

NCT Workforce Insights v.3

- 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. If you haven't already, do follow the Workforce Insights podcast on wherever you listen so you can be updated when there's a new episode.
- I'm Sharmeen Ziauddin, careers editor here at Community Care. Today's episode is in collaboration with Northamptonshire Children's Trust. I have three practitioners – well, one is a student – all here to discuss their experiences at NCT. We have Cherise Campbell-Sullivan, Mason Poore and Brian Browne, who are all in the safeguarding and support team at NCT.
- Cherise is a student social worker who's halfway into her 70-day placement. Mason has been a practitioner since 2021. And Brian is an advanced practitioner in the same team. So let's start with Cherise. How's it been on your placement at NCT? [0:01:08.9]
- Cherise Campbell-Sullivan: Yeah, it's been really good. The team have made me feel welcome, offered me opportunities to shadow them on meetings, write up statutory visits for them, get involved making genograms on their behalf, writing up chronologies, going out and meeting families and children. Yeah, it's been really good. They've made me feel part of the team.
- Sharmeen Ziauddin: And when you've not understood something, have you been able to ask, you know, 'What should I do?' etc.? [0:01:41.4]
- Cherise Campbell-Sullivan: Yeah, definitely. All members of the team have let me know if I needed any support I can go to them. There are a few advanced practitioners within the team, there are other social workers, there's members of the team that have just completed their ASYE. So they understand how I feel being new and not knowing. So they've all offered their help if I've needed it.
- Sharmeen Ziauddin: And are you the only student in the team? [0:02:08.4]
- Cherise Campbell-Sullivan: No. We do have another student. They're on their 100-day placement, soon to finish. So they also gave me support as well because they knew it was my first placement. They've done their first placement so they know that I might need a bit of support.
- Sharmeen Ziauddin: Okay, great. So Brian and Mason, you've both been at NCT for a little while but you came from quite different local authorities. What has the change been like working for such a large place such as NCT, which covers a pretty huge geographical area? [0:02:42.1]

Mason Poore:

So for me, previously I worked in a very urban authority, a big city. So moving to a large geographical area, and our team is focused in a rural area of Daventry, my experience has been that requires a much better team approach, lots of open communication and co-working, keeping us up-to-date, which means you're closer to members of your team, which is something I hadn't experienced despite being in another large authority.

There are issues that you often face, such as weather, country roads and, for example, being stuck behind a tractor. It may seem silly but it is a genuine issue given our tight schedules. All it could take is a flat tyre or an accident and then your diary is cut into by an hour, which then has a domino effect.

On the plus side, it can be very scenic and relaxing, driving along beautiful countryside, which is quite nice given the stress of the caseloads within social work. So I really feel it depends on the way that you look at it.

But yeah, the main difference has been that you work closer with your team members and you talk to each other a lot more.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

Okay, what about you, Brian? [0:03:05.8]

Brian Browne:

So yeah, I think I'd shadow quite a lot of what Mason said there. I mean, similarly I came from a different local authority but it was on the other end of the spectrum; it was one of the smallest local authorities in the country. So, you know, coming to such a big local authority – I think Northampton's like one of the top five sized counties in the country – it was a massive shock to my system for me, being able to incorporate myself into this large organisation, you know, being a very small fish in a very, very big pond, you know, to use the phrase.

But what Mason said is dead right. We have to take that step further about thinking further ahead with our visits because it is a case of sometimes we do unfortunately have to travel from one end of the county to the other, and we have to accommodate that into our diary, which...it takes time away from, you know, time away from the families that we want to be working with.

And similarly, when we're working in different areas if there's an emergency and we have to dash across somewhere else that could also, you know, delay things. And going back to what Mason was saying about having a good team that we're in, we are able to lean on each other and rely on each other. I mean, I often speak with Mason outside of work and, you know, just explain about a difficult case or, you know, get his advice. Even as the AP, you know. There's colleagues that have a wealth of knowledge and advice. So I think we've got quite a good balance in our team where we are at the moment.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I mean, that's really important having someone to talk about a case. Not in an official setting, like in supervision or anything, but just outside of that, like you said, venting, being able to just discuss things with colleagues. And it's good that you guys have that.

Do you find that being able to work remotely has helped with the distances and perhaps not going into the office? I don't know what your schedules are like but surely that's made a bit of a difference in a positive way. [0:05:48.8]

Brian Browne:

So I know for me, 'cause I live a good 45 minutes away from where our office is, fortunately I do border onto the county of Northamptonshire. So sometimes it works in my interest, other times it works against me. For example, like today I'm going to have to go down to the boundary of Oxfordshire, which is a good hour and a half drive, to do a visit because of something that's come in that we've had to deal with today. So you know, it does have...it's swings and roundabouts. It has its pros and it has its cons. I think, you know, working virtually is great in a sense because sometimes when you do just need to focus, get your head down and not be in the busy office environment, you know, it's useful then. But then on the flip side of it, if you then have to go into the office or have to go in to do visits it can also be a hindrance, whereas if I was in the office, you know, it's half an hour drive, sort of thing. I don't know about your position, Mason. [0:06:46.7]

Mason Poore:

Yeah. I think it's a balance, really, and there are elements of working together in Northampton I've found which I've not found in other authorities. So as I've said, it's challenging to achieve that balance, i.e. do we impede on the importance of relationship-based practice and ask other members of the team to fulfil duties such as visits in areas far away if we experience a difficulty, or do we attend such visits with scarce availability and miss the opportunities? At times you are between a rock and a hard place. And then looking at the implication of rural social work practice, i.e. within the Daventry area, for the families particularly that we work with those luxuries are often inaccessible, such as regular buses, local community groups. So people experience social immobility due to those constraints, and therefore travelling an hour plus on a bus does not afford them the ability to access support and demonstrate the change that we require them to do so.

So whilst acknowledging the challenges we face, it's also how it implicates the families we work with, and how that interacts with thresholds and other issues that we face, which is another conversation completely.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

And you mentioned transport and inaccessibility, but what are some of the main issues you come across in Northamptonshire as a children's social worker, and how has NCT helped you to support those children and young people and families that you work with? [0:08:20.0]

Mason Poore:

For me, I feel that...I feel like domestic violence and abuse and neglect are issues that commonly arise in the authority. And we will discuss in more detail about it, but given the climate of isolation that was enforced during Covid, I think that's really prominent in the Daventry area still to this day.

Brian Browne:

I know that specifically in the Daventry area...so how it breaks down is that there's different pockets and different teams that cover the

different parts of the county. So we're primarily focused in the west. So the teams that we're in, the support and safeguarding teams that we're in, we have the largest area that we have to cover, and there's two teams that we have that cover basically the west of Northamptonshire. And then you've got other teams in Corby, Wellingborough, Kettering and Northampton. And what you'll see is that within different teams there's different themes that you'll see with the families that we work with. And so, for instance, more to, you know, to Northampton itself, there's a lot of gang crime and a lot of county lines and what-have-you, whereas over in Wellingborough and Kettering I think it would be fair to say that the majority of the cases over that way are focused more on county lines and drug trafficking and what-have-you and different vulnerabilities.

But going back to what Mason was saying about Covid and the impact that we're still seeing today, I think he's dead right with how...because our side of the county is so vast that, you know, things are inaccessible to certain families that we work with. And you know, that does then...like what we saw with Covid, that there was a significant increase in domestic abuse and domestic violence across the country, that's still a trend that we see primarily in the cases that we work. And I think that where we're benefitting at the moment is that there is...Northampton has actually just embarked on delivering parental conflict training across the teams. So I mean, that's something that I specialise in as well. We've got a family support worker that specialises in it. So we recognise that, you know, there is that area of need, so there is specific training that we can access which is above and beyond what I would call 'universal services' are. So things like, you know, Women's Aid and the Freedom Programme and charitable organisations that we'd normally refer to, we've also got in-house services that we can get the family support workers to go out to the families specifically to try and bridge that gap of, you know, not maybe being able to get from, you know, say Middleton Cheyney, which is like south-west of the county, all the way into Northampton for an hour once a week when, you know, there's buses that run every three hours or something.

So I think, you know, that's where there is a gap and it's clear that, you know, the strategic management, the strategic leaders are thinking about that and trying to, you know, support us as frontline practitioners to try and bridge that gap. But it is still a challenge that we're going to face. And it's the same with anything in social work. There's always going to be, you know, that chasing perfection. We're never going to be ahead of our work, ahead of our caseload. We're always going to be chasing and there's always going to be new themes that comes out that we have to adapt and update our practice to, which is, you know, what we're all very specialist at doing in our teams, is adapting, changing our way of working with people.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I think that's one of the advantages, then, of being such a large authority or a large organisation, is that you can have those in-house services or work towards providing more services. And also you mentioned, you know, everybody has different expertise and you can draw upon those different practitioners. Yes, it's massive

geographically but then the workforce is equally as large and that comes with its own benefits, I suppose, doesn't it? [0:12:15.8]

Brian Browne:

It does, yeah. And I think the other thing for me as well is, I mean, I've been here longer than Cherise and Mason with the Trust. I think for me, over my journey since being here is that the CEO and the senior leadership team, like members of the senior leadership team, they're very accessible as well. So I will regularly, you know, give Colin the CEO a Teams call and just run something past him. Or even if it's a case of getting to a service manager, they're very accessible. So our service manager will sit in our office with us. Even though she covers multiple teams, there's dedicated days of the week that she'll be in the office. So we can even, you know, pick on her expertise. Not in a formal capacity but, like you said, the office talk just to get some oversight or some guidance or just to raise that this is a current theme. And I know from my perspective, I've been given the opportunity where we have identified things that could be, you know, improved or we could trial things, where I was given the freedom to actually, you know, do a project or try to advance the training in the team and stuff like that.

So you know, NCT's on a journey and it's definitely on the right path, I think. But you know, there's still a long way to go.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

I'm glad you mentioned the visibility of senior leadership. I mean, how important is it, and what difference does it make to have somebody like Colin Foster... For those who don't know who are listening, Colin Foster is the director of Northamptonshire Children's Trust. He's the big boss and he's a very down-to-earth man. I've met him and, you know, he is different, I would say. You know, what do you guys make of him and his style of leadership? [0:14:02.6]

Brian Browne:

So Mason, I don't know if you want to come in, 'cause we've spoken about this outside of it, comparing our previous experiences. So Mason, do you want to go first?

Mason Poore:

So just to contribute to the point around service manager, I totally agree. Our service manager will sit in the office sometimes. In the previous authority I worked for, you'd often have to go through the rigmarole of putting a request in for something we called a 'complex case discussion', whereas informally you can have that conversation and nudge someone on the shoulder and say, 'Can I just ask you and pick your brains about this particular case?'

So whilst the implementation of remote working is helpful in terms of managing caseloads because it relieves that pressure of travelling into the office constantly when there isn't an obvious need to be in the office, however with that reintegration it's been that visibility is so much easier. The genuine interaction of humans as well, you can benefit 'cause it's not just an exchange of words. Behind the language you use, your mannerisms, your body language, and that's where you can really learn some positive social work practice to work with families.

For example, if we were to complete social work visits over a Teams of a Zoom call, we wouldn't get very far. So that's just one benefit.

Also, in regards to the CEO, to be known as a social worker, and there's a huge chain working up, so to be able to email someone as high up as a director...we'll get an email from there where they've recognised good practice and just to say, 'Good work, keep it up,' that's that validation that social workers often feel they don't get because of the scrutiny from social media, news and so forth. So that's been very welcoming and makes you feel like you're part of a wider team that people you won't work with day-to-day know your name and know who you are and can reach out to speak. [0:16:02.7]

Brian Browne:

Yes. I mean, I would agree with that as well. So talking about Colin, I've known him for a couple of years now and, like you said Sharmeen, he is different. He is. He does have a different approach to being a CEO of the Trust. I know that from my perspective, having multiple conversations with him and, you know, seeing him and what-have-you, he's a very visible leader and it's very obvious that he cares. And I think that's the fundamental difference from my experience with working in other local authorities or other organisations to where I am now, is that yes there is a job to do as the CEO, and it's a very high-pressured job and I get that. And there's a lot of accountability that comes with it. But he still has time for the young people and families that we support, and he still has time for us.

And going back to what Mason was saying about recognising good practice, you know, although it may seem something that's really, really trivial, it can help. So like, say...as is a common thing in social work, we have highs and we have lows. And a couple of weeks ago you could have had a compliment come in from a family, which are far and few between. Two weeks has passed and then you're having a low week, but that's the time when that message has got to Colin, and then he's dropping you an email and it can just be a bit of a pick-up, you know, that you are doing the right thing, that the job is for you and the place is for you. I think that's something that's really powerful that we have that's different at NCT to other places that I've worked.

But I think the other thing as well is that seeing him caring makes me care more. And I think that's something, I know from my perspective that, you know, being able to have conversations with Colin where you can hear his passion, you can hear his, you know, how much he cares about what we're doing. It kind of keeps that fire going as social workers, and it just helps us, you know, go to the next step.

And it's like it's often said that safeguarding social workers have a shelf-life. That's quite a common thing. I know that...and it's between two and five years. I know that right now I don't...you know, I'm quite comfortable where I am and I'm quite enjoying my work, even with the highs and lows. I've got a great team around me and that's going, you know, all the way up to the top, top of tree sort of thing. [0:18:28.3]

Mason Poore:

Just to contribute further that as well, just one last comment is I think people listening to this podcast might think, 'Why would I want to travel into a large area like that in the middle of nowhere?' and that's also, 'I don't want to bump into a family which I'm maybe having some challenging work with.' So you get a sense of relief when you leave somewhere that you don't live particularly local to, where you think

the next day, 'Do you know what? If I'm going out for dinner or I'm going out for lunch it's unlikely I'd bump into them.' Not that that would be a concern to bump into a family.

But also it was a shock for me adjusting when I went to Northampton because I would get home after an evening of visits and my phone would be ringing or messages, 'Are you home okay? Are you home okay?' And I was like, 'Well, why do I need to let you know?' And they said, 'Well that's how we do things here. We need to make sure everyone's safe and sound.' And it's, like, very refreshing to experience that. So there are other little positives you don't really pick up on at the time.

Sharmeen Ziauddin:

That's actually really thoughtful and very important for a lot of social workers to have that security and reassurance. I think, Brian, what you said about, you know, praise and appreciation, being valued is really, really important, especially in a job like social work, which can often be a thankless job where you only read about social workers in the news when something terrible happens, so those little moments of appreciation are really quite important, I think. [0:19:59.2]

Brian Browne:

Yeah. No, I would agree with that. It does go a long way. And I think...I know from my perspective, you know, when I did transition across to Northamptonshire, one of the things that attracted me was the fact that Northamptonshire were in the infancy as a Trust (and we still are), but in the infancy of their journey. And that's something that I wanted to contribute towards and be a part of.

And although, you know, social work is often referred to as a thankless job, I can't say that's...I mean, from my perspective I can't say since being in Northamptonshire that that's been strictly true all the way through. Because, you know, being here, having the support, which I think's, you know, the most valuable thing that we have as practitioners, having the support, having the ability to take initiative, to go forward with ideas, to trial things and have that flexibility and that autonomy as a practitioner has actually led to successful cases. And I can think of, you know, several cases where I've worked where they have been difficult and I know that in other local authorities, reading the serious case reviews and what-have-you, that you know, a child would have been remove from the family's care a lot sooner than, you know...well, in fact we didn't actually remove the child from the care. But there was a lot of...not opportunities but pitstops where, you know, other local authorities may have gone, 'No, the child needs to go because it's in their best interests,' but given the flexibility, the inspiration and trying to change the narrative of what a social worker is, you know, that's something that's very passionate for me, is changing that narrative. And you know, going back to Colin being quite visible, you know, he's supporting me in one of my own little passion projects that I'm doing, and you know, it's being able to change that narrative and for the wider community that we're not these big, scary, nasty people that, you know, with a reputation that's quite stigma-ed to us, but we're there to facilitate change. We're not there with magic wands. We're there to help people and support and guide and, you know, befriend if we need to, advocate. There's so many hats that social workers do, I don't think that it's fully

represented in this county. Or across the world, to be fair. But particularly in this country.

All of us in the team, we have our own lives and we have our own things that we do outside of work, and I know that multiple people in the team have their own little things that they're able to do and be flexible to promote that in their own lives as well.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Cherise, you've been very quiet so I'll just come back to you and ask you what is your plan after you finish your placement? What's next? [0:22:42.2]

Cherise Campbell-Sullivan: So, I'll be back at university to then go out on my 100-day placement. I'm unsure where that will be yet. I should find out around September time. So to finish that, and then hopefully graduate and become a social worker and get out and practice, really.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And will you be looking to join NCT? [0:23:04.8]

Cherise Campbell-Sullivan: So, my original plan is that I always wanted to go into adults with learning disability, but since being with NCT within the safeguarding team, I may look into doing my ASYE with NCT, as they have been really supportive. I have enjoyed working with the team and actually working with families with children. So, yeah. It's an option, I think.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: Well, best of luck to whatever you do. Was there anything else you guys wanted to add? [0:23:36.5]

Brian Browne: You know, we've spoken about the negatives that we have with the county, and I think it's widely known in social work the reputation that NCT has. And I know that when I was first debating coming across to NCT and leaving my last local authority I had a lot of people telling me not to and saying, 'You won't be able to cope with it. It's a failing local authority. It's too much, blah, blah, blah.' That's not been the case for me at all. And I know that NCT are doing a massive drive at the minute for recruitment. So you know, if you do want a change and you do want to give it a go, please, you know...there are always...there's always opportunities coming up. So I would really advocate if, you know, for people to come and join the team because part of the journey that we're on, and I know part of the wider strategic journey for the Trust, is to get that stability in our workforce, and that's something that I've certainly seen since stepping up into the AP role, that particularly in our area we've had stability in our team now, and it's been a really powerful thing because it's not a case of workers coming in, staying for a couple of weeks or months and then leaving. We've had that stability where we're actually able to build relationships, you know, that are actually quite positive and supportive. So we know each other's ticks, we know what makes us work, we know when we're having a bad day we can recognise those signs and really support each other. So yeah, no, I'd really advocate to come across to the Trust. It's really worth it.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And I think that point on stability, it's the most important for the children and the families that you support.

Brian Browne: 100%. 100%.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: And that's really the key, isn't it, to a stable workforce, is the key to serving the people that you support as well as you can, and those children not having different social workers every few months. Thank you, thank you for joining today.

Brian Browne: Brilliant. Thank you, Sharmeen.

Sharmeen Ziauddin: That was Cherise, Mason and Brian from NCT. You can learn more about NCT by looking at their employer profile on www.communitycare.co.uk. Do follow us on the Workforce Insights podcast. 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 new Social Work Community podcast, where we discuss all things social work. Every month we focus on a different topic. And 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 and give them a follow.

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