proud of this approach. It's a different way of thinking about supporting children and young people.

I said earlier that self-esteem, confidence, self-worth are absolutely critical, and somebody understanding their identity and their identity being rooted in those settings, that's when we start to see young people strive for success to have aspirations themselves and want to achieve a different future. And that's what our life story work does, we think.

So social workers will always talk about life story work as being life story books, later life letters, maybe drawing a family tree, maybe looking at a timeline. They are all really valid ways of approaching and understanding a life story and really valid elements of direct work with children and young people.

But we've turned it on its head a little bit and we now talk about 'My Norfolk Story', which a life story approach. We really want to get away from conversations about it being a 'piece of work' because that immediately says it's a fixed point in time, and we all know ourselves that as we get older, as we remember things, as we kind of change as an individual, we have a different understanding of what's in our past, what our history has taught us and how we've found ourselves here today. And so life story approach is all about making sure that we've got a relationship and we've got the restorative skills to show up when a child or young person wants to have that conversation. So it's an ongoing way of working with young people and it's not just for looked-after children or those who are going to be adopted. It's for every child and young person. In families we do it naturally, we do it automatically. I was talking to my mum at the weekend. You know, I'm 47 and we were like, 'Oh, do you remember when you did that, Kate, when you were five?' and giggling about it and talking about it. And I have a different understanding of that memory today than I did ten years ago or twenty years ago, and that's what's so important for children and young people particularly, particularly those who are known to children's services. All these things have happened around them. You've got all those professionals involved making decisions, thinking about them, talking about them, writing about them, making decisions about them. And so this is really about each individual practitioner being available to young people, to children, when they ask a question and coming back to it. It's like layers of an onion where the first time you might talk about something with a child it might be on a very basic level, particularly if they're young, you know, about why they're in care, for example, or why we're involved with the family. But you might need to have that conversation many, many times over years. And it's all about that relationship and that supporting the child or young person to understand where they're



come from, who they are, and how they've become the person they are today. And it really helps them to find who they are. It builds their identity, which in turn we hope will help them with self-esteem and confidence.

But Sarah, again this is something that you and your team do day in, day out. Please do come in.

Sarah Hewitt:

Yeah. I think it's taken a while for some of our more established person advisors who work with the 18+ cohort of young people that we support to realise that they are absolutely fabulous at doing life story work without realising that what they're doing is life story work. So some of them when I started in the team would say, 'I know, I talk to my young people. They don't want to talk about their life story.' And then as I unpick and reflect with them and I realise that they've had conversations about how that young person came into care or what's gone on with their relationship with their mum or dad, or why they don't see their brother or sister or, you know, why they didn't do their GCSEs. And I say, 'That's life story work. You are talking about their experiences in their life story and you're helping them make sense of it.' And they now get it.

And a lot of our older young people don't want to sit down and do a timeline. They don't want to draw pictures. It's not natural for them. But what they do want to do is talk, and they want to reflect and they want to be listened to. And they want someone just to make sense of it. And what we've seen through doing that is a lot of young people being able to repair some relationships with family members because their expectations of those family members lowers. Through the work that they do with their personal advisor they start to understand that they can't change the way that their mum or dad might act or react to them, but what they can do is understand where that might be coming from and understand how it impacts on them and when to remove themselves from it because they can learn from their past experiences. And that is...I think it's wonderful when I see that and when I talk to practitioners. Or to young people, 'cause some of them do phone me and talk to me about stuff, and they're able to reflect on that. And it just shows the value of how we take it for granted. You know, we take it for granted that we understand our history and we understand what's happened, because we can have those continuous conversations. As Kate says, you know, I'm nearly 50, I have those conversations with my mum and dad and my brothers and sisters all the time. Never really think about it. And a lot of the young people we work with don't get that opportunity. So that's what we're here to do. Help them make sense of it.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I really like the onion analogy. So thanks for sharing that. Thank you. It's been great talking to you both.

Sarah Hewitt:

Thank you.

Kate Dexter:

Oh, it's been good to talk. Really good.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

That was Kate and Sarah from Norfolk County Council. If you want to learn more about Norfolk, go to [www.communitycare.co.uk](http://www.communitycare.co.uk), click on

the menu and scroll down to Employer Profile and select Norfolk County Council.

To keep up-to-date with Community Care, do follow us on our socials, whether it is on Facebook or LinkedIn, X and Instagram. On Instagram we are @thesocialworkcommunity. And don't forget to follow wherever you get your podcasts from. That way you'll be updated when we drop a new episode.

We have two other podcasts that you should add to your library. The first is the brand new Social Work Community podcast, where we discuss all things social work. Every month we focus on a different topic. And then there's Community Care Inform Learn On The Go, where experts and academics in the social care sector discuss research, theories and practice issues. So go give them a follow.

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