Workforce Insights Wiltshire County Council

Sharmeen Ziauddin:	You're listening to the Workforce Insights podcast, formerly known as Employer Zone Insights. 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 Wiltshire Council. The guests featured on this episode are Dan Wilkins and Juliana Ameh. Dan is the head of transformation and quality for adults at Wiltshire Council. He's got over two decades of experience supporting people with learning disabilities and autism. Juliana Ameh finished her ASYE a year ago and is on the learning disabilities team. Prior to becoming a qualified social worker, she was a support worker for people with learning disabilities.
	In the episode, they talk about how the provision for adult services has changed since the Covid-19 pandemic, how demand for particular services has gone up and the reasons for that. They talk about neurodiversity and how service users and staff can be supported. So let's have a listen.
	So, hello to the both of you. Welcome to the podcast. How are you both? [0:01:24.4]
Dan Wilkins:	Morning. Very good, thanks.
Juliana Ameh:	Yeah, I'm very good, thank you.
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	So, it's 2024. A lot has happened in the last four years, not just in social care but in the whole world. We've lived through a pandemic, and of course that has had varying degrees of impact on organisations and individuals. What has been the impact and the long-term effects on adult social care since the Covid-19 pandemic? [0:01:48.5]
Dan Wilkins:	Lots has happened, obviously, in the last four years. One of the biggest changes is obviously pre-Covid we were very much office-based. You know, homeworking was quite minimal. We didn't really have the infrastructure set up in the way we do now. So I think the way we have worked as an organisation, as all organisations have, has changed fundamentally. So there's much more kind of hybrid working in terms of people working from home, going into the office. There's much the way…teams have worked together, that team dynamic in terms of that support has changed because pre-Covid you would always have people meeting in those hubs, in those buildings to have that check-in. During Covid we obviously had time where office contact was really minimal so we were communicating via Teams, via WhatsApps. Now we're in that kind of middle ground

where we have a bit of office working, a bit of hybrid working, still working from home. So I feel that, yeah, there's been that fundamental shift really, in a really short space of time and, you know, reflect that it was almost an overnight change from everyone being in the office to everyone working from home.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yep. It's been very different for, I think, all organisations, hasn't it? Juliana, what's changed for you? [0:03:07.7]

Juliana Ameh: So I think in terms of my experience coming into the team as a student and then going on to do my ASYE, what we have seen is how we've worked with the individuals we support in terms of that transition period where a lot of individuals that we supported needed to have more virtual assessments. And that worked for some individuals but it wasn't as great for other individuals as well. But going into the restrictions being lifted, a lot of the individuals that we've supported are now being able to access face-to-face assessments as well, which has been really positive. And I think there has been a shift in terms of, for instance, day services and provisions. During the Covid pandemic a lot of the individuals we supported couldn't access these services, which for some individuals had a dramatic impact. For some it was positive 'cause they could spend more time at home with family, but for others it just created more isolation as well. But going into with restrictions being lifted now, a lot of individuals are now accessing the day services, for instance, and trying to manage in terms of waiting lists, for instance, and what provisions are available. I think that's something we're also experiencing in terms of the backlog as a result of Covid.

In terms of working, as Dan rightly said, there was a shift in terms of the way we supported each other as a team, where hybrid is something that everyone is getting used to and there's greater connections in terms of online. We're now having to have discussions, meetings, more online, which wasn't always the case before. But what we have seen is that on some occasions it's more easier to just pick up the phone and you're able to reach someone or arrange a meeting in a shorter period and get everyone together more than you could prior.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So you think it's easier now to get hold of people because, you know, they're on the other end of Teams? [0:05:39.0]

Juliana Ameh: In terms of my experience it has been, 'cause I could just a message and just say, 'Are you available for a quick call?' I might have been in the office looking around for this person and not have been able to find them. But saying that, I do understand that I've had colleagues say – who were in the team prior to when I joined and prior to Covid – who have said actually they've not enjoyed the transition of less people in the office spaces. For instance, we do a lot of multi-disciplinary work with our help team. So they have also moved online, in terms of their service, which is also virtual as well, as well as in-person. But when they were physically in the office we've had colleagues say, oh, they've missed the days of just being able to go across and have a chat and just have that case discussion. Yeah. So in terms of experiences it's been quite individual as well. But yeah.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:	In terms of provision for adults who need support, you know, like day centres and respite care, are they back to pre-Covid levels in terms of what you provide? [0:06:56.2]
Dan Wilkins:	Yeah. We've definitely seen an increase in demand. I kind of reflect that that demand was increased in pre-Covid anyway. It wasn't like Covid hit and then suddenly we had an increase in demand. We were already seeing year-on-year kind of incremental, you know, year-on-year increase in demand.
	I think what's happened during Covid and post-Covid we've kind of reviewed the way we're using those services, and I really reflect quite a lot on this that for some people during Covid the fact that they couldn't go to day centres had a really negative impact on them and put a lot of pressure on them and their families. But there were some people who absolutely flourished. They absolutely…you know, the pressure of going to a day service for some people, they didn't have to deal with that anymore. So we saw some improvements with that.
	And I think that's what we're looking at now, in terms of, 'Well, how do we shape services that meet the needs of those people that actually want that individualised support versus those people that want day services?' And I think that's a real change for us.
	I mean, capacity and demand. Any local authority in England will have the same challenges around that. And it's, 'How do we make sure we use that capacity to the best of our ability?' You know, our approach within Wiltshire is to look at supporting people to have direct payments, supporting people to have individual service funds, you know, packages of care, looking at that individualised care so they have a bit more control over what they do. But as I say, yeah, that demand was increasing anyway. It's an interesting question to know whether…if that demand would have continued to increase without the pandemic. It probably would have done.
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	So that raises a really interesting point. I mean, there's a lot more awareness around neurodiversity in social in general. So you've seen an increase but you think it was on the increase anyway. What are the different types of learning disabilities that you see more of in the people that you support? [0:09:16.9]
Juliana Ameh:	I would say in terms of learning disabilities no two individuals are ever the same. We have to deliver very person-centred care. And what we could say is, in terms of service delivery, what has been amazing is that the OES (which is the Outreach and Enablement Service) and the Intensive Enablement Service, they've been able to identify some of the individuals we support who might need support managing their day-to-day lives, creating structures, support in terms of being able to access the community. And in terms of a shift from the day service, just touching on some of what Dan has said where we had individuals who didn't enjoy day services as much, you've now…the service that has been developed by Wiltshire Council has been really integral in terms of providing that person-centred care because having individuals, having one-to-one support, and what you do find is it's really outcome-focused. You're looking at, 'What is their specific

need? How can they be supported to reach their goals and their future aspiration?'

Just going back to what I said in terms of no two individuals are the same, you could have similarities, but I think with services like this it's unfortunate that it's just over twelve weeks. But on some occasions they are able to extend those services. But what they have been able to really identify is work with that individual on a one-to-one basis, or on some occasions you would have two-to-one support workers who would go in for a period of time and really work with that individual just to identify what their needs are and supporting them in reaching their outcomes.

Dan Wilkins: Can I just add, so in terms of the question around kind of increase in presentation, what we have seen is an increased awareness around that neurodivergence. So kind of increased understanding around autism, increased understanding around ADHD are the two predominantly. And within Wiltshire we changed the way we were supporting people…autistic people without a learning disability. So prior to 2022, if somebody was autistic but they didn't have a learning disability they would be supported by one of our ongoing support teams. Back in 2022 we changed the way we supported those people. So the learning disability and autism service which Juliana works in was previously the community team for people with learning disabilities. That team would only work with autistic people that had an associated learning disability as well, and we changed the remit of that so that somebody, an autistic person without a learning disability, would be supported by that service. And that was a key shift for us because some of the challenges that autistic people, some of the challenges that neurodivergent people have, is in terms of their executive functioning, which can often not be fully understood. So an example of an executive function would be, like, being able to cook a meal, looking after yourself, doing those kind of things that we take for granted. And some autistic people would really struggle with that. When we changed the learning disability and autism service, that was a fundamental change for the staff because suddenly they were working with people that were very independent in many ways in their lives and achieving wonderful things, but also struggling with some of the more day-to-day tasks that we take for granted. And so how do we support people where they've got that impairment of executive function? And that was a positive shift for the organisation to make. And then I hope it was a positive move for the autistic and neurodivergent people we support because it's a very…you know, it's a very different way of assessing that kind of eligible Care Act needs. [0:13:39.3]

Juliana Ameh: Just in agreement with what Dan has said, I think fundamentally the shift does make sense, and it continues to make sense, I think, having those individuals that we are now supporting within the learning disabilities team. It has been positive and it continues to do so. I think what we have seen, in terms of some of the challenges that Dan has identified, is the provision and services as well. Whilst as workers we've had to also had…there's been a change in terms of how we assess, where you are seeing individuals who are independent in many aspects of their life but continue to have needs.

	But one of the challenges we have seen is where, for instance, in terms of services that are available, not being able to refer or redirect. I think this might be nationwide. It's not Wiltshire alone. But being able to, for instance, an individual with autism only being to access the generic service. For instance, in our team we could refer someone with learning disabilities to our community help team but it's not the case for individuals with autism. I think this is a shortfall that nationwide really needs to be a lot of thinking in terms of how support…how we can really provide services for individuals for autism as a whole.
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	Do you have specific training in Wiltshire for social workers and support workers who work with people with autism, or is it something you just pick up with experience? [0:15:29.6]
Juliana Ameh:	In terms of our team, we have had trainings. We've had face-to-face delivered trainings specific to our team, which has been good. I think definitely it's an area that still needs work. It's definitely…in terms of what the experience we hear as a whole in our team as well, it's an area that continues to need work because autism is such a broad spectrum. Yeah. I think we have had training. But as I said, it's something that…an area that could still be developed in terms of how the training…what trainings are available.
Dan Wilkins:	Can I pick up on that? I'd absolutely agree. And if you look at the outcomes for autistic people are quite negative, so they're at a higher risk of suicide compared to the general population, a higher risk of mental health, they're at a higher risk of not being in employment. So one of the statistics I read recently was 25% of autistic people in paid employment, which is ridiculous when we have a workforce deficit within the country. So there needs to be much more work around this. Around 15% of the entire population are neurodivergent. But whilst we've seen an increase in awareness and trends that we saw in the pandemic with the increased use of social media, TikTok etc., we saw an increase in that awareness, I'd argue that you'd almost see an increase in that kind of discrimination as well. Particularly ADHD. There's been some fairly high-profile people that have come out with ADHD, and in some areas of society people have been quite negative around that. And that's really unhelpful, really unhelpful. So that's what we've been working with, and doing that kind of societal advocacy, being advocates for people regardless of whether they have an eligible Care Act need which means they're entitled to a service from the local authority. How can we, kind of as a society, develop the understanding for neurodivergent people and kind of help to break down those barriers? And that's still an ongoing mission and that's part of the learning disability and autism service, and that's part of what we're doing as a council. Because we want to have an inclusive society and inclusivity means that everyone's included. Do you know what I mean? And I feel that that's some of the challenges we have, so that we do identify autistic people with mental health needs, that they're supported, you know, where we identify that people need some help to learn to cook and stuff like that, that they're supported, and we have a bit more of a…rather than a one-size-fits-all approach that we have a really individualised approach to supporting people.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:	You raise a really important point about how society views things like ADHD and autism, and it is very misunderstood and, as you said, I guess everyone's still learning, even those like yourselves who are in the sector and who work with people with autism. You mentioned TikTok and social media. There is definitely a lot more awareness over the last five years. A lot more people talk about it and a lot more adults, as you said, are being diagnosed with different learning disabilities and autism or ADHD. Dan, you're an expert in this. You've been working with people with learning disabilities for so many years. How has the landscape changed in diagnosing and people coming forward, and even knowing what autism is? [0:19:07.8]
Dan Wilkins:	I'll start with saying be wary of anyone that says they're an expert but anyway!
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	Okay!
Dan Wilkins:	Let's leave that aside! But I think for me, you know, in the last twenty years there's been a fundamental shift. When I started in my career autism within females wasn't recognised. I remember being told that, you know, females didn't have autism. I also remember being told that you can't have ADHD as an adult. I distinctly remember being told that. Now those things have been disproven and, you know, there's growing awareness that…of autism within girls, you know. I think, you know, the figures have gone from 1 in 10 to 1 in 4, and I'm fairly sure that there will not be that disparity between kind of, you know, males, females using that. So we have seen that increase in awareness.

Waiting lists are a real challenge up and down the country, you know, for adults and children. I'm aware that there are some areas where there's a two-year waiting list for an adult diagnosis of autism. Some people are choosing to go down and have a private diagnosis, which is obviously good but not available to the vast majority of people. I'm very mindful that there are people who will not meet the diagnostic criteria for an autism or ADHD diagnosis but they still have need out there that needs to be supported and understood. And that's something that we need to look at so we're not excluding people from services or society because they don't have that formal diagnosis of ADHD or they don't have that formal diagnosis of autism. There's an acknowledgement that there's still a need there, there's still a support need there.

There's a real positivity as well, you know. When I started in my career, autism was referred to as high-functioning or low-functioning. Now it's actually understood that autism is more like a sphere of need, and it will change, like we all do. We all have good days. We all have days where we're going to change the world. And we all have days where we just want to stay in bed. And that's the same for everybody. And that's how…you know, with neurodivergence you will see that fluctuation because that's human, isn't it? That's how we all are. And I think that's what we're getting at.

So I see there's better understanding. I think there's a…we have moved away from that binary either you're autistic or you're not, you have ADHD or you're not. We have raised awareness. With |

awareness comes more prejudice and discrimination, so how do we counter against that?

But also the voice of autistic and ADHD people and other neurodivergent people is much louder than it was twenty years ago, and that's really positive and that's, you know, that's really good to see.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:	Can I ask you about staff within Wiltshire Council who may have learning disabilities or maybe are autistic or have dyslexia. How can social workers who have a type of neurodivergence…what can they do to help themselves? [0:22:31.3]
Juliana Ameh:	In terms of Wiltshire Council as a whole, there are provisions, facilities available for staff. What we have seen is the disabilities network and also…which has been really positive and supportive in terms of signposting staff members to provisions that are available. And I think, for instance in our team, we actually have a neurodiverse group. This is a space for individuals with dyslexia, dyspraxia, autisms, ADHD to be able to come together and just have information in terms of what tools are actually available to you as an individual to support you to be able to deliver in terms of your work.
Dan Wilkins:	You know, I think Wiltshire Council is a very kind of inclusive employer. In terms of advice for neurodivergent social workers I think, a) you will know yourself what kind of measures will assist you. Some people, some neurodivergent people really struggle with having the cameras on. That's something that I don't insist on people having the cameras on because, you know, you need to respect that.
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	You mean in meetings and…
Dan Wilkins:	Yeah.
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	…things? [0:23:45.8]
Dan Wilkins:	Yeah. And some people do, and that's okay. But my…I would rather…for a neurodivergent person that doesn't feel comfortable having the camera on, I would rather them have the camera off and be able to participate in the meeting than have it on and kind of feel uncomfortable.
	And again, mindful…and going back on my previous point around that fluctuation. There might be some days when the neurodivergent individual's very happy to have the camera on, there's other days when they're not. So you know, stuff like that.
	The other things we can do with neurodivergent staff, you know, if I've arranged a face-to-face meeting with that neurodivergent member of staff to prep them and see what we can do and kind of make those reasonable adjustments so that they're not coming into a big, bright building with lights and noise, that actually they're doing that preparation. And that might be, you know, we had one member of staff who wanted to come in before everybody else so they could just, you know, familiarise themselves with the room. It's stuff like that. And I think that again, that's one of my reflections. Twenty years ago

that would not have happened. We do now. We have that knowledge, we have that understanding with people.

And yeah, I mean again, for neurodivergent social workers, speak to people you trust. Speak to someone in your organisation you trust. Ideally that will be a manager but if you don't have that relationship with your manager, find somebody. Speak to them, talk through your experiences, you know. As I say, there's 15% of the population are neurodivergent. Somebody else in that organisation – in fact, several people and hundreds of people depending on the size of your organisation – will be having that experience too. So Juliana's point around that staff network, that's really key. Find your peers, find your buddies, find those champions within your organisations.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: You mentioned positivity earlier. What are the positive outcomes now, going forward for adult social care post-pandemic and in terms of how many people have autism and need services? [0:25:54.0]

Dan Wilkins: I mean, I think generally within adult social care we're under a transformation programme. So neurodivergent people, yes, but kind of older adults as well. So I think people want much more control over their lives, you know. They don't want to be passive recipients of services. And I think that's a massive change.

So one of the works we're doing, so in Wiltshire we have a Wiltshire Centre for Independent Living, a wonderful organisation. And they are a service user-led organisation. So we have been working with them to develop the vision for adult social care. And there were a number of events held last year, and the vision that was co-produced is we all deserve to live our lives our way. And that's now the strapline of adult social care. And that's wonderful, and I don't think anyone can disagree. It's hard to disagree that we all deserve to live our lives our way.

The next step of that is, 'How do we take this ambition and make it reality?' So we are continuing to work with Wiltshire CIL and other service user groups to develop, you know, what services do we need. So technology-enabled care. Alexas are in a lot of homes. How can we use existing technology for people to support it? So rather than having a carer coming in four times a day to remind someone to give your meds, set a reminder. Stuff like that, you know.

One of the things we're piloting is robotic cats. So that gives people that companionship, you know. We have thirty-odd. I can send you a picture if you like. They're wonderful. And they've been proven to be really effective for people who have dementia, to provide that companionship and that reassurance.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: I would love to see a picture of a robotic cat, yes!

Dan Wilkins: I will send you one through, I will send you one through!

In terms of learning disabilities and autism, how do we make sure that people are being supported to live their best lives? Which is something I completely pinched from Wiltshire CIL, so I'm going to name them here – Mary Reed, Chief Exec, that's living her best life. But that's wonderful. How do we…you know, I mentioned earlier only

25% of autistic people in paid employment. In England only 5% of learning disabled people have a job. How can that be? That's absolutely ludicrous.

So how do we support people to work? Because we know people at work, they have better outcomes. They're happier, they socialise, they have their own money. People don't want to be dependent on the state. People want to be independent. So how can we do that?

So there's a real drive here within Wiltshire Council to really…classic social work…everyone on Day One of social work would have been told, 'Empowerment'. That's it. That's it. This is, 'How do we empower people? How do we give them the power to make the changes in their lives?' And that's the exciting stuff.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:	I'm glad you mentioned Mary because we have an article feature from last year about Wiltshire CIL, which I wrote, and it was lovely speaking to Abby Joe and Mary. And anyone who's listening can read that. [0:28:57.2]
Dan Wilkins:	I would recommend it. She's brilliant, Mary. Absolutely. So if people have five minutes to read that article I'd recommend they do, 'cause her and Abby Joe and that whole organisation do some wonderful work.
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	They do. Thank you. Juliana, did you want to add something? [0:29:12.6]
Juliana Ameh:	Completely agree with what Dan has said in terms of…I think what we have seen is definitely greater empowerment for individuals that we support, and I think the use of technology has…I think we've now seen how important or the scope in terms of being able to give that individual greater independence. I guess moving more from having that support worker come in, as Dan touched on, but looking at a different way of being able to deliver that service for that individual. Yeah, I completely agree with what Dan has said.
	I think in terms of what we have seen now is, connected to the idea of empowerment as well, is people with learning disability or neurodivergence want to have control over their lives. They want to have that purpose as well, and employment also plays a part in doing that. It's opened up greater discussions in terms of, 'Why can't people with learning disability have paid work?' And yes, they're able to do volunteering work, which is brilliant, but why can't they have paid work as well? And it's now giving employers…it's now allowing employers to also think of how can they provide for this group of individuals, which is really key in terms of that transformation of the adult social care, yeah, in terms of the planning in general, really, yeah.
Dan Wilkins:	There's a wonderful book written by Saba Salman called *Made Possible*, and it's a brilliant book and it shows the…it's a biography of ten learning disabled people and what…how they have overcome challenges and barriers in their lives to really succeed. And it's brilliant. And if ever I'm having one of those off days and I need a reset of why I do the job that I do, *Made Possible* is my go-to. I literally have it on my desk. I can see it. It's a brilliant book. I'd, yeah,

	again recommend that people read it 'cause it shows what can be achieved if we give people the opportunities. Or what can be achieved if we don't and what people overcome as well. But I always think it's better to remove barriers than expect people to climb over them!
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	Yeah, absolutely. I'll share the book in the show notes. [0:31:40.9]
Juliana Ameh:	I think it really ties in with that social model that's a concept that society is…people are more disabled by the barriers that society puts in front of them. And I think as a council in general, from what I've seen, is there's a real focus in removing those barriers and really focusing on empowering those individuals, which is really positive to see.
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	You guys are doing a great job. Thank you so much for joining us today. [0:32:11.7]
Dan Wilkins:	Thank you very much.
Juliana Ameh:	Thank you for having us.
Sharmeen Ziauddin:	That was the Workforce Insights podcast with Wiltshire Council. I've put the book that Dan mentioned in the show notes, as well as the article link to the Wiltshire Centre for Independent Living, so do give that a look.
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	And there's the Community Care Inform Learn On The Go podcast where experts and academics in the social care sector discuss research, theories and practice issues. So go give them a follow.
	That's all for now. See you next time.