

## Which episode was your favourite?

Kirsty Ayakwah: Hello, and welcome to another episode of The Social Work Community podcast. My name is Kirsty Ayakwah, the senior careers editor at Community Care, and in this episode we're taking a little trip down memory lane and reviewing the conversations we've had with social workers about the key issues affecting the profession. If this is your first time on The Social Work Community podcast, welcome. Whether you're a student or an experienced social worker, whether you're in frontline or management, this podcast is for you. You'll hear direct from social workers in your community about their successes and their challenges.

Our first season was hosted by Sharmeen Ziauddin, and included discussions on racism in the profession, the impact of negative media coverage on social workers, the pros and cons of being a young social worker, and if social workers should be on social media. We also shared a moving interview with one man, who not only overcame adversity after moving to the UK as a refugee when he was just a young teen to securing a double win in the Social Worker of the Year awards.

In this episode, I catch up with Sharmeen to talk about the interviews that launched this podcast in October 2023, find out which one resonated the most with social workers, and share some insights into what we can expect from Season Two. Let's have a listen. [0:01:47.8]

So Sharmeen, I've really enjoyed Season One of The Social Work Community. It feels like the topics you've covered are ones that have resonated with our social workers, such as the impact of negative media on the profession and social workers, and the one on prejudices and racism, and also what it feels like to be a young-looking social worker and how social workers treat you. But tell me which of the ones you think have had the biggest impact. [0:02:19.2]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: So, I would say the racism one, racism in social work. That's probably the one in terms of comments sparked a bit of a discussion on the Community Care website. We've also had comments on social media with social workers highlighting that it was an extremely important conversation. In terms of listeners, it was by far the most widely downloaded as well.

Kirsty Ayakwah: So why do you think that is? Why do you think it resonated with social workers? [0:02:48.4]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay, so I think the fact that our guests, Nana and Ash, spoke very honestly and quite earnestly about a subject that's so emotive, like racism and Islamophobia, and actually very relevant, really attracted people to listen. It goes into quite a lot of depth. So they give

examples of their own experiences and quite honestly, people of colour aren't invited to talk about those things and are expected to just deal with it on their own. So, no doubt many people can relate to some of the things they said. Even if they're not black or Asian social workers themselves and they haven't experienced things like that themselves, they would have seen it happening with colleagues, I would imagine. And I think the challenge remains by local authorities. We don't have enough people of colour in senior positions in social work, and I think that's quite obvious for everybody to see. There's initiatives like BAALI, which is the Black And Asian Leadership Initiative, which a few local authorities have sent their social workers on. We know that black social workers make up quite a large part of the social work workforce. According to the 2021 census it's around 14%, I believe. And that's a lot because I think black people make up less than 5% of the general workforce in England. So if you look at those figures, we don't see that representation across management in the sector. So I think there's quite a long way to go, and I think that probably was a part that resonated with a lot of people.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Let's have a listen to Ash. [0:04:12.2]

Ash:

Because we know racial experiences can lead to racial trauma. And again, this is why allyship really comes into it and why I say that. What I yet have to see in policies is subsequent to racial trauma, you know, social workers can feel anxious, social workers can experience anxiety, social workers can trigger their own previous experiences. Social workers will take it really personally and then really blur the lines between being professional and being personal. And that will have direct connotations with your practice.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah. I mean, I'm thinking back to something that Ash had said where he talked about allyship and having support from your managers, or being in spaces where you might have a service user who is exhibiting signs of racism. You might be the only person, the only social worker there. And I think he talked about having support. That might be having another social worker that come and supports you, or just being able to speak to your manager afterwards. So yeah, that really resonated with me and hopefully this is something that we can continue to discuss and tackle. [0:05:20.5]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Yeah. I think it's definitely a topic that we'll cover again, no doubt. Maybe a different angle with other guests who share their own experiences, and really finding what is a solution, especially if you do get racism from people you're supporting – families and young people, whoever. What is the solution for management, for your manager to kind of sort that out, really? What happens? I think those are things to be discussed in the future.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Mm, definitely. So talking of isms, the one that you did with Elizabeth and Omar, which talked about the pros and cons of being a young social worker and their experiences, usually when we think about

ageism we're thinking about being an older social worker, but they spoke about being young and what that means for them when they're going to support families, how they're treated, how they're viewed, if those families feel like they are competent enough to look after whatever situation they're in. So what was your experience of doing that interview? [0:06:27.3]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Yeah, they were a lot of fun. It was really interesting when they told me about the slang they used, or young people used, and they're quite in tune with that 'cause they're young people themselves. They're both under 25 so they are officially young people! Yeah, it was great. I loved that Omar's an activist and he does a lot of work with the International Federation of Social Workers. You know, he's really out there doing his thing in terms of trying to change the curriculum to make it more up-to-date. So yeah, kudos to them both.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

And we've just got a little clip that we're going to share so that people can hear it. [0:07:07.8]

Elizabeth:

I had an adolescent say to me, 'The gavvers are coming,' And I said, 'Who are the gavvers?' And she said, 'They're the police.'

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Oh.

Elizabeth:

So I didn't know that some adolescents or teenagers call the police 'gavvers'. So it's a different language, and more slang and language is coming out all the time in young people. So I think for me, I sort of learnt that although I am young, I am actually older in a sense because there's still language coming out and new slang that I don't know about, and it's making me feel older.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

I think you didn't know what that word was either, did you? [0:07:45.4]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

No, because I'm not young. No, I didn't know, and I think everybody...all of our colleagues at Community Care did not know what that meant either. I mean, Elizabeth didn't know and she's, I think, 22 or 23. But interestingly, I have teenagers myself at home, and I get to hear some of these words. Not 'gavvers', I must say. And there are always new words being introduced in the English language, colloquial words, and it's always very entertaining to hear them.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Definitely. I mean, I know from my experience of speaking to social workers, some have said if they're younger that helps with their relationship-building with a younger person or a care-leaver. You know, they've found that that has been actually a benefit. Have you learnt any other new words? [0:08:39.3]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

So, the most recent one I can think of is 'rizz', the verb 'to rizz', which means kind of chatting someone up. Or 'dropping game', which people might not know, which is what they used to say. According to teenagers that's really common. So if you're chatting someone up –

or 'chirpsing them', as they said in the nineties – it's 'dropping game'. But moving on from 'dropping game' it's 'rizz', to rizz, or you're 'rizzing' someone.

- Kirsty Ayakwah: Oh, okay. That means you're chatting them up. Okay.
- Sharmeen Ziauddin: Yeah.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Well, maybe there's another career for you as a social worker where you can share these new words and sort of connect with the young people. [0:09:19.3]
- Sharmeen Ziauddin: No, I'm sharing knowledge. For all the social workers listening, you know, if you didn't know this word, add it to your dictionary.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah. So you can get down with the kids.
- Sharmeen Ziauddin: Exactly. Get down with the kids.
- Kirsty Ayakwah: Well, talking of getting down with the kids, I know negative media coverage is one of the episodes you opened The Social Work Community podcast with, and you spoke to Alistair and Becky, who talked about their experiences. Let's have a listen. [0:09:46.4]
- Alistair: So it's the soaps. They have to do it for effect. But I always hate the way that social workers are portrayed. You know, child-catcher or...what was that film? *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*.
- Sharmeen Ziauddin: *Chitty Chitty Bang Bang*, yeah. It was the child-snatcher, wasn't it? It was this little...
- Alistair: Child-snatcher. That's what everybody says. Child-snatcher. And I'm like, 'That's not what I do.' And it's funny, I went to a barbecue once and everybody was out the back, and all these people had obviously just new babies or whatever. And they had all the baby monitors in the house. And we were outside and we were having this barbecue, and people were asking who does for...jobs. And I said, 'Oh, I'm a social worker,' and they all dived for the baby monitors and they all vanished! 'Cause they just thought, 'Oh my God, he's going to take my children off me!' And I was like, 'What?' You know, there's this representation of...that we just go into houses and remove, it's just totally false.
- Sharmeen Ziauddin: I love Alistair's sort of no-nonsense approach to everything. You know, he's quite old-school. He's been a social worker for thirty years. He's a fun guy. He's a YouTuber. It was really interesting to hear their quite differing perspectives on being social workers, 'cause Becky is more newly qualified, although she did her qualification later on in life over Covid. But it was really lovely to speak to them both because they are sort of more experienced in terms of their careers. But what I thought was, what they told me about videoing, that they...and they've been filmed by service users, and I thought that was quite a

revelation that I couldn't...I mean, that sounds pretty daunting. I can imagine if you're just out of uni and you've done your ASYE and you've just...you're doing your first proper role and someone starts filming your interaction with the mother or a child, I mean, I would find that very scary, personally. But interestingly, we do see on social media...we do see videos of interactions with the police. Lots of people film when they get stopped or arrested or whatever. But I've never seen an actual video of a social worker. So I think it's quite rare. Or maybe it's just rare that anything actually happens negatively from the social worker's side for it to warrant being put up on social media. So that's probably a good sign, I would say.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah. Yeah, definitely. You've actually reminded me of a social worker I spoke to who the same thing happened. They were being filmed. So there was a little camera in, like, a living room setting, and the parent had put the camera there to film the interaction between the social worker and the child. And it was the social worker that noticed something and the child who mentioned, 'Oh yeah, there's a camera there.' So I mean, that particular person, although they are on social media, they're private. So they do consume social media but they don't interact with it, they don't comment. And that was just their way of protecting themselves. So it's interesting that some social workers feel that there's a way for them to interact with social media still, even if they're not being sort of actively out there, whereas others, they're more comfortable, I guess, being completely out there and they've got their controls to sort of protect themselves. So I think Kayleigh is another social worker that talked about that experience as well? Let's have a listen to Kayleigh. [0:13:21.3]

Kayleigh:

You have to be careful about politics and you have to be aware of what we stand for as social workers as well. So there are some debates that you can get really in trouble for being part of or expressing certain views. And I think social media is a public arena, like real life is a public arena. If we say the wrong thing in public we can get in trouble for that, and it's just the same. I don't think that even the most locked-down accounts are ever really private. I really just don't think that's possible. So I think you just have to be more aware than you maybe were before about what you're doing and how you're coming across even on your personal accounts. Like, you need to take a step between your immediate response to something and not sort of be carried by your emotions and try and put a step between that. I think where people go wrong is when they just write something too quickly in the heat of the moment and it's about giving yourself space to think about whether you really want to have that said.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Yeah, I think you've just got to be really smart about your social media usage. I mean, social workers more so than other professionals, but everybody, I think. Any professional. Anybody who will be employed I think needs to be really careful. And I think now,

this generation perhaps of social workers, or the newer generation, knows that better than maybe people did ten years ago when sort of Instagram just started or Facebook was sort of quite prominent in the late noughties. You weren't really aware, and things do crop up, don't they, all the time on Twitter and Facebook that people have said, and they get cancelled or whatever. So I think people are wising up to this and are a bit smarter than they used to be.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah. And I think when I recall back to the interview that you did with Yewande and Kayleigh, which was should social workers be on social media, I think that's something that they highlighted. So I think they're two examples of social workers that have been able to navigate that sometimes quite toxic environment and take the good out of being on social media, because it's a good resource for new social workers that are coming on board. I mean, is there anything about your interview with them that you wanted to share about that? [0:15:37.6]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Yeah. Like you said, there is so much good in social media, and I think Yewande and Kayleigh are great examples of how to utilise that platform. You know, they are out there. Their faces are there, their names are there. They help a lot of their colleagues or people who tune into their channels, in giving, you know, sharing their wisdom and their experience. So generally I would say they have very much thought about how they project themselves on camera and how they...like whether they give their full names or not, or you know, like Kayleigh said, she has a private account that is, you know, totally private. And Yewande doesn't give her last name, for example. So she's...they've got things in place, and I guess everybody who wants to have a public platform needs to do similar things to guard their privacy from people they support or service users, or everybody that they come into contact with.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah. No, I mean, definitely I think that there is a balance that can be met between either not engaging at all or being on it just 'cause it is very valuable. So yeah, I really enjoyed that one. But I have to say, the one that really touched me was the one you did in March, the one with the refugee who became Social Worker of the Year. So that's Omaid. That one, oh my gosh, I was so close to tears. And I'll let you explain a bit more about Omaid and, you know, how you got that interview. [0:17:10.4]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

So, I mean, he won two awards last year, and when I saw his LinkedIn post and Anastasia, our colleague who'd reported on the awards mentioned him in it, and there was a LinkedIn post about it and I saw, I thought, 'Oh my goodness, we have to get him on the podcast!' So luckily he agreed.

Yeah, when I was interviewing him – and actually, before we record the podcast we have a pre-podcast chat to prep and talk about what we're going to talk about and for me to meet the person and see, you know, if they're happy to come on the podcast – and that was quite



emotional for me. I hope you didn't pick up on the fact that I was, like, a bit teary-eyed by the end of it. And actually, a lot of things he said in that chat I don't think were recorded on the actual podcast. But you know, things like, you know, if you've listened to his episode, I mean, a lot of the things he said were heart-breaking but, you know, his father was killed when he was one month old. And his father was in the Afghan army, I believe. And this is pre-2001, and his mum fled Afghanistan because of the threat to their lives. You know, obviously her husband had been murdered and they fled to Pakistan. They lived as refugees for many years. I just found it really fascinating and it just makes it so obvious that people seeking asylum, and those children who have been sent unaccompanied, all have their own tragic stories and we don't really hear the desperation and the heartache behind it. So I think getting that story was quite important, and I know social workers work with so many unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and it was just very poignant. And obviously I was in awe of his story, his strength, what he's achieved. He didn't speak to his mum for five years, for example. He had no contact. It took him that many years to find his mum. So you know, all this stuff he's so deserved of those awards, and I know he's going to go on and do great things, and I'm just glad we got him before he becomes a megastar!

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah. Honestly, if you've not listened to that particular podcast I'd encourage you to because I was gripped, you know. There was a part where he talked about being in the prison cell, not because he'd done anything wrong but that's just where they kept him. And... [0:19:35.9]

Omaid:

And then it was early hours in the morning around, I think it was nine o'clock or something, that the social worker came. And when I saw that social worker, that was the time I broke down. I don't know, automatically broke down, and I didn't know if that was a social worker, I don't know what it was, but when I saw a female I broke down. I broke down really badly, into tears. I still remember that social worker. She came and she hugged me. She goes, 'Don't worry. You're in safe hands.' They had an interpreter there. They were asking me a lot of questions and I was like, 'I don't even know what to say to you. My mind is not even working. I don't know where I am and I don't know what I'm doing. I just need...I just need to be safe.' They were the words that I was saying, 'I just need to be safe, I just need to be safe.'

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Imagine not having any physical contact or any positive physical contact, being away from your family. It must be...

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

As a child.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah, being a child, yeah. I can't imagine it. And I think, like you said, that is usually what is missing from the discussion that tends to happen in the news about people – we're talking about young children – who have had to leave everything that they know and come to another country and not speak the language. So just to see his

transition from a refugee child to a social worker who's supporting other young people is amazing. Yeah. So well done. That's a brilliant story.

So I really feel like you've left us on a high, you know, in terms of the range, the depth of stories that you've shared that come from social workers. So my question is, what do we have in store for Season Two? [0:21:24.0]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Well, what do we have in story? Well, that would be telling! However, going back to the topic of racism, I think somebody raised the question of we need... 'cause Nana and Ash were both children's social workers, perhaps we need one for adult social workers because there's a different type of racism which people have experienced from elderly adults who perhaps have dementia. And really, what do you do when you're subjected to racist abuse by an elderly person you're supporting? It sounds so horrible. And you know, that is a huge challenge. So I think that's a discussion that we need to have.

I know we've got a few things like agency social working and permanent social working. It's a huge topic in terms of all the changes that we're trying to be implemented for locum social workers. So we'll probably cover that.

And I think one that I'm quite keen to do is do we need more male representation in social work? I think we do, perhaps. And why do we? So that's something I'd like to delve into or you can delve into.

Kirsty Ayakwah:

Yeah, yeah. I think I need to do some delving. There is another one that I'm quite keen to look into. As you know, I had a nice chat with a social worker... well, she's quite senior, actually. And it was looking at the different kinds of settings, something that you've done in print, unusual settings for social working. And this one looks at really interesting roles that I've never heard of, where you have a social work presence there. So that includes, ah yeah, sickle-cell... sickle-cell social worker. I've never heard of that. But apparently that exists. And there's a lot in the sort of Trust setting, in the hospital setting. So it would be interesting just to explore the different career opportunities. I think people usually think of children's or adult's or [unclear – 0:23:30.7] but there are so many others. So it looks like Season Two's going to be quite exciting, varied.

But I wanted to use this opportunity to encourage other people listening to this, if you're a social worker, if you think there's a topic that we haven't covered that you'd like us to highlight, if you'd like to put yourself forward. 'Cause we're always looking for candidates, aren't we, Sharmeen? [0:23:54.1]

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Yes, always.



Kirsty Ayakwah: Yeah. So let us know. Just DM us on Instagram or at [www.thesocialworkcommunity.com](http://www.thesocialworkcommunity.com). So that's all one work for 'thesocialworkcommunity'. And you know, we look forward to catching up with Sharmeen next time, as she tells us a bit more about the work that she's doing and the people that she's interviewed and the insights that she's gathered as a result. Your last word, Sharmeen? [0:24:19.5]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Thank you, Kirsty. Last word is that we did run this True Social Work campaign, which I just wanted to get in there. So the campaign launched last year. I'm sure everybody's heard of it but if they haven't, it was a really good opportunity to change the perception the public has about social workers in order to attract people to the profession but also encouraging people to return to the profession and, of course, boosting the morale of existing practitioners who, let's face it, often do a thankless job. Not always but sometimes. And there's lots of content on Community Care, the website [www.communitycare.co.uk](http://www.communitycare.co.uk), around the campaign, real positive pieces about the difference social workers have made in people's lives. A real variety, actually, and videos as well. So yeah, check it out if you haven't already.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Awesome. Thank you so much, Sharmeen. [0:25:15.1]

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Thanks, Kirsty.

Kirsty Ayakwah: Thank you for listening to this podcast. If a keen podcast listener, why not check out some of the other podcasts in our Community Care library? Workforce Insights showcases important workforce and career issues impacting social workers, and is delivered in collaboration with local authorities and Trusts and other organisations. We have the Community Care Inform podcast series called Learn On The Go, where expert practitioners and academics discuss what the latest research, theories and practice models mean for social workers. All these podcasts are available on most platforms, including Spotify, Audible, Amazon and Apple podcast.

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